



# Religious Pluralism in the Middle East

**REPORT 2018 - VI**

CENTRE FOR RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST- CRPME

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## **Executive Summary**

The CRPME report is addressing main features and challenges regarding religious pluralism in the Middle East during the first half of 2018. The region of focus includes the countries of Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Lebanon and the Maghreb region with an added emphasis on each country's institutional framework. The aim of the report is, on the one hand, to pinpoint the challenges related to religious pluralism in the region. On the other hand, it strives to highlight positive state and community initiatives that promote religious co-existence and pluralism. The documentation work leading to the report reflects the research already published on the CRPME site, which is being constantly updated with the developments regarding the religious communities in the region. It is, thus, neither exhaustive nor discursive in covering all the relevant events but it focuses on the events that could reveal certain issues, trends, continuities and discontinuities.

There are five types of challenges confronting religious communities in the region:

1. The post-ISIS future of the religious communities living in Syria and Iraq
2. The deeper integration, or lack thereof, of religious communities within society
3. The matter of recognition of religious faiths aside from the Judaic, Christian and Muslim ones
4. The preservation of the religious communities' cultural heritage
5. The Gordian knot between the State and the officially recognized State religion

Within the Maghreb region, the countries of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya have been largely preoccupied with combatting religious extremism, with the notion of religious pluralism being more prevalent in Morocco. The latter's efforts in promoting religious pluralism can be seen as an antidote to extremism. On the one hand, it is aggressively combating extremism and, on the other hand, it is actively conducting good practices towards coexistence and pluralism.

In Syria, the dismantlement of the “Islamic State” has created an institutional challenge in regard to bringing the newly-liberated areas within the government’s administrative control. However, the continuation of the Syrian conflict has generated additional trends and challenges to the institutional configuration of post-war Syria, particularly in the field of sectarian balances and religious coexistence. At the same time, Turkey’s growing involvement in Syria and its impact on Kurdish self-rule, Assad’s (and his allies) effort to set the foundations of future Syria and the challenge of bringing back to normal large swaths of east Syria, constitute the driving forces of the post-war future.

Iraq, following the “ISIS parenthesis”, has witnessed a number of shifts all the more evident by the record low turnout during the recent electoral process as well as a newly-found will for inter-community collaboration in electoral lists and beyond. In addition, over three and half million displaced Iraqis have returned home, most of them to the Nineweh province, which is host to several religious communities and was the most affected region in Iraq. However, more than two million Iraqis remain displaced.

Saudi Arabia and its religious establishment enjoy a healthy relationship, one maintained by the promotion of their shared political interests. However, it is noteworthy that there is still no official framework for religious freedom. Only mosques are allowed, and non-Muslim religious services are not officially permitted. Nonetheless, the State continues its efforts to promote tolerance and mutual understanding between Shi’as and Sunnis. Despite efforts for change in domestic policies and via interfaith initiatives, the Wahhabi character of the State still stands strong, especially in relation to law and order. The promotion of “moderate” Islam in Saudi Arabia still has its limitations, with the need for reformation of the education system being considered as a prime example.

In Iran, aside from Muslims, only Iranian Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians are free to practice their religion, within the limits of the law. Conversion to Christianity is not allowed and its converts, as well as members of religions that the State does not recognize, such as Baha’is or Yarsanis, cannot be registered, are not entitled to the same rights, and are subjected to repression and imprisonment for exercising their religion. Despite these measures, Christians live in relative peace with the regime and have three

representatives in the Iranian parliament. Christianity is growing in Iran, being one of the fastest growing Christian communities in the world.

Since 2016, vandalism attacks in Turkey against non-Muslim houses of worship have multiplied. The State's push for the predominance of Sunni Islam is quite evident, as Islamic schools have been granted larger budgets in an effort to raise a "pious generation". At the same time, the South of Turkey has borne the brunt of the conflict between security forces and the militants of the PKK and has had its cultural and religious icons damaged or destroyed, effectively erasing thousands of years of the living communities' history. In addition, a number of Byzantine churches previously turned into museums are still in the process of being converted into mosques, with the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul being the most alarming example. The Muslim predominance over non-Muslim communities in all aspects of society is heavily underlined through the use of iconic symbols such as the Hagia Sophia, which seems to perennially represent the disparity in the everyday life of all Turkish citizens.

In Egypt, an ongoing debate is growing over whether the religious head of the Coptic community should represent it in State matters. It seems as if part of the Coptic community is not in agreement with Pope Tawandros' policies and his representation of their rights. Nevertheless, the law on building and normalizing Coptic churches stands as a positive example of the church's relationship with the State as well as for the promotion of Coptic religious rights. In regard to the disdain of religion law, a number of draft reform bills were submitted to the parliament but failed to make a lasting impression, paving the way instead for initiatives for criminalizing atheism. Nonetheless, the calls for a "religious revolution" by the Egyptian President have been answered by the Al-Azhar University against the rise of religious extremism through the promotion of pro-active initiatives.

In Israel, a heated debate on the status of Jerusalem as a "holy city" for the Judaic, Christian and Muslim religions seems underway. This issue is seen as an interaction of private and State actors in Israel's society, with the intent to transform the multi-religious character of the city. Nonetheless, a number of American and Israeli organizations have been sponsoring interfaith conferences pertaining to issues such as forgiveness and ecology. Furthermore, the project "The People of the Book" was launched in late 2017,

which aims at explaining the common ground and the differences between Judaism and Islam, and at achieving mutual understanding and consolidating respectful coexistence.

In Lebanon, the confessional system by default mixes religion and politics, giving political and institutional power to confessional communities. Lebanon's religious leadership role is not limited to promoting interfaith dialogue and discouraging extremism. Although the role of "public spokesman" has given them the power to be viewed as mediators in facilitating the political tensions among the political parties of the country, it has not been without shortfalls, as pertaining to the issue of social cohesion in Lebanon. Yet, the role of religious leadership and the institutionalisation of religious pluralism and coexistence has acted as a buffer-zone to sectarianism. Overall, the institutionalisation of religious pluralism and coexistence demonstrates a certain level of maturity not only of the leadership, be it religious or political, but also of the society that extremism has been banging on its door from the beginning of the Syrian crisis.

Finally, in Jordan, the livelihood and safety of the thousands of refugees of many religious denominations who found shelter in the country seems to be one of the main challenges at hand. The Kingdom has repeatedly been trying to export a religiously liberal facet of its policies, at times achieving a pluralist profile, but not always succeeding. It should be noted that religious freedom still seems to be narrowed down to the two monotheistic religions, due to the rigid religious framework of Jordan. Nevertheless, close attention is being paid to the gradual increase in religious tourism, with a focus on pluralism, religious tolerance and interfaith interaction via the close proximity of various holy sites.

## **Turkey**

The events of July 15<sup>th</sup> 2016 ushered a new era for the day to day life of Turkish citizens from all walks of life. The religious communities living in Turkey seem to have been caught in the middle of the strife to purge Turkish society from the President Erdogan's adversaries, i.e. those allegedly affiliated with the Gülen Movement, the factions of the PKK within Turkey, and Islamic State militants. The state of emergency that was declared was soon extended, political and other grudges came to the forefront, and Erdogan's bid for constitutional reform came to dominate most, if not all, aspects of Turkish politics, as well as the *modus vivendi* of Turkish citizens, and more specifically the non-Muslim ones.

### **The Justice Department and the religious communities**

The aftermath of the events of July 2016 granted free reign to conspiracy theories against religious communities. As such Christian Protestants were considered working with or under the "Gülenist influence", attempting to proselytize good Muslims, undermining Turkish authorities at every turn, and being an important part in the machine aiming to remove Erdogan from power. Soon, Protestant churches were vandalized and pastors were deported or jailed without trial. The most well-known case is the one concerning Pastor Andrew Brunson, who was imprisoned since the summer of 2016 with the accusation of colluding with the Gülen Movement. Nearly two years later, his trial is still being postponed, despite efforts led by Christian groups, international groups, and even US senators. A common theory that gained considerable ground was that the Pastor was incarcerated in order to facilitate the negotiation for the extradition of Fethullah Gülen from the United States to Turkey. Although it certainly seems that a straight trade of the two men would be out of the question, the Pastor's detention points to a tactic that is surely headed that way. It remains to be seen if a resolution on the Pastor's case will see the light of day during 2018. The previous months, however, point to the contrary, with the Turkish Justice Department procrastinating, seeking a sentence of 35 years, withholding confidential witnesses from the Pastor's defence, and keeping the details of the accusations unknown for security reasons. President Erdogan went one step further

in January 2018, declaring that as long as the leader of the Gülen Movement is not handed over, no detained foreign suspects will be extradited back to their country of origin. What is more, it is worth underlining the fact that Pastor Brunson is not the only case. Thousands of journalists, academics, soldiers, activists, and others are still detained for months without trial and with no sentence.<sup>1</sup>

Since 2016, vandalism attacks against Christian churches have multiplied. Despite coming together and immediately denouncing the attempt and its engineers, the leaders of the religious communities were soon embroiled in as the orchestrators of conspiracies and as traitors to the Turkish domestic harmony, aiming to topple the Erdogan-led government. These unfounded theories were spread through the media frenzy that followed the societal and political chaos in Turkey, and even though debunked, grabbed a hold on the people's mind-set, ensuring a strained and unpleasant coexistence in the years to come. The members of the religious communities seem to remain silent on the matter, perhaps waiting for the storm to pass. As a result, during late January 2018 and the start of the Turkish "Operation Olive Branch" against the Kurdish forces in Northern Syria, most of the religious leaders declared their support to the operation and wished a quick resolution to the matter.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Erkoyun, Ezgi, "U.S. pastor denies allegations of coup links as Turkey trial begins", *Reuters*, (16/4/2018) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-usa/u-s-pastor-denies-allegations-of-coup-links-as-turkey-trial-begins-idUSKBN1HN15N>

See also Ahval, "Secret witness in Brunson case says U.S. pastor helped PKK", (7/5/2018)

<https://ahvalnews.com/andrew-brunson/secret-witness-brunson-case-says-us-pastor-helped-pkk>

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<https://www.meforum.org/articles/2018/turkey-turns-on-its-christians>

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/16/world/europe/turkey-us-pastor-andrew-brunson-trial.html>

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<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/04/us-no-evidence-pastor-brunson-guilty-of-any-crime/>

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<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/01/jailed-us-pastor-still-refused-due-process-in-turkey/>

Hurtas, Sibel, "Turkey doubles down in pastor row with US", *Al-Monitor*, (16/3/2018) <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/03/turkey-united-states-ankara-doubles-down-in-priest-row.html>

<sup>2</sup> Derdiyok, Mehmet Ali, "Turkish-Armenian Patriarchate prays for Turkish army", *Anadolu Agency*, (23/1/2018)

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/-turkish-armenian-patriarchate-prays-for-turkish-army/1039294>

See also Daily Sabah, "Human rights chairman condemns attack on Armenian church", (1/5/2018)

<https://www.dailysabah.com/minorities/2018/05/01/human-rights-chairman-condemns-attack-on-armenian-church>

Baker, Barbara G., "Turkish Protestant church vandalised a second time in Malatya", *World Watch Monitor*, (27/11/2018) <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/11/turkish-protestant-church-vandalised-second-time-malatya/>

Despite its silence on all Turkish matters and the seeming détente in Turkish-Israeli affairs since 2017, the Jewish community residing in Turkey is once again the target of hate speech following the de jure recognition of Jerusalem by the United States as the capital of Israel. This situation has led many Turkish Jews either to file applications for obtaining Portuguese citizenship after a recent decision of the government of Portugal or to move to Israel.<sup>3</sup>

### **State intervention in religious affairs**

As of recently, the most blatant case of State intervention was found in the case of the election of the Armenian Patriarch in Turkey. During the past ten years, the Armenian Patriarch fell ill and was unable to perform his duties. An acting Patriarch was selected in his place. However, the lack of Patriarchal elections led to the need of rectifying the matter. As a result, a new Patriarch was to be elected in February 2018. Although proceedings were underway, the Turkish State stopped them at the last minute, claiming – as it had already stressed in 2008 when the matter first arose – that the only possible way for a new Patriarch to be selected, was for the current one to have passed away. As it stands, the Armenian community is without an official and elected religious leader due to the lack of a religious legal framework for such matters in Turkey.<sup>4</sup>

Another matter indirectly linked to the affairs of the religious communities residing in Turkey, is the State's push for the predominance of Sunni Islam in the everyday life of its citizens. Islamic schools have recently been granted larger budgets and are considered the highest form of education where the best performing students

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<sup>3</sup> Jovanovski, Christina, "Turkey's Jews are scared, but afraid to talk about it", *The Jerusalem Post*, (4/2/2018)

<https://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Turkeys-Jews-are-scared-but-afraid-to-talk-about-it-540362>

See also Hurriyet Daily News, "Jews most targeted by hate speech in Turkish media: Report", (23/11/2017)

<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/jews-most-targeted-by-hate-speech-in-turkish-media-report-122961>

Erkus, Sevil, "2,000 Turkish Jews applied for Portuguese citizenship: Envoy", *Hurriyet Daily News*, (7/5/2018)

<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/2-000-turkish-jews-applied-for-portuguese-citizenship-envoy-131418>

Ekin, Sibel, "More Turkish Jews seek new life in Israel", *Ahval*, (3/3/2018) <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey/more-turkish-jews-seek-new-life-israel>

<sup>4</sup> Yildirim, Mine, "Turkey: Why Can't Armenians Elect a Patriarch?", *The Armenian Weekly*, (9/3/2018)

<https://armenianweekly.com/2018/03/09/turkey-cant-armenians-elect-patriarch/>

See also Baker, Barbara G., "Turkish state blocks election of a new Armenian Patriarch", *World Watch Monitor*,

(22/2/2018) <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/02/turkish-state-blocks-election-of-a-new-armenian-patriarch/>

Hurriyet Daily News, "Istanbul Governor's Office cancels elections for Armenian Patriarchate of Turkey", (8/2/2018)

<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/istanbul-governors-office-cancels-elections-for-armenian-patriarchate-of-turkey-127004>

are expected to attend. In an effort to raise a “pious generation”, the Turkish State steps further away from secularism, marginalizing the other religious communities who are de facto unable to attend schools of such standing.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, in an effort to distance itself from secularism, the Turkish State has granted the power to religious officials to perform civil marriages. As a result, muftis have been added to the list of State officials that had this power. Although previously, muftis could perform marriages, the latter were not official without a State marriage license. As it stands, this will no longer be the case. It should be noted that the other officially recognized religious communities such as the Christian and Jewish ones lack such granted authority by the State.<sup>6</sup>

## **Religious culture preservation**

Although religious communities in Turkey have seen better days, it seems that an effort is being made in order to preserve their Christian and Jewish cultural heritage, at least when it comes to places of worship. The Directorate-General of Foundations has spearheaded this initiative with restoration projects dating back to the previous decade. Notable examples of this initiative are the three-year restoration and reopening of the Greek-Orthodox Church of St George in Istanbul, as well as the seven-year restoration of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church of Sveti Stefan, more commonly known as the “Iron Church”. Both restorations have very important symbolic connotations, given that the former stands as the official seat of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew since 1600, while the latter is known for being built out of cast iron and as an icon for the Bulgarian-Orthodox religious community. Furthermore, the Cathedral of Ani in Kars, previously converted into a mosque and later turned into a museum, will also be restored.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Middle East Eye, “Turkey plans to place quarter of top students in Islamic schools”, (12/4/2018) <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-says-plans-place-quarter-top-students-islamic-schools-1344684327>

<sup>6</sup> Uras, Umut, “Turkey: Religious officials to perform civil marriages”, *Al-Jazeera*, (19/10/2018) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/turkey-religion-officials-perform-civil-marriages-171019132948431.html>

<sup>7</sup> Daily Sabah, “Decade of restoration for churches, synagogues in Turkey”, (1/1/2018) <https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/2018/01/02/decade-of-restoration-for-churches-synagogues-in-turkey>

In addition, an important number of Byzantine icons are in the process of being restored, depicting Christianity and its religious rituals, and being considered as historical artefacts. During May 2018, the “Foundations Week” event saw the inauguration and reopening of restored churches, synagogues and mosques. The event was attended by President Erdogan and was heavily mediatized, giving further credence to the importance of religious cultural history in Turkish society. It would seem that the historical affective memory of the religious and cultural mosaic of the Ottoman Empire constitutes nowadays a significant aspect of Turkish policies.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, cultural and religious history is not as preserved in the South of Turkey, where perhaps electoral priorities are not as prevalent, and the security-related ones are considered as of the essence. Specifically, the region of Diyarbakir bore the brunt of the conflict between the Turkish security forces and the militants of the PKK during previous years. As a result, important cultural and religious icons of the city were damaged or destroyed, effectively erasing thousands of years of the living communities’ history. After the fighting subsided, a reconstruction plan of the city of Diyarbakir was underway. However, the reconstruction of the city emphasized more on security aspects, rather than on the preservation of the city’s historical landscape. What is more, the expropriation of the historic Armenian Church St Giragos and other cultural urban areas was decided, but was overturned two years later by the State Council.<sup>9</sup>

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See also Kokkinidis, Tasos, “Historic Greek Orthodox Church in Istanbul Opens after Three Years of Restorations”, *Greek Europe Reporter*, (21/11/2017) <http://eu.greekreporter.com/2017/11/21/historic-greek-orthodox-church-in-istanbul-opens-after-three-years-of-restorations/>

Daily Sabah, “Iconic Istanbul church reopens after 7 years of restoration”, (7/1/2018)

<https://www.dailysabah.com/istanbul/2018/01/07/iconic-istanbul-church-reopens-after-7-years-of-restoration>

Ertan, Nazlan, “Istanbul’s Iron Church restored as Turkey warms to Bulgaria”, *Al-Monitor*, (29/1/2018) <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/01/iron-church-in-istanbul-symbol-of-bulgarian-nationalism.html>

Hurriyet Daily News, “Cathedral of Ani to be restored in Turkey’s Kars”, (20/4/2018)

<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/cathedral-of-ani-to-be-restored-in-turkeys-kars-130594>

<sup>8</sup> Alyanak, Cigdem, “Turkey restoring 452 historic Byzantine church icons”, *Anadolu Agency*, (5/1/2018)

