Helpdesk Research Report: Religious Identity and Inequality in the MENA region
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Query: What are the links between religious identity and inequality in MENA countries?
Enquirers: DFID, MENAD

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1. Overview

A highly ethnically and religiously diverse region, the Middle East region (and Egypt in North Africa) is considered to be rife with religious tension. Proponents of this view argue that this is so because religion constitutes a significant part of the political culture in the Middle East and in particular, in states with a Muslim religious tradition. Fox (2008) also finds that there is little separation between religion and the state in the Middle East. However, more generally, a 2009 comparative study (Akbaba 2009) of religious discrimination in western democracies, Asia and the Middle East for the time period of 1990-2004 found that religious discrimination is not, on average, more prevalent in the Middle East than in Asia, and that states with Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu majorities all display similar levels of religious discrimination. However, the study does find that even though the Middle East and Asia have similar values of average discrimination, the range between minimum and maximum values is broader for the Middle East.

What this does show, however, is that in multi-religious societies, the presence of different religions can be perceived by the majority group as a challenge to their worldview. The Middle East and North Africa region is home to numerous and diverse religious groups. Religious minorities can be placed into three broad categories (Kumaraswamy 2003):

- Arab non-Muslims: This includes Christian denominations such as Copts, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Maronites, Latins and Protestants;
- Non-Arab non-Muslim: Examples are Jews, Armenians, Assyrians;
- Heterodox Islamic sects: Shi`as, Alawis, Druze, Baha’is

The practice of religious discrimination against the minority at the state and society level can be seen as an attempt 'defending the walls' of the majority religion (Akbaba 2009). On the other hand, in some cases in the Middle East, such as Bahrain and Syria, the government is dominated by minority groups, which have themselves resorted to repressive measures to control the marginalised majority. In countries with both majority- and minority-dominated
governments, the vulnerability of subordinated religious groups can become heightened during times of economic and political flux, perhaps as a result of a fundamental discomfort with the presence of minorities and the need for a distraction in times of trouble (Ghanea-Herco 2004). The authoritarian Bahraini government’s actions against its majority Shi’a population, in light of the events of the ‘Arab Spring’, can be seen as an example of this. The government has recently demolished a large number of Shi’a mosques, removed Shi’a professors from their positions in universities, forced Shi’a deputies in parliament to resign, and tortured, imprisoned, placed on death row, or even killed Shi’a activists (Al-Jazeera May 1 2011).

It is clear that religious minorities across the Middle East region (including in Israel) face discriminatory laws, policies and practices which affect their ability to fully realise their political and civil rights and also impact on their access to economic, social and cultural rights. In Muslim majority states, the political status of Jewish and Christian communities is defined by the Muslim concept of dhimmī, according to which ‘people of the book’ are defined as a tolerated, but subordinated, religious people, who are to be given protection and security, religious autonomy and local cultural independence. Non-Muslims who do not fall within this category can find themselves particularly excluded.

Many analysts highlight that religious minorities experience discrimination in terms of accessing education, employment, access to justice, etc. However, few go on to provide a more detailed explanation of these processes. Also, very few empirical studies on the links between religious discrimination and inequality, poverty and development in the region have been conducted.

Issues of violence against religious groups, and restrictions on the freedom to worship are better documented. It appears that there are two religious restrictions that are particularly commonplace in the region: restrictions on building and maintaining places of worship; and arrest, detention and harassment of religious clergy. It is also important to remember that discrimination can be the result of public policy or social practice or both. Akbaba (2009) points out that even though a country’s laws might indicate respect for the religious rights of minorities, sometimes cultural differences form major divisions between majority and minority religions. In fact, it may even be the case that strong laws addressing religious discrimination might themselves be indicative of wider social problems in this regard. As a result, and particularly in recent years, there have been repeated reports of harassment, physical attacks and firebombing against religious minorities, particularly in states such as Iraq.

More broadly, findings from the literature on inequalities for religious minorities can be clustered into the following categories:

**Violence and intimidation.** In Bahrain, young Shi’a men who have taken part in street protests against alleged discrimination by the Sunni-dominated government, and clashed with security forces, have been detained, and - they claim - tortured (Human Rights Watch 2010). In Iran, the communal property and sacred sites of the Baha’i community have repeatedly come under attack. Baha’i community leaders have also been subject to arbitrary arrest. In Iraq, the properties and businesses of Christians and Yezidis have been targeted by violent insurgent groups. In Egypt, attacks on minorities, particularly Coptic Christians, by Islamist militants have risen and resulted in deaths and injuries. The government’s failure to convict those responsible – including two of the three alleged perpetrators in the January 2010 Naga Hammadi attack has fostered a climate of impunity. The state security services have also been reported to have used excessive force and live ammunition targeting Christian places of worship and Christian demonstrators. In Saudi Arabia, following clashes between Shi’a worshippers and the Saudi religious police in Medina in 2009, there have been arbitrary arrests of Shi’a protesters as well as religious and community leaders, and the closing of communal prayer halls.
Political representation. Generally the space given to religious minorities in Muslim countries for participation in the political life at all levels has been severely limited in most Middle Eastern countries (Ghanae-Hercoc 2004). A number of Arab countries have constitutionally excluded minorities from holding senior positions in the government. The presidents of Iran and Syria are required by their respective Constitutions to be Muslim. Apart from Lebanon, few senior posts in countries in the region are occupied by minorities. In Egypt, there are only a handful of Christians in the senior ranks of the security services and armed forces. There is one Christian governor out of 28, one elected Member of Parliament out of 454 seats, no known university presidents or deans, and very few legislators or judges (USCIRF 2011). In Saudi Arabia, there are no Shi’a judges except for seven judges serving three Shi’a courts – of which two are first instance courts and one an appeals court. The powers of these courts have recently been further restricted (Human Rights Watch 2009). In Iraq, religious minorities are only guaranteed 6 seats out of 440 at the provincial level (Minority Rights Group 2010).

Accessing services. It is commonly argued that religious groups are often denied access to health and education services – however there is very limited, empirically-based information on this. In Iran, there are some reports that Baha’is in Iran are denied access to higher education, and from teaching and practising their faith. In fact the teaching of minority religions is considered an important issue in terms of access to education (Kheiltash and Rust 2009). There are also reports that ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq have experienced discrimination and hostility from health practitioners. In Saudi Arabia, the government has also been reported to discriminate against Shi’as in the selection process for students, professors and administrators at public universities, and Shi’a students have experienced intolerance within the primary and secondary school systems.

Accessing jobs and employment. The issue of appointments to senior positions with state institutions, the armed forces and the security services is relatively well-covered in the literature. It is argued, that apart from Lebanon, few senior posts in countries in the region are occupied by minorities. In Egypt, there are only a handful of Christians in the upper ranks of the security services and armed forces. There is one Christian governor out of 28, one elected Member of Parliament out of 454 seats, no known university presidents or deans, and very few legislators or judges (USCIRF 2011). In Iraq, there are reports of discrimination on the basis of religion or ethnicity with regard to appointments in Iraqi state institutions, including appointment to high administrative positions within state institutions (Minority Rights Group 2010). More generally, however there is little discussion about employment issues, perhaps because employment figures are not disaggregated. In Bahrain, for example, a 2005 ICG report stated that the unemployment rate stood at around 15 per cent, but it was thought that the actual figure was likely to be substantially higher, mainly within the Shi’a community. The report also argues that under-employment and low wages also disproportionately affect the Shi’a communities. However, no empirical evidence is given to support this (ICG 2005).

