



Middle East

Eric Witte

Violence against minority groups in Iraq continued at catastrophic levels in 2007, and the mounting impact has been felt region-wide. Sectarian and ethnic war has cost hundreds of thousands of lives, driven ancient minority communities to the edge of destruction, and sparked an exodus from Iraq of epic proportions. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have sought refuge in Middle Eastern countries, and have placed a particularly heavy burden on Jordan and Syria. The war in Iraq has also been one of the main reasons for a deterioration in the relationship between the US and Iran. Mounting tension has worked to the detriment of ethnic and sectarian minorities there, whom the government accuses of receiving Western assistance. Polarization between the Arab world and the West has also contributed to Lebanon's political crisis, in which alleged Syrian-backed assassinations of minority politicians have brought the country back to the brink of war. Meanwhile, efforts resumed to forge a peace between Israel and the long-marginalized Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza, now controlled by rival factions Fatah and Hamas, respectively.

There is broad scientific consensus that human-induced climate change is affecting the Middle East, resulting in hotter summers, reduced rainfall and rising sea levels. By 2050 the amount of available fresh water per capita is expected to drop by half. In a region where conflicts have been sparked and exacerbated by an already acute shortage of fresh water, climate change presents a newly recognized threat to stability. In April 2007 the UN Security Council convened at the behest of the UK Council presidency to discuss the nexus between global warming and conflict. That same month a group of prominent retired American generals released a report on climate change as a national security issue, particularly noting its potential to exacerbate conflicts in the Middle East.

Although two major rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, flow through it, Iraq already has problems with access to fresh water due to dam projects in Syria and Turkey. The Food and Agriculture Organization reports that 74 per cent of the irrigation water in central and southern Iraq suffers from salinity. With reduced rainfall expected due to climate change, on top of an expansion of Turkey's dam infrastructure, Iraq is facing a much drier future. This resource scarcity

could exacerbate a conflict in which minorities have suffered the most.

By Middle Eastern standards, Iran is relatively rich in fresh water. However, a severe drought in its south-east over the past few years has disproportionately affected the ethnic Baluchi minority concentrated in that region and provided fodder for accusations of government neglect. With global warming, Baluchis will face new environmental pressure to add to their discontent.

Country by country

Iran

Ethnic and religious minorities make up nearly half of the Iranian population. Discontent among various minority groups has risen sharply over the past two years. Since Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to power in August 2005, the government has more forcefully promoted the country's majority Persian and Shia Muslim identity. In contravention of formal guarantees in the Iranian Constitution and international commitments, in 2007 the government continued a crackdown on ethnic and religious minorities through methods including police repression, discrimination in education, and state media campaigns. There was significant overlap between minority rights abuses on ethnic and religious grounds in Iran, as nearly all ethnic Baluchis and Turkomans, most Kurds, and some Arabs practise Sunni Islam disfavoured by the regime.

Rising tension among Western governments over Iran's nuclear programme and alleged backing for Shia militias fighting American-led forces in Iraq have contributed to a poisoned environment for some minority groups within Iran. The government is wary of the large US and UK military presence in neighbouring Iraq and Afghanistan, especially given the steady flow of reports from Washington over the course of 2007 that senior members of the Bush administration are advocating military attacks on Iran. The government has accused disgruntled minority groups including Arabs, Azeris, Baluchis and Kurds of accepting covert support from the US, the UK and Israel. Reports of such assistance are murky, and it remains unclear to what extent, if any, they are true, or merely serve Tehran as a pretext to discredit and clamp down on regime opponents from minority communities.

Around 7 per cent of the Iranian population is Kurdish and concentrated in the north-west, along

the borders with northern Iraq and south-west Turkey; another sizeable community of Kurds lives in the north-east, along the border with Turkmenistan. The Iranian regime has watched with alarm as Kurds have consolidated their autonomy within Iraq, and fears the establishment of a Kurdish state that would make claims on Iranian territory. An Iranian Kurdish militant group, the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), which is affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) of Turkey, operates in Iran from bases in the rugged mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan. Tehran accuses the US and Israel of supporting PJAK, and over the course of 2007 shelled northern Iraq indiscriminately in response. The regime has extended accusations of complicity with foreign enemies to other Kurds protesting, or even talking about Kurdish issues. In February 2007, Amnesty International reported that police allegedly killed three Kurds and injured dozens more during a demonstration for Kurdish rights in the town of Mahabad. Reporters without Borders announced in July that two Kurdish journalists had been sentenced to death in the town of Marivan. Both of the journalists had written on Kurdish issues for a magazine banned in August 2005, and the prosecution cited interviews one of them conducted with Voice of America as evidence of 'activities subverting national security' and 'spying'.

Ethnic Baluchis, who are mostly Sunni Muslims, live on both sides of the Iranian-Pakistani border and comprise around 2 per cent of the Iranian population. Baluchistan is the country's poorest region and in recent years has been plagued by severe drought. Baluchis complained of government discrimination and neglect following severe storms in June 2007 that cost over 20 lives, and claimed that the government response was inadequate. Since 2005 a Baluchi militia called Jondallah has claimed credit for attacks on government targets; Tehran also accuses it of attacks on civilian populations. Amnesty International reported that by August 2007, in the wake of a February bomb attack on a bus full of Iranian army troops claimed by Jondallah, around 50 Baluchis had been executed in the intervening months.