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/culture-and-art/turkey-restoring-452-historic-byzantine-church-icons/1023631>

See also Daily Sabah, “Restored churches, mosques in Turkey reopen during Foundations Week”, (8/5/2018)

<https://www.dailysabah.com/minorities/2018/05/09/restored-churches-mosques-in-turkey-reopen-during-foundations-week>

<sup>9</sup> Borzaslan, Mahmut, “Heartbreak in Turkey’s Diyarbakir as development transforms ancient Sur”, *Al-Monitor*, (21/11/2017) <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/diyarbakirs-urban-plans-risk-destroying-heritage.html>

See also Agenzia Fides, “The State Council overturns decision on expropriation of Armenian church in Diyarbakir”, (7/3/2018) [http://www.fides.org/en/news/63866-ASIA\\_TURKEY\\_The\\_State\\_Council\\_overturns\\_decision\\_on\\_expropriation\\_of\\_Armenian\\_church\\_in\\_Diyarbakir](http://www.fides.org/en/news/63866-ASIA_TURKEY_The_State_Council_overturns_decision_on_expropriation_of_Armenian_church_in_Diyarbakir)

In contrast to the houses of worship restoration policy, a number of Byzantine churches previously turned into museums are still being converted into mosques. The most prominent and alarming instance of this policy, is the one concerning the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, which operates as a museum since 1935. On May 29th 2016, the anniversary celebrations for the conquest of Constantinople took place, along with public prayers and demonstrations for the right to pray inside the Hagia Sophia Museum. Soon after, Koranic readings were broadcast from inside the Hagia Sophia building complex, while, during November 2016, Friday prayers were read, and a full-time Imam was appointed. Both initiatives were met by the immediate response from both the Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the US State Department. Despite the prompt reaction of the International and Christian communities, as well as the UNESCO-protected status as a cultural monument of the Hagia Sophia, the events of the months that followed cemented the perception that this offence would not be limited to a one-time occurrence. Prayers were held again during June 2017 in the presence of State officials. During December 2017, a group forced its way into the Hagia Sophia in order to pray. Three months later, at the end of March 2018, President Erdogan recited an Islamic prayer in the Hagia Sophia during the opening ceremony of a classical Turkish arts event, and dedicating it to Istanbul's conqueror.<sup>10</sup>

The above are indicative of the constantly shifting and often at-odds priorities of Turkish policy in regard to religious communities and their cultural history. It should be noted that in some instances, the cultural mosaic of the defunct Ottoman Empire is emphasized and pushed to the forefront, in an effort to create a link with Erdogan's rather than Ataturk's secular Turkey. What is more, the Hagia Sophia was converted into a museum in 1935 by Kemal Ataturk. With the anniversary of the creation of the Turkish State coming up, the Muslim predominance over non-Muslim communities in all aspects

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<sup>10</sup> The Independent, "Turkish president Erdogan recites Islamic prayer at Hagia Sophia despite historic link to secularism", (31/3/2018) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/turkish-president-erdogan-recites-islamic-prayer-at-hagia-sophia-despite-international-outcry-a8282861.html>

See also Ioannou, Theo, "Turkish Nationalist Group Invaded Istanbul's Hagia Sophia Church to Pray", *Greek Europe Reporter*, (11/12/2017) <http://eu.greekreporter.com/2017/12/11/turkish-nationalist-group-invaded-istanbuls-hagia-sophia-church-to-pray-video/>

Daily Sabah, "Erdogan launches first classical Turkish arts biennial in Istanbul's Hagia Sophia", (31/3/2018) <https://www.dailysabah.com/events/2018/03/31/erdogan-launches-first-classical-turkish-arts-biennial-in-istanbuls-hagia-sophia>

Hurriyet Daily News, "Turkish President Erdogan recites Islamic prayer at the Hagia Sophia", (1/4/2018) <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-president-erdogan-recites-islamic-prayer-at-the-hagia-sophia-129594>

of Turkish society is heavily underlined through the use of iconic symbols such as the Hagia Sophia, which seems to perennially represent the disparity in the everyday life of all Turkish citizens.

## **Syria**

The territorial eradication of the last remaining traces of the so-called “Islamic State” in Syria did not signal the beginning of celebrations. Contrary to Iraq, the end of ISIS rule in east Syria removed only a piece of a complex multi-directional conflict, which continued unabated. The dismantlement of the “Islamic State” created an enormous institutional challenge to bring the newly-liberated areas to government’s administrative control. At the same time, though, the continuation of the Syrian conflict has generated additional trends and challenges to the institutional configuration of post-war Syria, particularly in the field of sectarian balances and religious coexistence. On the one hand, the invasion (and ongoing presence) of the Turkish army in north Syria brings in several new dynamics in the Syrian civil war; mainly regarding the Kurdish self-administration endeavour. On the other hand, the projected defeat of the Syrian opposition, as Assad’s forces advance on several opposition strongholds, brings post-war Syria closer to fruition. The notion that Syria’s post-war economic reconstruction and institutional reconfiguration is “imminent” sets in motion several new initiatives aimed at solidifying the needs and the interests of the victorious side. In short, the Assad government is preparing the institutional and economic setting of post-war realities on the ground.

Turkey’s growing involvement in Syria and its impact on Kurdish self-rule, Assad’s (and his allies) effort to set the foundations of future Syria and the challenge of bringing back to normal large swaths of east Syria that, in some cases, have been under ISIS rule for more than three years, constitute the three main challenges and driving forces in Syria’s post-war future. These three challenges are linked to the issue of religious pluralism, as all three deeply affect the balances between large ethno-religious communities and the fate of religious minorities in post-war Syria.

### **The Kurdish institutional outlook in the wake of the Turkish intervention**

The Turkish military incursion in Kurdish-held Afrin in north Syria has served a blow to the self-administration and self-protection claims of Rojava authorities. The fall of Afrin and the Turkey-US deal on the withdrawal of Kurdish forces from Manbij bring the Kurdish experiment of self-rule in northwest Syria close to an end. It is hard to predict

how far Erdogan is willing to push into Syria in order to dismantle the political and military power of Syrian Kurds. Likewise, it is hard to estimate the level of international support the Kurds will get, mainly from the US and France. Whatever form the state-like Kurdish entity takes in the end, the Kurdish-controlled administration of Rojava stills needs to address pressing challenges, while directing its efforts to self-defence. Issues of religious pluralism are raised in both efforts.

The multi-ethnic and multi-religious outlook of SDF, the US-supported force which took the burden of anti-ISIS operations in east Syria, was shaken by a series of defections to the Turkish side. Some Sunni Arab forces, who has been part of or cooperated with SDF, have allegedly joined the Turkish army in their fight against Kurdish forces. More controversial was the defection of Talal Silo in November 2017. Silo, a Syrian Turkmen, was SDF's spokesperson and commanded Turkmen forces in SDF. His decision to defect to the Turkish side and the re-alignment of some Sunni tribal forces demonstrate the fragile state of ethno-religious balances in SDF. Interestingly, Silo was replaced by Keno Gabriel, a Catholic Christian, who has been the spokesperson for the Syriac Military Council (a Christian military force affiliated with SDF).<sup>11</sup>

The Kurdish civilian administration, which remains largely controlled by PYD (the PKK-allied political arm of YPG), is also struggling with issues of sectarian and religious peace. The main challenge is the handling of suspected ISIS members, who were detained during anti-ISIS operations. These include several hundreds of Sunni Arabs and a few dozen foreign fighters. With limited interest from their countries of origin (several Western among them) to request their repatriation, the rudimentary Kurdish courts are forced to process several dozens of similar cases.

In its bid to demonstrate competence in administration and secure international legitimacy, the Kurdish authorities of Rojava have set a primitive justice system that tries to abide by western standards. According to Kurdish officials, the Syrian Kurdish approach to justice is based on the notions of leniency and reconciliation. Examples of this more lenient approach are the abolition of the death penalty in the trials of

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<sup>11</sup> SDF Press, "Appointing "Keno Gabriel" As The Official Spokesman For The Syrian Democratic Forces" (20/1/2018), <http://sdf-press.com/en/2018/01/appointing-keno-gabriel-as-the-official-spokesman-for-the-syrian-democratic-forces/>

suspected ISIS-members and the introduction of an amnesty law.<sup>12</sup> Leniency towards detained Arab Sunnis in the liberated from ISIS areas is also directed by a Kurdish desire to maintain its relation with the Sunni community, especially after the defection of a significant portion of its Sunni Arab component to Turkey. Yet, the Kurdish justice system despite its good intentions lacks in many fields; most importantly, the lack of a legal appeal process and the absence of defence lawyers during the trials of suspected ISIS sympathizers.<sup>13</sup>

The Kurdish military and administrative efforts are not threatened only by Turkey, but also the Assad government, which has not forgone its territorial claims to al-Hasakah governorate. In fact, the administrative capital of Rojava, where ISIS members are facing trial, is partially controlled by pro-Assad forces. For the moment, the Syrian regime is focused on recapturing small pockets of Sunni Arab opposition throughout the west and central Syria. However, one should not preclude a northwards advance, in a bid to “finish off” the restoration of Syrian sovereignty.

### **Assad government’s institutional foundations for future Syria**

The Assad regime continues its efforts to present the image of a pluralist society that protects and values its citizens from minority groups. The most recent example was the appointment of a Syriac Orthodox MP, from al-Hasakah region, as Speaker of the Syrian parliament. The last time a Syrian Christian has held this post was in the Inter-War period.<sup>14</sup> However, the regime’s current image of a pluralist society does not apply to all Syrians. There is not much information on the legal prosecution of suspect ISIS members arrested by the Assad forces, due to the limited access that external observers have in government-controlled Syria. Nevertheless, the Assad government does not appear to share the Kurdish need for demonstrating leniency; largely, because it believes it can win

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<sup>12</sup> El Deeb Sarah, “Syria’s Kurds put IS on trial with focus on reconciliation”, *Associated Press* (9/5/2018) <http://www.latimes.com/sns-bc-ml--syria-justice-for-jihadis-20180507-story.html>

<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Ensure Fair Trials of Syria ISIS Suspects” (13/2/2018) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/13/ensure-fair-trials-syria-isis-suspects>

<sup>14</sup> Gulf News, “Christian to head Syria parliament for first time in decades” (28/9/2017). <https://gulfnews.com/news/mena/syria/christian-to-head-syria-parliament-for-first-time-in-decades-1.2097738>

the war without any concession, a belief based on the military predominance of Assad forces. Hence, a hard -punitive- approach to justice is very probable.

The notion of punishment in Assad-controlled Syria is more evident in the punitive nature of recent property legislation that affects numerous Syrian refugees and displaced. The Law 10, which has drawn significant criticism, effectively strips over half of the Syrian pre-war population of their properties. The law, which was introduced in early April 2018 stipulates that property owners had 30 days to lay claim and register their land properties to the Syrian authorities. Past this period, unregistered properties will come under government control, which can then allocate them as it wishes.<sup>15</sup> The registration process is full of hurdles as many property documents have been lost in the chaos of the war, while there have been also reports of pro-Assad forces' systematic destruction of Land Registry offices in some recaptured areas.<sup>16</sup> The intricacies of the registration process and specific provisions, such as the requirement to announce property claims only in local media and only by close relatives if the owner is absent, make it near impossible for displaced Syrians to register their properties. Given that the civil war has displaced whole families, while intra-state and inter-state bureaucratic communication remains slow and ineffective, the Law appears to exclude and punish those who have left their homes to find refuge elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, it excludes hundreds of thousands of Syrians who are wanted by the authorities and are, thus, hesitant to present themselves to Syrian authorities, at least not before the conflict is over.

In fact, Law 10 is only the latest addition to a series of legal and extra-legal tools that the Syrian government is deploying in anticipation of the "imminent" post-conflict economic reconstruction and demographic reconfiguration of Syria.<sup>18</sup> Law 10 constitutes an attempt to solidify the demographic changes generated by the devastating 7-year civil war. The population evacuation (or exchange) agreements that of late has

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<sup>15</sup> Deyaa Alrwishdi and Rebecca Hamilton, "Paying Attention to Land Rights in Syria Negotiations", *Just Security* (12/4/2018), <https://www.justsecurity.org/54781/paying-attention-land-rights-syria-negotiations/>; Arwa Ibrahim, "Syria: 'Absentees law' could see millions of refugees lose lands", *Al Jazeera* (7/4/2018)

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/syria-absentees-law-millions-refugees-lose-lands-180407073139495.html>

<sup>16</sup> Enab Biladi, "Properties Ownership" Law No. 10: Regulation, Acquisition or Demographic Change, (1/5/2018) <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2018/05/properties-ownership-law-no-10-regulation-acquisition-or-demographic-change/>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

been a characteristic of the Assad government strategy in besieged opposition strongholds, appear to carry a similar purpose. Key Sunni majority areas, such as East Ghouta, Homs and east Aleppo, have been “cleared” of their population in such agreements. Law 10 is expected to target these areas and, thus, specifically punish those Sunnis who have sided with the opposition and have been forced to abandon their homes.<sup>19</sup>

Interestingly, though, some Sunnis are expected to profit from the property legislation. It is often wrongly assumed that all the Sunnis joined the population. A significant part of the Sunni—economic—elite, who benefited economically from the Assad regime, chose to remain loyal. Those who did not, saw their assets seized.<sup>20</sup> The Assad regime is indeed eager to reward these Sunni businessmen, who stood with the regime, with lucrative deals in the real estate reconstruction of post-war Syria; and Law 10 paves the way.

Hence, Assad’s vision of Syria’s future is willing to selectively include and accommodate only those members of non-Alawi communities that have shown unabating loyalty. The rest are faced with anything but leniency on regime’s part. The punitive approach of Assad regime comes hand in hand with concrete efforts to effectuate realities on the ground that barely comport with the image of a religious pluralist state.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Daher, “Assad Regime Still Reliant on Fractions of the Sunni Bourgeoisie”, *Syria Untold* (21/12/2017) <http://syriauntold.com/2017/12/assad-regime-still-reliant-on-fractions-of-the-sunni-bourgeoisie/>

## **Iraq**

The liberation of most of Iraq from the “Islamic State” forces was met with predictable festivity all over Iraq. However, as months pass the main question remains: how will Iraq get back to its normal (or better) self. While Iraq does not undergo a thorough institutional reconfiguration, like the one in Syria, Iraq has not been left unscathed by ISIS. The shifts and changes that the “ISIS parenthesis” brought have been evident in the recent electoral process, which had a record low turnout (44%) and brought the former prime-minister Haidar al-Abadi in the third place, after Muqtada al-Sadr and Hadi al-Amiri. Furthermore, May elections demonstrated a newly-found will for inter-community collaboration in electoral lists and beyond. Cross-sectarian lists and some counter-intuitive results in some constituencies point to a direction different from what most analysts foresaw for post-ISIS Iraq. At the same time, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reports high numbers of displaced populations returning to their homes, while a number of high-level and civil society initiatives appear to take place in Iraq.

Nevertheless, the above steps towards greater sectarian peace and religious pluralism paint one side of Iraq’s post-ISIS image. Attacks against voting centres and candidates and alleged interference in the compilation of electoral lists and the voting process paint a different picture. Likewise, continuing instances of revenge attacks and looting and the obstacles placed for the return of some Sunni communities present a post-ISIS Iraq that is selectively reconciliatory. This is most evident in the manner in which the Iraqi government and other forces, such as KRG, approach the issue of justice and the prosecution of suspected ISIS members.

### **The Iraqi parliamentary elections in May 2018**

In the run up to May elections, the streets of major Iraqi cities were covered with billboards and posters of various candidates. Electoral lists in mixed-population centres were competing to secure key candidates from majority and minority religious communities. The Nasr electoral list, which was headed by the former prime-minister Abadi, fielded candidates in all Iraqi governorates, while Abadi himself visited Sunni-

majority constituencies in Salah al-Din and Anbar.<sup>21</sup> The Nasr list even opened offices in Kurdish-controlled cities, such as Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah,<sup>22</sup> in a bid to demonstrate and reassert Baghdad's—conciliatory—authority after the ill-fated Kurdish independence referendum.

The Nasr and other electoral lists that tried to approach candidates from the Sunni community were encouraged by the apparent Sunni willingness to participate in the electoral process. Contrary to the past, voices within the Sunni community advocating a boycott were limited, while the Fiqh Council of Iraq called Sunnis to participate actively in the elections.<sup>23</sup> The Sunni community also demonstrated a sense of war fatigue, as many Sunnis appeared to come to terms with the post-2003 reality of being a minority. According to the Sunni politician Misha'an al-Juburi, "the Sunnis have come to terms with the fact they are merely an accessory to power".<sup>24</sup> Equally as important, they realized that the reconstruction of the Sunni areas passes through the Shia-controlled Iraqi government.<sup>25</sup>

The May 2018 Iraqi elections has been an experiment of electoral social engineering and, as such, it has to display odd alliances and odd results. The winning coalition hosted an electoral alliance between the "Hizb Istaqama" (Justice/Integrity Party), led by Shia nationalist Muqtada's al-Sadr, and the Iraqi Communist Party. The bridge for these two apparently opposite parties has been the coalition's anti-corruption platform and a shared aversion to external intervention in Iraq. For Muqtada al-Sadr, who was at the head of the 2015 anti-corruption protests in Baghdad, the fight against corruption has been the vehicle for his return to the centre-stage of Iraqi politics. Interestingly, the issue of corruption was at the centre of the limited intervention of the spiritual leader of Iraqi Shia, Ali al-Sistani, in the recent elections. A Shia cleric, close to Sistani, has gone as far as stating on national television: "the corrupt people we have

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<sup>21</sup> Hamza Mustafa, "Iraqi PM Becomes First Shi'ite Leader to Promote Electoral List in Sunni Province", *Asharq al-Awsat* (23/4/2018), <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1246471/iraqi-pm-becomes-first-shi'ite-leader-promote-electoral-list-sunni-province>

<sup>22</sup> Rudaw, "Abadi's party opens office in Sulaimani ahead of elections," (4/14/2018), <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/140420181>

<sup>23</sup> Ali Mamouri, "Religious disputes escalate over upcoming Iraqi elections", *al-Monitor* (22/4/2018), <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/04/ira.html>

<sup>24</sup> Isabel Coles and Ali Nabhan, "Iraq's Shiite-Sunni Divide Eases", *Wall Street Journal* (1/5/2018), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iraqs-shiite-sunni-divide-eases-1525167000>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

voted for have robbed the nation. We ought to not vote for them again, even if they are members of our clan or sect... I would rather trust a faithful Christian than a corrupt Shiite. A person who does not pray and fast but can be trusted with the money of the people and the nation is deserving of my vote.”<sup>26</sup>

The anti-corruption message was accompanied by a strong nationalist posture, which cemented the radical shift in Muqtada al-Sadr’s views towards Iran and Tehran’s intervention in Iraq. Nevertheless, the Iraqi elections did not signal the electoral defeat of past practises and external meddling in Iraq’s affairs. The Fatah coalition, which came second in the elections, was headed by Hadi al-Amiri, who has served as commander of the Iran-backed Shia militias coalition Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Units - PMU). The Fatah coalition became the vehicle for PMU to enter politics despite the calls to opposite. Al-Sistani has clearly expressed his opinion that Shia militias should disarm or join the official security forces. Most importantly, though, according to Sistani, the Shia militias should “choose between politics and arms” because otherwise they smear their "holy status", which they earned with their role in defeating ISIS.<sup>27</sup>

In reality, though, the division between politics and arms was less than apparent in some areas. In governorates with strong PMU presence, the militias appear to have used their military strength—that occasionally rivals the official government forces—and their influence over non-Shia militias under PMU to promote their candidates.<sup>28</sup> Their impact was most evident in the case of the Christian seats in these elections. The Babylon Movement, which sprang out of the PMU-affiliated Christian militia with the same name, won two out of the five seats reserved for Christians, leaving behind more established Christian parties, such as the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM). Allegedly, in the Nineweh and Sulaymaniyah governorates, where the Babylon

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<sup>26</sup> Ali Mamouri, op.cit.

