



Middle East

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In a volatile region mired in conflict, 2009 ranks as a particularly tumultuous year. The rise of the right in Israel's February 2009 elections puts into question the rights and freedoms of Israel's Palestinian minority. The formation of a coalition government incorporating the far-right political party of Yisrael Beiteinu has further alienated this minority, composed of both Palestinian Christians and Muslims.

The Israeli military operation in Gaza in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) in January 2009, resulted in considerable loss of life and widespread destruction of property. A year on, and with Israel obstructing the entry of construction material, thousands of Gazans continue to live in tents or the rubble of their former homes. The blockade, which has been imposed on Gaza since 2007, also limits the entry of food and medical supplies.

The events in Gaza overshadowed the relationship between Israeli Palestinians and their government, as it did relations between Israel and Arab governments throughout the region. This chapter focuses in particular on Palestinians outside the OPT who are in a minority or non-dominant position in neighbouring states, as well as on the Palestinian minority within Israel.

The elections in Iran, which were among the most controversial to date, also led to a reinforcement of dogmatism. The re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2009 was challenged by reformists and moderates, who had promised to improve the situation of minorities and initiate a *rapprochement* with Europe and North America, after years of isolation. The disputed elections were followed by massive public demonstrations across the country, which were, at times, violently repressed by government forces. With fresh demonstrations erupting in December, the internal situation in Iran continues to be alarming.

Meanwhile, Iran's allies in Lebanon were defeated by the March 14 Alliance in Lebanon's close June 2009 elections. It then took Prime Minister Saad Hariri five months of intense negotiations to break the deadlock with the opposition and form a coalition government; this was duly achieved. It is to be hoped that improved relations with Syria will have a positive impact on Lebanon's economy and lead to greater stability, following years of turmoil.

Meanwhile, internal conflict in Iraq continued

to threaten the lives of its numerous minorities. Although there was an overall decrease in sectarian violence, religious minorities are still falling prey to attacks from militant groups. The volatile situation in Iraq continues to push thousands of Iraqis, particularly members of minority religious groups, to seek refuge in neighbouring countries, and asylum further afield.

Northern Yemen also witnessed increased conflict and concomitant loss of civilian life in 2009 as clashes erupted in the north of Yemen between government forces and Al-Houthi rebels. Saudi Arabia was dragged into the conflict when some of the fighters managed to cross its border.

Military operations, sectarian violence, disputed elections, the consolidation of power in the hands of extremist political parties and the rise of religious militant groups have all contributed to the volatile situation in the Middle East. A report published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the League of Arab States in December 2009 identified six additional key interrelated challenges facing the region, including: institutional reform, job creation, the promotion and financing of pro-poor growth, the reform of educational systems, economic diversification, and increased food security and self-sufficiency within existing environmental constraints. Despite the magnitude of the challenges and the threats to regional stability, the Middle East has all the ingredients it needs, from a rich and diverse culture to an abundance of natural, economic and human resources, to rise above these challenges and overcome the threats.

Iran

The year 2009 was a significant one for Iran and its people. It began with celebrations in February, as the country geared up to mark the 30th anniversary of the Islamic revolution. Drafted in the aftermath of the revolution, Iran's Constitution recognizes Islam as the state's official religion and the Twelver Ja'fari School of Shi'ism as the doctrine followed by its adherents. The majority of Iran's 66.5 million population is Muslim (Shia 89 per cent, Sunni 9 per cent). In addition to the Sunnis, Iran has several other religious minorities; 2 per cent of Iran's population are Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian and Baha'i. According to Article 13 of the Constitution, Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian Iranians are the

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The status of Palestinian refugees in the Middle East: 60 years on, still unprotected

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 led to the forcible displacement of over 725,000 Palestinians from their homes. On 8 December 1949, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was established by UN General Assembly Resolution 302 (IV) to 'carry out in collaboration with local governments ... direct relief and works programmes' for the benefit of these refugees. UNRWA began operations on 1 May 1950. Sixty years on, in the absence of a solution to the Palestinian refugee issue, UNRWA continues to be the main provider of basic services to 4.6 million registered Palestinian refugees residing in its five areas of operation (Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip).

Throughout the years, UNRWA has had to deliver its services both in times of relative calm in the Middle East and in times of hostilities. The Agency works in close cooperation with the governments of Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, and with Israel and the Palestinian Authority in the OPT, in order to carry out its operations. Notwithstanding UNRWA's achievements over the past 60 years in educating generations of refugees and providing them with health care, relief and other essential services, the status of Palestinian refugees in the Middle East remains precarious.

With the exception of Jordan, none of the Arab

host countries have granted citizenship to Palestine refugees. A formal legal status under national law, codified in legal instruments, in many instances does not exist. The legal position of Palestinian refugees in individual Arab states largely depends on administrative practices, which are often subject to arbitrary changes. The actual treatment of the refugees depends to a great extent on the policies of the various host countries vis-à-vis Palestinians in general, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in particular.

In an attempt to regularize the status of Palestinian refugees in the Arab world, the League of Arab States adopted the Protocol on the Treatment of Palestinians in the Arab States on 11 September 1965. Also known as the Casablanca Protocol, this is a multilateral agreement which was ratified by nine state members of the League, including the three main host countries (Jordan, Lebanon and Syria). It is binding on the ratifying states, although neither the Protocol nor the Arab League's Charter provide for enforcement mechanisms in cases of violation. The Casablanca Protocol called for Palestinians, while keeping their Palestinian nationality, to be treated on a par with nationals in Arab states with regard to employment, the right to leave and return to the territory of the state in which they reside, freedom of movement between Arab states, issuance and renewal of travel documents, and freedom of residence, work and movement.

The Protocol set a high standard of protection for Palestinians. Unfortunately, most Arab states never fully implemented it. In addition, in 1991, the League of Arab States adopted Resolution 5093, which authorized states to treat Palestinian refugees in accordance with local norms rather than the provisions set forth in the Protocol, thus bypassing the standard of protection set by it.

Today, Palestinian refugees continue to face discriminatory treatment, particularly with regard to employment and freedom of movement in the Arab region. After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, Palestinians have been targeted in Iraq, and thousands of them have fled.

