



LIBYA

LEBANON

SYRIA

ISRAEL/OT/  
Palestinian Authority

EGYPT

JORDAN

IRAQ

KUWAIT

IRAN

SAUDI ARABIA

BAHRAIN

QATAR

U.A.E .

YEMEN

OMAN

ARABIAN  
SEA

Middle  
East and  
North  
Africa

Said Shehata

In 2012, the Middle East and North Africa witnessed several dramatic changes that affected ethnic and religious minorities in different countries. Egypt elected its first Muslim Brotherhood president, Mohamed Morsi, and the country experienced waves of violence and instability after he came into office.<sup>1</sup> Morsi was a polarizing figure and steps taken by his government caused concern among minority communities. While the number of fatalities and injuries from sectarian violence decreased in 2012 compared to 2011, Coptic Christians continued to experience attacks on churches and properties throughout the year, and some were imprisoned. The violence reached its peak a few months after year's end with an attack on the Coptic Orthodox Cathedral, seat of the community's Pope, in April 2013.

During 2012 the 'Arab Spring' turned into an 'Arab Autumn' in Egypt and other countries, such as Libya, Tunisia and Yemen. A 2012 Pew Center study found that the Middle East and North Africa region ranked the worst with regard to government restrictions on freedom of religion and religious sectarian violence; according to the Pew Center, governments in the region are more restrictive than anywhere else.

In Libya, there were elections for the General National Congress in July, but there were disputes about representation of some areas, such as Jebel Nafusa. At the same time there were several incidents of violence, since the government was unable to control the militias. The American ambassador to Libya was killed in Benghazi in September. Prime Minister Ali Zidan formed a new government, which was approved by the General National Congress in October. Zidan attempted to forge a broad coalition by including liberals and Islamists in his cabinet. Meanwhile, the situation for minorities remained serious, with non-Arabs and Christians being targeted by militant groups. Black Libyans, including persons of sub-Saharan origin, were particularly vulnerable. The population of Tawergha remained displaced, after having been forced out of the city in August 2011 by armed groups from Misrata.

In Iraq, there were hundreds of incidents of violence and in one day more than 100 people were killed. The number of civilian casualties increased. The political scene continued to

be characterized by deep divisions. Tariq al-Hashimi, the Sunni vice-president, was sentenced to death *in absentia* on terrorism charges, but he insisted that the charges and sentence were politically motivated. Tensions in the government reflected the fraught relations between the Sunni and Shi'a Muslim communities. Christians, Turkmen, Yezidis and other minorities in Iraq continued to be targeted, and large numbers remained displaced. For smaller minorities, such as the Sabean Mandaean, their continuing existence as a community is in doubt.

In Syria, the violence increased for the second year since the uprising in March 2011. According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), nearly 93,000 people had been killed by spring 2013. By the end of 2012, 750,000 had left the country, and well over 2 million people had been displaced inside Syria. Minorities, such as Christians and Alawites, fear being targeted if the Bashar al-Assad regime collapses. There were cases of Christians being forced to leave their houses and flee for their lives by both government and anti-government forces.

In Saudi Arabia, Shi'a Muslims continued to face arrest and detention. In Iran, the regime continued to discriminate against minorities. There were executions and imprisonment of members of different ethnic and religious minorities in 2012, including Ahwazi Arabs.

Across the region then, the picture is gloomy. There is an urgent need throughout the Middle East and North Africa to ensure the protection of minorities, in accordance with UN instruments of human rights and minority rights. Secular authoritarian regimes, as in Syria, have sought to convince minorities that they are safer when their forces remain in control. However, in the long term, this strategy is fraught with danger for minorities, as they risk being targeted by opposition forces as having been too closely linked to such regimes. Clearly, true democracy remains a distant prospect for both minorities and majority groups.

## Egypt

In June 2012 the country elected its first Islamist president, Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party. This

marked a turning point for Egyptians generally and minorities in particular. There were hopes that Morsi could be a president 'for all Egyptians', as he said on several occasions, but Morsi excluded opponents from decision-making processes and appointed members of the Muslim Brotherhood to key positions in government.

Morsi faced repeated controversy in taking some decisions, such as setting the date of the House of Representatives elections for April 2013, despite widespread fears that the country was not yet prepared, and with regard to the reinstating of the People's Assembly (the lower house of parliament) in July, despite a ruling by the Supreme Constitutional Court that the electoral law was flawed. Morsi was also criticized for rushing the draft Constitution to referendum in December. Although nearly two-thirds of voters backed the new Constitution, it was widely criticized for ignoring women and not going far enough to protect minorities. For example, Article 43 affirmed freedom of religion but limited it to Islam, Christianity and Judaism – risking the further exclusion of Bahá'is. Several articles appeared to criminalize defamation of religion; similar clauses or legislation in other countries have led to the targeting of minorities.<sup>2</sup>

Religious minorities, including Copts, Shi'as and Bahá'is, continued to experience discrimination and their situation did not improve in 2012. There has been an increase in attacks on Christians and churches in Egypt since the fall of the former regime. The Egyptian government has failed or been slow to protect Copts, who comprise about 10 per cent of the population, and other religious minorities.

There were a number of incidents in which Copts and churches were targeted during the year. In January 2012, homes of Copts in Sharbat village, near Alexandria, were burned following rumours of an alleged relationship between a married Muslim woman and a Christian man. In February, eight Christian families were evicted from the village by police, and local religious and political figures, reportedly following a so-called 'reconciliation' session. The eviction was overturned two weeks later after media campaigns and a visit by some parliamentarians to the village; however no one was prosecuted. In August, in Dahshour, Giza governorate, about

100 families escaped after Christian homes and shops were set on fire.

While the number of fatalities and injuries from sectarian violence fell in 2012 compared with 2011, the situation remained very serious and escalated in early 2013 with the attack on the Coptic Orthodox St Mark's Cathedral, seat of the Coptic Pope Tawadros II, in April 2013. Two people were killed and over 80 were injured. Police fired tear gas into the compound and were accused of standing by as assailants attacked those inside. The congregation had gathered to mourn four Copts who had died the weekend before in religious violence in Khosous. A Muslim also died in that earlier incident.