<sup>27</sup> Tamer El-Ghobashy, Mustafa Salim, “Top Iraqi Shiite cleric calls for scaling back militia influence, backing prime minister”, *Washington Post* (15/12/2017), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/top-shiite-cleric-calls-for-scaling-back-militia-influence-backing-prime-minister/2017/12/15/8834eb0e-e192-11e7-9eb6-e3c7ecfb4638\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.ed20d388d6dd](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/top-shiite-cleric-calls-for-scaling-back-militia-influence-backing-prime-minister/2017/12/15/8834eb0e-e192-11e7-9eb6-e3c7ecfb4638_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.ed20d388d6dd)

<sup>28</sup> Erica Gaston, Frauke Maas, “Iraq after ISIL: Tikrit and Surrounding Areas”, Global Public Policy Institute (29/8/2017), <http://www.gppi.net/publications/iraq-after-isil-tikrit/?L=6>

Movement won the seats, votes for Babylon Movement were also cast by Shias and not only Christians.<sup>29</sup>

The Iraqi elections, as a reflection of the state of interreligious coexistence in post-ISIS Iraq, presents a mixed verdict. On the one hand, the relatively uneventful electoral process and acceptance of its results and the often-odd alliances it has produced, show an Iraq that wants to go past its recent past. On the other hand, instances of active manipulation of electoral politics and, generally, the power that other-than-state actors enjoy, show an Iraq that still has a lot of road ahead to become a fully functional and pluralist republic.

### **The question of return**

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) over three and half million displaced Iraqis have returned home, most of them to the Nineweh province, which is host to several religious communities and was the most affected region in Iraq. However, more than two million Iraqis remain displaced.<sup>30</sup> One reason for their continued displacement is the near-total destruction that some areas have suffered, which makes return there meaningless at this point.

Iraq needs large funds to initiate the much-needed reconstruction of regions that in some cases have been reduced to rubble. The United States have hinted that no direct assistance is forthcoming, except for in the form of loans and other incentives to bring American companies to invest in Iraq. In a regional donors meeting that was held in Kuwait, in February 2018, Iraq's neighbours pledged to donate \$30 billion for Iraq's reconstruction. This falls short of the \$82 billion that Iraq has sought and, in any case, most probably only a portion of the pledged \$30 billion will actually reach Iraq.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Nasr Ali, "In Nineveh 30k Shiites voted for Christian Babylon List", *Rudaw* (21/5/2018),

<http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/210520181>

<sup>30</sup> International Organization for Migration (Iraq), "Displacement Tracking Matrix DTM Round 92" (March 2018),

[http://iraqdtm.iom.int/LastDTMRound/Round92\\_Report\\_English\\_2018\\_March\\_31\\_IOM\\_DTM.pdf](http://iraqdtm.iom.int/LastDTMRound/Round92_Report_English_2018_March_31_IOM_DTM.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> Maher Chmaytelli, Ahmed Hagagy, "Allies promise Iraq \$30 billion, falling short of Baghdad's appeal", Reuters (14/2/2018), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-reconstruction-ku/allies-promise-iraq-30-billion-falling-short-of-baghdads-appeal-idUSKCN1FY0TX>

The shortage of external help, leaves Baghdad with limited resources to rebuild trust and bring prosperity to almost one third of Iraq that was directly affected by ISIS brutality. The failure of centrally-controlled channels to foster the reconstruction, leaves space for a wide spectre of sub-state initiatives (private, local, diaspora or militia-led) that directly challenge the authority of the central state. At the most basic level, underfunding might undercut Iraqi efforts towards accountability, such as the recent legislation on the compensation of Iraqi civilians, who were injured or their property was destroyed during operation of the Iraqi security forces.<sup>52</sup>

The restricted ability of the central government to project—economic—authority largely hinders Baghdad’s efforts to project effective military and physical authority in these areas, which leaves space for militias. Most of the looting and destruction happened in areas and cities, which were reconquered with heavy PMU or other militia presence. Tikrit is an example par excellence. In fact, according to reports on the ground, most of the looting and killing was conducted by Sunni militias affiliated with PMU, who specifically targeted individuals and property of rival tribes, which has sided with the “Islamic State”.<sup>53</sup>

Fear for this type of reprisal attacks is the second main reason for those Iraqis, who are still displaced, to not return. IOM surveys have shown that many members of tribes affiliated with ISIS have decided to not return, citing militia presence and the fear of reprisal attacks as main reasons for their decision. In some cases, such as Salahidin, actual legal restrictions have been placed to deter the return of anyone who has been complicit in ISIS crimes.<sup>54</sup> Local Sunni tribes are also called to set a high bar for the return of the tribe’s “black sheep”; demanding that they, first, “openly declare that their members who had joined ISIL had been wrong; [second] they reject contact with them and refuse to support them; and, [third] demolish their homes”.<sup>55</sup>

The IOM data paint a relatively hopeful picture for the repatriation of almost 6 million Iraqi civilians, who were displaced by the conflict. However, security and

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<sup>52</sup> Clara Sandoval and Miriam Puttick, “Reparations for the Victims of Conflict in Iraq”, *Minority Rights Group* (November 2017), <http://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Reparations-in-Iraq-Ceasefire-November-2017.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> Erica Gaston, Frauke Maas, op.cit.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

reconstruction remain at the centre of the question of return for several Iraqis. Reconstruction is the main issue for members of religious minorities, who were targeted by ISIS, while security (and especially revenge attacks) is the main issue for members of the Sunni community, who stand accused for the crimes of ISIS. What both share, though, is the need for justice and reconciliation.

## **Justice and reconciliation**

Understanding and dealing with the past and building a pluralist and inclusive future remain at the core of Iraq's efforts to bring stability and peaceful coexistence among its various communities. Prosecution of ISIS members, who have been involved in "Islamic State" crimes has begun immediately after the liberation of most of Iraq. Suspects are charged almost exclusively under the Iraqi counterterrorism law. According to Human Rights Watch, suspects are charged only for their membership in ISIS, even if the "services" that suspects provided are of secondary importance and there was no direct implication in crimes. The courts do not differentiate between different crimes and if an individual is convicted, he or she faces only two possible sentences: death penalty or life imprisonment. Fast-track convictions appear to be the norm, as less than 5% of the cases are dismissed.<sup>56</sup> A similar but separate judicial procedure is implemented in the Kurdish Regional Government, which prosecutes suspect ISIS members under its own counterterrorism law. According to officials from both sides, although there is need for cooperation and coordination, the two systems operate in parallel with no national framework or strategy in place.<sup>57</sup>

There are a number of initiatives that aim at dealing with ISIS and its crimes outside the room of a court. However, most of these initiatives remain dysfunctional or underfunded. For instance, the Iraqi central state has introduced an amnesty law, in 2016, which allows the release of ISIS members, who can prove that they joined the group under threat or that their confession was extracted under pressure. However, according to the Human Rights Watch, the judges appear reluctant to use the provisions

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<sup>56</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Flawed Justice: Accountability for ISIS Crimes in Iraq" (5/12/2017), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/12/05/flawed-justice/accountability-isis-crimes-iraq>

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

of the amnesty law.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the Iraqi government, with the support of the UN Development Programme, has created “peace committees” and a citizens’ archive, which aspire to create a forum for Iraqis to discuss and document ISIS atrocities.

Especially for the Yazidi victims of ISIS brutality, the central government has set the “Judicial Investigation Board for Crimes Against the Yazidis”, whose purpose is to set the ground and prepare cases against ISIS members, who have been implicated in the killing and kidnapping of Yazidis. KRG has also set a “High Committee for Identification of Genocide Crimes against Residents of Kurdistan Areas Outside of KRG”, with a similar purpose. However, both initiatives remain largely on paper, with limited actual work to present. At the same time, according to Yazidi sources, both the Iraqi government and the KRG-set committees were set up without prior consultation with the Yazidi community.

After the liberation of Mosul, Iraq has requested assistance from the UN, which formed the “Iraqi Independent Investigations Team”. The “Iraqi Independent Investigations Team’s” purpose is to “collect, preserve, and store evidence in Iraq of acts that may amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide committed by the terrorist group ISIL”, which limits its scope to investigation rather than prosecution of the crimes. The influence of the “Iraqi Independent Investigations Team” for the moment has been limited mainly due to the reluctance of several UN members to fully support its work as long as Iraq accepts the death penalty.<sup>39</sup>

Although the punitive approach to justice seems to dominate the Iraqi government’s efforts to deal with ISIS crimes, there are a number of other initiatives that aim at reconciliation and healing. Although, according to Human Rights Watch, there are no organized nation-wide rehabilitation and reintegration programs for those who have been convicted for ISIS crimes,<sup>40</sup> the Iraqi government has introduced a bill regarding Mosul’s reconstruction that also involves counter-extremism programs and promoting religious moderation.<sup>41</sup> Authorities have been also more willing to address

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Beth Van Schaack, “The Iraq Independent Investigative Team & Prospects for Justice for the Yazidi Genocide”, *SSRN* (10/1/2018), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3099932> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3099932>

<sup>40</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Flawed Justice” op.cit

<sup>41</sup> Yousif Kalfan, “What Will Happen To Minorities in Syria and Iraq After ISIS”, *Muftah* (8/1/2018), <https://muftah.org/what-will-happen-to-minorities-in-syria-and-iraq-after-isis/#.W1SGZjexWM9>

hate speech and incitement to violence. For example, KRG has fired in the past months a number of Sunni clerics, who employed hate speech in their Friday sermons.<sup>42</sup> Hate speech and the underlying beliefs that enable these ideas to take root are at the core of numerous civil society initiatives that try to fill the gaps of the Iraqi institutional framework and put pressure on the Iraqi government to do more in terms of restoring Iraq's ethno-religious tapestry on new more inclusive foundations. The most noteworthy initiative of this kind is the "Center for Combating Messages of Hate in Iraq", which was launched this March. The Center, whose creation was the work of the Masarat Foundation and its director Saad Salloum, gathers notable personalities from academic, religious and civil institutions from different religions, sects and ethnicities, aspiring to create a forum, where representatives from different religious communities can sit together and discuss the steps towards a more peaceful and pluralist Iraq.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. See also US Department of State, *2016 Report on International Religious Freedom*, (15/8/2017), p. 11 <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269136.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> Masarat, "An Anti-Hatred Discourse Center in Iraq Announces its Inauguration in a Launching Conference in Beirut" (24/3/2018), <http://masaratiraq.org/2018/03/24/an-anti-hatred-discourse-center-in-iraq-announces-its-inauguration-in-a-launching-conference-in-beirut/>

## Egypt

Coptic Christians are estimated to account for 10% of Egypt's 90 million population. Ever since the toppling of the Muslim Brotherhood and the rise of President al-Sisi to power, their relationship, or at least the Coptic Pope's with the current administration, seems to have grown fruitful in regard to their everyday life. However, there is an ongoing debate as to whether the religious head of a community can or even should represent one in State matters. Furthermore, previous calls for a "religious revolution" by the President were opposed by the more radical members of Egyptian society, as well as by fringe forces aligned to the "Islamic State".

### **The implementation of the church-building law**

The church-building law was swiftly passed following the summer of 2016, in an attempt to regulate unlicensed churches and to codify the conditions through which a church is allowed to be built and to operate. Despite the efforts of the lawmakers, the church-building law was hindered by the hastiness with which it was written and failed to properly fill the prior existing legal vacuum. Nonetheless, the law eventually proved resilient and gave way to obtaining licenses for church-building. In early 2018, an addendum to the law was put into effect, wherein closed churches, which had applications filed for obtaining a license would be able to operate until a final and official decision was made regarding their legal status.<sup>44</sup>

Eventually, the law led to the reopening and the approval of applications for raising new churches or legalizing unlicensed ones in New Assiut, New Sohag, al-Our, al-Toud, and Kom al-Loufy, among others. Nevertheless, this initiative was met with the resistance and disapproval of the local Muslim population, in Minya especially. Once word got around that the churches would open or reopen, mobs demonstrated violently, causing property damage and demanding for the Coptic Christian population to evacuate the village or region, effectively preventing the houses of worship from

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<sup>44</sup> Farouk, Menna A., "Egypt makes it easier for churches to obtain licenses", *Al-Monitor*, (25/1/2018) <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/01/egypt-christians-reopen-unlicensed-churches.html>

See also Egypt Independent, "Two Minya churches obtain legal recognition, officially open", (18/1/2018) <http://www.egyptindependent.com/two-minya-churches-obtain-legal-recognition-officially-open/>

operating. Often, the discrepancy between the fines handed to the persons arrested for the damages caused and the Christians operating unlicensed churches was jarring.<sup>45</sup>

## **Initiatives to counter religious radicalization**

The expression “religious revolution” was coined by Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi in his various addresses since 2015. It was part of an initiative of his government aiming to supplant radical discourse within Egyptian society against non-Muslim communities, and specifically the Coptic Christian one. Nonetheless, overall, the intended reach was for the radical elements to refrain from fuelling intolerance, violence and hate speech, which essentially generate a rift between the Egyptian citizens. The message called for religious reform on different aspects of Egyptian institutions, ranging from the al-Azhar University, to the Egyptian media, and to the judicial institutions.

Three years later, the “religious revolution” message is still in effect, with initiatives sponsored by both the al-Azhar University and the Egyptian State. Despite some disagreements early on, it seems that the highest religious institution in the country is on the same page with President al-Sisi’s government. Sufi celebrations are being heavily promoted, as they essentially preach for self-discipline and restraint, and act as a counterpoint to radical Islam. Furthermore, imam intensive training camps and courses have been established in Suez, Port Said, Ismailia and Upper Egypt, in an effort to renew interfaith discourse, spread moderation and marginalize radical ideologies in the most at-risk regions. One of the most prominent and publicized initiatives was the establishment of “fatwa kiosks” in Cairo, aiming to educate Muslims on the true meaning of the Islamic faith and to downplay the unauthorized fatwas in vogue via radical imams. Coupled with the Islamic research of the “Fatwa Observatory”, which strives to modernize religious edicts through the eye of contemporary Egyptian life, it certainly seems as if the prospects of the “religious revolution” are still looking up, even though one can only account for true change and renewal in the long run.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> World Watch Monitor, “Church owner fined, attackers given suspended sentences”, (31/1/2018) <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/01/egypt-church-owner-fined-attackers-given-suspended-sentences/>

<sup>46</sup> Hussein, Walaa, “Cairo looks to Sufi sheikhs to counter extremism”, *Al-Monitor*, (18/3/2018) <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/03/egypt-adopts-new-sufi-order-fight-terrorism-shadhili-alliya.html>

As a result, it is important to underline the domestic success and high praise for the film “The Sultan and the Saint” in Egyptian cinemas, which depicts the conversation between a Muslim ruler and a Christian (who later on became a saint), and promotes peaceful interfaith dialogue and mutual respect. On the same wavelength, having al-Azhar professors encouraging the non-religious participation of Muslims to Christian festivities, as exemplified by the yearly presence of President al-Sisi at the Coptic Christmas celebrations, should not be taken lightly. Although they might seem as only a blip on the radar of Egyptian society, it is through efforts such as these that change can come from within and where the media often play a significant part in the societal transformative process.<sup>47</sup>

### **Culture preservation and religious integration into society**

The Coptic Museum in Cairo is considered to host one of the largest collections of Coptic artefacts in the world. As a result, the museum stands as a beacon for Coptic cultural heritage and indicates the presence of the Coptic community in the Egyptian past. Yet, problems have plagued the maintenance of the museum as well as the preservation of its icons. Security-related issues, the lack of funding, and the growing acquisition of artefacts, coupled with the Ministry of Antiquities’ inability to cope with the Egyptian financial crisis, have led to a situation where the proper handling of the museum’s properties is untenable. Given that the historic Christian heritage in the country is an important aspect of the tourism-related industry and attracts a significant portion of visitors from abroad, it should come as no surprise that a discussion is underway for the Ministry of Tourism to take over, at least temporarily, the current situation.<sup>48</sup>

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See also Farouk, Menna A., “Egypt holds training camps for imams to uproot terrorism”, *Al-Monitor*, (16/10/2017) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/10/egypt-training-camps-imams-terrorism.html>

Asal, Mohamed, “Egyptian religious authorities’ efforts in facing terrorism and extremism”, *Egypt Today*, (9/10/2017) <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/26786/Egyptian-religious-authorities%E2%80%99-efforts-in-facing-terrorism-and-extremism>

Al-Sherbini, Ramadan, “Egyptians find solace in Sufi sessions”, *Gulf News*, (18/12/2017) <https://gulfnews.com/news/mena/egypt/egyptians-find-solace-in-sufi-sessions-1.2143018>

