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# **Egypt's criminalisation of minority free speech through blasphemy cases**

By [Mohamed Mandour](#) – Rowaq Arabi

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### **Excerpt: Blasphemy as an Instrument to Criminalise Atheism**

Coptic Solidarity (04.10.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3uUfoC4> - (...) Egypt has a long history of persecuting atheists. Despite the constitution's affirmation of freedom of belief and the absence of any statute criminalising atheism, the Egyptian state has used blasphemy provisions to punish atheists. State religious institutions and the judiciary view atheism not as a free expression of religion, but rather as a threat to Islam and thus to national identity and state sovereignty over the public sphere, as well as a provocation of the majority. The state therefore penalises atheists for taking a position contrary to the majority religion, describing atheism as an extremist concept.

In the past, atheist intellectuals have been imprisoned on blasphemy charges on the basis of their writings. Salah Mohsen, for instance, the author of *Tremors of Enlightenment*, was sentenced in 2001 to three years in prison by the State Security

Court for 'spreading extremist ideas' and promoting perverse ideas with the aim of distorting Islam. When interrogated by the prosecution, Mohsen said that he was an atheist who did not believe in any religion and that he was trying to spread his vision and ideas through writing. As an atheist, these ideas were most certainly contrary to Islam.[36]

Atheists benefited from the two years of relative openness that followed the 25 January 2011 revolution, which was accompanied by a tangible expansion in the use of social media. Atheists established numerous Facebook pages, the most well known of which were *Atheism Is the Solution*, *Radical Atheists Without Borders*, and *A Rational Atheist*. Some atheists chose to post on YouTube using Black Duck software. Nevertheless, the period of political openness—and consequently the margin of freedom for atheists—did not last long. After 30 June, as the state sought to restore its hegemony over the public space and under the banner of fighting terrorism, the Ministry of Endowments waged a battle with the Islamist movement for control of the country's mosques. At the same time, in cooperation with the Ministry of Youth and Sport, it launched a national campaign to combat the spread of atheism among young people.[37] In line with the vision of religious institutions in Egypt and linking the rise of terrorism to atheism, a ministry conference recommended the need to emphasise moderation in order to prevent terrorism and a turn to atheism and moral decay, insofar as these deviations had paved the way for terrorism.

The same idea found expression in an article by Minister of Endowments Mohamed Mokhtar Gomaa, titled 'The Industry of Atheism and Terrorism'. Declaring terrorism and atheism as equivalent threats to the nation and its stability, Gomaa wrote, 'Terrorism and atheism are both a colonial product that threatens our national security and works to destabilise us. There must be concerted efforts by religious and cultural institutions to confront this phenomenon'.[38]

The article confirms once again that the subjects over which religious institutions seek control are an extension of the same colonialism that national identity emerged to confront. These institutions, according to Gomaa, are currently threatened by atheists or terrorists, both arising from the same source: colonialism. Despite the enormous difference between terrorism, which aims to harm human beings, and atheists' free expression of belief, religious institutions consider them both to be non-compliant for contravening the conception of moderation they protect.

As discussed above, national subjects produced by religious institutions play an active role in producing national identity and thus reproducing the discourse of these institutions. If the institutional discourse incites against atheists, then it is expected that atheists would be subjected to popular repression at the hands of 'patriots', which typically manifests itself in two forms. The first is the physical assault of atheists. To take just one example, Ahmed Harkan was attacked by citizens in Alexandria and turned over to the police.[39] In the second form of repression, citizens file police complaints or lawsuits against atheists, as happened with blogger Alber Saber. A citizen filed a complaint against Saber at the police station, alleging that he had published online content offensive to religions. After several extremists tried to break into his apartment, Saber called the police. They took him to the station, where he learned of the complaint against him. Saber was physically assaulted inside the station as well as by prisoners at the direct instigation of a policeman.[40]

