



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice

Egypt

Egypt – EGY37914 – Evangelical
Christians – Proselytising activities –
Treatment by authorities – Treatment by
Muslims
17 December 2010

1. Please provide information on the treatment of Evangelical Christians, particularly those engaged in proselytising activities in Egypt.

Limited reports indicate that some evangelical Christians in Egypt have had difficulties with the authorities in recent years; two of these concerned a group of young evangelical Christians arrested in May 2010 for distributing Christian materials in Alexandria. Although proselytising is not illegal in Egypt, the government has restricted efforts to proselytise Muslims, and apostasy (that is, the conversion of Muslims to other religions) is a very sensitive issue in this country. It is plausible, therefore, that proselytising activities of evangelical Christians could attract negative attention from the Egyptian authorities and Muslims, but very few reports were found regarding specific incidents of this, or mistreatment of evangelical Christians.

Evangelical Christians in Egypt

Christians are the largest religious minority in Egypt, making up between eight to twelve per cent of the country's total population.¹ The vast majority of these are Orthodox Copts; other Christian denominations constitute only one per cent of the population,² which means that evangelical Christians are a very small minority in Egypt – or in the words of Middle Eastern newspaper *The National*, “an almost negligible minority within a minority”.³ According to a Christian website advocating prayer for the Arab world, most evangelical churches in Egypt are concentrated in Cairo, Alexandria, and Upper Egypt.⁴ One of the largest of these is the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt – Synod of the Nile, which was founded in 1854 by American missionaries, and appeared to have approximately 250,000 members in 2006.⁵

¹ US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – Egypt*, 17 November – Attachment 1, sec I.

² US Department of State 2010, “Background Note: Egypt”, 10 November, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5309.htm> – Accessed 29 November 2010 – Attachment 2.

³ Bradley, M. 2009, “Evangelicals woo Egyptian Copts”, *The National*, 10 November, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/worldwide/africa/evangelicals-woo-egyptian-copts> – Accessed 13 December 2010 – Attachment 3.

⁴ “Egypt” n.d., Website of Prayer Group for the Arab World, <http://www.arabicbible.com/lpg/> – Accessed 14 December 2010 – Attachment 4.

⁵ “Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt Synod of the Nile” 2006, Website of the World Council of Churches, 1 January, <http://www.oikoumene.org/member-churches/regions/middle-east/egypt/evangelical-presbyterian-church-of-egypt-synod-of-the-nile.html> – Accessed 16 December 2010 – Attachment 5; see also “The Synod of the Nile, Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt” n.d, Website of the General Assembly Mission Council, <http://gamc.pcusa.org/donate/E052081/> – Accessed 16 December 2010 – Attachment 6.

In 2009 at least two sources reported on apparent “friction” between the evangelical Christian community and the Orthodox Coptic Church in Egypt.⁶ *The National*, for example, reported that

over the past few months, the Orthodox church’s traditionally defensive stance has turned to face a new opponent. Prominent Orthodox leaders have publicly accused Protestant Evangelicals – a Christian sect with strong roots in the United States – of recruiting Orthodox youth as part of a broader plot to evangelise Egypt’s estimated eight million Christians.⁷

As this article suggests, evangelical Christians’ proselytising of Coptic Orthodox Christians has been a source of tension between these denominations in recent times. Although no comparable report was found regarding evangelical proselytising of Muslims, other sources suggest that such activities would be frowned upon by authorities and may cause interreligious tension or conflict.

Proselytising Muslims and the issue of apostasy

According to the US State Department’s 2010 *International Religious Freedom* (IRF) report, proselytising is not actually illegal in Egypt, but while

[n]either the [Egyptian] constitution nor the civil and penal codes prohibit proselytizing... police have detained or otherwise harassed those accused of proselytizing on charges of ridiculing or insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife.⁸

Proselytising to Muslims is particularly sensitive.⁹ The IRF report notes that the government “restricts... efforts” to proselytise Muslims and foreign religious workers are generally tolerated on the “condition” that they do not attempt to proselytise to those of the Islamic faith.¹⁰ A 2009 article in the UK’s *The Times* newspaper indicated that Christian proselytising to Muslims has added to tensions between the two religious communities in Egypt:

Muslims complain... that Western Christians, especially evangelical churches in America, have been using the Copts and the few Egyptian Protestant churches to proselytise among the Muslim majority.

