

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment, please email the [Knowledge and Information Management Unit](#).

20 June 2017

EGY105805.E

Egypt: Situation of Coptic Christians, including treatment; availability of state protection (2016-May 2017)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview

Sources indicate that Coptic Christians make up approximately 10 percent of the population of Egypt (Freedom House 2017; Human Rights Watch 12 Apr. 2017). An article published in *Foreign Policy* states that Coptic Christians "saw General Abdel Fatah El-Sisi, who initiated Morsi's removal and later became Egypt's new president, as a savior" (*Foreign Policy* 9 Dec. 2016). According to Freedom House, "[t]he Coptic Church leadership has allied itself with [President] Sisi since the coup [of 2013], apparently to ensure the security of its constituents" (Freedom House 2017).

2. Situation and Treatment of Coptic Christians

Amnesty International reports that religious minorities, "including Coptic Christians..., continued to face discriminatory restrictions in law and practice and inadequate protection from violence" (Amnesty International 22 Feb. 2017, 149). In contrast, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, a researcher affiliated with Belgium's Fonds National de Recherche Scientifique (FNRS) who specialises in the situation of Coptic Christians in Cairo, stated that [translation] "in general, there is no systematic discrimination or persecution from authorities towards Copts" in Egypt (Researcher 11 May 2017). However, the same source added that [translation] "Egypt is a Muslim state," and as such the head of the state must be Muslim, and, for example, Coptic Christians cannot be deans of universities, they cannot occupy important positions in hospitals, and there are no Coptic Christians in the army or in the police (Researcher 11 May 2017). The same source indicated that the treatment of Coptic Christians by the police, authorities and local Muslim populations varies by region and social class: the situation is more tense in regions with a higher number of Coptic Christians, such as the Delta Region or middle and high Egypt than in Cairo, but in Cairo, the treatment of Coptic Christians also depends on the neighbourhood (Researcher 11 May 2017). The same source added that poorer Coptic Christians face more discrimination than those who are wealthier (Researcher 11 May 2017).

In an article based on a speech delivered at the "Coptic Solidarity Conference"[1] on 9 June 2016 and published on the website of the Brookings Institution, a "nonprofit public policy organization based in Washington, D.C." (Brookings Institution n.d.a.), Sarah Yerkes, a former fellow of the Brookings Institution's Center for Middle East Policy and an international fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations (Brookings Institution n.d.b), states that "[p]resident [Sisi] has been outwardly supportive of Egyptian Copts" (Yerkes 20 June 2016). Human Rights Watch similarly indicates that "President... Sisi pledged to respect freedom of belief and made important visits to Coptic Christmas masses" (Human Rights Watch 15 Sept. 2016). On 7 January 2015, *The Jerusalem Post*, an Israel-based newspaper, reported that President Sisi "became the first president to have attended mass at a church in Cairo, on the Coptic Christmas Eve" (*The Jerusalem Post* 7 Jan.

2015). On 7 January 2017, media sources reported that Sisi attended Christmas mass for his third year in a row (The New Arab 7 Jan. 2017; Egyptian Streets 7 Jan. 2017). Yerkes indicates that, when attending a mass in 2015, Sisi made remarks on the unity of Egyptians, which "sends a loud and clear message to Egypt's minorities that he will not tolerate discrimination - and that Egyptian nationalism and unity supersedes religious differences" (Yerkes 20 June 2016).

However, Yerkes adds that "despite *de jure* protections, [Sisi] himself fails to acknowledge *de facto* discrimination against Copts. This is most evident in the disproportionately low level of Christian representation in government, particularly with the influential security establishment" (Yerkes, 20 June 2016). She further indicates that "[o]n paper, Egyptians enjoy 'absolute' freedom of religion, guaranteed by the 2014 constitution. But, the constitution also decrees Islam to be the state religion, and conversion to any religion other than Islam is prohibited" (Yerkes 20 June 2016). Similarly, in its 2017 *Freedom in the World* report for Egypt, Freedom House indicates that "the 2014 constitution made the right to freedom of religion 'absolute'," but adds that "little has changed in practice since the document's adoption" and that "[a]buses against Copts continued in 2016, adding to numerous cases of forced displacement, physical assaults, bomb and arson attacks, and blocking of church construction in recent years" (Freedom House 2017). In contrast, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) states in its 2016 annual report that there has been a "significant decrease in the number and scale" of sectarian attacks against Copts since 2014 (US 2 May 2016, 92).