<sup>47</sup> Samir, Salwa, “Film about interfaith dialogue opens in Egypt to praise”, *Al-Monitor*, (18/10/2017) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/10/the-sultan-and-saint-relaunch-interfaith-dialogue-in-egypt.html>

See also Al-Bawaba, “Azhar Professor Encourages Muslims to Join Christmas Festivities”, (29/12/2017) <https://www.albawaba.com/editorchoice/azhar-professor-encourages-muslims-join-christmas-festivities-1066994>

<sup>48</sup> Mikhail, George, “Egypt’s Coptic heritage jeopardized due to lack of funds”, *Al-Monitor*, (19/11/2017) <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/cairos-coptic-museum-wants-budget-security.html>

## **Hisbah lawsuits and the long path to secular life**

Disdain of religion prosecutions or “hisbah lawsuits” (i.e. accountability lawsuits) have been on the rise ever since the Arab uprisings of 2011. It should be pointed out that the disdain of religion law was added to the Egyptian Penal Code in 1981 and does not only apply to the religion of Islam, but to all three officially recognised religions by the Egyptian state: the Islamic, the Christian and Judaic ones. The offenders can be sentenced from six months to five years. The people that are usually penalized under the disdain of religion law are Coptic Christians, Shia Islam practitioners and atheist citizens. Although the “hisbah lawsuits” pertain to Islam-related acts, Christianity and Judaism are not left out of the loop. A number of draft bills were submitted by Egyptian members of parliament in order to reform the disdain of religion law but failed to make a lasting impression. Furthermore, initiatives to criminalize atheism were promoted, invoking the defamation of Islam as their *raison d’être*. It should be noted that the number of atheists residing in Egypt is unknown as the vast majority fears the ensuing repercussions of such a “coming out”. During December of 2017, 29 year-old Ibrahim Khalil was accused of promoting atheism through social media, and was afterwards interrogated and detained pending further investigation. In other words, atheism is considered as an affront to Islam as well as a potential danger for Egyptian society that needs to be swiftly dealt with.<sup>49</sup>

## **Egyptian elections and Coptic support**

The most recent elections in Egypt led to the renewal of President al-Sisi’s term. Although it is generally considered that the relationship between the Coptic community and the President is a healthy one that has been developing ever since the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood from power, the situation is not as clear-cut as one might think. The

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See also Al-Zahaar, Riham, “Coptic Icons on Antiquity List”, *Watani International*, (16/1/2018)

<http://en.wataninet.com/culture/heritage/coptic-icons-on-antiquity-list/22695/>

<sup>49</sup> Amin, Shahira, “Egypt’s parliament in bid to ban atheism”, *Al-Monitor*, (29/12/2017) [https://www.al-](https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/12/egypt-parliament-ban-atheism-religion-sisi.html)

[monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/12/egypt-parliament-ban-atheism-religion-sisi.html](https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/12/egypt-parliament-ban-atheism-religion-sisi.html)

See also World Watch Monitor, “Coptic teacher charged with contempt of religion for questions about Muhammad”,

(22/3/2018) [https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/03/coptic-teacher-charged-with-contempt-of-religion-for-](https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/03/coptic-teacher-charged-with-contempt-of-religion-for-questions-about-muhammad/)

[questions-about-muhammad/](https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/03/coptic-teacher-charged-with-contempt-of-religion-for-questions-about-muhammad/)

Amin, Shahira, “Egypt’s parliament in bid to ban atheism”, *Al-Monitor*, (29/12/2017)

<http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/egypt/egypt-s-parliament-in-bid-to-ban-atheism>

publicized friendship between Pope Tawandros and President al-Sisi is nowadays commonly reported and stands as a symbol of the place of the Coptic community within the fabric of Egyptian society. Hence, it could be argued that the Coptic religious institution in Egypt has been promoting respect and safeguarding the Coptic community through its relationship with the current government. However, part of the Coptic community is advocating for a more secular society, where their religious leader would not be in charge of their political affairs and where religious identity would not come into play.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Rabie Hossam, "Not all Coptic youths on board with church's support of Sisi", *Al-Monitor*, (16/2/2018) <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/02/many-coptic-youths-stances-oppose-sisi-and-church-election.html>

See also Assyrian International Agency, "Ahead of Egypt Vote, Most Christians Put Faith in Sisi", (21/3/2018) <http://www.aina.org/news/20180321140412.htm>

Mostafa, Salem, "Christians in shock after deadly attack on Coptic Church in Egypt", *Middle East Monitor*, (31/12/2017) <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20171231-christians-in-shock-after-deadly-attack-on-coptic-church-in-egypt/>

World Watch Monitor, "Brothers shot dead ahead of Coptic Christmas", (2/1/2018) <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/01/egyptian-brothers-shot-dead-in-lead-up-to-coptic-christmas-celebrations/>

## Israel, Palestine and the religious facet of a political struggle

Before we investigate the current situation in Israel and the Palestinian territories, we must make a, sometime vague, distinction in relation to the violations that target the Palestinian Muslim and Christian population. These violations have twofold origins: on the one hand there are the violations deriving from state policies, with the most distinguishing one is the expansion of the Jewish settlements; and on the other hand, there is a profane orchestrated attack by private actors, mainly Jewish settlers, that target Palestinians physically, in addition to encroaching illegally Palestinian land. The latter phenomenon may be sponsored by Israeli authorities.

Basically, one of the major issues at stake is the status of the “holy city” of Jerusalem, which includes a number of holy sites for the three monotheistic religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. But the real problem regarding religious and political violations within Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories lie way beyond the question of the “status” of Jerusalem. It stretches out to a holistic and gradual marginalization of the Palestinian community, whether Muslim or Christian, and it is institutionalised by a recently passed controversial draft of law, the so called “Jewish Nation State” bill. Some analysts underestimate the significance of this law, claiming that it is a sign of the ultra-nationalist coalition that is currently holding power in Israel. Concurrently there are others, more critical to the Israeli narrative, that have pointed out that the bill will have a negative legal precedent in terms of religious tolerance and pluralism in Israel, while at the same time it will harm Israel’s international prestige.<sup>51</sup> Notwithstanding, many analysts agree on a common base of Israel’s sliding to some kind of “ethnocracy”, neglecting the rights of its religious and ethnic minorities. The law is still on the “reading” in the Knesset process, though it has passed the first one. The Arab Palestinians describe it as “racist”, for it, *inter alia*, declares Jerusalem as the only capital for the Jewish nation, while it relegates the Arabic language into a “special status” (for the time being it is the second official language).<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ben White, “Israel’s ‘Jewish nation state’ bill is pushback against Palestinian citizens’ resistance”, *Middle East Monitor*, (21/03/18), <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180321-israels-jewish-nation-state-bill-is-pushback-against-palestinian-citizens-resistance/>

<sup>52</sup> “Israeli parliament passes first reading of ‘Jewish state’ bill”, *Middle East Eye*. (01/05/18), <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/Knesset-Israel-Palestinians-Netanyahu-Jerusalem-Hebrew-Arabic>

Even if the “Jewish Nation State” bill does not change so much, it is clear that the routine violations regarding religious and political rights ascribe to a structural central policy, designed by the Israeli state. This “exclusion” policy derives, *inter alia*, from the legal status of the residents of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian territories.<sup>53</sup> One of the main violations that concern the Muslims living in Israeli land is the negative discrimination against them, giving institutionalised privileges to the Jewish population. Israeli authorities will be soon obliged to deal with what some scholars in Israel call “the demographic time bomb”. This “bomb” deals with the growing number of Muslims inside Israeli territory. In an incident that took place in the Jewish-Arab town of Kfar Vradim, in late March 2018, the head of the local council, Sivan Yechieli, realized that half of the families that won bids to buy housing lots in the community were Muslim. Even though these lands were part of the lands that were expropriated violently in 1976 by Israel, the mayor decided to cancel the procedure, claiming the community’s “Jewish, Zionist and secular nature.”<sup>54</sup> The explaining letter continues with the “common acceptance” of the necessity “to sustain a community that preserves agreed-upon core values”.

Nevertheless, S. Yechieli was not acting in his own judgement. In a 2014 law amendment, the Israeli Supreme Court decided that certain “sensitive” communities have the right to decide rejecting incorporation of potential residents based on “incompatibility with the community’s social-cultural fabric”.<sup>55</sup> Overtly, Israel, as an occupational power, does not respect the international humanitarian law, applying a policy of homogenization in *Eretz Israel* (Mandatory Palestine).

## Religious tensions in Jerusalem

The struggle over Jerusalem unveils an unequal tag-of-war for political sovereignty over the “holy city”. Some incidents disclose that the Israeli government is mobilizing its allies and proxies, in a strategy to achieve a further exclusion of the Palestinian Muslims and Christians. Nevertheless, even unwittingly, the forthcoming elections for the city’s

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<sup>53</sup> Tel Aviv is one of the very few countries to maintain a crucial distinction between the legal concept of citizenship and nationality. Therefore, the Arab Palestinian nationals of Israel do not fully enjoy the rights of the citizens of Israel, since the former are not of Jewish origins.

<sup>54</sup> Akiva Eldar, “Israeli mayor finds thorns in ‘village of roses’”, *Al Monitor*, (27/03/18), <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/03/israel-arab-land-sale-racism-galilee-kfar-vradim-demography.html>

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

mayor, and the Rachel Azaria's decision to run for the seat, could coil ultra-Orthodox Jews around the candidacy of Yossi Deitch, or other ultra – Orthodox.<sup>56</sup> Maximizing its claims over the city, is leading, as observers underline, to the transformation of Jerusalem demographics. A number of laws have attempted to silence literally and metaphorically the Muslim population, violating the basic international principles of human and religious rights.

After the unprecedented silencing of the minarets loudspeakers, since Muslims address it as a racial incitement against Islam,<sup>57</sup> the Israeli authorities have accelerated their pace for the Judaization of Jerusalem and the West Bank. Restricting access to the city and its Holy Sites, such as Al-Aqsa, is only one facet of the process of de-Islamising Jerusalem. An alleged “breach of allegiance”, the Israeli interior ministry claims, could invoke from Jerusalemite Palestinians their residence permit, without elaborating what could this “breach” or “allegiance” actually mean.<sup>58</sup> Thus, the 300.000 Palestinians of the occupied East Jerusalem could be gradually stripped of the residence rights in the city, allowing Israel to consolidate its power in the territory.

The changing urban fabric of Jerusalem is seen by many, as an attempt to redraw the 70:30 ratio population status, and even to fully drive out the Palestinian population. An adopted strategy that is mushrooming in the area resembles much with the pre-1948 Zionist project strategy: purchasing land titles and therefore raising the price tenures, in an unaffordable cost for the Muslim and Christian population, who, as a consequence, slowly abandon the city for its suburbs, for cheaper rents.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, the illegal settlements built around Jerusalem are in the near future planned to be connected with the city, while the “Greater Jerusalem Bill” is going to legitimize the project of expansionism.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> David Sedley, “Could Rachel Azaria's candidacy pave way for ultra-Orthodox mayor in Jerusalem?”, *The Times of Israel*, (25/06/218), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/could-rachel-azarias-candidacy-pave-way-for-ultra-orthodox-mayor-in-jerusalem/>

<sup>57</sup> “Palestinian Israelis protest at mosque loudspeaker bill”, *Middle East Eye*, (13/03/17),

<http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/palestinian-israelis-protest-mosque-loudspeaker-bills-938403177>

<sup>58</sup> “Israel approves 'loyalty' law to revoke residency of Jerusalem's Palestinians”, *Middle East Eye*, (07/03/18),

<http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-approves-law-removing-arabs-jerusalem-mks-said-303438307>

<sup>59</sup> Betty Herschman, “Changing the Demographics of Jerusalem”, *Carnegie Endowment*, (13/12/17),

<http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/75006>

<sup>60</sup> Yara Hawari, “Bulldozing history: How Israel uses archaeology to entrench occupation”, *Middle East Eye*,

(05/03/18), <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/how-israel-uses-archaeology-maintain-occupation-1406963568>

On top of it, a strategy of constructing a more robust nationalist historical narrative, with religion as its nucleus, is one of Israel's targets. Hence, this could strengthen the Jewish identity of the city at the expense of a pluralistic reality. In May 2018, the Israeli government decided to spend about 16.6\$ million, in order to launch excavation projects beneath the al-Aqsa compound, linking the growing presence of Jewish settlers in Jerusalem, the encroachment of the holy site and the legitimization of a timeless Jewish presence in the city. This overtly aggressive move is accompanied by the violation of the sanctity of Bab al-Rahma, which is in the process by the Israeli authorities of being separated by the Noble Sanctuary of al-Aqsa, with "plans for a park to be established there".<sup>61</sup> For Hanna Issa, secretary-general of the Palestinian Authority's Muslim-Christian Committee, the "Greater Jerusalem" project means the disappearance of the Muslim and Christian historical and civilizational traces,<sup>62</sup> drifting Jerusalem apart from its religious past.

Now the other subjects of the violations concern the settlers, who the Israeli authorities claim that "act independently". Private actors, which the Palestinian media underline that act with the support of the Israeli authorities, place a great threat for the Palestinian existence in the area. The culture of impunity that Israel has imposed for both the security forces and the settlers is seen as an endeavour to consolidate the apartheid state.

In early 2018, Israeli settlers sprayed racist slogans on cars belonging to Palestinians, in the village of Beit Iksa, close to the illegal Ramot settlement.<sup>63</sup> Arson incidents are also common, and are used as a means to terrorize Palestinian families and the whole community, which is resisting to the expanding of the settlements. In April Israeli settlers set fire to the entrance of the Al-Sheikh Saada Mosque, near the West Bank town of Nablus. The main slogan that the settlers use is "death to the Arabs" or "death to

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<sup>61</sup> "Israel to spend \$16.6 million on excavations under Al-Aqsa Mosque", *Middle East Monitor*, (09/05/18),

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180509-israel-to-spend-16-6-million-on-excavations-under-al-aqsa-mosque/>

<sup>62</sup> "Greater Jerusalem means no churches and no mosques", *Al Jazeera*, (12/04/18),

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/jerusalem-means-churches-mosques-180411192421173.html>

<sup>63</sup> "Israeli settlers spray paint 'racist slogans' on Palestinian cars", *Middle East Monitor*, (17/01/2018),

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180117-israeli-settlers-spray-paint-racist-slogans-on-palestinian-cars/>

the Muslims”, while the PA accuse Israel of “sponsoring settler terrorism” and invoke the lack of international protection.<sup>64</sup>

## **Jerusalem and the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate**

The problem of Jerusalem has been intensified with another issue, which is further affecting Jerusalem’s demographical status. This is the alleged land sale by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate to big real estate Israeli companies, the latter suspected to have far – right connections. This issue is seen as an interaction of private and state actors in Israel’s society, who intend to transform the multi-religious character of the city. Many of the 52.000 Christians in the Palestinian Territories are worried about the ongoing plight both of their nationhood but also about the stance of their central religious authorities.

Given the fact that Israel grants special status and recognition to Jewish institutions for their contribution to the promotion of the Jewish identity<sup>65</sup> and the *de facto* exclusion of Palestinian people from *Eretz Israel*, we should acknowledge the role of organizations, such as the far – right Ateret Cohanim, in purchasing land in Jerusalem. What is the proclaimed objective of these organizations is the purchase and even dispossession of Arab Muslim and Christian land, in order to achieve a demographic alteration of the status of the Occupied Territories.

This demographical tampering facilitates the divisions between the Palestinian Christians (but also the Muslims) and the official leadership of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. And this is a result, regarding the accusations against Theopillos III concerning the land sales of prime assets, through leasing, to Ateret Cohanim and other Israeli organizations.<sup>66</sup> The official Church’s position is that these purchases were illegal.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> “Jewish settlers torch Al-Sheikh Saada mosque: Activist”, *Al Jazeera*, (14/04/2018), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/jewish-settlers-torch-al-sheikh-saada-mosque-activist-180414135930526.html>

<sup>65</sup> Palestine Works, “Religious Freedom in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory: Selected Issues A Report to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom”, p. 23 <https://goo.gl/WqSjcv>

<sup>66</sup> Tamara Nassar, “Israel climbs down over taxing Jerusalem churches”, *The Electronic Intifada*, (28/02/2018), <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/tamara-nassar/israel-climbs-down-over-taxing-jerusalem-churches>

<sup>67</sup> “Court rejects attempt to nullify Jewish purchases in Old City”, *Arutz Sheva*, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/233250>

The controversy that was sparked out in the autumn of 2017, continued also during 2018. The “disputed legality” of these land sales and purchases, as it was described by the World Council of Churches,<sup>68</sup> has reflected a challenge against Theophilos III legitimacy and his policies concerning the state of Israel on the one hand.<sup>69</sup> The Greek Patriarch himself, underlined his non complicity with any sale of Greek Orthodox property. The Palestinian Authority has officially repeatedly objected to the land sales to Israeli investors.

