



Religious Pluralism in the Middle East

REPORT 2016 - I

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Executive Summary

The report is addressing main features and challenges of religious pluralism in the Middle East in the last six months. The region covered is mostly the Middle East including the Arabian Peninsula. Sometimes it may also include countries of the Maghreb, when there are developments of particular interest. The report is focusing on the great challenges religious pluralism faces in the region but, at the same time, it is highlighting positive state and community initiatives that promote religious co-existence and pluralism. The documentation work leading to the report reflects the research already posted in the Centre's website, 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 three kind of challenges confronting religious communities in the region:

- I. In the ongoing Syrian civil war and the Iraqi political chaos, developments on the ground and the framing of the discourse, suggest an increasing militarization of sectarian identity, beyond the key contenders in the conflict.
- II. Changes in the constitutional and legal framework in various countries connected with the uprisings and or/with political and socio-economic changes and transitions in the referred countries.
- III. Issues arisen from the connection of the position of various religious communities with the political situation in their states, such as in Lebanon and Israel/Palestine.

The sectarianisation of the larger and more powerful communities, representing both local actors and regional 'interested parties', has been an enduring trend in the Syria-Iraq conflict theatre for several years. Conflict's duration and intensity has engraved distrust and existential rivalry deeper in each involved party's view of an acceptable compromise. This 'settled' distrust renders future

reconciliation a daunting prospect. Likewise, distrust and hatred fuel and 'enforce' population homogeneity, altering violently the human geography of the region. Pockets of mixed or 'other' sect population, either consisting of indigenous or displaced population, straddled or taking refuge in 'enemy' territory occupied by jihadists, are under constant threat. Although often overlooked, large communities in minority settings (such as Sunni pockets in Kurdish or Shia-held territory) have endured a great share of sectarianisation backlash, as well. In effect, displacement and sectarian state-building are 'clearing' areas of former pluralist coexistence, changing the ethno-religious composition of the region in the process.

Sectarianisation and the drive for population homogeneity, have been exceptionally devastating for numerous communities of lesser political power and self-defence capacity. After millennia of presence in the region, religious communities, as old as Mesopotamia itself, are being pushed outside their centuries-long ancestral lands. These communities face the difficult choice between a probably one-way flight to distant places and a fake dilemma between seeking protection under dominant communities, or otherwise risk annihilation.

In this context, a new alarming trend of militarization is developing, affecting religious pluralism both in Syria and Iraq, as well as the wider region. Even religious communities, that have traditionally placed themselves on the side-lines of major contentions in the region, increasingly acquire a military posture.

Changes in the legal framework have been implemented or pledged concerning the protection of religious pluralism in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, UAE and Turkey. There are, however, difficulties and delays in implementing them. The issue of proselytising remains problematic in all Middle Eastern countries. Christian, and particularly Evangelical Churches' missions, are considered to have not only religious, but also political objectives. In countries like Iran, UAE and Egypt, the state maintains working/amicable relations with

established Middle Eastern Churches, such as the Armenian or the Greek Orthodox Church, but there is considerable suspicion over the Evangelical missionary activity. There are still, however, communities that, although part of the region and of the indigenous societies, remain subject to discrimination; such as, the Bahai's and the Sunni Muslims in Iran, the Alevi and the Christians in Turkey. It seems that, despite initiatives to change the legal framework regarding religious freedom in countries, such as Turkey, Egypt and Iran, the relations of religious minorities with the state is more a matter of perpetual negotiation, bargaining and co-opting policies rather than the outcome of an institutionalised framework.

In Saudi Arabia, the Riyadh-based King Abdul Aziz Centre for National Dialogue (KACND) looks to bring Sunni and Shiites together, in order to promote mutual understanding, through contact and to counter hate speech. There are, however, steps to be taken towards more freedom and worship for non-Sunni Muslims and more rights for the Shiite minority in the country. Although GCC countries were not part (with the exemption of Bahrain) of the Arab revolts they are at the verge of considerable changes in their economy and society. Saudi Arabia is pledging to rapidly decrease her dependency on oil and this would inevitably lead to changes within her society, regarding gender issues and the religious freedom of millions of foreign workers and investors. The socio-economic partial or full integration of millions of foreign workers and investors that are becoming the vast majority of the population in many Gulf Monarchies is closely connected with religious tolerance and pluralism.

