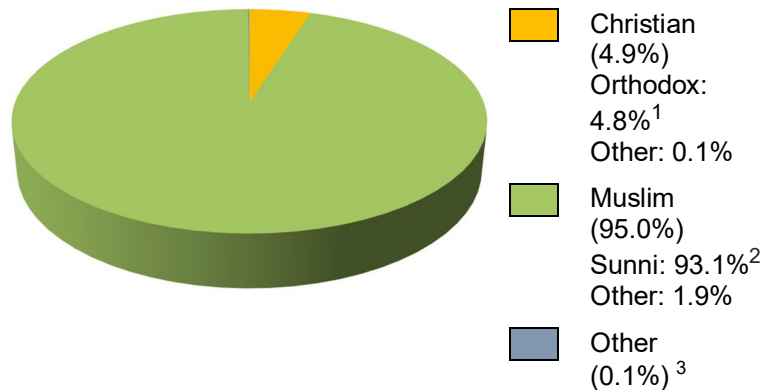


EGYPT



Area:	Population ⁴ :	Political system:	Major Language(s):
1 million km ²	83.9 million	Autocracy	Arabic

Legal framework on freedom of religion and its application

The Arab Republic of Egypt has a long tradition as a nation state. Although predominantly Muslim, the country is home to the largest Christian community in the Arab world – the Copts. The proportion of Christians is at its highest in the governorates of Upper Egypt. Many Christians also live in Cairo. There is a tiny Jewish minority of several hundred members. The number of Shi'a Muslims, Baha'i and other groups is very small too. In recent years Egypt has suffered from political and economic instability and turmoil. In 2011 long-time President Hosni Mubarak was toppled after mass demonstrations. In 2012 Mohammed Morsi, of the Muslim Brotherhood, was elected president by a slim margin. In June and July 2013, the Egyptian military removed him from power following street protests by millions of Egyptians. They accused him of Islamising the country and administering it poorly. Those opposed to Morsi's fall from power and its context described the development as a coup. Supporters said it was necessary to save democracy. Egypt remains highly divided on the matter. Since 2014 General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi has been the elected president of the country. But economic and security problems continue. Especially on the Sinai peninsula, the country is facing an Islamist insurgency by groups allied with Daesh (ISIS). Cairo has also been the scene of attacks against state officials.⁵

In January 2014 the revised constitution⁶ of the state was accepted by referendum. More than 98 percent of those who voted were in favour of the text. The Catholic Church welcomed the text. Coptic Catholic Bishop Kyrill William of Assiut told Aid to the Church in Need that the revised constitution's retention of *Shari'a* law as a source of legislation in Egypt was not necessarily problematic. He said: "This has been the case in Egypt for a long time, even before Morsi. It never did us Christians any harm. But what is more important is that the new article 3 guarantees Christians and Jews autonomy in matters of civil status and internal Church affairs."⁷

The preamble of the 2014 constitution describes Egypt as: "The cradle of religions and the banner of glory of the revealed religions. On its land, Moses grew up, the light of God appeared, and the message descended on Mount Sinai. On its land, Egyptians welcomed the Virgin Mary and her baby and offered up thousands of martyrs in defence of the Church of Jesus. When the Seal of the Messengers Mohamed (Peace and Blessings Be Upon Him) was sent to all mankind to perfect the sublime morals, our hearts and minds were opened to the light of Islam. We were the best soldiers on Earth to fight for the cause of God, and we disseminated the message of truth and religious sciences across the world."

According to article 2, "Islam is the religion of the state and Arabic is its official language. The principles of Islamic *Shari'a* are the principal source of legislation." The preamble specifies that "The reference for interpretation thereof is the relevant texts in the collected rulings of the Supreme Constitutional Court." Article 3 states: "The principles of the laws of Egyptian Christians and Jews are the main source of laws regulating their personal status, religious affairs, and selection of spiritual leaders."

Article 7 protects Al-Azhar University as the most important Sunni institution of Islamic teaching. "Al-Azhar is an independent scientific Islamic institution, with exclusive competence over its own affairs. It is the main authority for religious sciences, and Islamic affairs. It is responsible for preaching Islam and disseminating the religious sciences and the Arabic language in Egypt and the world."

