

## **The Crisis of Religious Minorities in Muslim North Africa and West Asia**

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Before the emergence of Islam, Jewish and Christian minorities living today in most countries in the region of west Asia and north Africa accounted for most of the population. The relationship was reversed over the centuries as a result of wars of conquest, internal theological disputes within the church (for instance about teachings on the nature of Christ), power politics and nepotism, the prohibition against converting from Islam to Judaism or Christianity, opportunities for advancement after conversion to Islam, inheritance regulations which favored conversion to Islam, and marriage laws which made sure that children of mixed marriages were always Muslim. But it was also the politics of tolerance which made the Islamic conquerors' reign slightly more bearable than Byzantine rule.

Judaism is now a diminishing minority in the Near East and Northern Africa. In some countries, such as Yemen which earlier had a large Jewish community, it has disappeared.

Christianity represents a small minority in north Africa and in the Near East. In some regions such as Saudi Arabia and Yemen which possessed a large Christian community before Islam emerged, there are officially no indigenous Christians or churches. The established evangelical, Catholic, and Orthodox churches in the region have reported declines; at the same time in some countries there is a steady increase in the number of new, independent house churches – usually underground because of the pressure of persecution. Some of these house churches (such as those in Morocco) are implicitly tolerated, while others (such as those in Iran) meet at the risk of death.

Many experts have asked, will Christianity will share the fate of Judaism? Will traditional Christian churches in this region be extinguished? This is a pressing question in view of the great flight of refugees from Christian communities in recent years (out of Iraq, for example.) Only in Egypt, which has a large minority of some 8 million Coptic Christians, is this situation unlikely.

Jews and Christians, however, are not the only minorities in Islamic societies in north Africa and West Asia. There are also minority groups arising out of Islam. These unite Islamic, Gnostic, and Christian elements and are considered heretical by classical Islamic theologians. They may be politically tolerated (as with the Baha'i in Egypt) or bitterly persecuted as "blasphemers" (as with the Ahmadiya movement in Pakistan).

Some minorities don't try to win individuals over to their faith. Some comprise members who have all been born into the community, for instance the Druse community in Lebanon. Others, such as state churches, are identified with ethnic groups, for instance Assyrians or Armenians. In still other cases their status – either as an Islamic minority or a distinct religious community – has not been conclusively decided, for example the Alevites in Turkey.

In Islamic societies the relationship to these minorities is essentially defined by history, with Muhammad's life being seen as exemplary. It is further defined through statements made in the Qur'an and tradition (Arabic: *hadith*) about dealing with non-Muslims. The relationship is depicted in Islamic law, above all in the regulations relating to minorities in *shari'a* law. Societal norms have also been prescribed by influential theologians such as the renowned Sunnite theologian Yusuf al-Qaradawi (the author of around 120 books, who has three websites and his own television program) and educational establishments such as the Al-Azhar University in Egypt.

### **Islamic Theology regarding Minorities**

When Muhammad began preaching Islam on the Arabian Peninsula from around the year 610 AD, he preached mainly to Arab tribes, although he hoped to be acknowledged by Jews and Christians whom he initially referred to quite favorably as “some who have faith” (Sura 3:110). He presented himself to them as the last prophet in history, as a descendant of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. When neither Jews nor Christians accepted his claim to have been sent (Suras 2:111; 5:15), Muhammad began to engage militarily with Jewish groups, beginning in 624 AD after his emigration to Medina. Over the course of years he also began to denounce Christians theologically.

In the end he denounced Christians as “blasphemers” (Suras 2:116; 5:72-73) on the basis of their teaching on the Trinity. From the viewpoint of the Qur’an they were worshipping three deities, God, Son, and the Mother of God. The Qur’an also rejected the teaching of the sinfulness of all people, their salvation through the death of Jesus, and Jesus’ resurrection. At the end of his life Muhammad saw the Christian faith as falsified and in need of reform. Later Islamic theology viewed the Christian faith in the same way.

For that reason Judaism, Christianity and all other earlier religions are considered to have been corrected and superseded by the Qur’an, which is believed to be the sole reliable Scripture, and Islam, which is the uncorrupted “primeval religion.” This feeling of superiority within Islamic theology over all other religions leads to the reckoning of all religions not mentioned in the Qur’an (above all, post-Qur’anic religions) as unbelief and idolatry, while Jews and Christians are mentioned in the Qur’an as “people of the book.” They are not completely “non-believers,” nor are they heathens, but they have the reputation of rejecting the rightful claim of Muhammad to have been sent, and of holding to an inferior religion against their better judgment. This makes them guilty of “polytheism,” a most grievous sin.

These theological ideas from the Qur’an and tradition, which have been expressed by many influential scholars up to the present, still shape attitudes

towards minorities in Islamic societies. This means that up to now, Jews and Christians have generally possessed the right to exist. But they do not count as equals in a religious and legal sense and are viewed as second-class citizens. By contrast, post-Qur'anic (ie., non-acknowledged) minorities (such as the post-Qur'anic religious community of Baha'i in Egypt) possess no legal status. Nor do converts from Islam to another religion. The free exercise of religion and equal standing of Muslims, Jews, Christians, Baha'i, Buddhists, and possibly other religious groups does not currently exist in any Islamic country (except for Lebanon) which invokes *shari'a* law.

### **The Historical Legal Position of Minorities**

Since they were partially recognized after Muhammad's death, Jews and Christians became "wards" (Arabic *dhimmi*) in areas conquered by Islam. As a rule, they did not have to choose between conversion or death. They were allowed to maintain their religious affiliation but were always subjugated.

They were and still are second-class citizens. They had to pay a special tax and were legally disadvantaged. The early and late medieval legal literature names a number of provisions which obligated Jews and Christians to be recognizable by everyone, such as their clothing in public. Among other things, they could only ride donkeys instead of horses, always had to make way for Muslims, and could not build their homes higher than those of Muslims. These humiliating and restrictive regulations meant they sensed daily their legal and social disadvantages.

