
PROJECT INTRODUCTION

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Eshhad: Center for the Protection of Minorities



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BACKGROUND: ESHHAD

The Middle East has long been plagued by an unrecognized, neglected, and festering sectarianism that has been institutionalized into state policies and manifested as localized criminal actions. Schools allow curriculum that incites against religious minorities; national identification cards identify religion, allowing police officers to distinguish individuals based on their religion of birth; archaic laws establish and maintain starkly different processes for constructing houses of worship; and the state continues to encourage informal reconciliation sessions that often result in the forcible removal of the victim and his family, rather than the prosecution of the perpetrator. A single snapshot of the problem cannot capture the full extent of the reality on the ground, and it is for this reason that Eshhad first began gathering publicly available information on sectarianism in Egypt.

Only after identifying the problem, documenting the context in which it occurs, and providing data and numbers, will each country in the region truly be able to stem the religiously motivated discrimination and violence that it hosts. Eshhad aims to become a part of this necessary process.

Egypt's current president, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, has called on al-Azhar to lead a religious revolution; further, the state has started to enforce stricter regulations on religious leaders in mosques. Although tackling the extremism that is preached from pulpits is a necessary step to curb sectarianism, it cannot stand alone and must be part of a more comprehensive set of state policies to target the issue at hand.

Since ex-President Muhammad Morsi's ousting and the state's violent dispersal of the Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins in the Raba'a al-Adaweya and Nahda Squares, Egypt's Christian community has become the target of what seems to be unprecedented levels of sectarianism throughout the country. These deliberate acts of violence against religious minorities, which continue today, include the burning of churches, the looting of homes, the death and injury of innocent civilians, and the continued intimidation and threats of Christians.

However, Christians have not been the sole target of incidents of sectarianism in Egypt. Over the years, Shi'a, Bahá'ís, Jews, and Non-Religious persons have also been subject to discriminatory state policies and practice, governmental neglect, and non-state harassment. Institutionalized by the state following decades of both deliberate support of sectarian practices and negligent dismissal, sectarianism has become a recurring theme in the lives of many minorities, barring them from basic rights and civil liberties.

Although sectarian conflict and violence are not new phenomena in Egypt, it has become increasingly difficult to accurately document sectarian incidents and their triggers. In this context, Eshhad was founded to fill a vital information gap and provide a clearer picture of religious discrimination and violence within Egypt. Eshhad, the Arabic command to "testify," aims to do exactly that: to provide a simultaneously qualitative and quantitative testimony of the policies and practices targeting minorities in the Middle East.

Although discrimination and violence against minorities is only one of many matters of concern during a democratic transition, a society's treatment of its minorities reflects how that state treats issues of freedom of speech, belief, and religion at a larger scale within the country. When a country enshrines inherently unequal

and discriminatory practices in the law, when it allows perpetrators of religiously motivated violence to continue their actions with impunity, and when it denies the presence of a deeply enshrined problem, it is failing to live up to the democratic principles that it has subscribed to domestically and internationally.

SECTARIANISM

While there is no single political or legal definition of sectarianism, for the purposes of the database and map, Eshhad defines sectarianism as actions that are motivated—in whole or in part—or colored by bigotry, discrimination, or hatred regarding perceived differences between divisions within a group on account of a minority status, whether religious, ethnic, or another defining feature, by state or non-state actors.

Eshhad's specific focus is sectarianism of a religious nature. Sectarianism includes both non-state and state actions. Further, sectarianism can be committed against persons, private properties, or religiously affiliated entities. The means by which sectarianism can occur include but are not limited to verbal threats, media incitement, discriminatory legal policies, kidnapping, the taking of personal property, physical violence, and murder.

While intent is a necessary element to understand each sectarian incident, Eshhad does not solely rely on this factor when deciding whether to document a specific event. Any attempt to understand the motivation behind a person's actions would require in-depth investigation and evidence gathering that does not fall under Eshhad's mandate. Rather, Eshhad's data provides the context in which each individual lives, the same context in which sectarianism thrives. By providing this information, Eshhad seeks to bring light to the collective perception of intent, a notion that is vital to understanding the environment in which these crimes are committed.

For a more extensive explanation of how Eshhad categorizes events, the [Eshhad Map Methodology and Database Codebook](#) is available.

THE PROJECT

Eshhad first began tracking sectarian incidents on August 14, 2013, during the widespread attacks on Christians following the violent dispersal of the Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins. Since then, the project has continued documenting events through an online database and is now an incubated project at the [Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy \(TIMEP\)](#). While Eshhad is currently focused on highlighting the proliferation of sectarian attacks on minority groups in Egypt, future phases of the project may expand to document sectarianism against other marginalized groups in the region as a whole.

The project currently provides a live database and map of events as they are occurring in Egypt, profiles of religious minorities, and a briefing on church construction in Egypt. Eshhad will provide analysis of religiously motivated sectarianism and issue briefs on additional matters of concern.

OTHER RESOURCES

Inspired by the success of crowd-sourced data collection and mapping initiatives in Egypt like [HarassMap](#), Eshhad was born to fill an information gap on sectarianism.

Although the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) hosted a [similar project](#) that documented data on sectarian violence from January 2008 to January 2010, almost no other non-governmental organizations continue to provide similar documentation. Despite this, a number of useful reports and individual investigative research pieces on sectarian policies like church construction laws, national identification cards, and blasphemy prosecutions in the Middle East have been conducted by groups like [EIPR](#), the [Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms](#), the [Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies](#), and [Human Rights Watch](#).

PROJECT CONTRIBUTORS AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Born over two years ago, the growth of Eshhad could not have been possible without the support of its contributors.

Project Contributors:

- Amira Mikhail, Non-Resident Fellow at TIMEP and Eshhad Principal Investigator
- Mai El-Sadany, Non-Resident Fellow at TIMEP
- Allison McManus, Research Director at TIMEP
- Jay Roddy, Editorial Manager at TIMEP
- Samer Mosis, Summer 2015 Research Intern at TIMEP

Eshhad would also like to thank its previous contributors who helped in the growth of the project at its earlier stages:

- Amir Beshay
- Kirollos Barsoum
- Karim El Hayawan
- Seham Ahmed

Any inquiries or requests regarding the project should be directed to admin@eshhad.org.

METHODOLOGY

Eshhad relies on a number of available sources, including Arabic and English news sites and on-the-ground verification of particular cases conducted by international and domestic non-governmental organizations and

human rights groups. Due to security concerns, not all incidents are uploaded onto the public database; at times, names of victims may also be omitted.

For documentation purposes, Eshhad aggregates and collates data on events or incidents that could reasonably be considered sectarian and may rise to the level of persecution against minorities. Difficulties in discerning the intent of each incident arise when researchers and investigators are not directly at the scene of the incident to document and verify all alleged facts. For this reason, Eshhad collects data regardless of the intent or motive, while fully recognizing the variety of reasons that may have motivated any particular incident. Monitoring and collecting a wide range of incidents provides a context in which sectarian violence thrives and allows observers to understand the history of the area in which the event occurred and to potentially identify areas of concern.

Eshhad began data collection in August 2013. Later phases of the project may include expanding the data set to include incidents that occurred before August 2013.

The [Eshhad Map Methodology and Database Codebook](#) provides a deeper explanation of how Eshhad conducts research and codes data.