Another issue was brought to the fore in the beginning of 2018 with the Jerusalem churches achieving a temporal victory against the Municipality of the city. The issue was the attempt of the latter to impose taxes on Church property.<sup>70</sup> The municipal taxes, known as the *Arnona*, come in contrast, as the Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem claim, to the historical, spiritual and humanitarian service that the Church is offering for centuries.<sup>71</sup> After a four-day closure of the Holy Sepulchre church, in protest of the legislation, the Netanyahu government finally withdrew the bill. Nonetheless, after the bill was revised by Rachel Azaria, a lawmaker with the centrist coalition party Kulanu, was brought to the Knesset for a first reading. The revision, which the Churches call it disorientating, does not mention the term “church property”, and gives the right to the Israeli state to expropriate church land giving back compensations. The heads of the Armenian, Greek Orthodox and Catholic churches, issued an announcement in the mid-June to condemn the attempt “to promote divisive, racist and subversive agendas, thereby undermining the Status Quo and targeting the Christian community on the basis of extraneous and populist considerations”. In top of it, the Churches accuse the Israeli state that they were not called by the Regional Cooperation Minister, Tzachi Hanegbi, to discuss the matter, as was promised to them.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Sue Surkes, “World Council of Churches warns Israel, backs Patriarchate over land deals”, *The Times of Israel*, (23/11/2017), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/world-council-of-churches-backs-patriarchate-over-land-deals/>

<sup>69</sup> Will Horner, “Jerusalem for sale: Christians fight transfer of church land to settlers”, *Middle East Eye*, (09/08/2017), <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/schism-jerusalem-palestinian-christians-pledge-fight-sale-church-lands-1390795373>

<sup>70</sup> “Israel suspends taxation legislation for Jerusalem's churches”, *Al Jazeera*, (27/02/2018), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/02/israel-suspends-taxation-legislation-jerusalem-churches-180227164222822.html>

<sup>71</sup> “Heads of Local Churches respond to decision of Jerusalem Municipality to impose taxes on church properties”, *Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem*, (15/02/2018), <https://www.lpj.org/heads-of-local-churches-respond-to-decision-of-jerusalem-municipality-to-impose-taxes-on-church-properties/>

<sup>72</sup> “Palestinian churches in Jerusalem cry foul over Israeli tax law”, *The New Arab*, (18/06/2018), <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/6/18/jerusalem-churches-cry-foul-over-israeli-tax-law>

Israel, however, is trying to further extend the *de facto* annexation of both physical and symbolic space. Every month the Palestinian Ministry of Endowment issues a report with the Israeli violations in the holy sites of the West Bank and Jerusalem, which are usually counting around 100 to 200. Only in April the violations recorded were 128. Many of them include the encroachment of the al-Aqsa mosque and the gradual militarization of the whole al-Aqsa zone. What is revealing is that Israel seems to have the desire to expand its sovereignty and to the nearby sites, since, for instance, it violated also the space of the Al-Youssefiyeh Cemetery.<sup>73</sup> The “Judaisation” plan in the occupied Jerusalem is implemented by an escalating ban of access to Muslim worshippers in the al-Aqsa compound, especially during the month of Ramadan. Nevertheless, Palestinian Muslims are trying to defy the ban and hold massive public prayers in front of the checkpoints leading to al-Aqsa.<sup>74</sup>

### **The Jewish – Evangelical alliance**

Some different Christian communities, not only in Palestine, but throughout the world, and mainly in the USA, have been vocal in denouncing Trump’s decision to move the American embassy to Jerusalem, and to raise their concern about the nature of the continuation of the Israeli occupation. Despite coming from different church traditions, they underline the plight of the Palestinian people, calling to the Palestinians to “lift up, in your places of worship, [...] Muslims and Christians alike.”<sup>75</sup> The statement, expresses also its concern about the growing political and humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip and the importance of interfaith unity. Nonetheless, a stronger camp, that of the Christian – Zionists, seems to have a greater influence in the US external policy.

The key figure is the American Vice President Mike Pence, who is a renowned member of the Christians United for Israel (CUFI) pressure group. CUFI operates as the largest pro – Israeli organization in the United States, with approximately three million

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<sup>73</sup> “Report: 128 Israel violations on Palestinian holy sites in April”, *Middle East Monitor*, (07/05/2018),

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180507-report-128-israel-violations-on-palestinian-holy-sites-in-april/>

<sup>74</sup> “Banned worshippers pray at Al-Aqsa Mosque gates in defiance of Israeli policy”, *Middle East Monitor*, (19/05/2018), <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180519-banned-worshippers-pray-at-al-aqsa-mosque-gates-in-defiance-of-israeli-policy/>

<sup>75</sup> “Palestinian Christians and Muslims call on faith communities to help end the occupation”, Mondoweiss, (26/04/2018), <http://mondoweiss.net/2018/04/palestinian-christians-communities/>

members and as its declaration points out, the organization is “devoted to transforming millions of pro-Israel Christians into an educated, empowered, and effective force for Israel”.<sup>76</sup> The policies and influence of CUFI and Pence mark a genuine ideological shift for the support of Israel. Now Israel is perceived openly, as the fulfilment of a given biblical prophecy, and, thus, its support resembles to a political messianism.<sup>77</sup>

According to Dan Hummel, a fellow at Harvard Kennedy School, in the CUFI organization are involved many wealthy Christian – Zionist businessmen, who ardently support financially the Zionist movement and the IDF, while, at the same time, they also have the support of the huge Evangelical movement in the US. What these organizations have as a common denominator, though, apart for their biblical prophecy,<sup>78</sup> is their aversion for Islam.<sup>79</sup> In addition, as mentioned before, Israel is about to start excavations beneath the al-Aqsa and the Dome of Rock sites.<sup>80</sup> Zionists vehemently believe that there are Jewish temples beneath al-Aqsa, so it is a historical duty for them to rebuild the religious sites of their ancestors.

### **Positive steps towards inter-faith dialogue**

Nevertheless, leaving aside excessive eschatological discourses, there are still personalities, that turn down extremism. A number of American and Israeli organizations, have sponsored the actualization of interfaith conferences that concern issues, such as forgiveness and ecology.<sup>81</sup> However, the prospect of interreligious dialogue is not exhausted between Christianity and Judaism. Elhanan Miller, a rabbinical student, in late 2017 launched a project called “The People of the Book”, which aims at explaining the common ground and the differences between Judaism and Islam. This project, targets to achieve a mutual understanding, consolidating a respectful

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<sup>76</sup> CUFI, Mission and Vision, <https://www.cufi.org/impact/about-us/mission-and-vision/>

<sup>77</sup> Morgan Strong, “How Christian Zionists got their man into the White House”, Middle East Eye, (02/01/2018), <http://www.middleeasteye.net/essays/battle-armageddon-776157873>

<sup>78</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, Elizabeth Dias and David M. Halbfinger, “Israel and Evangelicals: New U.S. Embassy Signals a Growing Alliance”, *The New York Times*, (19/05/2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/19/world/middleeast/netanyahu-evangelicals-embassy.html>

<sup>79</sup> Morgan Strong, Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> “Israel to spend \$16.6 million on excavations under Al-Aqsa Mosque”, *Middle East Monitor*, (09/05/2018), <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180509-israel-to-spend-16-6-million-on-excavations-under-al-aqsa-mosque/>

<sup>81</sup> Abigail Klein Leichman, “Interfaith forgiveness conference meets in Jerusalem”, *Israel21c*, (17/07/2017), <https://www.israel21c.org/interfaith-forgiveness-conference-meets-in-jerusalem/>

coexistence.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, Israel's Sephardic Chief, Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef, after the chemical attack in Syria's Douma in April, stressed the importance of putting a halt to war crimes. He underlined the moral obligation that Jews have, due to the nefarious war crimes against them in the past, to intervene in Syria and destroy the nuclear reactor.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Ben Sales, "Rabbinical student explains Judaism to Muslims in Arabic", *The Times of Israel*, (31/12/2017), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/rabbinical-student-explains-judaism-to-muslims-in-arabic/>

<sup>85</sup> "Israeli chief rabbi: Jews have 'moral obligation' to intervene in Syria", *The Times of Israel*, (08/04/2018), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-chief-rabbi-jews-have-moral-obligation-to-intervene-in-syria/>

## Jordan and the stillborn religious liberalism

Since 2016, Jordan is among the two Arab countries that has legislated the removal of the religious affiliation in the national ID cards, celebrating the era of the “smart IDs”. The Kingdom of Jordan has repeatedly been trying to export a religiously liberal facet of its policies, sometimes indeed achieving a pluralist profile, sometimes, though, failing. In Jordan, as in most of the Arab – Muslim countries, religious endorsement is obligatory, although the freedom of religion and of consciousness is legally recognized. Criticizing religion, or declaring oneself as an atheist is, sometimes, treated harshly by law. The dominant interpretation in Muslim countries, regarding a number of issues, such as morals, ethics, social relationships, hierarchy etc. has led, gradually, to a stricter interpretation of religious discourse. For example, in Egypt, since March 2018 there is a bold preparation for criminalizing atheism.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, Jordan as a custodian of the Holy sites, is caught amidst the uproar that the “Jerusalem issue” has caused, trying at least in words, to preserve the status quo of the religious sites in Jerusalem. King Abdullah II assured the delegation of the World Council of Churches “that under the Hashemite custodianship of Jerusalem's Islamic and Christian holy sites the efforts will continue for the preservation of the city's holy shrines and for defending the property of its churches”.<sup>85</sup>

## The favourable imprint

Nevertheless, the main concern of Amman and King Abdullah II is focusing on the livelihood and the safety of thousands of refugees who found shelter in the country. Statistics are numbering the Christian refugees there around 10.000-15.000, mainly from Iraq and Syria.<sup>86</sup> Several NGOs with the collaboration of the Jordanian government, are seeking to ensure a decent level of living for Syrian and Iraqi refugees, creating a bulwark

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<sup>84</sup> Hakim Charles Khatib, “Atheists in Muslim Majority Countries: Between Inclusion and Exclusion”, *Egyptian Streets*, (15/05/2018), <https://egyptianstreets.com/2018/05/15/atheists-in-muslim-majority-countries-between-inclusion-and-exclusion/>

<sup>85</sup> “Jordan to continue protecting Jerusalem's holy sites — King”, *The Jordan Times*, (22/11/2017), <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/jordan-continue-protecting-jerusalem%E2%80%99s-holy-sites-%E2%80%94-king>

<sup>86</sup> “Iraqi Christian refugees in Jordan dream of fresh start abroad”, *The New Arab*, (17/12/2018), <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/12/17/iraqi-christians-in-jordan-dream-of-fresh-start-abroad>

towards further impoverishment and exploitation. In March 2018, Prince Hassan underlined the importance of the open dialogue between faiths, in order to achieve a sustainable development, based on exchanging ideas and experiences. In the strategic learning exchange (SLE) “Engaging with Faith Organisations and Communities for Sustainable Development”, he added that “faith implies a common denominator based on the values of those who believe in human dignity”.<sup>87</sup>

Jordan, amidst its own financial crisis, is trying to facilitate the issue of work permits for the adults and school registration for children, even though a number of families and civil society workers are often complaining regarding the discrimination in these processes the Christians face. Jordan INGO Forum (JIF) representative Hanalia Ferhan, stressed that Jordan should work on more ground-breaking initiatives “in order to continue to be a model response”.<sup>88</sup> In addition, the growing public debate on a number of issues, such as children’s rights, has shifted some legislative measures regarding a wide problem in the Arab world, such as early marriage. In Jordan, the government has set the minimum marriage age for girls at 17 and for boys at 18,<sup>89</sup> while a web of laws, based on fundamental human rights, has been implemented to criminalize rape in any case (including those who express their will to marry the victims).<sup>90</sup>

The Kingdom of Jordan has paid close attention to religious tourism, based also on pluralism and religious tolerance. The Jordan Tourism Board and its director Arabiyat, stressed that there is a gradual and steady increase in the number of religious tourists, since Jordan has around 35 Islamic sites and shrines and 34 Christian holy sites that were mentioned in the Old and the New Testament.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, the last period a mosque in the city of Madaba, a few kilometres away off Amman, has been celebrated as a model of religious coexistence. Thanks to a Palestinian businessman, a mosque was

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<sup>87</sup> Ana V. Ibáñez Prieto, “Religious leaders explore link between faith, development, humanitarian work”, *The Jordan Times*, (21/03/2018), <http://www.crpme.gr/el/eidiseis/religious-leaders-explore-link-between-faith-development-humanitarian-wo>

<sup>88</sup> Camille Dupire, “Too many Syrian refugees in Jordan at risk of remaining excluded from development”, *The Jordan Times*, (25/04/2018), <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/too-many-syrian-refugees-jordan-risk-remaining-excluded-development>

<sup>89</sup> “Christian and Muslim leaders discuss the bill against early marriages”, *Agenzia Fides*, (14/02/2018), <http://www.fides.org/en/news/63746>

<sup>90</sup> Zena Tahhan, “‘Historic day’ as Jordanian parliament repeals rape law”, *Al Jazeera*, (01/08/2017), <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/08/day-jordanian-parliament-repeals-rape-law-170801103929836.html>

<sup>91</sup> Ahmad Bani Mustafa, “Number of overnight religious tourists increases — JTB”, *The Jordan Times*, (02/11/2017), <http://jordantimes.com/news/local/number-overnight-religious-tourists-increases-%E2%80%94-jtb>

built in Madaba, especially dedicated to Jesus as a Prophet of Islam. Muslims and Christians visit the mosque for worshipping but also out of curiosity, and, given the fact that the mosque is close to the Greek-Orthodox church of St. George, the interfaith interaction seems to be an everyday norm.<sup>92</sup>

In addition, in the context of the “Three Points of the Amman Message”, an initiative established between 2004 – 2006, concomitantly with the sectarian clashes were in pinnacle in Iraq, Abdullah II received in June the 2018 Templeton Prize Laureate. The prize is awarded to personalities whose efforts are to promote interreligious dialogue and mutual understanding and respect between different religions and dogmas.<sup>93</sup>

### **The unpropitious imprint**

As mentioned above, many Christians or refugees from other religious denominations are coping with the face of social and religious discrimination in Jordan. The problem of registration, settlement and social integration, are not the only one as some claim. Earlier this year, the US-based NGO, Iraqi Christian Relief Council, stressed the neglect and the discrimination that they face, based, as they underline, on their religion. An NGO representative states that while there is a slight progress in the procedure of resettlement in Europe, Canada and Iraq for the Iraqi Christians, at the same time the Christian refugees that settled in Jordan are being completely neglected by the UNHCR. The refugees have repeatedly complained, that the aid they are supposed to receive is redirected, mainly, to Muslim families.<sup>94</sup>

For Christian families, the most fundamental problem, though, is that of being granted the refugee status. Jordan has had for the past decades an experience in refugee management, nevertheless the refugees themselves they claim that besides the ongoing delays, there is a targeted denial of reviewing their documents. This leads these families

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<sup>92</sup> “Madaba, the Jordanian city of prayer in the Mosque of Jesus”, *Ansa*, (20/09/2017), <https://bit.ly/2sobz8z>

<sup>93</sup> “King announced 2018 Templeton Prize Laureate for interfaith, intrafaith harmony efforts”, *The Jordan Times*, (28/06/2018), <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/king-announced-2018-templeton-prize-laureate-interfaith-intrafaith-harmony-efforts>

<sup>94</sup> Samuel Smith, “Iraqi Christians in Jordan Are Being 'Neglected' by United Nations, Rights Activist Warns”, *The Christian Post*, (29/01/2018), <https://www.christianpost.com/news/iraqi-christians-in-jordan-are-being-neglected-by-united-nations-rights-activist-warns-215524/>

in an *in limbo* regime and in distress. What they demand is not a “preferential treatment”, as they describe it, even though they stress that they “were specifically targeted for their faith”, but an equal and a just treatment.<sup>95</sup>

This example reveals a consolidated religious discrimination in Jordan. Even though some analysts and are trying to present Jordan as a model for religious coexistence in the Middle East,<sup>96</sup> the Kingdom has still a long way of achieving an interfaith social harmony to build a “fortress of peace”. Even though the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies in Amman is trying to document and relief the pain of religious minorities, the Mandaeans that fled to Jordan have a different view on the matter. They stress, that in search of safety amidst the persecutions from both the IS and the Shi’a militias, Jordan, as a transit country, seemed a safe haven. However, most of Iraqi Mandaeans are perceived as migrant workers, unlike Syrian refugees, something that puts them in the social margins. But, as it seems, this is not the only challenge, since the Mandaeans are forbidden in practicing their religious rituals. As a Mandaean woman describes, “we are forbidden from practicing our religious rituals comfortably, as Jordanian authorities prohibited us from doing so, especially when it comes to performing baptisms at river banks or water pools.”<sup>97</sup>

The legal context for these prohibitions is the rigid religious framework of Jordan, which only recognizes Islam and Christianity as official religions in the Kingdom, despite the presence of Druze and Baha’is. Thus, religious freedom seems to be narrowed to the two monotheistic religions, while other religious cults could be persecuted as “harming the public morals”.<sup>98</sup> On top of it, inciting sectarian strife and insulting religion has been the framework for silencing other dissident, satirical or aberrant voice.<sup>99</sup> That was the case of the renowned Jordanian cartoonist Emad Hajjaj, who, in his attempt to criticize the Greek – Orthodox Church for selling land in Jerusalem to Israeli developers, was prosecuted by a Jordanian court. The cartoon depicted Jesus saying that he disowns

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> “JT reporter presents book on Jordan’s interfaith drive to Pope”, *The Jordan Times*, (30/05/2018),

<http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/jt-reporter-presents-book-jordan%E2%80%99s-interfaith-drive-pope>

<sup>97</sup> Mohammad Ersan, “Are Iraqi Mandaeans better off in Jordan?”, *Al Monitor*, (04/02/2018), <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/02/jordan-iraqi-mandaean-refugees-religion.html>

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> “Jordan blocks access to LGBTQ online magazine”, *IFEX*, (13/08/2017), <https://www.ifex.org/jordan/2017/08/13/lgbtq-censorship/>

anyone involved in the selling of Palestinian land to the Israeli occupation. The uproar caused in the Jordanian society was big, leading some people condemning Hajjaj and calling for the court to sentence him, and even some other marginal voices, claiming that he should be gunned down like the writer Nader Hattar.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Suha Ma'ayeh, "Jordan's top cartoonist faces charges of insulting religion", *The National*. (01/11/2017). <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/jordan-s-top-cartoonist-faces-charges-of-insulting-religion-1.672024>

## Lebanon: Institutionalisation of Religious Pluralism

The Lebanese confessional system by default mixes religion and politics, which gives political and institutional power to confessional communities. In turn, the role of religious leaders and their effort into institutionalising coexistence and religious pluralism in a multi-religious society is a safe-guard for all religious components.<sup>101</sup> What is equally important, and certainly most interesting in Lebanon, is how institutionalisation of religious pluralism can promote political and societal stability and harmony beyond sectarian and religious lines.<sup>102</sup> Given the widespread distrust of the Lebanese towards politicians, which was confirmed with “the strong decrease of voters, which at a national level have not reached the 50 percent threshold of those entitled to vote”,<sup>103</sup> the role of the religious leadership of Lebanon has demonstrated to be crucial in the political scene, especially as the religious leadership is not entirely isolated from politics.<sup>104</sup> Lebanon’s religious leadership role is not limited to promoting interfaith dialogue, combating and discouraging extremism nor on matters of religious doctrines, but, perhaps more importantly, as public spokesmen. This ambiguous role has given them the power to be viewed as “interlocutors when engaging sectarian constituencies”,<sup>105</sup> and as mediators in facilitating the political tensions among the political parties of the country.

