

PROMOTING AND PROTECTING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Arab world has been in the throes of a tumultuous reconfiguration of domestic and regional powers unprecedented since the aftermath of WWI when new countries were being carved out of old empires. Yet, in countries that have experienced regime ruptures, participation in liberation struggles has not translated into power-sharing for the politically marginalised. The question of how to promote and protect diversity in the region is a pressing one. Particularly at a time when Syria – a country with a high level of religious and ethnic heterogeneity – is on the brink of political reconfiguration. Inclusive policies will be essential to ensure the prospects of advancing holistic human development and real exercise of citizenship.

What is at stake with religious diversity?

In the aftermath of regime ruptures in the Arab world and with the political ascendancy of Islamist groups, there has been a mass exodus of citizens belonging to religious minorities from the region. Exclusionary policies and practices have been one of the main factors which have contributed to a decline in the Middle Eastern Christian population, from more than 20 per cent in the early 20th century to less than 10 per cent at present (although other factors including lower birth rate and search for a better life have also contributed to this). Some analysts predict that if the current declining trend continues, they will amount to less than five per cent by 2020.

The threats to religious diversity posed by the ongoing upheaval in the region could incur a heavy price on the wellbeing of the people of the Middle East. Failure to promote and protect religious diversity could lead to the Balkanisation of the region. In other words, the fragmentation of communities along religious and ethnic lines at immense human cost as witnessed in former Yugoslavia in 1991. In Syria, where religious and ethnic communities comprise large numbers, there is a risk that not only will there be a loss of diversity if communities decide that the only way to co-exist is to separate, but the wider cohesion of the country could also be under threat. This is already the case in Iraq, not only in Kurdistan, where it is possible to identify neighbourhoods which are primarily aligned along Sunni, Shi'a and Christian religious lines.

A further threat emanating from the marginalisation or disappearance of those religious communities is that it will increase the strength of political forces with totalitarian ideologies that wish to mould politics and society in their own image. Religious diversity within Islam will suffer, as well as all forms of political and cultural expressions that do not conform to a particular model of governance.

Impact of security breakdown and absence of inclusive models of governance

Exclusionary politics and practices with respect to religious difference is a deep-seated problem. However, in recent years, the problem has been exacerbated by two significant factors. Security breakdown and the absence of inclusive democratic models of governance, which has coincided with the expansion of the influence of conservative and radical Islamist groups in society and politics. ➤



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Security breakdown

People in countries that have experienced regime ruptures such as Egypt, Iraq, Tunisia and Libya have suffered from the absence of human security – the functioning of a security system geared towards protecting citizens and safeguarding their wellbeing as opposed to protecting the interests of the ruling regime in power or being driven by the geo-strategic interests of outside powers.

While human security has never existed in these countries, the situation has been worsened after the regime ruptures for two reasons. First, in many of the cases where people have reverted to community policing as a means of governing, highly conservative religious groups have risen to power and sought to enforce their own rules of engagement on a community level. Second, flows of arms and militant jihadi groups across the borders of these highly volatile countries have been implicated in acts of violence against religious minorities as well as against those practicing Islam in a way that they regard as deviant, such as the Sufis.

Members of minority religions have been especially vulnerable because they are in many instances targeted by both local and external Islamist radicals. In Libya, Coptic expatriates from neighbouring Egypt who had migrated to Benghazi in search of job opportunities were rounded up, had their heads shaved and were allegedly tortured after Al-Qaeda-linked Ansar al Shari'a called upon Libyans to rid the country of the infidels who were accused of proselytising (see Case Study 2: Egypt).

Case Study 1: Iraq

The population of Iraq is characterised by a high level of religious and ethnic diversity. While an estimated 97 per cent of the population is Muslim, of those about 65 per cent are Shi'a and the remainder Sunni. Non-Muslim religions include the Mandaeans, Shabaks, Yazidis and Christians who are members of some of the oldest churches in the world: the Chaldeans, Syriacs, Assyrians, Nestorians and Armenians among many others. This is in addition to a wide array of ethnic groups including Kurds, Turkomen and Armenians.