Article 53 declares: "Citizens are equal before the law, possess equal rights and public duties, and may not be discriminated against on the basis of religion, belief, sex, origin, race, colour, language, disability, social class, political or geographical affiliation, or for any other reason". Article 64 states: "Freedom of belief is absolute. The freedom of practising religious rituals and establishing places of worship for the followers of revealed religions is a right organised by law." According to article 74, "No political activity may be exercised or political parties formed on the basis of religion, or discrimination based on sex, origin, sect or geographic location."

And article 244 states: "The state grants youth, Christians, persons with disability and expatriate Egyptians appropriate representation in the first House of Representatives to be elected after this Constitution is adopted, in the manner specified by law." Under article 98 (f) the penal code, denigrating religions, promoting extremist thoughts with the aim of inciting strife, demeaning any of the "divine religions" and harming national unity carry penalties ranging from six months' to five years' imprisonment.⁸

Although religious conversion is not prohibited by law, in practice the government does not recognise conversion from Islam, and Muslim-born citizens who leave Islam for another religion may not change the religion entry on their identity cards.⁹ The law does not recognise the Baha'i Faith or its religious laws and bans Baha'i institutions and community activities. Baha'is do not have recourse to civil law for personal status matters. The same applies to Jehovah's Witnesses.¹⁰

When former General al-Sisi took his oath as Egypt's new President in June 2014, he paid tribute to the role of the Coptic Church in Egypt both in terms of the past and the present. Reporting on al-Sisi's speech, Coptic Catholic Bishop Antonios Aziz Mina of Giza, stated: "The new President said the Church has played an important role in Egypt's history and has made undeniable contributions to safeguard national unity, facing those who fomented conflicts among the Egyptian people. [He] also said that the Church, together with the Sunni University of al-Azhar, can give a valuable contribution to free religious speech from the exploitation it has suffered in recent years."¹¹

The Catholic Church welcomed the election of al-Sisi. Bishop Adel Zaky, head of the Roman Catholic Christians in Egypt, said: "Sisi is the right man at the right time. His victory gives us Christians security and a perspective for the future. Better times are coming."¹² The former commander-in-chief of the Egyptian armed forces was elected with more than 93 percent of the votes.¹³

Incidents

Ehab Karam, a Coptic dentist, was killed in September 2014 in the province of Assiut, Upper Egypt, after he was abducted by unknown persons, probably for ransom. Karam had been stopped by the kidnappers while he was going home; he was a dentist in the town of el-Badari.¹⁴

In October 2014, Ahmed Harqan, an atheist, stated that police had detained, beaten, and interrogated him. Harqan and his wife had fled to a police station in Alexandria after a mob

threatened them with violence. Five days earlier, Harqan had discussed his atheist beliefs on a widely-viewed television talk show. According to Harqan, the police questioned them about their religious convictions and called them apostates. On 26th October, the public prosecutor ordered the investigation of a defamation of religion complaint filed against Harqan by a group of lawyers for statements he made during the talk show.¹⁵

In October 2014 in the Egyptian village of al-Qusiya, 50 km from Assiut, members of Coptic families were forced to barricade themselves in a house after a gang of extortionists had attacked them for not paying “taxes” imposed on them by a Muslim clan. The Coptic Watani network reported that at least 20 complaints lodged with the local police after similar cases had fallen on deaf ears. The scourge of “taxes” imposed on Copt family groups by Muslim extortionists is becoming a cause for concern in Assiut, in the Upper Nile.¹⁶

According to information given to the local media by Copt Christian Mina Thabet, a member of Maspero Youth Union and founder of the Peoples Party in December 2014, in the Minya governorate alone the amount of money paid for the release of kidnapped Christians since January 2011 is now more than 120 million Egyptian pounds (equivalent to 16 million Euro). Mina Thabet stated he thought criminals who attack Copt Christians are protected by the bureaucratic apparatus which is meant to guarantee security. It was reported that corruption explains at least in part the lack of police reaction to this criminal activity.¹⁷