In Iran the lifting of sanctions and the electoral victory of the reformists and moderates in the recent elections will strengthen civil liberties for religious minorities. There are today clear signs of a gradual progress in this domain, regarding poor religious freedom conditions for religious minorities, especially for Baha'is, Christian converts, and Sunni Muslims. But the domestic battle for power in Iran is far from being over. Socio-economic developments, the ascent of a powerful middle class, the opening of the economy and the role of foreign investment would certainly affect religious pluralism in this country.

Interestingly in the case of Morocco's religious pluralism pursued by the state seems to be directed to include not only the non-Sunnis and non-Muslim religious communities, but also the Salafi community, as they are a potential threat of extremism. In this sense, it may be argued that Morocco is approaching the notion of religious pluralism in a different way. While the notion of religious pluralism is assumed to imply opening the space of the public sphere for other non-dominant religious communities to participate, Morocco is opening space to neutralize extremist elements within its dominant Sunni community before it opens the space for the former.

Regarding Israel/Palestine and Lebanon issues of religious pluralism and genuine socio-political and socio-economic equality for religious minorities remain hostages of the political stalemate. In Israel the significant shift in the political scene towards the Right and the continuation of the occupation reinforces the belief of a significant part of the political establishment and of the Jewish people in Israel in a messianic mission to reconquer Eretz Israel, which leads in practice to the attempted segregation of Muslims in Israeli society. This means that other faiths, such as Christianity, are not particularly targeted by state policies, though still are regarded as enemies of the faith, by radical religious groups and certain segments of the political establishment.

The case of the Christians in Palestine is somewhat different than in other Muslim countries. While elsewhere, Christians are persecuted for their faith, in Palestine their plight does not derive so much from religious reasons, but from the same source all Palestinians, Muslims and Christians, suffer, i.e. the occupation of the Palestinian Territories by Israel. While the national struggle gives all Palestinians a sense of unity, the occupation leads to a vicious circle that can ultimately affect the Christians in the country as a community. The deterioration of living conditions leads to the radicalisation of the youth especially, giving fertile ground to extreme Islamist groups to grow. As there is no hope for the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians to recommence any time soon, it is very likely that conditions will continue to deteriorate, and the trend of escapism among Christians will continue to grow.

Lebanon is facing multiple challenges, from the absence of President since 2014, the ongoing war in Syria that has brought fear of a spill over, the large influx of Syrian refugees – which are predominantly Sunni—, affecting the demographic balance of Lebanon between the Muslim and Christian communities, to the alliances of each party with external forces. This renders the Lebanese society and its religious pluralistic statue vulnerable.

What has brought to question the durability of Lebanon's legacy of religious pluralism and coexistence is the country's dependency on foreign powers. The sectarian politics of foreign powers seem to inject sectarian tension in the Lebanese political arena, and probably to the society itself. Christians have been very wary of their position in the confessional system given that since 2014 the Presidential position is vacant. These concerns may be seen under a sectarian lens, especially due to fear of the all-decreasing numbers of Christians and of the extremist threats in and next to Lebanon.

Such concerns have more of a political undertone rather than a religious one, but in a confessional system it may be argued that political maneuvers are swiftly interpreted as religious and sectarian tension. The tendency of sectarian codification does not occur only in the political arena but also in the social arena of Lebanon. Various social issues are portrayed with a sectarian undertone and with religious underpinnings that may misrepresent the Lebanese mosaic of religions, as having many cracks.

The report proposes three set of recommendations:

The immediate set:

- i. Working towards the necessary all-inclusive regional consensus for establishing humanitarian corridors in both Syria and Iraq in order to shield and shelter endangered non-Muslim minorities.
- ii. Christian communities should be encouraged to participate in on-going discussions on the future of Syria.

- iii. The peace process in Syria should be inclusive and should preserve pluralism and the unity of the country.
- iv. All necessary steps should be taken in order to ensure that the perpetrators of religious massacres would face International Justice and also that all those who have assisted them in any form would be also held accountable for their deeds.

The set of recommendations concerning freedoms and rights of the religious communities:

- i. Governments of the region should be assisted in upholding the rights of religious communities
- ii. Democracy is not enough; respect for human and religious rights should be enshrined either in the constitution or in a bill of rights. Equality before the law is essential and no church law should be beyond appeal to civil courts.
- iii. OSCE experience in programs on monitoring and promoting religious tolerance and rights of religious minorities could be utilised through formats such as the OSCE's Mediterranean Partnership.

