

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

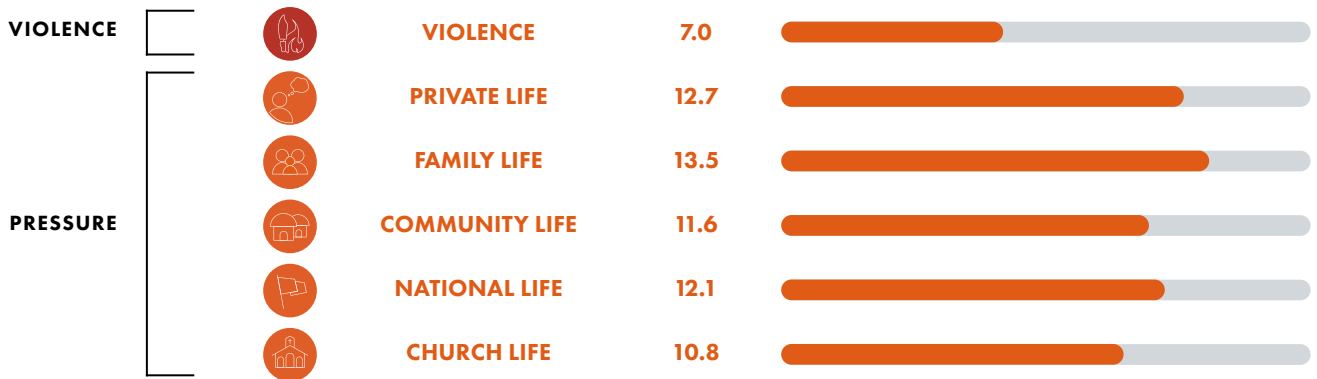
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**35**

## 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).

## Key findings

Most freedom of religion violations occur at the 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 to grooming, forced conversion and forced marriage. The President speaks positively about Egypt's historical Christian community, but weak law enforcement leaves them vulnerable to attack, with security services sometimes being complicit. 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 conversions to be officially recognized.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi

### POPULATION

106,157,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

9,695,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	9,695,000	9.1
Muslims	95,762,000	90.2
Agnostics	594,000	0.6
Atheists	97,800	0.1

Source<sup>2</sup>

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 el-Sisi sworn into power in 2014, the situation in Egypt stabilized, but human rights have been experiencing a crisis. 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. 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 early to work and contribute to the 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 their religion.

<sup>1</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

<sup>2</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

## 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.

## 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. Despite a more inclusive national narrative, the large Coptic minority faces significant difficulties, including

discrimination in education and government legislation that hinders essential aspects of church life. 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. 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. In other instances, Christian victims are forced to participate in customary reconciliation councils, which leave Muslim perpetrators with few consequences. 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. In addition, they remain strictly monitored by the Egyptian intelligence services.

### 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 by 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 el-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 at 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 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 vulnerable to being 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. Christian girls, often under-age and from vulnerable families, are lured into marriages. Female converts from Islam may be locked in the home, physically beaten or even killed to defend family “honor”. If married, they can easily be divorced and lose custody of their children.

- Abduction
- Denied custody of children
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Targeted seduction
- Violence – death
- 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. 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. Church leaders, most of whom are male, are particularly vulnerable to rights violations (including killings), in part because they are easily identifiable as Christians.

- Abduction
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Imprisonment by the government
- Military / militia conscription / service against conscience
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	35	68
2022	20	71
2021	16	75
2020	16	76
2019	16	76

*The three-point drop in score in WWL 2023 was caused mainly by less reported violence; for example, there were fewer reports of attacks and damage to Christian properties and faith-related killings. Yet the level of violence against Christians is still very high, with at least five Christians being killed and more than 20 attacked among other reported incidents. In addition, a significant number of Christian converts from a Muslim background have been arrested and physically abused by the Egyptian security services.*



## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **April 2022:** Coptic Orthodox priest Arsanious Wadid (56) was killed on 7 April 2022 by an Islamist. The killing took place on Alexandria’s seaside promenade during an outing with the church youth group.
- **June 2022:** A Christian man was attacked and killed in the Sohag governate, Upper Egypt. The perpetrator was declared mentally unstable (by his family), an excuse often used to excuse a radical Muslim attacker.
- **August 2022:** A Christian father and his son were killed in the Sinai Peninsula, most probably by militants linked to the Islamic State.

WWL Year	Christians detained	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians internally displaced
2023	40	10*	19	2
2022	11	10*	51	117

*This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. 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. 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. The 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. Most Coptic Christian children have Christian religion classes at school but they 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 is higher 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 the 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 2,000 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.

## **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 with 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 in obtaining permits for the construction of new buildings and receiving 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, Baha'i, 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, Baha'i, 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 from state officials and society, including Christian Egyptians. In addition, atheists are very prone to violations, especially those active on 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: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- 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 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

*Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

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