The ongoing war in Iraq has stirred unrest in the neighbouring Iranian province of Khuzestan, which in Arabic is called al-Ahwazi. High poverty rates among Ahwazi Arabs, despite their province's production of 90 per cent of Iran's oil revenue, have

fuelled resentment, as has discrimination on cultural-linguistic grounds. Some Arabs are Sunni and not allowed to practise their faith publicly, or construct a single Sunni mosque. In January and February 2007 the Iranian government executed eight Ahwazi Arabs for alleged participation in 2005 sabotage of oil infrastructure in Khuzestan by the intentionally excruciating method of slow strangulation. Three UN rapporteurs deemed the one-day trial deeply flawed. The accused had not been allowed access to their lawyers and, when the Ahwazi lawyers complained, they were arrested. In September the government conducted three more such executions, sparking public protests on which police opened fire. In November 2007, eight additional executions appeared imminent, but an international advocacy campaign subsequently succeeded in removing two Ahwazi men from death row.

Azeris, who are Turkic-speaking Shias, make up nearly one-quarter of the population and are concentrated in north-western Iran, along the borders with Azerbaijan and Armenia. Of all of Iran's ethnic minorities, Azeris receive perhaps the greatest acceptance among Persian Iraqis; indeed, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, is ethnic Azeri. Nevertheless, Azeris continue to face discrimination and are denied education in their mother tongue. In February 2007 Iranian security forces arrested dozens of Azeris peacefully protesting for Azeri-language education in towns across the north-west. According to Amnesty International, some of those detained allegedly were mistreated in custody. In May, Azeris again demonstrating for language rights were arrested in their hundreds; these protests were timed for the one-year anniversary of a cartoon in a government newspaper that depicted a cockroach speaking Azeri.

Iran's largest religious minority, the Baha'i, also faces some of the worst government abuse. The estimated 300,000 Baha'i adherents are persecuted for their belief that other prophets followed Muhammad and, as followers of an unrecognized religion, are barred from public worship or contact with co-believers in other countries. Baha'i rights organizations reported an increase in government harassment in 2007. This included police raids on Baha'i homes and businesses in Tehran in February, criminal prosecution of group members for promotion of an 'un-Islamic' organization, and government orders to 25 industries in April to deny

business licences to Baha'i. A 2006 government edict led to the expulsion of more than half of all Baha'i university students during the 2006–7 academic year, solely on the basis of their religion.

In November 2007 the UN General Assembly's Human Rights Committee narrowly approved a draft resolution expressing 'deep concern' at human rights violations in Iran. Among other provisions, the draft called on Iran 'to eliminate, in law and practice, all forms of discrimination and other human rights violations against persons belonging to religious, ethnic, linguistic, or other minorities'.

Iraq

The fifth year of war following the US-led invasion of Iraq was one of the bloodiest. The main fault line remains that between Sunni and Shia Arabs. However, within the broader war, small, often-forgotten minorities have been most prone to violent attack. The overall number of civilian deaths from the beginning of the conflict is disputed, but probably ranges in the hundreds of thousands. In July 2007 the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that 2 million Iraqis had become refugees and 2 million more internally displaced since March 2003. The agency further estimated that 2,000 additional Iraqis continued to be displaced every day. Most of the refugees have fled to Jordan and Syria, which have taken in some 500,000 and 1.5 million Iraqis, respectively – according to the UN, nearly a third of these refugees come from minority communities.

Iraqis fleeing insecurity and dire economic conditions have encountered new political and physical barriers at foreign borders. Some groups have found escape especially difficult, notably the Palestinian minority.

For the approximately 30,000 Iraqis internally displaced each month, new barriers also arose in 2007. In October, UNHCR announced that 11 of 18 Iraqi provincial governors had closed their territories to internally displaced persons from other provinces, and that any new arrivals would be denied government support for food and education.

Sectarian violence

Shia and Sunni Arabs living as numerical minorities among a majority of the other community face severe threats in all parts of the country, targeted by militias vying for power and land, or exacting

retribution for attacks from the other side. Sectarian violence has been especially fierce ever since February 2006 when Sunni militants bombed one of the holiest Shia mosques in Samarra. Many in the Shia numerical majority are eager to consolidate control over the country, while long-dominant Sunnis fear persecution as a minority. The December 2006 hanging of Saddam Hussein following a war crimes trial deemed deeply flawed by human rights advocates did nothing to dampen those fears. In August 2007, the main Sunni bloc withdrew from Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government, accusing him of sectarianism. By October, despite intense international pressure, the Iraqi government still had not reached agreement on how the country's oil revenues should be shared; Sunnis, predominantly from the country's oil-poor centre, fear efforts by Shia and Kurds to keep revenues in the oil-rich south and north.

In September 2007 the US Department of Defence claimed that death rates from sectarian violence had fallen compared with those of the previous year, however an analysis released separately by the politically independent US Government Accountability Office 'could not determine if sectarian violence had declined'.