During 2012 a number of Copts were imprisoned on blasphemy charges. In September Bishoy Kameel, a Copt from Sohag, was detained and then sentenced to six years in prison after posting cartoons on Facebook allegedly insulting to the Prophet Muhammad and President Morsi. Also in September, Alber Saber, an atheist from a Coptic family, was sentenced to three years' imprisonment on blasphemy charges with regard to both Islam and Christianity. He posted videos critical of religions. He was released in January 2013 and left the country. In contrast, Ahmed Mohammed Abdullah, known as Abu Islam, mocked Christianity on his TV show and tore the Bible in front of the American Embassy in Cairo. He was tried but released on bail.

In May, 12 Copts in Minya were sentenced to life in prison and eight Muslims were acquitted by an Emergency State Security Court in connection with clashes between Muslims and Christians in 2011. No Muslims were jailed on this occasion. The case went to retrial in January 2013.

The violence and lack of accountability gave rise to a growing climate of impunity. Moreover, legislation remained in place requiring official permission that made it difficult for Coptic communities to construct churches; no new churches were built during 2012. A rising number of Copts were leaving the country by the end of 2012, according to community leaders.

Shi'a Muslims, Bahá'is and other religious minorities also face discrimination. Analysts fear that Egypt is becoming increasingly divided along religious and political lines. The lack of

official recognition of Shi'a Islam and the Bahá'í faith puts these groups in a difficult position with regard to their religious practices and their daily lives. Some Egyptian Sunnis question whether Shi'as are real Muslims; this stereotype persists in spite of some attempts by al-Azhar University, a leading Sunni institution in Egypt and the Muslim world, to bring Sunnis and Shi'as together.

In January 2012, Egyptian authorities reportedly closed the Shi'a Husseinia mosque in Cairo to prevent Shi'a Muslims from observing the annual Ashura rituals. The mosque had only just been opened. Shi'as are forbidden from building their own religious places where they can practise their beliefs. There were no Shi'a representatives in the Constituent Assembly. In addition, there have been media attacks on Shi'as by some Salafist TV channels (Salafists are a strictly orthodox Sunni Muslim sect, which advocates a return to the early Islam of the time of the Prophet and the first four Caliphates).

Mohamed Afour, a Shi'a teacher, was sentenced to a year in prison after having been arrested while reportedly practising his Shi'a rituals in a mosque. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights said that he was sentenced because of his faith. The state continues to apply discriminatory measures against Shi'as, while leaving the community exposed to the growing danger of Salafi extremism, according to Ahmad Rasem El-Nafis, a prominent Shi'a scholar. According to El-Nafis, the Egyptian authorities do not offer adequate protection.

Bahá'is were previously not eligible to obtain identity cards because the only options under 'religion' were Muslim, Christian or Jew. But in 2009 a court allowed Bahá'is to leave the field empty. However, many of them have yet to receive identity cards, and this affects their daily lives, regarding matters such as inheritance, legal marriage and pensions.

With regard to women, sexual harassment continued without any serious steps by the government to stop it. For example, in June, at least six Egyptian and foreign women were sexually assaulted in Tahrir Square, Cairo. On rare occasions, cases were referred to the courts but there have been no prosecutions of those who committed these acts. The only military officer

who was tried for sexual assault of some female protesters was acquitted by a military judge.

Moreover, an article guaranteeing equality between men and women was removed from the 2012 Constitution, although there is provision for equality before the law without discrimination and an article that says that the state shall guarantee coordination between the duties of the woman and her public work. It will also provide protection and care for divorced and widowed women.

With regard to Nubians, activist Manal al-Tiby was the representative for Nubians in the Constituent Assembly, but she withdrew her membership in September 2012 in protest against what she described as the domination of Islamists in the drafting of the Constitution. The new Constitution makes no mention of Nubians as a distinct ethnic group. Tens of Nubians held demonstrations against selling land that they claim is ancient Nubian property. The government replied that development projects in this area were planned to benefit the Nubian community. 'Nubians want full citizenship, where their history is celebrated and taught in schools' curricula, going back to the land around the lake, naming the lake (currently called Lake Nasser) Nubia Lake and having a say in the development plans in their region,' according to writer and activist Fatma Emam. Emam was referring to the mass relocation of whole Nubian communities in 1964 to make way for the Aswan High Dam on the Nile.

## **Iran**

Iran has many minorities, including Ahwazi Arabs, Azeris, Bahá'is, Baluchis, Christians and Kurds. Activists and members of those groups continued to face discrimination and marginalization by the Iranian authorities. Representatives of Iranian minority groups expressed their frustration and disappointment at the regime because it deprives them of their rights, including those mentioned in the Constitution. In 2012, the Iranian government did not allow the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed, into the country to investigate the human rights situation. Shaheed urged the Iranian government to end discrimination against women as well as

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**Case study** by *Sarah el Ashmaouy*  
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# Egypt: Nubian community health support systems

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**The opening of a new hospital in Aswan only underlines the government’s long-term neglect of the health needs of Nubians.**

In January 2011, then President Mubarak inaugurated the new Aswan hospital; Aswan is the capital of Nubia in Southern Egypt. Meanwhile, in Cairo, the Nubian community had organized a support system for members of their community who need to access health care that was not available in Aswan. Each of the 22 villages of the Nubian region collected money to rent or buy a modest space in Cairo where inhabitants of the same village could stay while receiving health care in Cairo. This was coordinated through the Nubian club, which was created to maintain the cohesion of the Nubian community in Cairo and has an apartment in Tahrir Square for Nubians to meet and seek support if facing any troubles. The Nubian club was thus at the heart of the self-created health care support system.

This self-support system is a symptom of the problem of health care in Egypt, particularly in the peripheries of the country like Nubia. Despite the efforts of the Nubian community in Cairo to help Nubians living elsewhere to access services, the quality of health care accessed in Cairo by Nubians depends on their income and resources, which are usually among the lowest in the country. To tackle this, Cairo Nubians have consolidated networks of

individuals inside hospitals and medical centres who are willing to help Nubians in dire need of health care. But the problem remains bigger than the action of individuals.

