



October 27, 2023

## Advocacy of Hatred based on Religion or Belief in Egypt

### Historical background

The status of Egypt's indigenous Copts has been one of subservience and systematic discrimination for centuries. Copts suffer the double injustice of living under systematic discrimination by the Egyptian government, and also from 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.

The Coptic people are an ethnoreligious population that identifies as the descendants of ancient Egyptians and civilization.<sup>1</sup> Since the Arab invasion in mid- seventh century, rulers have treated the Coptic population with various degrees of discrimination and persecution that ranged from radical increase in taxes to full-scale massacres.<sup>2</sup> Most of the native population converted to Islam over six centuries to escape the *jizya* and humiliations of dhimmi status. The term "Copt" came to define the native Christian population that had not converted to Islam.

Historical sources demonstrate the Copts' burden to comply with bylaws like clothing mandates, increases in the *jizya*, displacement of the patriarch, and closure or demolition of church buildings.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, these restrictions created a distinct Coptic population.

In 1911, Coptic leaders and representatives convened to formulate their demands, which demonstrated Coptic self-awareness, and a desire to live as equals with Muslims in their homeland.<sup>4</sup>

After the declaration of Egypt as a British protectorate in 1914, Egyptians developed a theme of unity against a new common enemy, the colonial power. The 1952 "revolution," that ended the monarchy, established a dictatorial, Islam-tainted, regime. A primary vision adopted by Gamal

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<sup>1</sup> James B. Minahan. *Encyclopedia of Stateless Nations: Ethnic and National Groups Around the World: Ethnic and National Groups Around the World*, Second Edition, Vol Second edition, Greenwood; 2016, 108, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1281605&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>2</sup> El-Maqrizi, Taqi-ad Din, *A Short History of The Copts and of their Church*, English Translation by Rev. S. C. Mallan, M.A., London, 1873, 76.

<sup>3</sup> Guindy, Adel, *A Sword Over the Nile: A Brief History of the Copts under Islamic Rule*, New York, Austin Macauley Publishers, 2020, 179-214.

<sup>4</sup> Takawi, Mourad, *Representing the Coptic community: the Communal Council and the road to the 1911 Coptic Congress*, Middle Eastern Studies, October 3, 2022, 2-3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2022.2124508>.

Abdel-Nasser, and later by all other presidents, is Arab nationalism. It ignited greater hatred and discrimination against Copts, whom many saw as the non-Arabs who followed “the colonizers' faith.” This idea aimed at alienating the Copts from their motherland and unofficially transform their identity from the Christian indigenous population to the heretic foreigners.<sup>5</sup>

## **Hatred Defined in Legal and Policy Frameworks**

### **The Constitution & State Religion**

The primary vehicle for instilling hatred based in legal and policy frameworks that results in intolerance, discrimination, and violence based on religion is through the establishment of religion. In Egypt, the Constitution includes articles guaranteeing freedom of religion and criminalizing discrimination based on religion.<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup>

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. All the constitutional articles are to be interpreted in light of and in submission to Article 2. In short, the Egyptian government cannot implement contradictory principles. This is established in Egyptian court precedent.<sup>8</sup>

Egypt is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) yet joined with the reservation that provisions of the covenant do not conflict with shari’a. As with the Egyptian constitution, this is again asserting the supremacy over the ICCPR, and Egypt’s status is incompatible with the rights guaranteed in this important human rights instrument.<sup>9</sup>

### **Government and State Actors Teaching and Promoting Hatred**

Egypt’s educational curricula and schooling system are permeated with discriminatory teachings. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has highlighted notions of superiority of Muslims over other religious minorities.<sup>10</sup>

The institution of Al-Azhar is enshrined in the constitution as “the main authority in Islamic religious and general affairs.” The government provides sufficient funding for it to achieve its

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<sup>5</sup> Guirguis, Laure, *Copts and the Security State: Violence, Coercion, and Sectarianism in Contemporary Egypt*, Stanford, Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University, 2012, 25-27.

<sup>6</sup> *Constitution of Egypt*, Article 64.

<sup>7</sup> *Constitution of Egypt*, Article 2.

