

Freedom of Religion and Belief in Egypt

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Freedom of Religion and Belief Program

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Report Summary

This report documents inter-religious sectarian attacks, and security interventions and abuses seen in cases in which Christians engage in religious rites in private buildings or attempt to obtain a license to establish new churches or are suspected of intending to turn existing buildings, or buildings under construction, into churches. Instances of this were observed in the governorates of Minya (in al-Hawasiliya and Izbat Basilius in the district of Beni Mazar) and in Beni Soueif (in Izbat Girgis, the district of al-Fashn and al-Fuqai village in the district of Biba). The report also discusses cases in which the security apparatus and municipal councils halted construction or demolished buildings under construction on Christian-owned property, suspecting that these buildings would be sold to the bishopric or turned into a church in the future. These cases were observed in the city of al-Adwa and the village of Reida in the governorate of Minya and in the city of al-Qusiya in Assyout.

Minya remained the major center of sectarian violence, whether related to the construction of churches, Christian religious practice or rumors of romantic relationships between Muslims and Christians (as was the case in the village of al-Sanquriya in the Beni Mazar district). In other cases, everyday disputes degenerated into collective Muslim-Christian violence (seen in the villages of Dafash in the Samalut district, al-Ismailiya in the Minya district and Girgawi in the Matay district).

The report also documents events that took place in al-Bagour in the governorate of Monufiya on 17 September 2009, when a Muslim man stabbed three Christians in three separate incidents in one day in the district of al-Bagour and the neighboring villages of Miyiyit Afif and Bahnay. The attacks left one dead and two injured, one critically; the perpetrator was arrested the following day and the case was referred to the prosecutor's office, which is still investigating the matter.

As usual, the report reviews the most significant judicial rulings to be issued in the period under review, as well as a summary of important administrative decrees, political developments, civil society activities and reports, both Egyptian and foreign, touching on religion in Egypt.

FRB quarterly reports

The aim of the Freedom of Religion and Belief Quarterly Reports is to provide legislators, policymakers, researchers, the media and other stakeholders with a primary source for documented information on the most significant political, legal and social developments affecting freedom of religion and belief in Egypt. This report does not offer an analysis of the facts, but only documents them as a basis for further analysis.

In preparing this report the Freedom of Religion and Belief Program of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) relies on field research by program staff, complaints received by the EIPR during the reporting period, information gleaned from news reports and confirmed by researchers and laws and governmental decrees related to freedom of religion and belief as published in the Official Gazette. This report is not a comprehensive overview of all pertinent developments, but is limited to the facts the report's authors view as most significant and were able to confirm.

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I. Court rulings and trials

1. On 30 June 2009, the first circuit of the Court of Administrative Justice, headed by Judge Mohamed Ahmad Atiya, rejected a suit filed by Girgis Malak Wasef contesting the state changing his religion to Islam after his Christian father converted to that religion. The plaintiff said in his lawsuit (no. 4475/58) that he was not yet seven years old when his father converted to Islam and that the Ministry of Interior's Civil Status Authority changed his religion to Islam and his name to Mohamed Mustafa Mohamed without his consent. The plaintiff asked the court to compel the Ministry of Interior to issue official documents for him containing his personal information as registered at his birth, including his original name and religion. He argued that the changes were made without his consent and that, having reached the age of legal maturity, he has the right to choose his religion.

In its ruling, a copy of which was obtained by the EIPR, the court explained its rejection of the suit by noting that "the principles and judgments of Islam, as the religion embraced by a majority of Egyptians...determines the right of the non-Muslim to embrace the revealed religion of his choice, and these same judgments prohibit a person who has entered Islam and practiced its rites from leaving the religion, given that it is the final seal of the revealed religions. This has become an aspect of public order that must be respected." The court added, "Although Islamic jurisprudence recognizes different opinions on the application of the *hadd* punishment for apostasy, no [jurist] denies the magnitude of the apostate's crime and his assault on Islam after he has willingly embraced the religion."

The court stated that public order in Egypt "is pained by harm to the official national religion, which has taken up a permanent place in the hearts of the majority of the Egyptian people, represented by the evil of rebelling against its judgments and the criminality of apostasy." The court also said that "the Muslim who has freely embraced Islam or lived and internalized Islam...cannot forsake Islam, toying with this true religion and distancing himself from right guidance and indulging in his own passions." The ruling stated that conversion is only permissible if it follows a certain order, which the ruling described as an order "sanctioned by the Almighty God." Explaining this, the court said, "He who believes in Judaism is called on to embrace Christianity, which was revealed later, and he who believes in Christianity is called on to embrace Islam, the seal of all religions. In all these cases, the opposite is incorrect, as evidenced by God's ordering of the revelation of His religions, and in accordance with public order and morals in Egypt."

Responding to questions about Egypt's ratification of international human rights conventions that uphold the freedom of belief and an individual's right to embrace the religion or faith or his choice, the court said, "Egypt, as an Islamic state in which the majority of people believe in Islam, exercised its legislative sovereignty to approve these conventions while also being mindful of the provisions of Islamic law and careful that there is no contradiction between the content of these conventions and these provisions,

which have been consolidated as public order that must be respected.”

The court also cited a fatwa issued by the Dar al-Ifta' on 14 May 2006, in response to petition 704/2006, regarding the permissibility of declaring one's apostasy and the state authorities' acknowledgement of it. The fatwa concluded, "He who enters Islam voluntarily, without coercion, and on the basis of evidence leading him to change his religion to Islam cannot deviate from the public order of his community and ask that his name and religion be changed after he has already changed them once before or proclaim his apostasy, for the confusion he evinces will tempt people away from the true religion, and this is a matter involving the rights of others."

The court concluded that the plaintiff is a Muslim because his father converted to Islam when the plaintiff was six years old. In turn, he cannot renounce Islam. The court noted, "It is a matter of consensus in Islamic jurisprudence that the son follows either of his parents in Islam, and the preponderant opinion in Hanafi jurisprudence is that a person who is Muslim through his parents need not publicly renew his faith after reaching the age of maturity for it is already an assumed fact, since it is in keeping with one's natural disposition or closest to it." On these grounds, the court ruled that the administrative body is not compelled to consider the plaintiff's request.

2. On 8 July 2009, the Emergency Supreme State Security Court rejected an appeal from the Minister of Interior contesting the court's previous decision to release blogger Hani Nazir, the proprietor of the blog Kareez al-Hubb. The Ministry of Interior arrested Nazir on 3 October 2008 following rumors in the village of al-Aila, located in the district of Abu Tisht in the Qena governorate, that he had published material offensive to Islam on his blog (see paragraph 24 of the First Quarterly Report, 2009). Available information indicates that Nazir was arrested after some village youths found a link on his blog that led to a story titled "Azazel's Billy Goat in Mecca," written by a person calling himself Father Yuta. The story is allegedly a response to Youssef Ziedan's novel *Azazel*, which the Coptic Church considered offensive.

Although the court's release order was final according to the provisions of the Emergency Law, the Ministry of Interior did not comply and issued a new administrative arrest order for Nazir without releasing him. The attorneys for the blogger, who is detained in the Burg al-Arab Prison in Alexandria, filed another petition against the new arrest order, registered as no. 7159/2009, but the court rejected that petition on 30 September 2009. According to the provisions of the Emergency Law, another petition contesting the detention order cannot be filed for another 30 days.

3. The Court of Administrative Justice on 12 July 2009 began considering suit no. 41935/63, filed by Mohamed Higazi against the President and others. The plaintiff is asking for recognition of his conversion from Islam to Christianity. According to the text of the complaint, a copy of which was obtained by the EIPR, the plaintiff is asking that the Civil Status Authority be compelled to change his name to Bishoi Armiya Boulos and change

his religious affiliation from Islam to Christianity in all his official identity documents. If the suit is rejected, the plaintiff asked that his name be changed to Bishoi and that a dash (—) be placed in the slot for religious affiliation on identity documents. The case is still pending before the court.

