

# Middle East and North Africa

Preti Taneja

**I**n 2010, religious and ethnic minorities across the Middle East and North Africa remained disproportionately affected by ongoing conflict, political turmoil and state-sanctioned repression of their rights.

Though Iraqi parliamentary elections were held in March 2010, the government was not formed until November. In this political vacuum, which also saw the end of US combat operations in the country, violence against minority groups escalated. In February, attacks in Mosul over ten days left eight Christians dead, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW). In October, militants laid siege to Our Lady of Salvation Syriac Catholic Church in Baghdad, taking over 100 people hostage. Numbers of reported casualties vary. Amnesty International reported over 40 people killed while the BBC reported more than 50 fatalities in the ensuing violence.

The politically motivated violence contributed to the flight of traumatized minorities and others from Iraq, and this exodus continues to affect the whole region. The United Nations (UN) refugee agency, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) placed the number of Iraqi refugees, most of whom are in neighbouring countries, at 1.8 million in a 2010 report. Of these, a large proportion is from religious and ethnic minority communities, who are increasingly targeted in Iraq for various reasons that are rooted in their minority status. In December 2010, UNHCR country offices in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria reported that following the October church siege, increasing numbers of Iraqi Christians were arriving and registering for assistance. Some had fled before and had been forcibly returned to Iraq by third countries in Europe, only to flee again.

The threat of civil unrest in Lebanon was also a matter of regional and international concern in 2010. Tensions over the as yet unreleased findings of a UN investigation into the 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri – which is expected to implicate leaders of the country's Hezbollah party – led eventually to the resignation of Hezbollah members of the coalition cabinet in January 2011. At the time of writing, Lebanon remained without a government, and there were fears that tension between the two sides could erupt into violence that would affect the whole region.

Political controversy also rocked Jordan, a

**Right:** A woman cries over a coffin during the funeral for two Christian brothers killed in Mosul, November 2010. *Khalid al-Mousuly/Reuters.*

country widely regarded as one of the most stable in the region. In November 2009, King Abdullah II dissolved a parliament that had only served two years of its four-year term. Elections were due to follow swiftly, but were postponed for the drafting of a new electoral law, and the country reverted to direct royal rule for a year-long period. Despite protests that the new electoral law further marginalizes the country's Palestinian population, elections were finally held in November 2010, but were boycotted by the country's main Islamist opposition group.

In addition to ongoing marginalization and discrimination, Palestinian Arabs in Israel bore the brunt of controversial new legislation considered by many to be discriminatory, as it requires all new non-Jewish citizens to pledge allegiance to Israel as a 'Jewish and democratic State'. Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu later announced that the proposal would apply to all new citizens; however, the disproportionate impact on Palestinians remained the same. Meanwhile, one year after the Israeli military's Operation Cast Lead claimed the lives of countless Palestinian civilians in Gaza, both Hamas and the Israeli government issued rebuttals of the 2009 UN investigation headed by Justice Richard Goldstone, which found that both sides had committed war crimes. In May, Israeli naval commanders stormed a flotilla of ships carrying pro-Palestinian activists who were attempting to carry tonnes of aid to the people of Gaza, which has been subject to an Israeli blockade since 2006. At least 10 civilians were killed and many were wounded in the raid, according to a formal statement by the UN Security Council. International condemnation followed, and the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon ordered an impartial inquiry into Israel's actions. In early 2011, Israel issued a report saying its actions were legal under international law. In July 2010, the Knesset stripped Israeli Arab MK Hanin Zuabi – the first female Israeli Arab to be elected to the Knesset on an Arab party list – of three parliamentary privileges because she had taken part in the Gaza-bound flotilla.

At the time of writing, there was deepening



international concern over the increasing instability in Yemen and serious questions over the future well-being of its people. Since 2006, the country has been engaged in a six-year sectarian conflict that has displaced more than 250,000 people. The instability has led to rising lawlessness, and the country has emerged as a base for attacks on civilians elsewhere, including attempted bombings of commercial and cargo flights bound for Germany, the USA and the UK. Over the course of last year, the situation of the Yemeni people became increasingly desperate,

with thousands taking to the streets in January 2011 to demand the resignation of Ali Abdullah Saleh, who has been president for 30 years.

As MRG has noted in its reports, minority women across the region are subject to intersectional discrimination because of both their sex and their minority status. They can also suffer gender-based repression within their own communities. They are particularly vulnerable to certain forms of violence in conflicts. Across the region, they continue to be subject to varying degrees to personal status laws

that are based on Sharia law. Such laws privilege Muslims over non-Muslims, and Muslim men over Muslim and non-Muslim women, for example in marriage and inheritance.

Increased legal discrimination and conservatism is not always tolerated or enforced, however. A campaign in 2009 against a revised personal status law in Syria was begun by women's groups in Damascus. Using social media and email, the campaign found support throughout the Middle East and was also backed by international non-government organizations (NGOs). This resulted in the law being 'shelved' by the Ministry of Justice, according to the NGO, Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML). WLUML reported that the law would have made it easier for a man to divorce his wife and nearly impossible for her to do the same, and would have allowed Christian men to marry more than one woman.

This regional update focuses as much as possible on specific incidents and issues faced by women from minorities; however, disaggregated data by sex and religion/ethnicity is very difficult to access, particularly in such a volatile area.

## Algeria

According to MRG, about a quarter of the Algerian population self-identifies as Berber. The year 2010 was the 30th anniversary of the 'Berber Spring' in 1980, when students took to the streets to demonstrate against the repression of Berber culture and to demand language rights. Algerian state forces crushed the peaceful protests. Since then, sometimes violent demonstrations have continued to mark relations between Berber communities and the state, and, despite some concessions, the issues are ongoing. For instance, while the Constitution holds that Islam is the state religion and Arabic the official language, the state declared the Berber language Tamazigh a 'national language' in 2002 and has permitted it to be taught in schools. But a 2010 report from a German NGO, the Society for Threatened Peoples (GFvB) said that, despite this, there is still no actual teaching of written or spoken Berber languages in Algerian schools.

In January 2010, Berber activists in Kabylie commemorated the 1980 uprising by repeating demands for autonomy for Berber people. According to the 2010 report on freedom of association by the Euro-Mediterranean Human

Rights Network (EMHRN – a network of more than 80 human rights organizations across the region) in 2010 a march was planned in the small city of Aïn Benin to 'demand respect for human rights and commemorate the "Berber Spring"', but was met with force. The report states that although permission to hold the event was formally requested, a response was never given. Police were deployed on the day of the march and around 30 people were arrested. They were held for several hours, questioned and made to sign statements before being released.

The Christian and Jewish minorities in Algeria each make up 1 per cent of the total population. Sunni Islam is the official religion of the state, and non-Muslim religions are subject to restrictions that affect their ability to meet in public to worship. Non-Muslim groups are required to register with the government, and the state also controls the importing of religious texts. Proselytizing has historically been dealt with particularly harshly.

Relations between Christian and Muslim communities were difficult in 2010. The US State Department Report on International Religious Freedom 2010 (IRFR 2010) reported that in January, protesters disrupted a Protestant service being held on the first-floor of an apartment building in Kabylie. A week later, they 'vandalized the building and burned Bibles, hymnbooks, a cross, furniture, and appliances'. The attack took place amid local fears that the Protestant group was trying to convert Muslim children, and concerns that men and women are permitted to worship together in the house, according to the pastor.

