



Middle East

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The Middle East is arguably one of the most ethnically, religiously and linguistically diverse areas of the world. Ancient languages, ethnic groups and religious sects have survived the creation of modern nation states, but find themselves under constant threat from generalized violence and local identity politics. Throughout the region in 2008, conflicts over both resources and identity have continued.

The US-led invasion of Iraq, in particular, has had serious effects on neighbouring governments bearing the weight of a large-scale refugee crisis that has put great strain on resources from water to health and education provision. Small minority communities have been forced to flee and are being dispersed worldwide. Minority communities inside Iraq continue to suffer targeted attacks because of their identities. The conflict has also contributed to security concerns in neighbouring countries and borders have become more solid.

In recent history, the elements of cultural difference – language, religion and ethnicity – have become dominant issues in the evolution of nationalism in the region. Being one of the most important vectors for the transmission of cultural identity, education provision, particularly for minorities, has suffered as a result.

Language has played a pivotal role in the creation of Arab, Persian and Kurdish national identities, and for much of the region has been the most important marker of ethnicity. The relationship between language, ethnicity and the concept of the 'nation' has meant that minority language issues have become increasingly politicized and sensitive.

Increasingly, throughout the region, states have put considerable energy into creating uni-lingual public spaces. The results of this for linguistic and ethno-linguistic minorities have been dramatic. As such, minority groups throughout the region have been targeted and in some cases violently repressed for campaigning for the right to mother tongue education – the lack of which is widely considered to be detrimental to students' achievement of their potential. In most cases, of course, it is rural communities and women and girls from minorities who suffer most from educational exclusion.

The continuing trends of forcibly adopting majority-language education, providing fewer resources for the education of minority groups, and actively persecuting those who try to maintain minority education-

al activities can only further threaten, challenge and marginalize minorities throughout the Middle East.

No future: the situation of minority IDPs and Iraqi refugees

Within Iraq an estimated 2–3 million Iraqis are internally displaced (IDPs). Detailed statistics suggest that between 8.6 per cent (International Organization for Migration) and 12 per cent (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre) of IDPs are from Iraq's smaller minorities – similar proportions to the general population.

IDPs face considerable obstacles to ensuring that their children receive regular schooling. Not only do economic constraints and security concerns affect school enrolment, but families also face difficulties transferring official school documents. Schools in areas with large numbers of IDPs are becoming overcrowded.

Members of some minority groups, particularly Mandaean-Sabeans, have fled their home areas in large numbers, and find their culture and future endangered by their status as IDPs or refugees. Others, like Yezidis and Chaldean and Assyrian Christians, are divided, and face ongoing violence in their home areas as well as the challenges of displacement.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and others have warned that the number of Iraqi religious minorities that are fleeing – including Christians, Yezidis and Mandaean-Sabeans – could threaten the existence of these faiths in Iraq. The Mandaean population has decreased from more than 60,000 in the early 1990s to an estimated 4,000–5,000 today.

It is difficult to estimate how many Iraqis have fled their country. Currently, the UNHCR has registered approximately 300,000 Iraqis, primarily in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. Early estimates suggested there might be more than 2 million Iraqi refugees in total, but efforts to locate or provide aid to them have yielded little result. Among those known to be displaced, UN and other figures suggest that 20–25 per cent come from Iraq's smaller ethnic or religious minority groups. Christians and Mandaean-Sabeans are particularly heavily represented.

Many Iraqi refugees lack legal status in their host countries, have limited access to basic services, and face challenges in accessing education – and few opportunities for employment. Lebanon, Syria and Jordan have tended to treat Iraqis as illegal migrants,

'They put me in a class with girls five years younger than me'

Two young Iraqi refugees in Jordan tell *Kate Washington* their stories

Ruwaida, 15, says:

'When we were still in Iraq a group of men came into my school and shot our teacher. Nobody knew why. I liked that teacher very much, she was always really kind.

'After that I didn't want to go to school any more. My father said I didn't need to, he would teach me at home. I think he meant to, but he was busy and sad and my mother was crying a lot. That was about five years ago, I think. Maybe a year after that we came to Amman. My parents decided it was too scary in Baghdad and my brother couldn't leave the house at that time. One of our neighbours was kidnapped and we didn't see him any more. When we came to Jordan people told my parents that there were no schools for Iraqis unless you paid lots of money.

'We didn't have lots of money so my parents sent my two brothers to school. I didn't mind, I didn't want to go to school anyway. It made me feel sick. Two years ago the King said Iraqis could go to school and my parents were really pleased. They made me promise that I would try and go to school. I was really nervous. Actually it didn't matter, the school couldn't take me. We had the wrong papers from my old school and I was too old for my class. This year they tried again. They put me in a class with girls five

years younger than me. It was too bad and they were too bad with me. I cried for three days. My father said I didn't have to go any more. When I was a small girl I thought that I would be a doctor or maybe an engineer when I was older. My father is a doctor and my mother is an engineer. It looked kind of easy. But that was when I was very small ... I don't think I'll be a doctor any more.'