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While the status of Palestinian refugees in Arab states continues to give cause for concern, it should not detract from Israel's responsibility towards these refugees. Following their displacement from their homes in 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 194(III) on 11 December 1948, which affirmed the refugees' right to return, and to restitution and compensation. Despite repeated and near unanimous reaffirmations of this resolution by the General Assembly every year since 1948, Israel continues to deny Palestinian refugees their rights to return to their homes and to receive compensation for the losses they have incurred. In addition, Palestinian refugees residing on the West Bank have been hard hit by Israel's regime of closures, since they are largely dependent on income from work inside Israel. Meanwhile, the Gaza Strip's population, two-thirds of whom are refugees, has been subjected to a crippling embargo since 2007, which has resulted in

severe shortages of even the most basic goods such as food, fuel and medicine. Thousands of them were also forced to leave their homes during last year's Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip, and many continue to live in tents to this day.

As UNRWA marks its 60th anniversary, the continued existence of the leading agency in charge of Palestinian refugees serves as a potent reminder of the plight of the world's largest and longest-standing refugee population. Only a just resolution of this issue will enable Israelis and Palestinians to move from their tumultuous past of wars and conflicts to a future of reconciliation, peace and security. ■

Below: A Palestinian man with his son, waiting to load their possessions onto a truck to be transferred from Al Tanf camp, located between Iraq and Syria, to Al Hol camp in Syria, December 2009. *UNHCR/B. Diab.*



only recognized religious minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education. Baha'is, on the other hand, are not recognized as a religious minority. However, as non-Muslims, they are protected under Article 14 of the Constitution, provided that they refrain from conspiracy or activity against Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Notwithstanding the formal guarantees of protection in the Constitution, members of the Baha'i faith have long been subjected to discrimination, harassment and arbitrary arrest. According to Amnesty International (AI), Baha'is continued to be denied access to higher education in 2009. At least 10 Baha'i students were expelled from their universities on the basis of their religion throughout this academic year. According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) report of 2009, Baha'is are also prohibited from teaching and practising their faith, and are barred from all leadership positions in the government and the military. The report also confirms that Baha'i communal property and sacred sites have repeatedly come under attack. AI further reports that government-controlled broadcast and print media, such as the *Kayhan* newspaper, intensified negative campaigns against Baha'is throughout 2009, accusing them of establishing ties with Israel. These accusations are in part due to the fact that the Baha'i world headquarters is located in Israel.

The plight of Baha'is in Iran was brought to the fore when Ministry of Intelligence officials arbitrarily arrested seven Baha'i community leaders in March and May 2008. Their trial has been postponed at least twice, and they are facing charges of 'espionage for Israel' and 'propaganda against the system', both of which carry a possible death penalty. They were expected to stand trial in February 2010, and the trial was continuing at the time of writing. As of July 2009, according to the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, a US-based non-governmental organization (NGO) working on human rights violations in Iran, there are an additional 30–40 Baha'is in detention because of their religious beliefs. The USCIRF 2009 report also stated that, 'Government officials reportedly offered Baha'is relief from mistreatment in exchange for recanting their religious affiliation, and

if incarcerated, recanting their religious affiliation as a precondition for releasing them.'

On 18 December 2008, for the sixth consecutive year, the UN General Assembly passed another resolution (A/Res/63/191) condemning the human rights situation in Iran and denouncing the government's harsh treatment of religious, ethnic, linguistic or other minorities – whether they are recognized or not. On 20 November 2009, the UN General Assembly's Third Committee approved a further resolution (A/C.3/64/L.37) on human rights in Iran, which expressed particular concern, *inter alia*, over the situation of minorities. Both resolutions specifically mentioned the case of the seven Baha'i leaders.

The Baha'i community was not the only religious minority subjected to discrimination and harassment. According to USCIRF 2009, proselytizing continues to be prohibited by the Iranian government, which closely monitors the activities of evangelical Christians while discouraging Muslims from entering church premises. In September 2008, the Majlis (Iranian parliament) approved a revision to the Penal Code whereby apostasy, specifically conversion from Islam, would be punishable by death. This revision was reportedly implemented on a one-year trial basis. The Legal Judicial Committee of the Majlis, however, recommended removing it from the Penal Code in June 2009. USCIRF said there were no documented cases of the death penalty being applied for apostasy in 2009, although there were at least 10 reported arrests of Christian converts.

Although Jews are a recognized religious minority in Iran, they are increasingly concerned about their future security in the country. USCIRF 2009 reported increased hostility towards the Jewish community as a result of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's rhetorical attacks on Israel and Zionists, which have blurred the lines between Zionism, Judaism and Israel. Many Jews sought to limit their contact with Israel, or limit open support for the state of Israel, for fear of reprisal.

Non-Shia Muslims also faced substantial societal discrimination. According to AI, Iran's Kurds, most of whom are Sunni Muslims, face discrimination at least in part because of their religion, even though Sunni Islam is recognized and accorded formal legal standing in Iran. Many Sunni Muslims note the absence of a Sunni mosque in Tehran as a prominent example of the government's disregard for this minority. The USCIRF 2009 report

also noted that several Sunni mosques have been demolished in other parts of the country. Sunnis are under-represented in government-appointed positions in the provinces where they form a majority, such as Kurdistan and Khuzestan. The report stated that residents of these provinces have also reported discrimination and lack of resources, though it is difficult to determine whether this discrimination is based on religion, ethnicity or both. USCIRF 2009 also revealed that smaller religious communities, such as Mandaean-Sabeans and Sufis, have faced repression and harassment by authorities similar to that faced by other religious minorities.