In August, two Christian men were arrested for eating and drinking while at work on a building site during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan. They were charged and detained under a law that bans Algerian citizens from 'causing offence to the Prophet ... or denigrating the dogma of Islam'. The trial of the two attracted dozens of protesters, media reports said, with the public prosecutor calling for a three-year jail sentence. However, the two were acquitted in October. In December, Agence France Presse reported that four Christian converts were facing one-year jail sentences for opening a church without state permission. The outcome of the trial is not yet known.

Jews in Algeria continue to suffer discrimination. In June, the government refused requests from

Algerian Jewish associations based in France to visit holy sites in Algeria. Elsewhere, though, the state has made some overtures to religious groups. In February, a symposium entitled 'Religious Worship: A Right Ensured by Religion and by the Law' was held in Algiers by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. According to the IRFR 2010, representatives from Christian and Jewish religious groups in the country and Catholic and Protestant religious leaders from the United States and France were invited, but members of the Jewish community did not participate.

Women, including non-Muslim women, suffer discrimination in Algeria in matters of personal status. As with many of the countries in the region, the Algerian family code draws on Sharia law, and as such Muslim women are prevented from marrying non-Muslim men unless they convert to Islam (although this is not always enforced) Meanwhile, children born to Muslim fathers and non-Muslim mothers are considered Muslim, whatever the mother's religion. Non-Muslim minorities also suffer discrimination in inheritance laws when a Muslim family member lays claims to the inheritance, the IRFR 2010 noted. In this case, widowed non-Muslims whose husbands were Muslim are left particularly vulnerable.

## Egypt

Egypt's minority communities include Bahá'ís, Coptic Christians, Nubians and fewer than 200 Jews. In the last few years, experts have noted the rise of sectarian tensions in the country, while a framework of legislation exists that allows minorities to be discriminated against in mainstream society.

Coptic Christians represent between 6 and 9 per cent of Egypt's total population. They are required to list their religion on compulsory national identity cards, a factor which some have noted allows for discrimination to occur against them at the hands of state and private companies, and in access to education and public services. Christians are also under-represented in government at national and local levels. Following the November 2010 elections, Christians held only 2 per cent of seats in the People's Assembly. Christians may freely convert to Islam, but Muslims are prohibited from converting to Christianity or any other religion.

In January 2010, the Coptic minority suffered one of the worst atrocities it has experienced in the

past decade, Amnesty International reported. On 6 January, Coptic Christmas Eve, six worshippers and an off-duty police officer were killed in a drive-by shooting that took place as people left a church after midnight mass in the city of Nagaa Hammadi. Amnesty said the attack was reportedly a reprisal for the alleged rape of a 12-year-old Muslim girl by a Christian man in November 2009. The allegation had already resulted in the burning and looting of Christian shops in the nearby town of Farshout by hundreds of Muslim protesters. On 7 January, hundreds of Christian protesters clashed with security forces outside a morgue where the bodies of the dead Copts were being held. The protesters chanted anti-government slogans and were met with tear gas. Clashes also occurred in nearby villages, and 28 Copts and 12 Muslims were arrested.

Officials quickly reported that eight people were being held in connection with the drive-by shooting. One of the perpetrators was sentenced to death, while, a year later, two others are awaiting the conclusion to their trials. This slow access to justice is not uncommon, experts have noted, and adds to the sense that the state is guilty of a long-standing failure to bring to justice those who attack Christians.

In November, Coptic Christians clashed with authorities over the building of a new church in Cairo's Giza district. Hundreds of protesters threw home-made petrol bombs and stones, while security forces fired tear gas into the crowds. The Christians denied authorities' claims that they did not have a proper permit to build the church. One protester was killed and dozens injured. According to the interior ministry, around 100 people were arrested following the clash.

Bahá'ís in Egypt have also historically suffered state-sanctioned repression and persecution. Their faith is not officially recognized by the state, and as such they have been forced to claim they are Muslim, Christian or Jewish on ID cards, or risk not being issued with compulsory documents, including birth certificates, death certificates and passports. Without ID cards, Bahá'ís have limited freedom of movement, and their access to public services, banking services, property rights, education and other key areas is prohibited. In 2009, following years of legal action, the first ID cards which allow religion to be left blank were issued. By mid 2010, the US Committee on International



Religious Freedom (USCIRF 2010) reported that the government had issued around 180 birth certificates and 50–60 national ID cards to Bahá'ís. But the state continues to refuse to recognize Bahá'í marriages, and there is no mechanism for civil marriage in the country. ID documents have been refused to married Bahá'ís unless they specify their status as 'unmarried'. Some Bahá'ís have pointed out that the application form for ID cards includes the provision that any false statements could result in a fine or a prison sentence; therefore, they are reluctant to misrepresent their marital status.

### Iran

Iran is home to many ethnic minorities including Arabs, Azeris, Balochis, Fars, Kurds, Lurs and Turkmen. Around 2 per cent of the population are members of religious minority groups, including Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians, all of whom are recognized as religious groups under the Constitution, and Bahá'ís, who have no recognized status. Though Article 14 of the Constitution also charges all Muslims to treat non-Muslims according to the 'ethical norms and the principles of Islamic justice and equity, and to respect their human

rights', the situation for Bahá'ís in Iran remained dire in 2010. In a September report on human rights in Iran, the UN said that members of the community faced arbitrary destruction of their homes, arrests, and confiscation and destruction of property. Their access to education and employment is also restricted.

### Religious minorities

The trial of seven Bahá'í leaders (including two women), who were arbitrarily arrested in 2008 and held without charge for 20 months, began in January 2010. In August, it was reported that Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli and Vahid Tizfahm – who deny charges of espionage, propaganda activities against the Islamic order, and 'corruption on earth', among other allegations – were given 20-year jail sentences. Independent observers were not allowed to attend the trial. In September, the Bahá'í World News Service reported that lawyers representing the seven were informed that the sentence had been reduced to ten years on appeal. At the time of writing, MRG had received reports that the 20-year sentences were

**Left:** Orthodox Coptic Christians protest during the weekly sermon at the Coptic Cathedral of Saint Marcos in Cairo. This protest followed an armed attack on churchgoers as they left midnight mass for Coptic Christmas. *Khaled El-Fiqi/EPA.*

re-imposed in March 2011.

In October, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon issued a report criticizing Iran's use of torture and the death penalty, its discriminatory treatment of women and its failure to protect minority rights. In November, the UN General Assembly approved, for the seventh consecutive year, Resolution A/C.3/65/L.49, expressing deep concern at ongoing human rights violations in Iran, in particular its:

*'Continued discrimination and other human rights violations, at times amounting to persecution, against persons belonging to ethnic, linguistic, recognized religious or other minorities.... Increased incidents of persecution against unrecognized religious minorities, particularly members of the Baha'i faith.'*

Iran's non-Shi'a Muslim minorities also suffer ongoing persecution. In February 2010, at least 27 members of the Nematullahi Sufi order were arrested, and their place of worship in Isfahan was demolished, according to the report of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief to the Human Rights Council. The report states that the families of those arrested were denied any information about their fate, and that their lawyers were prevented from meeting with them.