<sup>8</sup> SCC-18-Y17, Supreme Constitutional Court, 1996, <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/arabic/Egypt-SCC-SC/Egypt-SCC-18-Y17.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Egypt ratified the ICCPR and ICESCR on January 14, 1982

<sup>10</sup> US Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Assessing Religious Freedom in Egyptian Curriculum Reform*, Washington, DC, August 25, 2022, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-08/2022%20Egypt%20Curriculum.pdf>

educational and da'wa purposes, while there is no similar provision for government funding to other faiths. <sup>11</sup> Current state funding of al-Azhar is \$1.02 billion a year.

Al -Azhar maintains a separate school system and curriculum for elementary through secondary school, which educates about 2 million students. There are 320,000 students enrolled in Al-Azhar University, the largest university in Egypt, studying in 76 faculties (covering religious and non-religious studies) with campuses spread throughout the country. Graduates of Al-Azhar high school are also entitled entrance to army and police academies. This Muslim-only system is financed by the taxpayers including non-Muslims. Non-Muslims cannot enroll in al-Azhar non-religious faculties unless they can memorize and recite the Quran. <sup>12</sup>

The Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmad el-Tayeb, who has presided over al-Azhar since 2010, is also president of the World Council of Muslim Elders and works in full coordination with Saudi Wahabi institutions. **Under his leadership, al-Azhar has become one of the greatest sources of promoting religion-based hatred in the world.** This has a particularly serious security implication since most imams in America, Europe, and Australia have studied at al-Azhar. It is therefore impossible to contain Islamic terrorism without attempting to contain the extremist thought which springs from these institutions.

Sheikh el-Tayeb espouses double speech, one (belligerent) message which he addresses to Muslims, and another (peaceful) which he addresses to the West. <sup>13</sup>

## **Discrimination Institutionalized in Legislation**

### **2016 Church Law**

While the 2016 law regulating the building and repair of churches in Egypt was presented as a breakthrough in the process of acquiring permits to make repairs and to construct new churches, it is inherently discriminatory and does not treat churches on equal terms with mosques. <sup>14</sup>

Egypt boasts 140,000 state-owned/operated mosques 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).

The State Department’s latest IRF Report on Egypt notes the total number of churches and service buildings that have applied for legal status since 2017 is 3,730 and that the total number

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<sup>11</sup> *Constitution of Egypt*, Article 7.

<sup>12</sup> Coptic Solidarity, *Facts vs. Fiction: Coptic Solidarity’s Fact-Checking of the ‘Religious Freedom and Diversity’ Document Issued by the Embassy of Egypt in the USA*, Washington. March 17, 2021, <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/coptic-solidaritys-analysis-of-the-religious-freedom-and-diversity-info-sheet.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Magdi Khalil, Special for Coptic Solidarity, *A Glimpse Into the Mindset of Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, The Grand Imam of al-Azhar*, March 24, 2019, <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2019/03/24/a-glimpse-into-the-mindset-of-sheikh-ahmed-al-tayeb-the-grand-imam-of-al-azhar/>.

<sup>14</sup> The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Studies, *TIMEP Brief: Church Construction Law*, July 29, 2021, <https://timep.org/2019/07/29/timep-brief-church-construction-law/>.

granted by year end was 2, 526. Most of these approvals are preliminary, meaning that the remainder still have to fulfill often onerous conditions, none of which apply to mosques. <sup>15</sup>

### **Church Burnings**

In the month of August 2022, eleven Coptic churches in Egypt “caught fire.” In each case, Egyptian authorities denied arson as a possible cause, citing instead “natural” or accidental causes such as faulty wiring. Not only did they all occur during an important holiday—the Virgin Mary fast -when churches are especially packed—but that timeframe also coincided with the “anniversary” of Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers torching 62 churches in Egypt in 2013. It suggests that the instigators may have been “commemorating” those events by burning more churches. Not one mosque “caught fire” during this same timeframe. <sup>16</sup>

### **Closures**

More than 50 churches have been closed on the dubious claim that they pose security threats — that is, because Muslims riot at their existence. <sup>17</sup> Copts must rely on the whims <sup>18</sup> of local government officials to repair crumbling churches, bear all the costs, and still have their churches closed or destroyed at any moment.