At times Jews and Christians were able to ascend and fill influential positions in the service of their ruler. At other times pogroms and excesses were undertaken against them. Because *shari'a* law has never reinterpreted early Islam or the example of Muhammad, Islamic theology continues to ensure minorities hold less privileged positions in society.

Thus the legal position of minorities in Islamic societies has been oriented towards *shari'a* law. That law is predicated upon the Qur'an, tradition (Arabic: *hadith*), and on the legal development of early Islam up to the tenth century. Most Muslim theologians consider *shari'a* law to have been exhaustively formulated by then and remains binding today.

*Shari'a* law is considered by established theology at universities and mosques everywhere to be God-given, perfect, and unchangeable, albeit interpretable, up to the present time. Even if *shari'a* law is not fully implemented – above all in criminal law – its legal and societal claim is unbroken and its impact is exerted upon the legal and social position of minorities. So Jews and Christians cannot enjoy the same rights as Muslims in states where *shari'a* law is invoked.

For instance, a source of daily discrimination against Jews and Christians occurs where religious affiliation is indicated in personal identification. So every time a check takes place, Jews and Christians are instantly shown to be disadvantaged. The alternative aimed at in Jordan, of not indicating one's religious affiliation in the passport, does not lead to less discrimination, since the missing information makes it clear one is dealing with a minority person.

### **Religious Freedom and Apostasy in Islam**

If the status of “ancestral” Jews and Christians in countries characterized by Islam is to some extent assured, the behavior is completely different when it comes to apostasy, that is, the conversion from Islam to Judaism or Christianity. According to the unanimous understanding of the four significant Sunni legal schools, as well as the Shi'ite legal school, apostasy, according to *shari'a* law, is punishable by death. In classic Islamic theology, this unanimously advocated action is justified by a directive in the Qur'an to kill individuals who “turn renegades” (Sura 4:88-89) and by Muhammad's sayings such as “Whoever changes his religion, kill him.”

This regulation was enacted for the first time, apart from individual cases, during the so-called Ridda wars, the movement of apostasy from Islam which began at Muhammad's death in 632 A. D. It was activated among those tribes who viewed themselves as loyally bound only to Muhammad himself. In Islamic history there are several known cases of executions of "apostates," albeit also cases of pardon by caliphs and those in power.

Throughout history, established theology has never distanced itself from the demand for capital punishment for those who fall away from Islam, and many influential theologians up to the present have exerted the same demand. Turning away from Islam is seen as an act of treason against the state and homeland and must to be punished and stemmed. This understanding prevails in the writings of established Islamic theologians at large institutions of learning such as al-Azhar in Cairo and the Islamic University of Medina, because the provision is anchored in *shari'a* law which subjected apostates to the death penalty at a time when the Islamic community moved militarily against every individual who was disloyal to it.

According to the unanimous understanding of the founders and students of the four Sunni legal schools, as well as the most important Shi'ite legal school, religious freedom existed up to the tenth century AD only insofar as non-Muslims were able to convert to Islam. Apostasy, however, was subject to the death penalty.

Of course, historically there have been other opinions among Muslims, among those in power, and among theologians. Some theologians have even spoken out aggressively for the freedom to choose one's religion (such as Abdullah Saeed, who resides in Australia, comes from the Maldives, and is a professor of Islamic Studies in Melbourne). Overall they have found few followers, however, and have exerted little influence. This is because the *shari'a* calls for capital punishment, and "mainstream" theologians view deviation from this position as heresy.

Nowadays apostasy is subject to capital punishment in only a small number of Islamic countries, and only seldom is an apostate brought before a court. But in Iran, which essentially professes the validity of the complete *shari'a* law, it still happens. There the convert Yousef Nadarkhani, who had a Muslim background, was condemned to death by the Supreme Court of Iran on June 28, 2011 and for months awaited his execution when he was unexpectedly released in September 8, 2012. Although this case has tentatively come to an end, it should not make us forget the many people who are still in prison in Iran only because their faith deviates from the state propagated form of Islam many of whom are subjected to torture and mistreatment in various forms. Executions for conversion have likewise occurred in Sudan, Yemen, Mauritania, and Saudi Arabia.

Converts in countries in which no apostasy law exists, however, are not safe either. This is because time and again there are *fatwas* (legal opinions) or statements from those in power that publicly condemn them to death. So in Egypt, for instance, the former Religious Endowments Minister, Mahmud Hamdi Zaqzuq, defended the death penalty for converts in 2007 although it is not legally prescribed in Egypt, because apostasy from Islam was high treason.

Such publicly stated judgments produce a social climate in which converts such as Muhammad Hegazi fall into mortal danger and have to go underground. Hegazi converted in 2007 from Islam to the Coptic Church. He wanted to have his new religious affiliation recorded in his personal identification so that his children would not have to be raised as Muslims, and announced publicly that his desire was rejected. He was subsequently condemned to death – out of court – by a number of theologians in Egypt. Hegazy is now living with his family underground.

Even if they are not officially charged with apostasy, converts, critical scholars of Qur'an studies, human rights activists, women rights activists, liberal thinkers and secularists are discriminated against socially in many places. They may be threatened and assaulted in public (such as Naguib Mahfuz, the Arab

Nobel Prize winner for literature, in Cairo in 1994) or even murdered (such as the Egyptian secularist Farag Fawda in 1992, also in Cairo). This is because the claim of *shari'a* to be divine law has been upheld in the social consciousness by politicians, and more often by established theologians through sermons in mosques, books, *fatwas*, and naturally also via the internet.

Since in questions of civil law *shari'a* law possesses validity in all Islamic countries, with the exception of Turkey, there is at least discrimination and pressure to return to Islam. Such pressure may include the loss of employment, disinheritance, forced divorce, the removal of children, and under certain circumstances expulsion from the family, abuse, incarceration, compulsory admission to a psychiatric institution, or in extreme cases, death at the hands of the family or society.