In December 2014 Islamist websites warned Muslims to refrain from any form of participation, even indirectly, in the Christmas celebrations. The sites attacked Muslims who give their best wishes to their Christian neighbours at Christmas. In the Islamist blogosphere there have also been death threats and incitement to organise attacks against churches during the busy Christmas liturgical celebrations. In response, prominent Egyptian Muslims took a stance against the threats.¹⁸

In January 2015 at least three Christian Copts – including a 10-year-old child – were among the victims of the clashes in Cairo and other Egyptian cities on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the end of President Hosni Mubarak’s long regime. Local sources claim that, during the riots, shots were fired at the church of St Raphael the Archangel in Maadi. Egyptian media said 18 died and more than 50 were wounded.¹⁹

In February 2015 the first Catholic Church on the Sinai Peninsula was consecrated at Sharm el-Sheikh. Aid to the Church in Need contributed to its construction.²⁰ Coptic Catholic Bishop Makarios of Ismailia, to whose diocese Sharm el-Sheikh belongs, said at the consecration ceremony: “This is a great day of joy for Catholics in Egypt.”²¹

A video of the decapitation of 21 Egyptian Copts kidnapped in Libya at the beginning of January 2015 was put online by jihadist websites in February 2015. Daesh took responsibility. In retaliation, Egyptian Air Force planes attacked and bombed jihadist positions in Libya, mainly in the area of Derna. “Revenge for Egyptian blood” – says a statement issued by Egyptian armed forces regarding raids in Libyan territory – “is an absolute right and will be implemented.” Egypt’s presidency announced seven days of national mourning for the 21 murdered Copts.²²

In March 2015 the Coptic Catholic Church of Kafr el-Dawar, dedicated to the Virgin Mary and officiated by the Franciscan fathers, was attacked in the early hours of the morning by armed men who used an explosive device against the place of worship and wounded two policemen guarding the building.²³

In March 2015 Abel Hai Azab, Dean of the University of Al-Azhar, announced that the institute would open its doors to Christian doctors and professors within the five hospitals connected to the medical school of the Islamic university.²⁴

In March 2015 the Egyptian Court of Appeal confirmed a five-year jail sentence in the case of preacher Ahmed Mahmoud, also known as Abu Islam. He was convicted for having torn the pages

of a Bible during a demonstration in 2012. Salafist militants set fire to the sacred text after it had been damaged by the preacher. The Egyptian Supreme Court has also condemned Abu Islam to pay a fine of about \$1,000. The confirmation of the sentence is relevant because the process against the preacher was the first filed in Egypt for a case of blasphemy against Christianity.²⁵

In March 2015 the Ministry of Education announced that it had decided to remove and/or clarify passages from primary school textbooks, particularly Islamic education books, deemed to promote incitement and extremist ideology.²⁶

In April 2015, an Egyptian court sentenced about 70 people to life imprisonment for burning a church in the village of Kafr Hakim outside Cairo.²⁷

In Egypt, efforts to “renew religious speech” and therefore “dry up the sources” of extremism and terrorism, “are still not sufficient”. This is what Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said in a speech broadcast nationally in May 2015. He urged the Islamic University of Al-Azhar and other national religious institutions to do more in this area, since it had the potential for major impact in Egypt and nearby countries. About four months earlier, in a speech to scholars and religious leaders at Al-Azhar University, President al-Sisi urged the religious leaders of Islam to promote “a religious revolution” in order to eradicate bigotry and replace it with a “more enlightened vision of the world”.²⁸

In October 2015, at least 10 Copts were wounded during clashes in the town of Samalut, Minya Governorate. Several shops and homes were badly damaged but nobody died.²⁹

Attacks against places of worship “go against the authentic Islamic religion and its teachings of tolerance”, but fail to undermine the unity of the Egyptian people. This is how Ahmed al-Tayyeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, condemned the attack carried out in November 2015 against a church in Cairo belonging to the Evangelical Coptic community. In the attack, men on motorcycles shot members of the security forces who were guarding the Christian place of worship, in the Giza district of Cairo, seriously injuring a policeman.³⁰