2.1 Church Renovation and Construction Legislation

According to Human Rights Watch, on 30 August 2016, Egypt's parliament passed a new law on the construction and renovation of churches, which maintains restrictions and "discriminates against the Christian minority" (Human Rights Watch 15 Sept. 2016). According to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), an organization "working since 2002 to strengthen and protect basic rights and freedoms in Egypt" (EIPR n.d.),

[a] special law to regulate construction of churches... sends a discriminatory message... While the state [Egypt] permits the construction of mosques based on compliance with building codes and subordination to the Ministry of Endowments, it imposes additional conditions on churches, most significantly, the need to obtain a permit from the competent governor approving the practice of religious rites at a specific location. (EIPR 31 Aug. 2016)

According to sources, the new law provides that the governor must approve any request to build or renovate a church within a 4-month timeframe, and that a justification must be provided in case of rejection (Middle East Eye 16 Nov. 2016; Oasis 24 Oct. 2016). Human Rights Watch indicates that "the new law allows governors to deny church-building permits with no stated way to appeal" (Human Rights Watch 15 Sept. 2016). EIPR cites the Ministry of Legal Affairs' explanatory memorandum attached to the law as stating that "[t]he competent governor shall examine the application in light of his authorities to preserve public security and safety and oversee utilities and protect their security, as well as uphold the freedom to practice religious rites" (EIPR 31 Aug. 2016). According to EIPR, "[t]his could be interpreted to mean that if there are objections to the presence of a church that could spark unrest, the governor has the right to deny the church a permit" (EIPR 31 Aug. 2016). France24, a France-based news media company, similarly reports that the security provision in the law "means [that] the threat of sectarian violence could result in the denial of building permissions" (France24 16 Sept. 2016). Human Rights Watch states that the "security provisions... risk subjecting decisions on whether to allow church construction to the whims of violent mobs" (Human Rights Watch 15 Sept. 2016).

Sources further indicate that the law stipulates that the size of a church to be built must be commensurate to the number of Christians in the area of the proposed location (EIPR 31 Aug. 2016; Human Rights Watch 15 Sept. 2016). Middle East Eye, an "online news organisation" focused on the Middle East (Middle East Eye n.d.), cites Egypt's minister of parliamentary affairs as stating that this part of the law "by no means imposes restrictions, it just simply states that we cannot build a cathedral in a tiny village" (Middle East Eye 16 Nov. 2016). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the Time constraints of this Response.

Sources further indicate in January 2017 that based on the law on church construction and renovation, Prime Minister Sherif Ismail formed a government committee to legalize the status of unlicensed churches (Egypt Independent 30 Jan. 2017) or to "legalize all churches constructed in Egypt without the appropriate permits" (Egyptian Streets 30 Jan. 2017). Further information, including implementation, could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the Time constraints of this Response.

2.2 Incidents of Violence in 2016 and 2017

Middle East Eye states that since 2011 "dozens of instances of inter-communal tension and violence" were reported (Middle East Eye 16 Nov. 2017). The same source indicates that there were cases where relationships between Muslim women and Christian men "were considered a matter of dishonour sometimes leading to disputes and even violence," and that "[t]he building of new churches has also been at the centre of sectarian strife" (Middle East Eye 16 Nov. 2016). Similarly, France24 indicates that the construction of churches "has long been a contentious issue in Egypt and is often the source of sectarian violence" (France24 16 Sept. 2016).

World Watch Monitor, a website that "reports the story of Christians around the world under pressure for their faith" (World Watch Monitor n.d.), reports that on 17 June 2016 "more than 5000 people" mobbed homes of Copts in a settlement near Alexandria, and looted 10 homes, after reports that a Coptic man "was turning his home into a church" (World Watch Monitor 20 Jul. 2016). Similarly, *Watani*, a weekly Egyptian newspaper established in 1958 by a "Copt... who strove for the establishment of a civil democratic society in Egypt, where all Egyptians would enjoy full citizenship," reports that on 17 June

Coptic owned homes were ... burned in the village of al-Beida, south of Alexandria, on suspicion that a house under construction would be turned into a church. Two Copts were injured, a number of Coptic homes plundered and damaged, and two Coptic families forced out of their homes (*Watani* 30 June 2016).