### **New Construction Permits**

Recently granted building permits are nearly all in new construction zones, not addressing the dire shortage of churches throughout the countryside. The State Department’s 2019 IRF report quoted Bishop Makarios of Minya saying that about 150 villages and neighborhoods in his diocese need a church or related structure. <sup>19</sup>

### **Family Law**

The USCIRF reported on family law in the MENA region, demonstrating the cross-over violation of numerous human rights and civil liberties through the advocacy of hatred based on religion. Abuse, particularly of women and children is made possible in areas of family law when religious leaders are empowered to make legal decisions in lieu of civil options. It impacts areas of marriage, divorce, custody, guardianship, and inheritance. <sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Coptic Solidarity, *Annual State Department Report 2020: What Constitutes Improvement for Copts in Egypt*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2020/06/17/annual-state-department-report-what-constitutes-improvement-for-copts-in-egypt/>.

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Ibrahim, Coptic Solidarity *Eleven Coptic Churches "Catch Fire" Over Two Weeks*, August 31, 2022, <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2022/08/31/eleven-coptic-churches-catch-fire-over-two-weeks/>.

<sup>17</sup> Raymond Ibrahim, Coptic Solidarity, *"For Security Reasons," Many Coptic Churches Remain Closed in Egypt*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2023/04/26/closed-for-security-reasons-many-coptic-churches-remain-closed-in-egypt/>.

<sup>18</sup> Raymond Ibrahim, Coptic Solidarity, *"Pray in the Rain Local Governor Tells Coptic Christians Bereft of a Church Roof*, December 28, 2022, <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2023/04/26/closed-for-security-reasons-many-coptic-churches-remain-closed-in-egypt/>.

<sup>19</sup> US Department of State, *2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Egypt*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/egypt/>.

<sup>20</sup> US Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Personal Status and Family Law in the Middle East and North Africa: Implications for Women and Religious Freedom*, Washington, DC, September 19, 2023, <https://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/releases-statements/uscirf-releases-new-report-religiously-based-family-law-middle-east>.

## Manifestations of Hatred Based on Religion or Belief in the Egyptian Streets

### Trafficking of Coptic Women

Coptic Solidarity's reports *Jihad of the Womb: Trafficking of Coptic Women Girls in Egypt*<sup>21</sup> and *The Disappearance of Christian Women in Egypt: a Crisis that Requires Urgent Attention* detail the complicity in this urgent crisis of Egyptian criminals, police, Imams, and the judiciary. Coptic women are targeted for abduction, forced marriage and conversion, because they are Christians. The state colludes to hide minors until they are of age and provide them with new IDs identifying them as Muslims, and any children born to them will then be Muslims. They are subjected to physical and sexual violence in lives of servitude to their Muslim captor.<sup>22</sup>

### Violent Attacks

Numerous Copts have been attacked and even murdered in public, merely for being of a minority faith. Examples:

**Fadi Nabil Mikhail** - A Coptic engineer and site supervisor was murdered by a Muslim coworker with premeditation by shoving him with the bucket of his loader several times before crushing him. (May 2023)<sup>23</sup>

**Fr. Arsenius** - While walking in a crowded street of Alexandria with his family and some church-youth, Fr. Arsenius Wadid was stabbed in the neck by an unidentified but bearded man, killing him. (April 2022)<sup>24</sup>

**Rani Ra'fat** - Three masked men pulled up in their vehicle near the workshop of Ra'fat and opened fire when he appeared. Ra'fat died on the spot and had 22 bullets in his body. (May 2022)<sup>25</sup>

**Mona Wafdi Marzouk** - While Mona was walking to her family farm in the early morning, a man attacked her, first trying to strangle her, followed by cutting her throat with a sickle. Luckily, it did not fully slice through the arteries of her neck. (June 2022)<sup>26</sup>

**Kirollos (Cyril) Megali** - Abdullah Hosni, a Muslim man with a long history of harassing Christians, randomly attacked Megali with a meat cleaver in a village in Sohag. Kirollos, who was