Radical Shia militias have overt backers in government, and have infiltrated the Iraqi National Police and, to a lesser extent, the Iraqi army; from within the security services and without, death squads and militias continue to target Sunni civilians. They have also particularly targeted the Palestinian community in Iraq for abduction, torture and murder. Palestinians are Sunni, and under Saddam Hussein received privileged treatment in the country. The US alleges that Iran is providing support to some of the militants. In overwhelmingly Shia southern Iraq, Shia militias have fought each other for resources and power.

Many of the Sunni attacks on Shia have been perpetrated by foreign-led militias, including 'al-Qaeda in Iraq', and have often featured car bombs and suicide attacks. In February 2007, a bomb at a Shia market in Baghdad killed 137; in April five car bombs targeting Shia in Baghdad killed 200 people in a single day. As part of an announced offensive during the holy month of Ramadan, Sunni militants conducted a wave of suicide bombings and other attacks in September. During 2007, the US military began arming and training militias loyal to Sunni

traditional tribal leaders, some of whom are hostile to foreign Sunni militants. Shia leaders have been wary of the tactic, worrying that support for Sunni militarization could eventually further sectarian attacks on their communities.

The ongoing sectarian violence has continued the process of segregation between Shia and Sunni Iraqis. In 2007 the government intervened to try to shore up the common practice of mixed sectarian marriage in Iraq by introducing cash bonuses for newly married, mixed Sunni–Shia couples. Meanwhile, Baghdad real-estate agents experienced a boom in arranging housing exchanges between Shia and Sunni minorities in Baghdad neighbourhoods. As the city and country become more segregated, life for remaining sectarian minorities has become more perilous.

International forces, mostly American, have been reluctant to take action on behalf of smaller minority groups, especially as political desperation to find a way out of the quagmire in Iraq has increasingly meant finding accommodation with the three dominant groups, elements of which are usually responsible for targeting smaller groups. Additionally, smaller minorities for the most part have no militias of their own, and must rely on police, who are often corrupt, or themselves perpetrators of ethnic and sectarian violence.

Attacks on non-Muslims

Iraq's Christian minorities, from the ancient communities of Chaldo-Assyrians and Syriac-speaking Orthodox Christians to the Armenians who fled to Iraq from the Ottoman Empire early in the twentieth century, are now all under severe threat. Across Iraq, Shia and Sunni Islamic extremists have singled out Christian families, often forcing them to pay protection money. When the funds run out, they are given a choice of converting, fleeing or dying. Among Christians who stay, women are forced to wear the Muslim *abaya* body covering. Death threats forced the last Anglican vicar, a British citizen, to flee Iraq in July 2007. He testified before the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) that in a single week earlier in July, 36 of his congregation had been kidnapped.

While many Christians have fled abroad, others have moved to the relatively calmer north. Reports indicate that 3,000 Christian families have left

Baghdad and moved to the Kurdish territories, whilst another 4,000 have moved to the Nineveh Plains. The new arrivals often lack employment, schools and housing. There has been talk that some Christian communities – especially the umbrella Assyrian ones – are lobbying for a separate entity in the Nineveh Plains just north of Mosul. Discussions continue over the shape of any such entity and what degree of self-governance it would take on. While representatives of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) have said they support the creation of a 'Nineveh province' within Kurdistan, the US government has opposed the idea, saying it would 'further sectarianism'.

The year 2007 was one of devastation for Yezidis, ethnic and linguistic Kurds who are adherents of a 4,000-year-old, pre-Islamic faith. Following a *fatwa*, or religious instruction from a Sunni militant group called 'Islamic State of Iraq' calling for the deaths of Yezidis, suspected Sunni militants pulled 23 Yezidi men from a bus and executed them in April 2007. The same group of extremists perpetrated the single most devastating terrorist attack of the Iraq war in August 2007; four truck bombs killed almost 500 Yezidis in two villages in the Nineveh Plains, along the Syrian border. The area is strategically important disputed territory. Following the US offensive against Sunni insurgents to the south, reports indicate that 'al-Qaeda in Iraq' has increased its presence in this region. Many Yezidis have fled the country and those who remain are now fearful of travel outside of their communities. Yezidi farmers are losing their livelihoods because they can no longer travel to markets to sell their produce. In October, the *New York Times* reported that security fears had led Yezidis to stop performing religious ceremonies.

Conflict in the north

The Kurds in the north have autonomous rule, with centres in Erbil and Suleimaniyyeh, and are drafting a local constitution for the Kurdish areas. Kurdish aspirations for an independent Kurdistan are anathema to Iran, Syria and Turkey, all of which have neighbouring Kurdish minorities who, they fear, would seek to join such a new state. Over the course of 2007, Turkey grew increasingly concerned about attacks on its territory conducted by militants of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which uses northern Iraq as a refuge. In August, Turkey and

Mandaean-Sabeans – bearing the brunt of warfare

The Iraq war has had a devastating effect on the Mandaean-Sabean community, which is being gradually driven out of its ancient homeland. Preti Taneja profiles the group, its history, beliefs and its prospects for survival.

The Mandaean-Sabeans are an ancient people whose faith dates back to pre-Christian times. It is estimated that only around 60,000 still exist, living in groups that, because of ongoing persecution, are scattered around the world, including in the Middle East in Syria, Jordan and Iran, and in Australia, North America and Europe. For more than two millennia they made their home in what is now southern Iraq, between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers. The nearest city is Basra. Today, the community is under such extreme pressure that their religion, culture and language are in danger of disappearing forever.