For instance, the Maronite Church has had this role of interlocutor as an institution through issues ranging from allowing the use of parish premises as polling stations<sup>106</sup> to others, such as official meetings with regional powers. The most recent example is Patriarch Bechara Boutros al-Rai’s meeting with King Salman in Saudi Arabia

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<sup>101</sup> As part of Lebanon’s presidential-parliamentary system, the premier must be a Sunni Muslim, the president a Maronite Christian and the speaker of parliament a Shia Muslim. While the constitution officially recognizes 18 religious groups, including, Shia, Sunni, Alawites and Ismaili, Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Druze and Jews amongst others

<sup>102</sup> Daniel Moulin-Stožek, “How do we see each other? Interdisciplinarity and the potential of interreligious scholarship”, *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 38:3, pp 235-237 (2017)

<sup>103</sup> Agenzia Fides, “The elections confirm the fragmentation of the political framework. The Lebanese PMS Director: no one will be able to govern alone”, (7/5/2018) [http://www.fides.org/en/news/64147-ASIA\\_LEBANON\\_The\\_elections\\_confirm\\_the\\_fragmentation\\_of\\_the\\_political\\_framework\\_The\\_Lebanese\\_PMS\\_Director\\_no\\_one\\_will\\_be\\_a](http://www.fides.org/en/news/64147-ASIA_LEBANON_The_elections_confirm_the_fragmentation_of_the_political_framework_The_Lebanese_PMS_Director_no_one_will_be_a)

<sup>104</sup> Henley, Alexander D. M. “Religious Authority and Sectarianism in Lebanon”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, (16/12/2017) [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP\\_295\\_Brief\\_Henley\\_Lebanon.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_295_Brief_Henley_Lebanon.pdf)

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Agenzia Fides, “Maronite Church: the use of parish premises as polling stations may only be authorised by the local Bishop”, (5/4/2018) [http://www.fides.org/en/news/63983-ASIA\\_LEBANON\\_Maronite\\_Church\\_the\\_use\\_of\\_parish\\_premises\\_as\\_polling\\_stations\\_may\\_only\\_be\\_authorized\\_by\\_the\\_local\\_Bishop](http://www.fides.org/en/news/63983-ASIA_LEBANON_Maronite_Church_the_use_of_parish_premises_as_polling_stations_may_only_be_authorized_by_the_local_Bishop)

in November 2017, which was the very first visit of a Lebanese Christian Patriarch to the Saudi Kingdom. This visit demonstrated the genuine efforts of the Maronite Church for remaining *faithful* and committed to religious pluralism. The Maronite Patriarch of Lebanon reached out to Saudi Arabia, a regional power who exerts influence on the main Sunni party, Future Movement, within Lebanon. This visit was followed after the so-called “Riyadh resignation” of the Sunni Prime Minister of Lebanon Saad Hariri; the resignation, which was soon suspended by Hariri himself, was announced during his visit to Saudi Arabia, requesting for Hezbollah’s withdrawal from the Syrian war, which caused tremendous havoc within the Lebanese political scene. While Patriarch Rai’s visit was not necessarily representative of the Christian community’s stance on Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia, the Maronite Patriarch happens to be closer to the anti-Hezbollah Christian party, Lebanese Forces, whom have been “talking about the danger of Hezbollah’s growing influence”.<sup>107</sup> By the same token, the Grand Mufti of Lebanon, Abdul Sheikh Abdul Latif Deryan, had to indirectly intervene by highlighting the good Lebanese-Saudi relations and described them as “brotherly and historic”.<sup>108</sup> It is this dynamic between the religious leadership and the political milieu that renders Lebanon so unique and worth mentioning as an example par excellence even by Pope Francis, who in November, 2017, spoke about Lebanon after the Angelus, saying that he hoped the country “could continue to be a message of respect and coexistence for the whole region and the whole world.”<sup>109</sup>

Indeed, the importance of this form of institutionalisation of religious pluralism allows religious figures to offer space for political negotiations. While the political milieu – which is hypersensitive to sectarianism and increasingly characterized with tension– has been exercising good practices vis-à-vis religious pluralism and coexistence, instead of instrumentalising their sectarian political identities to further promote their political agenda. Amidst the Hariri resignation crisis, the political antagonism between Hariri and Nasrallah, which may be viewed as sectarian parties that can incite sectarian tension,

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<sup>107</sup> Shebaya, Halim, “Where do Lebanon’s Christians stand on Hezbollah?”, *Al-Jazeera*, (30/11/2017)

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/lebanon-christians-stand-hezbollah-171128102446572.html>

<sup>108</sup> Al Arabiya, “Lebanon Grand Mufti stresses importance of brotherly relations with Saudi Arabia”, (11/11/2017)

<https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2017/11/11/Lebanon-Grand-Mufti-stresses-importance-of-brotherly-relations-with-Saudi-Arabia.html>

<sup>109</sup> AsiaNews, “Pope hopes that Lebanon can continue to be a message of respect and coexistence”, (19/11/2017)

<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Pope-hopes-that-Lebanon-can-continue-to-be-a-message-of-respect-and-coexistence-42361.html>

did not spill over the sphere of religious coexistence and pluralism. In fact, when Hariri was posed a series of questions regarding religion and politics in relation to Sunni-Shia and Hezbollah, by a group of children in a mock school classroom for an episode of MTV's *Dak El Jaras*, Hariri's response was to list the "theological tenets he believed both had in common: *God, Quran, Prophet, and 5 Pillars*," and stating that "[e]verything else is a political dispute. To me there is no difference between Sunnis and Shia".<sup>110</sup> Similarly, various good practices have been exercised by other political figures, such as the Lebanese President Michel Aoun, who for the first time, in March 25, 2018, "opened the doors of the presidential palace of Baabda to the celebration of the Annunciation, which since 2010 has been proclaimed an Islamic-Christian national holiday in Lebanon".<sup>111</sup>

In the past, the religious communities have demonstrated that their political affiliation is not directly linked with their religious identity. In Halba, in Northern Lebanon, where Hariri's Future Movement party enjoys popularity among Sunnis, a study in 2015 on the Sunnis in Akkar found that Hezbollah enjoys 14% of support among Lebanese Sunnis, while another 15% reported a neutral view.<sup>112</sup> This phenomenon was also mirrored in the recent Lebanese parliamentary elections on May, 6, 2018, where Hariri struggled against Hezbollah-backed Sunni candidates in Beirut, Saida and Tripoli, traditionally a stronghold of the Future Movement.<sup>113</sup> It is worth mentioning that despite the good practices of both politicians and religious leaders regarding religious pluralism are not enough to maintain a good standard of living for the Lebanese. Only 49% of the Lebanese constituency showed up on the election demonstrating the deep disappointment of the Lebanese vis-à-vis the political milieu.

While the spotlight has been on the political implications of the elections and on the developments regarding the Shia, Sunni and Christian communities in Lebanon, the

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<sup>110</sup> Ashi, Jenan, "Playtime over: Lebanese children tackle Hariri on politics and religion", *Middle East Eye*, (26/2/2018) <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saad-hariri-opens-classroom-children-800420310>

<sup>111</sup> Agenzia Fides, "Islamic-Christian Feast of the Annunciation celebrated at the Presidential Palace", (27/3/2018) [http://www.fides.org/en/news/63964-ASIA\\_LEBANON\\_Islamic\\_Christian\\_Feast\\_of\\_the\\_Annunciation\\_celebrated\\_at\\_the\\_Presidential\\_Palace](http://www.fides.org/en/news/63964-ASIA_LEBANON_Islamic_Christian_Feast_of_the_Annunciation_celebrated_at_the_Presidential_Palace)

<sup>112</sup> "Drivers of Instability, Conflict and Radicalization: A Snapshot From Akkar", *Civil Society Knowledge Centre*, (2016) <http://civilsociety-centre.org/resource/drivers-instability-conflict-and-radicalization-snapshot-akkar>

<sup>113</sup> Hilton, Daniel, "Lebanon election: Hezbollah strengthened, Hariri weakened", *Middle East Eye*, (7/5/2018) <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/lebanon-election-hezbollah-strengthened-saad-hariri-weakened-1170461227>  
For more on the parliamentary elections of Lebanon see: Ajroudi, Asma, "Hezbollah, Amal and allies biggest winners in Lebanon elections", *Al-Jazeera*, (8/5/2018) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/hezbollah-amal-allies-claim-lebanon-election-sweep-180507160524402.html>

Jewish community has not yet flourished in the political scene of Lebanon. The Jewish community did not participate in the elections. To be exact, “Jews in Lebanon account for 0.13 percent of the registered voters in Sunday’s polls. They total 4,704 people, the majority of whom vote in Beirut’s second electoral district, where 4,453 are registered”.<sup>114</sup> This is primarily due to the fact that many live in the diaspora as the estimates are that approximately 100 Jews remain in the country. Yet, “Lebanese law does grant minority sects in Beirut, including Jews, a seat in parliament. The minorities’ representative is currently Mustaqbal Movement MP Nabil de Freij, an Evangelical Christian, which is another of Lebanon’s minority sects.”<sup>115</sup>

The ambiguous role of the religious leaders and the confessional system in Lebanon has not only been characterized as positive, but also has had its shortfalls. For instance, this institutionalisation of sectarianism is also seen as a mechanism that hinders social cohesion in Lebanon. The religious institutions may build “social boundaries between sects [with] the sectarian personal-status courts and school systems that fall under these leaders’ legal”, which were “initially intended to provide for freedom of religion, but they have ended up severely restricting people’s freedom to live outside of a confessional framework”.<sup>116</sup> In other words, in a country where religion and politics may overlap and may easily be transformed into sectarian tensions, the role of religious leadership and the institutionalisation of religious pluralism and coexistence has acted as a buffer-zone to sectarianism. Yet, their role has not allowed a cultivation of “citizens of Lebanon”. Nevertheless, the institutionalisation of religious pluralism and coexistence demonstrates a certain level of maturity not only of the leadership, be it religious or political, but also of the society that extremism has been banging on its door from the beginning of the Syrian crisis.

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<sup>114</sup> Rida, Nazeer, “Lebanon: 4,450 Registered Jewish Voters Will Not Take Part in Sunday’s Polls”, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, (5/5/2018) <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1258731/lebanon-4450-registered-jewish-voters-will-not-take-part-sunday%E2%80%99s-polls>

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Henley, Alexander D. M. “Religious Authority and Sectarianism in Lebanon”. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, (16/12/2017) [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP\\_295\\_Brief\\_Henley\\_Lebanon.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_295_Brief_Henley_Lebanon.pdf)

## Maghreb

The Maghreb region – which includes Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya – has been mainly preoccupied with combating extremism. The notion of religious pluralism and coexistence in terms of institutions is more vivid in some than in others – such as Morocco. It may be argued that the lack of institutionalisation of religious pluralism or even the limited effect of the institutional efforts to promote religious pluralism and coexistence, is not due to the lack of political will but rather to the small number of the non-dominant components as these countries are overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim.

## Morocco

The country's efforts to promote religious pluralism can be seen as an antidote to extremism. On the one hand, it is aggressively combating extremism and, on the other hand, it is actively conducting good practices towards coexistence and pluralism. More particularly, the country has been promoting Sufism as a means to engaging with the youth and using it as a shield against extremism, by creating "state institutions for religious education and instruction, as well as putting forward a restructuring of the High Council of Ulemas (Muslim religious scholars)" and establishing a new "public radio station *Radio Mohamed du Saint Coran*", which aims to address "religious guidelines and channel religious discourse through a diverse range of media."<sup>117</sup> Moving hand in hand with the institutional changes that can assist to redirecting the Islamic religious discourse towards the notions of coexistence and pluralism, Morocco is attempting to combat poverty and social inequality, given that these elements are considered the root causes of extremism.

In terms of developing and consolidating the notions of religious pluralism and freedom of religion, in 2016, the King, in conjunction with the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs of the Kingdom of Morocco and the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, based in the U.A.E., hosted the first Marrakesh conference in January,

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<sup>117</sup> Anouzla, Ali, "Islamist extremism in Morocco Time for a rethink", *Qantara.de*, (4/12/2017) <https://en.qantara.de/content/islamist-extremism-in-morocco-time-for-a-rethink?nopaging=1>

which concluded with the Marrakesh Declaration. The Declaration provided a framework for religious pluralism and encourages the promotion of the values of the United Nations Charter and of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>118</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the great steps that have been taken by the monarchy, the non-Sunni non-dominant religious communities have not fully enjoyed the fruits of the attempts at institutionalised religious pluralism. In November 2017, the representatives of Morocco's religious minorities gathered in an unprecedented meeting in Rabat to demand protection from repression and harassment, where they “urged the government to clarify the law on freedom of worship in Morocco, where Islam is the state religion and adherents of other faiths complain of discrimination”.<sup>119</sup>

Having said that, the King of Morocco, Muhammad VI, has put tremendous effort to institutionalising religious pluralism and coexistence in Morocco and to setting Morocco as an example not only for the Maghreb region, but for the Middle East in general. This effort was recognised in the US department of State report *International Religious Freedom Report 2017*, which found that the Kingdom had made concrete steps in regard to religious tolerance and moderation since 2016, but additionally stated that “there are still instances of minority faiths facing societal pressure”.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> For more on the Declaration see: Mofitah, Osama Arhb, Peterson, Marie, “The Marrakesh Declaration: A Muslim call for protection of religious minorities or freedom of religion?”, *LSE Religion and the Public Sphere blog*, (May 2017) <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2017/05/the-marrakesh-declaration-a-muslim-call-for-protection-of-religious-minorities-or-freedom-of-religion/>

<sup>119</sup> “Religious minorities’ struggles the focus of Morocco conference”, *World Watch Monitor*, (17/11/2017) <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/religious-minorities-struggles-focus-morocco-conference/>; “Christians, Jews in Morocco say minorities conference a 'breakthrough'”, *i24News*, (11/18/2017) <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/160575-171118-jews-christians-in-morocco-hail-minorities-conference-as-a-breakthrough>

<sup>120</sup> Leger, Dana, “US State Department: Minority Faiths in Morocco Face Societal Pressure”, *Morocco World News*, (31/5/2018) <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2018/05/247646/us-state-department-minority-faiths-morocco-societal-pressure/>

## Iran

### Institutional Framework of Freedom of Religion

The population of Iran numbers 80 million people, with Muslims constituting 99 percent of the population; 90 to 95 percent are Shi'as and the rest are Sunnis. The remaining 1% of the non-Muslim population is very diverse and includes Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Baha'is, Yarsanis, Sabean-Mandean. The three largest non-Muslim groups are Baha'is, Christians and Yarsanis.

According to the Constitution, which is the source of all laws of the country, Iran is an Islamic Republic, with Shi'a Ja'afari Islam as the official state religion, thus all Iranian laws have to be based in Islam. The four Sunni schools (Hanafi, Shafi, Maliki and Hanbali) as well as the Shi'a Zaydi School of jurisprudence are respected, and their followers are free to perform their own religious practices.<sup>121</sup> Apostasy from Islam and proselytization in any other religion than Islam are crimes punishable by death. Nevertheless, the constitution also recognized members of other religions who are designated as the "People of the Book" (Christians, Zoroastrians and Jews), in accordance to the Islamic tradition. More specifically, the 13<sup>th</sup> Article of the Constitution states that Iranian Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians are free to practice their religion, within the limits of the law. This includes their right to perform their own religious rites in their own houses of worship, receive religious instruction in their language, have judicial independence, form their own religious societies and act according to their religious teachings. In terms of economic rights, they are equal to their Muslim co-citizens.<sup>122</sup> What is more, the constitution declares that Muslims are required to treat non-Muslims with justice and respect their human rights, as long as they do not have conspired or acted against Islam or the Islamic republic. It is noteworthy that article 23 of the Iranian Constitution states that no-one may be harassed for holding a certain belief.

Citizens belonging to a different faith must be registered, in order to be able to attend their religious services and exercise certain rights; those who cannot prove that

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<sup>121</sup> Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Iran 2017 International Religious Freedom Report," (29/5/2018), 5 <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281226.pdf>

<sup>122</sup> Gholamhossein Masoud, "The Basis of Freedom of Religious Minorities in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran," *International Journal of Humanities*, Vol. 20 No.1, (2013), 29-48, 32

their family belong to one of the three recognized religions prior to the 1979 is considered Muslim.<sup>123</sup> Christian converts however, as well as members of religions that the state does not recognize, such as Baha'is or Yarsanis, cannot be registered, they are not entitled to the same rights, and are subjected to repression and imprisonment for exercising their religion.

The recognized religious minorities have political freedom, as they can participate in all general elections. Out of the 290 seats in the Iranian parliament, five are reserved for the recognized religious minorities: two for Armenian Christians, one for Assyrian and Chaldean Christians together, one for Jews and one for Zoroastrians; their representatives have equal rights with the other members of the parliament. The Constitution also permits the formation of political parties based on the four recognized religions (Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism), provided that they do not violate the Islamic criteria.<sup>124</sup> However, non-Muslim cannot be elected to a representative body or hold senior positions in the government, intelligence or the military.<sup>125</sup>

Moreover, the Law on the Formation, Duties and Election of National Islamic Councils explicitly mentions the right of all citizens of the recognized religions to run in local elections.<sup>126</sup> However, a debate has recently sparked in the Iranian political scene over this issue. In April 2017, a senior member of the Guardian Council, Ahmad Jannati, claimed that religious minorities should not be allowed to stand as candidates in elections, as he considered it un-Islamic and contrary to the wishes to the country's founding father, Ruhollah Khomeini.<sup>127</sup> On these grounds, when Sepanta Niknam, member of the Zoroastrian faith and head of the Yazd Zoroastrian Association, was re-elected in May 2017 to the local council in Yazd, a city with considerable Zoroastrian population, a losing Muslim conservative candidate, Ali Asghar Bagheri, filed a complaint. It is noteworthy that Niknam had already served a four-year term in the local

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<sup>123</sup> Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Iran 2017 International Religious Freedom Report," op.cit., 5

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 9

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 7

<sup>126</sup> Center for Human Rights in Iran, "Former MP: Guardian Council Has "No Legal Authority" to Exclude Religious Minorities From Elections," (25/4/2018) [www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/former-mp-guardian-council-has-no-legal-authority-to-exclude-religious-minorities-from-elections](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/former-mp-guardian-council-has-no-legal-authority-to-exclude-religious-minorities-from-elections)

<sup>127</sup> World Watch Monitor, "Iran: do non-Muslims have the right to hold elected public office or not?," (20/4/2018) [www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/iran-do-non-muslims-have-the-right-to-hold-elected-public-office-or-not](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/iran-do-non-muslims-have-the-right-to-hold-elected-public-office-or-not)

council. Nevertheless, in September 2017, Niknam's position was suspended by the Guardian Council claiming that a non-Muslim should not be elected over a Muslim.<sup>128</sup>

This decision has divided the political scene of Iran, with reformists and progressives disapproving the Guardian Council's decision, and more conservatives ruling in favor of it. Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani declared the suspension of Niknam due to his faith illegal, and referred the issue to the Expediency Council, which has the power to issue a final ruling. President Rouhani in has also condemned November 2017 the suspension of an elected candidate and asked the Supreme Leader to intervene, while he expressed his frustration again in June 2018 for this situation.<sup>129</sup> As by January 2018 the Parliament and the Guardian Council failed to reach a compromise over the issue of non-Muslims running in Muslim-majority constituencies, and in June 2018, the matter remains unresolved. This dispute has highlighted the divisions in the Iranian political system, and tests the limits of the religious freedoms and rights of the religious minorities in general.