In January 2016 President al-Sisi attended the Coptic Christmas Eve Mass celebrated by the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch Tawadros II. During his greetings, al-Sisi is also reported to have made reference to the attacks on the churches and Christian communities in Egypt carried out by extremist groups. He apologised for the delay in the repair of churches destroyed during the riots in August 2013, when about 80 institutions and Christian places of worship were attacked and devastated by gangs of thugs linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists. A year earlier, al-Sisi attended Christmas Mass in the same cathedral. That was the first time an Egyptian President attended a Christmas service.³¹

That same month, Egypt’s parliament convened, consisting of 596 members, including an unprecedented 36 Christians.³²

In January 2016, 10 Coptic men were arrested while they were building a wall for the Coptic Church in the village of Abu Hennis, near the city of Salamout, in the governorate of Minya. The news was reported by the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Salamout, saying that the arrests were made on the grounds that the workers did not present legal authorisations for the construction of the wall.³³

In January 2016 the court of Beni Mazar sentenced a Coptic teacher convicted on charges of insulting Islam to three years in prison. The episode happened last spring at a village school in Nasiriyya, near the town of Beni Mazar, in Minya province. Four of the students were arrested for having shown a video, filmed with a mobile phone, in which they mimicked the scene of the slaughter of a faithful Muslim in an attitude of prayer. It is said to have imitated the horrific executions committed by Daesh jihadists. The brief video sparked anger. The teacher held partly to blame for the film had already been forced to leave Nasiriyya village with his family.³⁴ At the end of

February 2016 the Egyptian Court in Minya passed a heavy sentence against the students: three were given five years in prison and the fourth, not yet 18, will go to a guarded residence for juvenile offenders.³⁵ In March 2016 the Justice Ministers promised a “solution” for Coptic students punished for offending Islam.

In March 2016 the court for misdemeanours in Cairo rejected the appeal filed by writer and blogger Fatima Naoot against a conviction for blasphemy she had received the previous January. The writer had been sentenced to three years in prison and payment of a fine of 20,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$ 2,550) for criticising the Islamic practice of sacrificing lambs, calves and sheep each year on the occasion of Eid al Adha, the “feast of sacrifice”. The writer, currently on tour in Canada, became the second Egyptian public figure convicted of blasphemy in recent months. In December 2015, Beheri, an Islamic researcher, was convicted of blasphemy for expressing views considered offensive to Islam.³⁶

In May 2016 the new text of the law on the construction of places of worship was issued in its pre-definitive version, and will be discussed by the Egyptian Parliament. The draft legislation was delivered to the leaders of the Coptic Orthodox Church, so that they could evaluate the text and raise any objections. In autumn 2014, representatives of the main churches and Christian communities in Egypt had sent a memorandum to the leaders of the Egyptian government with suggestions and proposals. The underlying intention that inspired the proposals of the Christian leaders – according to Anba Antonios Aziz Mina, Coptic Catholic Bishop of Giza – was to “facilitate the implementation of streamlined and clear procedures that depend only on the law, and are to be subtracted to any kind of arbitrariness”. According to the Churches’ proposals, permits for the construction of places of Christian worship should be granted by the local municipal authorities – rather than involving the provincial or national authorities. This is reported to be the case for the construction of private buildings. The bureaucratic constraints that complicate the construction of new churches date back in part to the Ottoman period. In 1934, the Interior Ministry added the so-called “ten rules”, which forbid, among other things, the building of new churches near schools, channels, government buildings, railways and residential areas. In many cases, the strict application of these rules has prevented the building of churches in cities and villages inhabited by Christians, especially in the rural areas of Upper Egypt.³⁷

In May 2016 extremists burned down a church in Minya, Upper Egypt, according to a local Coptic Bishop. “St Mary’s Church in the village of Esmaelia al-Bahreia was burned down completely after an attack carried out by extremists,” said Bishop Macarius of Minya. Egyptian media, which reported the fire, have claimed that an electric short-circuit caused the incident. However, the bishop claimed the fire was arson. St Mary’s Church was a makeshift church made from wood, located 6km north of Minya City. It was used in lieu of a “proper church” because of government restrictions: The bishop said: “The makeshift church has been used for worship for over a year... since a proper church is yet to be authorised by the government since 2009.”³⁸