Security services and the judiciary turn a blind eye to inflammatory rhetoric emanating from religious institutions, as well as extremist attacks against atheists, and in turn, the minority is punished. The prosecution charged Saber with contempt of religion and interrogated him about his position on religion and the reasons for his atheism. The investigation report revealed that Saber maintained a Facebook page titled Nākeh al-

Āleha (Copulator of Gods) and was also an administrator of the *Egyptian Atheists* page. The court sentenced him to three years in prison for promoting extremist ideas and creating web pages advocating atheism. As such, the court supported religious institutions' view of atheism as an extremist concept, demonstrating the law's role in punitive control and the protection of the majority's religion through the suppression of alternative conceptions. The same scenario was repeated with two students, Sherif Gaber and Karim al-Banna, both of whom were sentenced to prison for advocating atheism online.<sup>[41]</sup> In June 2020, the Alexandria Economic Misdemeanour Appellate Court upheld a three-year prison sentence given to blogger Anas Hassan for insulting religions and misusing social media; Hassan was an administrator of the *Egyptian Atheists* page on Facebook.<sup>[42]</sup> (...)

## Footnotes

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[40] Ezzat, Ahmed.

[41] Hamdi, Ahmed (2012) 'al-Ilhad fi Misr: Manbudh Ijtima'iyān wa-Tariq ila Ghayahib al-Sujun' [Atheism in Egypt: Social Taboo and Path to Prison], *Deutsche Welle*, 27 March, accessed 3 May 2021, <https://p.dw.com/p/1ExRE>.

[42] Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (2020) 'Economic Misdemeanour Appeals Court Upholds Verdict against Blogger, with 3 Years Imprisonment and a 300,000 EGP Fine for Managing the Egyptian Atheists Facebook Page', 23 June, accessed 3 May 2021, <https://www.eipr.org/en/press/2020/06/economic-misdemeanour-appeals-court-upholds-verdict-against-blogger-3-years>.

*Photo Credit: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi meets with Al-Azhar's Grand Imam Ahmed al-Tayeb at the Ittihadiya presidential palace in Cairo, Egypt 26 February 2017. The Egyptian Presidency/Handout via Reuters*

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**Isis executes a Coptic Christian in North Sinai: he had financed the construction of a church**

***Nabil Habashi Khadim, 62, was an esteemed merchant and philanthropist. He was kidnapped on 8 November last and killed with a Kalashnikov shot to the head. His murder was posted online by the jihadist movement who accused him of having contributed to the construction of the only Christian place of worship in Bir Al-Abd.***

AsiaNews (19.04.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3n1IATG> - The Islamic State (IS, formerly Isis) has executed an Egyptian Orthodox Coptic Christian, killing him with a bullet to the head in an execution filmed and posted online yesterday on the jihadist group social channels and shared by numerous users and platforms.

The victim, already considered a "new martyr" by the country's Orthodox, is an esteemed intellectual and businessman: 62 year-old Nabil Habashi Khadim who was kidnapped on November 8 in the city of Bir Al-Abd, in northern Sinai. In the video he is seen being shot in the head with a Kalashnikov while kneeling on the ground.

Local sources report that the man had contributed to the construction of the only Christian place of worship in the city, the church of the Madonna dell'Anba Karras (Our Lady). This is also one of the reasons that led the jihadist commando to kidnap him. In the video, one of the executioners belonging to the local Daesh cell (Arabic acronym for IS) explicitly accuses the man of having contributed, even financially, to the construction of the church just before pulling the trigger and executing him. The jihadist group also accuses the Church of "collaboration" with the Egyptian army, police and secret services.

Still others link the timing of the killing to the upcoming Easter holidays, which fall on May 2 for the Coptic Orthodox.

Witnesses say that Nabil Habashi Khadim, the latest in a "long line of North Sinai martyrs" was an esteemed jeweller from the city of Bir Al-Abd. His family is considered to be among the oldest in the Coptic community in the area, very active in the gold trade as well as owning a clothing store and a cell phone resale business.

On 8 November a group of men, armed but in civilian clothes, kidnapped him on the street in front of his house and fled undisturbed. In all these months the searches of the police and the appeals of the family for his release have been in vain.