Sadam Hussein's rule instituted discriminatory policies against religious minorities, which at times amounted to persecution. Since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 the situation has significantly worsened. The religious diversity of Iraq has been threatened due to armed militia attacks on members of religious communities, assaults on their places of worship, confiscation of property, kidnappings and economic encroachments on their sources of living and fatwas (legal opinions) by religious leaders that legitimise the social and economic exploitation of members of religious minorities on account of their non-compliance with Islam.

The Bahai's, a legally prohibited religion, had their holy House (House of Baha'u'llah) in Baghdad confiscated by the government body Shiites Endowment, who converted it into a mosque. The Mandaeans, the followers of an agnostic religion which is almost two thousand years old, currently face extinction as 80 per cent of them have left the country after being exposed to attacks by Islamist militants from mid-2000 onwards. The number of Iraqi Christians on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was about 1.5 million. Today, however, as a result of systematic discrimination, there are now only between 500,000 and 800,000. The government has turned a blind eye to systematic practices of clearing parts of Iraq from religious groups and their displacement. No measures to hold those accountable for violations of human rights have been taken, sending a clear signal of government acquiescence.

Absence of inclusive democratic models of governance

In Egypt and Iraq, years of institutionalised policies generated religious intolerance by the ruling authorities. Following regime ruptures in the region, violence and religious intolerance has increased. With the political ascendancy of Islamist groups, identity has become increasingly demarcated along religious lines. Practices by ultra-radicals such as demanding a ransom from non-Muslims in return for not harming them, and insisting on women covering up have become more common place.

Islamist political forces have often used a discourse that recognises full citizenship of all, irrespective of religious difference. However, this is disconnected from citizens' experiences on the ground in contexts such as Egypt, Gaza, Libya and Iraq, and exemplified by recently documented attacks by Islamist hardliners on Sufi Muslim shrines in Libya. In the case of Egypt, the growth of religious intolerance under the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood is not only a result of bad governance but also the targeting of religious minorities as enemies of Islam through a highly inflammatory discourse.

It is not just religious diversity across religions that suffers, but within religions as well. In 2012 Tunisia, a country which boasts a long history of religious tolerance, experienced an increased level of attacks attributed to Salafist militants against religious minority shrines, secularist and liberal political leaders, media offices, and security forces headquarters. Al-Nahda, the Islamist party in power failed to punish the perpetrators.

Policy implications

The promotion of inclusive political orders and societies in the Middle East is highly complex and will require a multi-pronged strategy that considers the following policy implications:

1. Security sector reform

There is an urgent need to reform the security apparatus to make it responsive to the protection and service of citizens. In some cases such as Iraq, Yemen and Libya, the local police force need to be adequately equipped against militias and organised criminals that continue to target members of religious minorities. In all Arab countries in transition (including Iraq), non-state actors such as civil society organisations, human rights movements and political parties need to initiate campaigns to put pressure on addressing the wide prevalence of weapons. However, the protection of citizens' human security will also need to address religious prejudice in the attitudes and practices of the police force. Human rights organisations, community leaders and the media should assume a leading role in exposing their acts of complicity in sectarian violence against minorities, and campaigns be initiated to hold them accountable.

2. Revision and enactment of rule of law

Laws that discriminate against religious minorities with respect to the actual articles (i.e. when discriminatory regulations are enacted against the construction of places of worship) as well as their application (i.e. when criminal law is applied differentially based on religion) need to be addressed.

3. Affirmative action to promote representative democracy

Affirmative action is needed in order to ensure that participation and representation in governance are secured, and are not compromised by societal prejudices against voting for a candidate of a different faith. This bears serious consequences for Syria. The ballot boxes will not necessarily bring to power a government that is inclusive. Only principles laid out in any future political settlement will serve to safeguard the rights of minorities. This may include decentralised governance structures as well as quotas to ensure fair representation in legislatures and state institutions.