According to an article by Mada Masr, an Egypt-based news organization (Mada Masr 18 Oct. 2016), in Koum al-Loufy [Qom al-Loufi], "Muslim residents, attacked and set fire to the building that [a Coptic resident] was constructing, along with the home of five other Copts on 30 June 2016, after a rumor circulated that the Coptic resident wanted to turn the house into a church" (Mada Masr 14 Apr. 2017). According to Mada Masr, the Coptic resident "testified that he intended to live in the house and not use it for religious purposes" (Mada Masr 14 Apr. 2017). *Watani* similarly reports that the police made the two brothers who were constructing the houses sign "pledges that the houses they were building would be used for residence and not for practising religious rites" (*Watani* 30 June 2016). *Watani* indicates that four homes were burned, with three incurring "severe damages" (*Watani* 30 June 2016). *Le Monde* indicates that the houses burned included the one of Younan Khalaf, his three brothers and his mother, and that they were also [translation] "physically assaulted" (*Le Monde* 16 Nov. 2016).

According to Mada Masr, on 14 July 2016, the houses of five Coptic Christians were attacked and burned by a mob in the Abu Yacoub village after a rumor that a church would be built (Mada Masr 18 July 2016). World Watch Monitor similarly indicates that on 15 July 2016, "five homes belonging to Copts were looted and torched in a village... in Minya, after it was rumoured that a building – a church-run nursery – was being turned into a church" (World Watch Monitor 20 Jul. 2016).

Sources report that on 13 April 2017, a group of residents in Minya threw stones at Coptic Christians (Mada Masr 14 Apr. 2017; Al Monitor 25 Apr. 2017). Mada Masr reports that it occurred after Maundy Thursday prayers "as Coptic Christians were leaving the house of a Coptic resident" (Mada Masr 14 Apr. 2017). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

On 18 July 2016 *Daily News Egypt* reports that a fight between children from Muslim and Coptic families "escalated" and "led to a fight between the parents of two Coptic families and one Muslim family" which resulted in "[a] group of angry Muslims assault[ing] men from the Coptic families" (*Daily News Egypt* 18 July 2016). The same source states that a "young man" was killed and three were injured (*Daily News Egypt* 18 July 2016). Ahramonline, the English-language news website of Egypt-based Al-Ahram establishment that also publishes Al-Ahram newspaper, indicates that the Christian families who were attacked were the "families of two priests" and that a 27-year-old man was killed and three others were injured (Ahramonline 18 July 2016). Sources report that four suspects from the Muslim family were arrested in relation to the incident (Ahramonline 18 Jul. 2016; Mada Masr 18 July 2016). The same source reports that Al-Azhar, "the country's top Sunni Muslim authority" (Ahramonline 18 July 2016), asserted that "the reason behind the incident was the children's fight" (*Daily News Egypt* 18 July 2016). However, *Daily News Egypt* further cites a "religious freedoms researcher at the [EIPR]", as stating that "a rumor of the building of a new church in the village resurfaced among Muslim residents, leading to the tension that eventually led to the bloody scenes later" (*Daily News Egypt* 18 Jul. 2016).

According to media sources, in May 2016, a mob burned seven homes of Christians and paraded a 70-year-old Christian woman, who had been "stripped" of her clothes, through the streets in a southern Egyptian village (*Independent* 26 May 2016; AP 26 May 2016). The same sources state that according to the "local Orthodox Coptic Church," this happened after rumours spread that a Christian man had a relationship with a Muslim woman (*Independent* 26 May 2016; AP 26 May 2016) or after "rumours spread that the woman's son had had an affair with a Muslim woman" (AP 26 May 2016). *Independent*, a UK-based newspaper, cites the local governor in Minya as denying that the elderly woman was stripped naked and accused the Muslim

Brotherhood of "exploiting" the situation (*Independent* 26 May 2016). However, sources indicate that that President Sisi issued a public apology (Mada Masr 14 Apr. 2017; World Watch Monitor 17 Feb. 2017).

Sources indicate that prosecutors in Egypt dropped the case brought by the woman against three of the men involved in the assault for "lack of evidence" (*The Telegraph* 16 Jan. 2017; AP 15 Jan. 2017). However, *Watani* reports that the head of the woman's defence team "hailed the recent court decision which did not merely accept that [her] case should be reinvestigated by the prosecution, but rather referred it directly to court" (*Watani* 16 Feb. 2017). UK newspaper *The Telegraph* adds that prosecutors continued the case against the woman's son for adultery (*The Telegraph* 16 Jan. 2017). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2.3 Incidents of Terrorist Attacks Against Coptic Christians in 2016 and 2017

According to an article in *Le Monde*, since the seventies, Islamists in Egypt have used attacks on Christians as a tactic in their struggle against the state, further stating that [translation] "in each period of violence with the State, Copts serve as a target to Islamists, who then hope to provoke a disproportionate state repression and rally the large Muslims population to their cause" (*Le Monde* 27 Jul. 2016). An article published in Al-Monitor, a news website that features reporting and analysis by journalists and experts from the Middle East, on state measures taken after two church bombings on Palm Sunday 2017, similarly cites a member of the Egyptian parliament as asserting that "that terrorist groups always play the religious strife card in Egypt. This is why they [terrorist groups] target churches, in order to break the national unity between the Muslims and Copts of Egypt" (Al-Monitor 11 Apr. 2017).

