

Name: Sharon Olorunniwo

Student Number: 16323766

Course: BCNM01 - Human Rights in the Middle East

“Consider the human rights of religious minorities in the contemporary Middle East. Using specific examples from Muslim majority countries discuss instances in which the human rights of religious minorities have been/are being violated. Detail ways in which Islamic law, international human rights law, or some combination of the two, might afford better protection.”

“It is the duty of every cultured man or woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. If we are to respect others’ religions as we would have them respect our own, a friendly study of the world’s religions is a sacred duty.” - Gandhi

Article 18 of the UN The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

The majority of the Middle East’s population today is Muslim, as it has been for centuries. However, as the place of origin of a range of world religions including Judaism, Christianity, Yazidi and many lesser-known faiths. Although you may argue that there exists religious diversity in this region the world is now beginning to become aware of the plight of religious minorities such as Syrian and Iraqi Christians and Yazidis, who are at present the most at risk in these countries. They are suffering at the hands of extremists who claim to represent the religion of over one billion people by wreaking havoc “*fi sabilillah*” (for the sake of God). Religious minorities in the Middle East are increasingly under threat from jihadist groups such as the so-called Islamic State (IS). Groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS exploit this intolerance of religious by taking such fanaticism to new and barbaric heights.

There are several factors contributing to the persecution of religious minorities in the Middle East and the rise of ISIS and other Muslim extremist groups in the Middle East is just one of the many factors. Although sectarian conflicts in the region is not news to many of us, the 2003 Iraq War and the Arab Spring (*democratic uprisings that arose independently and spread across the Arab world in 2011*) unleashed a new torrent of violence and have loosed a campaign of religious cleansing across the Middle East.

According to intensive research the most persecuted religious minority in Muslim majority countries in the *contemporary* Middle East would have to be Christians. ***Austrian S&D MEP Josef Weidenholzer brought up the detention of 200 Assyrian Christians in north-eastern Syria during a European Parliament session: “Do we really want to see this region of the world empty of Christians?”***¹

Christians have lived in the Middle East and for nearly two thousand years many have considered it the birthplace of Christianity. However, despite this as a result of years of persecution and discrimination, especially in the past 15 years, they now constitute no more than 3-4% of the region’s population, down from 20% a century ago.²

¹ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/world/20150225STO26905/religious-minorities-at-risk-in-middle-east-death-has-become-something-banal>

² https://www.huffingtonpost.com/alon-benmeir/the-persecution-of-christ_b_13652002.html

Of course, we must recognize and acknowledge that Christians are not the only minority being denied their right to live and to practice their religious freely in this region, but their plight is more visible in many places, beyond what has been experienced by Yazidis, Kurds, Druze, and others. Unfortunately, given the turmoil in the Middle East and the rise of Islamic extremism, with few exceptions Christians and other minorities may no longer be able to live in harmony with their largely Muslim neighbours.

For example, in Iraq there is estimated to be about 2.5 million Christians living there as of November-December 2011. Their situation has worsened since the downfall of Saddam Hussein and they have become a target of al-Qaeda terror attacks. In recent years about two thousand Christians have been murdered in Iraq, sparking a surge of emigration to the West.³

There are many less known religious minorities that are facing discrimination for example the Baha'is in Iran. The Baha'i faith was established in Iran, then called Persia, in the mid-nineteenth century. Iran is a Muslim-majority country and this religious minority has been systematically discriminated against and persecuted, since the 1979 revolution. The Iranian Revolution of 1978–1979 violently ended the monarchy of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi (1919–1980) and replaced it with an Islamic republic, the theocracy of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1901–1989). Because of Islamic rule people of the Baha'i faith are not protected as a religious minority under the Iranian constitution as opposed to other religious minorities such as Jews and Christians. An overwhelming majority of Baha'is are unable to earn degrees in higher education, limiting their chances at finding decent employment. Many Baha'i fear for their lives daily, and it has been revealed by several leading human rights organisations that many of their shrines have been destroyed as have their cemeteries. These are direct violations of their right to religious freedom and education.