Conversion from Islam is met with harsh state reprisal. Youcef Nadarkhani, who was born to a Muslim family but converted to Christianity, was arrested and sentenced to death under charges of apostasy in 2009. In September 2010, the Gilan province Court of Appeals upheld the sentence. In December, Nadarkhani's lawyer filed an objection with the Supreme Court, and, at the time of writing, the NGO International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran reported that it is not known whether the sentence was overturned or upheld. Elsewhere, two Christian women, Maryam Rostampour and Marzieh Amrizadeh Esmacilabad, who were accused of proselytizing and apostasy, were cleared of all charges in May 2010. Security forces in Tehran arrested them in March 2009 after they were accused

of handing out Bibles and attending religious gatherings. They were held, initially without charge, in a crowded cell with 27 other women at Evin prison for more than six months, Amnesty International reported. They suffered infections, fever and lack of medical attention.

### **Ethnic minorities**

The Azeri community continues to face restrictions on the use of their language, including in the media, as well as political and social marginalization.

In 2010, the case of an Azeri woman, Sakhineh Mohammed Ashtani, who was accused of adultery, attracted international attention when she was sentenced to death by stoning. It was argued that one of the factors that stood against her during her trial was that she did not speak Farsi well enough to be able to understand the proceedings in the case. Ashtani has reportedly been subject to torture. Her previous sentence was revoked, but she continues to face a sentence of death by hanging.

Arabs in Iran's Khuzestan province have faced decades of marginalization and under-development. According to the Ahwaz Human Rights Organization, in its submission for the February 2010 Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the UN Human Rights Council, the province is rich, and produces 90 per cent of Iran's oil, but one-third of its population lives in abject poverty. They have little access to sanitation, proper housing, and no regular access to clean water or electricity. Access to employment is also limited, and Arabs suffer discrimination in language rights, which impacts on their access to media and other sources of news and information, and to cultural activities. The Ahwaz Human Rights Organization reported that, 'due to discrimination, almost all Ahwazi women living in rural areas are illiterate', and states that 'while the illiteracy rate is about 10–18 per cent in Iran, it is over 50 per cent among Arab men in Khuzestan, and even higher for Ahwazi women'.

For Kurds in Iran, the situation is similar, with the added component of ongoing violent clashes between Kurdish factions and the state. In its recent Iran briefing paper *Seeking Justice and an End to Neglect: Iran's Minorities Today*, MRG reported that in August 2010 the mother of Behmen Mesudi set herself on fire in front of Orumiyyeh Prison after her son was tortured and then beaten to death by a prison guard.

## Sistan-Balochistan

Sistan-Balochistan, where many Baloch live, is one of Iran's most impoverished provinces, where according to MRG's recent briefing on minorities in Iran, 'human rights have been violated in a way unseen in other parts of the country'. Over decades this has resulted in disproportionate poverty rates, low standards of living, and linguistic and cultural repression. The armed pro-Balochi group Jondallah has engaged in the execution of non-Balochis and government officials, and taken part or expressed support for suicide bombings. This has resulted in an increased militarization of the province and a rise in extra-judicial killings of Balochis by the state.

This cycle of violence looked set to continue past year-end when a suicide attack occurred at the Imam Hussein mosque in Chabahar, in south-eastern Iran. The bombing took place during the Shi'a holy day, Ashura, when worshippers mark the death of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussein. An estimated 39 people were killed. According to the UK's *Guardian* newspaper and other media, Jondallah claimed responsibility. At the end of 2010, 11 Baloch prisoners were reportedly executed for alleged membership of Jondallah following the attack, however all had been imprisoned before the attack took place.

## Iraq

Around 3 per cent of Iraq's population is made up of Christians including Armenian, Assyrian, Chaldean and Syriac minorities. Religious and other ethnic minorities include Baha'is, Bedouin, Black-Iraqis, Circassians, Kaka'is, Palestinians, Roma, Sabeen Mandaean, Shabaks and Yezidis. There are just eight remaining members of the Jewish community. Sunni Muslim Turkmen are the third largest ethnic group in Iraq, while the Kurdish community makes up 15–20 per cent of the population.

Exact numbers of minorities remaining in Iraq are very difficult to establish due to ongoing displacement, internal migration and violence. In 2010, religious and ethnic minority communities continued to suffer targeted killings and abductions, the destruction of their places of worship, homes and businesses, and, according to the USCIRF 2010, insufficient government protection. A national census that was scheduled to take place in October was postponed for the third time since

1987, re-scheduled for 5 December and then postponed indefinitely. The ongoing dispute over territories in northern Iraq, including the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, that affects Kurds, Arabs, Christians, Turkmen, Yezidis and other vulnerable minorities, is at the centre of this delay.

## Political representation

The rising tension in this volatile northern region was also at the heart of disputes over Iraq's electoral law, which was debated in October 2009, delaying the country's parliamentary election, which was scheduled to take place in January 2010. The amended law, which attempts to reach a compromise on how the vote should be conducted in the disputed territory, was passed in November 2009. The new law increases minority representation to eight seats, with Christians allocated five seats, Shabaks and Yezidis one each, and Mandaean electing their first ever parliamentary representative – Khalid Ahmed Roumi. However, minority representatives criticized the scope of the amended law. The Mandaean seat is restricted to the Baghdad governorate, meaning only those who live in the city, or have proof of residency, can vote for the Mandaean candidate. This does not reflect the fact that Mandaean have also traditionally lived in Basra and Kirkuk, but have since 2003 been displaced all over the country. Many have fled abroad. Mandaean community representatives in Jordan said that the electoral law should recognize them as one national constituency (as is the case with Iraqi Christians) so they could vote for their chosen candidate, regardless of their governorate of origin. According to the *Jordan Times*, a case was brought before an Iraqi federal court by the Mandaean Council to challenge the amendment in early February.

Yezidi leaders meanwhile pointed out that, given the size of the Yezidi population (estimated at between 300,00 and 400,000, according to MRG sources) and the constitutional provision that there should be one seat for every 100,000 people, the community should have been granted a higher number of seats. Black Iraqis, who number around 2 million according to community estimates, also raised objections. Speaking to Al-Jazeera news in January 2010, activist Tahir Yahya said, 'We want to be like the Christians and Mandaean and other white minorities who have fixed representation in



parliament – we the black people in Iraq have rights.’

In addition to quotas based on ethnicity, the Iraqi Constitution also holds that parliament should include a 25 per cent quota of female candidates (82 representatives). To ensure this, each party and coalition list must have 25 per cent female candidates.

Elections finally took place on 7 March 2010. However, due to investigations into allegations of fraud and wrangling between parties, it took until November for a power-sharing agreement to be announced, and for Nouri al-Maliki to be reappointed as prime minister. The Council of Ministers includes two Christian ministers (human rights, and industry and minerals), but only one of the 38 ministers is female (Minister Without Portfolio Bushra Hussain Salih)

#### **Attacks on Christian minorities**

During this 10-month political vacuum, a period that also saw the end of US combat operations in Iraq, violence against minorities continued. The UK’s *Guardian* newspaper called 2010, ‘the worst year since 2003 for Iraq’s Christians’, stating that more Christians fled in 2010 than any other year since the US-led invasion began. In the second week of February, ten Christians were killed in Mosul, in five separate incidents. The USCIRF 2010 reported

**Above:** A woman from the Sabeen Mandaean minority in Iraq. *Ali Abbas/EPA.*

that this caused 43,000 Christians to flee the city for villages in the Nineveh plains, the Kurdistan Regional Governorates and Syria. Christian news websites reported that four people had been arrested for the crimes in early March.

