

World Watch Research

Egypt:

# Background Information

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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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## Map of country



Egypt: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
114,484,000	10,084,000	8.8

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

## Recent history

After serving as president for three decades (from 1981 to 2011), Hosni Mubarak was forced to step down during the Arab Spring uprisings. The demonstrators put forward demands for more political freedom and expressed the discontent of the population with the country’s social and economic situation. In June 2012, after a brief transition, Mohamed Morsi, a politician who was a senior member of the Muslim Brotherhood, won the presidential election (gaining 52% of the votes). "Victory for Islam" was a widely used slogan in his election campaign, which raised levels of fear among the Coptic minority. Once in power, Morsi assumed dictatorial executive powers that alienated many Egyptians. Popular demonstrations were organized by a group called the Tamarrod which enjoyed the support of the police, the army, businessmen and also prominent Islamic and Christian Coptic religious figures

(International Crisis Group/ICG, 7 August 2013). Ultimately, the army [intervened](#) and ousted President Morsi alleging that he had failed to respond satisfactorily to the demands of the Egyptian people (BBC News, 4 July 2013). The army adopted its own transition road map which culminated in the adoption of a new constitution and the holding of new parliamentary and presidential elections.

At the end of the process, Field-Marshal Abdul Fattah al-Sisi emerged as the new Egyptian strong man. Al-Sisi was minister of defense when Morsi was in power and he was the principal figure behind the ousting of Morsi. He was hailed by some as a hero who saved Egypt from the clutches of the Muslim Brotherhood, while others contend that his leadership is a sure sign of Egypt's return to the old days of autocracy backed by the army. Once the new constitution was adopted, al-Sisi ran for president as a civilian and - given the personality cult that had been built around him prior to the election - it was not surprising that he [won](#) with an overwhelming majority (ICG, 7 August 2013). Since al-Sisi's ascent to power there has been a large-scale crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. In March 2018, al-Sisi was [re-elected](#) with 97% of the votes (The Guardian, 2 April 2018). This huge win was a clear indication of how effectively all opposition had been removed during his first term.

In February 2019, parliament members voted (later passed by a referendum) on extending the presidency term to allow President al-Sisi to stay in office for another 12 years after finishing his second term. New amendments also boosted the power of the army, already the dominant force in Egyptian politics and economy. Despite President al-Sisi's apparently waning popularity, he won a further re-election in December 2023, in a vote which again saw no meaningful opposition, with the official voter turnout being 66.8%. The relative high turnout seems to have been partly pushed by the government itself, given the widespread apathy among the general population ([Reuters, 19 December 2023](#)).

First the COVID-19 crisis and then the worldwide economic deterioration following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 caused a strong headwind for the Egyptian economy. This has been further worsened by the attacks by Houthi rebels on Red Sea shipping, which caused a loss of more than 2 billion USD in Suez canal toll revenues in the Egyptian financial year 2023/2024 ([Dawn, 19 July 2024](#)). To attract foreign investors, secure loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and to halt inflation, the Central Bank devaluated the Egyptian pound by about 50% ([Reuters, 14 June 2023](#)). This devaluation came on top of an earlier 50% devaluation in 2016. Despite such measures, inflation has remained high and the pound has kept losing value. Not surprisingly, poverty has increased with official figures stating that a third of the population lives below the poverty line, but other sources estimating that 60% of the population struggle to survive ([Reuters, 6 March 2024](#)).

In return for reforms, the IMF has approved several multibillion loans in recent years. In the Spring of 2024, in a combined effort from the EU and the IMF, complemented by significant investments from the UAE and the UK, the Egyptian government secured no less than 60 billion USD in loans, grants and investments. However, the majority of past loans seemed to end up in the hands of the military and security establishment instead of being invested in the economy. In addition, structural issues including massive corruption appear not be addressed, with the military and powerful business men retaining power, apparently even forcing President Sisi's hand ([TIMEP, 5 September 2024](#)). In the meantime, any dissent remains severely oppressed by the regime, with arbitrary travel bans and the freezing of financial assets being used to stifle any criticism ([HRW 2024, Egypt country chapter](#)) Even simply fact-checking government-provided information can easily lead to detention ([HRW, 20 September 2023](#)).