In addition, the issuance of new personal papers due to an official change of religion is conceivable only in the case of conversion to Islam. To leave Islam is legally impossible (even the case of such “moderate” countries as Jordan). In Egypt, for example, one’s religious affiliation is noted in one’s personal identification. Basically a Muslim may not leave Islam and convert to, say, Judaism or Christianity. As a matter of principle he does not receive new identification papers, and is not struck off the Islamic religious community register.

Nor is it just the converts who must often flee underground: The children of a Muslim father are always legally Muslims. If the father converts, or even if both parents convert, their common children are legally required to take Islamic religious instruction, be married on Islamic terms, and automatically have Muslim children. That is the opposite of religious freedom and self determination.

### **Shari’a law in practice as it relates to minorities and converts**

In the course of the present developments – the so-called Arab revolutions – most religious minorities (including converts) in north Africa and West Asia are



caught between secularists on the one hand and Islamists on the other, who clamor for additional steps to legally under-privilege minorities. For those who had already suffered for decades under various legal restrictions, their status as a minority was at least assured insofar as it involved a recognized, traditional Christian minority such as membership in a Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant church.

The previous governments in Arabic countries – in large part “leftovers” from the Cold War – were largely secular or nationalistic up to the time of the Arab revolutions, even though all countries of this region (except for Lebanon) named Islam as the state religion in their constitutions. These governments contributed little to the active persecution of religious minorities (except in Iran and Saudi Arabia) although they sometimes showed little opposition to attacks against minorities, did not pursue attackers consistently, legally disadvantaged minorities, and continued social discrimination. All this could change, however.

The actual condition of religious minorities differs from country to country and from group to group. Common to the Arabic countries of north Africa and west Asia is reference to *shari'a* law, which is designated as the source of individual laws and legal regulations. What follows is a dependence upon *shari'a* for civil law, which means minorities in all Arabic countries in the region are legally and socially disadvantaged. Also, no comprehensive religious freedom exists that offers the possibility of leaving a religion or converting to any other.

In this way, the countries of this region profess adherence to the *shari'a* in their constitutions as well as to religious freedom, But the latter can appear very different locally. The spectrum reaches from officially guaranteed religious freedom provided by the state, such as in Turkey (even if it looks different in practice), to a complete lack of religious freedom in theory and practice, such as in Saudi Arabia.

Tensions within the individual countries are not only between Christians and Muslims. Often the Islamic “denominations” are at odds with each other, as

with Sunnis and Shi'ites (such as in Saudi Arabia). There are countries in which the *shari'a* is put into practice in civil and penal law (such as in Iran). There are countries in which it is applied in part (above all in civil law, such as in Egypt), and there are countries in which it possesses no validity (such as in Turkey). But nowhere does true freedom of choice exist in religious affairs.

In Arab countries the *shari'a* is valid with respect to civil law. For this reason marriages of Muslim women to Christian or Jewish husbands are essentially forbidden. So someone born into a Muslim family cannot legally leave Islam and change his profession of faith. Registration in the Muslim personal register can never be deleted. Nor can a non-Muslim inherit anything from a Muslim relative. A convert to Christianity can be forced by a court ruling to divorce. He may have his children taken away, and find they are given to a Muslim family. In the process, a young man automatically becomes a Muslim at seventeen if his Christian father converts to Islam. He must immediately begin attending Islamic religious instruction, and may only enter into an Islamic marriage. A Muslim man – except in Tunisia and Turkey – may enter into multiple marriages and no one can legally prevent him from doing so. So a woman essentially inherits the half of a male portion of the inheritance and is, according to *shari'a* law, committed to obey her husband. (In the case of conflict, according to Sura 4:34 and the understanding of numerous theologians, this includes his right to punish her.)

According to *shari'a* law, as well as in practice, mission among Muslims is prohibited in all Arab countries. In some countries (such as Saudi Arabia) “mission” includes every discussion of faith between Muslims and Christians and every gift of a Bible. In other countries (such as Egypt), “mission” includes letting Muslims through the door into a worship service (such as in recognized churches like the Coptic Church) or in other countries taking Muslims to a Christian gathering (such as in Iran).

In some countries (such as Tunisia) at least small Christian gatherings in private homes have been tacitly tolerated. Also those to which converts come unless a family calls upon state authorities to intervene (as has been the case in Libya up to now). Of course the baptism of former Muslims is strictly forbidden. This is a political offense and goes beyond the operational limits of Christian church communities.

### **Reasons for rejecting religious freedom**

The most prominent statement of the Qur'an on the topic of religious freedom is the verse: "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (Sura 2:256). Many Muslim theologians have emphasized that no one may be forced to convert to Islam. That is at least partly reflected in the Islamic history of conquest. As a general rule, Christians and Jews were allowed to retain their faith and maintain their religious autonomy, although as subjects they became legally disadvantaged. Nobody who did convert to Islam, however, was allowed to leave it. According to most theologians, Sura 2:256 does not mean Islam advocates equality of all religions and free change in both directions. Instead it is usually interpreted to mean that one cannot force any individual who already belongs to Islam (who is "in religion") into the act of belief (in the sense of being convinced).

One reason why conversion to Christianity is seen as fundamentally wrong is that the Qur'an views both Judaism and Christianity as inferior religions: Conversion appears to be a step backwards to a faith which has been surpassed, and which from the viewpoint of Islam has been corrected and superseded by Muhammad, the "Seal of the Prophets" (Sura 33:40).

The Cairo Declaration on Human Rights names Islam in Article 10 as "the religion of unspoiled nature," that is, the uncorrupted religion which by its nature draws every individual. Every deviation from it counts as inferior. In addition, Christianity appears to many theologians to be a western religion, a religion of crusaders and colonial lords and linked to western political domination.