## Sunnis

The majority of the Sunnis in Iran are ethnic minorities, mainly Kurds, Baloch and Arab; their population is estimated between five and nine percent of the total population. The Iranian constitution states that they are free to perform their own religious practices. Nevertheless, Sunni Iranians seem to be under-represented in the Iranian political system. In 2017, there were 21 Sunni representatives in the Iranian parliament; however, Sunnis have not been appointed in senior government positions since the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>130</sup> What is more, they claim to be underrepresented in provinces where they constitute the majority of the population, such as Kurdistan. In April 2017, a prominent Sunni preacher, Sheikh Abdul Hameed Ismail Zahi, requested

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<sup>128</sup> The Washington Post, "Iran suspends Zoroastrian member of Yazd city council," (9/10/2017) [www.crpme.gr/news/iran-suspends-zoroastrian-member-of-yazd-city-council](http://www.crpme.gr/news/iran-suspends-zoroastrian-member-of-yazd-city-council)

<sup>129</sup> Center for Human Rights in Iran, "Iran's Rouhani Writes to Supreme Leader On Dispute Over Suspended Zoroastrian Council Member," (8/11/2017) [www.crpme.gr/news/iran-s-rouhani-writes-to-supreme-leader-on-dispute-over-suspended-zoroastrian-council-member](http://www.crpme.gr/news/iran-s-rouhani-writes-to-supreme-leader-on-dispute-over-suspended-zoroastrian-council-member). Center for Human Rights in Iran, "Rouhani Calls Suspension of Non-Muslim City Council Member 'Really Upsetting'," (8/6/2018) [www.crpme.gr/news/rouhani-calls-suspension-of-non-muslim-city-council-member-really-upsetting](http://www.crpme.gr/news/rouhani-calls-suspension-of-non-muslim-city-council-member-really-upsetting)

<sup>130</sup> Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Iran 2017 International Religious Freedom Report," op.cit., 27

Sunnis to be allowed to run in the country's presidential elections; however the constitution clearly states that candidates should be Shi'a Muslims and that Sunnis are not permitted to hold several high-ranking government positions.<sup>131</sup> In addition, another Sunni leader, Molavi Abdol-Hamid, stated that "The regime should not differentiate between the Shiites and Sunnis in rights and duties".<sup>132</sup>

## Christians

Christians is the biggest minority that is officially recognized by the Iranian Constitution. Members of the Armenian, Assyrian and Chaldean Churches are acknowledged as indigenous, since their presence in the country predates Islam. Conversion to Christianity is not allowed, and Christians must prove that their families were Christian prior to the 1979 revolution to be registered. The government also considers Sabean-Mandeans as Christians, even though they do not consider themselves as such.

Christians live in relative peace with the regime. Their number varies from 150,000 to 350,000, with more than 100 churches around the country, and they have three representatives in the Iranian parliament (two for Armenians and one for Assyrian and Chaldeans). Christmas may not be an official holiday, but it is recognized by the regime, and the festive decorations are widespread in the country. Registered Christians are also allowed to drink wine, and some of them even produce it.<sup>133</sup> Christians are able to manage personal affairs in accordance to their religious practices, and even take courses on their religions in their own language, as long as it is approved by the Ministry of Education. In some cases students could be exempted from studying Shi'a Islam if they provided a signed letter from their denomination; however, in September 2017, the authorities rejected the letters from the non-Trinitarian "Church of Iran", on the grounds the denomination was an "illegal organization".<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Saleh Hamid, "Why does Iran ban its Sunni citizens from running for president?," *Al Arabiya*, (25/4/2017) [www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/why-does-iran-ban-its-sunni-citizens-from-running-for-president](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/why-does-iran-ban-its-sunni-citizens-from-running-for-president)

<sup>132</sup> Ibid

<sup>133</sup> Christopher Dickey, "Iran's Oddly Selective Crackdown on Christians," *The Daily Beast*, (27/12/2016) [www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/iran-s-oddly-selective-crackdown-on-christians](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/iran-s-oddly-selective-crackdown-on-christians)

<sup>134</sup> World Watch Monitor. "Christian children in Iran told: 'study Islam or leave school'," (8/11/2017) [www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/christian-children-in-iran-told-study-islam-or-leave-school](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/christian-children-in-iran-told-study-islam-or-leave-school)

In order to prevent conversions to Christianity, churches must preach in their own language; religious services or instruction in Farsi is not allowed. What is more, baptism is not permitted, and unregistered Christians must not enter Armenian or Assyrian churches. Christian Community leaders claim that should they break the law, their churches will be closed. Numerous churches have been closed down, such as the Assemblies of God, for reasons relating to preaching in Farsi, allowing non-registered Christians to attend meetings and for proselytization.<sup>155</sup> In addition, publications and other materials on the topic of Christianity are restricted on those with historic or academic merit, and any other religious material can be confiscated. Despite these measures, Christianity is growing in Iran, being one of the fastest growing Christian communities in the world.<sup>156</sup> Nevertheless, as the regime does not recognize Christian converts, members of unrecognized churches, primarily Evangelists, are often arrested and detained for operating illegally in “house churches” or for drinking communion wine. According to World Watch Monitor, at least 193 Christians were arrested or imprisoned in 2016 in relation to their religious affiliation, and in 2017 over a dozen of Christian converts were given prison sentences up to 15 years.<sup>157</sup>

## **Zoroastrians**

Zoroastrianism is the oldest religion in Iran, dating back over 4,000 years; it is also believed to be the oldest monotheistic religion in the world. The Zoroastrian population in modern-day Iran is approximately 25,000 people. The Iranian constitution officially recognizes the Zoroastrian faith, and allows its followers to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, to form religious societies and to offer religious education to their members. Zoroastrianism is widely respected around Iran, considered an important tenet of the national identity. Zoroastrian celebrations such as Nowruz and Yalda, are widely observed by the wider Iranian population.

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<sup>155</sup> Mohabat News, "Islamic Clerics Warn Against Spread of Christianity in the Most Islamic City in Iran," (11/8/2017) [www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/islamic-clerics-warn-against-spread-of-christianity-in-the-most-islamic-city-in-iran](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/islamic-clerics-warn-against-spread-of-christianity-in-the-most-islamic-city-in-iran)

<sup>156</sup> Mission Network News, "Iranian Church among the fastest growing," (16/2/2018) <https://www.mnnonline.org/news/iranian-church-among-fastest-growing/>

<sup>157</sup> World Watch Monitor "Why Iranian Christians are pinning hopes on 'moderate' Rouhani, despite human rights failures," (19/5/2017) <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/05/iranian-christians-pinning-hopes-moderate-rouhani-despite-human-rights-failures> , World Watch Monitor, "Iran," <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/iran/>

However, the recent political debate over the legitimacy of the suspension of a Zoroastrian in the local council in Yazd has raised concerns over the rights of religious minorities, particularly since Sepanta Niknam had already served a four-year term without any problems. It is noteworthy that Niknam received more than 21,000 votes, from Muslims and non-Muslims alike.<sup>138</sup>

## **Jews**

The presence of the Jewish population in Iran dates back over 2,700 years, and is currently estimated between 10,000 and 20,000. There are about 100 synagogues around the country, about 30 of them in Tehran, though not all of them are operating. Judaism is one of the recognized religions in Iran, along with Christianity and Zoroastrianism, and they are allowed to have their own schools, restaurants and religious institutions, as well as one representative in the Iranian parliament. Despite the tenuous relations between Iran and Israel, Iranian Jews are not prohibited to visit Israel, unlike other citizens. What is more, Jewish MP Siamak Moreh Sedgh has claimed that while there are some discriminatory laws against religious minorities that should be addressed, for example the fact that the amount of financial compensation paid to the families of victims of violence varies according to the religion of the victim, he has underlined in numerous occasions the fact that Jews feel safe in Iran.<sup>139</sup> He recently emphasized in the unity and solidarity of all Iranians in face of adversities.<sup>140</sup>

## **Baha'is**

Baha'is are the largest unrecognized religious minority in Iran; with a population at least 300,000 some consider it to be the largest non-Muslim religious group in the country. Since their religion was founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, all of its followers are considered

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<sup>138</sup> Center for Human Rights in Iran, "Iran's Expediency Council Dragging Its Feet Over Fate of Religious Minority Candidates in Local Elections," (12/4/2018) <http://www.crpme.gr/news/iran-s-expediency-council-dragging-its-feet-over-fate-of-religious-minority-candidates-in-local-elections>

<sup>139</sup> RT, "Jews feel safer in Iran than in US & EU despite Tel Aviv-Tehran tensions," (14/2/2018)

[www.crpme.gr/news/jews-feel-safer-in-iran-than-in-us-eu-despite-tel-aviv-tehran-tensions-video](http://www.crpme.gr/news/jews-feel-safer-in-iran-than-in-us-eu-despite-tel-aviv-tehran-tensions-video), Gideon Kuts, "Jerusalem Post, (30/10/2016) [www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/iran-s-sole-jewish-mp-iran-is-safer-for-jews-than-france](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/iran-s-sole-jewish-mp-iran-is-safer-for-jews-than-france)

<sup>140</sup> Tehran Times, "Jewish lawmaker: 'We are united in defending Iran'," (30/5/2018) [www.crpme.gr/news/jewish-lawmaker-we-are-united-in-defending-iran](http://www.crpme.gr/news/jewish-lawmaker-we-are-united-in-defending-iran)

converts from Islam and thus heretics by the regime; after 1979, numerous members of the Baha'i faith have been imprisoned or even executed, while their property and belongings of its members are been seized by various Iranian institution. They are not legally allowed to hold gatherings, practice their faith and have places of worship. The government has kept many Baha'i properties is has seized, including cemeteries, holy places, historical sites and administrative centers.<sup>141</sup>

Moreover, the government has issued a secret memorandum in 1991, called "The Baha'i Question", which dictated the Iranian government's policies towards the Baha'i community. It stated that while Baha'is should be permitted to have a "modest livelihood", their economic progress and development should be blocked, so as they will not reach any position of influence.<sup>142</sup> Government agencies have closed hundreds of Baha'i owned businesses claiming they had violated the trading rules. What is more, Baha'is are not allowed to be employed in the public sector, while facing difficulties in the private sector as well; in April 2007 the Office of Public Places issued a ban on work permits for Baha'is in a wide range of industries, from hospitality and tourism to technology businesses.<sup>143</sup> This situation is creating a huge economic pressure on the Baha'i community.

In addition, Baha'is, as well as other unregistered religious minorities, do not have access to higher education; upon enrollment, all applicants have to choose their religion, and the options are limited to the four recognized religions (Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism). Most Baha'is are barred from enrollment for having an "incomplete application", while sometimes they are expelled in the course of their studies.<sup>144</sup> For these reasons, an underground university was founded in Iran in 1987, the "Baha'i Institute for Higher Education" or BIHE; as it is classified as an illegal organization, any involvement with it can lead to arrests and imprisonment.

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<sup>141</sup> Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Iran 2017 International Religious Freedom Report," op.cit., 18

<sup>142</sup> Nasser Sedghi, "The Economic Apartheid And Repression Of Baha'is In Iran," *The Iranian*, (29/3/2018) [www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/the-economic-apartheid-and-repression-of-baha-is-in-iran](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/the-economic-apartheid-and-repression-of-baha-is-in-iran)

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Iran 2017 International Religious Freedom Report," op.cit., 7

Many Baha'is have been detained or imprisoned by the authorities on charges including insulting religious sanctities, corruption on earth and actions against national security or Islam. However, advocate groups report violations in the legal procedures when it comes to individuals of the Baha'i faith; while Iranian law requires detainees to be formally charged with a crime in a short time, in cases of Baha'i detainees this procedure can take months.<sup>145</sup> Moreover, in some cases the detainees are denied legal counsel, while trials usually take place behind closed doors. Many individuals of Baha'i faith are incarcerated in Iran, among them five of the seven Baha'i leaders that were convicted in 2008 in 20 years of imprisonment. It is noteworthy that Foreign Minister of Iran Mohammad Javad Zarif stated that while the state does not recognize the Baha'i faith as a religion, he denied that Baha'is were imprisoned due to their faith.<sup>146</sup>

### **Yarsanis or Kakais**

Yarsanis are members of a distinct faith, known as Ahle Haq or Kakai, and they are mainly located in Loristan and the Kurdish regions. There is not an official count of their population, but it is estimated up to two million. Their religion is not recognized by the Iranian regime, who classifies them as Shi'as practicing Sufism.<sup>147</sup> Yarsanis do not have official political or religious representation. As they have no legal recognition, they cannot legally practice their religion communally, perform religious ceremonies in public, or establish houses of worship. What is more, their houses of worship have been closed by the authorities, so, like other unrecognized groups, they often practice their faith in private homes, in secret.

Moreover, Yarsanis experience discrimination in their daily lives, as a result of their lack of official status; they are unable to give Yarsani names to their children; they are not allowed to bear religious symbols, wear Kurdish garments, or communicate in the Kurdish language; during their military service, Yarsanis are forced to trim their

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<sup>145</sup> Nasser Sedghi, "Massive Development Of Anti-Baha'i Propaganda Material And Activities By Iranian State-Sponsored Agencies," *The Iranian* (16/4/2018) [www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/massive-development-of-anti-baha-i-propaganda-material-and-activities-by-iranian-state-sponsored-agencies](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/massive-development-of-anti-baha-i-propaganda-material-and-activities-by-iranian-state-sponsored-agencies)

<sup>146</sup> Kian Sabeti, "Foreign Minister Zarif: What Baha'i Prisoners?," *Iran Wire*, (27/4/2018) [www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/foreign-minister-zarif-what-baha-i-prisoners](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/foreign-minister-zarif-what-baha-i-prisoners)

<sup>147</sup> Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Iran 2017 International Religious Freedom Report," *op.cit.*, 6

mustaches, contrary to their religious beliefs; regarding their religious instruction, books about the Yarsan faith are banned, and they cannot legally produce or distribute any religious literature.<sup>148</sup> Thus, Yarsanis are not allowed to attend higher educational institutions or take governmental positions without denying their religious identity.

In face of these challenges, Yarsani leaders have send a letter in 2015 to Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, requesting a constitutional amendment that would give them an official status as a religious minority, though they have received no reply since.<sup>149</sup> Members of the Yarsan Community Civil Activists Society highlight their determination to work peacefully within the legal framework of the country as well as the Universal Declaration for Human Rights, to achieve their recognition.

## **Sabean-Mandeans**

Sabean-Mandeans are an unrecognized religious group, with an estimated population between 5,000 and 10,000 in Iran. The authorities classify them as Christians, however they do not identify themselves as such.<sup>150</sup> As with the other unofficial religious minorities, they are not legally permitted to perform their religious rituals communally or in public, and they are now allowed to establish houses of worship. In daily life, they are not able to access higher education or seek government employment unless they declare themselves as Christians in their application form.

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<sup>148</sup> Jonas and Sirous Sanjabi, Farshid Soltani, "Islamic regime behavior towards Yarsan people in Iran | Tuesday, 18 July 2017 11:47," Yarsan Democratic Organisation, (9/7/2018) [www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/islamic-regime-behavior-towards-yarsan-people-in-iran](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/islamic-regime-behavior-towards-yarsan-people-in-iran)

<sup>149</sup> Center for Human Rights in Iran, "Religious Minority in Iran Asks Khamenei for Constitutional Protection," (17/6/2016) [www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/religious-minority-in-iran-asks-khamenei-for-constitutional-protection](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/iran/religious-minority-in-iran-asks-khamenei-for-constitutional-protection)

<sup>150</sup> Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Iran 2017 International Religious Freedom Report," op.cit., 4, 6

## **Saudi Arabia**

### **State and Religion**

Saudi Arabia's total population is about 28.6 million, including 8 million foreign residents. Between 85 to 90 percent of its citizens are Sunni Muslims and about 10-15 percent are Shi'as.

According to the Basic Law of Governance, Saudi Arabia is a sovereign Arab Islamic state, in which Islam is the official religion. All citizens are required to be Muslim, and residents who wish to naturalize must convert to Islam and provide proof of their religious affiliation.<sup>151</sup> In addition, it is stated that it is the duty of every citizen to defend Islam, along with his homeland; any criticism of Islam is forbidden, and blasphemy against Islam is a crime that may be punished by death, lengthy imprisonments and lashings.

Besides some common characteristics between countries that are designated as Islamic, the particular interpretation of Islam that is adopted in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia sets it apart. The rise of the Saudi dynasty into power was interlinked with the rise of Wahhabism as the unofficial state religion; Wahhabism, an Islamic doctrine which aims to "purify" Islam, rejects of any element or concept introduced into Islam after the time of the Prophet. The Kingdom and the religious establishment are safeguarding each other, as the state is using Wahhabi rhetoric to hush any opposition by naming it un-Islamic, and in return Saudi religious scholars and muftis enjoy an unparalleled privileged position in the state's political and social hierarchy. Therefore, Saudi Arabia's political and religious institutions are deeply embedded.