Despite the release of some political prisoners because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Egyptian government did not at that point free Coptic activists Ramy Kamel and Patrick George Zaki ([The Tablet, 28 April 2020](#)). Their 'wrongdoing' was to highlight the plight of Egypt's Copts and, in the case of Zaki, to also mention the difficulties experienced by the LGBTQIA+ community. Kamel was later released in January 2022, while Zaki who had been released on bail in December 2021, was sentenced in June 2023, but subsequently received a [presidential pardon](#) - BBC News 19 July 2023). Similarly, Coptic lawyer Peter Ragheb was arrested in April 2021 on charges of "joining a terrorist group" and "spreading false news" after sharing articles relating to the political and human rights situation in Egypt on his social media accounts ([Egyptian Front for Human Rights, 6 April 2021](#)). His pre-trial detention ended in 2022 ([Coptic Solidarity, 13 December 2022](#)). This is an indication that President al-Sisi may not have been entirely sincere in his 2014 public declaration to be a "[protector](#)" of the Christian community; or only as long as Christians actively show support for him (Egyptian Independent, 28 November 2014).

On the geopolitical level, Egypt participated in several historical summits which included Israel, in line with the Abraham Accords ([Al-Jazeera, 22 March 2022](#), [Carnegie Endowment, 6 April 2022](#)). While strategically and politically aligning itself with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, Egypt also received major investment from both countries ([The Africa report, 4 July 2022](#)). Following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in October 2023, al-Sisi guaranteed to protect Egypt against a forced displacement of the Gazan population into Egypt, and used his considerable influence over state media to switch the nation's attention from the struggling economy towards the Palestinian issue during the run-up to the elections ([France24, 10 December 2023](#)). Meanwhile, pro-Palestinian protestors have been arrested, indicating that the Egyptian regime leaves no space at all for popular activism ([Reuters, 31 May 2024](#)).

## Political and legal landscape

The Arab Republic of Egypt has a semi-presidential system. On paper, Egypt is a democracy. In practice, ever since King Farouk was overthrown in 1952, 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 ([Fanack, 7 July 2020](#)).

With President al-Sisi sworn into power in 2014 the situation in Egypt stabilized, but according to Human Rights Watch ([HRW 2024 Egypt country chapter](#)):

- "The Egyptian government continued to systematically detain and punish peaceful critics and activists, effectively criminalizing peaceful dissent and often equating it with "terrorism. ... Meanwhile, thousands of detainees remained locked up in dire conditions in lengthy pretrial detention or on sentences stemming from unjust trials. Civic space remained severely curtailed as independent organizations operating under draconian laws faced continued judicial and security harassment. ... Interior Ministry police and National Security agents continued to forcibly disappear critics and dissidents in official and unofficial detention places where detainees are frequently subjected to torture and forced to confess."

One cannot help but feel a sense of déjà vu now that a military strongman is once again cracking down on the Muslim Brotherhood and all opposition in general. President al-Sisi's regime wants to project an image of being a guarantor of stability, order and security for Christians. The administration seems determined to tackle the increasing Islamization of the state that accelerated under the leadership of

President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. Nevertheless, the Islamic Salafi al-Nour party continues to exist and operate legally, although the Constitution prohibits religious parties (Art. 74). At the same time, there is a risk that segments of the Muslim Brotherhood and their supporters, who feel aggrieved by their loss of power and the repression they are facing, might become more radicalized and join underground militant Islamic groups in great numbers. Such developments could lead to a further polarization of society in Egypt and could pose a serious risk to the nation's stability and the security of Christian Egyptians in the long run.

The current high level of support for President al-Sisi's regime by a large number of the churches and Christians, might also be used against them. Followers of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups are likely to [view church buildings](#) and Christians as easy targets to show that the Egyptian government is not able to protect its supporters (WWM, 11 November 2019).

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit ([EIU Democracy Index 2023](#)): Egypt is classified as an 'authoritarian' regime. Especially the freedom of speech and expression has been completely eroded and is basically non-existent.