The Mandaean faith is centred around John the Baptist. Mandaean baptism takes place regularly and often, as a form of spiritual cleansing. The person being baptized must submerge their head three times in the running water of a river, and in the presence of a Mandaean priest. The language is a form of Aramaic, the language of the New Testament. This language is still spoken by Mandeans in Iran, but in Iraq it exists mainly in Mandaean liturgy. It is listed in the 2007 UNESCO *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*, but very little else has been done to formally protect it. Mandeans are pacifists: the religion prohibits the carrying of weapons or taking of life. Although they are mentioned in the Qur'an as 'people of the book' this is disputed by some Islamic interpreters. Circumcision and marriage outside the faith is considered religious conversion for Mandeans.

The Iraq war: Mandeans targeted
Today, it is estimated that only 5,000 Mandeans remain in Iraq, mostly in Baghdad, and in the area around Basra.

Since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Mandeans have been the specific targets of violence. Mandaean women and children have been kidnapped and forcibly converted to Islam by rape, circumcision, physical beatings and even burning by bonfire. The community has suffered the looting and destruction of their homes and businesses. Specific instances have been well documented by MRG, Mandaean Crisis International, Mandaean Human Rights Group and Genocide Watch, among others.

Mandeans do not have the protection of tribal structures, and their pacifism means they will not turn to violence, even in self-defence. Thus they are among the most vulnerable communities in Iraq. They daily face the harrowing dilemma: convert, leave or die.

Layla al Roomi, a Mandaean who is based in the UK and is now lobbying for the Iraqi community, said, 'In the last months, there have been further killings of Mandeans in Iraq. Families are being separated, homes are being taken. It is worse than it has been so far. Despite the Bush administration saying that there is more security in Iraq, minorities are continuing to suffer.' In fact, she said, 'beneath the noses of the British and US troops in southern Iraq, including Basra, there has been a total cleansing of Mandeans and Christians.'

Some Iraqi minorities have been resettled in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) governorates in northern Iraq, and on the Nineveh Plains. But for most Mandeans, who have few family or community ties in those areas, this is not an option. In the KRG only 20 or 30 Mandaean families with professional qualifications have found refuge. And the threat of Turkish military action undermines any sense of security these new arrivals might feel. Outside the KRG in northern Iraq, the few Mandeans who have resettled still receive threats of kidnapping, forced conversion and death from religious fundamentalists.

Refugee life: hardship and loss of culture
The Mandaean Human Rights Group estimates that around 2,000 families (about 8,000 refugees) have fled to Syria and about 900

families (about 3,600 refugees) are now in Jordan. They live cramped in small apartments, sometimes five or six people to a room.

Basil, a 33-year-old Mandaean Iraqi, fled Baghdad 10 months ago with his parents. He trained to be an engineer. In Iraq, he worked for the United Nations before the headquarters were bombed in August 2003. Doing this work, he received death threats, and finally he left to work as an operations manager for a trucking company. The company had transport contracts with the coalition forces. 'That's what forced me to leave Iraq,' said Basil. 'I was almost killed. People were threatening me and chasing me – when they could not find me, they targeted my father. They knew that he was a dentist in Baghdad, they knew where his clinic was. They knew I dealt with the US army – they demanded I meet them and told me where to come. They knew so many things that we had to flee.'

Now, he lives with his parents in a small apartment in Damascus. Though he is glad to be alive, he is finding the situation he and his community are in increasingly difficult to bear. 'Sometimes I dream of going back to Iraq,' he says, 'despite the terror and the killings in Baghdad. There is no home, no comfort here.'

Refugees are not allowed work permits, and Basil confirms, 'It is hard to live in Damascus. There are no jobs, no future, you do nothing all day.' Instead he works as a volunteer for the Mandaean Association that has grown in the community. 'If you saw the circumstances we are living in, you would cry,' he said. 'People are running out of money, no one knows how they will survive when the New Year comes.' As the refugee population grows, rents increase even in

the poorest areas where refugees are housed.

Living this way, Mandeans cannot observe their religious rituals, including baptisms, weddings and funerals. Although they are free to worship in Jordan and Syria, there is no official area for them to do so and they are not close to the rivers that are so important to the faith. When members of the community die, Mandaean relatives have undertaken the perilous journey to bury them in Iraq, but, because of tighter visa restrictions for Iraqi refugees coming into the two countries, that is no longer an option.

The future

For most Mandeans, return to Iraq is not an option. The religious climate, the difficulties in reclaiming homes and land, and the lack of political protection would make their situation highly dangerous and difficult. The Mandaean culture and language is at risk of being totally eradicated from Iraq.

As its members must adapt to survive away from their homeland, there is a chance that this ancient faith will eventually disappear completely. The US and UK have proved sympathetic listeners, but this has not translated into action. For Basil and for the rest of Iraq's Mandeans, this is not enough. 'It makes it harder when we hear promises of protection. In the end they just seem to be lies.'