On 31 October, the Christian community suffered its worst atrocity since the conflict began in 2003. According to international media reports, five suicide bombers passed through police and military checkpoints, and attacked the Our Lady of Salvation Syriac Catholic cathedral in Baghdad. The attack took place during a Sunday evening service when about 100 worshippers were at the church. Gunmen held siege to the church for four hours, and witnesses reported hearing explosions and shooting. One hostage reported that worshippers were beaten by the militants. The BBC said many of the worshippers were women. Many were injured, while 56 Christians including two priests were killed, along with 12 others. The al-Qaeda linked group, the Islamic State of Iraq, claimed responsibility for the attack.

International and national political and religious leaders, including Pope Benedict XVI and Grand

Ayatollah Sistani, Iraq's highest Shi'a cleric, condemned the attacks. But in November the group continued to terrorize the minority community, detonating 11 roadside bombs in three Christian areas of Baghdad. Five people were killed. Finally, on 31 December, international media reported that two people were killed and eight injured in bomb and grenade attacks on Christian homes across Baghdad, by militants linked to al-Qaeda.

Numerous Christian and Yezidi businesses, particularly those thought to be selling alcohol, were targeted and attacked during the year. Mandaean, who are traditionally goldsmiths, reported that their shops continued to be targeted with threats and bombings.

### Minority women

Women from minority communities have increasingly reported that they wear Islamic *hijab* for security reasons when they are in public. The IRFR 2010 stated that, regardless of religious affiliation, women and girls are often threatened for wearing 'Western-style clothing, or for failing to adhere sufficiently to strict interpretations of conservative Islamic norms governing public behavior'. According to the report, women from the Mandaean community have told of being 'pressured' from outside to marry outside their faith, which is forbidden according to Mandaean religious practices. (For more information, see special report, below.)

### Northern Iraq

Tension in northern Iraq continued to affect minorities. Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution calls for a referendum to determine whether citizens of territories across parts of five governorates from the Syrian border to the Iranian border east of Baghdad wish to formally join the autonomous Kurdistan region. As a result, Christians, Shabaks, Yezidis and other minority groups living in the region have been subject to pressure from different political groupings seeking to force minorities to identify as either Arab or Kurd, or pledge support for a particular political party. This pressure includes intimidation, arbitrary arrests, political disenfranchisement and the threat of blocking access to employment and resources. Minorities have also reported property being confiscated with no compensation by Kurdish Peshmerga forces.

Targeted and random killings also occurred across the year in the region. In January 2010, Christians and Shabaks were injured in a bomb explosion in the town of Bartellah in Nineveh. Another car bomb was also exploded in Mosul on 10 January, and a Shabak man was shot on the same day. From January to March, MRG reported that more than 13 Christians were killed, with many describing the attacks as an attempt to drive minorities from the region ahead of the elections. Louis Sako, Archbishop of Kirkuk, described the attacks in Mosul as 'ugly and organized'.

The USCIRF 2010 reported that in February, the Iraqi government said it had established an investigative committee into the attacks. The governor of Nineveh ordered increased security and called for an international investigation, the report said, but by the end of 2010, no perpetrators were known to have been arrested or charged. Also in February 2010, church leaders established the Council of Christian Church Leaders of Iraq in an attempt to promote religious acceptance, strengthen their community and engage in dialogue with the state and other religious leaders.

Iraq's Bahá'ís continue to suffer repression, as the faith remains prohibited by Law 105 of 1970. Notwithstanding the provisions of the Iraqi Constitution which allow for freedom of religion, the IRFR 2010 points out that no court challenges have been brought to have Law 105 invalidated, and no legislation has been proposed to repeal it.

Forced returns of rejected Iraqi asylum seekers are occurring despite repeated calls from NGOs and UNHCR not to return people, particularly minorities, who are from high-risk governorates including Baghdad, Kirkuk and Nineveh. UNHCR stated that internal flight was not an option, given access and residency restrictions in other governorates as well as hardship faced by returnees. In 2010, forced returns of rejected asylum seekers including Christians, Shabak and Yezidis took place from the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK. In December, Sweden forcibly returned around 20 Iraqis, including five Christians from Baghdad. UNHCR condemned the action and expressed its concern at the message forced returns from third countries give to Middle Eastern countries hosting Iraqi refugees. Following a December 2010 seminar in Stockholm, involving NGO representatives including MRG, members of the

# Violence against women from Iraqi minorities is rife, but remains poorly addressed

---

According to NGOs reporting to the UN Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on Iraq in 2010, women from minorities are 'the most vulnerable section of Iraqi society'. Their minority status and gender identity put them at particular risk in a female population that is already experiencing great trauma.

Violence against women in Iraq has been an increasing problem since the conflict began in 2003. Figures released by the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) as part of a 2010 campaign against gender-based violence highlighted the scale of the issue. One in five women (21 per cent) in Iraq aged 15–49 has suffered physical violence at the hands of her husband; 14 per cent of women who suffered physical violence were pregnant at the time; 33 per cent have suffered emotional violence; and 83 per cent have been subjected to controlling behaviour by their husbands. The problem is compounded by the sense of shame attached to being exposed to such acts, and the corresponding reluctance to report against family members for fear of reprisals. Where crimes are reported, they are poorly handled by police, medical and judicial authorities, UNAMI said.

Women in Iraq also fear abduction and rape.

Men from all sides of the conflict, including Iraqi and US-led coalition troops and members of security forces, have been responsible for such crimes. MRG has reported that women, including those from minorities, who survive these ordeals can find themselves ostracized from their families and communities; some are punished or killed by their own relatives; and others are pressured to commit suicide by burning themselves.

There are also reports of women from minority groups being forced into marriage outside their faith communities. Minorities including Sabeen Mandaeans and Yezidis prohibit marriage outside their religion, and women who do so must renounce their faith. Caught in a politically sensitive situation in the disputed territory in northern Iraq, Yezidi activists have reported that since 2003, there have been around 30 known cases of Yezidi women being abducted and forced to marry members of the Kurdish security force Asayish. In correspondence with the author, a Yezidi activist reported that Yezidi families are threatened with reprisals if women and girls refuse marriage with militia members.

Evidence from the Iraqi Minorities Organization (IMO), an umbrella group that includes members from a range of minorities, confirms that minority women are subject to both domestic and politically -motivated violence. IMO also describes the levels of fear minority women face in their daily lives, and the measures they take to protect themselves; measures which are to the detriment of their religious and cultural identities. For example, in an unstable and increasingly conservative Islamic environment, non-Muslim women feel forced to wear the *hijab* in public to avoid being identified and targeted by extremists. They also refrain from wearing traditional accessories and make-up in public places in certain parts of the country. Christian women in Kirkuk and Mosul reported feeling extremely insecure outside their homes.

Iraq has ratified the UN Convention on the

---

## Special report Continued

---

Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). It is also a signatory to the 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women.

However, access to justice for such crimes is a particular problem for women from minorities, as it is for women and minorities in Iraq in general.

The Iraqi Constitution mandates that women are equal to men. However, certain constitutional provisions and other pieces of legislation discriminate against women.

Article 41 of the Constitution allows an individual the right to choose what personal status rules they want to follow based on their 'religions, sects, beliefs, or choices', a provision which potentially forces women to submit to discriminatory personal status codes. According to a 2010 report by the US-based think tank, Freedom House, 'Article 41 is currently suspended after women's advocates, NGOs, members of parliament, legal professionals, and the judiciary protested against the provision, viewing it as a way to increase sectarian divisions and impose undue restrictions on women'. In practice, according to minority activists, disputes relating to marriage and the family are settled inside the family and community itself, rather than being taken to the police or the courts.