According to a list of attacks on Christians provided by World Watch Monitor, on 9 July 2016, a man stabbed two Christian women in the neck in Zagazig (World Watch Monitor 20 Jul. 2016). World Watch Monitor reports that it learned "from the husband of one of the victims that the perpetrator twice admitted to police that he was carrying out the attack 'following the Islamic State's [IS, ISIS], instructions'" (World Watch Monitor 20 Jul. 2016). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to sources, on 11 December 2016, a bomb exploded in a Coptic Church in Cairo, wounding 49 people and killing at least 23 (*Le Figaro* 12 Dec 2016) or at least 25 people (*The New York Times* 11 Dec. 2016). *Le Figaro*, a newspaper based in France, indicates that it was a suicide attack that was claimed by the Islamic State (*Le Figaro* 7 Jan. 2017).

Sources report that seven Coptic Christians were killed between 30 January and 23 February 2017 in Northern Sinai (Amnesty International 1 Mar. 2017; Reuters 24 Feb. 2017). According to Reuters, the IS claimed responsibility for the killings and five of the killings were shootings, "one man was beheaded and another set on fire" (Reuters 24 Feb. 2017). Al-Monitor indicates that "IS threatened that others would follow" (Al-Monitor 10 Apr. 2017).

Al-Monitor indicates that "hundreds of Christian families escaped the city of el-Arish on 24 February, after [IS] and its branch in Egypt, Wilayat Sinai, increased attacks on Copts. It is believed to be the largest wave of collective displacement in Egypt since the June 1967 war" (Al-Monitor 20 Mar. 2017). The source further indicates that the displacement was triggered by the murder of seven Copts in El-Arish in sporadic incidents between 30 January and 23 February 2017 (Al-Monitor 20 Mar. 2017). In a 10 April article, Al-Monitor reports that "300 Copts were forced to leave their homes" (Al-Monitor 10 Apr. 2017). Reuters cites "church officials" as indicating that "100 families, out of around 160 in North Sinai, were fleeing" and that "[m]ore than 200 students studying in Arish [in North Sinai Governorate]... have also left" (Reuters 24 Feb. 2017).

The March 2017 Al-Monitor article indicates that Egypt's Social Solidarity Minister "announced on March 11 [2017] that 200 displaced families would be lodged temporarily in Ismailia, Cairo, Asyut and Dakahlia governorates" (Al-Monitor 20 Mar. 2017). According to the same source, the Minister initially "designated 48 housing units in Future City for el-Arish families," and a day later "announced that additional units had been approved for another 48 families" and that the housing units "are being rented from the Housing Ministry by the Social Solidarity Ministry" (Al-Monitor 20 Mar. 2017). The same source cites a spokesperson for the Social Solidarity Ministry as saying that "[t]he lodging of the displaced families is temporary" and that "the ministry will disburse financial assistance to those who have found refuge with family members outside el-Arish and will take care of families that do not have shelter, food, water or clothes" (Al-Monitor 20 Mar. 2017). Further and corroborating information on the Egyptian government response to displacement and to the killings could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources report that on Palm Sunday, 9 April 2017, two bomb blasts at Coptic Churches in Tanta and in Alexandria killed "48 people and injured dozens" (Al-Monitor 11 Apr. 2017) or killed "29 and injured 71 in