Imad, 14, a Mandaean, says:

'I like school and I am a good student. Everyone in my class is nice and my teacher is a good teacher. They don't mind that I am an Iraqi and everyone is quiet about me being Mandaean. Most of the students don't know what that means. One of the boys said I was a *Kafir* [Unbeliever] but the teacher told him he was a donkey and didn't know anything. That made everyone laugh and he didn't say it any more.

'I think they think we are *Kafir*. My father went and spoke to the head of the school about the religion class. He didn't tell me why.

'Some of my friends at school are Iraqi too, but you can't see it. Now they speak with Jordanian accents. It is easier to be here if you have that accent. When I first got here I didn't understand everything the teachers said because they have that accent. It is OK now I understand everything.

'The hardest thing about going to school is the boys on the way to school. The bus doesn't go all the way to the school and I have to walk for 10 minutes. A lot can happen to you in 10 minutes. One day one of my friends got beaten by a group of boys when he was walking alone. He doesn't come to school now.

'Now me and my friends wait for each other near the bus and walk together. We are four boys and that feels a bit safer. I can't tell my father what happened – I don't want him to stop me from going to school too.' ■

Names have been changed

although both Syria and Jordan now give Iraqi children access to schools and some public health facilities. In 2008, Human Rights Watch reported that

Lebanon released 200 Iraqis who had previously been detained, as part of a move for the 'regularization of foreign nationals'.

Minorities are disproportionately represented in the poorest segments of the refugee population, and some are significantly less likely to have their children enrolled in school than other Iraqis: in early 2007, only 15 per cent of Mandaean-Sabean families said their children were enrolled. This may have changed, since in 2007–8 the Jordanian government opened public education to all children, regardless of nationality or legal status.

Given access to education, many Iraqis appear to have taken advantage of it (24,650 Iraqi children were in school in Jordan in 2007–8) but most have no formal opportunities for higher education. They can receive some health care at moderately discounted rates, and aid from the UN and NGOs. Many work illegally; most are under-employed and vulnerable to exploitation.

Child labour remains an issue for families struggling to survive, and there are many anecdotal reports of survival sex among Iraqi women, particularly minorities who may have been victims of gender-based violence in Iraq. There continue to be reports of Iraqi women (from majority as well as minority communities) being forced to wear the Islamic hijab in Iraq, Syria and Jordan.

In Syria, the problems of Iraqi refugees are similar. There are about 200,000 Iraqis registered with the UNHCR, and only 46,642 Iraqi children enrolled in school.

Living off dwindling savings, it is easy for Iraqi refugees to develop a sense of hopelessness about their future. The shortfalls in education for children and employment for young people risk creating a generation of Iraqis that feels it has no future at all. Displaced minorities suffer particular problems from losing their community links. Mandaean-Sabeans in Jordan have no religious authority and are unable to practise their religious rituals, which demand the presence of bodies of water. With their community scattered, and becoming more so through resettlement, they risk the loss of their way of life altogether.

Other minority groups have been actively trying to promote and save their distinct languages and social and religious practice. In Amman, Jordan, Iraqi Assyrians have established their own informal school which teaches Assyrian language classes, religion classes and computer classes. The school is funded by charitable donations from the community.

Displaced minorities are also more likely than

Muslims to say they cannot or will not go back to Iraq, even if the security situation improves.

Migrant workers

Migrant or ‘guest workers’ are present in many Middle Eastern countries in their millions. They face a variety of problems because of legal and administrative rules, and lack of protection by their host governments. In many countries in the Middle East, ‘sponsorship’ laws typically tie workers to their employers and restrict their freedom of movement, making them vulnerable to workplace abuse. However, many foreign workers in the region face aggravated vulnerability because they are also religious and linguistic minorities.

Foreign workers are often from countries with Buddhist, Hindu or animist religions, which are not recognized by Middle Eastern governments or by many members of the population. This makes the workers more vulnerable to formal and informal abuse. Since a large number of foreign workers are women who travel to work in the domestic sector, these issues particularly affect minority women.

Throughout the region, there are numerous reports of overwork and physical, psychological and sexual abuse against foreign domestic workers. In accounts from Saudi Arabia, foreign domestic women workers report being regarded as less than human by their employers.

Foreign workers face harsh treatment from police and in detention, can be made to stand trial or sign confessions in languages they don’t understand, and can even face the death penalty. Foreign workers who run into legal problems and do not have financial or legal support can languish in detention indefinitely.