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<sup>21</sup> Coptic Solidarity, *'Jihad of the Womb': Trafficking of Coptic Women & Girls in Egypt*, Washington DC, September 10, 2020, <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/jihad-of-the-womb-report-fa.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> Amira Elmasry, Coptic Solidarity, *The Disappearance of Christian Women in Egypt: A Crisis that Requires Urgent Attention*, September 27, 2023, <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2023/09/27/the-disappearance-of-christian-women-in-egypt-a-crisis-that-requires-urgent-attention/#:~:text=attention%20%2D%20Coptic%20Solidarity-,The%20Disappearance%20of%20Christian%20Women%20in%20Egypt,crisis%20that%20requires%20urgent%20attention&text=Not%20a%20week%20goes%20by,about%20her%20conversion%20to%20Islam>.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2023/05/18/coptic-engineer-shoved-and-crushed-by-a-grudged-loader-driver/>.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2022/04/07/egypt-coptic-christian-priest-slaughtered-in-alexandria/>.

<sup>25</sup> Raymond Ibrahim, *"Loyalty to Allah" Prompted a Muslim Man to Murder a Coptic Christian*, May 15, 2022, <https://www.raymondibrahim.com/2022/05/15/loyalty-to-allah-prompted-a-muslim-man-to-murder-a-coptic-christian/>.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2022/06/23/muslim-man-tries-to-slaughter-coptic-christian-woman-with-a-sickle/>.

rushed to a hospital “drenched in blood and with multiple stab wounds,” spent three days in an intensive care unit before succumbing to his injuries, including hack wounds to his skull. (June 2022) <sup>27</sup>

## **Religion-Based Hatred in Legal Matters**

### **Customary Reconciliation Sessions**

During incidents of “communal violence” when Muslim mobs attack Copts, their homes, and churches, local police typically arrest both Copts and Muslims, despite culpability. The use of these community reconciliation sessions to settle “disputes” are utilized as a way of circumventing police reports, legal charges, and justice for Coptic victims. Copts are typically pressured to retract statements and charges in exchange for “protection” in their villages, or for the release of the imprisoned Copts. <sup>28</sup>

### **The Family House**

The Family House was founded by the state’s security apparatus to eschew the government’s responsibility in combatting “religious strife” by projecting the matter as inter-religious disputes to be resolved between Al-Azhar and the Churches. The Family House has done nothing to facilitate church openings or to reopen those illegally closed. It is utilized to compel Coptic businesspeople to pay for church repairs following attacks or to compensate Coptic victims in lieu of the government or culprits. <sup>29</sup>

### **Blasphemy Laws**

The “denigration of religions” provisions (“blasphemy law”) have been part of Egyptian law since introduced by former President Sadat. They undermine personal freedom and attempt to protect an undefinable entity, “faith” and are 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 aspect of Islamic traditions. <sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2022/06/09/muslim-man-butchers-coptic-christian-with-a-meat-cleaver/>.

<sup>28</sup> US Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Egypt Country Update*, Washington, DC, August 4, 2023, <https://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/releases-statements/uscirf-releases-new-report-religious-freedom-conditions-egypt>.

<sup>29</sup> Coptic Solidarity, *Facts vs. Fiction: Coptic Solidarity’s Fact-Checking of the ‘Religious Freedom and Diversity’ Document Issued by the Embassy of Egypt in the USA*, Washington. March 17, 2021, <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/coptic-solidaritys-analysis-of-the-religious-freedom-and-diversity-info-sheet.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> Coptic Solidarity, *Facts vs. Fiction: Coptic Solidarity’s Fact-Checking of the ‘Religious Freedom and Diversity’ Document Issued by the Embassy of Egypt in the USA*, Washington. March 17, 2021, <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/coptic-solidaritys-analysis-of-the-religious-freedom-and-diversity-info-sheet.pdf>.

## **Impunity**

Copts can be subjected to violent attacks at any time in Egypt. Because the perpetrators are almost never held accountable, these attacks continue.

