



FACTS vs. FICTION

Coptic Solidarity's Fact-Checking of the '*Religious Freedom and Diversity*' Document Issued by the Embassy of Egypt in the U.S.A.

The firm Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck LLP has recently distributed “on behalf of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Arab Republic of Egypt” a pamphlet titled: “Strengthening National Unity: Religious Freedom and Diversity in Egypt,” under the header of Embassy of Egypt, Washington, D. C. Brownstein et al was contracted by Egypt in Nov. 2020 for lobbying activities.

This document, which may be the first published by the firm under the contract, contains numerous claims that will be addressed, point by point below.

INTRODUCTION



GOVERNMENT'S CLAIMS

- Since taking office in 2014, President Abdel Fattah El Sisi has made the promotion of greater religious tolerance and strengthening unity amongst Egyptians a cornerstone of his agenda. In 2015, the president made history when he became the first Egyptian head of state to attend Christmas mass at St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo.
- In 2016, while attending Christmas mass again at the same location, President El Sisi vowed to rebuild and restore all churches that had been damaged by acts of terrorism on 56 churches and other Christian properties by the operatives of the Muslim Brotherhood in summer 2013. In addition to legislative action and national directives, the last six years have yielded significant gains for the promotion of religious freedom and tolerance by both government and religious communities.



COPTIC SOLIDARITY FACT CHECK

- President El-Sisi does talk occasionally about fraternity between all Egyptians or about “renewing of religious discourse,” but this remains rhetorical as it is rarely translated into concrete policies and actions. Moreover, President El-Sisi is not the first president to visit a church at the start of a Coptic Nativity mass (he actually never attended one.) Then-president Mohamed Naguib was the first to do so in January 1953 and in 1954 at the (old) St. Mark Cathedral. Also, President Gamal Abdel-Nasser laid the founding stone of the new St. Mark Cathedral in 1965 and inaugurated it in 1968.
- Mr. El- Sisi has presided over the worst crackdown on civil society and human rights that Egypt has seen in decades. While this oppression has impacted those of all political and religious persuasions, the [Copts suffer the double injustice](#) of not only living under systematic discrimination by the Egyptian government, but also endure attacks from neighbors and regular members of Egyptian society who attack Copts and their properties with impunity. The reality for Copts in Egypt is one of life as second-class citizens.
- Mr. El-Sisi justifies most of his brutal actions by fighting the Muslim Brotherhood, yet he has empowered the Salafis, who are no less vicious than the Brotherhood. The dominance of their ideology over the ‘deep state,’ the education and the media is indisputable. A recent draft civil status law presented by the government, retrogresses women’s rights one century, is a significant indicator—and is only an example among many.
- The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has [placed Egypt](#) on their Tier 2 list for the previous three years (2017-2019) meaning they engaged in or tolerated at least one of the three elements in the standard of “systematic,” “ongoing,” or “egregious” violations. and on the Special Watch List in 2020. The USCIRF believes Egypt qualifies for the “systematic” and “ongoing” criteria of religious freedom violations. Before 2011, USCIRF merely noted that they were monitoring the situation in Egypt to see if it warranted a designation. USCIRF recommended Egypt for the Country of Particular Concern status annually between 2011 – 2016.
- Not until Coptic Solidarity partnered with former Rep. Dave Trott (R-MI) to introduce [H.R.5974 - The Coptic Churches Accountability Act](#) in the 114th Session of Congress which required the Secretary of State to submit an annual report to Congress regarding “efforts to restore or repair Christian property in the Arab Republic of Egypt that was burned, damaged, or otherwise destroyed during the sectarian violence in August 2013,” did the Egyptian government make serious efforts to finish church repairs.