Iran

Iran’s minority communities – both ethnic and religious – make up nearly 50 per cent of the population. But they are subject to human rights violations by the state, such as intimidation, arbitrary detention, confiscation of property, denial of education and inequality in legal matters. Large numbers of both Iranian Kurd and Azeri activists have been detained for reasons of ‘national security’. In 2008 the use of security, educational, press and anti-dissident laws increased dramatically, according to Human Rights Watch.

A dramatic rise in repression of political and minority activists throughout 2008 culminated with

the forcible closure of Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Dr Shirin Ebadi’s Centre for Human Rights Defenders (CHRD) in December. According to Amnesty International, its closure ‘threatens the entire country’s human rights movement’.

Education

A policy of assimilation seems to be embedded in Iran’s approach to education. The Unrepresented Nations and People’s Organization (UNPO), an international group that advocates for stateless minorities around the world, claims that Iran has an official policy of ‘Persianization’ which puts at risk rights to cultural and linguistic heritage.

The Iranian Constitution states that all school textbooks must be in Persian, and while literacy rates in Iran are generally good, children from minority communities forced to learn in Persian/Farsi have high rates of illiteracy and often drop out of school early.

The government requires all heads of schools or institutes to identify students and staff affiliated and belonging to ‘subversive and non-subversive sects’ and to report on them.

Teachers in Iran have been particularly vulnerable to arrest, torture and even execution, because of state intolerance of minority-language education. In February 2008, Kurdish teacher Farzad Kamangar, superintendent of high schools in Kamayaran, was sentenced to death for ‘endangering national security’. According to the US State Department Human Rights Report on Iran, the Supreme Court upheld the sentence in July.

This policy of discrimination in education extends into severe restrictions on freedom of speech, opinion and the press, summarized by Human Rights Watch in its 2008 *World Report*: ‘Most journalists arrested in 2008 were targeted for covering ethnic minority issues and civil society activities.’ According to Iranian Minorities Human Rights Organization (IMHRO), ‘Any type of free media in ethnic minority languages is banned and the use of ethnic languages in any arts form is also prohibited.’

Minorities by group

Ahwazi Arabs make up about 3 per cent of Iran’s population. In January 2008, the government executed four Ahwazi political activists. The charges against them included ‘identity crimes’, such as rais-

ing the Ahwazi flag and giving their children Sunni names. In April 2008, dozens, possibly hundreds, of Ahwazi were detained in advance of the anniversary of riots in Al Ahwaz, which had erupted after a disputed letter was leaked from the government detailing plans to reduce the province’s Arab population.

Azeris make up nearly 25 per cent of the country’s population. While a number of key establishment figures are Azeri and they may be more generally accepted than other minorities, Azeris are nevertheless denied rights to be educated in their own language. On 21 February 2008, hundreds were arrested in connection with a peaceful demonstration on International Mother Language Day, demanding the right to use their own language in schools.

UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers Leandro Despouy issued appeals early in 2008 on behalf of an activist arrested for campaigning for greater rights to use the Azeri mother tongue, and on behalf of a journalist who wrote in and taught Azeri. Arrests of minority journalists, activists and intellectuals continued throughout the year and into early 2009.

Baha’is, Iran’s largest religious minority, have about 300,000 members. Their situation may be worsening as they face state-sponsored persecution, personal threats, restrictions on employment, expulsion from university and high school, and continued defamation in the media. In 2008 the government arrested more than a dozen leading Baha’is.

Ethnic Baluchis constitute about 2 per cent of the population and practise Sunni Islam. They live in the country’s poorest region. MRG has reported that since 2005 a Sunni organization based in Baluchistan, Jondallah, claimed responsibility for attacks against Iranian government targets. In August 2008, a Tehran-based Baluchi newspaper journalist, Yaghoub Mehrnehad, was arrested and executed for associating with Jondallah.

Around 7 per cent of Iran’s population is Kurdish. Clashes between the Partî Bo Jîyanî Azadî la Kurdistan (PJAK), the militant Kurdish group, and the Iranian government continued in 2008. The state has also engaged in numerous arrests, detentions and executions of Kurds this year, including at least one Kurdish juvenile. Kurdish newspapers have been closed, and journalists have been detained or executed.

Minority women have also been targeted: Hana

Abdi and Ronak Safarzadeh were arrested in 2007. They were members of Azarmehr Association of the Women of Kurdistan, organizing literacy courses and other capacity-building workshops in the Iranian Kurdish areas, as well as participants in the wider Campaign for Equality for an end to legal discrimination against women in Iran. Abdi was released in February 2009 after 16 months in jail; at the time of writing Safarzadeh is awaiting trial and could face the death penalty.