The May 2016 meeting between Pope Francis and Ahmed al-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of the Sunni Al-Azhar University, held at the Vatican, prompted high hopes of bringing Christians and Muslims closer together. In an interview with Aid to the Church in Need, Father Rafic Greiche, from the Catholic Church in Egypt, said: “It was the first time that the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar University visited the Pope. It was clearly a very cordial meeting. You could see that from the body language and the familiarity between the Pope and the Grand Imam. We believe that this has broken the ice in the relations between the Vatican and Al-Azhar University.” He added: “The resumption of official dialogue, which was suspended by Al-Azhar University in 2011, may not have been explicitly announced yet, but that is just a formality. I am firmly convinced that talks will resume.” The most important Islamic institution of Egypt, which is highly respected throughout the Sunni world, had unilaterally suspended bilateral talks with the Holy See in 2011.³⁹

Prospects for Religious Freedom

The situation concerning religious freedom has improved since an upsurge of anti-Christian violence peaked in August 2013 with the attacks on nearly 80 churches and other Coptic centres including convents, schools and clinics.⁴⁰ Father Rafic Greiche, from the Catholic Church in Egypt, emphasised that the position of Christians in Egypt has improved vastly since Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood was ousted from the Presidency in July of 2013. In May 2016, Father Greiche said: "There is no comparison between the situation today and that during the government of the Muslim Brotherhood. Today, we have very good relations between Church leaders and government agencies. However, there are still many problems, of course. But it is my impression that Muslims are growing more aware of our situation."⁴¹ President al-Sisi is sending encouraging signs for national unity of Muslims and Christians alike. His visits to the Coptic Christmas service in recent years are testament to it. Also the President's call for a reform of Islam has had a positive influence on public opinion. The new constitution of 2014 is also a step in the right direction. That said, often laws and government policies discriminating against non-Muslims remain unchanged. Also, deeply rooted social intolerance and discrimination of non-Muslims, especially Christians, remains a serious societal problem, especially in Upper Egypt. Christians are often victims of crimes such as blackmail and kidnapping, encouraged by a climate of impunity. And, given the focus on the traditional monotheistic religions, atheists and groups such as the Baha'i face daunting societal and governmental challenges.

There are signs of a change of approach in institutions such as the Sunni Al-Azhar University. But a lot still has to be done. Coptic Catholic Bishop Youssef Aboul-Kheir told Aid to the Church in Need: "The Al-Azhar University is regarded as a moderate force. But in fact there are many things in its teachings and programmes which are anything but moderate. For example, the use of force in cases of apostasy by Muslims is justified. This is in contradiction to moderate views. The Al-Azhar University must correct its programme."⁴²

¹ Coptic

² http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_73_2.asp

³ Pew Research Center <http://www.pewresearch.org/>

⁴ BBC Egypt Country Profile (6 November 2015) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13313370>

⁵ <http://www.fides.org/en/news/38092->

AFRICA_EGYPT_Condolences_of_the_Council_of_Christian_Churches_for_the_assassination_of_Attorney_General#.Vy4Fnp3wCM8

⁶ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Egypt_2014.pdf

⁷ ACN news January 2014

⁸ U.S. International Religious Freedom Report for 2014

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Fides, 9th June 2014 - <http://www.fides.org/en/news/35864->

AFRICA_EGYPT_New_President_al_Sisi_enhances_the_role_of_the_Coptic_Church_in_the_past_and_present_of_the_nation#.Vy2g8m4-cGax

¹² Oliver Maksan, Aid to the Church in Need interview with Bishop Adel Zaky reported in Independent Catholic News, 3rd June 2014 - <http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=24878>

¹³ ACN news May 2014

¹⁴ <http://www.fides.org/en/news/36416->

AFRICA_EGYPT_Kidnappings_continue_to_the_detriment_of_the_Copts_a_dentist_kidnapped_killed#.Vy4cDJ3wCM8

¹⁵ U.S. International Religious Freedom Report for 2014

¹⁶ <http://www.fides.org/en/news/36474->

AFRICA_EGYPT_Intimidation_against_Copts_who_do_not_pay_their_taxes_to_a_Muslim_clan#.Vy4bPp3wCM8