His death caused grief and emotion in the Egyptian Coptic community, whose leader Pope Tawadros II issued a stark condemnation and asked for prayers for the man "kidnapped by Takfiri elements in North Sinai five months ago and subsequently martyred".

The Church, continues the note, "weeps for a son and a faithful servant" who is now in the heavenly glory of Christ for having "testified to his faith even to the sacrifice of blood". The declaration concludes by confirming the support of the Coptic Orthodox community "for the efforts of the Egyptian state" to counter "these hateful acts of terrorism" and "to preserve our dear national unity" for a "future of peace and prosperity".

Islamic extremist groups have been fighting for years in northern Sinai, which intensified following the overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi in 2013 and the rise of the Islamic State in the region the following year. Several Christians have also been targeted, killed in attacks against **individuals** and groups of faithful.

In February 2018, the Egyptian security forces, the army and the police launched a massive campaign against armed groups and jihadists, with particular attention to the North Sinai area.

In just over two years, more than 840 terror suspects and over 60 soldiers have been killed.

Photo : AsiaNews.it

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## **No punishment, no repentance: The persecution of Christians in Egypt**

By Zara Sarvarian

Christian Today (03.04.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3fV9ivP> - Memories of the attack have never faded from Souad Thabet's mind.

An Egyptian Coptic Christian woman in her 70s, Souad wishes she could forget the moment that a group of Muslim men invaded her home in El-Karam village in Egypt.

They dragged her out of the house and stripped her. In her ears, is the noise and giggle of the large crowd of spectators. She was mocked and beaten. Her husband was too.

That was in 2016. Recently, Souad learned that her attackers have been acquitted.

El-Karam is a village of 40,000 people, 5 per cent Coptic Christian. A rumour spread in the village that Souad's son Ashraf was having an affair with a married Muslim woman.

Both Ashraf and the woman, Nagwa, denied the allegation. Ashraf believed the rumour to have been spread by Nagwa's husband, who used to be his business partner, but they had fallen out. Ashraf even received death threats and reported them to the police.

However, authorities did nothing, and he finally fled the village with his wife and children. His parents remained behind.

One night, a mob of local Muslims armed with weapons broke into several Christian homes, including Ashraf's. After looting the properties, they set fire to them. Ashraf's mother was dragged outside and stripped by Nagwa's husband, his father and brother, as she later testified.

### ***Reconciliation without repentance***

Violent mob attacks on Christians in Egypt mostly occur within mixed Muslim/Christian communities, with Christians generally the much smaller population. Radicalised Muslims, and sometimes the local Imams, promote the shunning of Christians, creating a fertile ground for aggression. Rumours of alleged blasphemy, the opening of a new church or even a small conflict over a trivial matter can trigger organised attacks on local Christians.

Often, these attacks are followed by so-called 'reconciliation sessions' meant to resolve the conflict. Christians usually have no choice but to participate. Next, they are pressured, with threats and intimidation, to accept the terms imposed on them: to change their testimonies against the perpetrators or recant their complaints to the

authorities. This practice perpetrates a climate of impunity where Muslims who have committed crimes against Christians are cleared of charges or not prosecuted at all.

After one such reconciliation session, the Coptic Christians of El-Karam, whose houses were burned on the night Souad was humiliated and beaten, changed their testimonies against Muslims who they had claimed were the perpetrators. They now said they had been mistaken in the identities of those people due to the dark night. This undermined Souad's case: the three people who had attacked her and been sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment were acquitted last December, as were all of the other Muslims.

"This is a great injustice," Souad's son, Ayad Daniel Attia, told a local expert. "We were pressured many times before to reconcile with my mother's attackers. We refused to do so hoping that we could seek justice by law. The law, however, did not bring us justice, nor did it protect our rights."

### ***Hostile climate***

Egyptian Christians have had to fight for their rights for several centuries now. Today, they make up 15 per cent of Egypt's 103 million population. They are hardly newcomers to the land; the Coptic Orthodox Church names the apostle Mark as the founder of Christianity in Egypt.