Iraq

Iraq has been home to a wide cross-section of the Middle East's ethnic and religious communities, some for more than two millennia. The majority of its population, about 60 per cent, are ethnically Arab Ithna'ashari ('Twelver') Shia. This group was kept out of positions of power under Saddam Hussein, but today has the greatest share of political power. Perhaps 20 per cent of the population are Arab Sunnis (though this figure is widely disputed) and 15–20 per cent are ethnic Kurds, a majority of whom are Sunni Muslim. There are numerous smaller ethnic and religious groups, including Christians (Chaldeans, Assyrians and Armenians), Baha'is, Dom (a people related to the Roma), Jews, Faili (Shia Kurds), Mandaean-Sabeans, Palestinians, Sarliya-Kakaiya, Shabak, Turkmen and Yezidis. Under Saddam, many of these communities were ethnically cleansed under a policy of Arabization. Some were given favourable treatment, however.

In December 2008, the USCIRF called for Iraq to be designated 'a country of particular concern' under America's International Religious Freedom Act. The reason for this, according to the State Department report, was particularly because of the situation for Iraq's smallest religious minorities, including Chaldo-Assyrian Christians, other Christians, Mandaean-Sabeans, Shabaks and Yezidis. Commission chair Felice D. Gaer said: 'The lack of effective government action to protect these communities from abuses has established Iraq among one of the most dangerous places on earth for religious minorities.'

In the sectarian violence following the US-led invasion of 2003, minority groups were disproportionately the victims. Palestinian refugees, who received favoured status under Saddam, became targets of attacks. Christians, who under Saddam were permitted to trade alcohol, were in several

areas singled out by hard-line Islamist movements for murder or forced conversion. Their religious buildings, shops and homes were also targeted. Mandaean-Sabeans, members of an ancient Gnostic sect whose prophet is John the Baptist, were targeted in Baghdad. The Mandaean Human Rights Group Report of 2008 states that forcible conversions and confiscation of property and businesses are taking place, and the Mandaean Associations Union reported the killing of nine Mandaeans in Al-Kut City in Iraq on 26 March 2008.

Regarding both Iraq's many internally displaced people (IDPs) and the general population, UN agencies and NGOs continue to express concern over access to schooling and the quality of education. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) stated in February 2008 that access to regular schooling has been hampered due to continued security fears, school closures and the exodus of teaching staff. School enrolment rates are thought to be as low as 46 per cent, with the highest drop-out rates noted in Nineveh Governorate – an area where many minorities live.

As the country has become more ethnically segregated, struggles have been exacerbated by resource conflicts. Iraq's oil resources are concentrated in north, including the Kurdish-governed areas, and in the Shia-majority south. This has led to disagreements over the level of federalism Iraq will have, and how resources will be shared, controlled and distributed by the government. Final agreement on issues such as Iraq's oil law continued to be delayed in 2008.

One result of these disputes has been ethno-political groups using identity politics and forced migration to assert their dominance over strategic resources or population areas. Kurds have fought for increased territory for their semi-autonomous region in the north, and minorities have been the targets of violence and intimidation as a result, particularly in and around the oil-rich cities of Kirkuk and Mosul, which Iraqi Turkmen, Christians and Yazidi communities consider their homeland. In those cities, some groups, including Arabs and Kurds, have tried to co-opt others, force them to leave, or consolidate power through violence; 2008 saw an increase of such inter-ethnic conflict. Kirkuk is currently under the political control of Kurdish authorities; decades of ethnic cleansing have shaped the mutual distrust among different ethnic groups and Turkmen have

been particularly opposed to the inclusion of Kirkuk under Kurdish authority.

The political participation of minorities in government has been a major issue in 2008, and is intimately connected with this kind of identity politics. Early drafts of the crucial provincial elections law included quotas for minorities, including Assyrian Christians and Shabak, but these were removed in September 2008, when a last-minute revision of the bill allowed a resolution of the status of Kirkuk to be postponed until early 2009. The decision sparked protests in some Iraqi cities, and international condemnation. In November, following an advocacy campaign by minority organizations and MRG, the parliament restored minority representation, but offered minorities far fewer quota seats than recommended by the UN: only six out of 440.

Shabak are ethnically and linguistically distinct from Kurds, but Kurdish militias in some areas of the north have harassed them, insisting that they are in fact Kurds in order to consolidate land claims. According to a July 2008 report from the Iraq Ministry of Human Rights, the Shabak minority had suffered the worst internal displacement, reporting 3,708 families (about 16,000 people) displaced.