Moreover, despite Article 29 of the Constitution, which prohibits violence in the family, schools and in society, under the Iraqi Penal Code a husband is legally entitled to punish his wife 'within certain limits prescribed by law or custom'. The NGO Social Watch has highlighted other provisions in the Penal Code that compound and institutionalize violence against women. Under the code, rape is a private offence; therefore the state cannot take any action without the consent of the complainant or a legal guardian. Article 398 holds that the perpetrator can be excused of

rape and sexual assault if he marries the victim. In the absence of any provision to the contrary, this applies even in cases where the victim is a minor. Sentences for kidnapping and abduction can also be avoided through marriage.

The conditions faced by women, and the particular vulnerability of women from minorities, make it extremely difficult for them to leave the house, access employment and education, or take part in any kind of recreation in public including sports, activists have reported. Access to employment in particular is a pressing concern, given that, in 2009, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that 1 in 10 Iraqi households are headed by women, more than 80 per cent of whom are widows. According to the BBC, this is around one million women, although it is not known how many of these are from minority groups.

Campaigners have highlighted the need to educate women about their rights in order to stem their increasing vulnerability. UNAMI has noted that many women have little or no knowledge about the (limited) options that are available to them. The US Embassy, through its Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Nineveh, has supported a series of six seminars on minority women's legal rights across the region, attended by 150 participants from communities including Christians, Shabak, Turkmen and Yezidis.

According to UNAMI, the Iraqi authorities are also taking steps towards addressing the situation. A domestic violence bill is being developed at national level and in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) controlled area, while special units in both areas have been established to develop a national database of cases of violence against women. Whatever measures are in place, it is vital that the specific threats facing women from minority communities do not go ignored. ■



Swedish parliament and Migration Board officials, the Swedish government instructed the Migration Board to take more care in analysing the claims of asylum seekers from Iraq's religious minorities.

## Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT)

### Israel

Palestinian Arab citizens make up around 20 per cent of the Israeli population (around 1.2 million people) and include members of three religious communities. MRG has reported that 81 per cent are Muslim, 10 per cent are Christian and 9 per cent are Druze. In 2010, Israeli Arabs continued to experience deeply ingrained institutional discrimination, restricting their political and religious activity, their access to resources and their rights to employment, education and property ownership. A December 2010 report by Adalah, an NGO and legal centre for Arab minority rights in Israel, highlights the multiple forms of discrimination faced by groups such as women and disabled members of the Arab community. It states that the employment rate among Arab women citizens of Israel is around 20 per cent, among the lowest in the world.

Israeli Arab women's lack of participation in the workforce is often ascribed to attitudes they face in their own communities. But this approach was disputed by education expert Fadia Nasser-Abu

**Right:** A Bedouin family in the unrecognised village of Al Zarnock in the Negev desert, Israel.  
*Karen Robinson/Panos.*

Ahija, who became the first Israeli Arab woman in the country to be appointed to a full professorship, taking up her post at Tel Aviv University in March 2010. Professor Nasser-Abu Ahija told Israel's daily newspaper, *Haaretz* that, 'Arab families are changing – and attributing more importance to educating their girls.' She also pointed out that schools in Arab areas suffer from a serious lack of government investment.

Elsewhere, it has been argued that the obstacles to women's participation are primarily the result of the discriminatory policies of successive governments, rather than family or social attitudes. These include discrimination in hiring policies in the civil service and private companies, and a lack of industrial zones and factories located in Arab areas compared with majority Jewish ones. Israeli Arab women are also affected by a dearth of public transport in their areas, a lack of suitable training courses at national and local levels, and a shortage of state-supported childcare services, compared to those available for Jewish communities. According to a large-scale survey on Arab women's employment in Israel, conducted by scholar and activist Yousef Jabareen, 78 per cent of non-working women said their employment status was due to a lack of job

opportunities, and 56 per cent of non-working women said they wanted to work immediately. His survey also found that there were slightly more Arab women at university in Israel than Arab men, but that this did not translate into employment opportunities.

Though Israel's Knesset has highly progressive laws on anti-discrimination and legal protection for women and disabled persons, such legislation does not cover discrimination against the Arab minority on the basis of ethnicity. In fact, the state itself is the largest employer of women in the country, but only 3 per cent of all female state employees are Arab women, according to Hanin Zuabi, Israel's first Arab woman MP to be elected as representative of an Arab party. Because of lack of legislation, women and disabled people from these communities cannot fully access the protection that should be available to them, Adalah noted.

Outside of the Arab community in Israel, this legislated discrimination seems to be widely accepted. A poll released in November 2010 by the independent Israeli Democracy Institute found that only 51 per cent of Jewish citizens of Israel support full equality in rights between Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel, while a March poll by Maagar Mochot, a private Israeli research institute, found that 49.5 per cent of Jewish 15–18-year-olds feel the same, according to *Haaretz*.

The right-wing government elected in 2009 continued to propose legislation to further marginalize the Israeli Arab minority. For example, in October 2010 the government approved an amendment to its Citizenship Law which, if passed, will require all new non-Jewish citizens to pledge allegiance to Israel as a 'Jewish and democratic State'. According to Adalah and other research bodies, the bill was formulated to target Palestinians married to Israelis who may be seeking citizenship. The *Guardian* newspaper noted that it will particularly affect Palestinians from the West Bank who marry Arab citizens of Israel, although in practice since the start of the second intifada there is actually very little possibility for Arab citizens of Israel married to Palestinians from the West Bank or Gaza to provide citizenship or residency rights to their spouses through marriage. Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu subsequently amended that the proposal so that it would apply to all new citizens. However, this did not address the concerns of Palestinians who

face having to take the oath.

In December, a religious ruling signed by a number of Israel's municipal chief rabbis banned the renting and selling of homes to non-Jews, Amnesty International reported. A letter of October 2010, also signed by rabbis, called for action to be taken against Jews renting or selling homes to Israeli Arabs.

Arab Bedouin communities are particularly affected by government actions concerning land tenure and development. In its 2009 report to the CEDAW committee, Israel stated that Bedouin in the Naqab number at least 170,000 people. They have suffered repeated evictions and state appropriation of their ancestral land. According to Adalah's 2010 report on inequality amongst the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel, 'between 75,000 and 90,000 Arab Bedouin in the Naqab live in around 40 unrecognized Arab villages throughout the Naqab, referred to by the state as "illegal clusters".' These villages are extremely precarious living environments, with few basic services. They have little, or no electricity or running water and are cut off from communication; people living in these villages are viewed by the state as 'trespassers'.

On 27 July, the 250 residents of Al-Araqib were woken in the middle of the night by police and given two minutes to leave their homes. Adalah reported that 1,300 police officers began to demolish the town while residents struggled to save their belongings. All the houses were razed to the ground. Attempts to rebuild the village have resulted in the same destruction each time. Amnesty International reported the eighth destruction of the now makeshift village on 23 December 2010.

### **The West Bank**

Aside from the Muslim Palestinian majority, the people of the West Bank include Bedouin, Jews (primarily Israeli settlers), Christian Palestinians and around 400 Samaritans. According to the international news agency Reuters, around 17,000 Catholics live in the West Bank. The number has shrunk as people have left in search of a better quality of life, members of the community have reported. The OCHA has noted that a large proportion (40 per cent in 2007) of land in the West Bank is occupied by Israeli settlements, military bases and tightly controlled areas including nature reserves and roads that are prohibited to Palestinians. An Israeli-controlled separation barrier of around 420 miles exists along and within the

West Bank, limiting the movement of Palestinians into Israel, separating villages from their own land, trapping thousands in closed enclaves and stunting the development of the Palestinian community inside the West Bank.