Read MRG's 2007 report: *Assimilation, Exodus, Eradication: Iraq's Minority Communities since 2003*, by Preti Taneja

Iraq signed an agreement on coordination of efforts to combat the PKK, but cross-border incursions by the PKK continued in September and October. In November Turkey moved 100,000 troops and heavy weapons to the border and the prospect of Turkish involvement in Iraq threatened to roil the relatively calm north, where small minorities have suffered the most from what violence has occurred in that region. Through intense US diplomacy with Turkey and pressure on the Iraqi Kurdish government to

block support to the PKK, it was hoped that such a scenario could be avoided.

Violence between Kurds and Arabs increased during 2007, as a referendum slated for the end of the year on the future status of the oil-rich town of Kirkuk neared. The Iraqi Constitution provides for the referendum to decide on whether Kirkuk province will join the autonomous Kurdistan Region. In April the central government approved an incentive package for Sunni Arabs forcibly settled

in Kirkuk under Saddam Hussein to return to their original homelands in the south. According to an Iraqi minister, by October around 1,000 Sunni Arab families had accepted the approximately US \$15,000 payment to leave their Kirkuk homes. Yet, whilst Kurds view Kirkuk as the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, many Arabs and Turkomans oppose this, and smaller minorities including Armenians, Chaldo-Assyrian Christians, Faili and Shabak have been caught in the middle. Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government, along with Kurdish militias, have targeted Arabs and Turkomans, including through tactics of abduction and torture. Increasingly, Sunni Arab militants opposed to Kirkuk joining Kurdistan have launched attacks on Kurdish targets.

Turkomans view Kirkuk as historically theirs. Out of its opposition to the Kurds gaining control of Kirkuk and the likewise-disputed oil-town of Mosul, Turkey has provided backing for Turkoman militias that are confronting Kurdish forces. Apart from the competition for land, Turkomans have been targeted on sectarian grounds, with women being particularly vulnerable. In June 2007, four Shia Iraqi soldiers were charged with the rape of a Sunni Turkoman woman in Tel Afar – one of many such reported incidents. In July 2007 a marketplace bomb attack on Shia Turkomans killed between 130 and 210 civilians, mostly women and children.

Kurdish militants have also harassed the small ethnic Shabak community. In the interests of extending land claims in the northern Nineveh governorate, these Kurds assert that, despite Shabaks' distinct language and recognition as an ethnic group, Shabaks are really Kurds. Additionally, the majority of Shabak who are Shia have been targeted by Sunni militants. In July 2007 a Shabak MP claimed that Sunni militants had killed around 1,000 Shabak and displaced a further 4,000 from the Mosul area since 2003.

Faili, who are Shia Kurds, also face threats on sectarian grounds. A July 2007 truck bomb at a café frequented by Faili in the town of Amirli killed 105 and injured nearly 250 more. Journalists suspected that the bombing was linked to the forthcoming referendum on Kurdish autonomy.

Grim prospects

Despite the election of a parliament and the drafting of a constitution, the prospect of full-scale

civil war between Shia militias and Sunni insurgents that threatens the existence of Iraq as a country, is still very real. A 'surge' of around 28,000 additional American troops in 2007 was meant to restore order in the country. Reported drops in levels of violence in Baghdad by the end of the year offered tentative hope – but clearly the country has a long road to travel before it climbs out of the post-invasion abyss. And the success of the surge strategy is by no means assured. Opposition to the war in the US has grown dramatically, and the Bush administration is facing ever stronger calls for force draw-down and withdrawal. In October, the British government announced that it would withdraw 1,000 troops, or 20 per cent of its force, from Iraq by the end of 2007.

Iraqi refugees

According to UN figures, nearly a third of the 2 million Iraqis who have fled the country come from the country's smaller minority groups. Beyond individual survival, these groups fear for the survival of their cultures.

According to a Kurdish government official in October 2007, at least 70,000 Yezidis, or 15 per cent of the group's population, have fled the country. Iraq's ancient and once sizeable Jewish community has all but entirely emigrated, with only a handful of Jewish people remaining in Baghdad.

Many Iraqi Christians also are emigrating in disproportionately large numbers. According to UNHCR, while Christians make up 4 per cent of the overall Iraqi population, they constitute 40 per cent of Iraqi refugees. According to the Iraqi non-governmental Christian Peace organization, a Christian minority of 850,000 in 2003 has been whittled down to under 600,000 today. In May 2007, USCIRF estimated that up to half of all Iraqi Christians had left the country.

For Iraqis fleeing the devastation of war, Syria has been a prime destination. Since March 2003 the country has taken in around 1.5 million Iraqis and, according to one Syrian non-governmental organization (NGO) estimate in August 2007, as many as 2 million. The refugees have swelled Syria's population by 8–10 per cent and the government estimates that the burden, including accommodation of Iraqi children in schools, has cost it US \$1 billion each year. The influx has caused increases in the prices of housing and basic

commodities. Assistance provided by UNHCR and other international agencies has not come close to covering the needs, and many Iraqi refugees are falling into poverty and despair. Homelessness is becoming a major problem, and some desperate Iraqis are turning to begging or crime to get by. Many of the Iraqi refugees are destitute widows, and some have turned to sex work to survive.