Yezidis, members of an ancient pre-Islamic faith, are particular targets. Though they did not occur at the disastrous levels of 2007, attacks against Yezidis continued in 2008, including the killing of seven members of one family by armed militants and a car bombing in the predominantly Yazidi town of Sinjar, near Mosul, that killed several people and wounded more than 40 others.

The situation of Iraq's Christian communities continued to be a concern during 2008. In March 2008, one of Iraq's most senior Chaldean Catholic clerics was abducted in the same city. In April, an Assyrian Orthodox priest was murdered in Baghdad. In October 2008, the UNHCR reported that targeted attacks against Christians in Mosul caused 13,000 people to flee. According to the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq, many have now returned.

The situation of Palestinian refugees in Iraq remains grave. After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, many were threatened, kidnapped, tortured or killed. Many tried to flee to neighbouring countries, but Syria will not admit them, Iraq remains

unsafe and their future is bleak. Thousands of Palestinians now inhabit three harsh desert camps on the Iraq-Syria border. In March 2008, UNHCR appealed for the immediate relocation and resettlement of Palestinians suffering from acute medical conditions. As of September 2008, 306 had been resettled: 116 were accepted by Chile, 174 by Sweden and 16 by Switzerland.

Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

Palestinian citizens of Israel, or 'Israeli Arabs', who constitute 20 per cent of the Israeli population, continue to be marginalized socially and politically, and divided into sub-groups that receive different treatment from the state. In October 2008 extremist Jewish rioters attacked Arab homes and property in Akka; in November outgoing Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, admitted that Palestinians in Israel suffer from 'deep-seated discrimination'. Most of the Israeli Palestinians are Sunni Arabs, but they also include Christian Arabs, Circassians, Druze, Samaritans and Bedouin. Other minority communities, such as Jews from the Arab region and migrant workers from the Horn of Africa, have also faced systematic social and political discrimination.

Repressive treatment of the Israeli Arab minority is typically justified by the government referencing Israel's identity as a Jewish state or by invoking security concerns. To this day, the country continues to be torn between its Jewish identity and its claim to full democracy, and political parties that deny that Israel is a Jewish state are banned.

Arab students in Israel are taught in their own language, but it was only in 2007 that parliament approved a textbook that included Arab views on the expulsion of Palestinians at the founding of Israel as a 'Nakba', or catastrophe. In 2008 the Arab Pedagogical Council was founded to research and offer policy recommendations connected to the Arab education curriculum. However, the Ministry of Education has been reluctant to cooperate with the council.

In July 2008, Israel's Citizenship and Entry Law, which prevents Palestinian spouses of Israeli citizens from receiving status and living together in Israel, was extended for another year. Land confiscations, the withholding of building permits and the disproportionate destruction of Israeli Arab homes and villages have also long been problems for Israeli Arabs,



Left: A Bedouin child shepherds his sheep, close to the desert mosque of al Nabi Musa, West Bank. *Abikam Seril/Panos.*

tlements, roads, military zones and nature reserves as all presenting obstacles to the livelihood of Bedouins and herders.

A 2009 report from the Health Ministry in the Negev region found infant mortality rates among the Bedouin to be three times above the national average – although since 2004 there has been a 5.5 per cent decline in the infant mortality rate among Bedouin.

The military attacks on the Gaza Strip that commenced in December 2008, and Hamas rocket fire into Israel, further increased existing tensions between Arab and Jewish Members of the Knesset (MKs). During the conflict, Israel's Central Election Committee banned two Arab parties from fielding candidates in elections for the Knesset. The Supreme Court declared the ban illegal and Arab parties gained one seat in the 2009 elections, but two Arab Labor MKs lost their seats.

The 2008 report by the Association for Civil Rights in Israel report found that Ethiopian immigrants to Israel were still experiencing discrimination and marginalization. It also highlighted that only 39.1 per cent of Ethiopian students graduated from high school. In July 2008 an investigative committee was set up in the Knesset to examine the situation of Ethiopians in the areas of education, housing, employment and welfare.

Throughout 2008 Israel appeared to continue its efforts to annex parts of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. There was a significant increase in settlement construction: 1,257 new constructions in 2008 as opposed to 800 during 2007. Concerns have been raised over the implications of continued illegal settlement for the future of any peace initiative.

Settler violence against Palestinians continues to increase. In 2008 the OCHA reported an increase of settler violence against Palestinians from 243 incidences in 2007 to 290 in 2008; approximately half of those injured since 2006 were women and children.

Although house demolitions were halted after an agreement between the Israeli government and the Quartet (the USA, Russia, the EU and the UN) in May 2008, in late 2008 demolitions resumed.

