

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, while religious freedom conditions in Egypt improved somewhat, several systematic and ongoing obstacles to religious freedom remained. The administration of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi publicly promoted religious tolerance as a goal for Egyptian society. The President himself again attended a Coptic Orthodox Christmas liturgy in January, and in a September public statement referenced his “[respect \[for\] nonbelievers . . . \[who\] are free to choose.](#)” At the same time, the Egyptian government continued to closely manage church construction and the legalization of preexisting buildings for church-related purposes. As in 2020, the pace of approvals for existing churches requesting legalization reflected a substantial decline from prior years, leaving a backlog of applications and many rural Christian communities unable to worship legally. Construction of churches remained largely limited to new, government-planned cities, as governors in rural communities with large Christian populations failed to reply to construction applications within the legally mandated four-month limit.

Egypt’s criminal justice system was responsible for a significant number of religious freedom violations. Throughout 2021, authorities maintained the long-term detention of [religious prisoners of conscience](#), including Christians Patrick Zaki and Ramy Kamel and Qur’anist Muslim [Reda Abdel Rahman](#). Zaki and Kamel were released in December 2021 in advance of trial and January 2022, respectively, and Abdel Rahman was released in February 2022. State security continued to harass religious minorities such as [Shi’a Muslims](#), while the judiciary maintained its robust enforcement of blasphemy laws and wielded counterterrorism and other laws disproportionately against both religious minorities and human rights and religious freedom advocates. While President El-Sisi [lifted](#) the state of emergency that his administration had long invoked to justify violations of civil liberties, the administration also [introduced amendments](#) that functionally replaced the emergency laws, and

detainees already subject to the emergency law [remained bound](#) by courts’ flawed judicial procedures.

As in 2020, reports of anti-Christian mob attacks and church destruction decreased in 2021, possibly corresponding to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. However, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) maintained a presence in the Sinai region, with affiliated groups claiming responsibility for the [April 2021 execution](#) of a Copt (Egyptian Christian), Nabil Habashi Salama. Acts of violence against individual Coptic victims, especially in rural areas, occurred in social environments with [persistent imbalances](#) in the treatment of perpetrators from the Muslim majority and their Coptic victims. The government did not ban communities’ use of “[customary reconciliation](#)” [councils](#), extra-judicial local tribunals that regularly issue minimal penalties to assailants from the religious majority and often revictimize Christians by forcing them to admit culpability in attacks against them.

The Egyptian government did not take visible, systematic efforts to address ongoing obstacles to religious freedom specified in USCIRF’s Annual Reports and recommendations from recent years, including [2021](#). The government’s requirement for national identity cards to list religion continued to render all religious minorities vulnerable to forced self-identification and potential discrimination. [Baha’is, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other smaller communities’](#) religions are excluded from the short list of approved faiths from which ID card applicants may choose, causing additional marginalization. In December, the Alexandria Administrative Court [ruled](#) that authorities in the governorate did not need to provide cemetery space for Baha’is and members of other minority religions. The single [Cairo cemetery](#) with space allotted to Baha’is is limited in capacity and situated hundreds of miles away from many Baha’i communities. In justification for its ruling, the [court referred](#) to a State Litigation Authority opinion stating that only Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are recognized as religions in Egypt.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Egypt on the U.S. Department of State’s Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Urge the Egyptian government to 1) remove religion as a required category from official identity documents, 2) take concrete steps toward phasing out the longstanding use of customary reconciliation councils to resolve incidents of violence against religious minorities, and 3) repeal Article 98(f) of the Criminal Code, which penalizes “ridiculing or insulting a heavenly religion or a sect following it,” and until that is accomplished limit the conditions under which the law is applied and allow charged individuals to post bail;
- Encourage Egypt to 1) resume expeditious approval of church registrations under Law 80 of 2016, and 2) fully implement national educational curriculum reforms promoting religious diversity and tolerance; and
- Conduct a comprehensive review of all U.S. assistance to Egypt and continue to withhold a portion of Foreign Military Financing (FMF) for specified international religious freedom violations along with broader human rights concerns.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise religious freedom issues through hearings, meetings, letters, congressional delegation trips abroad, or other actions.

Background

Article 2 of [Egypt's constitution](#) identifies Islam as the state religion and the “principles of Shari’a” as the primary source of legislation. Article 64 provides for “absolute” freedom of belief, although only adherents of “heavenly religions” (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) may practice their religion publicly and build places of worship. [Bans](#) from 1960 remain in effect on Jehovah’s Witnesses and Baha’is.