Iran is also home to several ethnic minorities. The majority of the population is ethnically Persian (51 per cent). There are also Azeris (24 per cent), Gilaki and Mazandarani (8 per cent), a sizeable Kurdish minority (7 per cent), Arabs (3 per cent), as well as Lur, Baloch and Turkmen (2 per cent of the population each). The Constitution recognizes Persian as the official state language, while allowing the use of other regional and tribal languages in the press and in schools (Article 15). In addition, Article 16 of the Constitution provides that Arabic, which is the language of the Qur'an, must be taught in all classes of secondary schools. Despite these constitutional guarantees, AI reported the arrest of several Azeri activists in 2009, in connection with activities held to protest the lack of teaching in Azerbaijani Turkic. Several Kurdish activists faced a similar fate. Moreover, according to AI, Kurdish prisoners went on hunger strike between August and October to protest against the use of the death penalty on Kurdish political prisoners. Their efforts were in vain. Human Rights Watch (HRW) confirmed the execution by Iranian authorities of a Kurdish political prisoner, Ehsan Fattahian, on 11 November 2009, after a court had sentenced him to death in closed proceedings on charges of committing violent acts against national security.

Members of ethnic minorities continued to campaign for greater political participation, economic, social and cultural rights, as well as access to employment in the public sector. Their demands figured prominently in the debates leading up to the most contested elections in the modern history of Iran. Mehdi Karroubi, one of the presidential candidates in the 12 June 2009 elections and an influential Iranian reformist politician, promised to improve the situation of ethnic minorities and to protect

the rights of religious minorities. According to the Lowy Institute, an independent international policy think-tank based in Sydney, Australia, Karroubi also pledged to remove all forms of discrimination against women, many of whom are doubly disadvantaged as members of a marginalized ethnic or religious minority and because of the subordinate status reserved to women in some communities, such as the Balochi and Kurdish communities.

The disputed re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on 12 June 2009 was followed by widespread protests across the country. The protests were initially largely peaceful. As tensions grew, however, government forces clamped down on demonstrators, using excessive and sometimes lethal force, which resulted in the deaths of dozens of demonstrators, hundreds of injuries and at least 4,000 arbitrary detentions. The 20 November 2009 UN resolution (A/C.3/64/L.37), mentioned previously, also strongly condemned the government's crackdown on demonstrators in the aftermath of the contested elections and expressed deep concern at the 'serious ongoing and recurring human rights violations in Iran'. Indeed, the human rights situation in Iran remains alarming. Opposition protesters took to the streets again on 27 December 2009 during a religious Shi'ite holiday (Ashura), to denounce the Iranian government. Clashes subsequently erupted with security forces allegedly firing directly into the crowds. International media reported the deaths of at least four protesters, including a nephew of the opposition leader Mir Hussein Moussavi. Hundreds more were injured and there were numerous arrests.

Iraq

Iraq has been ripped apart by sectarian violence since the US-led coalition invasion of 2003. In the absence of stability and security, millions of Iraqis have been forced into displacement. As of January 2009, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that 1.9 million Iraqis had become refugees since 2003 and that there were an additional 2.6 million internally displaced. The majority of Iraqi refugees fled to Syria, which currently hosts close to 750,000 refugees, of whom 167,840 are assisted by the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Jordan is also host to some 500,000 Iraqi refugees, only a fraction of whom (46,500) are registered with UNHCR.

Although UNHCR is ready to facilitate the vol-

untary repatriation of up to 5,000 Iraqis in 2010, a survey conducted in 2009 revealed that the majority of Iraqis have no plans to return to their country in the foreseeable future. According to UNHCR and the NGO International Rescue Committee (IRC), resettlement remains the main durable solution for these refugees.

The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime also led to the displacement of thousands of Palestinian refugees who had hitherto been residing in Iraq. About 22,000–34,000 Palestinians were believed to live in Iraq at the beginning of the war, according to statistics published by the *Forced Migration Review*. Seen as being favoured by the previous regime, they have faced retaliatory attacks since its demise. UNHCR figures show that only 13,000 are believed to have remained in the country. About 1,500 of them have been living in extremely tough conditions in Al Waleed camp, located close to Iraq's border with Syria, after fleeing from persecution in Baghdad in recent years. According to UNHCR, in April 2009, 59 Palestinian refugees were evacuated from Al Waleed to Romania, where they will remain in a transit centre pending their resettlement to a third country. Another 98 refugees were evacuated in July 2009 to a transit centre in Slovakia. There are to be an additional 843 Palestinian refugees from Iraq at Al Tanf camp, located in the no-man's land between Iraq and Syria near Al Waleed, and 391 in Al Hol, on the Syrian side of the border. The UNHCR expected to have resettled the majority of Palestinian refugees in both these camps by the end of 2009; however the Al Tanf camp was closed in February 2010 and the remaining population was transferred temporarily to Al Hol, where they remain at the time of writing.

While millions of Iraqis have sought refuge in neighbouring countries since 2003, violence and sectarian strife continues to threaten the lives of the millions who chose to remain. According to MRG sources inside Iraq, members of religious and ethnic minorities are particularly vulnerable.

Kurds represent the largest non-Arab minority in the country (15–20 per cent of the population), followed by Assyrians and Turkmen. Other smaller ethnic (and ethno-religious) minorities in Iraq include Armenians, Fayli Kurds, Roma and Shabak. According to Article 4 of the Constitution, only Arabic and Kurdish are considered official languages of the state. The same article, however, recognizes the right of minorities to educate their children in

their mother tongue. It also recognizes the Turkman language and the Syriac language, which is the language spoken by small Christian communities in Iraq, as official languages in the administrative units densely populated by these minorities. The Constitution further guarantees the right for regions or governorates to adopt any other local language as an additional official language if the majority of its population so decides in a general referendum.

As for religious groups, the majority of the population in Iraq is Muslim (60–65 per cent Shia Muslim) and Islam is recognized as the state's official religion (Article 2 of the Constitution). The Constitution guarantees the right to religious freedom of Iraq's religious minorities, namely the Christians, Mandaean-Sabeans and Yezidis. There is also a very small Baha'i community, numbering fewer than 2,000 members, and an even smaller Jewish community of less than 20 Jews.

Although government efforts to restore security and stability have curbed sectarian violence, USCIRF 2009 reported that religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq continue to be at risk of attacks mainly orchestrated by al-Qaeda in Iraq or, in some cases, by Shia extremists. USCIRF 2009 reported that numerous women, including non-Muslims, 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 Yezidi minorities.

MRG and organizations such as the Mandaean Human Rights Group continued to document the ongoing targeting of Mandaean-Sabeans by Islamic militias, including cases of rape, kidnapping and forced conversion.