Control over religious sites and places of worship. In Iran followers of the Baha’i faith do not have the right to assemble officially or to maintain administrative institutions. The Saudi government does not supervise or finance the construction and maintenance of Shi’a mosques, unlike Sunni mosques. Shi’as are thus forced to rely entirely on private contributions to construct their mosques, and must obtain the permission of the state central ministry, the local municipality and the provincial government in order to build a new mosque (MRG 2010). Akbaba (2009) argues that control over places of worship might be exercised due to multiple factors. Places of worship are significant for minorities and they provide means of social mobilization for ethnic groups. Religious leadership, places of worship, and rules/regulations that are respected by the religious community can facilitate the organization of the group and this increases the likelihood of social mobilisation.

It is important to remember that the status of religious minorities varies greatly across the region. In Lebanon, for example, the political system is divided along religious lines. In Syria,
religious minorities (which include Alawites, who are a sect of Shi’a Islam, Ismailis, Shi’a, Druze, Christians, Yezidis and Jews) are allowed to worship freely. Even in Egypt, Christians and Muslims are seen to share a common culture and live as neighbours throughout the country. However, religious tensions exist and acts of prejudice and violence occur. The two most glaring examples of religious discrimination are the treatment of the Bahai’s in Iran and the Shi’as in Saudi Arabia.

Much of the literature cited in this report highlights the challenges of understanding the issues facing religious minorities in the region. These include the following:

**Availability of data.** There is a general lack of reliable, regular and disaggregated population statistics on religious minorities. Often, even when data is available, it is highly disputed. Without such figures, it is difficult to understand the composition of the various minority populations and to evaluate their political, social and economic status.

**The primacy of ‘national’ identity.** Most of the minorities in the Middle East pre-date state formation. The modern Middle East emerged from the break-up of the Ottoman Empire, and is this made up of states whose territorial boundaries are mostly artificial. Thus, either different ethnic/national groups were clubbed together or the same group was dispersed among different states. In order to establish territorial loyalties as well as political legitimacy, most states sought to cultivate a unifying national identity and a sense of what the Akbaba (2009) calls “artificial homogeneity”. This meant that states began to view other identities as divisive, counter-productive, externally sponsored or unpatriotic – and as a potential challenge to the unity of the nation. As a result, in the quest to evolve and strengthen (and often to shore up the legitimacy of authoritarian governments) most of the states tended to ignore, belittle or undermine the existence of ethnic, national and religious minorities. (Kumaraswamy 2003; Akbaba 2009)

**The complex drivers of inequality.** Inequality does not always result from discrimination, but from other factors as well. Most often, it is the consequence of complex interaction of multiple factors:
- Most minority communities live in remote areas lacking in education or wage-labour opportunities.
- A lack of ‘cultural’ capital for taking advantage of opportunities, i.e. where traditional peoples have lived on the periphery of modernizing societies and are drawn into closer contact with more powerful and technologically proficient groups.
- Debilitating cultural or political conflicts
- Pervasive discrimination by the dominant society (Gurr 2000).

This helpdesk report reviews a range of literature on inequality and religious identity – including research studies on the prevalence of religious discrimination, reports on human rights abuses in particular countries, and academic commentary on historical trends in the region, as well as on the challenges of understanding religious discrimination and its links with inequality. Apart from Egypt, North Africa is relatively more religiously homogenous – therefore this report focuses on the Middle East region and Egypt. It should be highlighted that in many Middle Eastern countries, various measures have been taken to ensure the inclusion of minority groups in the political, economic and social spheres, and various examples of religious minorities that have excelled in various areas exist. However, building such a picture requires a more in-depth analysis on a case-by-case basis, and is beyond the scope of this query.

**2. Research Studies**

This article aims to address the lack of data on religious discrimination by studying 24 religious discrimination variables for 62 minorities through event-based coding in western democracies, Asia and the Middle East for the time period of 1990-2004. The first section discusses religious discrimination, ethnicity and religion with specific emphasis on Muslim majority states and the Middle East. The final section presents results on religious discrimination in different regions and states with different majority religions. The article outlines the common argument that political freedom is unfamiliar to Islam, as Islam’s worldview that it is ‘the final and ideal religion’ makes it unthinkable that anyone would legitimately have or desire another religion, and makes the mere presence of other religious communities constitute a major offense to the basic rules of Islam, and Muslim states may become actively defensive about it. However, the data indicate that the Middle East does not have significantly higher average religious discrimination values than Asia. Similarly, even though states with a Muslim majority seem to be less tolerant compared to states with a Christian majority, in states with other majority religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, discrimination against ethnoreligious groups is present as well. However, even though the Middle East and Asia have similar values of average discrimination, the range between minimum and maximum values is broader for the Middle East. In other words, the Middle East has extreme religious discrimination values for ethnoreligious groups such as the Baha’is in Iran (35 out of 48) and Shi’as in Saudi Arabia (30 out of 48). However, many Muslim majority states in Asia employ more discriminatory policies than many in the Middle East.

The study finds that there are two religious restrictions have high frequency in the Middle East. These restrictions are: ‘restrictions on building, leasing, repairing and/or maintaining places of worship’ and ‘arrest, continued detention, or severe official harassment of religious figures, officials, and/or members of religious parties for activities other than proselytizing’.

The author argues that control over places of worship might be exercised due to multiple factors. Places of worship are significant for minorities and they provide means of social mobilization for ethnic groups. Religious leadership, places of worship, and rules/regulations that are respected by the religious community can facilitate the organization of the group and this increases the likelihood of social mobilisation.

The author points that it is important to remember that there are significant overlapping areas between ethnicity and religion as both forms of identity can be ‘intertwined and mutually reinforcing. The author argues:

“Although ethnicity is not always compatible with a framework of religious belief, it is often associated with nationalism, which provides such a framework. Nationalism and religion can function as a social mobilizing force for people. Both nationalism and religion are ideologies of order which guide people’s worldviews, identities, and self-images. While issues of politics, economics, and to a lesser extent culture are often negotiable, religion and nationalism deal with ‘the constitution of being as such.”

The author also highlights that religious discrimination is “a thick concept”, which has multiple dimensions, and therefore data on religious discrimination reflects this. The article the outlines a set of variables which are helpful in unpacking the concept:

- Restrictions on public observance of religious services, festivals and/or holidays, including the Sabbath.
- Restrictions on building, leasing, repairing and/or maintaining places of worship.
- Restrictions on access to places of worship.
- Forced observance of religious laws of another group.
- Restrictions on formal religious organizations.
- Restrictions on the running of religious schools and/or religious education in general.
- Restrictions on the ability to make and/or obtain materials necessary for religious rites, customs, and/or ceremonies.
- Mandatory education in the majority religion (Code as 1 if some but not all students can opt out or take courses in their own religion, or if in public schools only, code as 2 if in all schools, including private schools).
- Arrest, continued detention, or severe official harassment of religious figures, officials, and/or members of religious parties for activities other than proselytizing.
- State surveillance of minority religious activities not placed on the activities of the majority.
- Restrictions on the ability to write, publish, or disseminate religious publications.
- Restrictions on the ability to import religious publications.
- Restrictions on the observance of religious laws concerning personal status, including marriage, divorce, and burial.
- Restrictions on the wearing of religious symbols or clothing. This includes presence or absence of facial hair.
- Restrictions on the ordination of and/or access to clergy. Restrictions on conversion to minority religions.
- Forced conversions.
- Restrictions on proselytizing by permanent residents of state.
- Restrictions on proselytizing by foreign clergy or missionaries. (This includes denial of visas if this denial is specifically aimed at missionaries but not if it is the same type of denial that would be applied to any foreigner.)
- Requirement for minority religions (as opposed to all religions) to register in order to be legal or receive special tax status.
- Custody of children granted to members of majority group solely or in part on the basis of religious affiliation or beliefs.
- Restricted access of minority clergy to hospitals, jails, military bases, and other places a chaplain may be needed in comparison to chaplains of the majority religion.
- Anti-religious propaganda in official or semi-official government publications.
- Restrictions on other types of observance of religious law.