The occupied West Bank is divided into three administrative areas: A, B and C. Area A is under the control and administration of the Palestinian Authority, while Area B is controlled by Israel but administered by the Palestinian Authority. Area C makes up 62 per cent of the West Bank and is under full Israeli military and planning control. Around 150,000 Palestinians live in this area, alongside approximately 500,000 Israeli settlers. Other minority groups include Bedouin who number around 25,000 people in Area C and 40,000 in the whole of the West Bank.

In 2010, the non-Jewish communities in Area C continued to suffer the demolition of what the Israeli authorities term 'unrecognized' or 'illegal clusters', that is, their homes and villages. In January, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) reported that the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) demolished Bedouin homes and part of a school, leaving 50 people homeless. Thirty children were sitting down to complete an exam, and witnessed the partial destruction of their school, the report said.

Palestinians in Area C also faced ongoing devastation of their livelihoods and destruction of their homes. UNRWA reported that in 2010, the military destroyed more than 349 Palestinian structures. Almost 485 Palestinians, half of them children, were left homeless. The number is a 'significant increase' on demolitions in 2009, when around 191 structures were demolished, UNRWA stated. Palestinians also face a number of complex legislative restrictions to their economic, social and cultural rights that keep them in extreme poverty, in stark comparison to their Israeli neighbours.

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women expressed particular concern in 2010 on the extreme situation faced by Palestinian women in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), resulting from the impact of the Israeli occupation, the continued construction of Israeli settlements and of the West Bank separation barrier, and the restrictions on movement of people and goods that the community faces. The commission's report noted that this affects their

'right to health care, including access for pregnant women to health services for antenatal care and safe delivery, education, employment, development and freedom of movement', and has led to an increase in 'incidents of domestic violence, and declining health, education and living standards, including the rising incidence of trauma and decline in their psychological well-being'.

### **Gaza Strip**

The Gaza Strip is currently governed by Hamas, and is subject to a blockade and harsh sanctions imposed by Israel, termed 'collective punishment' and in violation of international law by the UN. The area is home to a small minority of Christians (around 3,500), who have suffered sporadic violence and persecution not necessarily at the hands of the state, but from what one priest described to the UK's *Guardian* newspaper as 'vigilante justice'. MRG has noted that over the last decade, the area has become subject to increasing religious radicalization. Many Christians have fled the area's political tensions in the last decade. In 2010, around 500 members of the community were allowed by Israel to cross the blockade and visit Bethlehem for Christmas. In some cases, not all members of a family were issued permits, *The Guardian* reported.

### **Jordan**

Parliamentary elections were meant to follow swiftly after King Abdullah II dissolved Parliament just half way through its four-year term in late 2009, but the polls were delayed by the drafting of a new electoral law. Passed in May 2010, the law is not uncontroversial. Critics note that it increases seats in less populated rural areas that are mostly home to Bedouin and tribes loyal to the king, while decreasing representation in Jordan's urban centres, which are dominated by its large Palestinian refugee community.

The controversy resulted in a boycott of the election by the country's main opposition group, the Islamic Action Front. Notwithstanding this, elections were held in November 2010, with pro-loyalist and tribal-linked candidates filling the majority of the 120 seats. Twelve of these are reserved for women, nine for Christians and three for Circassians, an ethnic group who number between 20,000 and 80,000 people in Jordan.

UNRWA has around 1.9 million Palestinians registered as refugees, and operates 10 long-

established refugee camps across Jordan. While most Palestinians in the country are granted full citizenship, around 132,000 refugees from the Gaza Strip are provided only with temporary Jordanian passports and thus have limited access to citizenship rights, including employment, health and education. UNRWA names them among Jordan's 'most vulnerable' people, stating that rates of illiteracy are high, and they suffer from extreme poverty.

Religious minorities in Jordan include Christians, and small numbers of Bahá'ís, Druze and Shi'a Muslims. The IRFR 2010 states that Muslim-Christian relations are generally good, but followers of unrecognized religions and Muslims who convert to other religions face 'societal discrimination and the threat of mental and physical abuse'. The report notes that Bahá'ís in particular face ongoing official discrimination. On official ID cards, their religion can be registered with a dash, a blank space or as Muslim. According to the report, this has implications for the validity of marriages. Since Jordan applies Sharia law, a woman registered as Muslim cannot marry a non-Muslim man. Furthermore, children of non-Muslim fathers and Bahá'í mothers registered inaccurately as Muslim are considered illegitimate under Islamic law, and are not issued birth certificates. Without these documents, they cannot receive citizenship or register for school, the report said.

While the government of Jordan estimates that around 450,000–500,000 Iraqis live in Jordan, only around 31,000 were registered with the UNHCR at the end of July 2010. The IRFR 2010 states that around 61 per cent of Iraqi refugees in Jordan are Sunni Muslim, 25 per cent Shi'a Muslim, 11 per cent Christian, and 3 per cent belong to other religious groups, including Sabean Mandaean. Following the October 2010 attack on Our Lady of Salvation Syriac Catholic Church in Baghdad (see Iraq section), the UNHCR office in Jordan reported an increase of Iraqi Christians registering with them in the second half of 2010.

The IRFR 2010 said that Iraqi Sabean Mandaean in Jordan continue to report 'extreme societal discrimination and pressure to convert to Islam in the form of harassment and physical threats'. As a result, they find it difficult to attend schools and perform religious rites in Jordan, though the police have provided limited protection for them to perform baptism rituals.

**Right:** A Saudi Shi'ite Muslim girl takes part in the Ashura festival in Qatif, Saudi Arabia, December 2010. *Zaki Ghawas/Reuters.*

## Lebanon

As sectarian tensions continued to increase in Lebanon, for the country's religious and ethnic minorities several key events have marked the year.

An estimated 100–150 Jews live in Lebanon and, in 2010, long-awaited work to rebuild Beirut's Maghen Abraham synagogue (destroyed by shelling in 1982) finally began to bear visible results. Ongoing hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel have contributed to the exodus of Lebanon's Jewish communities, and plans to rebuild the place of worship have been delayed for years. But donations including from Christian and Muslim communities both in Beirut and worldwide have contributed to realizing the project. Work was scheduled to be completed in October 2010, and the synagogue is due to begin conducting services in 2011.

According to UNRWA around 422,000 Palestinian refugees are registered in Lebanon, (around 10 per cent of the population), around half of whom live in 12 recognized refugee camps. The community has been present in Lebanon for over 60 years. They have historically been denied citizenship rights, including access to all but menial employment, thus condemning them to generations of poverty. In August 2010, a new law was finally passed allowing Palestinians to work legally. Though this is a welcome step forward, it does not go far enough. While work permit fees have been waived and workers can now claim cover for work-related accidents, the UK's *Guardian* newspaper reported that a Lebanese employer must still demonstrate to the Ministry of Labour that a Lebanese national cannot perform the job before hiring a Palestinian. Palestinians are still prohibited from accessing more than thirty professions, including medicine, engineering and the law, and they are still unable to access state education and medical facilities, the BBC reported. Proposals to allow Palestinians to buy property were met with 'fierce opposition', according to media reports, and it remains to be seen whether the law will have any real effect. Access for Palestinians to universities and vocational training centres is restricted, with quotas for admitting foreigners under particular courses of study. Palestinian refugees are not entitled to



social security benefits such as family allowance and maternity leave. Around 95 per cent are not covered by health insurance and rely heavily on UNRWA for health services.