According to Middle East Concern ([MEC Egypt profile](#), accessed 30 August 2024):

- "Egypt's 2014 constitution establishes Islam as the State religion and the principles of Islamic law as the main source of legislation. It also provides that Christians and Jews may govern personal status and religious affairs according to their own codes. The constitution affirms the principle of non-discrimination, including on the basis of religion. 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. ... In late August 2016 Egypt's House of Representatives passed Law 80/2016 on the construction of churches. The law aims to make obtaining a permit for the construction of churches easier. The president has since then given permission for several new church buildings ... . Critics complain that under the new law the National Security Agency maintains a de facto veto on church building permits. Prime Ministerial Decree 199/2017 formed a committee that deals with existing unlicensed church buildings. Church denominations had until September 2017 to file a list of unlicensed building with the committee. Of the more than 3,700 applications for a license the committee had issued 1,109 licenses by the end of August, 2019." (By January 2024, the number of licenses issued had risen to over 3,100: [SIS Egypt, 8 January 2024](#)).

### **Gender perspective**

The Egyptian legal landscape has long been restrictive towards women and girls. Whilst it ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1981, it maintained a [reservation to Article 16](#) (UNDP, 2019, "Egypt: Gender Justice and the Law"), which provides for the elimination of discrimination against women as they enter or exit a marriage. Egypt has made positive steps in recent decades, introducing several laws that improve gender equality such as the [2008 Child law](#), which raised the minimum age of marriage from 16 to 18 (ILO, accessed 3 July 2023). The President of the Republic even declared 2017 as 'the year of the Egyptian woman' and female representation in Parliament has [steadily risen since 2012](#) (Index Mundi, accessed 3 July 2023). As of 2022, [27.6%](#) of seats in national parliament were held by women (World Bank Gender Data Portal

2023). Despite this, accomplishments lie behind aspirations and many laws are inadequate. Child marriage continues, particularly in rural areas; 17% of girls are reportedly married by the age of 18 and 2% are married before the age of 15 ([Girls Not Brides Egypt](#), accessed 30 August 2024). Under the Muslim Personal Status Law, men have the right to divorce their wives by talaq – a husband's right to dissolve a marriage by simply voicing his repudiation of his wife. Women can apply for fault-based divorces, although judges have discretion regarding the threshold of harm and whether divorce is granted. Upon divorce, guardianship of children belongs to the father while women retain custody of children until the age of 15 (UNDP: "[Gender Justice and The Law](#)" in Egypt, December 2019).

Men face [conscription](#) into the army from the age of 18, where they serve 18-36 months, with an additional 9 years reserve obligation (World Population Review, 2023). Within this context, Christians face discrimination. They are reportedly denied promotion and excluded from positions within certain areas of the armed forces and security services.

## Religious landscape

Egypt: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	10,084,000	8.8
Muslim	103,460,000	90.4
Hindu	1,800	0.0
Buddhist	1,200	0.0
Ethnic religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	110	0.0
Bahai	2,900	0.0
Atheist	120,000	0.1
Agnostic	812,000	0.7
Other	2,600	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Islam is by far the most dominant religion in Egypt. Estimating the total number of Christians in the country remains a matter of some debate, with estimates varying between 7 million and 16 million. Egyptian church leaders, for instance, believe the total number is over 15% of the country's 106 million population. Open Doors follows the WCD estimate of 10,084,000 Christians.

Although Christianity has deep roots in Egypt going back centuries before the advent of Islam in North Africa, Christians are often marginalized and treated as second class citizens in modern Egypt.

Christians can be found all over the country, but "they are particularly concentrated in Upper Egypt (the southern part of Egypt) and in major cities such as Cairo and Alexandria. Suburbs in Cairo, other cities and some villages are sometimes regarded or described as 'Christian areas', but few are exclusively Christian (or Muslim)." ([Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, May 2017](#))

Humanist International writes in its [Freedom of Thought Report](#) (updated 4 March 2024): "One of the most visible signs of discrimination against atheists, apostates from Islam and members of minority religions is the policy concerning the Egyptian State ID cards, which include a section on religion where only one of the three "divine religions" can be recognized. ... Muslim-born individuals who leave Islam are not allowed to change the religion field on their identity card. Only in a few cases in which Christians converted to Islam and subsequently returned to Christianity have the Egyptian courts, albeit inconsistently, allowed the change in the documents."

### Gender perspective

Within this religious context, men and women face significant pressure, particularly converts from Islam to Christianity. Egyptian law permits Christians to convert to Islam, but despite several human rights [concerns](#) against the disparity, not vice versa (CBN, 15 January 2023). As such, a Christian woman can be married to a Muslim man, but a Christian man cannot marry a Muslim woman. There also have been multiple debates over the veiling of women ([Al-Monitor, 28 July 2022](#)).