A November 2009 HRW report found religious minorities in northern Iraq to be caught in the middle of a struggle for land and resources between Arabs on the one hand, and leaders of Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish region on the other (also known as the Kurdistan Regional Government – KRG). According to the report, the KRG is accused of 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 among the insurgents to take it out on the Chaldo-Assyrian Christian, Yezidi and Shabak communities, labelling them 'crusaders', 'devil-worshippers' and 'infidels'.

According to USCIRF 2009, Christians and Yezidis 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, as reported by HRW.

The KRG received a political blow as a result of the January 2009 provincial elections in Nineveh province, when a nationalist Sunni party, al-Hadba, defeated the Kurdish coalition (Nineveh Fraternal List) after campaigning on an anti-KRG platform. USCIRF 2009 recorded that the provincial elections of January 2009 were, however, criticized by non-Muslims, particularly Christians and Yezidis, who reported being politically isolated by the Muslim majority because of their religion.

Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

Between 27 December 2008 and 18 January 2009, Israel conducted a large-scale military operation in the Gaza Strip, codenamed Operation Cast Lead. According to figures released in September 2009 by B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights organization, the most destructive military assault in Gaza's history resulted in the deaths of about 1,400 Palestinians, the majority of whom were civilians, and 13 Israelis, including three civilians. The military operation was spurred by rocket attacks against Israeli towns. Israeli air raids and the subsequent ground invasion wrought widespread destruction of Palestinian homes and other civilian infrastructure such as mosques and schools. The military operation followed an 18-month blockade of Gaza's borders, imposed after Hamas' takeover of Gaza in mid-2007, which had crippled its economy, leading to unprecedented levels of poverty and hardship among Gaza's 1.5 million residents – three-quarters of whom are refugees registered with UNRWA. According to a report released in October 2009 by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), an international medical relief NGO, 85 per cent of Gaza's population is entirely dependent on aid as result of the embargo.

On 3 April 2009, the President of the UN Human Rights Council established the UN Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict with a mandate:

'to investigate all violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law that

might have been committed at any time in the context of the military operations that were conducted in Gaza during the period from 27 December 2008 and 18 January 2009, whether before, during or after.'

The four-member mission was headed by Justice Richard Goldstone, who is a former justice of the Constitutional Court of South Africa and former Prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. On 25 September 2009, the mission issued its final report, which has become known as the Goldstone Report. The report found evidence of serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law committed by Palestinian militant groups and Israeli armed forces. The report was endorsed by the UN Human Rights Council on 16 October 2009, and on 5 November 2009, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 10883 giving Israel and the responsible Palestinian Authorities three months to undertake 'independent, credible investigations' into alleged violations of international humanitarian and human rights law committed during the conflict in Gaza.

The situation in Gaza ratcheted up the already tense relationship between Israel's Jewish majority and its Palestinian citizens. According to figures from Adalah, an Arab-Israeli legal advocacy group, Israel's Arab minority makes up about 20 per cent of the total population and brings together members of three religious communities: 81 per cent of them are Muslim, 10 per cent are Christian and 9 per cent are Druze. The rise of the right in Israel in the February 2009 elections did not bode well for Israel's Palestinians. In the run-up to the elections, prime ministerial candidate Avigdor Lieberman ran an electoral campaign against Israeli Arabs. As reported in Israeli daily newspaper *Haaretz*, Lieberman's far-right party, Yisrael Beitenu, shaped its campaign around the slogan, 'No citizenship without loyalty', which was aimed at Palestinian citizens of Israel, some of whom the party accuses of constituting a fifth column. Lieberman is known for his inflammatory statements about Arabs. According to international media, Lieberman has openly advocated the 'transfer' of Palestinian citizens in Israel and has called for the execution on the grounds of treason of Palestinian members of the Knesset who met with Hamas members on the West Bank or in the Gaza Strip. Revealing an alarming shift to the far right by a section of Israeli society, Lieberman's party emerged as

the third largest in Israel after the February 2009 general elections. On 16 March, his party entered into the coalition government led by right-wing Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu. Lieberman currently serves as Minister of Foreign Affairs and also has the title of Deputy Prime Minister.

Following the formation of the coalition government, Yisrael Beitenu introduced a series of bills detrimental to Palestinian citizens of Israel. In May 2009, a Yisrael Beitenu Member of Knesset (MK) proposed a bill that would have made it illegal to mark Israel's Independence Day as a day of mourning. Israel's Independence Day is commemorated by Palestinians worldwide as the day of Catastrophe ('Nakba'), as it marks the forced displacement of two-thirds of the Palestinian population from their homes during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. The so-called Nakba Law would have made participation in Nakba Day events punishable by three years' imprisonment. The Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI), Israel's oldest and largest human rights organization, criticized the legislation as impinging on citizens' freedom of speech, and as likely to increase the isolation and alienation felt by Palestinian citizens of Israel. A softer version

Below: Israeli border police deny entry to Muslims who came to attend Friday prayers at the Al-Aqsa mosque, in Jerusalem's old city. October 2009. *Abikam Seril/Panos.*

was approved by the Ministerial Committee for Legislation in July 2009, thus putting it on the fast track for ratification in the Knesset (the Israeli parliament). According to ACRI, the approved version gives the Finance Minister the authority to withhold funding from bodies that mark Israel's Independence Day as a day of mourning. In other words, it will enable the government to cut off funding to Arab local authorities and other groups that mark the Nakba.

The Palestinian narrative of displacement and dispossession was under further attack when, in October 2009, the Israeli Ministry of Education decided to withdraw all copies of a history textbook, meant for the 11th and 12th grades, after the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* reported in September that the textbook for the first time presented the Palestinian claim that there had been ethnic cleansing in 1948. A revised version of the textbook is expected to be approved in 2010.



