



Egypt - Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on Tuesday 16 July 2019

Information on the relationship/conflict between Christians and Muslims

In January 2019 *Minority Rights Group International* states that:

“The Christian population, the largest religious minority, enjoys official recognition alongside Sunni Islam and Judaism in the Constitution. Yet in practice, its members continue to face difficulties around the construction and renovation of churches, frequently resulting in outbreaks of communal violence that in turn can result in mass displacement, arson and other abuses” (Minority Rights Group International (24 January 2019) *Justice Denied, Promises Broken: The Situation of Egypt's Minorities Since 2014*, p.3).

This document also states that:

“Christian communities have suffered a variety of attacks against them, including violence at the hands of neighbours who have mobilized against them following rumours or in response to political developments. Many of these incidents constitute a form of collective punishment in which the Muslim majority in a particular neighbourhood seek to punish Christians in the area for the actions, real or alleged, of one or more individuals” (ibid, p.12).

A report issued in 2019 by *Freedom House* reviewing events of 2018 notes that:

“Most Egyptians are Sunni Muslims. Coptic Christians form a substantial minority, and there are smaller numbers of Shiite Muslims, non-Coptic Christian denominations, and other groups. Religious minorities and atheists have faced persecution and violence, with Copts in particular suffering numerous cases of forced displacement, physical assaults, bomb and arson attacks, and blocking of church construction in recent years (Freedom House (2019) *Freedom in the World 2019, Egypt*, p.6).

In January 2019 *Open Doors* states that:

“...Christians reside throughout the country, with higher concentrations in Upper Egypt and in the suburbs of Cairo and Alexandria. The Church is under constant pressure and Christians enjoy very limited rights and freedom. Christians in the country face multiple challenges including:

- Violent attacks by Islamic militants targeting Christians and churches
- Discrimination by the surrounding (Islamic) society
- Land theft and dispossession
- Repressive and discriminatory laws imposed by the state
- Arbitrary arrests and detention by the police after Christians have protected their churches

against mob violence or after they have been falsely accused of blasphemy” (Open Doors (14 January 2019) *World Watch List 2019: Egypt Country Dossier*, p.7).

The *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom* notes in April 2019 that:

“Anti-Christian mob violence occurred with impunity and regularity in Upper Egypt; on several occasions, these incidents came in direct response to efforts by local Christians to legally register their churches” (*United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (April 2019) 2019 Annual Report; Country Reports: Tier 2 Countries: Egypt, April 2019*, p.1).

This document also states that:

“While incidents of violence directly targeting Christians resulted in fewer casualties than in previous years, they persisted in various forms throughout 2018” (*ibid*, p.3).

This document also points out that:

“During 2018, ISIS and remnants of other radical Islamist groups continued to pose a serious threat to Egypt’s large Christian population. However, blaming Egypt’s sectarian issues on radical Islamist groups belies the reality that societal bigotry and government negligence also play roles in incidents of communal violence. Perceived negligence on the part of Egyptian security forces continued to be an ongoing grievance of the Christian population...” (*ibid*, p.4).

This report also notes:

“The prevalence of violence against Christians in Egypt was most clearly on display in incidents of mob violence that occurred in rural towns and villages in Upper Egypt; the perpetrators were moved to action by the words of their local imams and their own deeply rooted prejudices. There were at least eight such mob attacks in 2018: in three separate attacks in August alone, Muslim rioters attacked Coptic churches, homes, and businesses in Sultan Basha, Minya; Esna, Luxor; and Dimshaw Hashim, Minya, after reports circulated that local Christians had attempted to legally register their places of worship. Although none of these attacks resulted in outright fatalities, they caused significant property destruction and terrified local Christians. Furthermore, none of them produced legal consequences for the perpetrators; instead, by deferring to customary reconciliation sessions, local authorities made concessions to the rioters by agreeing to close the churches or prayer halls in dispute” (*ibid*, pp.4-5).

In June 2019 the *Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Australia* notes that:

“Most Egyptians, especially those living in urban areas, work, live and socialise together with little regard to each other’s religious identity. However, small-scale disputes such as neighbourhood disagreements can on occasion adopt religious overtones and escalate into community-level violence, particularly in poorer and rural areas. Most communal incidents in Egypt take the form of vandalism and destruction of property. The large-scale anti-Christian violence that occurred in 2011 and 2013 notwithstanding...highprofile incidents in which people are killed or churches attacked are not a frequent occurrence” (*Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Australia (17 June 2019) DFAT Country Information Report: Egypt*, p.17).

This document also states that:

“The majority of incidences of communal violence in recent years have taken place in the provinces of Upper Egypt. The province of Minya – which has a sizeable (approximately 40 per cent) and relatively assertive Christian population, high concentration of Islamists, high rate of poverty, and low rate of education – has been particularly notable in this regard” (ibid, p.17).

A report published in June 2019 by the *United States Department of State* notes that:

“Local authorities frequently responded to sectarian attacks against Christians through binding arbitration sessions rather than prosecuting perpetrators of violence, leading to complaints by members of the Coptic community” (United States Department of State (21 June 2019) *2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Egypt*, p.1).

This document also states that:

“Attacks continued on Christians and Christian-owned property, as well as on churches in the Upper Egypt region. On May 26, seven Christians were injured in the village of Shoqaf while attempting to defend a church from an attack by Muslim villagers” (ibid, p.2).

This document also points out that:

“There were reported incidents of mob action against, and collective punishment of, Christians” (ibid, p.13).

In January 2019 *Reuters* states that:

“Egyptian security forces have for years battled Islamist insurgents who have attacked Coptic Christians, tourists and security personnel. Security forces have stepped up their presence outside churches and other places of worship ahead of New Year’s Eve and Coptic Christmas, which is celebrated on Jan. 7. The Copts, who make up around 10 percent of the population, have long complained of discrimination. Authorities have placed armed guards outside churches and monasteries in an attempt to protect them from jihadist attacks” (Reuters (5 January 2019) *Egyptian explosives expert killed defusing bomb near church in Cairo*).

Reuters in January 2019 states that:

“President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi inaugurated Egypt’s largest church and mosque in the New Administrative Capital on Sunday, the eve of Coptic Christmas, in a message of tolerance in the predominantly Muslim country” (Reuters (6 January 2019) *Egypt’s Sisi opens mega-mosque and Middle East’s largest cathedral in New Capital*).

This document also states that:

“Coptic Christians make up an estimated 10 percent of Egypt’s nearly 100 million people and have long complained of discrimination under laws that favor Muslims. They have also increasingly been targeted in recent years by Islamist militants including Islamic State, which is waging an insurgency in the north of the remote Sinai Peninsula” (ibid).

A report issued in April 2019 by the *Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights* states that:

“EIPR condemns closure of the Naga al-Ghafir church in Sohag by security and documents closure of 22 churches since enactment of the church construction law; demands reopening of closed churches and a decree regularizing the status of all churches that filed papers with the regularization committee. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights condemns the closure of the Anba Karas Church in Naga al-Ghafir, located in the Sohag governorate, by the security forces. The church was shuttered after dozens of Muslim residents of the village surrounded the church and chanted hostile slogans against Copts; a Christian cleric and another citizen were injured after being assaulted with sticks” (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (15 April 2019) *EIPR condemns closure of the Naga al-Ghafir church in Sohag by security and documents closure of 22 churches since enactment of the church construction law; demands reopening of closed churches & a decree regularizing the status of all churches that file*, p.1).

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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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