## Economic landscape

According to the [World Factbook Egypt](#), accessed 30 August 2024):

- **Real GDP per capita (PPP):** \$17,000 (2023 est.)
- **Real GDP growth rate:** 3.76% (2023 est.)
- **Inflation rate (consumer prices):** 33.88% (2023 est.)
- **Unemployment:** 7.31% (2023 est.), with youth unemployment at 19% (female: 49.2% / male: 12.6%). The unemployment rate has dropped slightly in recent years, but structural problems of illiteracy and poverty continue to be devastating, with the recent devaluations of the Egyptian pound further increasing poverty rates and deteriorating the living standard for the majority of the Egyptian population.
- **Percentage of population below national poverty line:** 29.7% (2019 est.)

According to the [World Bank's Macro Poverty Outlook Egypt \(April 2024\)](#):

- **Economy:** "Growth declined to 2.7 percent in Q1-FY24 from 4.4 percent in Q1-FY23, reflecting the contraction of non-oil manufacturing and gas extractives; impacted by the foreign exchange crisis, import restrictions, capital controls, as well as domestic production problems. Shockwaves from the Middle East conflict which caused a sharp drop in Suez Canal traffic and dampened the strong recovery of tourism are also constraining growth in recent months."
- **Inflation:** "Annual urban inflation accelerated to an average 33.8 percent in January—December 2023 (up from 13.8 percent in 2022), even though 21.4 percent of the Consumer Price Index basket is regulated. Food items (63.9 percent inflation in 2023) remain the main driver of the headline rate and account for over 44 percent of bottom quintile expenditures."



- **Poverty rate:** "The national poverty rate is expected to have increased substantially (last reported at 29.7 percent in 2019), due to double-digit inflation since March 2022, with partial mitigation from the government's social packages. Low labor force participation and employment rates (at 43.1 percent and 40.1 percent, respectively, of the working age population in Q2-FY24) are also not conducive to poverty reduction."
- **Economic outlook:** "Growth is forecast to decline to 2.8 percent in FY24 from 3.8 percent in FY23, exacerbated by the repercussions of the Middle East conflict notably on key foreign income-generating sectors (Suez Canal and tourism). Growth is expected to start rebounding in FY25-FY26 driven by growth in investment (albeit from a low base), and improved private consumption with the projected pickup in remittances and the gradually abating inflation."

World Bank puts the Egyptian economy in the lower middle income category (World Bank, [World by Income report 2023](#)).

The Fragile State Index ([FSI 2024 Egypt](#)) shows that there have been small but steady improvements in the economic indicators in recent years, but the economy indicator deteriorated slightly in 2023-2024, probably reflecting the impact of international (Russia/Ukraine war) and regional (Israel-Gaza war) conflict on the economy, as well as the poor political and economic decisions made by the government.

President al-Sisi's administration began early on to attempt to revitalize the Egyptian economy and create much needed economic growth and jobs. However, many Egyptians suffered from the effects of the 2016 and 2022 devaluations of the Egyptian pound, which were, among other reasons, carried out to secure loans from the International Monetary Fund (see also above: *Recent history*). Besides securing loans from the IMF, the devaluations seek to attract foreign investors. Increased taxes and higher prices for gas, electricity and water have led to sharp price increases in general. While the middle class is struggling to make ends meet, the high poverty rate especially affects many Christians living in rural areas. The increased economic pressure on already marginalized families fuels migration. In addition, poverty is easily used to manipulate poor people for religious and political purposes. Unemployed Muslim youth can be influenced by radical Islamic groups to initiate attacks on churches and individual Christians. Additionally, there are indications that radical Islamic groups target poor Christians to convert them to Islam. Especially women and girls are vulnerable, as they become easy targets for forced marriages.

Discrimination against Christians in the job market remains evident, especially in governmental institutions. This applies in general to all Christians in Egypt, but converts from a Muslim background are particularly vulnerable.

### **Gender perspective**

The male labor force participation rate in Egypt, is about [4.5](#) times higher than that of women (World Bank, Gender Data Portal 2023). A 2017 Inheritance law has gone some way to protecting the economic rights of women, preventing persons from denying women their inheritance rights ([Al-Monitor, 12 December 2017](#)). Nonetheless, according to Inheritance Law No. 77 of 1943, [all citizens](#) – including Christians - are subject to Islamic Inheritance Law, which typically stipulates that men should inherit double that of what a woman receives (Ahmed, Z. and Nada, A., February 2020). Reports indicate inheritance laws are more strict in the matter of real estate, particularly in [Upper Egypt](#)

(Raseef, 11 May 2023). There have been positive developments in this regard, however; in one case an Egyptian court ruled that a Coptic Christian woman should receive equal inheritance to her brothers. She was encouraged by her brothers to fight for this right (The Times, 27 November 2019).