On 29 January 2008, the Court of Administrative Justice rejected a similar petition filed by the same plaintiff (no. 35647/61), in which the plaintiff asked the Civil Status Authority to change his religion from Islam to Christianity on all official documents (see paragraph 5 of the First Quarterly Report, 2008). Mohamed Higazi appealed this ruling before the Supreme Administrative Court (suit no. 13040/54), but a hearing date had not yet been set at the time this report was written. At the same time, Higazi decided to file a new lawsuit containing additional demands in the wake of the court ruling that allowed Baha'is to place a dash (—) in the slot for religious affiliation on official documents.

4. The period under review saw two lawsuits filed with the Court of Administrative Justice against the Minister of Culture, the Secretary-General of the Supreme Council for Culture and the Sheikh of al-Azhar. Both suits asked that the State Merit Prize in social sciences for 2009, given to writer Sayyid al-Qimni and philosophy professor Hassan Hanafi, be revoked. According to the lawsuits, copies of which were seen by the EIPR, the plaintiffs argue that al-Qimni and Hanafi have been rendered ineligible for the award due to the offenses to religion and faith found in their writings. The first lawsuit was filed by Youssef al-Badri contesting al-Qimni's prize on 13 July 2009 (no. 48575/63), and a hearing has been set for 3 November 2009; the second lawsuit was filed by several lawyers contesting both al-Qimni and Hanafi's prize on 11 August 2009 (no. 52478/63), and a hearing has been set for 10 November.

On 25 June 2009, the Supreme Council for Culture awarded the State Merit Prize to Sayyid al-Qimni and Hassan Hanafi, sparking widespread debate between supporters and opponents of the decision. The awardees are chosen by a vote of the members of the Supreme Council.

In a related context, on 1 April 2008, the Court of Administrative Justice headed by Mohamed al-Husseini issued a temporary injunction against the decision to grant poet Helmy Salim the State Award for Achievement in the Arts. Salim's prize was revoked pending a final decision on the merits of lawsuit no. 31339/61, also filed by Youssef al-Badri. According to the court, Salim had "offended the divinity" in one of his poems (see paragraph 1 of the Second Quarterly Report, 2008).

5. On 27 July 2009, the ninth circuit of the Sayyida Zeinab Family Court, headed by Judge Walid Mohamed Rifaat, ruled on petition no. 164/2007, removing Aser Usama Sabri from the care of his Baha'i parents and awarding custody of the child to the mother's Muslim aunt. The child's maternal grandfather had filed a suit demanding custody after he discovered that the child's parents had embraced the Baha'i religion; his sister joined the petition and also demanded custody for the same reason.

In its ruling, a copy of which was obtained by the EIPR, the court explained that “it is a settled matter of law that custody of a Muslim child cannot go to an unbelieving parent, for custody is a type of guardianship and God did not empower the unbeliever to exercise guardianship over the believer.” The court stated, “Although Hanafi jurists allow a non-believing mother to assume custody, they stipulate that the mother cannot be an apostate, for they believe that the apostate deserves imprisonment until she repents and returns to Islam or dies in prison.” The court said that Muslim clerics have agreed that “the Baha’i or Babiya faith is not an Islamic creed and that he who embraces this creed is not a Muslim and has committed apostasy.”

The court stated that it had accepted the testimony of two witnesses called by the plaintiff, who said that the child’s mother had “converted to Baha’ism and forsaken Islam.” The court concluded on the basis of the witnesses’ testimony that the mother “had converted to the so-called Baha’i religion and, as such, she has forsaken Islam and so no longer meets a condition required for custody of the child Aser, which in this case is the condition of not committing apostasy against Islam. The child’s continued presence with the first defendant—the mother—constitutes the greatest harm.” Neither the child nor his parents attended the hearing, having traveled abroad after the lawsuit was filed.

6. On 17 August 2009, the tenth criminal circuit of the Cairo Appeals Court began hearing appeal no. 321/2007, filed by blogger Abd al-Karim Nabil Suleiman, known as Karim Amer, contesting his conviction and four-year prison sentence on charges of showing contempt for religion and offending the President. The case was still pending as of the writing of this report.

The case began on 6 November 2006, when Amer was arrested and questioned about writings on his blog. The Public Prosecutor’s office claimed that the material showed contempt for Islam, incited civil strife, “contained prejudicial information and rumors designed to upset public security” and insulted the President. The prosecutor’s office referred the blogger to the Muharram Bek Misdemeanor Court, which sentenced Amer to four years in prison in February 2007; the verdict was upheld by the Misdemeanor Appeals Court in March 2007. Although attorneys with the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information appealed the verdict in May 2007, the court only began hearing the case in August 2009. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention issued a decision on 23 March 2009 deeming the Egyptian authorities’ detention of Karim Amer arbitrary and in violation of international law, and demanding his release.

II. Sectarian tension and violence

7. The Christian-majority village of Izbat Girgis, located in the al-Fashn district of Beni Soueif, witnessed sectarian violence between Muslims and Christians on 3 July 2009 after Christians held prayer services in a building in the village. The violence left at least five Muslims and two Christians injured; in addition, an uninhabited Christian-owned home and tractor were torched.

According to information obtained by EIPR researchers, the incident began when a local Christian decided to use one floor of the religious services building in the village, operated by the bishopric of Biba, al-Fashn and Samsata, as a place for Christians to worship. Father Simaan Shehata Rizqallah, the local priest, told EIPR researchers that the place in which village Christians are allowed to worship is very small—35 meters—and must serve nearly 1,500 Christians, forcing Christians in the village to pray in the street. As a consequence, a few months ago they began to outfit the second floor of the bishopric's services building for worship services. "But State Security warned us later not to pray in the building, saying that it was very close to one of the village mosques and that Muslims in the Izba refused to allow a Christian place of worship that close to a mosque," Father Simaan said.

At dawn on Friday, 3 July 2009, a fire broke out in an uninhabited home near the services building owned by a Christian citizen in the village; Father Simaan Shehata resides on the fourth floor of the services building. Villagers managed to put out the fire before firefighters arrived, and Father Simaan accused the guards of the services building of starting the fire. Before noon on Friday, dozens of village Muslims attacked local Christians and their property. Both sides engaged in stone throwing and fights with clubs, ultimately leaving a 15-year-old girl with a head wound. Unconscious and with her nose bleeding, she was taken to the Beni Soueif General Hospital for x-rays and tests. Another Christian and at least five Muslims were also injured.

The same day, security arrested 5 Muslims and 13 Christians, who were immediately brought before a prosecutor and charged with rioting, inflicting physical blows and causing injury; they were all placed under preventive detention. The prosecutor's office later ordered the arrest of a police guard, Gibrail Ramadan Gomaa, who was charged with hitting, assaulting and injuring the Christian girl; he was placed under preventive detention. The security apparatus set up a cordon around the village for at least one week and monitored people going in or out of the village.

On the evening of 9 July 2009, the two sides convened a reconciliation meeting in the home of a local Christian; the meeting was attended by Judge Ahmed Kamal, the head of the Cairo Economic Court, who hails from the al-Fashn district, as well as several local Muslims and Christians. A reconciliation agreement was drawn up and sent to the prosecutor's office, which ordered the release of all suspects on 16 July. The security apparatus shut down the services building and placed guards around it, and the building was still closed as of the writing of this report. The security apparatus also prevented EIPR

researchers from entering the village the day of the reconciliation meeting. Father Simaan Shehata told the researchers that he had received promises from the governor of Beni Soueif and State Security police that another building in the village would be set aside for Christian worship, but these promises have not yet been fulfilled.

The clashes in Izbet Girgis took place less than two weeks after similar clashes in Izbet Bushra al-Sharqiya, also located in the al-Fashn district only a few kilometers from Izbet Girgis. Those clashes also began after local Christians held worship services in a building in the village (see paragraph 16 of the Second Quarterly Report, 2009).