Yisrael Beitenu presented additional bills targeting Israel's Palestinian citizens. In May 2009, the party proposed a 'Loyalty Oath' bill, which would have required every Israeli citizen to take an oath that would include a pledge of loyalty to Israel as a Jewish, Zionist and democratic state; to its emblems and values; and to serve Israel either through military service or through any equivalent alternatives. The bill was rejected by all members of the Ministerial Legislative Committee, excluding Yisrael Beitenu MKs. In January 2010, a similar bill calling for all MKs to swear a 'loyalty oath' to the state was proposed by Yisrael Beitenu's MK David Rotem. The bill, which was set to be discussed at the Knesset's Ministerial Legislation Committee, would require the oath to be changed from 'I promise to be loyal to the State of Israel' to 'I promise to be loyal to the State of Israel as a Jewish, Zionist, democratic state, and to its symbols and values.' A year ago, Arab MKs' loyalty to the State of Israel was put into question when the Central Elections Committee (CEC) decided to bar Israel Arab parties from running in the February 2009 parliamentary elections. The CEC's decision was eventually overturned by the Supreme Court of Israel, following an appeal filed by Arab politicians.

Palestinian citizens of Israel were further expected to demonstrate their loyalty to the state by performing military service. Israel's Chief Commander, Gabi Ashkenazi, stated in September 2009 that all Israeli citizens should be required to perform national service. Israeli Arabs, both Christians and Muslims, have been exempted from military service since the State of Israel's establishment in 1948 as the authorities were reluctant to arm this potentially hostile Palestinian minority. The only exception was the Druze community, whose leaders agreed in the 1950s to their sons' conscription. The majority of Palestinian citizens of Israel opt not to join the army, as they object to the Israeli military's actions in the occupied Palestinian territories. USCIRF 2009 noted that their decision not to serve in the army puts them at a disadvantage as many rights and benefits in Israel are contingent on military service and therefore are claimed mostly by the Jewish population, including a wide variety of jobs, entitlement to state-controlled land and economic privileges such as cheap loans and tax breaks. In calling for mandatory national service, Ashkenazi noted that those Israelis who refused to serve could not expect 'civil equality'.

According to USCIRF 2009, government allocations of state resources favour Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jewish religious groups and institutions, discriminating against non-Jews and non-Orthodox streams of Judaism. The government also implements regulations to protect Jewish sites only, USCIRF 2009 noted. Non-Jewish religious sites do not enjoy legal protection under the 1967 Protection of Holy Sites Law because the government does not officially recognize these sites as holy. In 2004, Adalah filed a petition criticizing the government's failure to implement regulations to protect non-Jewish holy sites, many of which have been desecrated or converted to other uses. In March 2009, the Supreme Court ruled that 'implementing regulations to protect Islamic holy sites is unnecessary'.

Further, USCIRF 2009 said that Muslim residents of the Be'er Sheva area, in southern Israel, continued to protest 'the municipality's intention to reopen the city's old mosque as a museum rather than as a mosque for the area's Muslim residents'. According to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR), a Gaza-based NGO, the Israeli military also raided the al-Aqsa mosque in occupied East Jerusalem on 25 October 2009, and was accused of using excessive force against Palestinian civilians who attempted to prevent the raid. The raid followed a call by Jewish groups who had urged their followers to break into the al-Aqsa mosque to conduct Talmudic rituals. The PCHR reported another similar assault on the al-Aqsa mosque on 27 September 2009, when a number of Israeli settlers attempted to break into the yard of the mosque.

Christian religious sites were not left unscathed either. In November 2009, the global news agency Agence France Presse (AFP) reported the carrying out of unilateral work on the Holy Sepulchre Church in occupied East Jerusalem by the Israeli Antiquities Authorities (IAA). According to AFP, the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, which looks after Christian holy places on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church and liaises with other Christian denominations, protested the IAA's actions and asked it to refrain from altering the status quo pertaining to the Holy Sepulchre Church.

Jewish settlers also sought to establish a presence in East Jerusalem's central Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood, the location of many noteworthy landmarks. In a series of evictions on 2 August 2009, 53 Palestinians, including 20 children, were forced out

of their homes in Sheikh Jarrah by the Israeli authorities, following a court ruling. Their properties were handed over to a settler organization that intends to build a new settlement in the area. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the planned settlement will place an estimated 475 Palestinians at risk of forced eviction, dispossession and displacement.

In the occupied West Bank, Palestinians continued to be subjected to Israeli settler violence, with reports of settlers assaulting and destroying Palestinian property. In December 2009, settlers set fire to a mosque in the northern West Bank village of Yasuf. According to USCIRF 2009, most instances of settler violence and property destruction did not result in arrests or convictions.

Palestinian Muslim and Christian residents of the occupied West Bank were also unable to reach places of worship and to practise their religious rites owing to Israel's strict closure policies. As noted in the US State Department's International Religious Freedom Report (IRFR 2009), the construction of the separation barrier by the Israeli government, begun in 2002, 'has severely limited access to holy sites and seriously impeded the work of religious organizations that provide education, healthcare, and other humanitarian relief and social services to Palestinians, particularly in and around East Jerusalem'. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), an organization monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide, the construction of the barrier, which was condemned by the International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinion of 2004, has resulted in the confiscation of property owned by Palestinians and several religious institutions, and the displacement of thousands of Muslim and Christian residents of the West Bank. The impact of the barrier on access to religious sites was highlighted in the IRFR 2009:

'The separation barrier made it particularly difficult for Bethlehem-area Christians to reach the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, and made visits to Christian sites in Bethany and Bethlehem difficult for Palestinian Christians who live on the Jerusalem side of the barrier, further fragmenting and dividing this small minority community.'

The IRFR 2009 further noted that Israel prevented thousands of Palestinian Muslims from the West

Bank and the Gaza Strip from entering Jerusalem to access the Haram al-Sharif sanctuary, including the al-Aqsa mosque. Citing security concerns, Israeli authorities also generally restricted access to the mosque for Palestinian residents of Jerusalem, especially males under the age of 50, and sometimes women under the age of 45.

Jordan

A decade since King Abdullah II ascended the throne of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the country remains relatively stable in a region mired in conflicts and political turmoil. The majority of the Kingdom's small population of 6.3 million is Sunni Muslim (around 92 per cent). Christians of various denominations make up about 6 per cent of the population. The remaining 2 per cent include Shia Muslims, approximately 1,000 Baha'is, and an estimated 14,000 Druze. Small Circassian (Muslim) and Armenian (Christian) minorities together make up about 2 per cent of the population. No statistics are available on the number of persons who are not adherents of any religious faith.

