

# Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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## Responses to Information Requests

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8 May 2015

### EGY105152.E

Egypt: Situation of Coptic Christians, including treatment; state protection available (2014-May 2015)  
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

#### 1. Context

According to Freedom House, Coptic Christians form a "substantial minority" in Egypt (Freedom House 2015). According to Minority Rights Group International (MRG), the Coptic population ranges between 4.7 and 7.1 million (Nov. 2013). Sources indicate that Christians account for approximately 10 percent of the population (AP 6 Jan. 2015; *The Independent* 18 Feb. 2015). MRG reports that the highest proportion of Copts is located in Upper Egypt and Copts are mostly working class peasants and labourers, although there are also Copts who are upper class businessmen, middle class urban professionals or small landowners (Nov. 2013). The Associated Press (AP) indicates that Minya city is where the largest Coptic community in Egypt is located (AP 6 Jan. 2015) and approximately 10,000 Copts live in North Sinai (ibid. 16 June 2014).

Following the removal of President Morsi in 2013, a wave of attacks against Copts caused the destruction and looting of dozens of churches and Christian property (AP 6 Jan. 2015; Freedom House 2015). According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), these sectarian attacks continued during and after Morsi's tenure, including an "unprecedented level of violence" against Copts in August 2013 (US 30 Apr. 2014, 51). For detailed information on the situation of Coptic Christians in Egypt in 2013, see Response to Information Request EGY104625.

Freedom House reports that following the removal of President Morsi in June 2013, the Egyptian military controlled Egypt without an elected legislature at the start of 2014 (Freedom House 2015). President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi was elected to office in June 2014 (Human Rights Watch Jan. 2015; AI 2015). Sources indicate that Christians have continued to be targeted by Islamic militants in retaliation for their perceived support for the removal of President Morsi (Freedom House 2015; AP 16 June 2014; CSW 26 Sept. 2014), or for the sake of ransom (ibid.; AP 16 June 2014). According to a January 2015 article by AP, Copts have complained of a rise in kidnappings, armed robberies and assaults between 2012 and 2015 (ibid. 6 Jan. 2015). The USCIRF reports that, regarding the situation of Copts in 2014, blasphemy convictions, restrictions on church building, limits on conversion and "lack of accountability for violent attacks" remain in place (US 30 Apr. 2015, 90).

#### 2. Treatment

Sources report that Copts experience "discrimination" (AI 2015; *The Independent* 18 Feb. 2015). An "Egypt researcher" for Amnesty International (AI), who was interviewed by the *Independent* newspaper, stated that societal discrimination against Copts "exists in some parts of the country" such as in areas where there is a large population of Muslim Brotherhood supporters (ibid.).

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, an assistant professor of Middle Eastern studies at the University of Kiel, who specializes in contemporary Egypt, expressed his view that the risk of violence for Copts were the same in 2014 and "since the election of President al-Sisi," noting that, although sectarian violence has decreased in comparison to 2013, "tensions and the threat of potential sectarian violence remain a constant problem" (Assistant Professor 14 Apr. 2015). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a professor of Middle Eastern history at the American University in Cairo expressed the opinion that Copts have felt "more hopeful about their situation" with the election of President al-Sisi but that "the threat of sectarian violence and terrorist violence remains a general problem" (17 Apr. 2015).

The Assistant Professor explained that "sectarian violence" is a problem occurring mostly among "regular Muslims and Copts," involving mob attacks on Coptic property, shops, and private homes, with the degree of violence ranging from damage and looting to arson and complete destruction of property, as well as verbal and/or physical assaults against individuals, sometimes leading to up to a "handful" of fatalities (Assistant Professor 14 Apr. 2015). He further explained that the purpose of such attacks is mostly to "intimidate and humble Christians, to destroy their livelihoods and possibly force them to migrate" (ibid.). The same source explained that, in contrast to sectarian violence, "terrorist attacks" against Copts are perpetuated and planned by a small group of people involving shootings or car bombs and are intended to target and kill larger numbers of people (ibid.). According to the Professor at the American University in Cairo, this violence tends to affect people who experience high levels of poverty and unemployment, and who are living in areas with relatively large Coptic populations or in peripheral urban areas where there is a high "Salafist fundamentalist presence" (Professor 17 Apr. 2015). AP reports that abductions of Copts have mainly occurred in the south, in areas where there are large concentrations of Christians and "strongholds of Islamic groups" (16 June 2014).