The article points out that in some cases, low religious discrimination levels are found not because the state is tolerant, but because it is not strong enough to enforce discrimination. In some states, when the state does not penetrate the society and regulate social relationships, local authorities, as well as social traditions, might have a stronger impact than the state authority. The geographical size of a country or whether there is a ‘centralized’ or ‘federal’ system of governance can also have a significant role in the variability of local influence. For example, in Afghanistan, Hazaras have not faced restrictions on formal religious organizations or restrictions on the running of religious schools and/or religious education in general during the time period examined. However, religious figures were arrested, and there was severe official harassment of the clergy from 1996 to 2000. Well-established, strong states have the power to control religious organizations and education within their borders when they are willing to do so. However, when the state is weak and does not have the capacity to implement social policies, religious discrimination scores are lower. The study is able to capture this because of the difficulty of developing a coding scheme capable of capturing this kind of discrimination.

The study also does not measure the level of social prejudice, social harassment or violence. Even though a country’s laws might indicate respect for the religious rights of minorities, sometimes cultural differences form major divisions between majority and minority religions. In fact, it may even be the case that strong laws addressing religious discrimination might themselves be indicative of wider social problems in relation to the presence of such
discrimination. In some cases, anti-minority incidents, ranging from graffiti to harassment or firebombing, occur.

A preview is available at Google Books: http://books.google.com/books?id=6hEA_wWpyMC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Peoples+versus+States:+Minorities+at+Risk+in+the+New+Century&hl=en&src=bmrr&ei=Ka3TTxDlyMDbQZrsr3COBw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCkQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=&f=true

In this book, the author surveys the behaviour of 275 politically active ethnic groups during the 1990s and identifies factors that encourage the assertion of ethnic identities. The study finds that there has been a marked decline in ethnic violence since the early 1990s, and attributes this, in part, to many states abandoning strategies of assimilation and control in favour of policies of pluralism and accommodation. Nonetheless, around 90 groups are identified as being at significant risk of conflict and repression in the early 21st century. The Middle East as a region appears to score higher than others on religious discrimination. The study also makes some important points about understanding the links between inequality and group discrimination:

- Inequality does not always result from discrimination, but from other factors as well. Most often, it the consequence of complex interaction of all various factors. These factors are:
  - The fact that most minority communities live in remote areas lacking in education or employment opportunities.
  - A lack of ‘cultural’ capital for taking advantage of opportunities, i.e. where traditional peoples have lived on the periphery of modernising societies and are being drawn into closer contact with more powerful and technologically proficient groups.
  - Debilitating cultural or political conflicts.
  - Pervasive discrimination by the dominant society.

- Group discrimination may be the result of either public policy or social practice, or both. Group discrimination as a matter of social practice is widespread and often persists despite public policies that guarantee freedom from discrimination. So even when minorities are granted protection in law, often when people of minority speech, dress and behaviour interact with members of majority societies, they repeatedly encounter prejudices and social barriers whose net effect is to restrict indigenous people’s access to education, public services and good jobs and to limit their participation in political life.

- Discrimination is often a manifestation of historically rooted cycles of conflict. Most minorities were once autonomous people who were colonized, conquered or otherwise forcefully subordinated by more powerful peoples and states. Many groups resisted subordination; their resistance justified the imposition of restrictions; the restrictions laid the basis for persistent inequalities. Cycles of resistance and repression can be restarted whenever political opportunities arise, as they do, for example, whenever domestic or international power alignments shift. When an ethnic group resumes a dormant rebellion, repression is usually ratcheted up, leaving a residue of new, more discriminatory policies and practices that often provide justification for future rebellions.

This book is available for purchase from Cambridge University Press: http://www.cambridge.org/gb/knowledge/isbn/item1164591/?site_locale=en_GB
This book presents data generated by the Religion and State Project, which analyses government intervention in religion in 175 countries from 1990–2002. The author aims to systematically illustrate the increasing significance of religion as it relates to the state. His research offers a comparative analysis of government intervention in religion among six categories of state — those falling within Western democracies, the former Soviet Bloc, Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America. Fox measures government intervention in religion by looking at levels of religious discrimination, religious regulation, and religious legislation within each state in the dataset and compares findings within and between regions. The book finds that the MENA region scores higher on the RAS measures than any other world region.

Chapter 8 provides an overview of the different models of government involvement in religion in countries across the MENA region. The chapter also highlights that there is little separation of religion and the state in the region. All but three of the region’s governments have an official religion. All states place limitations on at least some minority religions or give preferential treatment to the majority religion. Six states have made at least one minority religion illegal, and Saudi Arabia officially declares all minority religions illegal. While many Middle Eastern constitutions guarantee freedom of religion or belief, they usually include qualifiers such as “in accordance with local traditions and beliefs” or “subject to public policy and morals.” This means that people have freedom of belief as long as it does not contradict Islam and Shari’a law as applied in the state in question. All the MENA states engage in at least two of specific restrictions in minority religions. Most commonly, these include restrictions on proselytizing, which exist in all states except Lebanon and Libya; and restrictions on conversion away from the majority religion.

3. Regional Overviews


http://www.minorityrights.org/download.php?id=850

The report reviews various sources which highlight instances of discrimination against religious minorities. The report is comprehensive and provides information on the treatment on the diverse religious and ethnic minorities in countries across the Middle East, and is thus a good reference. The summary below highlights issues of pervasive discrimination against sizeable religious minorities.

Iran

The Iranian Constitution provides formal guarantees of protection for religious minorities. However, members of the Baha’i faith have long been subjected to discrimination, harassment and arbitrary arrest. In 2009, it was reported that Baha’is continued to be denied access to higher education in 2009, were prohibited from teaching and practising their faith, and are barred from all leadership positions in the government and the military. The report also highlights that Baha’i communal property and sacred sites have repeatedly come under attack. In addition, in 2009 government controlled broadcast and print media carried out negative campaigns against Baha’is, accusing them of establishing ties with Israel (accusations based partly on the fact that the Baha’i world headquarters is located in Israel). In 2008, Ministry of Intelligence officials arbitrarily arrested seven Baha’i community leaders. At the time of writing, their trial had been postponed at least twice, and they were facing...
charges of ‘espionage for Israel’ and ‘propaganda against the system’, both of which carry a possible death penalty. There are additional reports that as of July 2009, there were an additional 30–40 Baha’is in detention because of their religious beliefs. Government officials are also reported to offer Baha’i detainees relief from mistreatment, or release from imprisonment, if they recant their religious affiliation.

Despite Sunni Islam being recognized and accorded formal legal standing in Iran, Iran’s Kurds, for example, most of whom are Sunni Muslims also face significant discrimination – at least in part due to their religious beliefs. Many Sunni Muslims note the absence of a Sunni mosque in Tehran as a prominent example of the government’s disregard for this minority. In addition it is reported that that several Sunni mosques have been demolished in other parts of the country. Sunnis are also under-represented in government-appointed positions in the provinces where they form a majority, such as Kurdistan and Khuzestan. Residents of these provinces have also reported discrimination and lack of resources, however it is difficult to determine whether this discrimination is based on religion, ethnicity or both. Smaller religious communities, such as Mandaeans-Sabeans and Sufis, have faced repression and harassment by authorities similar to that faced by other religious minorities.