⁶ Bradley, M. 2009, “Evangelicals woo Egyptian Copts”, *The National*, 10 November, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/worldwide/africa/evangelicals-woo-egyptian-copts> – Accessed 13 December 2010 – Attachment 3; Cornetta, A. 2009, “Friction Among Egypt’s Christians”, 16 October, *Bikya Masr* (news blog), <http://bikyamasr.com/wordpress/?p=4867> – Accessed 23 November 2010 – Attachment 7.

⁷ Bradley, M. 2009, “Evangelicals woo Egyptian Copts”, *The National*, 10 November, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/worldwide/africa/evangelicals-woo-egyptian-copts> – Accessed 13 December 2010 – Attachment 3.

⁸ US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – Egypt*, 17 November – Attachment 1, sec II.

⁹ US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – Egypt*, 17 November – Attachment 1, sec II.

¹⁰ US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – Egypt*, 17 November – Attachment 1, sec II.

The issue of changing religion is explosive, and there is widespread anger at attempts at proselytising and numerous instances of Muslims being killed who converted.¹¹

To expand on *The Times*'s point that changing religion is an "explosive" issue in Egypt, as noted by *Country Advice EGY37742* of December 2010, Islam is the official state religion of Egypt and the principles of Shari'a (Islamic law) are the primary sources of legislation.¹² Shari'a law prohibits conversion from Islam to other religions ("apostasy", a crime punishable by death under Shari'a law) and reports indicate that some Egyptian Muslims who have converted to Christianity have been scrutinised, harassed, threatened or mistreated by state actors and/or Muslims in the wider community.¹³ Given that there are significant sensitivities around apostasy in Egypt, it is plausible that proselytising activities of evangelical Christians could attract negative attention from the authorities and Muslims. However, few reports were found regarding specific incidents of evangelical Christians having trouble with the authorities and/or non-state actors.

Reports of problems and mistreatment

In 2010, the US State Department and an Egyptian newspaper reported on the case of a group of young evangelical Christians who were arrested in Alexandria in May 2010 for "distributing evangelistic books and pamphlets".¹⁴ The *Almasryalyoum* indicated that the young evangelicals had been arrested under the "Emergency Law" and cited the opinion of a human rights activist that this was "illegal, given that their activities had nothing to do with terrorism or drugs, which make up the entire remit of the Emergency Law since its amendment this month".¹⁵ The young people were released after two days in detention.¹⁶

One other report was located regarding evangelical Christians being subjected to rough treatment by Egyptian authorities, though the issue of proselytising did not come up in this case. In March 2010, Christian news source *Assyrian International News Agency* reported that an evangelical pastor and his wife had been assaulted by security agents in the city of Luxor, 700 kilometres from Cairo, "in order to evacuate them by force from

¹¹ Binyon, M. 2009, "Copts between the rock of Islamism and a hard place", *The Times*, 13 November, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article6916192.ece> – Accessed 13 December 2010 – Attachment 8.

¹² Country Advice 2010, *Country Advice EGY37742*, 1 December – Attachment 9, see question 2 (p 3-5); see also US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – Egypt*, 17 November – Attachment 1, introduction.

¹³ See for example US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – Egypt*, 17 November – Attachment 1, sec II; US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2010, *Annual Report*, May – Attachment 10, p 232; Darwish, N. 2009, "The scandal of apostate killing", *FrontPage Magazine*, 3 August, <http://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/p18142.xml> – Accessed 15 December 2010 – Attachment 11; Becket Fund for Religious Liberty 2009, United Nations Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review – Egypt: Submission of The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty", http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session7/EG/BF_UPR_EGY_S07_2010_TheBecketFundforReligiousLiberty.pdf – Accessed 14 December 2010 – Attachment 12, p 5.

¹⁴ US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – Egypt*, 17 November – Attachment 1 (source of quotation); see also Bayoumi, A. 2010, "[Thirteen] evangelicals arrested in Alexandria", *Almasryalyoum*, 24 May, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/news/13-evangelicals-arrested-alexandria> – Accessed 13 December 2010 – Attachment 13.

¹⁵ Bayoumi, A. 2010, "[Thirteen] evangelicals arrested in Alexandria", *Almasryalyoum*, 24 May, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/news/13-evangelicals-arrested-alexandria> – Accessed 13 December 2010 – Attachment 13.