## 2.1 Regions Where Coptic Christians Have Been Targeted

Sources report that Copts have been the target of violence and threats in the following locations:

- Upper Egypt, particularly the governorates of Al Minya, Sohag (CSW 26 Sept. 2014; Professor 17 Apr. 2015; Assistant Professor 14 Apr. 2015), and Asyut [Asiut] (ibid.; CSW 26 Sept. 2014). Al-Monitor reports that sectarian problems have been "rampant" in Minya, particularly in the village of Delga (Al-Monitor 24 Apr. 2014).
- Areas of Cairo (Research Fellow 1 May 2015; Assistant Professor 14 Apr. 2015) occupied by poor Coptic migrants arriving from Upper Egypt (ibid.).
- North Sinai (Al-Monitor 7 Jan. 2014; Assistant Professor 14 Apr. 2015), where Copts have been targeted and "severely threatened" by militias swearing allegiance to Islamic State (ibid.).

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies at University of Sussex, who has been researching Coptic issues since 1996, gave the view that "there is a constant unknown as to when a strike against [Copts] might occur and we cannot say that they are not always at risk even if they are not located in hotspots such as Upper Egypt" (Research Fellow 1 May 2015).

## 2.2 Incidents of Violence in 2014 and 2015

Human Rights Watch reports that attacks on Christian churches and property "continued" in 2014 (Human Rights Watch 29 Jan. 2015). According to AI, Copts have been subjected to "new sectarian attacks" in 2014 (AI 2015).

In March 2014, the Vatican news agency, Agenzia Fides, reported on an attack on the Coptic church in Ain Shams in Cairo, one of many protests by the Muslim Brotherhood following the announcement of al-Sisi as a candidate for president (Agenzia Fides 28 Mar. 2014). The source indicated that the "Islamist attack" on the church led to the deaths of four people, including a Coptic woman who, according to church sources, was killed when attackers noticed a crucifix in her car (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources report that Christian protestors clashed with police in September 2014 while holding a demonstration outside a police station in Samalout town in Minya to demand that police locate a kidnapped Coptic woman (AP 16 Sept. 2014; CSW 26 Sept. 2014). Some protestors reportedly threw Molotov cocktails at the station and more than 30 demonstrators were arrested (ibid.; AP 16 Sept. 2014). Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), a Christian advocacy group that researches issues of freedom of "religious and non-religious" beliefs in over 20 countries (CSW n.d.), indicated that police raided the homes of local Copts the next day, destroyed property, "physically abused residents" and detained 12 people "allegedly on spurious grounds"; they were later released by the Samalout Misdemeanour Court (CSW 26 Sept. 2014).

Sources report the following incidents involving violence against Copts and Coptic property in 2015:

- On 6 January 2015, two policemen were killed by gunmen who opened fire on them as they were guarding a church in Minya city (AP 6 Jan. 2015; EOHR 6 Jan. 2015). They had reportedly been guarding the church ahead of 7 January Christmas celebrations (ibid.).
- In January 2015, 18 people died during clashes in several cities on the fourth anniversary of the Egyptian revolution (Ahram Online 25 Jan. 2015; Agenzia Fides 26 Jan. 2015). The violence included shots being fired at a church in Maadi and the fatalities included three Copts (ibid.).
- In March 2015, a Coptic Catholic church in Kafr el-Dawar, 20 kilometers from Alexandria (in Lower Egypt), was attacked by armed men using an explosive device (Agenzia Fides 9 Mar. 2015). Two policemen guarding the church were injured (ibid.).
- In early April 2015, a policeman and three to four civilians were injured when militants fired on a church in Alexandria (Ahram Online 13 Apr. 2015; Reuters 5 Apr. 2015).
- The village of al-Galaa in Minya has been the site of ongoing sectarian violence in 2015 (Assistant Professor 14 Apr. 2015; EIPR 7 Apr. 2015), where attacks on Copts in the village reportedly took place despite a security presence (ibid.).
- On 12 April 2015, in Zagazig [Sharqiya governorate], two bombs exploded near the Saint Joseph Church and at the Zagazig Evangelical church; there were no injuries (Copts United 14 Apr. 2015a; Ahram Online 13 Apr. 2015). The attack reportedly occurred on Easter (ibid.).

### 2.3 Abductions

Sources report that Copts have been the targets of kidnappings and extortion (*Al-Ahram Weekly* 27 Mar. 2014; Agenzia Fides 3 Feb. 2014). According to Agenzia Fides, in February 2014, the police carried out a large operation in the city of Asyut to dismantle a crime network that had been targeting Copts for kidnapping and extortion (ibid.). According to a December 2014 article published by the same source, the "systematic kidnapping" of Coptic Christians had continued in Upper Egypt (Agenzia Fides 9 Dec. 2014). The Coptic Catholic Bishop of Assiut reportedly said that there had been "no improvement" and police response was "sporadic" (ibid.). According to Al-Ahram, nearly 100 Christians were abducted in Minya governorate between 2011 and March 2014 (27 Mar. 2014). Agenzia Fides reported in July 2014 that Coptic Christians in Nag Hammadi [Qena governorate], had been particularly affected by ransom kidnapping, noting that there were 72 kidnappings for ransom between 2011 and 2014, including the deaths of three victims that had been captured (Agenzia Fides 8 July 2014).

According to the Egyptian NGO Association of Victims of Abduction and Forced Disappearance, cited by the *Christian Post*, between January 2011 and March 2014, 550 Coptic girls have been kidnapped, forced to convert to Islam, and forced to marry their captors (*Christian Post* 18 June 2014). The same source indicates that 40 percent of the girls were raped prior to the conversions and marriages (ibid.). The Research Fellow said that Coptic women who have been kidnapped have also been raped, in some cases by multiple perpetrators (1 May 2015).

### 2.4 Church-Building

AI notes that Coptic Christians have "faced restrictions on building and maintaining their places of worship" (AI 2015). Sources report that following periods of sectarian violence in al-Galaa in Minya, a customary reconciliation session led Copts to accept the condition of constructing a church without a tower or bells (EIPR 7 Apr. 2015; Copts United 14 Apr. 2015b). According to the Assistant Professor, church-building has caused sectarian problems in some areas where there is a strong "Salafi presence" (14 Apr. 2014). In late March 2015, militants attacked a Coptic church under construction in Al-Our village in Minya, which was being built to honour 21 Egyptian Copts beheaded in Libya (*Christian Post* 30 Mar. 2015; *Daily News Egypt* 19 Mar. 2015). *Daily News Egypt*, a daily independent English-language newspaper, reports that Coptic residents had purchased land and begun the church's construction, which sparked anger from local Muslim residents (ibid.). According to the *Christian Post*, the priest of the church stated that he had called the police several times for assistance but that they arrived late, stopped outside the village instead of guarding the church, and did not intervene against the attackers (*Christian Post* 30 Mar. 2015). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources also report that in April 2015, security forces in Maghagha, a village in Minya, stormed a property used for worship services and vandalized the contents, claiming that the site was unlicensed (*Egypt Independent* 5 Apr. 2015; EIPR 7 Apr. 2015). The owner of the property, the Maghagha archbishopric maintained that they had the necessary permits (ibid.).