There is a long history of government neglect of Nubians in Egypt. Many Nubians were forced to leave their land to make way for the

**Below: Nubian children in Aswan, Egypt.**  
*Ry Tweedie-Cullen.*



## Case study continued

construction of the Aswan Dam in the 1960s. The government promised compensation and shelter; however, the resettlement plan offered poorly designed buildings for Nubian families. There were very few employment opportunities in the urban 'new' Nubia, and as a result many Nubians moved to Cairo for better education and employment opportunities. Nubians had little or no access to basic services

The Aswan hospital is the only one in the new Nubia to serve the 22 villages of the Aswan governorate. The eight medical centres scattered around new Nubia are difficult to access, lack basic medical equipment and often have no personnel. In some places, Nubians have to travel 44 km to access their closest medical centre, some of which are not even equipped to treat injuries or deliver babies. The lack of the simplest equipment, such as antidotes for scorpion bites or dialysis machines, has led to deaths from diseases which are easily preventable. The Aswan hospital, for example, only has two dialysis machines, one of which is not functional.

This is not only due to the poor health care policies of the Egyptian government but also the lack of reliance on local resources. Doctors from Cairo who work in the hospital leave Nubia three days a week to go back home, while Nubian medical students pursue their careers in Cairo. Nubians have frequently addressed their local governor, demanding better social services, including health care. Each time, their demands have been met with a promise of policy change, followed by a 'bureaucratic' excuse that refers the action back to the Cairo cabinet.

Lost in the pile of files referred back to the Cairo cabinet, the lack of action on the issue of health care in Nubia has left Ahmad, an 11-year-old boy from Aswan who suffers from epilepsy, no choice but to travel to Cairo. Here he hopes to find an Egyptian doctor who will finally sign a form that will enable him to access health care in Cairo, rather than the Aswan hospital, which cannot provide him with the care he needs. ■

ethnic and religious minorities. While there are mechanisms in Iran for respecting human rights, violations are reported in the testimonies of 221 individuals collected between November 2011 and July 2012, according to Shaheed. Minority languages are prohibited in both government institutions and as subjects to be taught in schools. Schools in minority regions are very poor and the rates of drop-out and illiteracy are higher in those areas than the national average, according to the Baluchistan People's Party.

Dozens of Ahwazi Arabs have been detained, tortured and executed since demonstrations broke out in Khuzestan province in April 2011. The year began with security round-ups in the region, leading to the arrest of at least 65 people. Twenty-seven Ahwazi Arab residents of Shush in Khuzestan were arrested because of their alleged involvement in a campaign to boycott the March parliamentary elections and expressing support for the 'Arab Spring'. In June four Ahwazi Arabs, including three brothers, were executed on charges of 'enmity against God', after having been accused of killing a law enforcement official. Family members disputed the charges. They had been arrested during demonstrations in the province of Khuzestan. In July 2012, five Ahwazi Arabs were sentenced to death and a sixth received a 20-year prison sentence. International human rights groups contested the charges and argued that they were arrested because of their connection to demonstrations in February and March 2011 ahead of the sixth anniversary of protests by Ahwazi Arabs in 2005 calling for a better life for their people. According to the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), a total of nine Ahwazi Arabs were awaiting execution by October, after further capital convictions later in the year.

Ahwaz city was rated as the most polluted city in the world by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2011 and the rate of asthma among children there has long been higher than the regional average. Life expectancy is the lowest in Iran. A critical issue is the prevalence of particles smaller than 10 micrometres (PM10), since these penetrate deep into the lungs and the bloodstream. The WHO recommends a limit of 20 micrograms of PM10 per cubic metre of air; Ahwaz city records 372 micrograms.

Heightened health risks from such intense air pollution include cancer, hypertension, diabetes and birth defects. Causes include desertification resulting from river diversion and the draining of marshes, as well as petrochemical and other industries located in the area. In *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2012*, MRG analysed the connections between natural resource extraction, land rights and discrimination against minorities, including a case study on Iran.

Ahwazi Arabs complain of being forced out of the oil-rich province of Khuzestan in order to replace them with majority Persians. In addition, the authorities consider their call for equality as a threat to national security. According to the Ahwaz Human Rights Organization, they are not allowed to teach their native language, and this violates the Iranian Constitution as well as the international human rights norms. The government also prohibits Arabic-speaking Iranians to name their children with non-Shi'a Arab names. The use of minority languages in schools and government offices

**Below:** Ahwazi Arab man and child, Iran.  
*Alan Rempfer.*

is generally prohibited, according to Amnesty International.

While Khuzestan is a rich province on account of the large-scale oil production, the area suffers from poverty and a lack of adequate social services. In addition, the towns of Bostan, Dashte-Azadegan and Hovazeh have inadequate access to health care centres and are subject to frequent deaths because of untreated accidents. The Dashte-Azdegan region has the highest rates of child malnutrition, according to the Ahwaz Human Rights Organization.

Kurds also face persecution in Iran. Journalist and founder of the Human Rights Organization of Kurdistan Mohammad Sadiq Kabudvand went on hunger strike in May and July, according to Amnesty International; he had been denied access to his seriously ill son and was himself refused medical treatment. In June, Mohammad Mehdi Zalieh Naghshbandian, a Kurd, died in Rajaei Shahr prison because of inadequate medical attention by prison officials. Three Kurds were



executed in September in Oroumieh, after having been found guilty of illegal political activities.

The situation is also difficult for the Baluch minority. Public demonstrations or acts of violence by extremists provoke a harsh government response. In October, three men were hanged in Zahidan prison, a few days after a suicide bombing in Chabhar. The three men were not connected to the bombing incident – rather their executions appeared to be intended as a signal from the government that acts of defiance would not be tolerated. One was reportedly a teenager. The Baluch People's Party noted that 11 political prisoners were awaiting execution in October. MRG has previously reported how the Baluch minority are caught in the struggle between armed insurgents and the Iranian authorities, with violent acts by the former serving as a pretext for further militarization and repression by the latter.