Since it allowed 300 Palestinian refugees from Iraq to enter in April–May 2006, the Syrian government has singled out this group for denial of entry. By May 2007, around 1,400 Iraqi Palestinians were camped at the Iraqi–Syrian border – fleeing Shia militia attacks at home and refused permission to enter Syria. Despite assistance from UNHCR and the International Committee for the Red Cross, Palestinians are living in squalid desert camps, exposed to blazing desert heat and sand storms, and lacking adequate water supplies. In May 2007 UNHCR appealed for international assistance in providing health care at the camps, noting that some Palestinian Iraqis were dying of treatable illnesses.

Jordan has admitted more Iraqi refugees per capita than any other country, with estimates ranging from 500,000 to 1 million. As in Syria, the influx has placed a heavy burden on the government, while driving up housing prices and the cost of basic goods. Many of the Iraqi refugees, disproportionately from Iraq's smaller ethnic and religious minority groups, live in poverty. Unemployment rates are high, in part because the refugees are ineligible for work in the public sector. With a higher cost of living, especially in Amman, increasing numbers of Iraqis have turned to begging.

Up till February 2007, Jordan still had no visa requirement for entry of Iraqi citizens, which helped make the country one of the prime destinations for those fleeing persecution. Beyond instituting a new passport requirement, ever since the 2005 suicide bomb attacks perpetrated by Iraqis on three hotels in Amman, the Jordanian government has feared the import of sectarian violence and routinely turned away Iraqi males between the ages of 18 and 45 and screened for Shia. In April 2007, Human Rights Watch documented the systematic rejection of Iraqi Shias at the border, as well as increasing police sweeps and repatriation of Iraqi refugees.

Although the US-led invasion triggered the conflict that has led to mass displacement, by July

2007 the US had only admitted 825 Iraqi refugees, while between 2003 and 2005 the UK had only let in 100. Iraqis working for these and other Western governments, international organizations, NGOs and international media outlets have been targeted by extremists; because many of the Iraqis willing to take such work are non-Muslims, these minorities have been disproportionately affected. As the number of Iraqis working at the US embassy killed or claiming asylum status abroad rose, in July 2007, the American ambassador pleaded with Washington to grant refugee visas to all local embassy staff and their families. A bill liberalizing the asylum process for Iraqis associated with US or US-backed institutions passed the US Senate in September, and included special allowances for Iraqis from minority religious groups. Sweden has admitted nearly half of the estimated 20,000 Iraqi refugees who have been allowed to settle in Western countries. Many of the thousands of refugees in Sweden are Assyrians and other Christians.

Israel

Israeli Arab citizens (or Palestinian citizens of Israel), who comprise nearly 20 per cent of the population, continued to face broad governmental and societal discrimination in 2007. In most cases where the government acknowledged discrimination against this group, it did so by citing the Jewish identity of the state and its security in the face of continued attacks from the Occupied Territories of the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

A 2006 report by Israeli Arab intellectuals titled *The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel* sparked controversy extending into 2007. The report, prompted by Israel's internal debate over a new constitution, called for Israel to abandon its identity as a Jewish state, stop treating its Arab citizens as 'enemies', and guarantee equal status for Jews and Arabs. One leading Arab academic, Dr Adel Manna, said in April 2007, 'The Israeli public doesn't want to understand that it is demanding that the Arabs become loyal but on the other hand it is not allowing them to do so.'

In March the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) called on Israeli lawmakers to scrap a race-based provision blocking family unification in Israel for broad swathes of the population in the Occupied Territories; the ban, adopted out of concern over terrorist attacks, has



Left: A Druze woman in the Golan Heights watches from a UN zone crossing along the Israeli-Syrian border. Ahikam Seri/Panos Pictures

services, they cannot live in the desert.' Indeed, 120,000 Bedouins have moved into seven approved government towns. However these cramped settlements, with scant attached land, suffer shoddy design and were erected beginning in 1968 without Bedouin input. Forced urbanization has led to a loss of Bedouin traditional customs, high crime rates, drug problems and severe unemployment. Bedouin women have been especially affected, having lost their traditional social roles; added hurdles to mobility outside the home have contributed to near 90 per cent unemployment for women. In mid-July the government announced the establishment of a new agency to handle Bedouin issues.

Despite ongoing problems and setbacks, 2007 also saw some halting advances in Israel's acceptance of its Arab minority. In January the government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert appointed Labour MP Raleb Majadele as a minister without portfolio – the first Israeli Arab ever to sit in a government cabinet. Over the objections of right-wing politicians, in July the government approved a history textbook that for the first time ever included Palestinian views on the 1948 creation of the state of Israel as a 'catastrophe'. However, the book was only for use in Israeli Arab schools.

A growing influx of Jewish settlers among Druze communities in northern Israel and the occupied Golan Heights further degraded the relationship between the state and Druze in the north in 2007. Druze and some in the established Jewish community complain bitterly of right-wing settlers bent on dominance of the local villages. In October, over 30 Druze and police officers were wounded in riots in the Golan Heights village of Peki'in.

Lebanon

Tolerance amid Lebanon's great religious diversity came under heavy strain in 2007 as a result of the July 2006 war between Israel and Lebanese-based Hezbollah militants, deepening regional Sunni-Shia tensions resulting from the Iraqi civil war, and a continuation of the long-standing divide in Lebanese politics pitting advocates of a pro-Western orientation against those favouring a greater alignment with Syria and the Arab world. Lebanon's

system of political confessionalism – the allotment of political offices to particular religious groups – continued to act as a catalyst for tension among various groups. At the same time, the divide between pro-Syrian and pro-Western sentiment created deeper divides within Lebanon's minority communities.

