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Freedom of Religion or Belief in Egypt

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Egypt is home to the Middle East's largest Christian minority, the indigenous Coptic community.[1] With roots stretching back nearly two millennia, Coptic Christians are an integral part of Egypt's history and society, having shaped its religious, cultural, and intellectual life from Cairo and Alexandria to the towns and villages of Upper Egypt.

Yet Copts continue to face unrelenting persecution, including sectarian attacks and discrimination under a legal system that too often fails to protect them.[2] Attacks go unpunished, reports of Coptic women and girls disappearing amid allegations of abduction and coercion remain unresolved, and converts from Islam risk prosecution for their religious beliefs. Even historic Christian institutions like Saint Catherine's Monastery face questions about their autonomy under state authority.[3]

These problems persist despite the Egyptian government's public commitments to religious tolerance and efforts to promote religious inclusion. The central issue remains that's Cairo's commitments rarely translate into equal protection under the law, accountability for sectarian violence, and the freedom to practice and express one's faith without fear of prosecution.

Egyptian authorities have repeatedly failed, or refused, to investigate attacks on churches, homes, and businesses owned by Copts or hold perpetrators accountable.[4] Instead, officials often resort to "reconciliation sessions" that place victims and perpetrators on equal footing, forcing victims to accept informal settlements in place of criminal justice. This culture of impunity leaves Christian communities vulnerable to further intimidation and undermines confidence in the institutions responsible for their protection.

Church construction and repairs present a separate but related challenge. Egypt's 2016 Church Construction Law established a licensing process for new churches and a mechanism to legalize existing, unlicensed buildings.[5] Egyptian law also requires permits for minor renovations and repairs in churches, including routine work such as fixing a sink

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[1] CNEWA Staff, "Egypt: Land of Alexandrian Christianity," ONE Magazine, September 2010. (https://cnewa.org/magazine/egypt-33484/)
[2] U.S. Department of State, "Update on Steps the Egyptian Government Is Taking to Ensure Proper Treatment and Justice for Christians," June 2026. (https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Update-on-Steps-the-Egyptian-Government-is-Taking-to-Ensure-Proper-Treatment-and-Justice-for-Ch-.pdf)
[3] Mariam Wahba, "Egypt's War Against the World's Oldest Christian Monastery," The Free Press, August 17, 2025. (https://www.thefp.com/p/egypts-war-against-the-worlds-oldest)
[4] U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Despite Promoting Religious Tolerance, Egypt Represses Religious Life." (https://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/releases-statements/despite-promoting-religious-tolerance-egypt-represses-religious-life)
[5] George Sadek, "Controversy Over New Egyptian Law that Regulates the Construction of Churches," In Custodia Legis, Law Library of Congress, November 15, 2016. (https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2016/11/controversy-over-new-egyptian-law-that-regulates-the-construction-of-churches/)

in a church bathroom. The government has since addressed some longstanding needs by approving thousands of applications, but a substantial backlog remains. According to USCIRF, roughly 2,000 requests were still pending as of October 2025.[6]

The relevant measure of progress is not the number of permits approved but whether Christian communities can obtain approvals through a transparent and timely process.

Beyond restrictions on religious institutions, Coptic women and girls face a grave threat.[7] Coptic families and advocacy organizations have reported cases involving suspected abduction, coercion, and forced conversions to Islam. Some victims have returned to their families, while many other cases remain unresolved.

Families who report such crimes have described police dismissing their complaints, accepting claims that women left voluntarily without adequately investigating the circumstances, or refusing to intervene despite allegations of coercion. Such responses leave families without meaningful recourse and expose Christian women to continued abuse.

The case of Silvana Atef illustrates these concerns. Atef, a mentally disabled Coptic minor from Fayoum Governorate, disappeared in October 2025. After her family reported the abduction, police failed to investigate or even respond to the family attorney. In January 2026, an Egyptian court declined jurisdiction in the case, according to USCIRF. [8] In February, the court ordered Atef, who was still a minor at the time of the ruling, to be placed in a care home affiliated with the Ministry of Social Solidarity instead of returned to her family. [9]

The dangers facing Copts extend beyond the failure to investigate violence and protect vulnerable members of the community. Egyptian authorities also use the legal system to restrict the exercise of religious freedom itself. Article 98(f) of the Egyptian Penal Code turns alleged contempt of religion into a criminal offense, giving authorities a tool to prosecute people for peaceful religious expression.[10] The cases of Augustin Samaan, a