Another reason for rejecting the freedom to change religion is that many Muslims do not view turning from Islam as a private affair but as a disgrace for the entire family — even as a political act of agitation, insurrection, or war on the Muslim community. Since several tribes on the Arabian Peninsula which had initially accepted Islam turned from it after Muhammad’s death in 632 A.D., Abu Bakr, the first caliph after Muhammad, fought against these tribes in the so-called Ridda wars (Wars of Apostasy) and successfully quelled the uprisings. Ever since those Ridda wars, apostasy has been a part of the Muslim collective consciousness, has been linked with political turmoil and treason, and has had to be subdued.

Many human rights have been violated as a result —the rights of non-acknowledged minorities, converts, those who think differently, secularists, proponents of enlightenment, and activists for human and women’s rights. In some countries, converts have to reckon with formal charges, hearings with state security officials, and under certain circumstances incarceration, monetary fines and prison sentences: In some other countries they face even torture and death. For that reason, a number of individuals keep their conversions to themselves, while others go underground, flee, or seek asylum in the West.

An exception to what has been stated here is Turkey, which basically discarded the *shari’a* as its legal source and oriented its civil law towards the Swiss civil code when the caliphate was abolished and the Turkish Republic was founded in 1923/24. At that time Turkey officially became a secular state.

Nevertheless, legally guaranteed religious freedom is not a reality in all areas, and non-Islamic minorities suffer de facto limitations of it. This occurs, for example, when church property confiscated by the state is not returned, seminaries closed by the state may not be reopened, or lower ranking authorities arrest and threaten state-permitted churches of converts and other individuals. At this point there is an overlap of Islamist and nationalistic motives, such as when two Turkish Christians and one German Christian were murdered in the city of

Malatya in 2007 out of a mixture of exaggerated nationalism, racism, and Islamist views.

### **The Arab revolution and religious freedom**

With the Arab Revolution the historical parameters have begun to change: Religious minorities increasingly slip between the fronts of individual Islamic groups fighting each other, as in Iraq, and between the millstones of secular and modernist oriented powers and Islamist powers, such as in Egypt, where Saudi Arabia has often offered support through *Wahhabi* providers of ideology and money.

Advocacy for religious minorities is not likely from either religious or Islamist powers. Particularly from Islamist powers, no improvement of legal status is to be expected. Indeed, those powers have often increased pressure on converts and have expressly spoken out for additional restrictions on religious freedom as well as for the implementation of *shari'a* law beyond the area of civil law, as, for example, in Algeria.

In countries where the union of state and religion has been pushed more strongly than before (such as under the government coalition of the Muslim Brotherhood and the extreme Salafis in Egypt), no legal improvement for religious minorities is likely.

The level of religious freedom in Islamic countries has generally decreased over the past three decades as Islamism has strengthened. By the same token and violence against minorities (Christian groups in particular) has generally increased, as can be seen in the increased number of attacks on Christians and church buildings, particularly in Egypt but also in countries such as Nigeria and Sudan. As a result, Coptic Christians have been increasingly intimidated, threatened, and bullied since the beginning of the revolution. Many Coptic Christians believe the military has placed itself on the side of Islamic extremists.

In which countries of north Africa and west Asia are there systematic violations of religious freedom by the state? How do they occur? And which religious minorities have been affected?

If religious freedom is defined as in the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there is up till now (with the exception of Lebanon and Turkey) no legally guaranteed religious freedom in any Islamic country, and no country in this region offers the legal framework in which freedom for those who think differently could thrive.

The closer the connection between religion and the state, the less religious freedom exists for non-conformists. In Saudi Arabia, where there is complete fusion of state and religion, there is essentially no religious freedom at all. Classical *shari'a* law rules. Whoever, as a native inhabitant, leaves Islam risks execution if discovered. Adulterers can be stoned, thieves can lose their hands, and murderers can be decapitated.

Saudi Arabia does not only punish native converts with death. Foreigners are not allowed to express anywhere that they are Christians. All Christian symbols and Bibles, and all gatherings of foreign Christians, even in private, are strictly forbidden. Those who disobey are incarcerated and, depending on the nationality of the persons involved, are expelled (mainly western nations), mistreated or even executed (primarily in the case of politically non-influential Asian nations). Such persecution of minorities lies directly in the hands of the state.

In other countries, too, state authorities are actively involved in restricting religious freedom, and denying civil rights and liberties. In some Islamic countries the building of new churches or the renovation of existing ones is prohibited. Dissenters may also face discrimination in education, in the military, and in politics.

In all Islamic countries, except for Lebanon, Islam is the state religion. Jews and Christians are tolerated, and non-recognized religious communities are

declared non-existent. In addition the state, being legally uncertain with respect to the treatment of converts and minorities, frequently neglects to track down and punish their attackers. So Coptic Christians in Egypt are terrorized by extremists and Jihadists, and often their attackers are not restrained or brought to justice.

Some eight million Coptic Christians in Egypt have no access to high offices in the government, in the diplomatic corps or in the military. Their access to higher education is also limited. It is hardly possible to receive a permit to construct a new church, and old ones fall into disrepair for lack of money and permission to renovate. Christian girls are reported to have been abducted, married off and forced to convert without the police effectively taking action. These are examples of what is at least a state-tolerated persecution of the Christian minority in Egypt.

The state acts partly on its own as far as restricting religious freedom is concerned. On the other hand, it may allow action to be taken, when for instance representatives of established scholarly institutions call for intolerance against those who think differently, indeed even for persecution and the killing of apostates. So a social climate emerges in which there is intolerance and contempt for dissenters. Certain individuals follow these calls and threaten or attack converts, secularists, and those who report with a critical tone.

So religious freedom within the context of west Asia or north Africa mainly means the freedom as a Muslim to remain a Muslim and for an “ancestral” Christian from a Christian family to be able to retain their faith. The freedom to leave the Islamic faith and to take up another does not exist anywhere, except in Lebanon and in Turkey.