8. On the evening of 6 July 2009, both parties involved in the case of the attack on the Abu Fana Monastery in May 2008 asked the Attorney-General of the Southern Minya Prosecutor's Office for permission to enter new statements in the case (no. 3128/2008). The attack on the monastery came against the background of a dispute over ownership rights to the land surrounding the monastery, claimed by both the local monks and the Bedouins residing in the area. Attorneys for both parties filed reconciliation affidavits, signed by the monks of Abu Fana Monastery and Mohamed Miftah Eissa, the father of the Muslim man killed during the attacks. The affidavits contained statements contrary to those given by both parties to the prosecutor at the outset of the investigation. In the new statements, both parties withdrew the allegations they had lodged at the beginning of the investigation and renounced all their civil claims in the case.

On 8 July 2009, the daily *al-Masry al-Youm* published the reconciliation affidavits of the monks and Arabs in Abu Fana. According to the paper, several monks stated, "Given the circumstances surrounding the incident—a nighttime battle and unclear visibility—and because of our great fatigue and inability to focus, we accused certain people of engaging in abduction, appropriation, theft, attempted murder, injury, vandalism, arson and weapons' possession, but later, when we saw these people close up, it became clear to us that we could not identify them...This statement was made freely and without material compensation." The paper also carried the affidavit of the Muslim man whose son was killed during the events; he said that he "heard several gunshots and when [he] looked, he saw [his] son leaving the farm to see what was happening. We found a tractor heading toward us, carrying people who were shooting at us, and my son was killed. Due to the distance, we could not identify who was shooting at us."

After the reconciliation was concluded and the new statements submitted to the prosecutor, the Ministry of Interior in mid-August 2009 released two Christians and two Muslims who had been under administrative detention since the clashes in accordance with provisions of the Emergency Law.

An earlier report issued by the EIPR stated that the Abu Fana Monastery came under armed assault on 9 January 2008 by nearly 20 people, as a result of which some eight monks' residential cells were destroyed. A monk was also shot at and injured by shrapnel in his hand (see paragraph 10 of the First Quarterly Report, 2008). A few months later, on

31 May 2008, one Muslim farmer was shot and killed—the source of the gunfire is still unknown—and seven monks from the monastery were injured, among them three monks who were abducted and later released by Bedouins living in the area. A small church near the monastery's farm was also destroyed along with all of its contents. Several monks' cells were torched, two bee and mushroom farms were demolished and property belonging to the monastery was stolen, including a tractor, agricultural equipment and a computer (see paragraph 10 of the Second Quarterly Report, 2008).

9. On 9 July 2009, Christians were the target of sectarian violence in the village of al-Sanquriya, located in the Beni Mazar district of Minya, following rumors of a romantic relationship between a Christian man and a married Muslim woman. The attacks left two Christians with light injuries; and a mobile phone shop owned by a Christian man along with several Christian homes in the village were vandalized.

According to information obtained by EIPR researchers, several village Muslims carrying clubs gathered in front of a shop owned by the Christian man. They proceeded to break the door of the shop, enter and steal its property, after which they attacked several Christian homes, inflicting much damage, before security forces arrived and stopped the assault.

The same day, security forces arrested Raafat Sami, the owner of the shop, although he was not present in the village on the day of the attacks. Indeed, he was out of the village pursuant to temporary security directives, issued because of the rumors, according to statements made by Father Philips Ibrahim, the village priest, to EIPR researchers. Security forces also arrested Hamada Eid Ismail and Mohamed Mustafa Mohamed for their involvement in the events. The latter was released by police on 29 September 2009, but the other two men remained in administrative detention as of the writing of this report.

A few days before the assaults, the Muslim woman and her husband had filed a police report in the Beni Mazar police station naming a group of local Muslims as the source of the rumor. The woman denied any relationship between herself and the Christian youth.

10. On the morning of 11 July 2009, the Abaskheroun al-Qallini Church, located in Izbet Basilius in the Beni Mazar district of Minya, was set on fire and a large section of it destroyed; the church's application for a license is still pending. Local Muslims and Christians accused one another of responsibility for the fire. A Christian eyewitness who lives in a house adjacent to the church told EIPR researchers that she saw two village Muslims (she identified them by name), one of them carrying a can of gasoline, enter the church from the side door. She also saw dozens of village Muslims gather in front of the main door carrying clubs and observing the church burn. The blaze went on for nearly two hours—during which the building's wooden roof caved in—before firefighters arrived. The witness added that she made this same statement to the prosecutor. At the same time, a village Muslim denied this version of events in his statement to the prosecutor, saying he saw a local Christian named Reda Zaki leaving the church carrying

a can of gasoline. The witness said that the prosecutor took statements from five other village Muslims after the fire.

Several hours after the fire erupted, security forces arrested Reda Zaki and brought him before the prosecutor, who charged him with arson and ordered him jailed for 12 days, after which he was released on bail of LE500. Reda Zaki told EIPR researchers that while he was attempting to put out the fire in the church, several policemen arrested him, took him to the police station and charged him with setting fire to the church.

On Friday, 11 September 2009, several villagers convened a reconciliation meeting involving Muslims and Christians. The two parties signed a reconciliation agreement, which, according to Father Anjilius Botros, the church priest, contained three points: "friendship and brotherhood between Muslims and Christians is reinstated; there is no objection to either Christian or Muslim worship; there is no objection to the establishment of a church in the village, but after the necessary government license is granted."

The security apparatus stationed guards at the burned building and prevented local Christians from repairing or using it.

11. After the Friday prayer on 17 July 2009, some 2,000 Muslims from the village of al-Fuqai, located in the Biba district of Beni Soueif, attacked a building belonging to the Christian Love Association and several homes inhabited by Christians after rumors spread in the village that Christians intended to turn the building into a church. The rumor began to spread in the village after Father Gibrail, the village priest, held church services in the building on 15 July 2009, attended by many people, some from outside the village. During the service, several students were honored.

Information obtained by EIPR researchers indicates that after the Friday prayer some 2,000 local Muslims headed to the association's building, chanting slogans against Christians and the presence of a church in the village. They began throwing stones at the association building and nearby Christian homes, breaking in and vandalizing some of the homes. Security forces arrived after the assault began, but they did not arrest any of those involved in the attacks. No police report or complaint were filed to the prosecutor. Security forces shut down the association building and prevented Christian villagers from praying in it. The closest church is in the Biba district, some five kilometers from the village.

Father Gibrail told EIPR researchers that Christians in al-Fuqai have been regularly holding religious services in the association building for years, and that State Security police officers and village Muslims are aware of this. "On Wednesday, 15 July, we held a mass," he added. "During the mass, two cars carrying relatives of local residents and the students who were going to be honored for their outstanding performance arrived from the nearby villages. They attended mass with us and we honored them. After that, security forces warned us that there was some security tension because of the mass, and in those

two days, detectives were deployed in the village to monitor the situation. Then on Friday, village Muslims came out of the mosque chanting and attacked the building and a nearby house and stole some of the contents." A village Christian told EIPR researchers that although the names of some of those who took part in the attack were reported, security forces took no measures against them. The witness said that the chants and stone throwing terrified women and children.

The EIPR learned that a reconciliation meeting was convened on 18 July, attended by the head of the village council and several representatives of Muslim and Christian families in the village; no church representatives attended. The Muslim representatives pledged during the meeting that the incident would not be repeated without addressing the status of the association building, which was still closed as of the writing of this report.

12. On 24 July 2009, after the Friday prayer, many Muslims—newspaper reports estimated some 2,000 people—from the village of al-Hawasiliya, located in the Minya district of the Minya governorate, attacked a building owned by the independent Baptist Assembly and set fire to it. Three Christian homes were also torched, in addition to several livestock pens. The attacks left two Christians injured and several livestock dead. The attack was sparked by local Muslims' objections to the building of another church in the village, where a Catholic church already stands.