In November 2010, Lebanon came under the UN Human Rights Council UPR. The government dismissed recommendations that would promote equality for women, allow Palestinians the right to own property and protect migrants from abuse, HRW reported. Lebanon's personal status law holds that Lebanese women cannot pass citizenship to their spouses or children, and the country's UN delegation rejected recommendations that this be amended. Amnesty International highlighted that this means the children of Lebanese women married to foreign nationals – including Palestinians – are not considered Lebanese citizens and cannot obtain citizenship, and are denied access to free state education. A court case challenging the law was upheld in 2009, based on constitutional provisions on gender equality for all citizens. But the Lebanese Civil Chamber Court of Appeal overturned the decision in April 2010.

### **Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia is a majority Sunni Muslim country. The state's official interpretation of Islam is derived from the teachings of an eighteenth century

Sunni religious scholar, Ibn Abd' Al-Wahhab, and is otherwise known as Wahhabism, a strict interpretation of Islam. The country is a hereditary monarchy, and the kingdom controls more than a fifth of the world's crude oil reserves. King Abdullah wields considerable diplomatic muscle in the Middle East and has been instrumental in peace-building efforts in various countries. But the health of the 86-year-old king remained precarious in 2010, and questions over the succession, which are of international and regional importance, remained rife at the time of writing.

Saudi Arabia's Shi'a minority, who make up about 15 per cent of the country's population, remain subject to systematic discrimination in education, employment and political representation. This includes Shi'a children being taught by Sunni teachers that they are unbelievers. Shi'a are banned from teaching religion and serving as general judges, or taking senior military or security positions, according to a 2010 HRW report, while female Shi'a teachers are prohibited from holding senior positions in schools.

Human rights activists advocating religious equality in Saudi Arabia are subject to ongoing arbitrary arrests and detention without charge. They also experience difficulties expressing views against the establishment. In June 2010, police arrested

Mikhlif al-Shammari, a Sunni journalist and campaigner, who wrote articles criticizing anti-Shi'a statements by clerics. As of the end of the year, he was still in detention.

Shi'as are permitted to mark the religious festival Ashura, which commemorates the death of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Hussein. But attacks by militants mean that, for the past few years, the day has been marked by bloodshed. In December 2010, Associated Press reported that extremists attacked the Ashura procession in Medina.

According to the IRFR 2010, the country's Human Rights Commission launched a four-year human rights awareness campaign in January 2010. The Commission worked with the Ministry of Education and provided materials and training to police, security forces, and the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), Saudi Arabia's 'religious police,' on protecting human rights. The Human Rights Commission, whose mandate is to promote tolerance and awareness, includes no Shi'a or women among its 24 members.

About 10 million people (which is around half the country's population) are expatriates. As well as Muslims, they include Christians, Hindus, Sikhs. These communities are only allowed to practise their religions in private.

Saudi Arabia's prohibitive laws restricting women's rights, including a father's legal right to keep adult daughters captive for 'disobedience', also impact on women from these communities. In May 2010, HRW reported on the plight of a Canadian woman of Indian origin who travelled to Saudi Arabia to visit her father, an Indian citizen who works there. For the last three years her father has refused to let her leave. This is a position supported by Saudi Arabia's 'guardianship' system, which allows a male relative or guardian all rights over women's major decisions, such as leaving the country, attending university, marriage and having certain surgical procedures. Foreign Muslim women are also subject to harassment from the CPVPV for not observing strict Wahhabi dress codes, particularly the wearing of headscarves.

## Syria

In the decade since President Bashar al-Assad came to power, Syria's minorities have continued to suffer

repression. The country's ethnic Kurdish minority (around 10–15 per cent of the population) has been particularly affected.

The 1962 census stripped around 120,000 Kurds of citizenship, amid state allegations that they had entered the country, settled and registered illegally. HRW and other NGOs have called these allegations false. It is estimated that there are around 300,000 stateless Kurds living in Syria today.

Between August and September, the UN Human Rights Council conducted its first ever mission to the country. Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, reported that Kurds continue to be denied Syrian citizenship, and therefore cannot access publicly subsidized food, cannot travel abroad, and cannot access employment and education in the public sector. Many live in the eastern part of the country, and have experienced severe drought and increasing poverty since 2005, his report said. De Schutter called the situation 'unacceptable' and called on the government to grant Kurds nationality so they may access their full economic, social and cultural rights.

In March, a boy was killed and dozens were injured when Syrian police opened fire on a Kurdish New Year celebration, Amnesty International said. Around 5,000 Kurds had gathered to celebrate Nawrouz, the Kurdish New Year. Some had brought banners protesting the imprisonment in Turkey of Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

A majority Sunni Muslim country, Syria is home to religious minorities including Alawites (a sect of Shi'a Islam), Ismailis and Shi'a, who make up around 13 per cent of the population. Christians form around 10 per cent, and around 3 per cent of the population is Druze. There is a small settled community of Yezidis (around 100,000 people), but the state does not recognize them as belonging to a faith that is distinct from Islam, according to the IRFR 2010. There is also a small population of between 100 and 200 Jews, who are treated with suspicion by the state. They must have government permission to travel, and they are subject to extra state scrutiny and are excluded from employment in the civil service and armed forces.

Though the Constitution provides for freedom of religion, the IRFR 2010 notes that the government continues to impose restrictions on this right, and that Jehovah's Witnesses remained banned and

suffer discrimination in accessing employment as a result. The report also notes that though there is no formal legislation forbidding proselytizing in Syria, those who are considered to be doing so risk arrest and detention that can last from five years to life. In May 2010, one American citizen and two Swedish citizens were detained and eventually deported for distributing Bibles in Aleppo.

Under the Constitution, Muslim women in Syria are forbidden to marry Christian men, and Muslim converts to other religions are still regarded by the state as subject to Sharia law. Christian women, who are permitted to marry Muslim men, cannot be buried in Muslim cemeteries unless they convert to Islam. Changes to the law that would have resulted in further discrimination against women were successfully stymied in 2009.

### Refugees

Syria is host to a large refugee population including around 500,000 Palestinians, people from Somalia, Sudan, Iran and Afghanistan, and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. In August 2010, there were 5,102 recognized refugees (not including Iraqis), and 1,103 asylum seekers. Iraqis numbered a total of 151,907.

Iraqi refugees have no legal status within the country, and are considered to be 'guests'. Though they can access basic services such as education and health care, the sheer numbers of refugees have strained Syria's infrastructure and economy, and employment is difficult to access. Many face increasing poverty. Child labour and child sex tourism have been identified as growing problems, and economic imperatives are placing Iraqi refugee women at increasing risk of forced prostitution, kidnapping and sex trafficking, the US State Department Trafficking in Persons Report 2010 noted. Many young girls have been forced by their families to work in nightclubs or forced into *muta'a* marriages, in which the girl's family receives a dowry and the 'marriage' ends at a specified time (effectively prostitution). Refugee families have reportedly abandoned children through economic need, leaving them vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation, the State Department said. In August 2010, UNHCR classified around 8,965 Iraqi women refugees as 'women at risk', a category that can include a number of vulnerabilities. UNHCR has also identified several hundred Iraqi women refugees as survivors of sexual

or gender-based violence.

The Iraqi refugee community includes religious minorities such as Iraqi Christians, several thousand Sabeian Mandaean and Yezidis, all fleeing targeted persecution in Iraq. In Syria, Mandaeans are able to perform religious rituals and ceremonies, including marriage and baptism, that they cannot currently risk in Iraq.