In some countries such as Bahrain and Yemen, the state assumes there are no native inhabitant Christians. Morocco also held this attitude for a long time. Christians who were foreigners were, however, allowed to conduct their worship services: in Yemen discreetly in private homes; in Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, UAE and Kuwait, also in official church buildings, the construction of which prompted

vehement protests from the Islamist powers. Muslims are forbidden to take part in church gatherings or in conversations about faith which are mostly initiated by Christians (“proselytism.”) But a Muslim is naturally called to “invite” every differently-minded individual to Islam. (Every Jew and Christian in an Islamic country is subject to this “invitation” many times, and conversions are tied to advantages.) In Morocco it is prohibited and punishable to unsettle the beliefs held by Muslims. Whoever voluntarily converts to the Christian faith remains exempt from punishment, but is frequently bullied by the police.

It is not only converts who are denied religious freedom. There is also none for minorities such as the post-Islamic religious community of the Baha’i in Egypt and Iran who are not recognized under *shari’a* law. In Iran, Baha’i are counted as apostates from a theological point of view, and possess no legal status. Hence they cannot register their marriages with the state, register their children in state schools, or of enter into the service of the state. In Egypt they have the choice of being registered as “Muslim,” “Jew,” or “Christian” on their identification cards. The category “Baha’i” simply does not exist. This means that Baha’i are officially registered as Muslims and do not receive identity documents. Those affected by discrimination can also be Muslim minorities such as Shi’ites in Saudi Arabia and the Ahmadiyya in Pakistan, who count as “unbelievers” and are subject to strong persecution.

### **Christians’ situation in Israel’s West Bank and Gaza Strip, and in Syria**

In Syria under the secularly oriented Ba’ath Party government, Christians had relatively more security and freedom than Christians in some other countries. Yet there are signs Islamist powers and revolutionaries are now terrorizing the Christian minority, extorting from them, and selectively murdering individuals. More than 90 percent of the Christians have supposedly fled from the city of Homs; out of up to 60,000 Christians there a year ago, 1,500 remain today.



According to all available information, Christians are not playing an active role in the current conflict, but they are subject to intensified persecution.

Israel is a secularly oriented country that is increasingly coming under pressure from the fast-growing Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Judaism (at present about 25 percent of the population). Christians, however, are able to practice their faith within their own community.

Jewish Orthodox (but not Reform Judaism), Sunnis, Druses, and a number of Christian churches are able to regulate their own affairs and are state-recognized. But no secular civil law exists in Israel, which means no civil marriage ceremony is possible. With respect to marriage, the laws of the respective religious communities must be observed. So, for instance, it is impossible for a Muslim woman to marry a Christian man because this is forbidden according to Islamic law and the Islamic community would not conduct such a marriage. Nor is marriage possible between two former Muslims who are converts to Christianity. What happens in practice is that the marriage partners who cannot legally marry or who wish to have a non-religious marriage ceremony travel to Cyprus for the wedding ceremony. The same applies for pairs from Lebanon who want a civil wedding. Israel exhibits only a limited degree of religious freedom for atheists.

A change of religion between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism is legal in Israel. But Christians who turned from the Jewish faith (Messianic Jews) had difficulty being acknowledged as a Christian community until 2009 although their congregations could be registered as “Houses of Prayer.” Ultra-Orthodox Jews exert pressure on converts from Judaism to Christianity and are expressly demanding that Parliament pass anti-conversion laws.

Arab-Palestinian Christians have multiple hardships: they are pressured by secular and fundamentalist (Jewish) powers within Israeli society, they are persecuted by Islamists as allegedly the “5th column” of western nations, and they are discouraged by the international failure to recognize their situation, since to

many the word “Arabs” is synonymous with “Muslims.” Arab Christians – especially converts – suffer from rejection by Jews, Muslim Arabs, politicians in western countries, and by Christians who belong to national churches and generally oppose missions efforts.

The Baha’i community has its center in Haifa, Israel, which is perhaps why the Baha’i are permanently charged by Iran with conducting “espionage” for Israel.

West Bank: The Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican , Evangelical Lutheran, Nazarene and many Baptist churches are recognized. Free church groups are tolerated. The primary problem faced by Christians is an outflow of their members into western countries due to a lack of prospects and the restrictions related to Israeli political policy. Sixty percent of Palestinian Christians are reported to have migrated to foreign countries over the past decades, with the result that the Christian portion of the population has dropped from 18 percent in 1948 to 2 percent today. There is admittedly no law against religious freedom and no systematic persecution. Traditional churches may erect buildings, and missional churches are tolerated. But Christians – especially converts – report threats and pressures, and *shari’a* is the basis for the administration of justice.

Gaza: Supposedly 162,000 Christians are living in Israel including in the autonomous Palestinian territories (APT). Of that number, 40,000 are in the West Bank and 2,000 in the Gaza Strip. According to statements by local eyewitnesses, only about 2,000 Christians live in Gaza, among 1.5 million Muslims. Because of the animosity of Hamas and its international connections which extend into Iran, most of the Christians have moved to the West Bank. Converts to Christianity are viewed by Israel as Arab Palestinians and by Muslim extremists as “collaborators” with the West or the USA. In the APT there are not only lines of conflict between Muslims, Christians, and Jews. There are also ethnic sources of friction.

### **Other minority groups**

The **Baha'i** splinter group, with about 3.5 million to 5 million adherents globally, arose out of Shi'ite Islam and was founded by Mirza Husain Ali Nuri ("Baha Allah" 1817-1892). Since the Baha'is deny that Muhammad was the last prophet in history, they are generally viewed by Islamic theologians as heretics, and, as a post-Qur'anic community, they are not officially recognized in any Islamic country. This means their religious community cannot be registered, and Baha'i believers receive no identification documents, on the basis of their religious affiliation. As a result, they can neither legally enroll their children in school nor open a bank account.