NATIONAL LEGISLATION AND INITIATIVES ENHANCING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND TOLERANCE



GOVERNMENT'S CLAIMS



COPTIC SOLIDARITY FACT CHECK

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The three major Christian Churches in Egypt were represented in the drafting of the 2014 Egyptian constitution through the Committee of Fifty.• The constitution includes principles ensuring peaceful coexistence and guaranteeing freedom of religion, including citizenship (Art. 53), rule of law (Art. 94) and freedom of religion and the construction of places of worship (Art. 64). Furthermore, the constitution foresees application of these rules that respect of each religious sect in personal status affairs (Article 3). | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Egyptian Constitution includes articles that guarantee freedom of religion and criminalize discrimination based on religion. Yet, the second article of the Constitution states that “Islam is the religion of the state...and the principles of Islamic shari’a are the main sources of legislation.”• These statements are antithetical since shari’a repudiates religious freedom. Additionally, it is founded on non-equality—the superiority of the Believer (a Muslim) over a Non-believer (and also the superiority of men over women), and it actually proscribes discrimination and persecution of minority faiths. This is why, for example, Egyptian authorities often turn a blind eye to crimes committed by Muslims against Christians. Because all the constitutional articles are to be interpreted in light of and in submission to Article 2, shari’a always takes precedence and is the primary form of institutionalized discrimination by the Egyptian government. In short, the Egyptian government cannot implement contradictory principles; shari’a as supreme arbiter <i>and</i> religious freedom. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The constitution prescribes equitable representation for Christians in the House of Representatives in its first elections, resulting in 39 Christian deputies. An April 2019 referendum made this stipulation permanent.• A 2017 presidential decree established the National Council for Combating Terrorism and Extremism. This body is headed by the President with members including the Prime Minister, the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar, the Pope of the Orthodox Coptic Church, the Minister of Defense, Members of Parliament, and other prominent figures. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The newly “elected” parliament has a total of 34 Christian deputies (all categories combined). This is an improvement over the situation under Mubarak, but barely represents 5.6% of the total membership, which is a serious under-representation in comparison to their share of the population (10-15%). Note also that there are no Copts in the parliament’s leadership positions.• It appears the Egyptian government has just added the Coptic Pope as a member of this obscure National Council for Combating Terrorism and Extremism in 2021. It has held one known meeting after an incident in April 2017 and issued no statement or follow-up after the meeting. It would seem the committee is purely for show. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A 2016 law on church construction was adapted to facilitate the timely construction and licensing of churches (see p. 2). | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The 2016 church law is inherently discriminatory and does not treat churches on equal terms with mosques, being specific to churches and not (as previously considered) about “houses of worship” in general. In fact, mosques are not subjected to any legal constraints and can be built at will nearly everywhere.• However deficient, the law is not even being implemented by the government, as it continues with church closures and granting conditional approvals at a snail’s pace. (See below.) |

NATIONAL LEGISLATION AND INITIATIVES ENHANCING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND TOLERANCE



GOVERNMENT'S CLAIMS



COPTIC SOLIDARITY FACT CHECK

- The Egyptian government, through a national project, promotes the journey of the Holy Family from historical Palestine throughout Egypt. In 2017, Pope Francis recognized the journey as an official Christian pilgrimage.

- Coptic Solidarity applauds this project (launched three decades earlier) that will certainly help increase tourism to Egypt.

- A Supreme National Committee to promote religious tolerance was formed by presidential decree in 2018 to combat sectarian conflict by developing awareness campaigns and other strategies.

- There is no indication whatsoever that this Committee has made any decisions—or if it has ever met. It appears to be another committee for show.
- On the other hand, and more importantly, Article 53 of the 2014 Constitution stipulates that an independent anti-discrimination commission shall be established. This has yet to be done.

Meritocracy in the civil service leads Christians to senior government positions.

- One minister, two governors, one deputy minister, several female judges, and top diplomats and Ambassadors, and 39 members of parliament are Christian.