In the aftermath of the devastating war with Israel in 2006, Lebanon's recently booming tourist industry was left in tatters, and the country's sharp economic decline contributed to resentment among non-Shia Muslims of Iranian- and Syrian-backed Hezbollah, increasingly blamed for provoking the war. For its part, in late 2006, Hezbollah withdrew all Shia members of government and launched major protests in Beirut demanding a larger Shia voice in Lebanese affairs, commensurate with its share of the country's population. A backlash among Sunni Arabs, along with some Christians and Druze, further reduced what remained of Hezbollah's standing as a protector of the nation.

In May, the UN Security Council approved establishment of an international tribunal to investigate and prosecute those responsible for a string of assassinations of prominent Lebanese officials and journalists opposed to Syria's years-long influence, beginning with the February 2005 assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Pro-Syrian political factions in the opposition, most notably Hezbollah and Maronite Christian followers of former Maronite militia leader and current Member of Parliament Michel Aoun, viewed the development as one more element in an alleged pro-American, pro-Israeli plot to turn Lebanon against the Arab world.

Lebanon's key divide between advocates of closer relations with the Arab world or the West is mirrored within the Maronite Christian community. Maronite leader Michel Aoun was once an opponent of Syria's influence in the country, but is now one of the most prominent figures in the opposition to the current pro-Western government. Meanwhile prominent anti-Syrian Maronite Christians have faced the threat of political assassination. In November 2006, assassins gunned down Pierre Gemayel, a young MP and son of a former president, who was also active in opposing Syrian involvement in Lebanese affairs. Amid allegations of voting irregularities, a pro-Syrian Maronite Christian won a by-election for his seat in

disproportionately affected Israeli Arabs who are more likely to have spouses from the West Bank and Gaza. Nevertheless, Israel's parliament, the Knesset, reauthorized the provision later in March, extending it until August 2008. Constitutional legal challenges to the law are pending.

Israel's 2006 war in Lebanon strained the relationship between the government and its Israeli Arab minority into 2007. An Arab member of the Knesset resigned his seat in April as it became known that he was under investigation for 'aiding the enemy' during the conflict, while he claimed that the government was persecuting him for his harsh criticism of its policies. In November 2007 the Knesset gave preliminary approval to a law that bans Israelis who visit 'enemy states' from taking seats in the Knesset. Supporters said it was aimed at ending meetings between Arab Knesset members and representatives of the Syrian government as well as such militant groups as Hezbollah and Hamas. Arab parliamentarians countered that the measure amounted to pure racism.

In September 2007 the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that the Jewish National Fund (JNF), established in 1901 to buy land for Jews in then-Ottoman administered Palestine, could no longer

follow a policy of refusing to sell land to Arabs. The JNF administers around 13 per cent of all land in Israel, in part jointly with the Israeli Lands Administration. Anticipation of the ruling created pressure within the Knesset to make the continuation of such explicit discrimination legal. In June 2007 CERD criticized the government for impeding the land rights of Palestinians outside of Israel who wanted to return, calling on the state 'to assure equality in the right to return to one's country and in the possession of property'.

One subset of Israeli Arabs, the estimated 150,000–200,000 indigenous Bedouins of the Negev desert, continued their long-standing struggle for land rights. The government pursued into 2007 the repeated destruction of 45 unrecognized Bedouin villages, some of which pre-date the establishment of the Israeli state. The Israeli government denies Bedouin claims to the land for lack of documentation. Beyond bulldozing the shanties, the government has denied provision of electricity, water and sewage services to the unrecognized settlements that are home to around 80,000 Bedouins. In February the Israeli housing minister told the BBC, 'If they want their children to be educated, to grow up in the right environment, with all the culture and

parliament in August 2007. A bombing in September 2007 killed another Maronite anti-Syrian MP, Antoine Ghanim, and six others in a mainly Maronite suburb of Beirut. As 2007 progressed, pro-Western and pro-Syrian factions in Lebanon focused their attention and energy on who would succeed current Maronite pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud. Because the position is reserved for Maronites, the national divide animated divisions within the Maronite community. Leading contenders for the presidency, due to be chosen by parliament, were Michel Aoun and former President Amin Gemayel, the father of murdered MP Pierre Gemayel. A boycott by pro-Syrian factions delayed the vote three times, and Lahoud's term expired in late November. Parliament had failed to identify a successor capable of gaining the necessary two-thirds vote and in early December the office of president remained vacant.

With exception of Palestinians, most, but not all, Sunnis align politically with the pro-Western faction in Lebanon's main political divide, and prominent anti-Syrian Sunnis have been assassinated in recent years – most notably former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. A June 2007 blast killed Sunni politician and Syria critic Walid Eido along with nine others.