Women face discrimination in a number of areas, especially with regard to family law. A number of women's rights activists remained imprisoned in 2012. One of them was released in November after spending 1,622 days in a detention centre, according to the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran and Campaign for Equality. Zainab Bayazidi, a member of the Campaign for Equality (previously called the Campaign for One Million Signatures to Change Discriminatory Laws in Iran), was arrested and sentenced to imprisonment because of her work challenging inequality. Bayazidi has also been active in the Human Rights Organization of Kurdistan. In addition, 36 universities across the country banned female enrolment across certain subjects, and set quotas limiting the number of women on other courses as well as enforcing gender segregation in their institutions.

The persecution of Bahá'is by the government intensified during the year. Human Rights Watch (HRW) noted a crackdown on the community in Semnan, leading to the closure of at least 17 businesses. Amnesty International reported that at least 177 Bahá'is were detained for their religious beliefs during 2012. Seven Bahá'i leaders continued to serve 20-year prison terms after their arrest in 2009, despite vocal international protests.

Iran officially recognizes three non-Islamic religious groups – Zoroastrians, Christians and Jews. During the autumn, Christian pastor Youssef Nadarkhani was released after having been jailed for nearly three years for his beliefs in 2012. He was acquitted of apostasy, but was convicted of evangelizing to Muslims. He was subsequently re-arrested in December and then released once more in January 2013. Religious minorities are not allowed to proselytize and there are restrictions on published religious materials. In January 2013, Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-born American pastor, was sentenced to eight years in jail for establishing Christian house churches; he had been arrested in September. In September 2012, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran reported that at least 300 Christians have been arbitrarily arrested and detained since June 2010.

## **Iraq**

It has been a decade since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The sectarian conflict between the Shi'a and Sunni communities has escalated, and tensions between different groups have grown. The sizeable Sunni population accuses the government of Shi'a Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki of marginalizing them. Everyone in Iraq is exposed to attacks and violence, and the resulting deaths and injuries have blighted Iraqi daily life. According to the UN Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI), the number of civilian casualties rose to at least 3,238 reported deaths in 2012, compared with 2,771 the year before (other sources reported higher figures). The year 2012 was the first since 2009 in which the figures had increased. The escalation continued beyond year's end; May 2013 witnessed the bloodiest month of violence since June 2008, in which 1,045 Iraqi civilians and security officials were killed.

The cycle of violence affected Shi'a and Sunni groups, as well as smaller minority communities. Shi'a Muslims experienced the worst attacks of any religious community in 2012, with pilgrims celebrating religious festivals especially targeted. In January 2013, Shi'a pilgrims were targeted by insurgents who killed and injured hundreds. In May, Sunni mosques and areas were attacked, which resulted in the killing and injuring of

hundreds. And in August, a leading Sunni cleric, Sheikh Mahdi al-Sumaidaie, was seriously injured and four of his bodyguards were killed in an attack on his convoy; the attack occurred after the sheik had celebrated the beginning of the Eid al-Fitr holy day. He had urged all Iraqis to renounce violence and work together.

Tensions between the Shi'a and Sunni communities escalated after the fugitive Iraqi vice-president, Tariq al-Hashimi, was sentenced to death *in absentia* in September allegedly for orchestrating terror attacks on officials and security forces. Hashimi was the most prominent Sunni politician in the country. The Shi'a holy day of Ashura in November passed peacefully, albeit following a string of car bombings just before. Only days after, at least 40 Shi'as were killed in attacks in Baghdad and southern Iraq. In March 2013, the tenth anniversary of the US invasion was marked by a series of attacks in Shi'a areas that killed nearly 60 people.

Smaller minority communities also faced attacks. According to UNPO, two Turkmen teachers were found dead in December near Humera, south-west of Kirkuk; both bodies bore

**Below:** A Sabean Mandaean bride participates in a wedding ritual, Iraq. *Shiho Fukada/Panos.*

signs of having been tortured. In January 2013, a tent full of Turkmen mourners in Tuz Khurmato was struck by a suicide bomber; at least 35 people were killed and over 100 were wounded.

Ethnic and religious minorities have been targeted in Iraq since 2003. The fact that minority communities do not have the protection of militias makes them more vulnerable to kidnapping for ransom; nor do they get the necessary protection from the authorities. Bomb attacks and suicide bombings have been used in areas where minorities live. Large numbers of the smaller religious communities, including Christians, Sabean Madaeans and Yezidis, have left the country. Violence has even reached the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, which has been safer than the rest of Iraq. Reports of sectarian violence were fewer there than elsewhere, although religious minority communities noted cases of arbitrary detention, harassment, discrimination and threats by officials of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Some members of minority





groups wear veils or hide their religious symbols to avoid being targeted. According to Christian women in Iraq interviewed by MRG, social pressures and the increasing sectarian tensions lead them to keep a low profile.

Christians continued to flee the country. The current population is believed to be less than half its pre-2003 size. Some were reportedly forced to sell their homes to militants at cheap prices. Christians had previously fled Baghdad for the comparative safety of the northern provinces. The flight north was especially marked following the large-scale attack on Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad in 2010, which left 56 Christians and 2 priests dead. Dwindling resources, lack of employment prospects and a sense that the violence is coming closer led Christian displaced to decide finally to leave the country. For example, in May, 20 Christian families reportedly fled Mosul after receiving threatening letters calling on them to leave their

homes. A controversial amateur internet video launched in September sparked a wave of such death threats by militant groups. In addition, several Christians were killed or kidnapped, and churches were attacked during the year. A radical group attacked a church in Dohuk in May and looted some of its contents. In September, the Chaldean Catholic Sacred Heart Cathedral in Kirkuk was hit by a bomb blast; there were no casualties. Although the building may not have been the intended target, the attack added to a general sense of vulnerability. A local human rights group reported three other attacks on churches in the city during the year. It was estimated that only 25,000 Christians now live in Mosul while their number was 75,000 in 2003.