Iraq

The majority of the population in Iraq is Muslim, of which 60–65 per cent are Shi’a Muslims. Islam is recognized as the state’s official religion, but the Constitution guarantees the right to religious freedom of Iraq’s religious minorities, namely the Christians, Mandaeans-Sabeans and Yazidis. While efforts to restore security and stability have curbed sectarian violence to some extent, there are reports that religious and ethnic minorities continue to be at risk of attacks mainly orchestrated by al-Qaeda in Iraq or, in some cases, by Shi’a extremists. USCIRF 2009 reported that numerous women, including non-Muslims, had opted to wear the hijab for security purposes after being harassed for not doing so. Shopkeepers were also targeted for selling alcohol or providing services considered to be inconsistent with Islam; this has particularly affected Christian and Yazidi minorities. The ongoing targeting of Mandaeans-Sabeans by Islamic militias - including cases of rape, kidnapping and forced conversion – has also been documented.

A 2009 Human Rights Watch report found that religious minorities in northern Iraq had become caught in the middle of a struggle for land and resources between Arabs on the one hand, and leaders of the semiautonomous Kurdish Regional Government. According to the report, the KRG has been involved in arbitrarily arresting, detaining and intimidating anyone resistant to its plans. These plans were met with stiff opposition from the local Sunni Arabs, and prompted extremist elements amongst this group to take it out on the Chaldo-Assyrian Christian, Yazidi and Shabak communities - labelling them ‘crusaders’, ‘devil-worshipers’ and ‘infidels’. According to USCIRF 2009, Christians and Yazidis also claimed that the KRG confiscated their property without compensation and that it had begun building settlements on their land. KRG officials, for their part, continued to deny any allegations of wrongdoing, blaming the problem entirely on Sunni Arab extremist groups.

Lebanon

Lebanon’s 15-year civil war ended in 1989. However Lebanon continues to be divided along sectarian lines. Generally, Lebanon’s government respects religious rights, and the Constitution protects religious freedom and the freedom to practise all religious rites, provided that the public order is not disturbed. According to a recent demographic study the two largest Muslim groups are Sunnis (28 per cent of the population) and Shi’as (28 per cent of the population). There is also a smaller community of Alawites and Ismailis. Christians make up over a third of the population (21.5 per cent are Maronites, 8 per cent are Greek Orthodox and another 4 per cent are Greek Catholic), while Druze amount to 5 per cent. Lebanon is also home to a declining Jewish minority, which is now estimated to have just 100–150 members. Israel’s military assault on the Gaza Strip, along with anti-Israeli literature published and distributed mainly by Hezbollah, have served to blur the lines between Israelis
and Jews. A Jewish-owned cemetery in downtown Beirut has been subject to continued acts of vandalism. Government documents referring to Jewish Lebanese citizens as ‘Israelis’ have added to this confusion, and to the increasing level of hostility towards Lebanon’s Jewish community. The government does not, however, require citizens’ religious affiliations to be indicated on their passports. However smaller minorities, such as Baha’is, Buddhists and Hindus, remain unrecognized as religious groups and have to register as part of another recognized religious organization in order to marry, divorce or inherit property in Lebanon.

**Saudi Arabia**

In Saudi Arabia, freedom of religion is not explicitly protected under the law and is severely restricted in practice. Non-Muslims and many Muslims who have not adopted Wahhabism are only allowed to practise their religion in private. Their right to worship is not, however, defined in law and it is not always respected. The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) - the ‘religious police’ – which is responsible for monitoring social behaviour and enforcing Wahhabi principles of morality, continues to conduct raids on private non-Muslim religious gatherings. The CPVPV has also been reported to harass women, especially foreign Muslim women, for not abiding by the strict dress code, and particularly for not wearing a headscarf. Further, Muslims who do not adhere to the government’s interpretation of Sharia face significant discrimination. The Shi’a minority is worst affected, and face systematic discrimination in education, employment, political representation, religious practice and the media. The government has also been reported to discriminate against Shi’as in the selection process for students, professors and administrators at public universities, and Shi’a students have experienced intolerance within the primary and secondary school systems. There are also few Shi’as in high-level positions in government-owned companies or in government agencies. Shi’as are also under-represented in senior government positions.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs Endowments Da’wa and Guidance (MOIA) does not supervise or finance the construction and maintenance of Shi’a mosques, unlike Sunni mosques. Shi’as are thus forced to rely entirely on private contributions to construct their mosques. Shi’as are also required to obtain the permission of the MOIA, the local municipality and the provincial government in order to build a new mosque while the Sunnis do not need the government’s approval to construct new mosques. The government was reported to have denied Shi’as permission to construct or register community centres. In 2009, hostility towards Saudi Arabia’s Shi’a community led to clashes between Shi’as and the CPVPV in Medina. The clashes led to a wave of unrest, and the arrest of dozens of people. To restore calm, King Abdullah released all the detainees but the situation remains volatile.

**Syria**

Although the government allows Syria’s various religious minority groups (which include Alawites, who are a sect of Shi’a Islam, Ismailis, Shi’a, Druze, Christians, Yezidis and Jews) to worship freely, it closely monitors the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist movements. Since an armed attack at a Shi’a shrine in September 2008 left 17 people dead, the government has also focused more closely on Islamist groups.

### 4. Country Cases

#### SAUDI ARABIA


This report documents the recent rise in sectarian tensions in Saudi Arabia, as well as the underlying processes of discrimination and hostility against the country’s Shi’a population, which are manifested by the Saudi state as well as the Sunni community. The sectarian
divide, the author argues, stems not just from religious intolerance but also from political tensions arising from the increased profile of Shi’a politics in the broader region – for example the activities of Shi’a Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shi’a dominance over Iraqi politics, and fears about the influence of Shi’a-dominated Iran over the Shi’a populations of the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia.

State-led discrimination includes a justice system based on religious law that follows only Sunni interpretations, and an education system that excludes Shi’a from teaching religion, and Shi’a children from learning about Shi’ism. Discrimination against Shi’a in the administration of justice is built into the justice system. There are no Shi’a judges except for seven judges serving three Shi’a courts – of which two are first instance courts and one an appeals court. Their jurisdiction is limited to personal status, inheritance, and endowments cases. In 2005, the limited jurisdiction of the two Shi’a first instance courts was further curtailed by a royal decree, giving Sunni courts the authority to supervise the Shi’a courts and take up cases pending there. In September 2007, fearing that Sunni courts would use this provision to take over cases previously under Shi’a court jurisdiction on issues such as land inheritance, the Shi’a judges announced they would resign should amendments not be introduced. Following a brief period of suspension of work, they resumed their work without achieving any concessions. In other provisions of the new decree, only the regular Sunni courts would have jurisdiction over cases involving a dispute between two parties, and if one of the parties even in a non-disputed case was not a Shi’a, the Sunni courts would automatically have jurisdiction.