Jordan is also home to about 500,000 Iraqi refugees, of whom only 46,500 are registered with the UNHCR. Forty-five per cent of the Iraqi refugees registered with the UNHCR are Sunni Muslim, 35 per cent are Shia Muslim and 12 per cent are Christian. There are also close to 2 million Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA. According to UNRWA, all Palestinian refugees in Jordan were granted full Jordanian citizenship, with the exception of some 120,000 refugees originally from the Gaza Strip (also known as ex-Gazans). The latter are eligible for temporary Jordanian passports, which do not entitle them to full citizenship rights such as the right to vote and employment with the government.

Article 2 of Jordan's Constitution recognizes Islam as the state's religion and Arabic as its official language. The Constitution also recognizes the equal rights of Jordanians before the law and prohibits discrimination between them as regards to their rights and duties on the grounds of race, language or religion (Article 6). The Constitution further guarantees the freedom to exercise all forms of worship and religious rites, provided they do not violate public order or morality (Article 14).

Christians form the largest religious minority in

Jordan. On 21 January 2009, the cabinet designated the Council of Church Leaders as the government's reference point for all Christian affairs. The Council includes heads of the 11 officially recognized Christian denominations in the country. According to the Jamestown Foundation, a USA-based think-tank, the Council does not, however, represent non-recognized Christian denominations, such as evangelical groups. Nevertheless, USCIRF 2009 confirmed the absence of any reports of discrimination or incitement against Jordan's Christian minority. It is said that Christians serve regularly as cabinet ministers, and they are represented in both the Lower and Upper Houses of Parliament.

In May 2009, Pope Benedict XVI visited Jordan as part of a wider tour of the Holy Land, which included stops in Israel and the West Bank. The Pope's visit was aimed at encouraging the minority Christian community in the Middle East, and promoting better inter-faith dialogue between followers of the three Abrahamic religions.

Despite the relative tolerance displayed by Jordan towards religious minorities, there are nevertheless some instances in which the government has interfered with the religious freedom of Muslim and non-Muslim groups. USCIRF 2009 highlighted the sensitive situation of converts, who face discrimination and harassment, as the government continues to prohibit conversion from Islam. The government does not recognize converts from Islam as falling under the jurisdiction of their new religious community's laws in matters of personal status. They are still considered Muslims.

Strict penalties are also applied in cases of slander of Islam or the Prophet Muhammad. On 21 June 2009, the court sentenced *Al-Arab al-Youm* reporter and poet Islam Samhan to one year's imprisonment and fined him US \$14,000 (10,000 Jordanian dinars), on charges of slandering Islam through his use of Qur'anic verses in a book of love poetry. He was released on bail pending an appeal of the Court of First Instance's ruling.

Although the government does not recognize the Druze religion or the Baha'i faith, it does not prohibit their practice. They are, however, identified in official government papers as Muslims, or a space/dash is marked under the religion field. Furthermore, Baha'i marriages are not recognized and they are thus unable to get birth certificates for their children. They are also prohibited from reg-

istering schools or places of worship, according to USCIRF 2009.

Lebanon

The 15-year Lebanese civil war ended with the signing of the 1989 Ta'if Agreement. Twenty years on, Lebanon continues to be divided along sectarian lines. Post-independence, Lebanon's political system was institutionalized in the National Pact of 1943. The National Pact had introduced a confessional formula, which provided for the representation of Christians and Muslims in a six to five ratio throughout government. Furthermore, the offices of president, prime minister and speaker of the parliament were allocated to the Maronite, Sunni and Shia sects respectively. Following a bloody internal conflict, the Ta'if Agreement replaced the six to five ratio of parliamentary seats, which had previously favoured Christians, with a more equitable division of parliamentary seats between Muslims and Christians. Accordingly, nine new Muslim seats were added to the Chamber, creating a 54-54 seat balance. The Agreement, however, maintained the distribution along religious lines of the country's offices of state. Appointments in the public sector are similarly based on a sectarian quota system.

Although the Ta'if Agreement provided for the eventual abolition of political sectarianism, little progress has been made in this regard. In a televised address, President Michel Suleiman proposed to establish a national committee charged with the abolition of the country's confessional political system. His proposal was seconded by Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri, who vowed to set up the committee and implement the Ta'if Agreement's provisions on the abolition of political sectarianism. The president's proposal was met with resistance and scepticism in Lebanon's wider political circles, thus casting doubt on whether the country is indeed ready to part with its confessional political system.

Sectarian tensions continue to underlie Lebanon's fragile balance of power. The assassination of Lebanon's Sunni Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri, in February 2005 created a rivalry between pro-Syrian political groups (otherwise known as the March 8 Alliance), and pro-Western political parties (otherwise known as the March 14 Alliance). The March 8 Alliance consists mainly of the Hezbollah and Amal Shi'ite groups, and followers of the Free Patriotic Movement's Maronite leader Michel

'I feel that my basic freedoms and rights are violated'

Lubna Mohamad, a Muslim Palestinian residing in Ramallah, talks to Lena El-Malak about how difficult it is for Palestinians living under occupation to access religious sites in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. While Palestinians do not constitute a minority in the OPT, Lubna's issues of access reflect the severe restrictions also facing Israeli Arabs when trying to visit Muslim and Christian holy sites in the West Bank. This continued to be true during 2009. Age restrictions concerning access to the al-Aqsa mosque also apply to Palestinians living in Jerusalem.

Lubna says that in the case of occupied East Jerusalem, the obstacles are often impossible to overcome.

'Although I live in Ramallah, which is only a 15-minute drive from Jerusalem, I have not been able to visit Jerusalem in years. In order for a West Banker to enter the holy city, they need to get a permit from the Israelis. Unless there is a compelling reason, like a critical medical condition requiring urgent treatment in Jerusalem, the Israelis do not grant permits to enter the city. Only women over 55 and men over 60 can request a permit to enter Jerusalem to pray in the al-Aqsa mosque. Since I am under the age of 55, I have not been able to enter Jerusalem in years.'