According to information obtained by EIPR researchers, Baptist Christians in the village started construction on the three-story building about a year ago. A committee from the Evangelical Confessional Council in Cairo, of which the Baptists are a part, was scheduled to survey the building on 25 July 2009, but two days before the committee members arrived, Father Milad Shehata, the village priest who lives in the building, was summoned to the police station and questioned about the two plaster crosses that had been added to the building's facade. A State Security officer asked him to remove the crosses, and when the priest refused, he was referred to the prosecutor's office, which questioned him on suspicion of building a church without a permit (according to police report no. 7907/2009). The prosecutor ordered his release and he was released later that evening.

The following morning, the priest was again summoned to the police station, where he was detained, after which several security forces vehicles were dispatched to the village. After the Friday prayer, several Muslims headed toward the building chanting slogans against Christians and against the presence of a church in the village; some of them were carrying gas canisters. In the midst of a heavy security presence, the assailants then set fire to the building, nearby houses and livestock pens. The fire moved to a house adjacent to the building owned by a Muslim.

Security forces arrested 40 people from the village, 25 Muslims and 15 Christians, after the incident. They were brought before the prosecutor, charged with vandalism and arson, and detained pending investigations into the incident. On 6 August 2009, the prosecutor ordered the release of the suspects—among them five children—after a reconciliation

meeting attended by Muslim and Christian villagers, local leaders and officials. The reconciliation agreement was submitted to the prosecutor's office, after which it issued the release order. Despite the order, however, security forces arrested and detained 20 of the suspects—12 Muslims and 8 Christians—under the provisions of the Emergency Law; they were still detained as of the writing of this report.

13. On 31 July 2009, a fight between a Muslim and a Christian in the village of Dafash, located in the Samalut district of the Minya governorate, devolved into sectarian clashes between dozens of Muslims and Christians, which left three Christians injured, one of them seriously. Information obtained by the EIPR indicates that the incident began when Mustafa Khamis Farag ran his motorcycle into farm animals owned by Nagi Hanin Fawzi, sparking an argument. News quickly spread that a Christian was assaulting a local Muslim and, in reaction, dozens of Muslims—eyewitnesses put the number at about 100—came carrying clubs and stones to Nagi Hanin's home. Muslim-Christian clashes erupted, during which Hanin sustained a severe head injury that required medical attention, and he was taken to the Minya University Hospital. His brother, Reda Hanin, also sustained a head injury that required 16 stitches; his uncle, Youssef Fawzi, sustained an injury on his forehead that required 10 stitches.

Security forces arrived in the village after the clashes and took control of the situation, arresting four people: Mustafa Khamis Farag, his brother Ayman, Reda Hanin Fawzi Eskandr and his uncle Youssef Fawzi Eskandr. All four were brought before the prosecutor in Samalut, who placed Mustafa and Ayman under preventive detention and released the other two men. Nevertheless, the latter two men were detained inside the police station until an administrative detention order was issued for them, in accordance with provisions in the Emergency Law, on 13 August 2009; they were still detained as of the writing of this report. On 16 September 2009, the prosecutor ordered the release of Mustafa and Ayman Khamis, but administrative detention orders were issued for them as well and they were still detained as of the writing of this report.

The village of Dafash was the scene of a dispute on 24 September 2008 between a Muslim and Christian that also grew into sectarian clashes (see paragraph 16 of the Third Quarterly Report, 2008). In addition, the village witnessed a demonstration organized by hundreds of Christians on 5 June 2008 in front of a church after a Coptic youth was killed in the village the same day. A local Muslim stabbed him in a field, allegedly as revenge for spying on the home of his brother and wife. The perpetrator was arrested, charged with murder and indicted, but about a week after the incident, a reconciliation meeting was convened, during which the killer's family agreed to pay an indemnity to the family of the deceased. On 5 October 2008, the Minya Criminal Court sentenced the perpetrator to one year in prison (suspended), after the victim's family renounced their civil claims before the court (see paragraph 15 of the Second Quarterly Report, 2008).

14. On 8 August 2009, the Emergency Supreme State Security Court rejected an appeal from the Minister of Interior contesting the court's release order for six people—three Muslims and three Christians—who were arrested following sectarian clashes on 13 May 2009 in the Saft al-Laban area of the Bulaq al-Dakrur district of Giza. The clashes left injuries on both sides and resulted in some property damage (see paragraph 14 of the Second Quarterly Report, 2009). Pursuant to the court order, the following day the six people were moved from the Burg al-Arab Prison to the Bulaq al-Dakrur police station, where they were detained for five days before finally being released on 14 August, according to a statement given to EIPR researchers by one of the detainees.

15. On 28 August 2009, clashes between Muslims and Christians erupted during the Mar Girgis *moulid* held in the village of Miyyit Damsis, located in the Aga district of Dakahliya.

Six people were injured in the clashes, and two cars and some of the visitors' tents were vandalized. According to information obtained by the EIPR, sectarian tensions have been running high in the village since early August after news spread that the governor of Dakahliya was banning all *moulids* and religious festivals in the governorate, including the Muslim *moulid* of Sidi Mohamed Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, which was scheduled for the first week of August in Miyyit Damsis. The ban was instituted as a protective measure against the spread of the H1N1 virus and came as a response to Ministry of Health directives proposing the suspension of all *moulids* this year. But the governor made an exception for the Mar Girgis *moulid* (celebrated by Christians), held on 25-29 August in the village. The daily *al-Dustour* reported on 15 August 2009 that fliers were distributed to village Muslims decrying the decree and demanding a unified ban, including on the Mar Girgis *moulid*. The paper warned of "the seeds of a sectarian crisis."

Father Makari Gabriel, the trustee of the Mar Girgis Monastery in the village, told EIPR researchers that a fight erupted between some Christian visitors and a village Muslim on 28 August. Matters escalated from there, drawing in groups of village Muslims and sparking clashes with some Christians. The security apparatus arrested seven Muslims and five Christians the same day and referred them to the prosecutor's office for questioning; the prosecutor jailed them pending investigations into the matter. Security forces cancelled the final night of the Mar Girgis *moulid*, scheduled for 29 August, and the next day, the prosecutor released all the detainees.

It should be noted that a fire erupted in Miyyit Damsis on 19 August, burning 12 of the tents set up to receive *moulid* visitors, who number more than one million every year.

16. On the morning of 17 September 2009, one Christian was killed and two were injured, one of them critically, by a Muslim man in the al-Bagour district of Monufiya. Statements from the victims and eyewitnesses collected by EIPR researchers indicate that the victims were targeted as Christians.

According to information obtained by EIPR researchers, Abduh Jurji Yunan, 65, was killed on 17 September after Usama Nasr Urban stabbed him several times with a large knife in his chest, on the side and the head. He then cut his throat in the presence of several passersby and neighbors in front of the Sarugi car shop in al-Bagour, which was owned by the victim.

The perpetrator moved on to the village of Bahnay, located four kilometers from al-Bagour, where he entered a shoe store owned by Adib Masiha, 40, and stabbed him several times. Masiha told EIPR researchers (as well as the prosecutor) that the morning of the attack he was standing in his father's shoe shop in front of the sewing machine with his back to the shop door when he heard a voice say, "You infidel, you Nazarene." He then felt a stab in his back that brought him to the ground. The perpetrator continued to stab him in the back, his right side and his head; as a result he sustained a skull fracture and was stabbed in his palm. Masiha was taken to the Shebin al-Kom Hospital where he underwent several surgeries to stop the bleeding and stitch his wounds. Masiha told EIPR researchers that there were no disputes or previous incidents between himself and the attacker, adding that he did not know why the man tried to kill him.

Zarif Sidhom Yunan, Masiha's cousin and an eyewitness, told EIPR researchers that on the day of the attack he and his son Maged were standing in their clothing store, adjacent to Masiha's shop, when they heard a scream in the street. They went out and into Masiha's shop and saw Usama Nasr stabbing Masiha with a big knife; Masiha was on the ground in a pool of blood. When Yunan went toward his cousin to help him, the attacker looked at him and said, "You're next, Zarif." The assailant then chased Yunan and his young son in the street for quite some time before finally giving up. Yunan told EIPR researchers that when he went to the police station to report the attempted assault, he was told that he had no right to file a police report since he was not injured.