### 2.5 Blasphemy

Human Rights Watch's *World Report 2015* indicates that Egyptian authorities continued to prosecute religious minorities, including writers and activists on charges of "contempt for religion" and

"blasphemy" (Human Rights Watch 29 Jan. 2015). According to the Assistant Professor, charges of blasphemy and "offending Islam" have been a rising phenomenon since the 2011 revolution, affecting both Christians and others, and posing a danger both to the individuals accused, as well as in terms of triggering mob violence (14 Apr. 2015).

Sources report on instances of charges of blasphemy and/or contempt of religion involving Copts, including:

- In Luxor, a Coptic man was convicted of blasphemy and contempt of religion and sentenced to six years in prison in June 2014 for posting pictures on Facebook that were deemed to be offensive to Islam (AP 24 June 2014). His arrest caused an outburst of sectarian violence in his village and unknown assailants threw Molotov cocktails at Christian-owned businesses (ibid.).
- A Coptic Christian man in Luxor was sentenced to six years imprisonment on charges of contempt of religion for "liking" a Facebook page for Christian converts (Jubilee Campaign 27 Feb. 2015, 3; *Morning Star News* 25 June 2014).
- A Coptic school teacher was fined and sentenced to six months in prison for insulting Islam in June 2014 after presenting an historical comparison of religion (Ahram Online 15 June 2014; Jubilee Campaign 27 Feb. 2015, 2).

### 3. Government Efforts Since 2014

Sources report that President al-Sisi attended a Coptic Christmas mass in January 2015), marking the first time an Egyptian president attended the religious ceremony (Ahram Online 6 Jan. 2015; US 30 Apr. 2015, 90). The USCIRF indicated in its 2015 annual report that Copts have welcomed "these and other symbolic gestures" (ibid.).

A new Constitution was adopted in 2014 that guarantees freedom of religion (Human Rights Watch 29 Jan. 2015; Freedom House 2015). However, according to Freedom House, "little has changed in practice" since the adoption of the new Constitution (Freedom House 2015). The Assistant Professor explained that the Coptic Church has been "optimistic" about changes to the legal framework in Egypt since al-Sisi was elected, but that the legal framework is less of a problem than the lack of effectiveness of state institutions in enforcing laws and regulations (Assistant Professor 14 Apr. 2015).

Sources indicate that in periods around Christian celebrations, authorities will take special measures to guard churches (Professor 17 Apr. 2015; EOHR 6 Jan. 2015; Ahram Online 13 Apr. 2015).

According to Freedom House, an estimated ten percent of the Christian churches and businesses destroyed in attacks in 2013 had been reconstructed by late 2014 (2015). Agenzia Fides reported that the Egyptian army assisted with the reconstruction of a Christian school south of Cairo which had been burned and destroyed during the riots of August 2013, and the school was able to reopen in September 2014 for the start of the new school year (19 Sept. 2014). Sources also indicate that the government has allocated about 30 acres of land to the Coptic Orthodox Church in a district of Cairo (*Egypt Independent* 8 Apr. 2015; Ahram Online 8 Apr. 2015) to increase church capacity to provide spiritual, social and educational services in the area (ibid.).

#### 3.1 Government Response to Tensions and Incidents

Sources indicate that there is less likelihood of instances of sectarian violence in larger cities (Professor 17 Apr. 2015; Assistant Professor 14 Apr. 2015). According to the Assistant Professor, this could be a "result of higher police presence and effectiveness in urban centers, as opposed to the countryside" (ibid.). According to AI's Egypt researcher, AI has "documented cases when Copts were accused of insulting Islam and in these cases the Copts will be attacked by members of their villages and the government has done nothing" (qtd. in *The Independent* 18 Feb. 2015). In reference to the problem of ransom kidnappings of Copts in Upper Egypt, an activist interviewed by Agenzia Fides gave the opinion that corruption was partly responsible for the "scarce capacity of police reaction" to such criminal activity (9 Dec. 2014).