Lebanon

The long-standing ethnic tensions in Lebanon that were stirred by the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, and the 2006 Israel–Hizbullah conflict, came to a head in 2008 with a series of violent confrontations between formal and ad hoc militias and the Lebanese military. A core issue was how different ethnic groups would be represented in Lebanon's confessional system of government, which attempts to strike a balance in a country that is essentially populated entirely by minorities. Lebanon is 60 per cent Muslim (Sunni, Shia, and Druze and Allawi, who only sometimes identify as Muslim) and 40 per cent Christian (divided again into a huge number of sects).

Approximately 400,000 Palestinians, mostly Sunni, live in Lebanon, many without identity papers. About half live in 12 UNRWA camps. They continue to face severe discrimination, are barred from 70 professional vocations and cannot own property or travel freely. UNRWA usually allows non-ID holding children to attend school, but they cannot register for examinations and so many drop out. In March 2008, UN news agency IRIN quoted UNRWA representative Hoda al-Turk as saying that new identification papers were 'imminent'. It is hoped that this will prevent arbitrary arrests and ensure access to school and medical facilities.

Latent conflict between different Lebanese factions has lasted for years. In the first half of 2008, a socio-economic alliance composed mostly of southern Shia with loyalties to Hizbullah, and Maronite Christians, shut down the government because they felt under-represented. A shaky political compromise was eventually reached but there were reports in the aftermath of seriously increased tensions along Sunni–Shia lines. The fear of large-scale conflict between Sunni and Shia (as was recently seen in Iraq) did not materialize, but the situation remains tense.

In February 2008 the Ministry of Interior announced that Lebanese citizens would be able to remove their religion from Civil Registry Records. The international community commended the move as a small step towards ameliorating Lebanon's sectarian divisions.

Violence and conflict have disproportionately affected the most marginalized groups. In 2007 conflict between Fatah al-Islam and the Lebanese army led to the destruction of Nahr al-Bared camp

particularly for the Bedouin of the Negev.

The Israeli government and media maintain an explicit concern that land must remain under Jewish ownership. In 2007 and 2008, for example, there was a continuing effort by the Jewish National Fund (JNF) and the Israeli Lands Administration to ensure that the JNF does not have to sell land to Arabs.

The land issue is of particular significance to the Bedouin, a cultural minority of nomadic herders who have traditionally inhabited Israel's southern desert, the Negev. For more than 40 years, they have faced a policy of forced urbanization, under which their settlements in the desert have been considered illegal and 'unrecognized'. The government has routinely refused to provide water, electricity

or sewerage services to these settlements, and often destroys them completely. There has been some progress on this issue: at the end of 2007, a government commission recommended that as many Bedouin villages as possible should be recognized by the state. However, the report did not call for an end to all demolitions, which continued in 2008 and early 2009.

In July 2008, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) warned that the estimated 50,000 Bedouins and herders of the West Bank were 'on the brink of an emergency' after three years of drought and cold winters. The ICRC stated that Israeli policies had aggravated the problem by preventing herds from being moved to water sources and fresh grazing land. The ICRC cited Israeli set-



Left: Tamara Chaya and her family are Iraqi Christians. Her uncle was kidnapped and murdered in 2006, and after threats against her immediate family they have fled to Lebanon. Tamara dropped out of school to work in a supermarket. *J.B. Russell/Panos.*

piloted in 40 schools.

The year 2008 also appears to have brought little progress towards the screening out of extremist teachers, which the Saudi government promised in 2007. The USCIRF report said some screenings had taken place, but also mentioned ‘multiple incidents’ in which teachers ‘promoted intolerant views in the classroom without being disciplined’. This general intolerance intersects with issues specifically facing minorities. In 2008, there were incidents of Shia students being called unbelievers, infidels or polytheists. Ismailis also continued to be defamed in textbooks as polytheists or infidels.

USCIRF highlights widespread government discrimination against Shia working in education. Shia academics comprised only 2 per cent of professors at one university in Al Ahsa, and only 1 per cent of primary and secondary school teachers in an area that is nearly 50 per cent Shia. Shia teachers were also barred from teaching certain subjects, including religious studies.

While most Shia ‘co-exist with their Sunni neighbors in relative peace’, they still face discrimination in many areas, according to USCIRF. In 2008, the government arrested at least one prominent Shia religious leader, detained others, and closed Shia mosques.

There is limited evidence of official attempts to improve relationships with the Shia communities in the Eastern Province, where the newly established Human Rights Council conducted public outreach.

Ismailis have faced similar issues. Early in 2008, there were also reports that Saudi authorities were attempting to settle Sunni Yemeni tribesmen in the Ismaili-majority Najran Province, in an attempt to dilute and further marginalize the Ismaili community. When Ismaili leader Shaikh Ahmad bin Turki Al Sa’b complained to King Abdullah in April 2008 about the official treatment of Ismailis, he was arrested. However, King Abdullah removed the governor of the province, Prince Mishaal, after local residents petitioned him to stop the resettlement.