The Baha'i in Egypt – lacking identification documents – live on the margins of society. They are referred to as non-believers or “apostates” and face many forms of discrimination. In Iran (home to 150,000 to 300,000 Baha'i) they have been regularly persecuted, and their leaders arrested since the Revolution. Their possessions and property have been confiscated and their religious sites destroyed. Since they are considered apostate, crimes against them do not call for any retribution and their murder does not entail the payment of blood money. Baha'i's can receive neither a birth certificate nor a marriage certificate, and as a result, a marital partner can be arrested as a prostitute. Hundreds of Baha'i, among them many members of the “Supreme Spiritual Council” have been taken into custody and executed since 1979. The Iranian government apparently seeks the extermination of this community.

The extremely small **Jewish** groups in Islamic countries (in Syria perhaps there are 85 individuals left) generally count as tolerated according to Islamic law, but they are often discriminated against as “representatives” of the state of Israel, alleged Zionists, or spies. Their number has continued to dwindle almost everywhere through emigration and in part because of violent attacks. In Iran the sole Jewish member of parliament regularly has to libel the state of Israel, and

Jewish schools and instruction in Hebrew are forbidden. Since 1979 the Jewish community in Iran has halved to about 15,000 members. Islamic countries today are de facto “free” of members of the Jewish religious community.

**Shi’ites**, as the second largest denomination of Islam, are particularly discriminated against in Saudi Arabia, economically, socially, educationally, and in government jobs, including for the royal family, since the presence of Shi’ites is often viewed as an “outpost” for arch-rival Iran. They are refused access to the military, the security apparatus, and the ministry of the interior. The eastern part of Saudi Arabia, in which they are concentrated, is economically underdeveloped and neglected. Shi’ites are also discriminated against in various areas in Bahrain, where they are suspected of subversion and collaboration with their fellow believers in Iran and Iraq.

The **Alevites** are a Shi’ite group who do not follow the “Five Pillars” of Islam or *shari’a* commands. In Turkey most Alevites are Kurds and adherents of laicism, democracy, and secularism. There have often been confrontation between Turkish-Sunni nationalists and Alevites.

**Atheists**. It is only seldom problematic to profess atheism or not to practice Islam, but open propaganda relating to atheism (also via the internet) is disapproved of. Where possible, atheism is gone after, for example in Saudi Arabia when the prescribed prayer times are not adhered to. This is less the case in Iran, where – especially among youth – a striking distancing from religion can be observed.

On the one hand, an atheist is not viewed as a member of a community (as a Christian is who converts and moves over to a church) and does not threaten Islam as such. He only appears as a single individual (if at all, since most Muslims do not rigorously practice Islam). There is no “minimum practice” of Islam that the state requires, or against which a person’s beliefs are measured. Pressure, discrimination, and persecution first begin when a person leaves Islam and converts to Christianity. But atheists in Islamic countries are still subject to the

ubiquitous nature of religion in public life, e.g., through their mandatory participation in religious instruction. Additionally, it is religious and not secular law which applies in areas relating to estate, marriage and family.

### **Social issues**

The observable restrictions on religious freedom in north Africa and west Asia relating to minorities, converts, and those who think differently must always be seen in their social, economic, political and historical context, and may not be just a religious phenomenon: Where there is a lack of religious freedom, there is always repression by the state, corruption, restricted human rights, a misuse of power, and general restrictions on civil rights and liberties. The lack of political and personal civil rights and liberties is accompanied by restrictions on religious freedom and a battle for domination and rule.

The Sunni-Shi'ite antagonism in Saudi Arabia is also a reflection of the political struggle for domination within the Islamic world between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In Syria the Alawites, a special group, were able to assert rule over most Sunnis for a long time. Yet generally it is not the minorities who have instruments of power at their command. In particular, since the emergence of Islamism and its strengthening from around 1970, the denigration of non-Islamic minorities and liberal-secular thinking Muslims has increased, based on *shari'a* law.

In Lebanon there is a patchwork of eighteen recognized religious groups (Jews, Druses, four Muslim and twelve Christian denominations) and a sensitive balance between them. But many factors appearing to produce religious conflict are not always religious at their core. Consider the history: About 300,000 Palestinian refugees were accepted between 1948 and 1976, there was an Israeli occupation from 1982-2003, intense battles between Shi'ite, Sunni, Christian, and Druse militias, the occupation by Syria up to 2006, and the Israeli invasion in 2006 due to provocation by the Hezbollah. Often there are national conflicts along individual ethnic and denominational fault lines, and international conflicts

between the regional powers of Iran, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. Admittedly Lebanon is not a typical Islamic country, since only 80 years ago it had a Christian majority (53 percent in 1932) and today it is only 59 percent Muslim. It is the only Arab country which legally allows conversion from Islam to Christianity, although such change continues to be socially frowned upon, and marriage between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim is still not legally possible.

Nor do conflicts in the autonomous Palestinian territories run solely along religious lines. Christian Palestinians are not included as Messianic Jews (=Christians) in Israel. At this point the conflicts are ethnic. Additional factors include the extreme poverty of the Palestinian segment of the population (70 percent of the inhabitants of Gaza live in poverty, and 80 percent are dependent upon external assistance), water scarcity (only 17 percent of the water reserves are usable in the APT), and the control Israel exerts over the autonomous Palestinian authorities.

Political tensions exist in Saudi Arabia. This society is characterized by a strictly regimented Wahhabism, but some powers are calling for opening up and modernization, while others want to maintain what is traditional and to see Islamification increased. Both are Sunni groups.

In Iraq and Turkey, the conflicts could initially appear to be religious. But between the Kurds and the Sunni Muslims, for example, the conflicts are basically ethnic.