The perpetrator then went to the neighboring village of Miyyit Afif, where he stabbed Hani Barsoum, 30, who was standing in front of the smith shop he owns. Barsoum told EIPR researchers that while he was standing in front of his smith shop the day of the attack, he saw the perpetrator coming toward him on a motorcycle driven by a person named Ragab (who told the prosecutor that he was driving the motorcycle under duress.) Usama Nasr came toward Barsoum and, taking him unaware, stabbed him in the neck before Barsoum's shop assistant, Mohamed Hassan, intervened. Hassan picked up a piece of iron attempting to save Barsoum, who managed to escape. Nasr then chased him brandishing the knife and saying, "I'm going to kill them all. Bring me that Christian." Barsoum managed to enter a house and lock the door behind him, after which Nasr got on the motorcycle and disappeared. Barsoum was taken to the Shebin al-Kom Hospital, where he received stitches in his neck.

Usama Nasr Urban was arrested the following day and questioned by the al-Bagour prosecutor. He was charged with premeditated murder and attempted murder, and was detained pending the investigations in the case. He was still detained as of the writing of this report.

Dozens of people who took part in the funeral procession of Abduh Jurji Yunan on Thursday, 24 September, held up signs saying, "We demand a fair trial," "No to bigotry, no to terrorism," "Stop the scandal of attacks on Copts," "No to the neglect of Copts' rights" and "We seek protection in you, Mubarak, from security's failure to protect Copts."

17. A fight between a Christian child and a Muslim child sparked sectarian clashes between some Muslims and Christians in the village of al-Ismailiya, located in the Minya province of Minya, on 17 September 2009. Press reports indicate that the clashes left nine people injured, among them three Christians and six Muslims. After the clashes, security forces arrested 13 people, among them three Christians and 10 Muslims, and brought them before the prosecutor, who questioned them and ordered them detained for four days pending investigations into the case. The prosecutor's office released seven of the detainees on 19 September, including two children and one woman. On 24 September, the rest of the detainees were released after submitting to the prosecutor an official reconciliation report in which all parties withdrew their complaints.

According to information obtained by EIPR, the fight between the children began when the Christian boy tore down Ramadan decorations put up by the Muslim boy. Members of both families intervened, after which the news spread through the village. Dozens of Muslims and Christians gathered, threw stones at one another and engaged in physical violence with clubs and knives.

18. On 22 September 2009, a fight erupted between a Christian and a Muslim in the village of Girgawi, located in the Matay district of Minya, sparking clashes between dozens of Muslims and members of the Christian family. According to information obtained by EIPR, Zaki Habib Hanin and Mansour Rashid Mohamed began fighting when Mohamed's son's ball ended up in Hanin's house. After news of the fight spread in the village, dozens of Muslims gathered in front of the Christian family's home chanting religious and anti-Christian slogans. One village Muslim hit Mina, Hanin's son, injuring him in the head. Hanin also sustained bruising on his arms as a result of the fight. According to eyewitness, police forces arrived about an hour after the clashes began. They broke up the fight and arrested Mansour Rashid, Zaki Hanin and his two sons Mina and Hani, as well as a fourth Christian, Hanna Mahrous.

Following the intervention of the mayor of the neighboring village of al-Tal, the two parties signed a reconciliation agreement in the Matay police station withdrawing their complaints, and the detainees were released the same night. That same evening, the parties convened a customary arbitration meeting in the home of the local sheikh of the neighboring Ali Basha village; the meeting was attended by the mayor of Girgawi and

both parties to the dispute. At the end of the meeting, Mohamed wrote a check for LE10,000, which was entrusted to the Girgawi mayor; in the event of a repeated assault, the check will be given to Hanin. It was also agreed that if either party assaulted the other in the future, the assailant would pay LE30,000 to the victim. The two parties both signed checks in this amount as well and turned them over to the mayor of Girgawi for safekeeping.

19. Hundreds of Christians from the village of Dalga, located in the Deir Mawas district of Minya, organized protests and sit-ins on Sunday, 27 September 2009. Earlier the same day, three Muslim brothers killed Hanna Amin Rizq and critically injured his brothers, Maher and Maurice, and nephew Ashraf Maher Rizq following a fight that took place in a parking lot in Dalga. Copts demonstrated in front of the Deir Mawas hospital and staged a sit-in there until the next morning, after which they moved inside the Church of the Virgin and Father Abram. The incident took place less than 50 days after another Christian, Fathi Gayyid Fadallah, was killed in the village, on 10 August 2009, by a Muslim and his nephew following a fight the previous day between the Muslim and Christian's sons.

Eyewitnesses told EIPR researchers that village Christians continued to protest until 29 September, chanting slogans decrying security failures and holding up signs that said "No to persecution of Copts," "No to the shedding of Hanna's blood," "Hanna is a martyr of sectarian strife," and "They killed Fathi, they killed Hanna...who's next?" There were also Muslim-Christian clashes in the village during Hanna Rizq's funeral procession on 29 September, and several Muslims threw stones at funeral marchers and the Church of the Virgin and Father Abram and chanted slogans about the victory of Islam. Christian youth threw stones as well and began chanting, "With spirit and blood, we will redeem you, O cross." The clashes left at least three local Christians injured, despite a heavy security presence in the village that was deployed only hours after Hanna Rizq was killed.

The Deir Mawas prosecutor's office is currently investigating the murder of Fathi Gayyid Fadallah, having charged Hisham Hamdi Shehata and his nephew, Taha Ahmed Hamdi, with premeditated murder; the suspects are being detained pending the findings of the ongoing investigation.

On 15 October 2009, the Attorney-General with the Minya prosecutor's office issued an indictment order for Nayil Mansour Sahrab and his brother Alaa, who were brought before the Minya Criminal Court in case no. 11577/2009 regarding the murder of Hanna Rizq and the injury of his two brothers and nephew. The suspects were charged with assault leading to death and causing injury, according to Samir Lamai, the victims' attorney.

III. Security interventions and harassment

20. On 28 June 2009, A.A. (21), his mother and two employees with the Beni Soueif civil registry office were arrested on charges of falsifying official documents showing that A.A. had converted to Christianity. The security apparatus alleged that the suspects had falsified A.A.'s birth certificate by changing his name and his religion from Muslim to Christian; they then obtained a national identity card based on the false information contained in the forged birth certificate. The incident was registered as no. 18/295/2009.

According to information obtained by EIPR researchers from Peter al-Naggar, the attorney for A.A. and his mother, A.A.'s mother was a Christian before she converted to Islam and married a Muslim man. She had four children before she returned to Christianity, and A.A. wanted to be a Christian like his mother. The attorney added that A.A. and his three brothers decided to try to obtain falsified identity documents since the Ministry of Interior does not recognize conversions from Islam to Christianity on official documents. The case was referred to the prosecutor the same day as the arrest, and the prosecutor took statements from the suspects before releasing them and closing the case, according to the attorney.

21. On 14 July 2009, the Supreme State Security Prosecutor began questioning 13 citizens about their belief in and promotion of Shi'ism. State Security police arrested Hassan Shehata Youssef and 12 others in April 2009 and detained them in an undisclosed location for four months before finally announcing the beginning of the investigation before the State Security Prosecutor. According to media reports, the prosecutor charged the defendants in case no. 624/2009 with forming an organization to propagate Shi'ite beliefs that offend Islam and Sunni confessions and receiving funds from abroad for this purpose. The defendants were still detained pending investigations into the case as of the writing of this report.

According to information obtained by EIPR researchers, Hassan Shehata's health has deteriorated; he suffers from diabetes, an inflamed facial nerve, and is general physically weak. Hassan Shehata used to be a preacher at a Cairo mosque and also hosted a religious program on Egyptian television; he was arrested in 1995, also for his Shi'ite beliefs.