¹⁶ US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – Egypt*, 17 November – Attachment 1.

their home and demolish Church property”.¹⁷ By way of background, the article said that at the time of the incident, the church believed it was “still in negotiations” with authorities to find a replacement for a building on its compound which had to be vacated so that it could be knocked down to make way for an archaeological excavation.¹⁸ The pastor was reportedly beaten and “dragged away” after he placed himself in the way of the demolition team, and his wife was slapped and pulled “by the hair” to force her to leave their flat on the church compound.¹⁹

Although no further reports were found regarding mistreatment of evangelical Christians in Egypt, specifically, there are many reports of Coptic Christians or Christians more generally being mistreated and discriminated against by authorities and/or attacked by Muslim compatriots in recent years.²⁰ These are summarised in question two of *Country Advice EGY37742* of December 2010, which is attached.²¹

Attachments

1. US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – Egypt*, 17 November.
2. US Department of State 2010, “Background Note: Egypt”, 10 November, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5309.htm> – Accessed 29 November 2010.
3. Bradley, M. 2009, “Evangelicals woo Egyptian Copts”, *The National*, 10 November, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/worldwide/africa/evangelicals-woo-egyptian-copts> – Accessed 13 December 2010.
4. “Egypt” n.d., Website of Prayer Group for the Arab World, <http://www.arabicbible.com/lpg/> – Accessed 14 December 2010.
5. “Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt Synod of the Nile” 2006, Website of the World Council of Churches, 1 January, <http://www.oikoumene.org/member-churches/regions/middle-east/egypt/evangelical-presbyterian-church-of-egypt-synod-of-the-nile.html> – Accessed 16 December 2010.
6. “The Synod of the Nile, Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt” n.d, Website of the General Assembly Mission Council, <http://gamc.pcusa.org/donate/E052081/> – Accessed 16 December 2010.
7. Cornetta, A. 2009, “Friction Among Egypt’s Christians”, 16 October, *Bikya Masr* (news blog), <http://bikyamasr.com/wordpress/?p=4867> – Accessed 23 November 2010.

¹⁷ Abdelmassih, M. 2010, “Egyptian State Security Demolishes Evangelical Church, Assaults Pastor”, *Assyrian International News Agency*, 24 March, <http://www.aina.org/news/20100323193843.htm> – Accessed 23 November 2010 – Attachment 14.

¹⁸ Abdelmassih, M. 2010, “Egyptian State Security Demolishes Evangelical Church, Assaults Pastor”, *Assyrian International News Agency*, 24 March, <http://www.aina.org/news/20100323193843.htm> – Accessed 23 November 2010 – Attachment 14.

¹⁹ Abdelmassih, M. 2010, “Egyptian State Security Demolishes Evangelical Church, Assaults Pastor”, *Assyrian International News Agency*, 24 March, <http://www.aina.org/news/20100323193843.htm> – Accessed 23 November 2010 – Attachment 14.

²⁰ See for example: USCIRF 2010, *Annual Report*, May – Attachment 10, p 227-238; US Department of State 2010, *2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Egypt*, 11 March – Attachment 15; US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – Egypt*, 17 November – Attachment 1.

²¹ Country Advice 2010, *Country Advice EGY37742*, 1 December – Attachment 9, see question 2 (p 3-5).

8. Binyon, M. 2009, "Copts between the rock of Islamism and a hard place", *The Times*, 13 November, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article6916192.ece> – Accessed 13 December 2010.
9. Country Advice 2010, *Country Advice EGY37742*, 1 December.
10. US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2010, *Annual Report*, May.
11. Darwish, N. 2009, "The scandal of apostate killing", *FrontPage Magazine*, 3 August, <http://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/p18142.xml> – Accessed 15 December 2010.
12. Becket Fund for Religious Liberty 2009, United Nations Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review – Egypt: Submission of The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty", http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session7/EG/BF_UPR_EGY_S07_2010_TheBecketFundforReligiousLiberty.pdf – Accessed 14 December 2010.
13. Bayoumi, A. 2010, "[Thirteen] evangelicals arrested in Alexandria", *Almasryalyoum*, 24 May, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/news/13-evangelicals-arrested-alexandria> – Accessed 13 December 2010.
14. Abdelmassih, M. 2010, "Egyptian State Security Demolishes Evangelical Church, Assaults Pastor", *Assyrian International News Agency*, 24 March, <http://www.aina.org/news/20100323193843.htm> – Accessed 23 November 2010.
15. US Department of State 2010, *2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Egypt*, 11 March.