

# Egypt's religious freedom tradition an asset to America, the world

El-Sissi walks the walk on tolerance for all faiths



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COMMENTARY

By Motaz Zahran

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## **OPINION:**

Freedom of religion isn't just an American value; it should be a universal one. At a time when it faces serious threats around the world, Egypt is committed to providing it for its citizens and all individuals in its territories.

Both the United States and Egypt were shaped by religious diversity from the start. Just as America's Pilgrims fled religious persecution to build a nation where all faiths could flourish, Egypt has been a cradle of Abrahamic faiths for millennia.

We are the birthplace of Moses, where the Holy Family found refuge, and we are the most-mentioned nation in the Holy Quran. In both Egypt and the United States, religious tolerance is woven into our national DNA.

Today, as the most populous Arab nation and home to the Middle East's largest Christian community, Egypt's approach to freedom of religion and belief carries enormous weight. What we do sets an example at a time when models for peaceful pluralism are desperately needed.

Our commitment is enshrined in Egypt's constitution, which explicitly states that "freedom of belief is absolute" and "the freedom of practicing religious rituals and establishing worship places for the followers of divine religions is a right regulated by law."

The constitution preserves Christians' and Jews' rights to govern their personal status according to their own religious laws, declares all citizens equal before the law, regardless of faith, and extends the practice of religion free from discrimination and incitement — while affirming commitment to the international human rights conventions Egypt has ratified.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi's commitment to religious freedom is shared by President Trump, who has made protecting freedom of religious belief a cornerstone of U.S. policy.

Early in Mr. el-Sissi's first presidential term, he launched an initiative to reform religious discourse to directly confront extremist ideologies. He established a tradition of celebrating Christmas in person each year with Egypt's Coptic Christians. And in 2021, he made a statement no Egyptian leader had ever made before: The right to believe in any faith or even non-belief is absolute and should be protected and respected.

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These statements were not merely rhetorical; they were swiftly put into action. Egypt's first Human Rights Strategy for the period from 2021 to 2026 identified a set of targets for the promotion and protection of freedom of religion and belief on legislative, institutional and awareness fronts.

Nearly 3,800 churches and ancillary buildings were legalized in Egypt, addressing obstacles to Christian communities formalizing some of their places of worship.

Despite economic challenges, we've built the biggest church in the Middle East: the Cathedral of the Nativity of Christ in the new capital, and we're allocating land for a new evangelical church in New Cairo. We've also restored historic Jewish synagogues, including Alexandria's 14th-century Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue.

Furthermore, a unified personal status law for Christian citizens is underway, following extensive consultations with various Christian denominations. We're also developing the Path of the Exodus and the Holy

Family Trail, projects honoring Egypt's significance to Judaism and Christianity while promoting religious heritage and tourism.

Our approach counters the extremist ideologies that threaten our society. By promoting interreligious dialogue, reforming school curricula to emphasize tolerance and strengthening rural community bonds and mutual understanding in cooperation with civil organizations, Egypt addresses the root causes of extremism and solidifies interfaith harmony among communities.

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These important strides are a start. Egypt understands that much still lies ahead in addressing complex historical, social and security challenges. But our approach is rooted in a genuine political will, steady institutional reform, open national dialogues and an ongoing commitment to aligning practices with constitutional prerogatives and international standards.

As we prepare to launch our second National Human Rights Strategy later this year, religious freedom remains a cornerstone. We're building on successes while acknowledging and navigating the associated complexities, much as America continues to refine its own approach to religious liberty.

The Middle East and the world need nations to choose coexistence over conflict, protection over persecution and pluralism over prejudice. The shared values of protecting religious diversity, defending equal rights and

promoting tolerance unite Egypt and the United States. We can demonstrate that religious freedom isn't just possible; it's the path forward for healthier, more stable and prosperous societies.

Egypt is on track to become a regional role model. Our focus on religious freedom reflects our history, heritage, constitution and national identity and character. Like the U.S., Egypt understands that protecting freedom of belief strengthens the entire society. Also like America, we recognize that religious freedom and national security are complementary, not competing, priorities.

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· *His Excellency Motaz Zahran is ambassador of Egypt to the United States.*

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