Prompted to talk about how this makes her feel, Lubna said:

'I feel that my basic freedoms and rights are violated. I am denied the right to freedom of movement and,

as a consequence of that, I am also deprived of my rights as a Muslim, to access and pray in holy sites located in East Jerusalem. Jerusalem is essentially sealed off, and Palestinians in the West Bank are walled in.'

She adds:

'The difficulty is not only in accessing Jerusalem. It is also not easy for a Palestinian living under the occupation to travel from one town in the West Bank to another. For instance, if I wish to pray in the tomb of the biblical patriarch Abraham in Hebron (Haram il Ibrahim), which is a holy site for Muslims, I would first have to cross three Israeli military checkpoints to reach Hebron. Although Hebron is only about an hour's drive from Ramallah, I need at least two and a half hours to get there because of the checkpoints. Assuming the Israelis let me into the city, I would still need permission from the Israeli army to enter the area of the Haram il Ibrahim mosque. Because the army is often suspicious of people who are visiting from outside Hebron, when they check my ID and discover that I am a resident of Ramallah, they can deny me entry to the area where the mosque is located. Sometimes, residents of Hebron are also denied entry to that area under the pretext that it may endanger the security of the 400 settlers who have occupied it.'

Lubna points out that the problem is not just one of access to holy sites. It is also about the security of those who are praying in these sites.

'Just think of the massacre of worshippers in the Haram il Ibrahim mosque in Hebron in 1996 by a Jewish settler. Worshippers have also been attacked while praying in the al-Aqsa mosque in occupied East Jerusalem, and the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem was under siege for several weeks in 2002. So, the issue really is the occupation. It is not just about removing a few checkpoints or allowing access to one holy site or another. It is about putting an end to the illegal Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem.' ■

Aoun, while the March 14 Alliance consists of the Future Movement led by Saad Hariri, the son of the slain prime minister, and the Lebanese Forces led by Maronite leader Samir Geagea. A tight race during the parliamentary elections of 7 June 2009 ended with the victory of the March 14 Alliance and the appointment of Saad Hariri as prime minister. After five months of intense negotiations with the opposition, Hariri was finally able to form a national unity government on 10 November 2009. He also made a landmark visit to Syria in December 2009, which marked the end of five years of animosity between Damascus and the March 14 Alliance, led by Hariri.

Although its confessional distribution of public offices may be viewed as inherently discriminatory, Lebanon's government generally respects religious rights. Lebanon's Constitution protects religious freedom and the freedom to practise all religious rites, provided that the public order is not disturbed. Religious groups are, however, legally required to register with the government in order to conduct most religious activities. There are 18 officially recognized religious groups in Lebanon. The two largest Muslim groups are Sunnis (28 per cent of the population) and Shias (28 per cent of the population), according to the most recent demographic study conducted by Statistics Lebanon, a Beirut-based research firm. 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.

Lebanon's Jews have been without a place of worship since Israeli shelling destroyed their synagogue in 1982. Plans to repair the capital's remaining synagogue were suspended in 2009 as funding failed to materialize, thus forcing the Lebanese Jewish Community Council to appeal to the international community for help to carry on the work.

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. USCIRF 2009 reported continued acts of vandalism committed against a Jewish-owned cemetery in downtown Beirut. 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. In April 2009, Interior Minister Ziad Baroud submitted a proposal to the cabinet to amend legislation by referring to 'Jewish Lebanese' citizens instead of 'Israelis'.

The government does not, however, require citizens' religious affiliations to be indicated on their passports. A circular issued by the Ministry of Interior on 11 February 2009 removed the requirement to inscribe a citizen's religious affiliation on national identity cards and civil registry records. HRW viewed this move as a step in the right direction, while noting that further steps were needed for Lebanon to meet its international human rights obligations. USCIRF 2009 highlighted the disadvantaged status under the law of unrecognized religious groups, such as Baha'is, Buddhists and Hindus, who are required to register as part of another recognized religious organization in order to marry, divorce or inherit property in Lebanon.

According to UNRWA, Lebanon is home to about 422,000 Palestinian refugees, or an estimated 10 per cent of the population. These refugees continue to be denied basic social and civil rights, such as the right to own property. Considered as foreigners under Lebanon's current labour law, they are prohibited from working in any syndicated profession. This has forced many Palestinian refugees to work illegally, rendering them vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination. The Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC), established in 2005 by the Lebanese Council of Ministers, has recently submitted a detailed plan to the government reforming Lebanese labour law to facilitate Palestinian employment. The plan is still being reviewed by the government.

Saudi Arabia

As with most countries in the Gulf region, Saudi Arabia is home to a large expatriate community. About 10 million foreigners, nearly half the country's population, reside in various parts of the Kingdom. There are no official statistics of the religious denominations of foreigners. They include Hindus, Christians, Sikhs and Muslims. As for Saudi's citizens, 85–90 per cent of them are Sunni Muslim, while the remaining 10–15 per cent are Shia.

According to the Kingdom's Basic Law, the Qur'an and the Sunnah (the Prophet's sayings and

traditions) are the country's Constitution. Arabic is its sole official language. The government'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. Freedom of religion is not explicitly protected under the law and is severely restricted in practice. Non-Muslims and many Muslims who have not espoused 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), Saudi Arabia's 'religious police', charged with monitoring social behaviour and enforcing Wahhabi principles of morality, continues to conduct raids on private non-Muslim religious gatherings, USCIRF 2009 recorded. It documented cases where the CPVPV also harasses women, especially foreign Muslim women, for failure to observe strict dress codes, particularly failure to wear headscarves.

Further, USCIRF 2009 noted that Muslims who do not adhere to the government's interpretation of Sharia also faced 'significant political, economic, legal, social, and religious discrimination, including limited employment and educational opportunities, under-representation in official institutions, and restrictions on the practice of their faith and on the building of places of worship and community centers.' The largest group affected is Saudi's Shia minority. Shias face systematic discrimination in education, employment, political representation, religious practice and the media. The government was reported to discriminate against Shias in the selection process for students, professors and administrators at public universities. Shia students also experienced intolerance within the primary and secondary school systems. There are few Shias in high-level positions in government-owned companies or in government agencies. Shias are also under-represented in senior government positions.