The set of recommendations concerning long-standing issues:

- i. Programs addressing extreme poverty and reducing women's vulnerability should be encouraged
- ii. Educational reforms that support interreligious understanding and mutual respect.
- iii. Programs addressing the positive role of the media in promoting a culture of tolerance and mutual respect.
- iv. Interreligious dialogue should be encouraged: all religious groups should cooperate in solving the problems of some of them.

The endangered pluralism of Syria and Iraq

Syria's night sky is 83 percent darker, compared to pre-civil war levels.¹ Indeed, conflict, destruction and displacement have cast a shadow over large swaths of Syria and western Iraq.² Under this veil of 'darkness', the area known as Mesopotamia has been witnessing an increasingly irreversible loss of its rich ethnic and religious tapestry that had survived millennia of conflict, destruction and displacement.

The sectarianisation of the larger and more powerful communities, representing both local actors and regional 'interested parties', has been an enduring trend in the Syria-Iraq conflict theatre, for several years. Conflict's duration and intensity has engraved distrust and existential rivalry deeper in each involved party's view of an acceptable compromise. This 'settled' distrust renders future reconciliation a daunting prospect. Likewise, distrust and hatred fuel and 'enforce' population homogeneity, altering violently the human geography of the region. Pockets of mixed or 'other' sect population, either consisting of indigenous or displaced population, straddled or taking refuge in 'enemy' territory, are under constant threat. Although often overlooked, large communities in minority settings (such as Sunni pockets in Kurdish or Shia-held territory) have endured a great share of sectarianisation backlash, as well. In effect, displacement and sectarian state-building are 'clearing' areas of former pluralist coexistence, changing the ethno-religious composition of the region in the process.

This trend is hardly 'novel'; Iraq has been undergoing these changes, for over a decade. The 'novelty' lies, instead, in the cascading effect that conflicts in Syria and Iraq have on each other's 'ethno-religious pluralism'. Feeding off each

¹ Amnesty International, "Syria goes dark: 83% of lights out after four years of crisis", (12-3-2015) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2015/03/83-of-syrias-lights-extinguished-after-four-years-of-crisis/>

² For the impact of conflict on night light over eastern Iraq see "Visible Light At Night Over Iraq Using The Visible Infrared Imaging Radiometer Suite (VIIRS-Day/Night Band)", *UNITAR/UNOSAT*, (14-11-2014), http://unosat-maps.web.cern.ch/unosat-maps/IQ/CE20140613IRO/UNOSAT_A3_light_Irak_tikrit_20141022.pdf

other, for half a decade already, grievances and realities in Syria and Iraq have become increasingly transnational. In the quest of real or imagined bonds across the border, Sunni, Shi'ite and Kurdish communities (and interests) reaffirm their ethno-religious identity. As a violent expression of this identity, population homogenization takes a regional character.

Sectarianisation and the drive for population homogeneity, have been exceptionally devastating for numerous communities of lesser political power and self-defence capacity. After millennia of presence in the region, religious communities, as old as Mesopotamia itself, are being pushed outside their centuries-long ancestral lands. These communities face the difficult choice between a probably one-way flight to distant places and a fake dilemma between seeking protection under dominant communities, or otherwise risk annihilation.

Most religious minorities have seen their communities dwindle. Numerous estimates have been proposed over time, all pointing to the alarming depletion of known or 'recently-discovered' communities, such as Christians or Yazidis, but also of not-widely known religious communities, such as Kakais, Shabak and Mandaeans, who are equally threatened. For most of these communities, fleeing their ancestral home means abandoning the epicentre of their religious identity.

Those who decide to stay, or lack the means to leave, are forced to seek protection from the dominant communities in their region or the territory to which they have fled. However, protection and security increasingly come with the price of submission to the expansionist sectarian state-building projects of their protectors, while asserting the right of independent and equal say is barely tolerated. Likewise, efforts to carve an independent course often bring smaller religious communities teetering on the verge of being crushed in the fight for the new status-quo between conflict's main local and regional adversaries.

In this context, a new alarming trend is developing, affecting religious pluralism both in Syria and Iraq, as well as the wider region. Developments on

the ground and the framing of the discourse, suggest an increasing militarization of sectarian identity, beyond the key contenders in the conflict. Even religious communities, that have traditionally placed themselves on the side-lines of major contentions in the region, increasingly acquire a military posture.