The Yazidi's are another religious minority being denied their human rights. The Yazidi faith is a religious sect whose beliefs combine elements of several ancient Middle Eastern religions. Islamic State considers them devil-worshippers. Take the Yazidi community in Iraq for example. The Islamic State [IS, also called ISIS and ISIL] attacked the Yazidis in northern Iraq in August 2014. The following statistics and numbers of the bloodshed in just a matter of days during this attack is harrowing.

“At least 9,900 of Iraq's Yazidis were killed or kidnapped in just days in an Islamic State attack in 2014, according to the first study to document the number of Yazidis affected which could be used as evidence in any trial for genocide.

About 3,100 Yazidis were killed - with more than half shot, beheaded or burned alive - and about 6,800 kidnapped to become sex slaves or fighters, according to the report published in the Public Library of Science journal PLoS Medicine on Tuesday.”⁴

This attack was so severe and merciless that the United Nations commission has labelled this attack as a genocide against the Yazidis.

³ <http://jcpa.org/article/majority-and-minorities-in-the-arab-world-the-lack-of-a-unifying-narrative/>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-yazidis/nearly-10000-yazidis-killed-kidnapped-by-islamic-state-in-2014-study-finds-idUSKBN185271>

I am aware that this essay must deal with discrimination against religious minorities in Muslim countries however we must be aware that just like Christianity there are different strands of Islam and not all Muslims are treated equally. For example, in Iran there has been and continues to be an ongoing harassment and persecution of Sunni (*one of the two main branches of Islam, commonly described as orthodox, and differing from Shia in its understanding of the Sunna and in its acceptance of the first three caliphs.*) religious leaders. Sunnis constitute the largest religious minority making up roughly 5 to 10 percent of the population in the Shiite-majority nation.

Molavi Abdolhamid Ismaeelzahi is considered Iran's highest-ranking Muslim Sunni cleric and is regarded as a "spiritual leader for Iran's Sunni minority." He has attempted to find a middle ground with Iran's ruling Shiite clerics, but his attempts have failed. The Iranian regime targets leaders of religious minorities in a shrewd attempt to impose fear collectively from the top of the group, in order to restrict the activities of its members.⁵

The Commission highlighted 27 countries for particularly vicious treatment of religious minorities. Eleven are strong Muslim-majority states. Here are some of the countries that were mentioned on the list and here are examples of religious minorities being persecuted in those countries.⁶

Burma

Christians long suffered in the military junta's attempt to brutally suppress insurgencies from a variety of ethnic groups, several of which were predominantly Christian. Recent ceasefires have ended most of those conflicts and the military has implemented important political reforms. However, noted the Commission, "these steps have not yet improved conditions for religious freedom and related human rights in the country, nor spurred the Burmese government to curtail those perpetrating abuses." More recently subject to virulent, violent abuse have been the Muslim Rohingya, many of whom have fled their homes and some their country.

Iran.

There was much hope for reform with the ascension of President Hassan Rouhani as president in 2013. But persecution has increased: "The government of Iran continues to engage in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention, torture, and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused." Atheists, Baha'is, Christians, Jews, Sunni Muslims, and Zoroastrians all are at risk.

Iraq.

The historic Christian community was destroyed by sectarian strife resulting from the Bush administration's misbegotten invasion. Up to half of Christians fled, many to Syria, where today they face new threats. The situation greatly deteriorated last year. While the Islamic State was the worst perpetrator, "the Iraqi government also contributed to the deterioration in religious freedom conditions."

⁵ <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1239901>

⁶ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dougbandow/2015/06/15/religious-persecution-rising-islam-threatens-religious-minorities-especially-in-middle-east/#7a0a39a7572c>

Pakistan.

Yet another U.S. ally, Pakistan tolerates “chronic sectarian violence” against religious minorities and the promiscuous misuse of the infamous “blasphemy” law. As a result, this country “represents one of the worst situations in the world for religious freedom for countries not currently designated” a CPC.⁷

As I mentioned earlier the rest of the world is becoming aware of the plight of religious minorities and there have been instances where they have intervened. When ISIS attacked the Yazidis in Iraq with genocidal intent, the US intervened and saved tens of thousands of Yazidis who were trapped on Mount Sinjar, under threat of extermination by the extremist Islamist group.