State discrimination against the Shi’a stems from the official Wahhabi creed, which influences the state’s education system, state sponsorship of official religious worship, and a judiciary which draws its legitimacy from Sunni Wahhabism. The author argues: “It is this umbrella of religiously legitimized or religion-infused state institutions under which prominent Islamic thinkers and clerics, often state officials, continue to propagate incitement to hostility against the Shia” (p.12). The Saudi government tolerates such speech, sometimes even by silencing its critics: in 2008 the Shi’a cleric Shaikh Tawfiq al-‘Amir was arrested after he spoke out in a sermon against a statement signed by prominent Saudi Wahhabi clerics, in which they called the “Shia sect an evil among the sects of the Islamic nation, and the greatest enemy and deceivers of the Sunni people” (pp.12-13). The report states: “These repressive measures have fuelled a lingering sentiment of discrimination among Shia. They observe how the government tolerates inflammatory and intolerant statements by Saudi Sunni clerics directed toward the Shia, while preventing the Shia even from simple acts of religious worship such as praying together” (p.2).

These state practices of discrimination and exclusion have also created a sense of unequal citizenship. Few Shi’a manage to enroll in military training colleges or serve in the army. There are no Shi’a ministers or high-ranking diplomats. The extent this is due to overt discrimination by the government, or a lack of Shi’a candidates because of their low expectations of getting government employment, or both, is unclear.

The report also highlights the recent rise in sectarian tensions in Saudi Arabia, which were set off by clashes between Shi’a pilgrims and religious police in Medina in February 2009, followed by arbitrary arrests of Shi’a protesters in the Eastern Province in March. The closing of private Shi’a halls for communal prayer in Khobar, which began in July 2008 and the arrests of Shi’a religious and community leaders in Ahsa in 2009 also have contributed to the tensions. Since the 2009 events, authorities have intensified ongoing restrictions on Shi’a communal life. They have also arrested and threatened the owners of Shi’a private communal prayer halls in Khobar to extract pledges to close them. The report also notes that since 2001 the authorities in Ahsa have imposed extrajudicial prison sentences on leaders of communal prayers and on persons selling articles used in Shi’a religious ceremonies such as ‘Ashura’ and Qarqi’un, which remain prohibited in many Saudi Shi’a communities.
This report argues that religious freedom conditions in Egypt had deteriorated under the Mubarak regime over the past several years, particularly for religious minorities, who are subject to serious problems of discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations, particularly Coptic Orthodox Christians - as well as disfavoured Muslims, remain widespread in Egypt. Despite initial efforts by the transitional government to dismantle the state security apparatus, the state of emergency remains in place and discriminatory laws and policies continue to have a negative impact on freedom of religion or belief in Egypt. Since February 11, the lack of adequate security in the streets has contributed to lawlessness in parts of the country, particularly in Upper Egypt.

**Violence.** During the past year, attacks on minorities, particularly Coptic Christians, including by Islamist militants imposing extra-judicial punishments, have risen and have resulted in deaths and injuries. The government's failure to convict those responsible - including two of the three alleged perpetrators in the January 2010 Naga Hammadi attack (when 8 Coptic Christians were gunned down and killed when leaving a cathedral after celebrating midnight Christmas Mass in the city of Nag Hammadi) - has fostered a climate of impunity, making further violence more likely. Over the past year, military and security forces have reportedly used excessive force and live ammunition targeting Christian places of worship and Christian demonstrators.

**Political and social discrimination.** In addition to violence, Christians face official and societal discrimination. Although Egyptian government officials claim that there is no law or policy that prevents Christians from holding senior positions, the Coptic Orthodox Christian community faces de facto discrimination in appointments to high-level government and military posts. There are only a handful of Christians in the upper ranks of the security services and armed forces. There is one Christian governor out of 28, one elected Member of Parliament out of 454 seats, no known university presidents or deans, and very few legislators or judges. According to the State Department, public university training programs for Arabic-language teachers exclude non-Muslims because the curriculum involves the study of the Koran. Under Egyptian law, Muslim men can marry Christian women but Muslim women are prohibited from marrying Christian men. Contacts between such persons are often a source of tension between Muslim and Christian communities in Egypt.

The report also notes that implementation of previous court rulings by the government - related to granting official identity documents to Baha'is and changing religious affiliation on identity documents for Christian converts - had continued to lag. In addition, the government had not responded adequately to combat widespread anti-Semitism in the government-controlled media. Based on these concerns, USCIRF recommends in 2011, for the first time, that Egypt be designated as a "country of particular concern" - for systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. Prior to this year's recommendation, Egypt had been on USCIRF's Watch list since 2002.

This article is available for purchase from Informaworld:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a907366132~db=all~order=page

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the plight of Copts in Egyptian politics among human rights networks, religious activists and scholars. In this article the author argues that while Copts face persistent discrimination in the form of the preferential status of
Muslims in government and the military as well as limitations on their rights in areas such as church construction and conversion as befits the tradition of their status as dhimmis (‘protected peoples’) under Islam, they are tolerated and occasionally supported by the government at the level of civil society.

Mubarak’s Egypt is a relatively liberal regime which nonetheless retains relatively tight controls on civil society activity so as to pre-empt political activism, particularly that arising from Islamist or secular rivals to the regime. In spite of the constraints of Egyptian politics and their subordinate status as dhimmis under Islam, Copts have managed to create a wide edifice of civil society in Mubarak’s Egypt. The explanations for this reside the internal strength and vibrancy of Coptic institutions themselves and in the non-threatening and moderating influence displayed by Coptic civil society.

One of the key aspects of the Coptic issue in Egyptian politics is that the Copts are caught between the Islamists and the state.

IRAQ

Lalani, M. 2010, Still Targeted: Continued Persecution of Iraq’s Minorities, Minority Rights Group International, UK
http://www.minorityrights.org/download.php?id=834

The Iraqi population is extremely diverse in terms of ethnicity and religion. In addition to the three larger groups – Kurds, Shı’a Arabs and Sunni Arabs – there exist communities of Armenians, Bahá’ís, Black Iraqis, Chaldo-Assyrians, Circassians, Faili Kurds, Jews, Kaka’i, Palestinians, Roma, Sabian Mandaeans, Shabaks, Turkmen and Yazidis. This report addresses the political, social, economic and cultural status of Iraq’s minorities in 2009 and early 2010, focusing on Christians, Faili Kurds, Shabaks, Turkmen and Yazidis, in the Kurdistan Region; Kirkuk and Nineveh provinces in the north; and Baghdad, given the concentration of minorities in these areas. The report finds that although the overall security situation in Iraq has gradually improved, the conditions for minority communities remains extremely difficult.

Violence and intimidation. In 2009 and early 2010, minorities were subject to frequent bombings, torture, arbitrary arrest, intimidation and displacement. Although little disaggregated data is available for 2009 on minority women, research suggests that minority women and children represent the most vulnerable section of Iraqi society. The ongoing threat of violence has seriously restricted minority women’s freedom of movement and can inhibit their right to express their religious and ethnic identity through the way they dress. These limitations in turn restrict their access to health services, education and employment.

Political representation. There are also issues around the political representation of minority communities at the national and provincial levels. In September 2008, the long-awaited Provincial Elections Law was passed by the government, but the draft Article 50, which guaranteed a number of seats for minorities in provincial (governorate) councils, had been removed. There were calls from the UN and others for the article to be reinstated, and the UN proposed that 12 seats for minorities be set aside in Baghdad, Basra and Nineveh provincial councils. The omission of the Article prompted protests by minority groups in Iraq. In November, an amendment was passed that guaranteed six seats out of 440 for religious and ethnic minorities. The Christian representative in the Iraqi parliament and General Secretary of the Assyrian Democratic Movement, Younadam Kanna, said, ‘It is a degrading decision for the unique minorities of this country. It does not serve public interest and we consider it a major insult for all minorities in Iraq.’ (p.22)

In the run-up to the national elections that took place on 7 March 2010, ethnic and religious minorities, particularly Christians, were targeted. Community leaders have claimed that these
attacks were intended to discourage minorities from voting. Out of the eight seats reserved for minorities, Christians received five and the remaining reserved seats were divided between Sabian Mandaeans, Shabaks and Yazidis. However, other minorities such as black Iraqis - who number between 1.5 and 2 million - were not guaranteed any seats in the national elections. Black Iraqis, have sought political representation in an attempt to advocate more effectively for their rights, and are resentful about not being treated in the same way as other minorities in the country.