The militarization of religious minorities, in both Syria and Iraq, takes three main forms. First, instances where members from religious minority communities are forcibly militarized by their 'protector' communities, either in terms of discourse or actual forced enlistment. Second, militarization stemming from a 'conscious' decision to embed themselves in established military formations run by their 'protectors'. Third, direct militarization from an equally 'conscious' decision to create -more or less- autonomous armed self-defence groups.

These trends of massive -and possibly irreversible- displacement of religious communities in Syria and Iraq and the militarization of communities that have no history of similar 'engagement', are further analysed in the following chapters of this report. Both chapters, also, attempt to look 'underneath' the trends, exploring the plurality of responses to real or perceived threat, even inside communities that are often perceived as compact (e.g. Christians). Most importantly, the following pages constitute an effort to document instances of 'resistance' against the trend of sectarianisation and/or militarization. These small examples of coexistence and pluralism represent the hope for an already 'dark' future.

Syria

All available data point to a gradual change of the ethno-religious configuration of Syria. A recent study has shown that five years of conflict have transformed the ethno-religious composition of Syria. Changes are apparent in the balance between the major communities. The Sunni community, constituting the bulk of refugee population, has shrank from 64% to 61% of Syria's total population. On the contrary, the Kurds and particularly the Ala'wi have gained -in terms of numbers- in the course of the conflict: Kurds now constitute 16% of Syria's population (up 1% from 2011) , while Bashar al-Assad's community has moved from 10% in 2011 to 13%.⁵ Actual figures of Syria's current and pre-2011 ethno-religious composition are highly debated,⁴ what is important, though, the evidence points to the direction of the changes.

Population shifts have been more noticeable for communities already small in size or less compact, such as Syria's Christians. With lower numbers to start with, five years of conflict have drove out a large portion of the community. According to different estimates, the Christian population in Syria has been nearly halved. Once again, the figures and percentages differ from one estimate to another, yet, all show that the Christian community has been reduced almost by half.⁵ Around 700,000 are believed to have sought refuge outside Syria,⁶ yet, fleeing is only one of several responses the Christian community in Syria has to show. Usually approached as a compact, monolithic

³ Balanche, Fabrice, " Ethnic Cleansing Threatens Syria's Unity", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 3-12-2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/ethnic-cleansing-threatens-syrias-unity>

⁴ See for example Holliday, Joseph. "The Struggle for Syria in 2011". *Middle East Security Report*, no. 2, Institute for the Study of War, (December 2011). <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/struggle-syria-2011>

⁵ According to Fabrice Balanche, (op.cit), Christians now represent 3% of the Syrian population, falling from 5% in 2011. A possibly more accurate estimate brings Christian population down to 5% percent from 10% in 2011, with 500,000, out of 1.25 million, Christians remaining in Syria today. Holliday, Joseph. op.cit., and Knights of Columbus and In Defense of Christians, *Genocide against Christians in the Middle East*, (March 9, 2016), p. 221 <http://indefenseofchristians.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Genocide-report.pdf>

⁶ Ibid.

community, the Christian population, in fact, is a rich, pluralistic tradition, with several denominational, geographical and ethnic variations. These variations have largely shaped the responses of each separate community within the Christian tradition, ranging from flight, to taking up arms or even accept a second citizen status under overtly hostile rule.

Other religious communities, such as Druzes, have managed to preserve their numbers, despite numerous pressures. Blessed with favourable geographical concentration and more compact in nature, Druzes evaded the type of displacement and destruction that Christian population has endured. Still, though, the Druze population in 2016 Syria is in precarious state, subject to forced militarisation and even forced conversions. For other significantly smaller communities, such as the Yazidis and the Ismaili Shia pockets in Sunni territories, survival has been totally dependent on where to the winds of conflict blow. Rushed flight in front of advancing hostile forces or prolonged sieges characterize the experiences of these communities.

These widely different experiences and plurality of responses to conflict in Syria are documented in the following pages. Each account and every event bears its own merit in bringing out the complex realities and challenges that religious pluralism in Syria faces. Each one bears witness to the alarming loss of Syria's pluralist ethno-religious mosaic and heritage, which, if left unchecked, will undoubtedly erase Syria's history and legacy of pluralist coexistence.