Another way we as a global community can help end religious persecution is by sanctioning countries that continue to restrict their citizens from religious freedom and the right to life. Violators need to fully understand that their transgressions will have consequences. With its tremendous global influence, the United States and the EU can go as far as leveraging international trade or other political deals with a demand of ending violations against religious minorities. This could give violating countries incentives to stop discriminatory practices. Approaches to addressing violations against religious freedom, however, cannot be generalized. Each country is different, and the same measures cannot be applied across the board.

Contrary to popular belief, the Qur'an contains many texts - revealed in both the Meccan and Medinan periods - that uphold the right to freedom of religion. These texts recognize each individual's right to believe or not to believe in God. The Prophet Muhammad respected this right throughout his life. However, traditional Islamic law and theology developed a range of limitations on this freedom in the post-prophetic period. The most notable of these are the laws relating to apostasy, blasphemy, heresy and hypocrisy. Many of these limitations were developed during the post-prophetic period on the premise of the protection of religion (*hifz al-din*)

The Qur'an presents religion as a human good whose protection is of utmost importance. Protecting the right of an individual to believe and practice the faith and religion of his or her choice is one of the most important functions of the community and government and is considered a human right.

In the Qur'an, God's plan for humankind is not that everyone should follow the same path; instead, each person has the right to think for them and believe what they want to believe sincerely. The Qur'an itself does not support the idea of forcing another individual to convert to a certain belief through any means whether that be by fear, torture or any other means.

In the Qur'an, both Judaism and Christianity, are respected as "religions of the book" alongside Islam (5:69; 3:113-114). The Qur'an urges Muslims to deal with *all* people - including idolaters - with respect, as long as they too show respect (49:11). The Qur'an also strongly rejects the idea of forcing anyone to adopt Islam, or of initiating hostilities toward any non-Muslim communities with whom Muslims had peaceful relations (9:4). As such, the Qur'an reflected a remarkable degree of tolerance towards other religions (5:69) at a time when religious tolerance was not generally the norm.⁸

To conclude, in the wake of a wider ideological shift in the Middle East people have begun to identify by religion much more clearly than they did 50 years ago. Unfortunately, it's a very militant and ugly form of religion, sponsored by people who take a very narrow-minded view of what religion should

⁷ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dougbandow/2015/06/15/religious-persecution-rising-islam-threatens-religious-minorities-especially-in-middle-east/#7a0a39a7572c>

⁸ <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2014/05/23/4010689.htm>

be and harbour a deep hostility toward those who they think are undermining the 'true religion'. The phenomenon of killing people is a very specific, limited problem and is truly not the root of the issue at hand. The much broader problem is that there is a de-legitimizing of people based on their religious beliefs. This is very dangerous and very widespread in the Middle East.

Although religion is in increasing disfavour in many Western societies, religious liberty is the first freedom, the bedrock liberty of conscience upon which civil and political freedoms rest. A society and government which refuses to respect the right for their people to believe in what they want to believe in is unlikely to respect other basic human rights.

It is encouraging to know see that there are Muslims that can see the wrong being done to other religious minorities. A group of Islamic scholars, Muslim leaders and government ministers from Muslim-majority countries have promised to work together to protect people of religious minorities, stating that Islam forbids religious persecution. One of the organisers, Sheikh Hamza Yusuf from the United States, speaking to NPR said

*"We have Christian churches that have been there for long before Islam was in these lands, that are being destroyed. And we have Jews in Yemen, one of the oldest Jewish communities, now the very existence of which is threatened."*⁹

It is very evident that the existence of certain religious minorities are being threatened by Islamic militant groups and certain regimes in the Middle East but as these issues come more to light that the global community will begin to do more to give everyone the right to practice their religion freely without fear of discrimination or persecution.

⁹ <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/morocco-hosts-conference-on-protecting-religious-minorities-in-muslim-countries/>