On October 9, 2011, the Egyptian army murdered 27 Copts and injured 327 others who were peacefully protesting the government's closure of a church in Aswan. This event is known as the Maspero Massacre. The government has yet to take responsibility for this brutal attack in which soldiers used live ammunition without warning and drove armored personnel carriers in zig-zag patterns through the protestors to kill as many as possible.<sup>31</sup>

On May 20, 2016, in the village of al-Karm, some 300 Muslim men forcefully entered Soad Thabet's home, stripped her naked, and then beat, spat on, and dragged her through the streets by the hair — to jeers, whistles, and triumphant shouts of "Allahu Akbar." Her "crime" was that her son was accused of being romantically involved with a Muslim woman. Despite video evidence and eyewitnesses clearly identifying the three Muslim men primarily responsible for the assault, from the very first court hearing in 2016 until the present, Egyptian courts have exonerated the perpetrators: they continuously acquitted them, tried to close the case, delayed and postponed hearings, and judges even recused themselves. Thabet and her family received threats and had to relocate from their village. Now, Thabet is facing litigation to compensate the men who assaulted her.<sup>32</sup>

## **Systemic and Structural Disadvantage**

### **Religion on ID Cards**

Religion-based hatred is crystallized into systemic and structural disadvantage against all religious minorities in Egypt. Religion is required on an individual's national ID card and the options are limited to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. There are no options for Atheists and Agnostics, but Baha'i can now receive a – "dash" in place of a recognized religion.<sup>33</sup> This allows daily discrimination against all religious minorities in education, employment, government services, sports, and much more.<sup>34</sup>

### **Inexorable 2% Glass Ceiling**

Since Egypt's first "cabinet" in 1878, there has been one Copt out of ten ministers. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 became president, there has been only one Coptic Minister in the government out of 34 ministers and

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/modern-martyrs/>.

<sup>32</sup> Raymond Ibrahim, Gatestone Institute, *Islamic Justice Prevails: Stripped Naked and Paraded in Egypt, Christian Grandmother is Now the Guilty One*, February 29, 2023, <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/modern-martyrs/>.

<sup>33</sup> US Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Egypt Country Update*, Washington, DC, August 4, 2023, <https://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/releases-statements/uscirf-releases-new-report-religious-freedom-conditions-egypt>.

<sup>34</sup> US Department of State, *2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Egypt*, Washington, DC, May 15, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/egypt/>.

14 deputy ministers. Currently there is one junior minister in charge of Immigration and Expatriate Affairs and has virtually no duties in her portfolio, making it a token appointment.<sup>35</sup>

- Presidential Decree #12 for 2023 lists 100 newly appointed vice-presidents of the State Council. Only one of them is a Copt.
- President el-Sisi appointed two Coptic governors to Damietta and Dakahliya governorates; Copts represent 10-15% of the population, but only two out of 27 governors and 18 deputy governors.
- Of about 165 Ambassadors and heads of diplomatic missions abroad, Copts are capped to 3 positions, and none serve in a key capital or international organization.
- Copts are subjected to a 'glass ceiling' of 2% in entries to military and police academies and judicial positions. They are completely absent from various "sensitive" offices such as security apparatuses and the presidency's administration.
- No Copts serve as president or vice-president in any of the government's 25 public universities. These include over 450 faculties; a handful of Copts are included in the 1,550 leadership positions; Copts represent 25-30% of the student population in public universities in Minya and Assiut yet less than 5% of the faculty.
- Only two Copts<sup>36</sup> play in the Egyptian Premier League and one Copt<sup>37</sup> participated in the last Olympics

It is imperative that the Egyptian government enact rigorous and urgent plans to restore full citizenship rights of Copts. Coptic Solidarity has a list of 10 such recommendations.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Coptic Solidarity, *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.*, Washington. March 17, 2021, <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/coptic-solidaritys-analysis-of-the-religious-freedom-and-diversity-info-sheet.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> US Department of State, *2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Egypt*, Washington, DC, May 15, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/egypt/>.

<sup>37</sup> Coptic Solidarity, *141 Athletes Represent Egypt in the Tokyo Olympics. One of Them is a Copt*. July 28, 2021, <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2021/07/28/141-athletes-represent-egypt-in-the-tokyo-olympics-one-of-them-is-a-copt/>.

<sup>38</sup> Mina A. Botros, Coptic Solidarity, *Recognizing the Coptic "Indigenous Peoples" Status for Protection from State-Sponsored Discrimination*, April 11, 2023, <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2023/05/02/the-coptic-identity-p4-of-4/>.