- Ever since Egypt first established a “cabinet” in 1878, there has been one Coptic minister out of a total of ten ministers. All throughout the 20th century, there were at least two (sometimes three) ministers out of 25-30. Portfolios were as prominent as prime minister, foreign affairs or even defense (under the monarchy), and deputy prime-minister or economy (under Mubarak). Since President El-Sisi came to power, there has been **only one Coptic Minister** in the government out of **34 ministers and 14 deputy ministers. Currently there is one junior minister** (Ms. Nabila Makram), **in charge of Immigration and Expatriate Affairs and has virtually no duties in her portfolio, making it a token appointment.**
- President el-Sisi appointed two Coptic governors to Damietta and Dakahliya governorates, a commendable decision; although Copts represent 10-15% of the population, there are still only two out of **27 governors and 18 deputy governors.**
- Egypt has about 165 Ambassadors and heads of diplomatic or consular missions abroad. At any one point in time, there are never more than three Copts; and none of them serve in a key capital or is positioned at international organizations. When was the last Coptic ambassador to D.C., London, Paris, U.N. or UNESCO? (Compare the situation of Copts to African Americans, who represent the same percentage of the total population in the U.S.)
- Copts are still seriously underrepresented and are subjected to a ‘glass-ceiling’ of 2% in entries to the military and police academies and the various branches of the judiciary positions. They are totally absent in various “sensitive” services such as security apparatuses and the presidency’s administration.
- There are no Copts serving as president or vice-president in any of the government’s 25 public universities, which are financed by all taxpayers. These public universities include over 450 faculties, with more than 1,550 leadership positions; Only a handful of these are occupied by Copts. In the public universities in Minya and Assiut, Copts represent 25-30% of the total students, yet less than 5% of the faculty.



GOVERNMENT'S CLAIMS



COPTIC SOLIDARITY FACT CHECK

(Continued)

- A Coptic judge was reportedly denied a promotion in the Administrative prosecution due to her faith; a Muslim colleague (Hisham Heikal) who objected to the discrimination against her was fired in April 2018 by President El-Sisi (through a presidential decree) and faces persistent reprisal acts.
- There is not a single Copt on the national Egyptian soccer team, and only one Copt has played for one of the top tier 18 soccer clubs in the past year. There was not a single Copt in Egypt's national delegation to the last two Summer Olympics.
- **As if the institutionalized and systemic discrimination is not bad enough, the Egyptian government adds blatant insult; talking about 'meritocracy' unintentionally reveals the despicable official views that the Copts deserve what they are facing because of their inherent deficiency.**

The denigration of religions is a criminal act.

- These acts have been criminalized to ensure public safety as well as preserve national harmony. This stipulation applies not only for Islam, but for Christianity and Judaism as well.

- The denigration of religions provision ("blasphemy law") has been part of Egyptian law since introduced by former President Sadat. Blasphemy laws undermine personal freedom and attempt to protect an undefinable entity, "faith." In Egypt, it is utilized to protect Islam. A disproportionate number of cases have been filed against Christians, and most others have been against Muslims who have spoken critically of some aspects of Islamic traditions. Rarely has it been applied in defense of Christianity (or Judaism), even though attacking these faiths is a daily staple of the media and mosques.

Administrative courts offer flexibility for Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses.

- The Egyptian constitution guarantees the right to adopt a religion of one's choosing and stipulates that the State shall construct places of worship for the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. However, this does not include Baha'is nor Jehovah's Witnesses. However, the Council of State, Egypt's administrative court system, issued a 2009 verdict permitting Baha'is to refrain from proclaiming any specific faith in identification documents.

- Baha'is are not permitted houses of worship, nor are recognized as an official religion. Baha'is are obligated to declare themselves on official documents as Muslims or, worse, to receive a dash (-) mark, thus ostracizing them even more. A better solution to decrease discrimination would be to remove religious affiliation from all official documents, as Egypt remains one of a few countries that requires the designation of religion on identity cards and on all official documents including even a rental contract or any application form.



GOVERNMENT'S CLAIMS

Church and synagogue restorations have been prioritized.

- Church and synagogue restorations have been prioritized. Egypt has undertaken significant efforts to restore and license Christian churches as well as strengthen Jewish community infrastructure.
- In August 2016, Egypt's House of Representatives passed a law helping facilitate the timely construction and licensing of churches. The law was passed by a two-thirds majority and supported by the leaders of Egypt's Coptic, Catholic and Anglican churches. The legislation delegates the power of issuing permits to Governors and sets up an administrative committee to license religious services facilities. The law also eliminated many of the bureaucratic and legislative obstacles that previously delayed progress. The administrative committee has licensed over 1,800 churches to-date.

- Making good on his 2016 promise, President Abdel Fattah El Sisi oversaw the restoration and rebuilding of 55 houses of worship damaged or destroyed by acts of terrorism in the summer of 2013. The multi-phase effort, launched in 2014, is almost halfway complete; 29 more religious facilities are to be fully restored in the coming months.