Many Shias are also subjected to systematic religious discrimination. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs Endowments Da'wa and Guidance (MOIA) does not supervise or finance the construction and maintenance of Shia mosques, unlike Sunni mosques. Shias are thus forced to rely entirely on private contributions to construct their mosques. They are also required to obtain the permission of the MOIA, the local municipality and the provincial

government in order to build a new mosque. Sunnis do not need the government's approval to construct new mosques. The government was reported to have denied Shias permission to construct or register community centres.

Hostility towards Saudi Arabia's Shia community led to clashes between Shias and the CPVPV in Medina in February 2009. The clashes triggered a wave of unrest, resulting in the arrest of dozens of people. To restore calm, King Abdullah released all the detainees but the situation remains volatile.

Syria

The majority of Syria's population is Sunni Muslim (74 per cent). The country is also home to a number of other Muslim groups, including Alawites, who are a sect of Shia Islam, Ismailis and Shia. Together they constitute 13 per cent of the population. Druze account for another 3 per cent of the population, while various Christian groups make up the remaining 10 per cent. There is also a small Yezidi community of 30,000 members and between 100 and 200 Jews.

There is no official state religion. The Constitution requires, however, that the president be Muslim and stipulates that Islamic jurisprudence should be a principal source of legislation (Article 3). President Bashar al-Assad and his family are Alawites while his wife is a Sunni Muslim.

Syria's Constitution protects religious freedom and guarantees religious minorities the right to hold any religious rites, provided that they do not disturb the public order (Article 35). Notwithstanding these constitutional guarantees, the government has imposed some restrictions on the freedom to worship. The government continues to outlaw Jehovah's Witnesses and forbids them from drawing attention to their activities. The government also discourages proselytizing and does not recognize the religious status of Muslims who convert to Christianity. Interestingly, however, the government has allowed Shia missionaries to construct mosques and convert Sunnis. USCIRF 2009 noted that this type of missionary activity was not considered as proselytizing because the government does not distinguish between Islamic sects.

Religious laws continue to govern the marriages and divorces of the respective religious communities. According to USCIRF 2009, government-appointed religious judges have applied Sharia-based personal



Left: A congregation of Christian women during Sunday prayer in Kamishli church, Syria. *Alfredo Caliz/Panos.*

its sole official language. The Constitution does not provide explicit protections to religious or ethnic minorities. Muslims and followers of religious groups other than Islam are free to worship according to their beliefs. The government does, however, forbid conversion from Islam and the proselytizing of Muslims. According to statistics released by the UN news agency IRIN, Yemen's population is predominantly Muslim Arab, with Sunnis constituting 53 per cent of the population and Zaydi Shias 45 per cent.

Once a sizeable minority of 50,000–60,000 people, the majority of Yemeni Jews were flown to Israel after its establishment in 1948 as part of an international airlift known as 'Operation Magic Carpet'. The lifting of a subsequent travel ban in 1991 prompted about 1,200 Jews to emigrate, mainly to Israel. Only 370 Jews remain in Yemen today and their numbers are in steady decline. The majority of Yemen's Jews reside in Amran, a region in the north of the country, and there is a smaller community of about 60 Jews in the Yemeni capital Sana'a. At least two functioning synagogues remain in the Amran Governorate.

Hostility towards the country's small Jewish community has increased over the years. NGOs and community organizations have reported incidents of threats and murder. Although the perpetrator of one such crime was eventually sentenced to death in June 2009, the government's inability to protect this endangered community adequately from increased threats by Muslim extremists is reportedly forcing Yemen's remaining Jews to emigrate. In October 2009, the *Wall Street Journal*, the US-based international daily newspaper, published a report on a secret mission to bring some of Yemen's last remaining Jews to the United States. About 60 Yemeni Jews have resettled in the US since July 2009. Officials have indicated that another 100 could follow.

North Yemen faced what the UN described as a 'humanitarian catastrophe', with the number of displaced reaching 250,000 over the six-year conflict between the government and al-Houthi rebels. The militant group consists of followers of the late rebel cleric Hussein Badr Eddine al-Houthi, who led a

rebellion against the government before being killed in 2004. The rebels denounce years of discrimination against the minority Shia community in the north.

The Yemeni government accuses the Houthis of wanting to re-establish imamate rule and seeking the autonomy of the northern Sa'adah province. To quash these aspirations, the government launched an offensive against the rebel group in August 2009. Fighting escalated again in November, when some Houthis infiltrated Saudi Arabia, drawing it into the conflict. At the end of the year, there were reports that the militant group's leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, had been severely wounded by Yemeni government forces. The fighting was ongoing in January 2010. ■

status law in a manner that discriminates against women. Syria's civil rights movements scored a minor victory, however, when, in July 2009, the Presidency of the Council of Ministers dismissed a personal status draft law proposed by religious conservatives and reversing progressive thinking on women's and children's rights. In November 2009, media reported that the draft law was returned to the Ministry of Justice and is currently under revision.

Although the government allows the various religious minority groups to worship freely, it closely monitors the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist movements. The government has been homing in on Islamist groups, since an armed attack at a Shia shrine in September 2008 left 17 people dead. In January 2009, media reported that the Syrian government began a comprehensive overhaul of its regulation of Islamic schools after it was revealed that one of the persons behind the September attack had studied at a local religious institute. The government has not yet closed any

religious schools or institutes. According to *Syria Today*, it is, however, closely monitoring their sources of funding and has severed any ambiguous ties between charitable trusts and educational institutions.

Syria is also home to ethnic minorities, including Kurds and Palestinians. Syria's Kurds have faced discrimination for decades. According to the UN news agency IRIN, an estimated 220,000 have not been granted citizenship, thus prohibiting them from owning property and severely limiting their access to education and public sector jobs. Kurdish parties remain outlawed and the government continues to arrest individuals actively engaged in them. Government-run schools also prohibit Kurdish students from learning in their native tongue, although they are allowed to speak Kurdish in public.

Yemen

According to the Constitution of the Republic of Yemen, Islam is the religion of the state and Arabic