Displacement. While levels of displacement in Iraq have stabilized, the report highlights that an estimated 2.8 million people remain displaced. Figures for November 2009 show that, for example, of the several thousand Christian families originally from Baghdad, only 60 currently reside there now, with the remainder having fled mostly due to attacks and intimidation.

The report highlights property restitution following displacement as an issue that needs urgent attention. Though certain procedures and bodies are in place to deal with the issue, they have so far largely failed to deal with land and property disputes, including complaints of property destruction. For minorities, the difficulties can be compounded. A majority of IDPs surveyed in 2009 reported not seeking assistance from relevant institutions, as they lacked required documents, mistrusted state institutions, could not afford the required fees, or feared retribution. MRG remains extremely concerned about the ongoing climate of impunity that exists in relation to attacks on minorities. Indeed, despite the extent of the atrocities committed against minorities in recent years, the victims see little evidence of investigations to identify and prosecute the perpetrators of these attacks. Even in cases where investigations have been conducted, they have generally been limited to those related to Christians and the conclusions, if any, have not been made public.

Access to services. There are some reports that Arab IDPs face linguistic barriers that prevent them from seeking medical care until their health conditions become critical and often untreatable. In addition, minorities have also experienced discrimination and hostility from health practitioners in Kurdistan, Nineveh, Kirkuk and Baghdad. Responses varied significantly among minorities, ranging from 14 per cent of Armenians to 84 per cent of Shabaks.

There were also reports in 2009 of religion-based employment discrimination by the government, in which some ministries were reported to hire and favour those employees who conformed to the religious preference of the respective minister. Although the extent of this problem is unknown, there is a marked perception about the existence of discrimination on the basis of religion or ethnicity with regard to appointments in Iraqi state institutions, including appointment to high administrative positions within state institutions. In the Kurdistan Region, human rights monitors have reported that party affiliation plays a role in determining who is employed in state institutions and ministries. Minorities who are not affiliated to one of the Kurdish political parties are reportedly discriminated against when applying for such jobs. Black Iraqis have also complained bitterly of employment discrimination, particularly when it comes to jobs in state institutions.

IRAN

http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/87362.pdf

This report outlines the discriminatory practices against religious minorities in Iran. It first outlines the religious make-up of Iran’s population. Approximately 89% of Iranians are Shi’a Muslims. The rest, including Baha’i, Christian, Zoroastrian, Sunni Muslim, and Jewish
communities, constitute around 11%. Despite their popularity in the country, the total membership of Sufi groups in the population is unclear due to a lack of reliable statistics. Even though the constitution guarantees the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, in reality, the central government emphasises the Persian and Shiite nature of the state. Under the current Constitution, certain religious minorities such as Zoroastrians, Christians, Jews, and Sunni Muslims are recognized. Followers of the Baha’i faith, who form a sizable group among religious minorities in Iran, are not recognized by the Constitution. Reportedly, all religious minorities suffer varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing.

There are an estimated 300,000-350,000 Baha’is throughout the country. Iranian Baha’is are not allowed to teach or practice their faith or to maintain links with co-religionists abroad. The government continues to imprison and detain Baha’is based on their religious beliefs. The state also considers Baha’is apostates because of their claim to a religious revelation subsequent to that of the Prophet Mohammed. Reportedly, the Baha’i faith is defined by the government as a political ‘sect’ linked to the Pahlavi monarchy and, therefore, as counter-revolutionary. Unlike the recognized religious minorities who are allowed by the government to establish community centres and certain cultural, social, sports, or charitable associations, since 1983, followers of the Baha’i faith do not have the right to assemble officially or to maintain administrative institutions. The property rights of Baha’is are generally also disregarded. Properties belonging to the Baha’i community as a whole, such as places of worship and graveyards, were confiscated by the government in the years after the 1979 revolution and, in some cases, defiled. The government’s seizure of Baha’i personal property, as well as its denial of access to education and employment, continue to erode the economic base of the Baha’i community.


This article is available for purchase from: http://www.springerlink.com/content/l412t5t76u5l6672/

This article explores issues related to educational equity with respect to gender, socioeconomic status, and religious and ethnic minorities among primary and secondary school pupils of Iran. The article begins by providing an overview of Iran’s education system and the current policies that directly affect girls, the poor, and ethnic and religious minorities. It then focuses on Iran’s primary school practices, curricula, and textbooks and its treatment of these groups.

Iran recognizes Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, and has sponsored textbooks specifically for these faiths called Teaching of the Sacred Religions and Ethics for the Religious Minorities. The Ministry of Education produces the textbooks for the schools and teachers and religious leaders of these minority religions in the production of the religious texts. The author argues: “Curiously, there is a place in the curriculum for approved religious minorities to participate in a special kind of religious program, but the content they learn is general enough that it does not foster a particular religion; rather, it fosters religious belief in general.”

However, religious minorities are virtually ignored within the standard educational content, and standard textbooks used by the majority school-going population, namely, the Shi’a Muslims give almost no attention to the fact that religious or ethnic minorities are part of the Iranian national population. When they do, the references are usually negative in character. For example, textbooks in Iran include anti-Semitic remarks relating to Middle Eastern history or religion. These are made in the context of Israel, but they pointedly degrade the Jewish tradition. The purpose of textbooks is also seen as being to inculcate into each child the sacredness and attributes of an Islamic person. Thus, women always appear in the texts wearing a veil or scarf. Men do not wear a tie, which is a mark of a Western man, and is
considered forbidden attire. Furthermore, pictures always display marks of Islam, including the Koran, religious leaders, a mosque, or some other symbol.

Overall, the study concludes that one of the primary goals of basic education in Iran is a forced insistence on a homogeneous, unified national and Shi’a Muslim identity. The author argues: “...educational inequity results from a disregard of demographic realities and the range of ideological and cultural diversity that exists in present-day Iran. Instead, we see its diversity exchanged for lopsided depictions of homogeneity, absence of entire minority groups, and cookie-cutter ideological representations”.

BHARAIN

International Crisis Group, 2005, ‘Bahrain’s Sectarian Challenge’, ICG, Brussels
http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Bahrain/Bahrain%20Sectarian%20Challenge.ashx

This report argues that although the Shi’as make up an estimated 70 per cent of Bahrain’s native population, they feel increasingly politically marginalised and socially disadvantaged. A particularly difficult issue is widespread suspicion among officials and Sunnis regarding their national loyalty and ties to the Shi’a in Iraq and Iran. In addition, recently, the government has resorted to aggressive police tactics and authoritarian measures to maintain order.

Section II.B of the report looks at the ways in which the Shi’a community is discriminated against:

- **Institutionalising Discrimination.** One issue is the manipulation of parliamentary electoral districts to ensure majority Sunni representation despite their minority status. As a result, the sparsely populated but largely Sunni southern governorate has been allocated six seats, while the heavily populated and overwhelmingly Shi’a northern governorate has been allocated nine, would seem to justify. The issue of electoral districting was important in the decision by the four opposition societies to boycott the October 2002 elections. Because the boycotting groups were mainly Shi’a, Sunnis won 27 of the 40 seats.