According to UNHCR, around 433 Iraqi Palestinians were living at Al Hol camp in north-east Syria in October 2010. This included a number of people from Al Tanf camp in the desert border between Iraq and Syria, which was closed in February 2010. Iraqi Palestinians were protected under Saddam Hussein's regime but became particularly vulnerable following the US-led invasion in 2003. The UN reported in late 2010 that there is little hope for resettlement in sight for these people, and that they have started living in the camp 'with a sense of permanence'. They have access to basic education, health and recreation services, and women are receiving some vocational training, although this functions as a means of passing time, rather than as a source of income generation.

### Western Sahara

Informal talks between the Moroccan government and the Polisario Front (the independence movement of Western Sahara) continued in early 2010 in New York, following an April 2009 UN Security Council Resolution urging the parties to engage in this way. The two sides have been involved in a decades-long dispute over the region, with the Moroccan position being that the Saharawi people should accept autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty. The Polisario Front backs the UN decision calling for a referendum on self-determination, which includes independence as an option. The February 2010 talks ended in impasse.

Before another round of talks began in November, violent clashes occurred when Moroccan security forces attempted to break up a protest camp in the disputed territory. According to the BBC and other media, at least five people were killed, and fighting spread from the camp to the streets of Laayoune, the capital of the territory. Witnesses told the BBC that security forces used 'helicopters and water cannon' to force people to leave. The Gadaym Izik camp held around 12,000 people and was erected in September/October 2010

in protest against Moroccan rule and Saharawis' living conditions. In a November report, HRW said authorities repeatedly beat and abused those they detained after the camp-closing incident, and that civilians had also been attacked.

Thousands of Saharawis also live in refugee camps in Tindouf province, Algeria. Some have been there since the start of the dispute over 35 years ago. The camps are controlled by the exiled government of the self-proclaimed Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) which is based in one of the camps. It is estimated that around 150,000 plus people live in the camps, and rely on aid from Algeria and international agencies. A 2010 UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) report states that women and children make up 80 per cent of the camps' population. Because of lack of fresh food, anaemia affects around 1 in 10 women there. NGO reports from the camps have highlighted the entrepreneurial spirit of the women in the camps, who are in charge of the day-to-day running of the camps, and have prioritized education. Many have started micro-businesses despite the harsh conditions they face.

Many in the camps were separated from their families by the conflict in Western Sahara, and have not seen them for many years. UN-facilitated flights seeking to unite people were temporarily put on hold in March 2010 and resumed in early September. But in mid-September, passengers on a flight from Western Sahara were prevented from disembarking by the Polisario Front when the plane landed in Tindouf.

When the November talks between the two sides closed, the UN Special Envoy to the region Christopher Ross said that although both parties continued to reject each others' proposals, they had agreed to meet in December and again in early 2011. One positive outcome was that both sides agreed to resume family visits by air and to speed up visits by road, it was reported.

Despite this progress, HRW, Amnesty International and other NGOs continue to highlight the detention and abuse of Saharawi activists by Moroccan authorities. Women activists have reported being detained and subjected to beatings and torture. In December 2009, when leading Saharawi human rights activist Aminatou Haidar was permitted to return to her home in Western Sahara after a month long hunger-strike in Spain, she was placed under house arrest. She remains under constant surveillance.

## Yemen

Although three-quarters of Yemen's income is derived from oil revenues, the World Bank has projected that these will run out by 2017. Sana'a is the world's fastest growing capital city, but it is predicted that the city will run out of water by 2015. Its population is expected to double by 2035. Today, almost half of Yemeni children suffer from malnutrition.

Yemen's problems are made worse by a long-running civil conflict that has displaced over 250,000 people. The armed group al-Houthi claim years of discrimination by the government against the Shi'a community in the north, while the government believes the group wants to establish an autonomous region there. Following armed clashes in 2009 and 2010, a tentative ceasefire was agreed in February 2010, but according to the IRFR 2010, low-level fighting was ongoing in April. According to UNICEF, women and children make up about 70 per cent of those affected by the conflict in the north, where access to basic services including water, nutrition, sanitation, health and education is becoming increasingly limited.

The country has a Jewish population estimated at 370, a number that has dwindled from about 60,000 over the last half century. This tiny minority has continued to face persecution, and were targeted by the al-Houthi movement during the 2009–10 clashes. The UK's *Independent* newspaper reported in April 2010 that, following rising 'hate attacks, murders and forced conversions', Yemeni authorities were in negotiations with the UK to resettle around 20 or 30 Yemeni Jews in Britain. The US had evacuated some 100 Yemeni Jews in 2009.

In 2009, a court ruled that a Muslim man accused of murdering a Jewish man because he refused to convert should pay the family 'blood money'. Following an appeal by the Jewish family, the Yemeni Supreme Court ruled that the perpetrator should be executed by firing squad in July 2010. The case stoked fear amongst the Yemeni Jewish community, according to Agence France Press.

Women in Yemen face extreme discrimination, according to a Freedom House report released in June 2010. The US-based research NGO noted that women in some areas continue to be subject to female genital mutilation (FGM), and that the Penal Code gives lenient sentences to those convicted of 'honour crimes'. Muslim women are not permitted to marry outside Islam. Muslim men



are allowed to marry Christians and Jewish women, but not those of any other faith, or women who have renounced Islam.

Yemen is home to around 200,000 Akhdam people, who are the country's largest and poorest minority group. Although Arabic-speaking Muslims, Akhdam are considered servants by mainstream Yemeni society. They suffer deeply ingrained discrimination akin to the caste-based marginalization suffered by India's Dalits. Their situation is harder to address when there is no formal caste system that can be targeted through, say, legislation. Many live in extreme slum conditions with no access to running water, sewerage or electricity. Traditionally, they have been forced to find employment as waste collectors; today they find precarious employment as street cleaners, sanitation workers and rubbish collectors. As such they are viewed as tainted, and some members of the community believe this attitude has become internalized among Akhdam people.

A 2010 report by the US-based Duhur news agency stated that, 'death rates from preventable disease [for Akhdam] are even worse than the nationwide average in Yemen, where overall infant mortality is already an appalling one in nine, and maternal mortality is one in 10'. When they do attend school, children from this community are put to work and experience discrimination and bullying because of the darkness of their skin and

*Above:* A Saharawi woman with her child at a refugee camp in Tindouf, situated in the Sahara Desert. *Alfredo Caliz/Panos.*

their poverty. Women from this community are also subject to gender-based violence from mainstream society and from the men of their own community, who force them into sex work, according to NGO reports. They have little access to justice because of their marginalized status. Reportedly many are murdered after suffering rape, according to the Yemeni Observatory for Human Rights. Experts have warned that this violence may increase as the security situation in Yemen becomes increasingly volatile.

There were around 171,000 registered refugees in Yemen in late 2009, according to UNHCR. These included people fleeing deadly conflict in Somalia and Ethiopia. According to online news agency Global Post, around 43,000 African refugees and migrants crossed the sea between the Horn of Africa to Yemen between January and October 2010. Rough seas and ill-equipped vessels mean many die at sea. When they reach Yemen, many live in Kharaz refugee camp, an unstable collection of buildings housing around 17,000 Somalis. Women from these communities are often the most vulnerable, having suffered sexual violence, and having been forced to pay smugglers to escape persecution. Once they arrive, they are at further risk of trafficking and sexual exploitation. ■