Case Study 2: Egypt

In January 2011, a people-led revolution resulted in the ousting of an authoritarian regime that had perpetuated human rights violations against a significant proportion of the population. During thirty years in power, Mubarak's regime used the secret political police to stir-up sectarian conflict as part of a strategy of divide and rule. His predecessor President Sadat empowered Islamist factions to strike against his political opponents, including communists and left-leaning movements.

Since 2011, the level of sectarian violence against religious minorities has worsened significantly. Incidents of sectarian violence against the Christian population (who account for approximately 10 per cent of the whole Egyptian population) rose from 45 in 2010 to 70 in 2011 to 112 in 2012 and so far in 2013, has exceeded 120 (as of 1 November 2013). These figures are not representative of the full scale of the incidents of violence, but they are indicative of a rising trend which has gotten significantly worse since 2011. Research suggests that Islamist factions played a leading role in mobilising violence in several of these cases. Sufi shrines have been desecrated and in June 2013, a week before the mass uprising against Morsi's regime, four Shias were killed in an attack led by members of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis.

Security laxity, absence of rule of law, and the ascendancy of Islamist groups, in formal and informal politics has forced members of religious minorities, particularly those living in Upper Egypt, into an especially vulnerable position. Following the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood-led government, pro-Morsi sympathisers launched an attack against Coptic Christians. On 14 August 2013, pro-Morsi sympathisers launched a large scale assault on property belonging to Christians including 74 places of worship, schools, and faith-based associations. While warnings of these imminent attacks were made, the security apparatus did nothing to prevent their occurrence. Despite promises made by the army, a programme of rebuilding has yet to begin.

In Egypt the overthrow of authoritarian and divisive regimes has not led to more inclusive governance. A number of social movements, coalitions and informal groups have been established (some led by youth) who have become active in advocating for full citizenship rights for all, irrespective of their religious affiliation or lack thereof. This is a welcome development, but there is still a great deal of progress to be made.

4. Recognition of wrongs and pursuit of traditional justice

Transitional justice processes will need to incorporate the injustices committed against citizens *en masse* for their religious affiliation in countries like Iraq and Egypt during and in the aftermath of the overthrow of authoritarian regimes. This will also be critical in the case of Syria. The violations of human rights of religious minorities during the civil war must not be forgotten in the face of the scale of atrocities committed against the whole population. In practice, it requires that independent non-state actors ensure that the evidence for such violations is collected and verified, and that accounts of their experiences are represented in historical narratives.

5. Comparative evidence-based country case study research

There is a need for more evidence-based research on how the new political configurations in the Middle East are affecting religious tolerance, not only in terms of religious minorities but also religious diversity more broadly. More attention should also be given to the extent to which there are similar patterns emerging across countries with respect to the actors, interests, methods and networks through which religious intolerance is perpetuated. More research is required on how other identity markers (gender, class, geographical location, age, profession) are influencing vulnerability to religious-based forms of intolerance and how they compare to vulnerability to other forms of discrimination (along gender lines or political affiliation).

6. Report and expose discourses, policies and practices that contribute to religious intolerance

International and national policymakers should support the establishment of local research think tanks that are able to collect, monitor and disseminate findings on the state of religious diversity in the country. These think tanks should seek to work closely with the media, human rights and civil society organisations to help improve the quality of public debate on these issues and also to draw attention to cases of religious intolerance.



Inclusive policies will be essential to ensure the prospects of advancing holistic human development and real exercise of citizenship.



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Further reading

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Middle East Report Christians in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Vol. 267, Issue 3, summer 2013

Credits

This *Rapid Response Briefing* was written by Mariz Tadros. Case Study 2: Iraq is a summary of a background paper prepared by H.E. Pascale Warda of the Hamurabi Human Rights Organization. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of IDS.

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The material has been funded by UK aid from the UK Government. However the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies.

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AG Level 2 Output ID: 267