- **Political Naturalisation.** It is alleged that the government is granting citizenship to non-Bahrainis - mainly Sunni Arabs from around the region – to mitigate Shiite dominance. There are no published figures but it has been suggested that as many as 50,000 to 60,000 have been given citizenship in this way.

- **Government Employment.** Shi’as hold a disproportionately small number of jobs within the state-controlled public sector, which is the largest employer in Bahrain. This is particularly acute at more senior levels which are dominated by the ruling family, and in most sensitive sectors, like the Bahrain Defence Forces (BDF) and the Ministry of Interior. According to a 2003 report filed by the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR): out of 572 high-ranking public posts covered by the report, Shiite citizens held 101 jobs only, representing 18 per cent of the total. However, the report corroborated claims that Shi’a dominated some ministries, such as the Ministry of Industry, in which they reportedly hold 50 per cent of senior posts. The vast majority of Shiite applicants for positions in the security forces, however, continue to be denied.

- **Segregation.** Most Shi’as live in poor villages on the outskirts of Manama, in cramped and poor conditions. A large residential area on the island, Riffa’ has been off-limits since the mid-1990s. Western Riffa’ is reserved for the royal family, while the east is open only to Sunnis. Reportedly, Shi’as are not only forbidden from living in the area, but are also not permitted to own land there. Shi’a view residential discrimination is experienced as particularly insensitive and view it as evidence of what many believe to be the royal family’s "looting" of national resources.
http://www.hrw.org/node/88201

This report is based on interviews with former detainees and a review of forensic medical reports and court documents. It concludes that since the end of 2007, The Bahraini government has resorted to torturing security suspects with the purpose of securing confessions. The report finds that most of those detained were young men from the majority Shi'a Muslim community whose street protests against alleged discrimination by the Sunni-dominated government had regularly led to confrontations with security forces. At court hearings many of those detained claimed that they had been tortured. Where government doctors were instructed to conduct medical examinations of the detainees, they also found evidence of injuries consistent with their allegations of torture.

Approximately 60 percent of Bahrain’s population is Shi’a. However the ruling Al Khalifa family is Sunni, and Sunnis maintain political control, including of the security forces. The Shi’a-Sunni sectarian divide is a major element in the country’s political dynamic. Shi’a communities believe that they have been largely excluded from holding senior positions, particularly within the political and security systems. While, the government disputes claims of systemic discrimination, it is also openly suspicious about strength of national loyalties of many Shi’a. It is also important note, that the internal security services are comprised of a high proportion of non-Bahrainis - Jordanians, Egyptians, and other Arabs as well as Pakistanis—almost all of whom are Sunni. Also, the Shi’a opposition claims that Bahraini authorities recruit these (and other) non-Bahraini Sunnis to become citizens in an effort to alter the sectarian population balance.

The press articles below highlight recent events in Bahrain, and the government’s crackdown against Shi’a protestors.

Abdo, G., ‘Shia in Bahrain: Repression and Regression’, Al-Jazeera, May 1, 2011

http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/may/22/bahrain-change-view-human-rights

Cockburn, P., 'Bahrain is trying to drown the protests in Shia blood', The Independent, May 15, 2011
http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/patrick-cockburn-bahrain-is-trying-to-drown-the-protests-in-shia-blood-2284199.html

5. Academic commentary

Kumaraswamy, P. R., 2003, ‘Problems of Studying Minorities in the Middle East’, Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, Volume 2, Number 2
http://www.alternativesjournal.net/volume2/number2/kumar.htm

This article aims to outline and discuss some of the issues around understanding the issues for religious minorities in the Middle East. The author starts off by offering a classification of contemporary Middle Eastern minorities into five broad categories which are as follows:

- Religious minorities: Jews, Christian dominations such as Copts, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Maronites, Latins and Protestants, Israeli Arabs
• Ethnic/national minorities: Kurds, Druze, Armenians, Circassians, Assyrians, animists of southern Sudan, Berbers, Turkomans, Israeli Arabs
• Heterodox Islamic minorities: Alawis, Druze, Ahmadis, Ismailis, Bahais
• Political minorities: Shias in Saudi Arabia, Sunnis in Iran
• Majoritarian minorities: Shias in Iraq and Bahrain, Sunnis in Syria and Palestinians in Jordan (although demographically these groups are in a majority, they are marginalized politically and do not have power commensurate to their numerical strength.)

The article then goes on to outline various other barriers to understanding the issues facing minorities in the region:

Denial. This occurs at the theological level and political level. At the theological level, there is a powerful trend among contemporary Islamic scholars to conceive of and portray the treatment of minorities living in Islamic states as benevolent and tolerant. In particular this refers to the concept of Dhimmi (the concept by which non-Muslims who are a people of the book – i.e. Jews and Christians - are defined as tolerated, but subordinated, religious people, and are thus to be given protection and security, religious autonomy and local cultural independence.) However “(i)it is essential to distinguish tolerance from equality. Religious tolerance, personal protection and conditional communal security of the Dhimmi in return for their allegiance to the Islamic rule are very different from equality”. At the national-political level – and often as a result of issues around the mistreatment of minorities – Middle Eastern states often adopt an official policy of denial, arguing that all citizens have only one identity – the national identity. For example, the Turkish authorities long refused to recognize the Kurds as a distinct people – portraying them as ‘mountain people’ - and proscribed the usage of Kurdish language. Such attitudes of denial prevent any serious discussion in the Middle East concerning its minorities.

History. Most of the minorities in the Middle East pre-date state formation. The modern Middle East emerged from the break-up of the Ottoman Empire, and is this made up of states whose territorial boundaries are mostly artificial, and which undermined regional homogeneity. Thus, either different ethnic/national groups were clubbed together or the same group was dispersed among different states. Furthermore, driven by the need to establish territorial loyalties as well political legitimacy, most states sought to cultivate a unifying national identity and a sense of what the author calls ‘artificial homogeneity’. They thus viewed any other identities as divisive, counter-productive, externally sponsored or unpatriotic. Internal diversity came to be viewed as a divisive factor and a ‘potential challenge’ to the unity of the nation. In their desire to evolve national identities based on arbitrarily drawn territorial boundaries, most of the states tended to ignore, belittle or undermine the existence of ethnic, national and religious minorities.

Lack of data. Reliable and periodic population statistics about minorities in the region is a major problem. Mostly, the figures are either not available or are highly disputed. Without them, it is difficult to understand the composition of minority populations and to assess their political, economic and social status. In some countries the issue of data is a highly sensitive political issue. There are various examples of this:

• Lebanon, one of the most heterogeneous countries of the Middle East, conducted its last census in 1932, and found that Christians constituted about 53 percent of the population, while the Muslims and Druze made up 43 percent. This census formed the basis of the 1943 power sharing arrangement that was developed at the time of Lebanese independence. Over the years, the population has shifted in favour of Muslims – who now constitute more than 60 per cent of the population. However Maronite Christians have vehemently opposed plans for a new census, seeing it as a political move to unseat them from power.
In **Saudi Arabia**, the government is sensitive about discussion on the Shi’a community, who live predominantly in the oil rich Eastern Province and are seen as a security and ideological threat. One aspect of this are conflicting estimates about the numbers of Shi’a: conservative estimates put the figure at 275,000, however the article cites Shi’a claims that they number as many as 2.5 million, thus representing 12.5-25 percent of the total population.

In **Egypt**, official estimates put the Copts at about 3.3 million or 5.6 percent of the total Egyptian population. Copts suggest a much higher figure of 11 million or 18 percent of the total population.