COPTIC SOLIDARITY FACT CHECK

- As mentioned above, the 2016 church law is inherently discriminatory and does not treat churches on equal terms with mosques. Furthermore, Egypt boasts **140,000 mosques** (all owned and/or run by the state) in addition to hundreds of thousands of prayer halls, situated in every public or private office building, factory, school or club; but only about 3,000 "licensed" churches (all denominations combined).
 - Based on information published by the government in the Official Gazette since the 2016 Church Law was passed till December 2020, a total of 1,800 churches and subsidiary buildings have received **preliminary/conditional approvals**. This represents 32.5% of the outstanding applications of 5,540. **Final** approvals are not typically reported by the government, but based on unofficial contacts with a number of concerned churches, it seems that **only a small percentage has been granted final approval**
 - USCIRF reported that **at least 25 churches and church-related facilities were closed in 2019** for "security reasons" (often following mob riots), with only one being reopened in January 2020. According to the 2016 Church Law, these existing churches without official registration were to be permitted to operate freely until they receive final approvals.
 - USCIRF reported that few new church permits have been granted in new construction zones, **but not in the existing communities that still lack houses of worship**. The new Cathedral is located in the yet-to-be inhabited administrative capital and does not have regular services. It is essentially a "show church."
 - To illustrate, Bishop Makarios of Minya stated that an estimated 150 villages and neighborhoods in his diocese are in need of a church or related structure. The new church law has done nothing to meet the immense need. There are hundreds of villages where Copts are denied a place of worship.
- More than seven years after the worst mass attack on churches in centuries, the government has only finished half of the repair and restoration work on those churches. Compare this with the dozens of mosques, built with taxpayers' money, inaugurated *every week*.



GOVERNMENT'S CLAIMS

- In January 2020, renovation of the Eliyahu Hanavi synagogue in Alexandria, one of the oldest and most cherished synagogues in the Middle East, was completed. In partnership with Tipat Halav, a Jewish welfare and historical organization, and U.S. Jewish organizations, Egypt's government invested over \$6 million dollars in the renovation. The government has also worked to restore Jewish cemeteries in Egypt, including the Fustat cemetery.

Religious communities have launched initiatives which have promoted extremism and religious tolerance.

- The Al-Azhar Observatory for Takfiri Fatwas was established in 2015. Two years later, the Al-Azhar Observatory organized the Citizenship and Coexistence Conference. Al-Azhar and the Coptic Church have also launched the "Egyptian Family Home" initiative, a cultural communications campaign to facilitate religious tolerance.



COPTIC SOLIDARITY FACT CHECK

- Restoring a synagogue when there are fewer than 10 Jews left in the country is a (welcome) symbolic gesture for regional political reasons, but in no way indicative of greater religious freedom. This so-called commitment by the Egyptian government is hardly credible given the rampant anti-Semitism promoted by government officials, through news and television shows, and in nearly every other aspect of society.
- The "Family Home" was founded by the state's security apparatus to eschew the government's responsibility in combating "religious strife" by promoting the entity as a joint project between Al-Azhar and the Coptic Church to "defuse community tensions following sectarian violence." Yet, The Family Home, including its local branches throughout the country, has been used as a tool for greater repression of the Coptic minority such as through the use of informal reconciliation sessions (see below.)
- The Family Home has done nothing to facilitate the opening of more churches or with re-opening the churches illegally closed in recent years. The Family Home is used as a tool to pressure Coptic businesspeople to pay for repairing attacked churches or remuneration of Coptic victims rather than holding the governorate or those at fault to account.
- The Family Home has done nothing to intervene in the many cases of kidnapped Coptic women and underage girls who are trafficked, forcibly converted to Islam, and often forcibly married. Coptic Solidarity published a report in 2020 titled '[Jihad of the Womb: Trafficking of Coptic Women and Girls in Egypt](#)' which addresses the widespread practice of abduction and trafficking of Coptic women and girls in Egypt. The report has been submitted to the relevant entities at the UN and with the US government. An estimated 500 Coptic women have been trafficked in the past decade. The problem is not new, but it has worsened in recent years. The report includes an appendix of some recent – mostly unresolved – trafficking cases. It demonstrates that these crimes fall within United Nations' conventions and protocol for trafficking as well as Egypt, the Arab League, and US definitions. Furthermore, the forced disappearance of minor girls in Egypt also constitutes crimes in contravention of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. As such, the Egyptian government and international entities must address these heinous crimes that have been conducted with near impunity.