Routine discrimination is experienced by Ismaili students, who complain of unfair rejection, particu-

and the pace of reconstruction continues to be slow. More than a year after the fighting and the displacement of 30,000 residents, only a small number of families have been able to return.

Saudi Arabia

In 2008, state and societal intolerance of minorities in general has continued to be the norm, with few signs of progress being made in the limited reforms that were instituted in previous years. Saudi Arabia has a population of about 28 million people; 5.5 million are non-nationals, while 2–2.5 million are Shia Muslims and 700,000 are Ismailis, with small numbers of resident Christians and other faith groups, according to the USCIRF.

Issues of concern in the kingdom include state and social intolerance of minorities in general, the lack of guarantees of religious freedom, and the situation of Shia (see Box: p. 211). Women in Saudi Arabia do not enjoy full human rights and are subject to strict Sunni interpretations of Sharia law, a situation that is exacerbated for minority women.

Muslims who do not share in the official, highly conservative Wahhabi interpretation of Islam still face problems with the *mutawwa’in* (religious police), and there continued to be numerous accusations of ‘harassment, abuse and killings’ levelled

against the organization, according to USCIRF. However, the report stated, ‘the government allowed unprecedented media coverage of the trials of *mutawwa’in* involved in these incidents, and public protests were not met with further harassment.’

USCIRF also maintains that non-Muslims, or Muslims who do not adhere to Sunni Wahhabism, continue to face significant legal, political, economic and social discrimination while at the same time being unable to conduct religious practice publicly – or in some cases, privately. In May 2008, 15 Indian Christians were arrested for private worship. The UN Human Rights Council advanced similar concerns in its 2008 report.

All Saudi public school students receive mandatory religious instruction, and the textbooks used promote the killing of apostates and polytheists, according to the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, a non-profit organization. Following international protests that the textbooks were in contravention of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ‘the Saudi Government claimed it had revised the texts and released new versions, but the USCIRF found evidence that large sections of the sample “revised” textbooks were not edited, but simply torn out or covered by correction fluid’. According to the USCIRF report, a more moderate curriculum was

‘We have to teach them to lie’

A Shia man from Saudi Arabia speaks of the difficult impact that discrimination, especially in the school system, has on young and old in Saudi Arabia. By *Preti Taneja*

‘Religious textbooks are one main problem. From elementary schools they teach kids how to classify people: that Muslims go to heaven and *kafirs* go to hell. It’s very dangerous. Children believe they are *kafir* and will go to hell.

‘The teachers tell all children, “You are not Muslim, you are Shi’ite. You don’t believe in God.” When exams come they ask Shias what they know about Shias. [They] have to write: “They are *kafir*”, and if [they] don’t [they] will fail the exam.

‘We have to correct their thinking at home, and say if they get the question in the exam they should answer. It creates confusion and double feelings for them – we have to teach them to lie!

‘We are afraid for the future of our children. Our hopes are very low.’ ■

larly in the field of aviation. Students have instead gone to study in Jordan, but have few prospects of employment upon their return.

Saudi Arabia’s recently established Human Rights Council has made limited progress. The Council’s vice-president, Zeid Al-Hussein, attributed all acknowledged human rights violations to ‘individual practices’, rejecting any indictment of government policies or social norms. On the other hand, Saudi dissident Ibrahim al-Mugaiteeb said that the Council has begun to have some effect by making people aware of human rights as a concept. The Council has also launched a website, which will allow it to take complaints online and raise awareness.



Left: Children play a game at the Beir Dukhan Mobile School for nomadic Bedouin children, about 25 km north of the city of Raqqa in the north-eastern Raqqa Governorate, Syria. *Shehzad Noorani/UNICEF.*

two Kurds who decided to teach Kurdish to some of their friends, were arrested by Syrian security services. Their case is still pending.

Kurdish cultural activities are also firmly restricted, and there are reports of Kurds being arrested for wearing the colours of the Kurdish flag. Decree No. 49 also requires government approval for those wishing to sell, rent or lease land near the Turkish border, which Kurdish groups say is discriminatory. In October 2008, seven Kurdish parties demonstrated against the decree and 187 people were arrested.

Yemen

Religious and ethnic minorities in Yemen have generally enjoyed reasonable levels of protection by the state. The population is predominantly Arab; but Afro-Arabs, South Asians and Europeans are also present. The majority are Muslim, including Shafi (Sunni) and Zaydi (Shia), though there are small numbers of Christians, Hindus and Jews.

