

WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
20

Egypt



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).¹ Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

Key findings

Most freedom of religion violations occur at community level, such as Christian women being harassed in the street or Muslim mobs forcing Christians to move out after an alleged blasphemy accusation. Such incidents take place mostly in rural areas of Upper Egypt and in certain urban areas where Salafist movements are active. Reportedly, Christian women and girls from disadvantaged backgrounds remain vulnerable for grooming, forced conversion and forced marriage. The President

¹World Watch Research measures pressure across all spheres of life as well as violence (full methodology [here](#) – password: freedom).

speaks positively about Egypt’s historical Christian community but weak law enforcement leaves them vulnerable to attack, with security services sometimes being complicit. Churches and Christian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are restricted in building or running social services. Despite the new Church Construction Law (2016), legalizing and building churches remain difficult, with churches being subject to a separate and unequal legal system. Christians with a Muslim background face enormous pressure from their families to return to Islam. The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar University (one of the most influential Islamic universities globally) has stated that Muslims may not convert to Christianity. The state also makes it impossible for conversion to be officially recognized.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi

POPULATION

104,692,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

16,250,000 (OD estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	16,250,000	15.5
Muslims	87,826,334	83.9
Atheists	88,443	0.1
Agnostics	520,800	0.5

Source²

The Arab Republic of Egypt is a republic with a semi-presidential system. On paper, Egypt is a democracy. In practice, the powers of the parliament have always been weak and, de facto, the president rules alone. The independence of the judiciary is limited and it is not unusual for the government to simply ignore court rulings. With President Al-Sisi sworn into power in 2014, the situation in Egypt stabilized, but human rights have been experiencing a crisis. Al-Sisi cracked down on opposition groups and thousands of his critics have been arrested, tortured, disappeared,

tried in military courts and executed. Health workers who dared criticize the government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic have been arrested under anti-terrorism laws. In 2018, the President ratified the Anti-Cyber and Information Technology Crimes Law, which ostensibly aims to combat ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’ but in reality gives the authorities power to block content. Social media is monitored and criticism of the government or Islam is not tolerated.

Egypt seeks to be an influential center of Sunni Islam. It is culturally conservative and has a strong national identity. In rural and impoverished areas in particular (where many Christians live), radical imams and less tolerant brands of Islam have significant influence. Reportedly, Christian women and girls from disadvantaged backgrounds in such areas remain vulnerable for grooming, forced conversion and forced marriage, especially by radical Islamic groups. All over, there is considerable division between Christians and Muslims. Employment discrimination against Christians remains evident, especially in government institutions. Christian businesses can be boycotted. Children in villages often leave school

² Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021) (Adapted according to OD-estimate)

early to help earn family income. Christians remain vulnerable to mob attacks, which can be triggered by a rumor of alleged blasphemy or the opening of a new church. Usually, the local authorities use so-called ‘reconciliation sessions’ to resolve a conflict, which often results in Muslim attackers going free and a culture of impunity for violence against Christians.

Approximately 85% of Egyptians are Muslim, virtually all of them Sunni. Christianity has deep roots in Egypt; Christians are especially concentrated in Upper Egypt and large cities. More than 90% of Christians are Coptic Orthodox. According to [Humanists International](#), Egyptian ID cards include a religion section which only allows recognition of members of the three ‘divine religions’. Muslim-born individuals who leave Islam are not allowed to change the religion field.

How the situation varies by region

Upper Egypt, the southern part of the country, is known to be more Islamically conservative and radical than the north. Most incidents and mob attacks take place in this region, with the Minya Governate being the most notorious and having the highest number of attacks on Christians per capita. However, Christians in the economically disadvantaged rural areas, and some urban areas in the north, experience a similar degree of oppression. This is carried out by radical Muslims, especially in the Nile delta villages and towns. Radical Islamic groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood have nationwide support, but violent Islamic militants are only openly active in the north-eastern area of the Sinai Peninsula. In April 2021, a video appeared of the execution of Nabil Habashy Salama, a Christian from north Sinai who was previously abducted by Islamic State (IS).

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

Historical Christian communities

The largest church in this category is the Coptic Orthodox Church. There are also established Protestant and Catholic denominations throughout the country. The large Coptic minority faces important difficulties, including discrimination in education, health and government legislation that hinders essential aspects of church life. However, this group has been tolerated by the state and by the Muslim majority because of its historical presence and its significant size of several million. Other historical Christian communities are regularly targeted by their surrounding neighborhoods. Rumors that a building has been turned into a church, an accusation of blasphemy (on social media) or a relationship between a Christian man and a Muslim woman are enough to lead to (mob) violence. Meanwhile radical Islamic groups remain a danger, particularly in the Sinai region.