After Arab armies invaded Egypt between 639-646 AD, periods of severe persecution began under Islam and the church struggled to survive. The number of Coptic Christians dwindled and by the 10th century they comprised only half of the population.

Today, oppression of Christians operates in different ways in Egypt. There is a widespread view in Egyptian society whereby Christians are regarded as second-class citizens. This view fuels their discrimination and creates an environment in which the state is reluctant to enforce the fundamental rights of Christians – despite claiming otherwise. It leaves Christians vulnerable to all kinds of attacks and pressure.

Upper Egypt, in the south of the country, is particularly dangerous for Christians. Islam has been more radicalised there than in the north. Most incidents and mob attacks take place in this region. However, Christians in the poor rural areas in the north experience a similar degree of oppression from radicalised Muslims – especially in the Nile delta villages and towns.

Due to the hostile climate especially in rural areas, neither church leaders nor ordinary Christians can protest these practices. This environment nurtures disregard for the law and contributes to a culture of impunity.

### ***"Dirty Christian, die!"***

One of the forms of impunity granted to Islamist radicals is by attributing mental illness to a perpetrator, thus clearing their criminal charges.

Sara\* was walking on the street in a busy shopping area in Warraq district of Giza governorate in January last year.

Suddenly, she felt a sharp object hitting her body. "Dirty Christian, die!" she heard a man shout while her legs started to tremble. The man had stabbed her in the neck.

"I didn't feel pain at first," Sara told the local expert. "I must have been in shock. I felt a lot of blood was coming out of my body and I just started dabbing it with my scarf, but it was too much."

While Sara fainted, the attacker, dressed in the typical white clothes of Islamic extremist Salafists, continued to threaten her. While a crowd of eyewitnesses gathered around them, the man did not feel the urge to flee, seemingly confident that his actions would have no consequences for him.

Sara had large, deep cuts around her neck and her life was saved in the hospital.

However, the person who committed the atrocious crime was never held to account, allegedly due to mental illness.

### ***Under the rug***

This climate of impunity is also created by the police, who often protect and cover up radical Muslims.

There have been numerous reports of murders of Christians who have been asked to renounce their faith and were instantly killed upon refusal. According to an Open Doors' contact, although the names of the suspects are known in most cases, the police frequently display a good deal of inertia in making swift arrests and starting investigations. This sense of impunity acts as a driver of further intolerance and persecution.

Sometimes police officers are themselves the perpetrators: Open Doors recently received new reports of brutal murders of two Coptic Christians at the hands of local police.

Dr David Landrum, Director of Advocacy at Open Doors UK and Ireland, said: "Christians have lived in Egypt for nearly two thousand years. Egypt is their home. It is completely unacceptable that the law does not protect their fundamental human right to practice their faith safely.

"It is completely unacceptable that they can be persecuted with impunity. Unless this culture of injustice is addressed in Egypt, we can expect to receive more reports of oppression and violence. The Egyptian authorities need to act now."

[Egypt is number 16 on the Open Doors' World Watch List](#), a ranking of 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.

*\*name changed for security reasons.*

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## **Religious freedom in Egypt? A counter-enquiry by Coptic Solidarity contradicts the official propaganda**

HRWF (26.03.2021) - Just after Jo Biden became the new president of the United States, the Egyptian Embassy in Washington published a document entitled "[Strengthening national unity: Religious freedom and diversity in Egypt](#)". A [\\$65,000 monthly contract](#) had been signed earlier between the Egypt's Ambassador to the US, Motaz Zahran, and Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck to have such a piece of propaganda drafted by a lobbying group. Coptic Solidarity has checked and published a nine-page [fact-checking report](#).

We have selected one issue from this report: The situation of Christian church buildings.

### **Egypt's statement**

In 2016, while attending Christmas mass again at the same location, President El Sisi vowed to rebuild and restore all churches that had been damaged by acts of terrorism on 56 churches and other Christian properties by the operatives of the Muslim Brotherhood in summer 2013.