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Egypt](#), accessed 30 August 2024:

- **Main ethnic groups:** The majority of the Egyptian population (99.7%) are ethnically Egyptian.
- **Main languages:** The official language is Arabic, with French and English "being widely understood by the educated classes".
- **Population growth rate:** 1.49% (2024 est.).
- **Fertility rate:** 2.65 children born per woman (2024 est.)
- **Urban population:** In 2023, 43.1% of the population lived in urban areas, while the annual urbanization rate stands at 1.9%.
- **Literacy rate:** 73.1% of the population can read and write; with a significant difference between men (78.8%) and women (67.4%) (2021).
- **Youth population:** The younger generation - up to 14 years of age - makes up almost 34% of the population, making it another African country with a young population in need of (economic) opportunities
- **IDPs/Refugees:** In 2024, Egypt hosted 465,000 refugees from Sudan, following the outbreak of the Sudan conflict in April 2023. Furthermore, there are 70,000 refugees from the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza Strip residing in the country (2022); as well as roughly 21,000 refugees from South Sudan. Other refugees are from Eritrea (21,000), Ethiopia (15,500), Yemen (10,000) Iraq (6,800) and Somalia (6,800).
- **Life expectancy:** 75.0 years on average; women (76.2 years), men (73.8 years).
- **Education:** Egyptians are expected to enjoy 14 years of schooling on average (2018). This figure is the same for both boys and girls. However, the current mean years of schooling of the general population is 9.6 years.

According to the [UNDP Human Development Report Egypt](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** Egypt ranks #105 out 193 countries in the Human Development Index (HDI 2022). Despite ongoing difficulties, the combined ratio of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a high score of 0.728.
- **Gender inequality:** With a Gender Development Index (GDI 2022) score of 0.884, women are still clearly disadvantaged in comparison to men. The GDI measures the differences in life expectancy, years of education and GNI per capita per gender.

Egypt has a high illiteracy rate, but with significant differences between urban areas (17.7%) and rural areas (32.2%) and between men (21.2%) and women (30.8%), according to the Bertelsmann Transformation Index ([BTI Egypt report 2022](#), p.22). And although "the literacy rate increased from 55.6% in 1996 to 71.2% in 2017...", the quality of education has deteriorated dramatically due to outdated equipment, crowded classrooms, a frontal style of teaching, and poor training for teachers." ([BTI Egypt report 2024](#), p.23).

It is expected that the gender gap will gradually decline as there is equal participation in education between men and women. In addition, poverty, a low level of health awareness and education and high and widespread domestic violence are common for many Egyptians, including Christians. It is not unusual for children in villages to leave school at an early age to help earn family income. Reportedly, many Christian children face discrimination within the educational system from both teachers and peers. Although there are private Christians schools, most Christians cannot afford them.

Power dynamics are at play at all levels of society: Muslims oppress Christians, men oppress women, and occasionally cases are reported that leaders of historical Christian communities use their authority to oppress the most vulnerable Christians of other denominations.

Especially with the rise of more radical interpretations of Islam, the pressure on Christians has been increasing over the past few decades. Egypt seeks to be a social and cultural center for Sunni Islam and continues to be influential through its Islamic Al-Azhar University and its media production houses. President al-Sisi called upon scholars at the prestigious Al-Azhar University to fight radicalism and introduce reforms in Islamic teaching. This has, for example, led to the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar stating that "the terms *dhimmi* (the protected but second-class Christian or Jewish community in a Muslim state) and *jizya* (the tax paid to achieve such status in lieu of converting to Islam) no longer have any relevance in Egypt" ([Christianity Today, 22 February 2021](#)). Furthermore, the Grand Imam congratulated "the Christian brothers on the occasion of Christmas". However, in rural and impoverished areas in particular, radical imams and less tolerant brands of Islam are clearly present. This was evident, for example, in the negative responses to the Grand Imam's Christmas congratulations ([Arab News, 29 December 2022](#)). The government is making efforts to reverse this trend, for example through more moderate media content. However, Egyptian society remains deeply conservative as far as Islam is concerned, making any government impact in this respect minimal.