Tanta" and "killed 18 and wounded 35 in Alexandria" (*The Guardian* 9 Apr. 2017). Sources indicate that the attacks were claimed by IS (*The Guardian* 9 Apr. 2017; CNN 10 Apr. 2017). Sources also report that president Sisi declared a three-month state of emergency in response to the bombings (Al-Monitor 10 Apr. 2017; *The Guardian* 9 Apr. 2017). CNN reports that president Sisi "declared three days of nationwide mourning following the bombings and said a three-month state of emergency would come into force once legal and constitutional measures have been completed" (CNN 10 Apr. 2017). Further and corroborating information on the response of authorities to the bombings could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources report that, on 26 May 2017, gunmen dressed in military uniforms attacked a bus with Coptic Christians in the Minya Province and killed "at least" 26 people (*The Guardian* 26 May 2017) or "at least 28 people" (*The New York Times* 26 May 2017). Further, according to *The Guardian*, 25 people were injured (*The Guardian* 26 May 2017). Sources report that the attack targeted three vehicles carrying worshippers and laborers headed to Saint Samuel Monastery (*The Guardian* 26 May 2017; *The New York Times* 26 May 2017). The same sources report that in response to the incident, Egypt carried out "airstrikes" against militant camps based in Libya (*The New York Times* 26 May 2017; *The Guardian* 26 May 2017). Further and corroborating information on the Egyptian authorities' response to the attack could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2.4 Conciliation Sessions

An article from *As Safir*, a Lebanon-based newspaper, translated into English by International Boulevard, a San Francisco-based platform that specializes in translating articles from journalists around the world and published by "The Diplomat Publishing, a San Francisco-based ... non-profit" (International Boulevard n.d.), states the following about reconciliation sessions:

In theory, participation in a reconciliation session is voluntary... Each party presents their account of the incident to the reconciliation council, and provides evidence of their claims. The arbitrators then discuss the case in private before reaching a verdict, which they file as a formal reconciliation 'report' laying out the details of the conflict, the terms of their solution, and stipulating penalties if it is violated. (*As Safir* 29 Mar. 2017)

The FNRS researcher explained that the reconciliation sessions used to resolve conflicts between Copts and local Muslim communities involve [translation] "representatives from the Church, religious figures" and people who have influence within the communities (Researcher 11 May 2017). The same source adds that reconciliation sessions are meant to [translation]"ensure a certain level of coexistence of people" in communities in which "people know each other" and in which "tensions can sometimes be high" (Researcher 11 May 2017). A Mada Masr article similarly indicates that "customary reconciliation is a traditional practice carried out by religious, security and tribal leaders across Egypt's villages" (Mada Masr 14 Apr. 2017). Without providing further detail, the FNRS researcher stated that reconciliation sessions are [translation] "fragile" as a conciliation method, but that they are "part of the Egyptian culture" and that "many issues are resolved with them" (Researcher 11 May 2017). The same source further stated that the state uses the reconciliations sessions because openly discussing community problems or tensions between communities is [translation] "taboo" in Egypt, and that conciliation sessions are a way to avoid creating further tension in Egyptian society (Researcher 11 May 2017). The FNRS researcher further indicated that conciliation sessions are used as a conflict resolution method when, for example, there are relationships between members of the Muslim and Christian community, or there are disputes over the construction of churches (Researcher 11 May 2017).

Mada Masr reports that, according to the EIPR, there have been "45 sectarian incidents [that] ended with customary reconciliation sessions in the last five years" (Mada Masr 14 Apr. 2017). Regarding conciliation sessions to address disputes over church construction, the same source cites a religious freedoms researcher at the EIPR as stating that reconciliation sessions "result in Copts losing their rights, as they are forced to comply with the demands of the majority, who are Muslim citizens opposed to holding prayers or the construction of churches, demands that are illegal and unconstitutional" (Mada Masr 14 Apr. 2017). The article published in *As Safir* indicates that the Church came to reject reconciliation sessions because

it effectively prevents the state from enforcing the rule of law through the police and judicial system. Reconciliation sessions might well be useful to follow up on and reinforce a court's decisions in a community, but they can never replace a formal judicial process. (*As Safir* 25 Apr. 2017)

In a speech delivered on 9 June 2016 at the Seventh Annual Coptic Solidarity Conference in Washington, DC, Dr. Daniel Mark, a commissioner for the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) similarly stated that

Local Egyptian authorities continue to conduct 'customary reconciliation' sessions between Muslims and Christians as a way of easing tensions and resolving disputes rather than seeking justice through the courts. In some cases, local authorities and religious leaders have abused these reconciliation sessions to compel victims

to abandon their claims to any legal remedy. The fact of the matter is that reconciliation sessions often disadvantage Christians in resolving various disputes, many of which are sectarian related attacks targeting Christians. (Mark 9 Aug. 2016).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Note

[1] Coptic Solidarity is a US-based advocacy organization that focuses on the situation of Coptic Christians in Egypt (Coptic Solidarity n.d.).

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Internet sites, including: Agenzia Fides; Al Jazeera; Atlantic Council; Coptic Solidarity; Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies; Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights; Le journal international; Masrawy; US Copts Association.

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