22. The weekly *al-Karama* reported on 27 July 2009 that State Security police sent out warnings to board members of some private religious television stations and their directors in Cairo on 21 July stressing the need to exercise caution when inviting guests on religious programs and warning programmers to avoid hosting dubious elements, including proponents of Salafi thought, extremist Shi'ism and other proponents of militant views, in order to avoid inflaming civil strife and disseminating views that could destroy society. EIPR researchers were not able to obtain a copy of these warnings or independently confirm the accuracy of the report.

23. On 28 July 2009, the security apparatus ordered a wood seller, Mamdouh Yassi, to stop working on a wood warehouse he was building in the village of Reida, located in the Minya district of Minya, because State Security police officers believed he intended to turn the building into an evangelical church. The security directives came four days after the sectarian attacks on Christians in the village of al-Hawasiliya, located two kilometers from Reida; the attacks were occasioned by the opposition of some village Muslims to the establishment of an evangelical church in the village (see paragraph 12 of this report). Security also demolished the sections of the warehouse that had been built. Mamdouh Yassi told EIPR researchers that he was summoned by State Security police in Minya in late July 2009 and questioned about whether he was building a church. Although he told the officers that he was a wood seller who was building a warehouse, one of the officers told him to discontinue working on it until the situation in Reida and nearby al-Hawasiliya calmed down. Construction on the warehouse had not resumed as of the writing of this report.

24. On 30 July 2009, the Civil Status police in Mansoura, in the province of Dakahliya, arrested G.S., a Christian woman, while she was applying for birth certificates for her two children, on charges of using falsified official documents that showed her as a Christian married to a Christian man. The police charged her with forging a marriage certificate showing her marriage to a Christian and obtaining a marriage certificate showing a Christian name and religious affiliation, even though her father had converted to Islam when she was 12 years old and changed her name and religion to Islam.

G.S. and her husband were brought before the prosecutor the same day, and the prosecutor questioned them about forging the marriage certificate (incident no. 8270/2009). The prosecutor released them pending investigations into the case; the priest who married them and the witnesses to the marriage were also summoned for questioning, but had not appeared before the prosecutor as of the writing of this report.

According to information obtained by the EIPR, G.S. was born in 1980 to Christian parents; her father converted to Islam in 1992. Although that same year he changed her religious affiliation on official documents, G.S. decided to remain a Christian. In 1998, she married a Christian using her Christian name and religious affiliation, and the couple had two children.

On 19 January 2006, G.S. filed lawsuit no. 11097/60 with the Court of Administrative Justice in Cairo, asking the court to compel the Civil Status Authority to issue her a national identity card containing her true religious affiliation and the name she was born with. The court suspended the case on 4 March 2009 pending a decision from the Supreme Constitutional Court on the constitutionality of an article in the Civil Status Law that allows a person to change his religion on official documents without condition or restriction, and inconsistencies between this article and the provisions of Islamic law.

25. On 15 August 2009, Father Stefanos Shehata, the priest of Izbat Dawoud Youssef, located in the Samalut district of Minya, sent a number of complaints to the President and human rights organizations, including the EIPR, asking that village Christians be allowed to use 100-meter square hall built on his private property as a reception hall for local Copts during weddings and funerals; he pledged that no prayer services would be held in the hall.

Father Stefanos told EIPR researchers that some 800 Orthodox Copts live in Dawoud Youssef and have no church and therefore must worship at the church in al-Tiba, about five kilometers from the village. The priest added that village Christians must also hold marriage services, weddings and funeral prayer services in the street, which offends their sensibilities and undermines their dignity and the dignity of the deceased. Father Stefanos said that he had submitted an application in May to the governor of Minya and State Security police asking for permission to use the hall for these Christian occasions, but the governor had not responded to the request, while State Security rejected it on the grounds that village Muslims do not want a Christian reception hall in their Muslim-majority village.

Father Stefanos added that a few days before he sent his complaint to the President, he received threats from some local Muslims warning that if he continued to demand a reception hall, he would be killed. This prompted him to leave the village, where his mother and siblings live, and he had not returned as of the writing of this report.

26. On 31 August 2009, the Qusiya city council, located in the governorate of Assyout, prohibited Unsi Sami from completing construction of a wall around a plot of land he owns in the village of Beni Hilal, administratively subordinate to Qusiya. The council ordered the sections of the wall already built to be demolished pursuant to security directives, as State Security police suspected he intended to build a church on the plot of fenced-in land.

According to information obtained by EIPR researchers, Unsi Sami obtained a permit from the city council to build the wall, but when he began construction in early June 2009, men from the police station and city council came to the building site and asked him to halt construction, on the grounds that some Muslim citizens had complained that Sami intended to build a church on his land, which is directly adjacent to the shrine of a revered Muslim figure. Sami said he was summoned to the Qusiya police station, where State Security officers questioned him about his intentions to build a church. When Sami denied such an intention, an officer asked him to sign an affidavit swearing that he did not intend to build a church, that he would only build a wall around his land and that if he engaged in any construction on his land he would inform the competent authorities.

When he resumed construction on the wall in mid-June, the city council asked him to halt it again, and the council filed a police report (no. 2787/2009) charging him with building violations. The prosecutor dismissed the complaint after taking Sami's statement on 26 June 2009.

Despite the prosecutor's decision, the city council issued a new decree on 31 August 2009, no. 443/2009, forcing Sami to halt construction, removing construction materials from the site, and demolishing the already constructed sections of the wall.

27. Several newspapers reported in late August and early September 2009 that police officers in the governorate of Aswan had launched street campaigns arresting people who ate publicly before sunset during Ramadan. Although the campaigns were not confirmed, on 12 September 2009, the daily *al-Shorouk* quoted General Hamdi Abd al-Karim, the deputy interior ministry for media, who said, "The campaign launched by police officers in several districts against those eating in public is grounded in the law." He asked human rights organizations that had criticized the arrests to "read the law well before attacking the Ministry of Interior."

On 14 September 2009, ten human rights organizations, among them the EIPR, issued a joint statement expressing their "unequivocal rejection" of the deputy minister's statements and asked the office of the Public Prosecutor to issue an immediate statement confirming the lack of legitimacy of such police campaigns, which the organizations described as illegal. The organizations also asked the Interior Ministry to make public the facts of these campaigns, their geographic extent, the number of people arrested and the charges brought against them. The 10 groups demanded the immediate release of any person being detained in the context of this campaign and full accountability for those managing the campaign. Neither the Ministry of Interior nor the Public Prosecutor's office had released any additional information as of the writing of this report.

28. On 16 September 2009, officials with the al-Adwa city council in the governorate of Minya demolished a house under construction owned by a Christian in the al-Qiyat village, administratively subordinate to the city, on the grounds that police officers suspected that the homeowner intended to turn the building into a church. According to information obtained by the EIPR, Khamis Fayeze Nashed began building a house on a plot of land he owns on 1 August 2009; construction proceeded apace without harassment until 16 August 2009, when he was summoned to the Sheikh Masoud police station with his cousin, Atallah Rashid Nashid. There police officers asked them to sign an affidavit stating that they were building a house, not a church and that they would not sell the house to the Orthodox Coptic Bishopric. The owner of the house was summoned the same day to the Adwa police station, where he was asked to write and sign a similar oath.

Nashed resumed construction until 16 September, when he and his cousin were again summoned to the police station, where they were detained upon arrival, while city council

bulldozers, supported by a large security force, demolished the house. Nashed told EIPR researchers that while he was being detained, the sheriff told him, "Relax – we've leveled your church because you know how to lie to us, saying you're building a house when you're really building a church."