Christians in Egypt report that, although Muslims and Christians have much contact in everyday life, it cannot be called a peaceful co-existence. Although all speak the same language, there is nevertheless considerable division caused by their contrasting belief systems. Radical Muslims in rural areas, where many Christians live, promote attitudes of rejection towards Christians, which is a fertile ground for aggression, especially targeting women and children. Christian women, in rural areas in particular, find themselves targeted by radical Islamic groups and as a result kidnapping for either conversion, ransom or forced marriage is not uncommon. In addition, when sectarian violence emerges, conflicts are often solved using so-called 'customary reconciliation councils'. However, because of their minority position, it is generally reported that "reconciliation sessions are not an effective way of facilitating peaceful co-existence between religion and belief communities and generally serve to embolden perpetrators of sectarian violence, who face no real consequences for their actions" ([CSW, 17 January 2023](#)).

### **Gender perspective**

Culturally, too, Egypt is conservative and despite its large urban centers (Cairo and Alexandria) is dominated by tribal attitudes. The population is not as ethnically diverse as other countries in North Africa and the Middle East and has a strong national identity. Within Egypt's multi-religious context, men and women are expected to assume traditional gender roles. Women are legally required to obey their husbands (Law No. 100 of 1985: Article 11b) and should she fail to do so, her husband can file an

obedience complaint against her. Domestic violence is common in Egypt, and reportedly worsened during the COVID-19 crisis ([Wilson Center, 26 January 2023](#)).

## Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Egypt](#) (23 February 2024) / Survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 72.2% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 40.0% of the total population. As of January 2024, 38.6% of Egypt's social media users were female, while 61.4% were male.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 97.3% of the total population

According to [Statista](#), the Internet is more accessible to men (Statista, 7 July 2022): In 2018, 52.4% of men had access to the Internet, compared to 41.3% of women. The gender gap in relation to mobile phone ownership stands at 8%, with men ahead of women ([GSMA, 2022](#)). It is therefore harder for women to access digital Christian resources or online Christian communities.

According to Freedom House, [Freedom on the Net 2023 Egypt](#):

- (Overview) "Internet freedom and the rights of internet users are severely constrained in Egypt. Criminal penalties, harassment and surveillance have contributed to high levels of self-censorship among Egyptian internet users."
- (A2) "Internet penetration is hindered by digital illiteracy, among other factors. The Economist Intelligence Unit's [Inclusive Internet Index 2022](#) ranked Egypt 57th out of 120 countries due to high prices and low digital literacy."
- (B1) "The state continued to block news websites during the coverage period as part of a wider crackdown on freedom of expression. Through Article 7 of the Law on Combating Information Technology Crimes, the NTRA can order telecom companies to block websites."
- (B5) "State officials actively manipulate information online, and the media landscape is dominated by the online versions of state-owned newspapers or outlets that are backed by government-connected businessmen."

### Other sources report

- Reporters Without Borders ([World Press Freedom Index 2024 Egypt](#)): Egypt slightly decreased from rank #166 in the 2023 index to #170 in the 2024 index. The press freedom remains under severe pressure: "Egypt continues to be one of the world's biggest jailers of journalists. The hopes for freedom that accompanied the 2011 revolution now seem distant. ... Independent media are censored and targeted by prosecutors. As for television and radio, their popularity has confined them to the role of relaying political propaganda. ... Virtually all media are directly controlled by the state, the intelligence agencies or a handful of wealthy, influential businessmen who are under the government's thumb. By contrast, media outlets that refuse to submit to censorship are blocked, as is the case with Mada Masr, an independent news site that has been inaccessible in Egypt since 2017."
- Data from the Committee to Protect Journalists shows that at least 13 journalists are currently imprisoned in Egypt, with one missing ([CPJ, accessed 20 July 2024](#)).