### **Coptic Solidarity's fact-check**

Not until Coptic Solidarity partnered with former Rep. Dave Trott (R-MI) to introduce [H.R.5974 - The Coptic Churches Accountability Act](#) in the 114th Session of Congress which required the Secretary of State to submit an annual report to Congress regarding "efforts to restore or repair Christian property in the Arab Republic of Egypt that was burned, damaged, or otherwise destroyed during the sectarian violence in August 2013," did the Egyptian government make serious efforts to finish church repairs.

### **Egypt's statement**

A 2016 law on church construction was adapted to facilitate the timely construction and licensing of churches.

### **Coptic Solidarity's fact-check**

However deficient, the law is not even being implemented by the government, as it continues with church closures and granting conditional approvals at a snail's pace.

### **Egypt's statement**

Church and synagogue restorations have been prioritized.

- Church and synagogue restorations have been prioritized. Egypt has undertaken significant efforts to restore and license Christian churches as well as strengthen Jewish community infrastructure.
- In August 2016, Egypt's House of Representatives passed a law helping facilitate the timely construction and licensing of churches. The law was passed by a two-thirds majority and supported by the leaders of Egypt's Coptic, Catholic and Anglican churches. The legislation delegates the power of issuing permits to Governors and sets up an administrative committee to license religious services facilities. The law also eliminated many of the bureaucratic and legislative obstacles that previously delayed progress. The administrative committee has licensed over 1,800 churches to-date.
- Making good on his 2016 promise, President Abdel Fattah El Sisi oversaw the restoration and rebuilding of 55 houses of worship damaged or destroyed by acts of terrorism in the summer of 2013. The multi-phase effort, launched in 2014, is almost halfway complete; 29 more religious facilities are to be fully restored in the coming months.

### **Coptic Solidarity's fact-check**

- As mentioned above, the 2016 church law is inherently discriminatory and does not treat churches on equal terms with mosques. Furthermore, Egypt boasts **140,000 mosques** (all owned and/or run by the state) in addition to hundreds of thousands of prayer halls, situated in every public or private office building, factory, school or club; but only about 3,000 "licensed" churches (all denominations combined).
- Based on information published by the government in the Official Gazette since the 2016 Church Law was passed till December 2020, a total of 1,800 churches and subsidiary buildings have received **preliminary/conditional approvals**.

This represents 32.5% of the outstanding applications of 5,540. **Final** approvals are not typically reported by the government, but based on unofficial contacts with a number of concerned churches, it seems that **only a small percentage has been granted final approval**

- USCIRF reported that [at least 25 churches and church-related facilities were closed in 2019](#) for “security reasons” (often following mob riots), with only one being reopened in January 2020. According to the 2016 Church Law, these existing churches without official registration were to be permitted to operate freely until they receive final approvals.
- USCIRF reported that few new church permits have been granted in new construction zones, [but not in the existing communities that still lack houses of worship](#). The new Cathedral is located in the yet-to-be inhabited administrative capital and does not have regular services. It is essentially a “show church.”
- To illustrate, Bishop Makarios of Minya stated that an estimated 150 villages and neighborhoods in his diocese are in need of a church or related structure. The new church law has done nothing to meet the immense need. There are hundreds of villages where Copts are denied a place of worship.
- More than seven years after the worst mass attack on churches in centuries, the government has only finished half of the repair and restoration work on those churches. Compare this with the dozens of mosques, built with taxpayers’ money, inaugurated *every week*.

## FINAL REMARKS

- The Egyptian government is going to great lengths to improve its “image.” Wouldn’t it be more truthful, more productive—and less costly—to improve the reality in such a way that it becomes naturally reflected into real progress towards equal citizenship rights for all?
- The fact is that the Copts, the indigenous population of Egypt, are subjected to institutional, systemic and systematic discrimination in their own country. It is imperative that the Egyptian government admit this reality at the highest levels of the state and enact rigorous and urgent plans to restore full citizenship rights of Copts.