29. On 17 September 2009, State Security police officers at the Cairo airport prevented Maher al-Gohari, a Muslim who converted to Christianity, from traveling to China, after his passport was stamped with an exit visa and shortly before he boarded the plane. Nabil Ghobriel, al-Gohari's attorney, told EIPR researchers that his client was prohibited from boarding the plane and led to a security waiting room, where he was informed that a travel ban had been issued for him by an "executive" agency that was not identified; he was detained there for three hours. His lawyer told EIPR researchers that al-Gohari filed a police report on 18 September 2009 against the Prime Minister, the Interior Minister and the director of airport security. He asked for an investigation of the incident and compensation. Al-Gohari tried to travel again on 22 September 2009; airport authorities again banned him from travel and this time confiscated his passport.

Maher al-Gohari had filed a lawsuit before the Court of Administrative Justice asking that the Ministry of Interior's Civil Status Authority be required to issue him an identity card documenting his conversion to Christianity, but the court rejected his request in a ruling issued on 13 June 2009 (see paragraph 8 of the Second Quarterly Report, 2009).

30. On 23 September 2009, police officers from the Qasr al-Nil station arrested Abd al-Masih Kamel Barsoum, 61, who works with an evangelical church in Minya, while he was distributing Christian religious material on the Corniche in the Tahrir area in downtown Cairo. Barsoum was taken to the Qasr al-Nil police station and reported for not carrying an identity card; he was referred to the prosecutor's office, which ordered his release. Despite the order, Barsoum was transferred to the Khalifa police station and at dawn on 24 September, was sent back to the governorate of Minya, and from there to the State Security office in the governorate, where he was questioned about distributing the material. Miryam Abd al-Masih, Barsoum's daughter, filed a complaint with the Public Prosecutor's office (no. 17069/2009) on 26 September 2009, saying that her father was being unlawfully detained; he was released the afternoon of the same day.

IV. Laws, decrees and political developments

31. In the months of July, August and September 2009, EIPR researchers documented the issuance of seven presidential decrees licensing renovations of already existing churches, six of them evangelical churches and one orthodox; all the decrees were issued for churches in the governorates of Minya and Assyout. The details are as follows:

- a. Decree 240/2009, 2 July 2009, for the evangelical Coptic community at the existing Welcoming Brethren Church, located in Magris, Sadfa district, Assyout governorate.
- b. Decree 241/2009, 2 July 2009, for the evangelical Coptic community at the existing evangelical church in Kom Asfhat, Sadfa district, Assyout governorate.
- c. Decree 250/2009, 12 July 2009, for the evangelical Coptic community at the existing Nahdat al-Qadasa Church, located in al-Duweir, Sadfa district, Assyout province.
- d. Decree 291/2009, 24 August 2009, for the evangelical Coptic community at the existing Balimuth Brethren Church, located in al-Tiba, Salamout district, Minya governorate.
- e. Decree 306/2009, 2 September 2009, for the evangelical Coptic community at the existing evangelical church in Nahiyat Mensafis, Abu Qurqas district, Minya governorate.
- f. Decree 307/2009, 2 September 2009, for the evangelical Coptic community at the existing Nahdat al-Qadasa Church, located on al-Thawra St. in Nahiyat Abu Qurqas al-Balad, Abu Qurqas district, Minya province.
- g. Decree 311/2009, 13 September 2009, for the Orthodox Coptic community of the existing St. John the Baptist Church, located in Awlad Elias, Sadfa district, Assyout governorate.

32. The daily *Nahdat Misr* on 23 July 2009 carried a story about a meeting of the People's Assembly Religious Affairs Committee, attended by Minister of Awqaf Hamdi Zaqzouq, to discuss a request for information filed by MP al-Sayyid Askar about the Ministry of Awqaf's printing of 100,000 copies of a book titled *The Niqab is a Custom, Not Religion*. MP Askar, a member of the Muslim Brothers bloc, accused the Ministry of Awqaf in the request for information of squandering public funds to print the book and violating the teachings of Islamic law by advocating against the niqab, the full face veil, instead of focusing efforts on "combating ostentatious women." The paper reported that the minister denied issuing directives to mosque imams or advocating against the niqab (see paragraph 29 of the Second Quarterly Report, 2009).

33. In a meeting of the President and the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) leaders in the Damietta governorate on 3 August 2009, held on the sidelines of the President's visit to Damietta to inaugurate several new development and service enterprises, President

Mubarak said, "I am the President of all Egyptians regardless of their religion. There is no difference between a Muslim and a Christian because we are all Egyptian citizens living on the land of Egypt." Mubarak stated that "religious discrimination is an old colonial project to divide sons of the same country."

34. In the period under review, starting on 8 August 2009, the Civil Status Authority began implementing Interior Minister decree 520/2009, which changed the Implementing Regulations of the Civil Status Law to regulate the issuance of identity documents such as birth certificates and national identity card for members of religions that are not officially recognized by the state; the decree allows the person concerned to place a dash (—) in the slot allocated for religious affiliation on official documents (see paragraph 28 of the First Quarterly Report, 2009). The authority issued several birth certificates and national identity cards to Egyptian Baha'is who had older documents that contained a dash in the religion slot or identified them as Baha'is. Nevertheless, the authority refused to issue any official documents to married Egyptian Baha'is, on the grounds that the authority does not recognize the Baha'i marriage contract. Instead, the authority asked married Baha'is to identify themselves as single instead of married, which was rejected by the applicants.

This problem had not yet been resolved as of the writing of this report. It is worth noting that before the new national identity cards began to be issued in 2000, the Civil Status Authority routinely issued official documents to Baha'i citizens that recognized their actual marital status without requiring a certified Baha'i marriage contract.

35. *Nahdat Misr* on 8 August 2009 published a long interview with Sheikh Salem Mohamed Salem, the head of al-Azhar's fatwa committee, which is responsible for, among other things, conversions to Islam from other religions. In the interview, Salem said that some days there are as many as 15 conversions and no less than 10 conversions a day. He added that the committee dealt with Egyptian citizens who wanted to convert to Islam, while non-nationals converted through the Office of the Grand Imam of al-Azhar (*Mashyakhah al-Azhar*). He said that the majority of conversions the committee saw were motivated by "worldly concerns," adding, "Not everyone who comes to convert has the real objective of entering the religion of Islam motivated by conviction, belief and pure intention; indeed, some, unfortunately, use conversion as a means of achieving some worldly end."

Giving some examples of people converting for worldly reasons, he said, "Some convert because they want to marry a Muslim girl...because Islam does not allow a Muslim woman to marry a Christian man...Others convert to Islam to avoid court orders and rulings." He also said there are cases in which Christian men convert to Islam "to rid themselves of their wives" or vice-versa; in other cases, a Christian woman may be involved in a romantic relationship with a Muslim man and so she converts to complete the marriage. The head of the committee added, "There is another type that converts thinking that al-Azhar and Muslims will give them huge sums of money as soon as they do, as the church does with Christian converts, and meet all their needs for jobs and apartments." He said he could not refuse to accept the conversion of anyone who came

before the fatwa committee, even if they appear for non-religious reasons.

Salem said that there are some parties—he did not identify them—that might intervene and ask that “a certain person’s conversion be obstructed if that conversion could cause endless problems or spark a crisis and social strife.” He said that in such cases, the committee uses certain justifications to delay the conversion. He said there are no statistics regarding the number of conversions before the committee, but he also said that state agencies occasionally come to review the conversion registry.

In a related context, Minister of Awqaf Mahmoud Hamdi Zaqzouq said, “The Office of the Grand Imam of al-Azhar alone sees 400 conversions of people of various nationalities every month. They come to al-Azhar of their own free will, and no one pressures them or offers them money, wealth or a job. Freedom of belief is guaranteed to all, as long as there is no contempt shown for religions or inflaming of sectarian passions.” The Minister made these statements in an interview published by the weekly *al-Diyar* on 8 September 2009.

36. The weekly *Sawt al-Umma* published an interview on 8 August 2009 with General Abu Bakr al-Gindi, the chair of the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics. Asked about the number of Copts, Shi’ites and Baha’is in Egypt, he responded, “We have no data on the number of Copts or Shi’ites. As for Baha’is, there is no such religion. The three religions that we list on the survey form are Islam, Christianity and Judaism, in addition to the word ‘other.’” Justifying the lack of such data, al-Gindi said, “According to the international norms of census-taking, questions of religion are optional. Every country in the world operates on this basis.”