Other minorities were attacked, such as the killing of a Yezidi and his wife in Sanjar district north of Mosul and a Shabak person in Nineveh by militants. In December, a

**Left:** A Shi'a Muslim girl takes part in the Ashura festival, Saudi Arabia. *REUTERS/Zaki Ghawas.*

Sabeen Mandaean goldsmith was killed in his shop south of Baghdad. Moreover, 20 graves belonging to Sabeen Mandaeans were attacked in Kirkuk. A local human rights organization tallied the following serious attacks on members of minorities: 5 killings, 5 kidnappings and 12 murder attempts against Christians; 2 killings and 4 kidnappings against Yezidis; 2 killings of Sabeen Mandaeans; and 26 killings of Shabaks. There were other less serious attacks, as well as incidents that went unrecorded.

There are inadequate health facilities in areas where many minorities live. A key issue during the year was the prevalence of suicides among minorities. There were, for example, about 50 suicides in the city of Sinjar, mainly inhabited by Yezidis. The UN is planning a sensitization campaign in schools in order to train teachers and pupils about the issue. Among the main reasons for these tragedies were dire poverty and failure to get asylum abroad. Other minorities have also witnessed increases in the suicide rates.

Some Iraqi women, including those who lost their husbands in the armed conflict, have experienced financial problems and have been sexually exploited. Those displaced, including women belonging to minorities, face serious risk of abuse by people smugglers. While the parliament passed a law in April to tackle trafficking, enforcement remains a serious problem faced by women who are vulnerable to sexual abuse.

There is a need to reform the educational curriculum to reflect the variety of different communities and encourage tolerance. A minority alliance worked during the year with the Ministry of Education to bridge ethnic and religious divides through education. The alliance reviewed the material provided to children studying at the intermediate level and made recommendations. Many of these were accepted and the revised textbooks were distributed to schools in September 2012. A key recommendation was that Iraqi children needed to learn more about the wide range of minorities in their country and their contributions to its history and culture.

## Saudi Arabia

Although King Abdullah made some efforts at reform in 2012, restrictions remain tight for women and non-Sunni Muslims. Saudi law neither recognizes nor protects freedom of religion. In addition, restrictions on those freedoms have been implemented by the religious police or Muta'ween.

Shi'a Muslims comprise 10–15 per cent of the population in Saudi Arabia. The majority of the population are Sunnis who follow a strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. There is also a small number of Christians who are largely expatriates, and also Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and others.

The majority of Shi'as live in the country's Eastern Province, especially in al-Ahasa and al-Qatif. Human rights groups say there is systematic discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in education, employment and justice. Shi'as are also under-represented at the higher levels of government.

Members of Saudi Arabia's Shi'a community have repeatedly protested in the wake of the 'Arab Spring' in 2011, calling for their rights to be respected. According to HRW, the Saudi security forces have killed 11 Shi'a protesters since 2011, while other sources report somewhat higher figures. Al-Qatif has witnessed a number of demonstrations in support of Shi'as in Bahrain and calling for reforms to their own situation, which is characterized by discrimination and marginalization. Hundreds of Shi'as were arrested during 2012, particularly in the Eastern Province, in connection with protests. While many have been released, some 180 protesters remained in detention at year's end. Demonstrations also resulted in violence, causing injuries as well as deaths. The detention of the influential Shi'a leader Sheikh Nimr Al-Nimr led to an increase in protests and resulting violence. Al-Nimr was arrested in early July because of his statement that Shi'as should be respected and live in dignity, otherwise the Eastern Province should secede. Four men were killed in the demonstrations that followed the Sheikh's arrest – three died during protests immediately after El-Nimr's arrest and a fourth was killed five days later in al-Awamiyah.

Further arrests in the Eastern Province led to short-term detentions and concerned Shi'a

religious practice. The only explanation given was usually that these were in connection with private worship. It seemed as if these detentions were primarily in areas where the population is more evenly split. Where Shi'a Muslims represent a local majority, there was apparently some improvement in the possibilities to pray publicly.

Recently, the Saudi authorities arrested some Shi'a Muslims and charged them with spying for Iran. Shi'a Muslims insist that they are innocent and that there is only a spiritual link between them and Iran.

Although King Abdullah has sponsored dialogues with religious groups, there is no freedom of religion for non-Sunni Muslims. Public expression of Christianity and other non-Muslim religions is banned. Mosques are the only public places of worship in Saudi Arabia, and the construction of churches, synagogues or other non-Muslim places of worship is not allowed.

In addition, the 35 Christian Ethiopians who were detained in December 2011 for 'illicit mingling' during a private religious service were deported in August. The detainees claimed that they were arrested because of their Christian faith, and several human rights organizations reported that the police interrogation was mainly about their faith. Twenty-nine of the Ethiopians were women, and they were subjected to strip searches.

In February, Hadi al-Mutif was released after 18 years behind bars. He was convicted of insulting the Prophet, although according to HRW the judges showed bias in the conduct of al-Mutif's case on account of the fact that he belongs to the minority Isma'ili Muslim community. He was only freed after his repentance was accepted by the chief Mufti.

During 2012, the government school textbook reform project continued, resulting in the elimination of some intolerant messages, but discriminatory language remains. Some content still justifies the exclusion and killing of Muslim minorities and those deemed to be 'apostates', while Christians and Jews are reportedly described as violating monotheism.

### **Women's rights**

Although King Abdullah has made some reforms, many restrictions on women remain. In January 2013, King Abdullah appointed 30 women to the

all-male Shura Council (Consultative Assembly) for the first time. There is still separation between the two sexes inside the Council and they have to speak through a communication system and enter through special gates; but it is a step that should be welcomed. The Council will also have four Shi'a members and one of them is a woman. Women will also have the right to vote in 2014 municipal elections. According to HRW, women are banned from travelling or going through medical procedures without permission from their male guardians. For example, in July an operation for a woman was postponed at the King Fahd hospital because her male guardian was not there to authorize it. In addition, there was controversy surrounding the news that male guardians were receiving automatic text messages when their female dependents crossed the borders of the country.