Yemen's most noted minority is a few tiny communities of Jews, who remained after the majority of the population emigrated to Israel. These communities, comprising little more than 300 members, have generally been well integrated with the population, have enjoyed government protection and been viewed positively by the public and in the media. However, they have also been a target for extremists. In 2008, the Jews in Amran Governorate, in the north, endured a series of threats from a group of their Muslim neighbours, culminating in the murders of two community members.

The government has offered to relocate the Jews to Sana'a, ostensibly for their protection. However, in 2007 a group of Jews from Saada was targeted by an extremist imam associated with the Al Houthi rebels. They were moved to Sana'a and as a result they lost their property in Saada. The Jews of Amran fear the same will happen to them.

The Al Houthi rebels themselves are members of the Zaidi Shia minority. They wish to return to Zaidi clerical rule, and have been involved in a four-year conflict with the government. USCIRF suggests that that conflict has died down in 2008,

after an agreement was reached in July. However, news sources reported bloody clashes in 2008, and USCIRF itself speculates that in 2008 the Yemeni government kidnapped Zaydi leader Mohammad Ahmad Miftah.

USCIRF also expressed concern over the arrest in 2008 of nine Christian converts and a number of Bahai's, who were arrested for proselytizing Muslims. Converting from Islam to another religion is a crime in Yemen, as is encouraging conversion, and both are potentially punishable by death.

Also of concern is the situation of the Mohamashin, or 'Akhdam', a quasi-racial and ethnic minority said to be a remnant of the caste system that existed under the Yemeni Imamate. The Akhdam are thought to make up around 2–5 per cent of the Yemeni population. A 2008 article in the *New York Times* describes a group facing severe social, economic and political discrimination. Access to education remains limited for the Mohamashin, but the story also highlights how, after years of economic discrimination, many among the group no longer seek education, seeing no opportunities to better themselves in Yemeni society.

A little-known linguistic minority of about 45,000 people exists on the Yemeni island of Socotra. Arabic is the official language on Socotra and is taught in schools. The indigenous population, however, speaks Socotri, an unwritten language of pre-Islamic origins. Reports suggest that many teaching staff at Socotri schools are Saudi Arabian Wahhabi teachers, who have no understanding of the local language or customs. Local families are concerned that children attending school are losing their distinct identity and language.

Similarly, children who often have to stay away from home during the school term are not involved in the local communities and are losing local environmental knowledge. One project to try to combat this loss of local knowledge and culture is funded by the Darwin Initiative, which is supported by the UK government's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The project aims to ensure that future generations of Socotrans are able to sustainably manage the island's unique flora, fauna and heritage. However, the project has to be taught in Arabic, and has to be developed in line with the Yemeni Ministry of Education's national curriculum. ■

Syria

Syria is home to ethnic minorities including Kurds and Palestinians. The state, while exercising some tolerance, has been repressive of groups such as Kurds forming what could be political alliances. Human Rights Watch has reported that in 2008 Syria's multiple security services 'continue to detain people without arrest warrants ... in effect forcibly disappearing them'.

Syria also has a large number of minority religious groups, including Allawi, Christians (including Assyrians and Armenians), Druze, Ismaili Shias and Yezidis. The state has a history of reasonable religious tolerance; all these groups appear able to practise their religions.

The official language in Syria is Arabic, however a number of religious minorities in Syria, such as Aramaic, Armenian and Assyrian speakers, have their own schools offering instruction in their mother tongues.

The most marginalized group appears to be Syria's Kurds. Of Syria's estimated 1.7 million Kurds the UK government's human rights report states that 300,000 continue to be denied citizenship. These Kurds have been denied Syrian passports and nationality, and their identity papers are stamped 'alien'.

Tensions between the government and Kurdish groups, heightened by the US invasion of Iraq, continued in 2008. In 2007, Syrian security services responded with force to major protests by Kurdish groups in the town of Qamlishi, near the Turkish border. In March 2008, security services again opened fire, this time apparently on civilians during a celebration of the Kurdish New Year, leaving three dead.

There have also been a number of arrests of Kurds in 2008. One well-known Kurdish leader, Osman Mihemed Sileman Heci, died on 18 February after several months in prison, according to the NGO the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), and Kurdish rights groups.

Syria bans political parties other than the ruling Baath party, and Kurdish parties are outlawed. The Syrian government has linked a number of the arrests or detentions of Kurds to individuals participating in banned political parties, or seeking a separate state. However, there is also a clear element of identity-based discrimination against Kurds.

Kurdish is an officially prohibited language and there are no Kurdish schools in Syria. Kurdish students are forbidden to learn in their native tongue, and even studying it is illegal. In summer of 2008, Darwish Ghalib Darwish and Zaki Ismail Khalil,