

The Egyptian state has institutionalized harsh treatment of non-religious minorities; atheism is deemed an evil that must be combated.

Non-religious persons have been prosecuted and incarcerated under Egypt's blasphemy laws for discussing their views on atheism.

Law enforcement officials often fail to intervene to protect non-religious persons from harm.

Atheism is not recognized as a legitimate spiritual or religious choice in Egypt. Non-religious persons (like all Egyptians) may only marry through a religious institution, must choose one of three state-recognized religions on their identification card, and are often treated as criminal or mentally ill.

EGYPTIAN STATE ANTAGONISTIC TOWARD ATHEISM

The Egyptian state has institutionalized harsh treatment of non-religious minorities; individuals who identify as atheist or agnostic are often dealt with extremely severely. Treating them as criminals or mentally ill, the government has targeted non-religious persons through state-sponsored programs and media as well as through enforcing blasphemy laws and other legal discriminatory government practices. Viewed within the broader context of the state's attempt to eliminate dissent in many areas of life through encouraging moral conformity, the government has attempted to exert control over popular religious institutions and non-religious persons. Just as the government has not allowed the political opposition—Islamist or liberal—to organize, they have attempted to exert direct control over popular religious life, [including the mosque pulpit](#).

Government leaders routinely make statements belittling non-religious citizens and their beliefs. Calling for a religious revolution, President Abdel-Fattah El Sisi, during his [Laylet al-Qadr](#) speech in July 2015, claimed that atheists were all still Muslims or Christians who had lost faith, assuring his listeners that they would return to the fold. In an attempt to deemphasize their prominence in December 2014, Dar al-Ifta', a religious body within the Ministry of Justice, announced that there were precisely [866 atheists](#) in Egypt. Ahmed al-Tayyeb, Sheikh of al-Azhar, has [said](#) that atheists lack sound arguments and must resort to

name-calling and insults and that atheism strikes against Islam.

The state also presents atheism as a threat to Egyptian security and brings criminal charges against outspoken atheists. In March 2014, Alexandria Security Directorate [Chief Amin Ezz al-Din](#) announced in a televised telephone interview that a special police taskforce would be formed to arrest a group of Alexandria-based atheists who declared their beliefs on Facebook. The government has proceeded with blasphemy charges in several cases where non-religious persons publicly announced their views; in 2015, [Sherif Gaber](#) and [Karim al-Banna](#) (whose father testified against him) were sentenced to serve time in prison for having discussed their atheism on [Facebook](#); the al-Banna case drew [criticism](#) from Human Rights Watch.

Non-religious individuals are forced to choose from the three legally recognized faiths (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) on their official government identification cards. Without government identification cards, individuals cannot obtain any legal documents. In addition, since the Egyptian state does not conduct civil marriages, non-religious persons—like the [Bahá'is](#)—cannot have a civil marriage and they must marry within religious institutions.

DESPITE CONSTITUTIONAL GUARANTEES, NON-RELIGIOUS FACE SEVERE DISCRIMINATION

Article 64 of the Egyptian constitution states that freedom of belief is absolute, but practically speaking this is not observed. Over the last few years, non-religious persons have begun to speak openly about their beliefs, initially [online](#) and later in traditional media. However, mainstream [Egyptian media](#) has portrayed atheists and non-religious people as psychotic and dangerous to society, suggesting that [they should be jailed or killed](#) to “cleanse” the country of their “evil.” Individuals who publicly identify as atheists are subject to harassment and death threats by other [citizens](#), including from their own families.

Non-religious persons also face severe discrimination. Some [lose their jobs](#) or face physical violence and when non-religious persons are attacked, police do not necessarily intervene to protect them. Some psychiatrists in Egypt have treated atheism as a mental illness, encouraging families to “treat” relatives with medicine and counseling. In 2012, 84 percent of Egyptians polled by [Pew Research Center](#) believed that the death penalty was an acceptable punishment for those who left the Muslim faith.

MINISTRY OF RELIGIOUS ENDOWMENTS PLAYS ACTIVE ROLE IN TARGETING NON- RELIGIOUS

In April 2015, Egypt’s Ministry of Religious Endowments announced that it was forming special groups to discuss controversial topics within mosques, including the “threats” of atheism, Shi’a, Baha’ism, killings, and drug addiction. This was not the first time such government action against atheism had been announced. In July 2014, Minister of Religious Endowments Muhammad Mokhtar Gomaa and Minister of Youth and Sports Khaled Abdel Aziz announced that they would launch a [campaign against atheism](#), in which sociologists, psychiatrists, and religious scholars would train young people to combat atheism by engaging non-religious people through social media and attempting to convince them to return to their families’ religions. A month later, the Ministry of Culture [announced](#) its intention to partner with

the Ministry of Religious Endowments to combat atheism.

FEW STAND UP FOR RIGHTS OF NON- RELIGIOUS

A group of atheists launched a Facebook page in late August 2015, calling on the members to openly proclaim their personal beliefs. In response to the page and sponsored by Salafi Dawa (Salafi Calling), the Fath Center for Research and Studies’ Department of Atheism [launched](#) a campaign against atheists, consisting of videos on how one can confront and deal with atheism in Egypt. El Sawy Cultural Wheel [hosted three seminars](#) in a two-month campaign against atheism.

Few Egyptian observers have stood up for the rights of the non-religious, and both [Christian](#) and [Muslim](#) religious leaders have condemned the “spread” or “appearance” of the “phenomenon of atheism.”

RESOURCES

“Egypt’s National Plan to Fight Atheism,” Ishak Ibrahim

<http://timep.org/commentary/egypts-national-plan-fight-atheism/>

“Moral Panic in the Egyptian Media,” Allison McManus and Maged Maher Gabra

<http://timep.org/commentary/moral-panic-egyptian-media/>

“Black Ducks” page on YouTube, a forum for Egyptian and other Arab non-religious persons

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFt8pHU9jLviHacyxYfuiDw>

ESHHAD

Eshhad is an online platform that aggregates and collates alleged religious persecution and sectarian attacks in Egypt.

Eshhad, which previously existed as an independent entity and is now an incubated project at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), seeks to encourage transparency and to influence policy by explaining the context in which sectarianism occurs throughout the Middle East.

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