Egypt’s population is approximately 105 million people, an estimated 90 percent of whom are Sunni Muslims; non-Sunni Muslims, such as Shi’a, are believed to comprise less than one percent. At an estimated 10 percent or more, Egypt’s indigenous Copts constitute the largest Christian minority in the Middle East and North Africa. Christian leaders [estimate](#) over 90 percent of Copts belong to the traditional Coptic Orthodox Church, with Coptic Catholics, Coptic Evangelical Protestants, and other denominations forming small but prominent subcommunities. There are reportedly at least 2,000 [Baha’is](#), approximately 1,500 Jehovah’s Witnesses, and fewer than 20 [Jews](#).

Legal and Judicial Challenges to Religious Freedom

In 2021, Egypt continued to enforce Law 98(f) of Egypt’s Penal Code, a blasphemy statute that bans “insulting the heavenly religions,” presenting one of the most serious and [systematic challenges](#) to religious freedom. On June 14, State Security officers [arrested](#) Marco Girgis Salib Shehata, a Copt, for possessing sexual-themed material on his phone characterized as “offensive to Islam.” Authorities detained him for a month before interrogating him on his personal behaviors including possible consumption of alcohol—permissible in Christianity—and prosecuted him on charges including violation of Law 98(f), eventually convicting and sentencing him in early 2022. Prosecutors likewise invoked the blasphemy law in the November trial and sentencing to five years in prison of [Ahmed Abdo Maher](#), a Muslim lawyer and scholar whose [critiques](#) of the Islamic conquest attracted attention on social media and satellite television.

Throughout 2021, Egyptian authorities also targeted religious minority group members and human rights and religious freedom activists through strategic deployment of other laws, such as counterterrorism statutes and laws penalizing “spreading false news [against Egypt].” Courts operating under state security emergency laws issued multiple consecutive renewals of the detentions of religious prisoners of conscience, including Ramy Kamel and Patrick Zaki, the latter of whom—though released after 22 months of detention—is [scheduled](#) to stand trial for publishing an [online testimonial](#) of the harassment he and other Copts have endured. Security forces likewise continued the detention since August 2020 of [USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience](#) Reda Abdel Rahman—a blogger from the [Qur’anist](#) community, a Muslim minority that holds the text of the Qur’an as the only legitimate source of authority for religious rulings—finally releasing him in February 2022.

Other Positive Developments

In a potential boost to [religious tourism](#), the government undertook, completed, and planned projects renovating historic houses of worship and shrines of importance to [Christians, Jews, and Shi’a Muslims](#) around the world. President El-Sisi demonstrated attention to Copts’ internal diversity through his [decree establishing](#) separate religious endowments for the country’s smaller Catholic and Evangelical Protestant communities, distinct from the predominant Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate.

In September, the administration widely publicized its release of a new National Human Rights Strategy, [touted as the first](#) in the nation’s history, which promotes religious tolerance and anti-sectarianism within educational, religious, and community institutions. The Strategy refers to a “target result” of addressing “guarantees related to the regulation, justifications, and durations of pretrial detention [so that they] are enhanced in national laws.” The document also makes several references to programs to reform the curricula of schools run by both the government and Al-Azhar—a leading academic institution within Sunni Islam—to remove exclusionary material and reflect messages of religious tolerance. The Ministry of Education has long promised such reforms, which remain [a work in progress](#).

Key U.S. Policy

Egypt remained an important U.S. partner in 2021, mediating between parties to the Israeli- Palestinian conflict and maintaining vigilance toward potential threats of Islamist insurgent violence. Its “critical role” in securing a [ceasefire](#) between Israel and Hamas-led Gaza in May garnered praise from President Joseph R. Biden. However, the Biden administration also took steps to fulfill a campaign pledge that the United States would issue “no more blank checks” to Egypt given its human rights abuses.

In February, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken “raised concerns over human rights” in his [first call](#) with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry and during November’s [strategic dialogue](#). The FMF aid package to Egypt emerged early in the year as a focal point for both the executive branch and Congress. In January, Representatives French Hill (R-AR) and David Cicilline (D-RI) [cosponsored](#) a House resolution calling on the Egyptian government to “end this culture of impunity,” while in May, Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) called on the Biden administration to freeze a tranche of aid contingent on Egypt’s improvements in human rights.

In September, President Biden imposed temporary [human rights-related conditions](#) on \$130 million of the \$300 million FMF tranche. Early in 2022, the State Department announced the United States would [reprogram](#) the \$130 million for Egypt’s failure to meet U.S. demands, which included releasing 16 detainees, although the administration allocated as planned \$170 million in aid and [authorized](#) \$2.5 billion in arms sales.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** Religious Freedom in [Egypt in 2021](#)
- **Podcast:** [Qur’anists in Egypt](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Calls on Egypt to Release Qur’anist Reda Abdel Rahman](#)
- **Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project:** [Reda Abdel Rahman](#)