

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

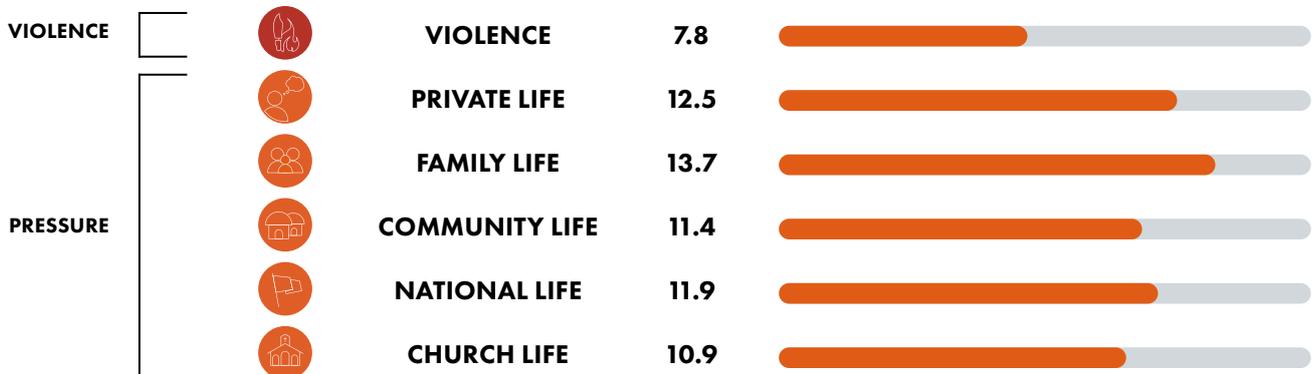
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**38**

## 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. 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 and security services regularly detain converts from Islam to Christianity.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi

### POPULATION

108,032,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

9,797,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



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## Context

| Religious Context | Number of adherents | Percentage |
|-------------------|---------------------|------------|
| Christians        | 9,797,000           | 9.1        |
| Muslims           | 97,533,000          | 90.3       |
| Agnostics         | 597,000             | 0.6        |
| Atheists          | 96,900              | 0.1        |

Source<sup>2</sup>

Though Egypt is technically a democracy, 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 political situation in Egypt stabilized, but human rights have been experiencing a crisis. El-Sisi cracked down on opposition groups and thousands of his critics have been arrested, tortured, disappeared and tried in military courts. 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 is culturally conservative and seeks to be an influential center of Sunni Islam. In rural and impoverished areas in particular (where many Christians live), radical imams 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. 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 result in Muslim attackers going free and a culture of impunity for violence against Christians.

According to the World Christian Database, 90% of Egyptians are Muslim, virtually all of them Sunni. Christians are especially concentrated in Upper Egypt and large cities. More than 90% of Christians are Coptic Orthodox.

According to Middle East Concern (MEC Egypt profile): “Egypt’s 2014 constitution establishes Islam as the State religion and the principles of Islamic law as the main source of legislation... It states that freedom of religion is absolute and guarantees freedom of religious practice in accordance with regulations, though this right is limited to adherents of the Abrahamic religions (i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam). Although religious conversion is not prohibited in codified legislation, conversion away from Islam is not allowed in practice.”

<sup>1</sup> Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

<sup>2</sup> Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

## 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 having the highest number of attacks on Christians per capita. Attacks are 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. At the end of February 2023, President el-Sisi claimed that terrorism had been defeated in the Sinai region (Ahram Online, 2 March 2023).

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

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

### Historical Christian communities

90% of Egypt's Christians belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church. There are also established Protestant and Catholic denominations. Despite a more inclusive national narrative, Coptic Christians face discrimination in education and government legislation that hinders essential aspects of church

life. Coptic Christians have been tolerated by the state and by the Muslim majority because of their historical presence and significant size of several million.

Historical Christians are regularly targeted by their surrounding communities. 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, violent radical Islamists remain a danger.

### Converts to Christianity

There is a small but growing number of Christian converts who experience severe 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, which also regularly detain converts from Islam to Christianity.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

There are several Evangelical and Pentecostal groups in the country, some of them being second or third 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, the Coptic Orthodox Church.

## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Islamic oppression

Christians often feel like second-class citizens and discriminated against in their dealings with the state. The state is reluctant to respect and enforce the fundamental rights of Christians. There have been several major violent attacks against Christians in the recent past, perpetrated by militant Islamic groups. However, no such large scale attacks have occurred in the last five years, although individual radical Muslims have killed and attacked Christians in recent years.

### Dictatorial paranoia

Egypt has a long tradition of authoritarian rule. Currently, Egypt is ruled by a civilian government

led by former army chief Abdul Fatah el-Sisi. 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.



## How are men and women differently affected?

### Women

Christian women from disadvantaged backgrounds are reportedly 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.

#### Female typical pressure points:

- 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 as they are easily identifiable as Christians.

#### Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Imprisonment by government
- 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 |
|----------|---|--------------------------------------|
| 2024     | 38                                      | 68                                   |
| 2023     | 35                                      | 68                                   |
| 2022     | 20                                      | 71                                   |
| 2021     | 16                                      | 75                                   |
| 2020     | 16                                      | 76                                   |

*Egypt's score remained the same but fell in rank due to more countries with higher scores in WWL 2023. The rise in violence score from 7.0 points to 7.8 was offset by the fall in pressure, with average pressure dropping 0.1 points to 12.1 points. Discrimination of Christians and other freedom of religion violations occur mostly at the community level, particularly in Upper Egypt, as well as in urban areas where Salafist movements are active. Even building a church can lead to violent reactions from Muslim mobs. Christians with a Muslim background face significant pressure from their families and from the security services as well.*



# Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **December 2022:** A Muslim mob violently prevented the replacement of a roof on a church in the Nile Delta, thereby attacking and damaging the church building, several Coptic houses and injuring some Copts.
- **May 2023:** A Coptic architect was run over and killed by a bulldozer driver, who confessed to attacking him because of his faith. The perpetrator has been sent to a mental health hospital, a common way to deal with individual Muslim extremists who attacked Christians.
- **June 2023:** Following numerous insults of the Christian faith, a Coptic student in Upper Egypt replied privately on social media to the offender. However, his messages were published publicly and he was accused of blasphemy. He was severely beaten by several young Muslim men and arrested by the police. His university referred him to the Disciplinary Council because of contempt of religion and subsequently dismissed him. Afterwards, he and his family had to relocate because of continuing death threats. His case led to a spike of hatred towards Christians on social media.

| WWL Year | Christians killed | Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed | Christians physically or mentally abused | Christians detained |
|----------|-------------------|--|--|---------------------|
| 2024     | 3                 | 3  | 44                                       | 25                  |
| 2023     | 5                 | 1  | 19                                       | 40                  |

*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. 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 and force them to recant. Many keep their faith a secret. Christians in Upper Egypt avoid 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 by 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. 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 in 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 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. Unveiled women, including Christian women, are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment.

### 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 carried out 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. However, since the law's introduction, over 3,000 churches have been legitimized, which is generally seen as an unprecedented step in Egypt's history. 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 under 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, 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 from state officials and society, including Christian Egyptians. In addition, atheists are prone to violations, especially those active on social media networks.

## Open Doors in Egypt

In cooperation with local churches and other partnering ministries, Open Doors is supporting the church in Egypt, of all denominations, through various ministry centers spread out throughout the country from north to south. We serve different age groups through a variety of long-term programs, including youth ministry, literacy training 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: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

*Some of the photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

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