In some cases the effectiveness of international terrorism and extremism influence the conflicts. The former abductions of foreigners (mostly Christians) in Yemen, had less to do with their religious affiliation than with their European or American nationalities. Sanctioned by their governments, tribes used these abductions to extort money for the construction of a school or the drilling of a new well. It was only recently in Yemen that foreigners were also abducted and targeted for killing by extremist powers because they were Christians.

### **The Possibility of Change**

Tolerance and peaceful coexistence can be improved locally by dialogue between national and religious groups and by education to promote the acceptance of those who think differently, This would have to begin in schools and the media. Exchange programs, as well as cultural programs which bring about encounters between Christians, Muslims, and Jews, among teachers and scientists, especially among young people, are to be welcomed. (In many Islamic countries Christians and Muslim groups live side by side without knowing much about each other.)

Meetings that extend beyond the borders of faith work against the demonization of those who think differently, and such encounters can happen through social or educational opportunities, for instance in the form of religiously mixed orphanages, kindergartens, schools, and community centers. Scholarships for stays in western countries could be provided to members of minority groups. Targeted cooperation with all institutions which speak out in favor of the freedom of opinion and freedom of religion, and which defend the rights of women in Islamic countries, is also recommended. (On the other hand, it is not helpful to withhold developmental and construction aid until human rights standards have been achieved, because this could quickly lead to a situation where no assistance is provided at all. But it doesn't mean this topic should be forgotten.)

What are particularly helpful are visits by high ranking politicians to the countries in question, The question of religious freedom should be on the agenda of international diplomacy and politics, and should be a topic in international meetings with governmental leaders from Islamic countries. The disadvantaged position of minorities and the desperate situation for converts need to be highlighted.

Legal certainty needs to be created for minorities and further emigration from the region prevented. Emigration presents a significant brain drain of individuals who mostly have an above-average education, and it impoverishes the

culture. There also needs to be a containment of extreme powers which up to now have viewed Christians and other minorities as legitimate targets for attack.

Outside nations should continue to point to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and UN conventions and send reminders about religious freedom to all groups in the region. Also needing to be discussed in an international context are other problematic conceptions of human rights (such as the 1990 Cairo Declaration of Human Rights with its *shari'a* caveat) and the lack of women's rights and civil liberties.

A basic rethinking about those with dissenting views must start, however, with Islamic theologians, because a new treatment of minorities can only be reflected in law and society when influential theologians can justify civil liberties with religion. A separation of religion and state would be needed to achieve tolerance to limit the sphere of influence of both. A religiously defined state will always restrict the rights of minorities and those who think differently (including atheists).

So support for progressive and liberal Muslim intellectuals is advisable. Minorities should make use of their rights locally as far as is possible and conduct genuine but nonaggressive forms of self-expression.

A free press is needed. Journalists must be won over to the idea of freedom and tolerance, for example through exchange travel and meeting with politician and local colleagues. This includes lobbying in international western press for those being persecuted and imprisoned. Many governments in this region pay a lot of attention to their reputation, and negative reports in the outside press damage their reputation, tourism, and economic relationships. Those imprisoned unjustly could be sponsored as in the case of the Iranian pastor Yusuf Nadarkhani, who has been condemned to death.

Muslims in particular have to be won over in to tolerance (also in their home countries) and see extremism condemned in every form. It would be expedient to invest energy into personal relationships in diplomacy.



### **Future Prospects**

In the western context the idea still prevails that minorities in west Asia would only have to forego “aggressive” missions in order to maintain their freedom. Others suggest that converts keep their faith secret and formally continue to practice Islam in order to avoid disturbances. But whoever raises the charge of “aggressive” missions in Islamic countries usually knows little about the local situation. Missions work is not possible in any of these countries, much less an “aggressive” form of it, since it would immediately lead to foreign workers being expelled. Conversations in west Asia about one’s own faith are not taboo, however, (as is often the case in western countries). Rather, they are willingly begun by taxi drivers, at universities by fellow students, or by those seated nearby at a picnic in the park. People simply want to know how the other person comes to terms with religion in his or her own life.

The United Nations’ 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights does not define religious freedom as a conviction which is kept secret, or a privately held world view. The Declaration defines publicly expressing one’s worldview and religion as a basic human right, including its peaceful solicitation. (In Turkey there is even a law which forbids impeding someone from propagating their faith.) Human rights are not reserved for westerners. To recommend to these people that they continue to appear to practice a religion to which they no longer wish to belong, “for the sake of peace” is a denial of basic human rights.

Churches in Islamic countries do not necessarily grow through the missionary work of foreign Christian organizations. Increasingly – in some areas exclusively – it is through the work of the local churches, independent of national churches, in which ethnic membership no longer plays a role. More and more are creating alliances across denominationally fragmented Christian minorities in west Asia.

The numbers of converts and new, mostly independent, Christian churches are increasing everywhere in Islamic countries. This is occurring slowly in countries such as Morocco, and quickly as in countries such as Algeria or Iran. Annual growth rates are 3 percent in Bahrain, 7.5 percent in Algeria, 9 percent in UAE, and up to 22.5 percent in Iran.

Since they are generally not recognized by the state, and cannot legally become members of a traditional church (which would refuse to baptize them, for fear of government repression), these converts usually meet in underground churches. Some become Christians without the assistance of others, for instance through reading the Bible or through freely available information on the internet. Others become Christians through dreams and supernatural experiences.

### **Persecution statistics**

The 2012 Persecution Index put out by Open Doors shows the condition of Christian minorities in Islamic countries has not improved. Saudi Arabia (3rd place), Iran (5th place), Iraq (8th place), Yemen (9th place), and Pakistan (10th place) continue to lead the list of countries in which Christians are persecuted on the basis of their faith. From among the countries involved in the so-called Arab Spring, Egypt ranked the highest. Currently it is in 15th place, and the year before it was in 19th place; Tunisia was in 35th place, and in the previous year 37th. In the first free elections in Tunisia and Egypt, Islamic and Islamist forces achieved large majorities. In Syria the wavering Assad regime has tried to unleash a religious war.