Under President al-Sisi, media censorship in Egypt has [increased](#) at a drastic pace (Atlantic Council, 28 August 2018). In 2018, the president ratified the Anti-Cyber and Information Technology Crimes Law, which ostensibly aims to combat "extremism" and "terrorism". However, these laws allow Egyptian authorities to arbitrarily block websites that are considered a threat to national security or to the national economy. Individuals who visit these websites can face steep fines and penalties. Despite the anti-cyber laws restricting the press and all other media channels (thus limiting freedom of speech), Christians in Egypt report that modern communications technology is nevertheless widely used in Egypt. Social media (especially Facebook) is used to mobilize public opinion. However, all social media is monitored by the government and criticism of the government or Islam is not tolerated. Most churches are currently using little modern technology in youthwork or for evangelistic purposes.

## Security situation

The domestic security situation in Egypt is currently stable. For years, the northeast of the Sinai region, near the border with Gaza, was the exception, where the struggle between the Egyptian army and violent Islamic militants continued. However, in February 2023 President al-Sisi announced that "terrorism has been defeated" in the region ([Ahram Online, 9 February 2023](#)). Nevertheless, there are now fears that militant attacks could spread to other places in the Sinai region ([MAITIC, 26 January 2023](#)). In recent years, the Egyptian security forces have regularly conducted operations against these militant groups, often at no small cost to the local population ([TIMEP, 6 April 2021](#)). The groups targeted include Islamic State group-affiliated Wilayat Sinai, which probably also conducted the attack against a Sufi mosque in the north of the Sinai in 2017, killing 305 people. Since then, the Egyptian army increased its military operations in the region ([Al-Monitor, 7 September 2020](#)). However, it remains very difficult to control the entire area and the security forces cannot prevent militant groups from attacking undermanned checkpoints and sometimes civilian targets. The threat of bomb attacks remains, especially for minority groups (including Christians). It is likely that such threats will continue in the short term.

There is also the threat of protests becoming violent. Minor demonstrations occurred in September 2019 in protest against government policies, after an exiled influential Egyptian businessman posted several videos accusing al-Sisi of widespread corruption. Reportedly, some of the protest were initiated by the Muslim Brotherhood, but other sources stated that the organization is too weak and that the government used the accusations as a distraction ([France24, 30 September 2019](#)). One way or the other, the protests were quickly contained by arresting the demonstrators. Fear further increased after the security services started checking the mobile phones of ordinary pedestrians who had shared messages about the protest ([Washington Post, 30 October 2019](#)). In March 2020, four activists were arrested after demonstrating for the release of prisoners threatened by the COVID-19 virus in overcrowded prisons ([The Guardian, 18 March 2020](#)). In September 2020, "small but widespread" protests occurred in remembrance of the 2019 protests ([HRW, 13 October 2020](#)).

However, due to the very oppressive nature of the regime, protests are scarce and often quickly quelled. Even around international summits like the COP27 Climate Change Conference there is no room for demonstrations to take place, while former protest leaders languish in jail ([The Guardian, 29 June 2022](#)). In addition, despite the deteriorating economic situation, a survey found that a small majority of the population reject street protests. Further analysis suggests that "any protests resulting from Egypt's current economic crisis will be sporadic rather than systemic" ([Washington Institute, 5](#)

[June 2023](#)). The same report found that only 25% of the population supports religious reforms towards moderation and tolerance. Similarly, the general public remained suspicious of the developing relationship with Israel, another issue in which there are clear differences between the views of the general public and the public policies of the government. The outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war only increased this tension, with the arrest of more than 120 pro-Palestine supporters being tangible evidence ([Amnesty International, 14 June 2024](#)).

Internationally, Egypt had been supporting Libyan strongman Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar, who controls the east of Libya. Like al-Sisi, Haftar is strongly opposed to Islamist groups and the Muslim Brotherhood (which Egypt has declared to be a terrorist organization). During 2020, Haftar's forces suffered considerable losses after Turkey brought military support to the UN-backed government which controls the west of Libya. Thus, in June 2020, al-Sisi announced that Egypt's army would intervene if Haftar were to lose more territory ([BBC News, 17 August 2020](#)). However, this did not happen since a ceasefire was reached in October 2020. Following the ceasefire and Haftar's defeat, it seems that Egypt has started betting on a different horse, as al-Sisi opened up towards the western government and left Haftar out of diplomatic meetings ([The Arab Weekly, 6 July 2021](#)). Above all, Egypt wants stability in its border region and hence is actively trying to find a political solution for the volatile situation in Libya ([Al Monitor, 12 April 2022](#)). The renewed relationship with Turkey might help in this regard, although the relationship remains complicated ([Daily Sabah, 8 September 2024](#)).