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[6] U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Egypt," 2026 Annual Report, March 2026. (https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2026-03/USCIRF%202026%20Annual%20Report%20Egypt.pdf)
[7] Mariam Wahba, "Egypt's Disappearing Women," Washington Examiner, November 15, 2024. (https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/beltway-confidential/3228977/egypts-disappearing-women/)
[8] U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Egypt Country Update," April 27, 2026. (https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2026-04/2026%20Egypt%20Country%20Update.pdf)
[9] Coptic Solidarity, "Latest in the Saga of 'Silvana Atef': Her Placement in a Care Home," February 1, 2026. (https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2026/02/01/latest-in-the-saga-of-silvana-atef-her-placement-in-a-care-home/)
[10] U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Egypt," 2025 Annual Report, March 2025. (https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report.pdf)

Christian academic, and Said Abdelrazeq, a convert to the faith, highlight how this legal framework threatens both Christians who publicly defend their faith and converts whose beliefs depart from their families' or the state's religious expectations.

The prosecution of Samaan is a particularly stark example of how this law is used to target Christians.[11] Egyptian authorities arrested Samaan in October 2025 over online religious content. In January 2026, a court sentenced him to five years' imprisonment with hard labor for "contempt of Islam" and "misuse of social media."[12] According to reporting by advocacy organization Coptic Solidarity, his content included material defending Christianity and responding to anti-Christian claims.

The case of Said Abdelrazeq illustrates a particular vulnerability of converts. In July 2025, security officers arrested Abdelrazeq for a second time shortly after he sought help updating his identity documents to reflect his conversion. Prosecutors charged him with contempt for Islam, joining a banned terrorist organization, inciting unrest, and disseminating false information.[13] During detention, Abdelrazeq reported being beaten by security agents, and prison authorities repeatedly denied his requests for a Bible. After months in pretrial detention, he was referred to trial before a terrorism circuit court in April 2026.

Prolonged pretrial detention compounds these abuses.[14] Detention can itself become punishment when authorities hold individuals for months without charges. When combined with charges based on religious expression, restricted access to counsel, or denial of worship materials, prolonged detention exacts a financial, social, and psychological toll on defendants and their families long before charges are filed or a case reaches court.

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[11] Mariam Wahba, "Egypt Sentences Christian Researcher Under Blasphemy Law, Underscoring a Recurrent Breach in U.S.-Egypt Relations," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, January 15, 2026. (https://www.fdd.org/analysis/egypt-sentences-christian-researcher-under-blasphemy-law-underscoring-a-recurrent-breach-in-u-s-egypt-relations/)

[12] U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Augustin Samaan," FoRB Victims Database. (https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/augustin-samaan)

[13] U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Said Abdelrazek," FoRB Victims Database. (https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/said-abdelrazek)

[14] Mariam Wahba, "Egypt Sentences Christian Researcher Under Blasphemy Law, Underscoring a Recurrent Breach in U.S.-Egypt Relations," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, January 15, 2026. (https://www.fdd.org/analysis/egypt-sentences-christian-researcher-under-blasphemy-law-underscoring-a-recurrent-breach-in-u-s-egypt-relations/)

Another concern is the Egyptian government's treatment of Saint Catherine's Monastery, one of Christianity's most important historic institutions.[15]

Located at the foot of Mount Sinai, Saint Catherine's was founded in the sixth century and is widely recognized as the oldest Christian monastery still operating. It is a place of continuous worship and a repository of religious and historical significance, including one of the world's most important collections of early Christian manuscripts.

In May 2025, an Egyptian court ruling concerning land around the monastery ordered monks to vacate certain plots, including gardens they had used for generations, on the grounds that the land had been illegally occupied. The ruling also asserted that the monastery's monks are mere "occupants," in effect nationalizing the property and allowing the state to take control of what is—and is not—allowed at St. Catherine's. This prompted concern from Greece, whose Greek Orthodox Church has longstanding ecclesiastical ties to the monastery and whose government has taken an active role in safeguarding its status.

Egyptian officials rejected claims that the government intended to seize the monastery or threaten its religious character.[16] Cairo and Athens subsequently pledged to protect its status, announcing an agreement in October 2025.[17] Yet questions about the monastery's legal standing, autonomy, and control over its surrounding land remain unresolved.[18]

USCIRF's 2026 annual report also raised concerns about restrictions on researchers' access to the monastery's manuscript collection and government actions affecting the monastic community.[19] The ability to worship is essential, but preserving a religious institution also requires protecting its historic manuscripts and the scholarly relationships that enable researchers to preserve, study, and pass on its religious heritage.