37. At a press conference convened by Minister of Awqaf Mahmoud Hamdi Zaqzouq during his reception of the Lebanese mufti on 15 August 2009, the Minister said that Egypt has no mosques for sects, a reference to Shi’ites. Zaqzouq said that Egypt has 104,000 mosques and prayer corners, all of which are under the full supervision of the Ministry of Awqaf. The national daily *al-Ahram* quoted Zaqzouq on 16 August as saying, “Of all the Islamic peoples, Egyptians love the people of the Prophet’s house [Shi’ites] most of all, but that does not mean that there are Shi’ite mosques in Egypt.”

38. The national daily *Rose al-Youssef* reported on 9 September 2009 that the Ministry of Culture drafted new guidelines governing the participation of publishers in the Cairo International Book Fair. The paper quoted al-Sayyid Ahmed Salah, the chair of the Central Agency for Fairs at the General Egyptian Book Organization, as saying, “The new guidelines require publishers not to distribute any published material that undermines belief. The maximum penalty is closure of the publisher’s stall and a three-year ban on participation in the book fair.” Salah added that publishers have been made aware of the new regulations and that they were issued “to avoid the events of last year.”

On 1 February 2009, the police arrested two Christians at the book fair who were allegedly distributing free copies of the Bible to book fair patrons for the purpose of proselytizing.

The two young men told EIPR researchers that they were tortured with physical blows and electric shocks in the State Security police headquarters in Assyout after they were arrested and forcibly returned to the governorate (see paragraph 22 of the First Quarterly Report, 2009).

39. On 17 September 2009, the daily *al-Shorouk* quoted Minister of State for Legal and Parliamentary Affairs Mufid Shehab as saying, "Some 500 churches were built in the last 25 years—more than the number built in the previous 100 years." The Minister denied that "there is a state war against the construction of churches or that the state discriminates between Muslims and Copts in the matter of houses of worship. Houses of worship are subject to certain norms, procedures and guarantees that must be fulfilled before a building permit can be granted." He added, "The state welcomes the establishment and renovation of churches."

V. Reports, publications and activities

40. From 28 to 30 June 2009, Cairo hosted the fourth meeting of the International League of Azhar Graduates, a non-governmental organization established in 2007 with the aim of strengthening the relationship between al-Azhar and its alumni from around the world. This year's meeting was titled "Al-Azhar and the West: The Guidelines and Limits of Dialogue." Muslim, Christian and Jewish representatives were invited to discuss 34 research papers on interfaith dialogue.

The meeting produced several recommendations, among them a recognition of the value of human differences in belief. "If [this difference] is properly invested, it can be a source of wealth by which nations can be perfected and civilizations flourish." The meeting also advocated "peaceful coexistence and cooperation among the revealed religions" as a pressing necessity "to confront the crises created by political ideologies that exploit religions to achieve their ambitions." The recommendations also stated that "the spaces of agreement among religions are bigger than the gaps of difference, and action based on values on which religions agree is capable of mending what politics has corrupted." They also noted, "The greatest obstacle to a successful dialogue among civilizations is the West's unjust policy toward Islamic societies. This makes it incumbent on Christian societies to call on their politicians to relieve this injustice." The meeting also recommended that "the International League of al-Azhar Graduates register at the UN Economic and Social Council to enhance its ability to engage in dialogue with civic institutions and invest its energies to achieve the message of al-Azhar."

41. The city of Vienna, Austria was the site of the first conference of the European Union of Coptic Organizations for Human Rights, held on 10 and 11 July and titled "A Future Vision for Reclaiming Copts' Rights in the Midst of Global Political Changes." The conference concluded by calling on "President Mohamed Husni Mubarak to immediately intervene to save the Copts of Egypt and resolve their problems, fearing for Egypt's reputation." The conference adopted several resolutions, among them "filing documented

legal complaints with international rights organizations against the ongoing abuses committed against Copts,” as well as urging the Egyptian government to sign the optional protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights “so that Egyptian individuals can submit their complaints” to the UN. In addition, the conference called on the government to draft bills regulating freedom of belief and it urged the Egyptian parliament to issue a personal status law for non-Muslims, as well as a unified law regulating the establishment of places of worship. The conference called for the immediate release of Father Mataous Abbas Wahba, convicted of falsifying official documents to facilitate the marriage of a Muslim woman and Christian man, whose appeal is still pending.

42. In July, the cities of Cairo and Alexandria saw several protests sparked by the murder of Egyptian national Marwa al-Sherbini on 1 July 2009 inside a courtroom in Dresden, Germany. She was killed by a German man whom she had sued for insulting her for wearing the hijab. The funeral for al-Sherbini—dubbed “the hijab martyr” by the Egyptian press—in her hometown of Alexandria on 6 July turned into a mass demonstration during which protestors held aloft banners condemning racism and urging Egypt to follow up on the case. After the procession, dozens of citizens organized a demonstration in front of the German embassy in Cairo to protest al-Sherbini’s killing, while hundreds more gathered in al-Azhar and condemned the crime, calling on the German authorities to impose the maximum penalty for premeditated murder. The verdict from the German court trying the murder case had not yet been issued as of the writing of this report.

43. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom, a consultative body whose members are appointed by the US President and congressional leaders, sent a letter to President Barack Obama on 10 August asking him to raise the issue of religious freedoms and human rights in his meeting with President Mubarak in Washington D.C. The commission urged Obama to discuss with the Egyptian President attacks on Copts, administrative barriers facing Baha’is and Muslim converts to Christianity who seek to obtain official documents, and the Egyptian role in the UN in attempting to ban “defamation of religions” in violation of freedom of religion and expression. The commission also urged the Obama administration to draft a timetable for the implementation of a set of specific political reforms. Once more, the commission also advocated removing the religious portfolio from the domain of the security apparatus – including the state security police, and particularly matters pertaining to the construction and renovation of houses of worship and religious conversion.

44. On 18 August 2009, several Copts organized a demonstration in front of the White House during the Egyptian President’s visit to the US capital. The demonstration, joined by several non-Christian groups and figures, was timed to coincide with the meeting between the two leaders in the White House. Demonstrators chanted slogans urging a resolution of Coptic problems in Egypt and calling for steps to be taken on the road to the establishment of democracy.

45. In late August, the National Council for Human Rights, an official consultative body under the authority of the Egyptian Shura Council, released the report it submitted to the UN Human Rights Council as part of the universal periodic review; the report addressed the state of human rights in Egypt as of the beginning of 2010. In the field of freedom of religion and belief, the report asked the Egyptian government to “rapidly make a reality of the principle of citizenship enshrined in the Constitution in the 2007 amendments”, and adopt the unified law governing the establishment of the right to construct places of worship drafted by the council. The report also recommended that the government adopt its recommendation to pass an equal opportunity and anti-discrimination law and establish a commission to oversee implementation of the law. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights is expected to release all the reports on Egypt submitted under the universal periodic review mechanism in November 2009, including the government report and reports submitted by Egyptian and international human rights organizations.

46. On 11 September 2009, an estimated 7,000 Copts gathered in the Church of the Virgin and Pope Kyrillos in the Izbet al-Nakhl area of Cairo to celebrate the Coptic new year. The crowd carried banners demanding an end to discrimination against Copts and attacks on them, a rejection of the use of customary reconciliation meetings to mitigate these attacks, the issuance of a unified law on houses of worship and the release of a Coptic priest who was convicted of marrying a Muslim woman and a Christian man with falsified documents.

The assembly followed on the heels of calls by Christian websites and Facebook groups asking Copts to strike on that day in defense of their rights. The organizers of the strike urged Christians to stay at home and wear black if they went out, as an expression of “Coptic anger,” according to a call issued by a Facebook group called Copts for Egypt. Pope Shenouda III and other church leaders refused to support the call for a strike.