In March two women-staffed police stations opened for the first time in Jeddah and Riyadh to encourage women to use police facilities. However, violence against women continues to go unpunished. In May a court convicted a man who assaulted his wife, but it was a lenient sentence: to learn by heart five parts of the Qur'an and 100 sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

### **Syria**

Atrocities and violence since March 2011 have turned the uprising in Syria against the Bashar al-Assad regime into a prolonged crisis. The continuous fighting between the army and armed opposition groups had resulted in the deaths of around 93,000 people by spring 2013. By the end of 2012, 750,000 had fled across the country's borders, and there were well over 2 million internally displaced. In February 2012, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, warned that the situation in Syria had 'reached horrific dimensions', describing the situation as 'an intolerable affront to the human conscience'.

There are different groups within the political and armed opposition. The opposition is supported by several countries, such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. In June 2013, the US announced that it would provide direct military support to the opposition; the European Union (EU) lifted its arms embargo the month before.

The regime is backed by Iran, Russia and the Hezbollah organization in Lebanon. So far no solution has been proposed to end this conflict. Some minorities, such as Christians and Alawites, have been targeted, because they are believed to support the regime. Sectarian divides have grown in Syria between Sunnis, Alawites, Christians and Druze, especially since 2012 according to UN reports and refugees interviewed by MRG.

The UN commission of inquiry also warned that the fighting increasingly has a sectarian aspect. Regime troops and pro-government militia have committed massacres, according to the commission. At checkpoints and detention centres, government forces have committed murder, torture, rape and enforced disappearances following arbitrary detentions. In its February 2013 report, the commission noted a disturbing pattern, namely the shelling by government forces of whole neighbourhoods, with bread lines and hospitals being particularly targeted. Opposition armed forces have also been guilty of murder, torture, hostage-taking and arbitrary arrests. While the offences are grave on both sides, the commission noted, the scale of attacks on civilian populations was far greater from the government side.<sup>3</sup> Citing local activists, HRW reported that at least 865 detainees had died during 2012 while in government custody.

At the beginning of the uprising, anti-Christian and anti-Alawite slogans were reported. Some opposition groups have banned such chants. However, there are concerns that the divisions among different groups in Syria may well be deepening.

President Assad belongs to the minority Alawite group and relies on Alawite support to stay in power, backed by certain members of other minorities, especially Christians and Druze, plus a select group of Sunni majority businessmen. Alawites comprise about 10 per cent of the population, Christians, about 10 per cent, while about 70 per cent are Sunni Muslims. Druze, a community whose faith emerged from Isma'ilism and Shi'a Islam, make up 4–5 per cent of the population; they have generally avoided taking sides in the current conflict. While a few Druze have aligned themselves, the majority have stayed neutral and have established checkpoints and militias in their areas, especially Suwaida,

southern Syria, where Druze mainly live, in order to protect their people. Some Druze have been involved in fighting against armed militant groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra (an al-Qaeda linked group). There were kidnappings and an attack on a Druze village in early 2013.

There are growing concerns that Alawites could be the main target of discrimination if the regime collapses. Some protesters associated the whole Alawite community with the Assad regime; as a result, Alawites were particularly targeted in reprisal attacks during 2012. Several international human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, called for the protection and safety of minorities in Syria, especially those suspected of backing the Assad regime, by any future government. In this context, Adama Dieng, the UN Special Adviser on the prevention of genocide, urged all parties to the conflict to adhere to international humanitarian and human rights law, especially those provisions which prohibit the targeting of individuals or groups based on religious or ethnic identity.

Kurds are denied their basic rights. They represent about 10 per cent of the Syrian population. Their language is not recognized and is not taught in schools. In addition, Kurds who could not prove their residence in Syria from 1945 onwards were denied their Syrian nationality according to Law 93 of 1962. About 300,000 Kurds do not have citizenship and are stateless. This puts pressure on their daily life in employment, travel and marriage. It should be noted that President Assad issued a decree to grant citizenship to Kurds living in Hasaka in 2011.

Towards the end of 2012, there were reports of fighting between the opposition Free Syria Army and Kurdish fighters linked to the Democratic Union Party (PYD), raising fears of a power struggle. Kurds have otherwise kept their distance from the fighting to avoid being targeted. Kurds have set up checkpoints along the main road of Qamishli, the unofficial capital of the Kurdish area. The lack of government presence in the Kurdish areas has given them more freedoms and they have started teaching the Kurdish language, which was forbidden before the March 2011 uprising. By assuming responsibility to keep security in their region, a cultural renewal has been made possible, with Kurds now able

to speak their language freely. But this has not meant that the Kurdish region has been isolated from the conflict. According to media reports, schools have been closed and medical assistance has been hard to come by. There have also been government air strikes against the region.

Shi'a Muslims also faced difficulty in 2012. For example, according to HRW, a Shi'a place of worship in Idlib was destroyed by opposition forces towards the end of the year. Shi'as living in Zarzour were displaced from their village, because they were seen as supporters of the regime.

Harassment of Christians reportedly increased during 2012. Government forces raided the Syrian Orthodox Um al-Zennar Church in Homs in February, leading Christians to join protests in greater numbers in that city. In May, security forces arrested worshippers gathered at St Cyril's Cathedral in Damascus to remember a deceased opposition activist. Christians left their homes in the villages of Ghasaniyeh and Jdeideh in Latakia governorate for fear of the opposition forces, as well as the urgent humanitarian situation, and worries about government air strikes and shelling. Two churches were reported to have been looted in December.

Some Christians have reportedly left their homes because they do not have a militia to protect them from attack. Some churches have been set on fire. A local priest told a BBC journalist that some young and unemployed Christians have come under pressure from the regime to defend themselves. They were told that armed militant groups were going to kill them. It should be said that many Christians have refused to be armed. Some arrangements between Christian activists and opposition forces were struck not to target the Christian areas.

## Tunisia

The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia opened the door to other countries in the region to change their regimes. The first free elections after the ousting of President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali took place in October 2011. The moderate Islamist Ennahda party, led by Rashid El-Ghanoushi, won a majority in the National Constituent Assembly along with two smaller coalition parties.