Thus, any practice non-conforming with the official interpretation of Islam is deemed threatening to social security. To keep the Saudi population in check, the semiautonomous government agency called Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) – or religious police – is monitoring social behaviors and is enforcing moral standards. It is intervening in cases that include gender mixing, displaying emblems of other religions, failing to respect Islam, behaving in a manner

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<sup>151</sup> Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Saudi Arabia 2017 International Religious Freedom Report," (29/5/2018), 4-5 <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281248.pdf>

inconsistent with the approved Islamic practices, etc. However, in 2016, the cabinet restricted the CPVPV's power to raid, question, arrest or detain anyone suspected of a crime if not accompanied by official police.<sup>152</sup> The re-organization of the religious police department has been considered an important step towards the direction of a more tolerant society.

In addition, Muslim practices diverging from the Wahhabi doctrine are largely forbidden. This includes the public celebrations of the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, or visits to the tombs of righteous Muslims. More recently, the Saudi authorities closed the Cave of Hira' to pilgrims, amidst concerns they might be acting heresy during their visits.<sup>153</sup> These positions largely marginalize the sizable Shi'a minority of the Kingdom, who are often under attack by the Saudi religious and political institutions. Some government-employed Sunni clerics are using anti-Shi'a rhetoric in their sermons, using derogatory terms and stigmatizing their beliefs, despite the efforts of the government to counter intolerant speech.<sup>154</sup>

Security forces also often treat Shi'as as a national security threat, mainly for engaging in political expression or organizing demonstrations. Many Shi'a activists are under trial for their participation in the 2011-2012 protests, and at least 38 are at the risk of execution.<sup>155</sup> In this regard, the government published a new counterterrorism law in November 2017, criminalizing "anyone who challenges, either directly or indirectly, the religion or justice of the King or Crown Prince." In 2017, the government embarked on a plan to demolish the old quarter of Awamiya, a largely Shi'a city where many protests were held, in order to build a shopping mall; this quickly escalated to a siege of the quarter by the Saudi authorities from May to August 2017. Moreover, while Shi'as are a sizable minority in the kingdom, they are underrepresented in government institutions. For example, in the Majlis al-Shoura, the Consultative Council, there are five Shi'a members out of the 150, and in the Human Right Commission there are no Shi'as at all;

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid, 5

<sup>153</sup> Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman Alkaff and NurulHuda Binte Yussof, "Saudi Arabia's Moderate Islam: A Restrained Contribution?" *The Eurasia Review*, (26/5/2018)  
<http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/saudi-arabia/saudi-arabia-s-moderate-islam-a-restrained-contribution>

<sup>154</sup> Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Saudi Arabia 2017 International Religious Freedom Report," op.cit., 16

<sup>155</sup> Adam Coogole, Saudi Arabia's 'War on Terror' Is Now Targeting Saudi Shiites," *Foreign Policy*, (23/8/2017)  
[www.crpme.gr/analysis/saudi-arabia/saudi-arabia-s-war-on-terror-is-now-targeting-saudi-shiites](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/saudi-arabia/saudi-arabia-s-war-on-terror-is-now-targeting-saudi-shiites)

there is only one Shi'a minister in the government, and not one Shi'a governor or deputy governor in the Eastern province.<sup>156</sup> Yet, there are some Shi'a courts in the Eastern Province, staffed with six Shi'a judges, who use the Ja'fari school of Islamic jurisprudence for cases in family law, inheritance and endowment management; however Shi'as located in remote parts of the Eastern province or elsewhere in the kingdom have no access to local, regional or national Shi'a courts.

The government also impairs the ability of Shi'as to practice their religion freely. Major urban centers such as Jeddah and Riyadh do not have any licensed Shia mosques, forcing them to hold prayers in private homes or community centers, which are subjected to police raid. The process of acquiring a government-required license for a Shi'a mosque is unclear, compared to the Sunni, and the government has not approved their construction outside the Eastern province, neither does it finance the construction or maintenance of any Shi'a mosque. As a general rule, Shi'a mosques are required to use the Sunni call to prayer. Nevertheless, the authorities permit large-scale public commemorations of Ashura and other Shi'a holidays in the Eastern province, where the majority of the population is Shi'a. It should be noted that since the 2015 attacks in Shi'a gathering places in the Eastern Province, a significant deployment of government security personnel are employed during the Ashura commemoration.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that there is no official framework for religious freedom in Saudi Arabia. As stated above, all Saudi nationals must be Muslims, and conversion from Islam to any other religion is considered a crime legally punishable by death, even though courts have not carried out a death sentence for apostasy in recent years. As for the millions of foreign residents of the country, many of whom are not Muslims, public observance and practice of any other religion is prohibited. Saudi Arabia does not allow any other houses of worship apart from mosques, and any non-Muslim religious service is not permitted. This means that the government does not formally allow non-Muslim clergy to enter the country so as to perform religious services; thus, non-Muslims such as Catholic and Orthodox Christians, whose religious traditions require a regular contact with the clergy, are facing difficulties in their religious

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<sup>156</sup> Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Saudi Arabia 2017 International Religious Freedom Report," op.cit., 15

observances. However, the government stresses out that individuals are allowed to worship privately, while those who experience infringements on their ability to worship could address their grievances to the Ministry of Interior, the Human Rights Council, or the National Society for Human Rights.<sup>157</sup>

Lately, certain non-Muslim groups, primarily Christian congregations, were largely allowed to conduct their own, small-scale meetings, as long as they did not advertise it and they did not use a permanent location.<sup>158</sup> Yet, raids on secret churches in private homes, or “house churches”, still occur, and those involved are in risk of detention and even deportation. Nevertheless, the situation for non-Muslim worship has been improved since the curbing of the power of religious police.<sup>159</sup>

## **Institutionalising a “Moderate” Islam**

Saudi Arabia has embarked upon a reform program that includes both domestic and religious policies from the standpoint of religion, largely attributed to the Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman. In an interview in October 2017, the crown prince vowed to bring the country “back” to a more moderate version of Islam, which will be open to all faiths and to all traditions, and he portrayed the current situation in Saudi Arabia as a reaction to the Islamic Shi’a revolution of 1979.<sup>160</sup>

In order to curb the influence of conservatives in the country, some members of the Council of Senior Scholars were replaced by more moderate ones. The powers of the religious police, who enforced strict moral codes, have been significantly reduced, women have been allowed to drive and the ban was lifted for public assemblies such as

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<sup>157</sup> Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Saudi Arabia 2017 International Religious Freedom Report," op.cit., 12

<sup>158</sup> Thomas Craughwell, "Will Churches Soon Be Allowed in Saudi Arabia? Not a Chance..." *National Catholic Register*, (18/3/2018) [www.crpme.gr/analysis/saudi-arabia/will-churches-soon-be-allowed-in-saudi-arabia-not-a-chance](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/saudi-arabia/will-churches-soon-be-allowed-in-saudi-arabia-not-a-chance), World Watch Monitor, "Saudi Arabia is modernising, but will this mean greater freedom for religious minorities?," (23/2/2018) [www.crpme.gr/analysis/saudi-arabia/saudi-arabia-is-modernising-but-will-this-mean-greater-freedom-for-religious-minorities](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/saudi-arabia/saudi-arabia-is-modernising-but-will-this-mean-greater-freedom-for-religious-minorities)

<sup>159</sup> World Watch Monitor, op.cit.

<sup>160</sup> Martin Chulov, "I will return Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam, says crown prince" *The Guardian*, (24/10/2017) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/i-will-return-saudi-arabia-moderate-islam-crown-prince>

music concerts and movie screenings. Even Christmas trees were displayed in the capital for the first time this year.<sup>161</sup>

Previous initiatives to counter extremism were boosted ever since the reforms were announced. The Riyadh Declaration, published in May 2017 after the Arab-Islamic-American Summit, called for a moderate Islam based on tolerance, love, mercy and peace, while combating misconceptions about Islam.<sup>162</sup> The government continued and enhanced the efforts to promote tolerance and mutual understanding between Shi'as and Sunnis, more prominently through the King Abdul Aziz Centre for National Dialogue (KACND). Internationally, the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID), based in Vienna, has also enhanced its credibility, with numerous programs to promote harmony among world faiths.<sup>163</sup>

The reforms have also reached the Muslim World League, an umbrella organization for Saudi charities which used to propagate their strict ideology around the world, but has since changed its tone. The Muslim World League's secretary-general, former minister of Justice Mohammed Al-Issa, has been particularly active in addressing issues such as extremism, anti-Semitism and interreligious dialogue. He has released statements claiming that countering Sunni extremists of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda is a priority in countering terrorism. In addition, he declared that there should be no compulsion in religious matters, while he underlined that using hadiths to justify anti-Semitic behavior is a crime against Islam itself, as Muslims should respect the right of Jews to live in dignity.<sup>164</sup> Mohammed al-Issa also visited the Vatican in September 2017 to meet with the pope.

Interfaith initiatives are a big part of the Kingdom's reform agenda. It is noteworthy that important religious figures of the Christian faith have been invited to

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<sup>161</sup> Haaretz, "Why the Saudi Crown Prince's First Official Meeting With Jewish Leaders Is Such a Big Deal," (29/3/2018) [www.crpme.gr/analysis/saudi-arabia/why-the-saudi-crown-prince-s-first-official-meeting-with-jewish-leaders-is-such-a-big-deal](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/saudi-arabia/why-the-saudi-crown-prince-s-first-official-meeting-with-jewish-leaders-is-such-a-big-deal)

<sup>162</sup> Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Saudi Arabia 2017 International Religious Freedom Report," op.cit., 17

<sup>163</sup> Tom Heneghan, "Saudi-backed interfaith center boosted by crown prince's surprising reforms," *Religion News Service*, (9/3/2018) [www.crpme.gr/analysis/saudi-arabia/saudi-backed-interfaith-center-boosted-by-crown-prince-s-surprising-reforms](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/saudi-arabia/saudi-backed-interfaith-center-boosted-by-crown-prince-s-surprising-reforms)

<sup>164</sup> Ben Cohen, "Islam Respects Right of Jews to 'Live in Dignity,' Muslim World League Chief Muhammad al-Issa Declares," *The Algemeiner*, (28/2/2018) [www.crpme.gr/analysis/saudi-arabia/islam-respects-right-of-jews-to-live-in-dignity-muslim-world-league-chief-muhammad-al-issa-declares](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/saudi-arabia/islam-respects-right-of-jews-to-live-in-dignity-muslim-world-league-chief-muhammad-al-issa-declares)

Saudi Arabia, a rare occasion by itself. In November 2017, the Maronite Christian patriarch of Lebanon, Bechara Boutros al-Rai, was invited in Riyadh and met with King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in the second such visit since 1975.<sup>165</sup> More recently, in April 2018, the president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Cardinal Jean Louis Tauran, met with the King in Riyadh.<sup>166</sup> Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has also met with Jewish and Catholic leaders during his trip to New York in April, as well as the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, during his London visit in March.<sup>167</sup> These meetings have been largely perceived as concrete examples of the Kingdom's sincerity in interfaith dialogue and the promotion of a more tolerant version of Islam, increasing hopes for a broader freedom of religion in Saudi Arabia.

The recent reforms have been widely welcomed by the Saudi population. According to a recent field study conducted by the KACND, Saudis are accepting the concept of coexistence. Around 82% said they acknowledge the freedom of others to have their own religions and doctrines, while 61% said they do not mind if people of doctrinal differences have their places of worship.<sup>168</sup> It is also possible that the government acknowledges that ultraconservative ideas have less impact on Saudi youth, who make up 60 percent of the population.

The wave of changes has not been well-received by the conservative Islamists in Saudi Arabia, who used to be very influential in the political and religious sphere. Nevertheless, it seems that the Saudi Arabian regime is unwilling to confront the ultraconservatives too forcefully. This could be the case of the arrests and public shaming of women's rights advocates in May 2018, or the official apology for the footage aired at a pro-wrestling event in Riyadh in April that was deemed offensive.

What is more, many have underlined the fact that popular Wahhabi clerics, known for being vocal and independent, have been jailed, while others, who are

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<sup>165</sup> Andrea Gagliarducci, "Cardinal Rai begins strategic call for Saudi religious freedom," *Vatican News Agency*, (28/11/2017) [www.crpme.gr/analysis/saudi-arabia/analysis-cardinal-rai-begins-strategic-call-for-saudi-religious-freedom](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/saudi-arabia/analysis-cardinal-rai-begins-strategic-call-for-saudi-religious-freedom)

<sup>166</sup> Samuel Lieven, "Will it finally be possible to build a church in Saudi Arabia?," *La Croix International*, (20/4/2018) [www.crpme.gr/analysis/saudi-arabia/will-it-finally-be-possible-to-build-a-church-in-saudi-arabia](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/saudi-arabia/will-it-finally-be-possible-to-build-a-church-in-saudi-arabia)

<sup>167</sup> Haaretz, op.cit., Thomas Craughwell, op.cit.

<sup>168</sup> Saudi Gazette, "82 % Saudis believe in freedom of belief," (5/5/2018) [www.crpme.gr/news/82-saudis-believe-in-freedom-of-belief](http://www.crpme.gr/news/82-saudis-believe-in-freedom-of-belief)

considered more hard-liners, have been embraced by the regime. Therefore, it employs a mix of intimidation and consolidation, when it comes to its attitude towards Wahhabi clerics. However, this seems problematic, as it is seen like the government is targeting more moderate clerics, who could potentially help the regime fight against intolerance and extremism, while keeping the ultraconservatives close to the center of political decisions.<sup>169</sup>

Despite the current efforts of change in domestic policies, the Wahhabi character of the state still stands strong, especially in relation to law and order. The promotion of “moderate” Islam in Saudi Arabia still has its limitations. After all, the concept of moderation in a religion varies, depending on the constraints of each country; in the case of Saudi Arabia, it has to take into account the political structure and the socioeconomic demands that are very much interlinked with the religious establishment.<sup>170</sup> Regardless of the statements from the Saudi government that they will promote a tolerant view of other religions, freedom of religion, in the form of public observance or the erection of houses of worship, is not likely to be institutionalised soon. The ultra-conservative narratives, such as the superiority of Wahhabi and Sunni Muslims over other denominations, the association of atheists with terrorists, or the advice of social exclusion of other believers, are likely to persist, even if their tone will lower. Nevertheless, these developments are very important steps towards religious coexistence.

## **Reform of Educational Institutions**

Educational institutions in Saudi Arabia, both private and public, are obliged to follow an official, government-approved religious curriculum, which is based on the Sunni Hanbali School of jurisprudence. Religious instruction is mandatory at all levels. Regarding private international schools, they may be allowed to teach courses on other religions or civilizations, but they are required to offer Saudi and non-Saudi Muslim

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<sup>169</sup> Kareem Fahim, "Saudi Arabia's once-powerful conservatives silenced by reforms and repression," *The Washington Post* (5/6/2018) [www.crpme.gr/analysis/saudi-arabia/saudi-arabia-s-once-powerful-conservatives-silenced-by-reforms-and-repression](http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/saudi-arabia/saudi-arabia-s-once-powerful-conservatives-silenced-by-reforms-and-repression)

<sup>170</sup> Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman Alkaff and NurulHuda Binte Yussof, op.cit.

students an Islamic studies course; non-Muslim students of international schools may follow courses on Islamic civilization or receive free time.<sup>171</sup>

For many years, the conservative education system in Saudi Arabia, which reflects the dominant Wahhabi doctrine, is facing harsh criticism for providing a fertile ground for extremism. This has been a particular concern for the Saudi government after 9/11, as 15 of the 19 terrorists involved were Saudi nationals.<sup>172</sup> Therefore, the government has since been making efforts to reform the educational institutions, so as to rid them of intolerance. In 2007 began a project to revise textbooks, curricula and teaching methods, and continued as part of the government's Vision 2030 (announced in April 2016). The government has also sponsored different projects and programmes in schools in order to counter extremism. While some progress has been made in this direction, particularly in large cities, it is unclear if the same attention has been paid in small towns and rural areas.

Despite these efforts, offensive material continued to be circulated in Saudi classrooms. According to a comprehensive Human Rights Watch report on September 2017, the government-issued textbooks continued to express harsh and intolerant language against other religions and non-Sunni Muslims.<sup>173</sup> In the 45 textbooks of the *al-tawhid* (Monotheism) curriculum for the year 2016-17, destined for students in the primary, middle and secondary schools, there were passages that stigmatize practices and traditions associated with both Shia Islam and Sufism, such as visiting the graves of religious figures, labeling them as polytheism. What is more, the curriculum often characterizes the followers of other religions, such as Jews and Christians, as unbelievers or pagans, and urge Muslims to dissociate and excommunicate them, while justifying the execution of "sorcerers". According to an USCIRF report, the textbooks in 2017-18

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<sup>171</sup> Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Saudi Arabia 2017 International Religious Freedom Report," op.cit., 5

<sup>172</sup> Ahmed Al Omran, "Saudi Arabia struggles to check extremism in schools," *Financial Times*, (16/1/2018) <http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/saudi-arabia/saudi-arabia-struggles-to-check-extremism-in-schools>

<sup>173</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia: Religion Textbooks Promote Intolerance," (13/9/2017) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/13/saudi-arabia-religion-textbooks-promote-intolerance>

expressed more intolerant views than similar books from 2012-2014, while they did not include any expression of tolerance.<sup>174</sup>

In February 2017, Saudi's education minister admitted that a "broader curriculum overhaul" was still necessary. In addition, the Ministry of Education announced the plan to stop printing textbooks altogether by 2020, in order to replace them with interactive tablets and digital curricula which could be more easily checked and edited.<sup>175</sup>

The reformation of the education system is pivotal to the broader pledge of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to return Saudi Arabia to a more tolerant and moderate country. Nevertheless, the challenges are plenty. It is not enough to change the curricula, the state also has to ensure that the teachers will follow the new guidelines and will not continue to express the intolerant views of their own, like the ones that have been prominent in the social and education circles for far too long.

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<sup>174</sup> United States Commission of International Religious Freedom, "Study Revealed Numerous Passages in Saudi Textbooks Advocating Intolerance and Violence," (May 2018)

[www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%20Special%20Report%20-%20Saudi%20textbooks%205-16-18\\_0.pdf](http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%20Special%20Report%20-%20Saudi%20textbooks%205-16-18_0.pdf)

<sup>175</sup> Ahmed Al Omran, op.cit.



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