Converts to Christianity

There is a small but growing number of Christian converts who bear the brunt of violations, most often at the hands of family members. Relatives punish converts for abandoning the Islamic faith, often by means of beatings or house expulsion.

Non-traditional Christian communities

There are several Evangelical and Pentecostal groups in the country, some of them being second, third or even further generations of converts from a Muslim background. Others come from an Orthodox background. They face pressure from both the Islamic society and to a lesser extent from the Coptic Orthodox Church.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression:

In Egypt, Islamic oppression operates in different ways. Islamic culture regards Christians as second-class citizens. This view causes the discrimination of Christians in the political realm and their dealing with the state. It also creates an environment in which the state is reluctant to respect and enforce the fundamental rights of Christians. In the family sphere, converts to Christianity face great pressure to renounce their faith. Christians also face pressure from Islamic oppression in their daily lives, in their local neighborhood or at work. There have been several violent attacks against Christians in the recent past, perpetrated by militant Islamic groups. Nonetheless, the activity of such militant groups is largely concentrated in north-eastern Sinai.

Dictatorial paranoia:

Egypt has a long tradition of authoritarian rule. In 2011, Hosni Mubarak's long dictatorship was ended through massive social protests. It eventually led to the controversial election of Mohamed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. His government did not behave democratically and was ousted in 2013 by a national uprising supported by the army. Currently, Egypt is ruled by a civilian government led by former army chief Abdul Fatah al-Sisi, after a presidential election in May 2014 and re-election in March 2018. This government seems to regard basic human rights and democratic pluralism as a low priority in view of the huge current economic, political, social and security challenges. In this context, therefore, religious freedom for Christians is not fully guaranteed.

Clan oppression:

Christians and Muslims act as two distinct groups in Egyptian society. As in many other Arab countries, tribal thinking strongly influences groups and this can easily lead to verbal and physical violence being aimed against those (who have placed themselves) outside the group. Converts from Islam to Christianity face particular pressure from their immediate relatives for shaming values like the honor of the family. Secondly, in Upper Egypt for instance, many cases of mob violence happen when Christians try to implement the official recognition of a church building. There is a mixture of Islamic oppression and clan oppression in such cases, which means the Christian minority must operate carefully.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Christian women from disadvantaged backgrounds are commonly targeted for marriage by grooming, rape and forced conversion by Islamist networks, mainly in rural and poor urban areas. Police response has often been complicit or apathetic and many women remain missing. Consequently, many women live in fear. Christian girls are lured into marriages; these girls are often under-age and come from vulnerable families. Female converts from Islam may be locked in the home, physically beaten or even killed to defend the family 'honor'. If married, they can easily be divorced and lose custody of their children.

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied custody of children
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - sexual
- Violence - verbal

MEN

The number of Christians in senior military or government positions is minimal. Particularly in rural areas, young men struggle to find a job and their faith puts them in a disadvantaged position. As the main financial provider, this hinders a Christian man's ability to provide for his family. The strain of these dynamics has reportedly caused higher rates of domestic violence and divorce. Perpetrators use these financial difficulties to convert younger men to Islam, luring them with financial incentives. Christian men have also been kidnapped for ransom and killed.

- Abduction
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence - death
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological



WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution score out of 100
2022	20	70.88
2021	16	75.07
2020	16	75.71
2019	16	75.73
2018	17	69.88

Egypt's four point drop in score from WWL 2021 to WWL 2022 was mainly caused by fewer reported violent incidents, most notably a lower number of attacked church buildings. The lower number of incidents is likely the result of the COVID-19 pandemic, as Egyptians were told to stay at home as much as possible and churches significantly reduced their activities. Nonetheless, the level of violence against Christians is very high, with at least eight Christians killed and more than 50 attacked, among other reported incidents.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- A 62-year-old Coptic Christian, Nabil Habashy Salama, was executed by IS and the video of execution was released with death threats to all Christians in Egypt. Another Christian, Sobhy Samy Abdul Nour, was also kidnapped and executed by IS.
- Ramy Kamil, a Coptic Christian activist who primarily advocates for full rights for the Coptic Christian minority, has been in prison for more than two years without trial on charges of terrorism.
- Several Christians have been arrested on charges of blasphemy, often after posting a message related to Islam on social media.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians' private property damaged or confiscated	Christians internally displaced
2022	8	51	31	117
2021	8	19	9	10

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - see [here](#) for full results. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.