Most Egyptian Christians support President al-Sisi for the very reason that he has vowed to keep Egypt safe and to [protect](#) the Christian community against terrorist attacks (Egyptian Independent, 28 November 2014). Nevertheless, Christians remain vulnerable, especially in the face of mob attacks. Rumors of alleged blasphemy or the opening of a new church can lead to mob violence against Christians. In upper Egypt, the local authorities use so-called 'reconciliation sessions' to resolve a conflict, which - de facto - often means that Muslim attackers go free. This has resulted in a culture of impunity for violence against Christians in that area.

Further reflecting the fragility of the Egyptian justice system, the perpetrators of a 2016 attack on elderly Coptic Christian woman Soad Thabet (who was stripped naked and paraded through the streets) were acquitted after their appeal in December 2020. Another legal case was repeatedly delayed, after which the Court of Cassation upheld the acquittal ([Mada Masr, 16 January 2023](#)). The case is widely viewed as a clear sign of the very vulnerable position of the Christian minority, including in the legal system.

### **Gender perspective**

Coptic women and girls appear to be particularly vulnerable for exploitation across Egypt, with reports of forced marriages, disappearances and occasionally abductions. While some are kidnapped directly off the street, this tends to be a rare occurrence. More commonly, they are approached by Muslim men who groom them into romantic relationships and into eloping with them, promising they would convert to Christianity; in those cases girls can then be forced to marry and forcibly converted to Islam. Captors have reportedly filmed the girls being sexually abused and used the footage as blackmail material to deter them from returning to their families, utilizing the strong [shame culture](#) in Egypt to their advantage (J Zakarriya, 2019, Journal of International Women's Studies). The response by Egyptian police has been [dismissive and ineffective](#), particularly in instances where Christian girls

displayed initial willingness to elope (WWM, 14 September 2017). Additionally, conversion to Islam is always accepted and encouraged.

## Christian origins

The Coptic\* Orthodox Church prides itself in the tradition which names the Bible's New Testament apostle Mark as founder of Christianity in Egypt. In Alexandria, a vibrant church developed with its own 'school' of theology in the 2nd century. This was home to the Church Father, Athanasius of Alexandria (+ 373 AD), who was one of the foremost theologians of the worldwide Church, especially for his defence of the view of God as a Trinity. Initially, the church was mainly a Greek phenomenon in the cities, but the original Egyptian population was soon won over for the new faith as well. Egypt became the cradle of monasticism; the Monastery of St Anthony became an important model for monasticism throughout Europe. \*The term [Coptic](#) is derived from the ancient Greek word for Egyptian (ABC News, 9 April 2017).

Persecution under Roman occupation was often severe in Egypt. This is why the Coptic calendar begins with 284 AD as its first year: In that year Diocletian became Emperor of Rome. His reign was marked by the torture and mass executions of Christians, especially in Egypt. After Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire, the Coptic Christians were soon in trouble with the Empire since their theology was branded as heretical at the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD). Arab armies then conquered Egypt (639-646 AD) and this led to more periods of severe persecution under Islam. The Church became focused on survival, instead of playing a public role in society. In the 10th century, the Coptic Christian community had decreased in number, making up about half the population.

The British colonial role in Egypt (1882-1952) gave much freedom to Christians. Since the Revolution of 1952 this freedom has been steadily eroded and there have been short periods in which Christians have faced very severe violations of religious freedom, but this has always been a localized phenomenon and not driven by the state.

Currently, the vast majority of Christians in Egypt (well over 90%) belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church. The Roman Catholic Church entered Egypt in the 17th century through the missionary activity of the Capuchins and Jesuits. In 1847 the Anglicans began working in the country, followed by the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church in 1854. Many other independent church groups and missionaries have followed since, adding to the rich variety of Egyptian church life.

## Church spectrum today

Egypt: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	9,131,000	90.5
Catholic	296,000	2.9
Protestant	527,000	5.2
Independent	134,000	1.3
Unaffiliated	21,400	0.2
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-25,300	-0.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>10,084,100</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	437,000	4.3
Pentecostal-Charismatic	707,000	7.0

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

**Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

The Coptic Orthodox Church remains the largest Christian denomination in Egypt with more than 90% of the Christian population. The Coptic Evangelical Presbyterian Church and the Coptic Roman Catholic Church are the two other main denominations in Egypt.

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Egypt>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

## External Links

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