At the time of publication, the Constitution

## Case study

# Christians in Syria

## **Fears for Syria's ancient Christian communities continue as they are attacked by both the militias and government forces.**

The Syrian Christian community makes up approximately 10 per cent of the population, but its size has been declining since the March 2011 uprising due to displacement and emigration. There are Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Assyrian and Chaldean Christians. The number of Syrian Christians abroad is about 5 million, although this number is rising due to displacement and emigration.

Syrian Christians have their own courts that deal with marriage, divorce and inheritance. Damascus contains a sizeable Christian community.

The plight of Christians in Syria was articulated by eyewitnesses, journalists and religious leaders. For example, a Syrian refugee in Lebanon said that Christians have no guns while they have been attacked by both armed militias and the government. A Catholic charity representative said that many Christians feel they have to support Assad because they fear what may happen if the rebels win: they may face the same tragedy as Christians in Iraq. Church leaders express fears that Syria may lose its Christian minority. Emigration has increased. Some sources reported increased intolerance and employment discrimination as key reasons for Christians choosing to leave. Churches and Christian institutions, such as schools and hospitals, have been destroyed. Neither the government forces nor the opposition militias admit those attacks. According to the Archbishop of the Syrian Orthodox Church, Yohanna Ibrahim, some churches have been closed because of the ongoing fighting. The number of worshippers has declined by over

50 per cent because of security issues, except in the areas that have Christian majorities and where security arrangements can be made. The Archbishop noted in spring 2013 that more than 30,000 Christians had fled Aleppo and more than 6,000 Armenians had left for Armenia, while more than 300,000 Christians were internally displaced by then.

In Syria, caution and fear now characterize relations between the different elements of society. Each community is cautious when dealing with other groups. Alawites left Aleppo

out of fear; Shi'as also fled the region for the same reason. And Christians are now on the move in order to avoid increased intolerance, targeting by militant groups, the threat of government bombardment and the increasingly dire humanitarian situation. ■

**Below: The Um al-Zennar Church was damaged during clashes between Syrian rebels and the Syrian government in Homs, in 2012. REUTERS/Yazen Homsy.**



remained in draft form. The prime minister was chosen from the Ennahda party, first Hamadi al-Jabali and then Ali Larayadeh. Some government policies have been heavily criticized, such as the apparently lenient handling of members of the radical Salafist movement who have attacked activists and intellectuals without being charged for their actions. In this context, Chokri Belaid, head of the opposition Democratic Patriots Party and a critic of Islamist parties, was assassinated in February 2013. While there have been reports of arrests, it is not yet known who committed this crime. Drafts of the Constitution raised concerns. There were demonstrations against Article 28 of the first draft, which stated that women and men's roles 'fulfil each other', while not explicitly affirming equality between the sexes. Draft Article 3 was criticized since it allowed for the criminalization of religious offences, with the risk that it would pave the way for restrictions on freedom of expression. In January 2013, HRW noted that the second draft had brought several key improvements. It did express concern, however, about draft Article 15, which gave greater weight to national legislation than to international human rights treaty obligations. The organization also worried that judicial independence was insufficiently protected. Finally, it noted that only Muslims could become president, a provision that contradicted a general equality clause.

Tunisia has small minority communities. The estimates for the size of the Berber community vary from 1 to 2 per cent of the population. There are also small Jewish, Bahá'í and other religious minority communities.

Islam is the only religion taught at public schools, but history as taught in public secondary schools also covers the history of Judaism and Christianity.

Attacks by members of the Salafist movement were an increasingly worrying tendency, especially since the authorities appeared to do little to bring the perpetrators to justice. Journalists, artists and human rights defenders were among the targets. In August, for example, a group of men attacked a festival to commemorate the international day for Jerusalem in Bizerte, north of Tunis, and at least three activists

were injured. The men reportedly accused the organizers of being Shi'a Muslims.

Jews have been under pressure since the departure of the ousted President Ben Ali. There have been occasions when members of the Salafist movement have shown hostility to the Jewish community. For example, during the January visit of Ismail Haniyeh, the prime minister of the Hamas government in Gaza, a group of Salafists shouted, 'Kill the Jews. It is our religious duty.' The slogan was condemned by Ennahda party officials. In this context, the Tunisian Association to Support Minorities sued Sheikh Ahmad Al-Suhayli of Rades for hate speech against Jews, following a sermon that was broadcast live in November on Hannibal TV. The lawyer who represented the association argued that the sermon violated the 2011 Decree 115, which criminalizes calls for hatred. Throughout 2012, there were repeated media reports that members of Tunisia's Jewish community were expressing unease about the new political order and the impunity apparently enjoyed by religious extremists. At the same time, President Moncef Marzouki attempted to send a reassuring message when he visited the historic El Ghriba synagogue on the island of Djerba at Passover. The visit was significant on many levels, not least since Passover in 2012 marked the tenth anniversary of a suicide bombing at the synagogue that killed 21 people. And the Jewish community received support from the authorities when an event organized by the prominent Islamist cleric Youssef al-Qaradawi was relocated from the island of Djerba to Tunis. The gathering was supposed to have been held four days before the annual Jewish *hiloula* (or pilgrimage) to the island during the Lag Ba'Omer holiday, and there were fears of something going wrong. The pilgrimage went ahead as planned. While 500 people came on the 2012 pilgrimage compared with 5,000 in 2010 (it was cancelled in 2011), the turn-out was still viewed positively by the community.

Jews have lived in Tunisia since Roman times. Jewish influence can be found in music, culture, names and other aspects of life in Tunisia. Their number exceeded 100,000 after the Second World War, but currently fewer than 2,000 Jews live in Tunisia, and about

half of the community lives on Djerba. It is the second biggest Jewish community in the Arab world after Morocco. Debates about the community's future have been ongoing but intensified in November, after the police arrested five Tunisians in Zarzis for allegedly planning to kidnap Jews belonging to wealthy families to get a ransom.