In the midst of Lebanon's political and sectarian crisis, the festering plight of the country's 250,000–300,000 Palestinian refugees erupted anew during 2007. The Palestinian community, refugees displaced by the 1948 creation of Israel and their descendants, continues to confront severe official discrimination in Lebanon, in part due to fears that integration of this large group of Sunni Muslims would upset the country's precarious sectarian-religious political balance. The growing refugee population has remained shoe-horned into 12 overcrowded camps whose confines have barely been allowed to expand since 1948. Palestinians are not allowed to own property, face tight restrictions on extending their homes, are barred from many professions, and are largely prevented from travel.

The Lebanese government accused Palestinian militants of the Fatah al-Islam faction of bombing two buses in a Christian town in February 2007, killing three; the attack was one day prior to the two-year anniversary of the Hariri assassination. The government also accused the group of several bank robberies throughout early 2007. Following arrests

of faction members for one such robbery in May, Fatah al-Islam militants holed up in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp fired on Lebanese soldiers with rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns. The army responded with indiscriminate shelling and fighting lasted for the next 15 weeks. An estimated 35,000–40,000 Palestinian civilians fled the camp during the conflict, in which 40 civilians died along with 168 Lebanese soldiers; around 400 militants were captured or killed as the army eventually prevailed. In October the first of the camp's residents were allowed to return, many finding their houses destroyed and some complaining that the army had looted their property.

Syria

Instability in Iraq indirectly led to more violence between Syrian Kurds and state authorities in 2007. As Turkish anger over cross-border Kurdish rebel incursions from northern Iraq increased over the course of the year and Turkey massed troops at the frontier, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad visited Ankara to express his support. With the crisis mounting, in early November around 200 Syrian Kurds took to the streets in the north-eastern town of Qamishli, near the Turkish and Iraqi borders, to express their support for Iraqi Kurds. Government security forces broke up the rally with bullets and teargas, killing one young Kurd and injuring four others. Thousands of Kurds attended the funeral of the Kurdish youth the following day. The incident raised the prospect of clashes on the scale of those in 2004, when security services cracked down on rioting fuelled by resentment over the continuing stateless status of an estimated 300,000 Kurds in Syria. In the end, 38 Kurds were dead and some 1,000 arrested.

Saudi Arabia

State and societal intolerance of religious minorities continues to be standard practice in Saudi Arabia, although the government introduced some steps in 2007 to improve the situation. Saudi Arabia has no legal guarantees for freedom of religion. Beyond non-Muslims, Muslims who do not share ultra-conservative interpretations of Sunni Islam continue to face harassment, arrest and torture at the hands of the country's *mutawwa'in* religious police for practising their faith. In the past, this has particularly led to tension in concentrated areas of

Shia and Isma'ili Muslim practice, especially in Eastern and Najran provinces, respectively. Shia mosques are required to issue the Sunni call to prayers. According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), extremist schoolteachers have berated Shia children about their alleged heresy and, in January 2007, a prominent cleric of the government's council of religious elders called for the expulsion of all Shia from Muslim countries.

Like all women, minority women are subjected to extreme Sunni interpretations of Islamic law (Sharia). This includes a strict conservative dress code, a ban on driving and the prohibition of 'illegal mingling' between unmarried or unrelated men and women. In October 2006, a Saudi court convicted a Shia woman who had been gang raped because she had been in a car with an unrelated male at the time they were both attacked and sexually assaulted. In November 2007 the court banished the female victim's lawyer from the courtroom and doubled her sentence, to 200 lashes and six months in prison, for 'her attempt to aggravate and influence the judiciary through the media'.

There have been recent incipient reforms to Saudi Arabia's religious regime. In December 2006, the government established a new Human Rights Council (HRC). According to USCIRF, whilst women are entirely excluded, the new 24-member body does include one Shia and one Isma'ili Muslim. It has a mandate to educate government institutions, including the *mutawwa'in*, about human rights and, by decree of the king, government ministries are required to reply to all HRC complaints within three weeks. Meanwhile, in Eastern province, the government eased restrictions on the public celebration of Shia holidays, and in March 2007 the government announced that schoolteachers espousing extremist views would lose their jobs.

Yemen

Yemen's Jews are the country's only indigenous religious minority. Once 50,000–60,000 strong, following the founding of Israel in 1948, most Yemeni Jews emigrated. The lifting of a subsequent travel ban in 1992 led to a further wave of emigration, and only 300–500 Jewish people remain in Yemen today. There are only two or three synagogues still active, as well as two private schools

where Jewish pupils can learn Hebrew in addition to their Arabic mother tongue.

The Jewish community has long been widely accepted in Yemen, and its remaining members – many of them elderly – are reluctant to leave. However, in 2007 followers of the deceased extremist Muslim cleric Hussein Badr Eddin al-Houthi issued direct threats to the Jews of the Al-Salem village in northern Yemen. The al-Houthi group seeks re-imposition in the north of Zaydi clerical rule. Since 2004 al-Houthi militants have clashed with the army of predominantly Sunni Muslim Yemen. In January, al-Houthi members issued written warnings to the 45 Jews of Al-Salem, giving them ten days to leave. The government responded by relocating the threatened group to the nearby town of Sa'ada and launched an offensive against the militants. Amid increased fighting in the area, the government again relocated the displaced Jews, this time to the capital, Sana'a, and has provided them with housing and other assistance. Members of the group have expressed a desire to return to their village of Al-Salem. ■