The Arab spring awakened the hope that in the Arab world young people have grown up who advocate openness, tolerance and balance. With this could they build a counter movement to the Islamization of the past twenty 20 years? Or has the Arab Spring , on the contrary, led to Islamist forces advancing more radically against religious minorities in order to ensure and expand their own influence? Is the Arab Spring threatening to become a “Christian winter”?

The final developments cannot be predicted, particularly in Syria. What has already become visible are the parliamentary majorities which Islamists and Salafists have been able to achieve in Tunisia and above all in Egypt after the “Arabellion.”

This is not fully surprising, insofar as western political action is often taken to be ambiguous. This is particularly the case given the prison abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib, the existence of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, and the false information justifying the invasion of Iraq. There are also the thousands of fatalities associated with the stationing of troops in Afghanistan. All this is perceived as dubious as far as human rights are concerned.

Western liberal democracy is not seen as desirable for many people in the region – especially given their experience of the past 30 years under regimes largely characterized by secularism and repression. The most promising model is the “moderate” Islamic one, which seems to present a hopeful counterbalance to corruption and the abuse of power.

For many people, this moral counterweight is embodied by the Muslim Brotherhood which has existed since 1928. On the basis of its emphasis on Islamic principles as well as its high degree of organization and often exemplary social work, many people classify it as a ray of hope for the creation of a just society. Up to this point the Muslim Brotherhood was an oppositional force in Egypt. Now it must design tangible policy. The question is, how it will do this?

It is hard to imagine that an Islamic country which advocates total *shari'a* law would be able to grant disadvantaged minorities, women, and secularists – as well as converts and other dissenters – complete rights. We must also remember that the Muslim Brotherhood's program can in no way be seen as moderate from a western democratic viewpoint. From the start they have advocated the *shari'a* (including a penal code such as floggings, amputation, and stoning as punishments) and the propagation of *jihad* as a defense of the Islamic community. They also hold distinct positions on marriage and family law, including, for

instance, the punishment of a wife who is disobedient. In addition, the more radical group known as Salafists received votes making them the second strongest party in Egypt.

The fact is that even given the confidence people gave the Muslim Brotherhood through the elections in Egypt, most Egyptians and Tunisians do not want a *shari'a* state such as in Iran. Nor do they favor the cutting off of hands in the case of theft, or public floggings and stoning for adultery. Meanwhile the government of the Muslim Brotherhood has already been overthrown. But how will the state under the new Egyptian government (most probably a military one) look like? Will the Muslim Brotherhood give in and abstain from their former demand of a religiously-shaped state?

A lack of religious freedom always accompanies a lack of political as well as personal civil liberties. With a democratically elected Islamic majority (for instance in Egypt after the Arabellion) which holds to a union between religion and the state due to its orientation towards the *shari'a*, true religious freedom for minorities and dissenters will not happen any time soon. As well as women, the victims are converts who in a society shaped by *shari'a* cannot claim any sort of legal status.

Jewish communities were once largely dispersed throughout north Africa and west Asia and contributed in diverse ways to the intellectual, artistic, and economic prosperity of this region. Today these parts of the world are almost “Jew-free.” It is estimated that between 1948 and 1970 about 850,000 to 1,000,000 Jews were driven out of Arab countries in which they had lived for centuries. Today it is mostly only small and disappearing communities which can sporadically be detected.

There were still 60,000 Jews living in Yemen up to 1948, and after religiously motivated pogroms in Aden that year and the formation of the state of Israel, about 50,000 people were flown out with the aid of “Operation Magic Carpet” in 1949-1950. In 2009 only a tiny Jewish minority remained in Yemen,

around 110 people in total. After the murder of Jewish Yemenis in 2009, due to their refusal to convert to Islam, they fled to Israel and the USA. Today the Jewish community in Yemen seen as defunct.

At the time of the last census in Iraq in 1987 there were still 1.4 million Christians, and at the beginning of the American invasion there were 550,000. Now it is close to 400,000, an example of how the collapse of state power threatens Christians' physical existence. In 1990 Egypt was still 20 percent Christian (today: 7 percent) and Syria 30 percent (today: 10 percent). In Turkey the Christians' share of the population shrank from 22 percent in 1900 to 0.21 percent in 2010.

In many places a form of nationalism is found which is in an unholy alliance with Islamism. Together they assert that a citizen of an Islamic country can only be a Muslim. The result is an implied political treason on the part of those citizens who turn away from Islam or who fail to belong to the Muslim community. The association of Christians with the Crusades, the Inquisition, imperialism, and colonialism, as well as western libertinism, are used by the media to systematically construct an enemy image of Christianity. This has fatal consequences locally, as it stigmatizes Christians as traitors, non-believers, spies – and in Turkey as “one who insults Turkish identity.” All contribute to hatred, alienation, and persecution. The second class status Christians have locally and the frequent lack of opportunities, especially among younger people whose ancestors have lived in the region for thousands of years, has led to a constant exodus of the most educated individuals to western countries, in particular to the USA.

A fear of complete liberalization of religious freedom can be observed in Islamic societies and legal circles. This is seen in the writings of influential Muslim theologians as well as in the social discussions which take place “on the street.” To many, religious freedom can only mean an increase in social tensions

and the surrender of one's identity. But scientific studies show<sup>1</sup> the opposite is true: Openness to complete religious freedom promotes social harmony and subdues social conflicts, while state restrictions on religious freedom are often the cause of tensions within one's own country.

For that reason we should work to promote religious and worldview freedom for all people, and support human rights, women's rights, civil liberties, and religious and political self-determination, regardless of the context in which these rights are refused to them.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance, Brian J. Grimm, Roger Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied: religious persecution and conflict in the twenty-first century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010

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