Photo : mapsofworld.com

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## Egyptian thinkers challenge religious persecution

By [Samir A. Zedan](#)

Providence (28.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3d9g8fF> - When Egypt was negotiating with Israel to reach a peace agreement, which the two countries signed in 1979, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat refused to appoint Boutros Ghali, a Christian, as minister of foreign affairs. Instead, Sadat made sure that Ghali was in a lower position to prevent him from being in charge of Muslims, despite his high credentials and pivotal role in reaching the agreement. Decades later, Christians and other religious minorities in Egypt still face numerous barriers to equality. But now many writers and journalists challenge their marginalization, and they often find themselves facing serious risks to their lives or

freedom. This group of Egyptian thinkers has contested these practices and argued openly that restrictions against Christians ought to be repealed.

Among them is Ibrahim Issa, a well-known journalist who received death threats for his opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood and Gama'a al Islamiya groups. He has challenged a wide array of Islam-related concepts. Often, he rejected exonerating Islam from crimes like those committed by ISIS and blatantly [compared](#) the controversial Muslim scholar Ibn Taymiyah, whose teachings are considered the driving force for violence against non-Muslims, to Hitler.

Issa was hired in March 2018 by the US-based Alhurra, a public Arabic-language satellite TV channel that the US-government-funded Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN) operates and that broadcasts news and current affairs programming to audiences in the Middle East and North Africa. There he promotes critical thinking and free inquiry, opposition to totalitarian tales, and humanistic values whenever they are relevant. His controversial show [Debatable](#) discussed historical disagreements about Islam in Egypt and frequently challenged Al-Azhar University, Egypt's highest Islamic authority and one of the most powerful Islamic universities in the world. "Islamic terrorism will end only when Muslims stop trying to relive their past" was his [boldest assertion](#) aired on television.

Egypt also imprisoned another thinker, Islam Buhairi, for challenging the role of clerics in controlling the religious discourse. He has long argued that several Islamic Hadiths were false as they emphasized the superiority of Islam. Buhairi propagated reforms for Islam that Al-Azhar University regarded as an offense to the religion.

Alhurra TV did not overlook his expertise with the Koran, and the channel hired him to present his own show, *Islam Hurr* (Free Islam). He continues to challenge Islamic texts in both the Koran and Hadith to help Muslims escape the influence of radical Islamic scholars. Additionally, he seeks to evaluate the validity of the Koranic verses that promote violence and terrorism. Furthermore, Islam Buhairi [criticized](#) the history of Muslim caliphs for promoting terrorism long before the Muslim Brotherhood group was formed in the early twentieth century.

Under other conditions, blogger Sherif Gaber was arrested for his atheism, political activities on campus, and atheist statements online. He is still in hiding, seeking refuge outside Egypt after being arrested several times and having his passport confiscated. He has been sentenced to prison for expressing his views in online videos about religion and other "controversial" issues. Gaber faced accusations of "disturbing public peace through YouTube" as well as "mocking religion and spreading immoral values." During his first encounter with the Egyptian authorities in 2013, he was arrested for "contempt for religions and propagating vice values and anomalies that threaten public peace and threaten national security." In this [video](#), Sherif Gaber explains how ISIS is nothing but a continuation of Islamic practices that date back to the beginning of the religion in the seventh century.

No wonder that numerous other thinkers in Egypt are engaged in efforts to challenge Islam's dominance in the country, and they have supporters across the entire Arab world.

However, without overt support from foreign entities—including foreign governments, their diplomatic representatives, and international forums—these voices can be easily suppressed or stifled. But too often Western countries turn a blind eye to how laws and practices in places like Egypt marginalize religious minorities and those who disagree

with the dominant form of Islam there. By ignoring these writers and thinkers, the West has weakened them. Radical Islamic movements may seem to be gaining ground in the region, but the United States and others can still help the surging, though timid, secular groups rejecting such ideologies.

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