In its 2015 annual report, AI states that Egyptian authorities "failed to tackle discrimination against religious minorities, including Coptic Christians" (AI 2015). According to CSW, there are "longstanding allegations that the authorities have failed to provide sufficient protection" for the Coptic community and that "inadequate police response has engendered a climate of impunity" (CSW 26 Sept. 2014). Human Rights Watch indicates that, "in many cases, authorities failed to intervene" in attacks on Christian establishments (29 Jan. 2015). According to the Assistant Professor, there have been complaints by Copts that the police are slow to respond, and "cannot be relied upon to protect Copts in situations of targeted violence" (Assistant Professor 14 Apr. 2015). The Assistant Professor indicated that, "[m]ostly, the perpetrators do not get prosecuted because the government opts for conciliation meetings and the charges are dropped or not pursued" (ibid.). The same source indicated that "in almost all cases" victims must drop charges against those

who damaged their properties or assaulted them in order to "buy peace" and sometimes people also choose to leave the area, usually moving to cities (ibid.). According to the USCIRF's 2015 report on Egypt, the situation of Copts has remained "precarious" as most perpetrators of sectarian attacks against Copts have not been convicted, including for large-scale incidents that occurred between 2011 and 2013 (US 30 Apr. 2015, 90). The same source states that the inability of the authorities to successfully prosecute those accused of committing violence and to protect Copts and other religious minorities "has fostered an atmosphere of impunity" (ibid.).

Sources report that during periods of sectarian violence, authorities will call for conciliation meetings between sides, and make temporary arrests on both sides of the conflict (Professor 17 Apr. 2015; Assistant Professor 14 Apr. 2015), and those arrested are then later released (ibid.). Conciliation meetings are, according to Al-Monitor, hearings where "a decision is rendered against one of the parties in the presence of Christian and Muslim leaders, as well as officials from the province and the church" (Al Monitor 25 Apr. 2014). According to the Assistant Professor, "witnesses often say that the [authorities'] response is more about calming the situation down than investigating and locating the people responsible" (Assistant Professor 14 Apr. 2015). Similarly, the Professor stated that this pattern of response tends to settle tensions for a time, but is "not a permanent solution" to the problems of sectarian violence (Professor 17 Apr. 2015).

The Research Fellow indicated that "there is an inequality of justice" through these meetings and "Copts are made to make concessions" with the terms of the conciliation being a "gross injustice" for Copts (1 May 2015). According to the Chairman of Minya's Reconciliation Committee, interviewed by Al-Monitor, "traditional hearings are more effective than resorting to the courts because of the expedited process of ending the dispute" rather than waiting years for the judiciary to process the issue (Al-Monitor 25 Apr. 2015). However, during an interview in the same article with the General Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese for Minya, he stated that traditional hearings are "not recognized as a solution by the church" and are seen as "stop-gap measures" that do not deal with the root causes of sectarian violence, which he linked to the state's neglect of Upper Egypt's development (ibid.). The Chairman of the Reconciliation Committee in Minya told Al-Monitor that the "intransigence of Brotherhood supporters" and the state of lawlessness in Egypt were reasons for the increased sectarian violence problems in Minya (ibid.).

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.

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## Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** The following were unable to provide information within the time constraints of this Response: Associate Professor of History at Middlebury College; Associate Professor of History, Simon Fraser University.

Attempts to contact the following were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies; Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights; Egyptian Organization for Human Rights; Lecturer, St. Andrews University.

**Internet sites, including:** Al-Arabiya; Albawaba; Al Jazeera; Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression; BBC; Cairo Institute for Human Rights; Christianity Today; *Christian Science Monitor*; Egypt – State Information Service; Institute for War and Peace Reporting; International Crisis Group; IRIN; Mada Masr; *The New York Times*; Open Doors; Radio France internationale; Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy; United Kingdom – Home Office; United Nations – Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Refworld, ReliefWeb.

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