Jews in Tunisia reportedly feel a need to maintain a low profile. For example, Jewish men generally do not wear the *kippah* (the Jewish male head-covering). Haim Bittan, the chief rabbi of Tunis, noted in an interview that Tunisian Jewish men wear a hat instead of the *kippah*. He explained, 'People might think we are Zionists and we do not want that, so we wear a hat.' There are no laws that restrict the wearing of the *kippah*, but the rising influence of the Salafist movement and fears that the head-covering or other Jewish symbols may be misinterpreted are the main reasons cited for being cautious. This is of course hard on practising Tunisian Jews since they feel a religious obligation to wear the *kippah* or other Jewish symbols. While *The Economist* magazine reported that the Tunisian authorities strengthened security for the spring 2013 *biloula*, it noted that pro-Palestinian graffiti simultaneously appeared on government buildings in Tunis.

Nevertheless, the few Jews who remain in Tunisia are generally unwilling to leave. While Silvan Shalom, Israel's deputy prime minister, called on Tunisian Jews to leave the country in December 2011, the reaction from the community was largely negative. A BBC reporter interviewed Jacob Lelouche, who runs the last kosher restaurant in Tunisia. Lelouche expressed his opposition to leaving, since he felt safe.

Most Christians are foreigners, but there are some converted Tunisians. While it is difficult to get a comprehensive picture of this group, MRG interviewed a Tunisian Christian convert in February 2013 who described how he had felt so threatened that he had decided to leave the country. The Tunisian Association to Support Minorities documented that a Salafist attacked the Russian Orthodox Church in Tunis and broke its crosses. The suspected person was arrested. ■

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Case study by *Hanan Hammoudeh*  
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## Palestinian refugees in Lebanon

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**The poor conditions in the camps in Lebanon where Palestinian refugees have been living for more than 60 years lead to chronic ill health and mental health problems.**

*'[Health issues] are a result of the pressures of life, poverty, the lack of movement, the electricity, the water, and the overcrowding.'*  
Ahed Khalil, aged 22, Burj el Barajneh refugee camp resident.

Often calling themselves 'forgotten people', Palestinian refugees make up 10 per cent of the population of Lebanon. Facing marginalization and discrimination, these residents are without basic human rights. Besides their lack of political and civil rights, they are denied access to public health care and largely depend on aid and the charity sector for health provision. Today, most of these refugees live in camps and locations that are characterized by water contamination, where health risks are exacerbated by overcrowding. Meanwhile, laws prohibit the expansion of the camps. A peek into the life of the camps illuminates the intersection of marginalization, social exclusion, poverty, and the consequent health impact among the present minority.

### **Doctor visits and hospital care**

On average, a doctor at a health clinic run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNWRA) sees 117 patients daily. Hospital care is often inaccessible to Palestinian refugees due to high costs, and those in need of care often seek aid from charities and other people in order to pay hospital fees. Poor health is both a symptom and a cause of economic hardships among the refugee

## Case study continued

community. An American University of Beirut report published in 2010, which took into account mental, physical, acute and chronic health issues, indicated that 57 per cent of households said they had made visits to a doctor or incurred medical costs resulting from chronic illnesses; thus chronic illness is the most common reason for receiving medical care. The most common of chronic illnesses was found to be hypertension, which was at a 32 per cent prevalence among Palestinian refugees with chronic illnesses, compared with 14 per cent among the Lebanese population. Overall, the study found a 31 per cent chronic illness incidence among Palestinian refugees, compared with the 17 per cent among the Lebanese population.

### Health behind camp walls

According to the report, 66 per cent of Palestinian refugee camp homes were affected by leaks and dampness, with water leaking from every one in three ceilings. The report also indicated that higher illness prevalence was associated with some housing traits common to camp infrastructure. People who lived in homes that had asbestos, eternit, or wood in their walls had an astounding 100 per cent of chronic illness prevalence. Homes in which four or more people lived per room were associated with higher prevalence of functional disabilities and acute illnesses. Ahed, a 22-year-old resident of the Burj el Barajneh refugee camp in Beirut, described the overcrowding of the camps as '*nas fo' ba 'ad*', a figurative phrase in Arabic literally meaning 'people piled on top of one another'.

The Palestinian refugee population has double the prevalence of disability of the Lebanese population, despite no significant difference in birth defects, and 20 per cent of disability cases among the Palestinian refugee population are the effects of accidents. When describing the environmental factors contributing to poor health in the camps, Ahed referred to, '[T]he electricity. Old infrastructure and water pipes intertwined

with electricity wires ... Children are dying as a result of this.' Among these is Ahmad Yakoub, a Burj el Barajneh resident who was 14 at the time of his electrocution and subsequent death. Between the years of 2010 and 2012 in the Burj el Barajneh camp alone, an estimated 20 people lost their lives as a result of electrocution. At a minimum, one electrocution-related death in the camp is estimated to take place every 2–3 months.

### Mental health and the political environment

With regard to mental health, 21 per cent of Palestinian refugees surveyed for the American University of Beirut study reported psychological problems, including distress, depression and anxiety. It was suggested that the stresses of the Lebanese civil war and lack of civil rights within the country have contributed to these burdens. Ahed said that the environment was a principal factor tied to the mental health issues among the camp population, caused by 'poverty, the lack of movement, the electricity, the water, and the overcrowding'.

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have long been victims of political scapegoating. Due to Palestinian factions' role in the Lebanese civil war, the population has long been stigmatized and has been approached with defence rhetoric. Ahed says that the camps are approached from a security angle, and this has thwarted adequate responses to issues such as health. Deprived of basic rights due to claimed security measures and embedded fears of permanent settlement, the health predicament of Palestinian refugees continues. ■

## Endnotes

1. Prior to going to press, President Morsi was removed from office in July 2013 by the Egyptian military.
2. In July 2013, interim President Adly Mahmud Mansour issued a decree outlining steps to be taken to revise the 2012 Constitution.
3. See OHCHR, 'UN commission of inquiry: all parties becoming increasingly reckless with human life as the Syrian conflict drags on', retrieved July 2013, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=13003&LangID=E>