GOVERNMENT'S CLAIMS

Customary Councils prevent litigation and facilitate conflict resolution.

- Customary Councils prevent litigation and facilitate conflict resolution. Customary Councils exist in local communities in remote areas of the country. Rather than resorting to lengthy litigation, which is also difficult in remote areas, these fora facilitate resolutions between individuals. These councils are not substitutes for the courts in criminal cases.

- **Government Initiatives:** The Ministry of Education has created a joint committee of instructors of Islamic and Christian studies to revise Islamic and Christian educational curricula taught at public schools. Their mandate is to mainstream doctrines that promote tolerance, mutual understanding, and co-existence. The Ministry, in collaboration with Al-Azhar and the Coptic Church, also holds seminars to discuss issues related to combating extremism and to sensitize students on common values between people of different religions. The Ministry of Education has also launched initiatives such as "Diversity without Disputes" and "My Values, My Beacon" to combat discrimination and intolerance as well as promote social cohesion and the rule of law.



COPTIC SOLIDARITY FACT CHECK

- **Customary Councils are used to circumvent police reports, legal charges, and justice for Coptic victims.** The Family Home (and its local branches all over the country) has been used as a tool for greater repression of the Coptic minority such as through the use of informal reconciliation sessions instead of taking perpetrators to court. In reality, there is no "religious strife," "inter-communal violence" or "sectarian violence" in Egypt. The violence invariably originates with (fanaticized) Muslims attacking Copts and their properties.
 - The use of these Customary Councils to settle "disputes" are utilized when Muslim mobs attack Copts and their properties. Coptic victims are typically intimidated and pressured to retract statements and charges in exchange for "protection" in their villages, or for the release of imprisoned Copts.
 - During these incidents of communal violence when Muslim mobs attack Copts, their homes, and churches, local police typically arrest both Copts and Muslims, despite culpability. The arrested Copts are used as bargaining chips to assure Coptic cooperation during the customary council sessions.
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- The results of this effort remain to be seen, but we observe a total absence of involvement by secularist intellectuals who should be playing a key role to instill the values of civility and secularism.
 - As important as fixing the specific religious curricula is, the more urgent need is to eradicate the Islamic content, which has been forced into other subjects such as language and history, where there are topics and texts that instill hatred of non-Muslims, incite violence, foster a sense of Islamic superiority and force non-Muslim students to submit to Islamic precepts that denigrate their own faith.



GOVERNMENT'S CLAIMS

- **In the Al-Azhar Education System:** Al-Azhar educational curricula now include content on human rights and religious tolerance. A new curriculum for primary schools focuses on the principle of citizenship and teaches the relationship between Muslims and Christians. In secondary schools, the component "Citizenship and Human Rights" has been added to encourage religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence.



COPTIC SOLIDARITY FACT CHECK

- Al -Azhar has its own educational system, with a separate curriculum, ranging from elementary to secondary school and enrolls over 2 million students in 11,000 schools. In addition, Al-Azhar University enrolls almost half a million students. This entire Muslim-only system, which is financed by the taxpayers including non-Muslims, is an absurd relic of a fanatic mentality that has no place in the 21st century. It must be disbanded altogether. Any discussion of promoting "citizenship and human rights" in such a system—which is built on directly oppositional values—is even more absurd.

FINAL REMARKS BY COPTIC SOLIDARITY:

The Egyptian government is going to great lengths to improve its "image." Wouldn't it be more truthful, more productive—and less costly—to improve the reality in such a way that it becomes naturally reflected into real progress towards equal citizenship rights for all?

The fact is that the Copts, the indigenous population of Egypt, are subjected to institutional, systemic and systematic discrimination in their own country. It is imperative that the Egyptian government admit this reality at the highest levels of the state and enact rigorous and urgent plans to restore full citizenship rights of Copts.