¹⁷ <http://www.fides.org/en/news/36931->

AFRICA_EGYPT_In_Minya_Governorate_in_4_years_some_120_million_Egyptian_pounds_paid_in_ransom_for_kidnapped_Christians#.Vy4aDJ3wCM8

¹⁸ <http://www.fides.org/en/news/37006->

AFRICA_EGYPT_Islamist_threats_against_the_Christmas_celebration_Muslim_leaders_we_defend_the_churches_together_with_Christians#.Vy4ZC53wCM8

¹⁹ <http://www.fides.org/en/news/37161->

AFRICA_EGYPT_Copts_killed_and_churches_attacked_in_the_riots_on_January_25#.Vy4YJZ3wCM8

²⁰ <http://members4.boardhost.com/acnaus/msg/1424232054.html>

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- ²¹ ACN news February 2015
- ²² <http://www.fides.org/en/news/37280->
AFRICA_EGYPT_21_Copts_kidnapped_and_murdered_by_jihadists_in_Libya_are_martyrs_for_the_faith_says_Patriarch_Ibrahim_Isaac#.Vy4XQ53wCM8
- ²³ <http://www.fides.org/en/news/37418->
AFRICA_EGYPT_Armed_assault_against_the_Franciscan_church_of_Kafr_el_Dawar#.Vy4WEp3wCM8
- ²⁴ <http://www.fides.org/en/news/37488->
AFRICA_EGYPT_Hospitals_in_Al_Azhar_open_their_doors_to_Christian_doctors#.Vy4VSp3wCM8
- ²⁵ <http://www.fides.org/en/news/37493->
AFRICA_EGYPT_The_conviction_for_the_Salafist_leader_who_tore_up_a_copy_of_the_Bible_confirmed#.Vy4Ut53wCM8
- ²⁶ http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_AR_2016_Tier1_2_Egypt.pdf
- ²⁷ http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_AR_2016_Tier1_2_Egypt.pdf
- ²⁸ <http://www.fides.org/en/news/37807->
AFRICA_EGYPT_President_al_Sisi_so_far_little_has_been_done_to_renew_religious_speech#.Vy4N6J3wCM8
- ²⁹ <http://www.fides.org/en/news/58512->
AFRICA_EGYPT_Sectarian_clashes_in_Samalat_the_city_of_martyrs_ten_Copts_wounded#.Vy4Akp3wCM8
- ³⁰ <http://www.fides.org/en/news/58723->
AFRICA_EGYPT_The_Imam_of_al_Azhar_condemns_the_attack_on_a_Coptic_evangelical_church#.Vy3_i53wCM8
- ³¹ <http://www.fides.org/en/news/59124->
AFRICA_EGYPT_President_al_Sisi_attends_Christmas_Eve_in_the_Coptic_Cathedral#.Vy39mp3wCM8
- ³² http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_AR_2016_Tier1_2_Egypt.pdf
- ³³ <http://www.fides.org/en/news/59288->
AFRICA_EGYPT_Ten_Coptic_workers_in_prison_for_having_built_an_illegal_wall#.Vy38tZ3wCM8
- ³⁴ <http://www.fides.org/en/news/59311->
AFRICA_EGYPT_Coptic_professor_sentenced_for_insulting_Islam_His_students_mocked_jihadist_barbarism#.Vy3DZZ3wCM9
- ³⁵ <http://www.fides.org/en/news/59589->
AFRICA_EGYPT_Justice_Minister_promises_solution_for_Coptic_student_offenders_of_Islam#.Vy37NZ3wCM8
- ³⁶ <http://www.fides.org/en/news/59726->
AFRICA_EGYPT_Sentence_for_blasphemy_of_the_writer_Fatima_Naoot_has_been_confirmed#.Vy4j-J3wCM8
- ³⁷ <http://www.fides.org/en/news/59958->
AFRICA_EGYPT_The_Egyptian_parliament_is_preparing_to_discuss_the_new_law_on_the_construction_of_places_of_worship#.Vy36ip3wCM8
- ³⁸ <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/extremists.burn.down.church.in.egypt/85988.htm>
- ³⁹ ACN news May 2016
- ⁴⁰ Aid to the Church in Need, *Persecuted and Forgotten? A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2011-2013 – Executive Summary*
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² ACN news February 2015