The forms of religious discrimination in Egypt take many different forms, but they point to a common policy challenge. Public assurances of tolerance have not consistently produced equal protection, accountability for sectarian violence, freedom from prosecution for peaceful religious expression, or adequate safeguards for Christian institutions. The United

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[15] Mariam Wahba, "Egypt's War Against the World's Oldest Christian Monastery," The Free Press, August 17, 2025. (https://www.thefp.com/p/egypts-war-against-the-worlds-oldest)
[16] Badr Abdelatty, "Saint Catherine Monastery: A Symbol Protected and Respected," eKathimerini, June 26, 2025. (https://www.ekathimerini.com/opinion/1273509/saint-catherine-monastery-a-symbol-protected-and-respected/)
[17] Reuters, "Greece, Egypt Agree Future of Mount Sinai Monastery, Greek PM Says," October 16, 2025. (https://www.reuters.com/world/greece-egypt-agree-future-mount-sinai-monastery-greek-pm-says-2025-10-16/)
[18] Dionysis Skliris, "St. Catherine's Monastery Rift Stalls Deal Before Egypt Ruling," To Vima, October 19, 2026. (https://www.tovima.com/politics/st-catherines-monastery-rift-stalls-deal-before-egypt-ruling/)
[19] U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Egypt," 2026 Annual Report, March 2026, p. 60. (https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2026-03/USCIRF%202026%20Annual%20Report%20Egypt.pdf)

States should assess Egypt's record against those concrete outcomes and use the diplomatic and statutory tools already available to press for improvement.

Congress has already made human rights a consideration in U.S. assistance to Egypt. The current appropriations framework conditions $320 million in annual Egyptian foreign military financing on specified human-rights-related determinations, while permitting a national-security waiver. Successive administrations have used waiver authority to release assistance despite persistent abuses. In October 2026, the State Department again waived human-rights conditions on this $320 million in military aid, citing national-security interests and Egypt's role in the conflict with Iran.[20]

When the executive branch repeatedly waives congressional conditions, those conditions risk becoming meaningless in practice.[21] The administration should apply the statutory requirements rigorously, make its determinations on the basis of verifiable evidence, providing Congress with a clear explanation whenever it invokes a waiver. Religious-freedom concerns should inform those assessments, including the treatment of prisoners of conscience, prosecution of peaceful religious expression, and the protection of Christian communities from violence.

The State Department should also take four concrete steps.

First, raise individual cases directly with Egyptian officials. U.S. diplomats should press for the release of individuals imprisoned solely for peaceful religious expression and for due process in all remaining proceedings involving Samaan, Abdelrazeq, and other prisoners of conscience. Officials should seek assurances that detainees can access counsel, family members, and religious materials.

Second, improve reporting on the treatment of Coptic Christians. The State Department should document alleged abductions or coercion involving girls and women, sectarian attacks, failures to investigate crimes, and obstacles to church construction and legalization.

Third, make engagement with religious communities a regular part of bilateral diplomacy. U.S. diplomats should engage Coptic leaders and other religious communities, including in Upper Egypt, to understand local conditions and track whether government commitments translate into measurable improvements. Such engagement should include discussions of

[20] Alexander Dziadosz, Patricia Zengerle, and Humeyra Pamuk, "Citing Iran War, US Waives Rights Condition on Egypt Military Aid," Reuters, October 1, 2026. (https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-waives-rights-conditions-320-million-military-aid-egypt-letter-shows-2026-10-01/)
[21] Mariam Wahba and RADM (Ret.) Mark Montgomery, "How the State Department Circumvented US Law," Townhall, September 25, 2024. (https://townhall.com/columnists/mariam-wahba/2024/09/25/how-the-state-department-circumvented-us-law-n2645216)

church licensing, the investigation of sectarian violence, and the protection of vulnerable converts.

Fourth, press Egypt to honor its commitments regarding Saint Catherine's Monastery. The United States should encourage the preservation of the monastery's religious and historical character, its ability to maintain its manuscript collection, and access for legitimate scholarly research and conservation. The government's public assurances should be assessed against its actions on the ground.

Egypt remains an important U.S. partner, and its public efforts to promote interfaith tolerance deserve recognition. But statements of inclusion cannot substitute for legal protections, impartial law enforcement, and accountability. Religious freedom requires that Christians be able to worship, maintain their institutions, express their beliefs, and seek justice without facing discrimination or punishment for their faith.

The United States has long made religious freedom a consideration in assistance to Egypt. The executive branch should give those conditions real effect and use the full range of diplomatic tools available to defend freedom of religion or belief. A partnership built on shared interests is stronger when it also takes seriously the rights of the people living under the partner government's authority.