The government of **Jordan** rarely provides accurate estimates of its citizens of Palestinian origin - who are believed to be the majority. For example, in December 2001, the Jordanian population was estimated at 5,182,000 and out of this, the Palestinian Authority lists as much as 2,560,000 as Palestinians. The government however views any suggestion of Palestinian majority as a concerted effort to undermine the Jordanian state and its stability.

**Securitisation.** Restrictions on and discrimination against minorities are often justified through a security prism. In Israel for example, Israeli Arabs are often seen as posing a security threat to Israel’s Jewish identity. Arab demands for equality and non-discrimination are often seen as an indirect attempt to undermine the state-building exercise. As a result, national debates such as territorial concession vis-à-vis neighboring Arab states are often accompanied by a demand for restrictions upon if not exclusion of, its Arab citizens. Likewise, discussion about Palestinian statehood has led to new debates about Palestinian irredentism and its implications for Israel as well as Jordan. The treatment of Dhimmi in Islamic states is also justified in terms of security considerations. The growing Islamization process only complicated the situation further.


This article is available for purchase from JSTOR: [http://www.jstor.org/pss/20069749](http://www.jstor.org/pss/20069749)

This article aims to compare the treatment of women and religious minorities in the Middle East region. Based on Special Rapporteur reports, it considers the human rights situation of religious minorities living in the Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East, in terms of discrimination faced by individuals and communities. For individuals, these include:

- violations of physical integrity and the right to life;
- denial of citizenship;
- denial of certain civil rights, such as registration of marriages or births;
- discrimination in the judiciary;
- exclusion from employment in certain government sectors, particularly from the army, judiciary and senior educational posts;
- prohibition of the marriage of a non-Muslim man with a Muslim woman;
- restrictions on freedom of movement, particularly regarding leaving the country; and
- severe restrictions on missionary activities.

Writing about political exclusion, the author argues that while all countries can point to isolated examples of religious minority representatives in senior high-profile posts, generally the space given to religious minorities in Muslim countries for participation in the political life at all levels has been severely limited in most Middle Eastern countries. In addition the author argues: "(T)okenism is not a signifier of the equal engagement and acceptance of communities into the mainstream. In fact, tokenism is precise proof of the minority community’s absence from the mainstream." (p. 723)
The human rights challenges that affect non-Muslim religious minorities as communities include:

- denial of recognition as a religious community and a resulting denial of any kind of political representation;
- denial of education;
- difficulties faced in attempting to run separate educational facilities (minority religious schools) or in having their religion taught in public schools;
- restrictions on freedom of worship or other religious activities;
- confiscation or threats on religious property, land, and places of worship;
- interference with the election of leaders and representatives; and
- denial of freedom of expression.

The author argues that "Islam" continues to be used in the Middle East as a legitimating factor behind repressive policies against religious minorities. The vulnerability of minorities is increased during times of economic and political flux, when the underlying unease with the presence of non-Muslims within Muslim states becomes particularly pronounced. "This indicates either a fundamental discomfort with the non Muslim presence or their propensity for being exploited in order to provide distraction in times of trouble."

The author also points to the internalization of difference that has occurred as a result of the historical and systematic marginalization of minorities: "Religious minorities may have long concluded that Islam does not possess the willingness or capacity to uphold their rights. In doing so, minorities have perpetuated the reification of "essential differences" and fed into the hands of those who are politically manipulating religious difference to reinforce their own popularity. Such a conclusion contributes to entrenching the gap between Muslim and non-Muslim. The religious minorities have become locked in a situation of being outsiders to the religious symbolism and interpretation under which they are presently being repressed, but which also holds the most potent key to guaranteeing their rights and status." (p. 729)

This article is available for purchase from: http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/mei/mei/2010/00000064/00000004/art00002

This article offers a historical perspective on the evolving situation of Shi'as in Iraq and Lebanon. It is commonly agree that the Shi'a community, has historically faced discriminatory policies propounded by the ruling class in Iraq, where Shi'as are a majority and Lebanon. Until the collapse of the Ba'ath regime in 2003, the Iraqi state was identified mainly with Sunni hegemony - the major political and military ranks were reserved for the Sunni minority. Similarly, in Lebanon, during the pre-civil war period, Shi'as were vastly neglected and banned from holding high governmental positions.

In Iraq, subsequent regimes have damaged Shi'a social institutions and financial interests, and discriminatory policies resulted in under-representation in the government administrations This lack of proportionality and representation of the nation's majority population has led to continual complaints by Shi'a communities of injustice in representation in government administration and in other issues.

In fact, the repression of the Shi'a community during the Ba'ath regime was considered unprecedented in modern Iraq, even according to Sunni writers. This policy was increasingly directed against the Shi'a clergy of Najaf, and the Ba'ath regime's measures intensified after the Iranian revolution of 1979. These measures included prohibiting Shi'a rituals and practices, limiting the power of Shi'a clergy, the deportation of tens of thousand of Shi'a civilians to Iran, and the execution and assassination of many Shi'a clerics, including leading
religious figures. According to conservative estimates, 150,000 Shi‘a were deported, and 41 Shi‘a clerics were executed between 1970 and 1981; the most prominent among them was Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, who was executed along with his sister in April 1980. Sadr’s execution was the first execution of a Grand Ayatollah in the modern history of the Middle East. The assassination policy was resumed after the 1991 Shi‘a uprising and targeted senior clerics, during which time the regime’s brutality reached its height.

Despite the different political circumstances in Iraq and Lebanon, the Shi‘a were equally marginalized in Lebanon by the French and Lebanese authorities alike and likewise fought against entrenched discrimination and exclusion. The author argues that the fundamental grievance of Shi‘a lay in the fact that the overwhelming majority of the Shi‘a population lived in the least-developed, poor, rural regions of Lebanon and were therefore doubly disadvantaged by poverty and discrimination. The Shi‘a community in the south faced the additional problem of Israeli retaliation operations against Palestinian guerrillas, which by the early 1970s had intensified and caused vast destruction of Shi‘a villages, and led to the widespread displacement, mainly to the capital Beirut. In 1971, nearly half of the Lebanese Shi‘ite population was concentrated in the greater Beirut area, and many were galvanized by the quest for a better future.

Despite granting the Shi‘ites status as a recognized religious community with its own autonomous juridical system, neither authority made any effort to integrate the Shi‘a community into government structure or public life. According the author, denial of proportional and equitable access to the civil service system forms a major part of the Shi‘a’s chronic grievances against the Lebanese establishment. In 1934, despite constituting the third largest community within Lebanon, only one Shi‘a held a high civil position out of a total of 27. In 1966, newspaper reports highlighted the weak representation of the Shi‘a in the civil service. According to these reports, Shi‘ite’s occupied only 13.7% of governmental posts while their population had swelled to the largest it had ever been in Lebanon. In 1962, about 9% of the higher governmental positions (class I) were held by the Druze community, which constituted 6% of the Lebanese population, while only 3% of class I posts were held by the Shi‘ites, who constituted 19.2% of the population. Similar figures were revealed for class II and III governmental posts in the late 1960s.

6. Additional information

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Dr. Maha Ahmed Ghalwash, The British University in Egypt
Dr Nazila Ghannea, University of Oxford
Dr. Harry Hagopian, Independent expert
Professor Jeffrey Haynes, London Metropolitan University
Dr Rana Jawad, University of Kent
Samia Khan, Social Development Direct
Anh Nga Longva, University of Bergen
Anis Salem, Egyptian civil society expert
Dr Jillian Schwedler, University of Massachusetts
Randa Serhan, American University Beirut
Max Weiss, Princeton University
Websites visited

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