Private life

A key ruling by the Cairo Administrative Court in 2008 stated that the freedom to practice one's religion is subject to certain limitations, and that conversion from Islam to another faith violates Islamic principles and is not allowed. Conversion is punished via blasphemy laws. Several Christians have been arrested or attacked by mobs after allegedly insulting Islam on social media. Accusations of blasphemy are easily made, so most Christians refrain from discussing their faith with people they do not know or trust. Social hostility towards converts is very high and even rumors of conversion can lead to mob violence, especially in rural areas. Conversion is seen to bring shame upon the family, who will often cast out converts, force them to recant or even kill them. Many keep their faith a secret. Christians in Upper Egypt are more careful using visible symbols, such as crosses in cars, due to fear of harassment. Most, if not all, Coptic Christians wear a tattooed cross on their arm, used for recognition to enter a church. However, it also makes them easily recognizable for attackers.

Family life

It is not possible for converts from Islam to Christianity to change religion on their ID cards. The registered religion of the father is automatically applied to the child, so children of converts are considered Muslim. Under Sharia law, a Christian man cannot marry a Muslim woman nor can two converts marry under

Christian rituals. Pressure from family to divorce a convert is high. Even if this does not happen, the convert will lose inheritance and guardianship rights according to Sharia law. Islam is dominant within the educational system. Coptic Christian children have Christian religion classes at school but still have to study Islamic literature and the Quran as part of the curriculum. At times, Christian religious classes are not provided and in some cases Christian students have to follow Islamic religious classes. This can be avoided at private Christian schools, but this is only financially possible for some.

Community life

Employment discrimination is widespread. Christians are not employed in the intelligence services, cannot serve in senior positions in the army and are under-represented in senior government positions. There has not been a single Christian player on the national football team in the last decade, although Christians constitute more than 10% of the population. Such discrimination has led to a high level of entrepreneurial activity among Christians since they cannot rely on the state or private employers for jobs. Pressure and discrimination against Christians increases in poor and rural areas, especially in Upper Egypt. Local Islamist groups know where Christians live and monitor them to make sure they don't evangelize or disrespect Islam in other ways. In recent years, several Christians have been attacked after allegedly insulting Islam or

allegedly having a relationship with a Muslim woman. Police presence and government control is less strict in rural areas and mob attacks often go unpunished. At state level, security and intelligence agencies spy on converts and try to force them to supply information on the activities of convert groups. Although all women experience forms of (sexual) harassment, unveiled women, including all Christian women, are particularly vulnerable.

National life

Article 64 of the Constitution states that ‘freedom of belief is absolute’, yet converts from Islam are not protected. Recognized Christians are free to manage their own personal status laws and religious affairs, but Sharia law applies in cases between a Muslim and a non-Muslim. If converts try to change their religious registration, it is likely that the authorities will put them under surveillance and prosecute them under blasphemy laws. Alleged blasphemy and speaking against the government can lead to arrest, torture and imprisonment. Mistreatment of converts by family

members is considered a family issue and can be done with impunity.

Church life

Churches rarely accept converts in order to avoid accusations of proselytizing from government and society, which could lead to attacks or a church closure for ‘security reasons’. It is common for the police and intelligence agencies to request a schedule of all events happening in the church. They have the authority to cancel events under the rationale of protecting national security. Plain clothes police sometimes attend church services to monitor what is said. Churches face opposition, even violence, when they try to legitimize their church building under the 2016 Church Construction Law. Despite the legitimization of over 1,000 churches since the law’s introduction, many are still awaiting recognition. Church events can be held outside, discreetly, in some regions but many Christians refrain from organizing these as they could be construed as a challenge to Islam.



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International obligations & rights violated

Egypt has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Egypt is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Perpetrators of violence against Christians are often left unpunished (ICCPR Art. 2)
- Christians are arbitrarily accused and charged for blasphemy (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Children of Christian converts are automatically registered as Muslim (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christians face discrimination in public and private employment because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Churches face several obstacles to obtain permits for the construction of new buildings and to receive licenses for legal recognition (ICCPR Arts. 21 and 26)
- Christian women, especially in rural areas, may be targeted, groomed and forced into marriage with Muslim men (ICCPR Art. 23; CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)
- Christians are killed because of their faith by members of terrorist organizations (ICCPR Art. 6.1)

Situation of other religious minorities

Other religious groups facing intolerance, discrimination and persecution in Egypt include Shia and Sufi Muslims, Bahai, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. Shia Muslims are particularly targeted by Sunni militants, making it dangerous for them to worship and practice their faith openly. Mormons, Bahai and Jehovah's Witnesses are denied recognition by the authorities, making it difficult for them to have places of worship. The missionary zeal and corresponding activities of such groups are considered illegal and adherents face hostility both from state officials and society, including Christian Egyptians. In addition, atheists are very prone to violations, especially those active in social media networks.

Open Doors in Egypt

In cooperation with local churches and other partners, Open Doors is supporting the church in Egypt through family and youth work, programs for widows and women empowerment, education and literacy training, advocacy and medical outreach.



About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2021 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- The full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology, as well as the complete WWL 2022 ranking and reports, can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