Christians

In late February 2015, Christian villages along the Khabur river (such as Tel Goran, Tel Shamiran, Tel Hurmiz and Tel Jazira) were attacked by ISIS, as part of the latter's push to 'clear' the Raqqa-Mosul corridor. A massive 'exodus' of civilian population followed; for the less lucky, agonising captivity under the self-proclaimed 'Islamic State'⁷ preceded the flight to safety, across different

⁷ Syriac International News Agency (SINA), "Attacks in Khabour Villages", (23-2-2015), <http://www.syriacsnews.com/breaking-news-attacks-in-khabour-villages/>

continents around the globe. A glimpse into the lives of people from Tel Goran, one year after their village was overrun by ISIS forces, shows the struggle of a community to preserve neighbourly bonds across thousands of kilometres. In their extraordinary account of the lives of refugees from Tel Goran, who in the past year dispersed across Germany, Sweden, United States and Australia, Malte Henk and Henning Sußebach pointedly note, "having sons and daughters across the world isn't just a privilege of the global upper class; it's also the lot of the global under class".⁸ In this new globalised refugee class, former tightly-knit communities are forced to virtually re-create their bonds, relying on fast and cheap communications and social media.

For each, the 'choice of flight' is far than easy; others long their – imminent-return, while, for others, this 'exodus', is the last –and possibly- final one in a series of similar expulsions. In the words of Samer Kefarkis, Tel Goran's former deacon, whose family in the past century has moved from the Ottoman Empire, to Iraq, to Syria and now Australia: "You can't get farther away than this... with the next expulsion, we'll have to go to the moon".⁹ What Kefarkis, a member of the Assyrian Church of the East, graphically attests, is shared by the experiences of other communities. A member of the Armenian community, forced to leave Aleppo, 100 years after his ancestors were expelled from Turkey, shares the fear that the trip to Yerevan, already undertaken by 15,000 Syrian Armenians, will be a one-way.¹⁰ With his family already in Armenia, he refuses to leave Lebanon, the place of his temporary refuge, until he can return to Syria.

Largely concentrated in Aleppo, the Armenian community has been hard hit by the escalation of conflict in the city. Out of a 100,000-strong Armenian

⁸ Malte Henk and Henning Sußebach, "Syria: The Exodus", *Zeit Online*, (12-2-2016), <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2016-02/syria-is-war-tel-goran-christians/komplettansicht>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Collard, Rebecca, "Armenians Are Still on the Run 100 Years Later", *Time*, (24-04-2015), <http://time.com/3834403/armenian-anniversary-syria/>

community, no more than 35,000-40,000 Armenians have been left.¹¹ This is a largely unnoticed bleed-out of one of the most historical communities in Syria, mainly because the Armenians are often pictured as supporters of the regime. This, in a sense, renders it an 'unworthy' of attention and sympathy plight, even though the community has been targeted directly. For instance, on January 17th, SNHR reported that the Armenian Evangelical Church of Emmanuel in Aleppo was shelled by opposition forces.¹²

Not everyone, though, responds in the same way. Variations in personal convictions within communities are one example of the plurality of Christian responses to conflict. Variations in responses are even more accentuated across the communities that are part of the Christian tradition in Syria, as parts -or whole communities- choose to reject out of hand the option of leaving. Denominational particularities, geographical factors and competing ethnic, religious and political affiliations, all affect the reaction of each particular Christian community. Without an understanding of the complex foundation that unites and sets apart Christians in Syria,¹³ any evaluation of the status -and more so the stance- of the Christian community, is a fallacy. For instance, Greek Orthodox Christians, concentrated in regime-held areas and historically closer to their Arab identity, have adopted a radically different stance and face different challenges, compared to the Syriac Orthodox community in east Syria, particularly those parts that also self-identify as Assyrians. Bundling together such a diverse community, that is interweaved in the historic evolution of the region, leads to hastened solutions and international responses.

¹¹ Ibid.; Janbazian, Rupen, "Surviving Aleppo: An Interview with Nerses Sarkissian, *The Armenian Weekly*, (9-12-2015), <http://armenianweekly.com/2015/12/09/surviving-aleppo/>

¹² Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), "Armed opposition targeted Emmanuel Church for Armenians in Al Manshiyeh neighborhood in Aleppo city in January 17", (18-1-2016), <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2016/01/18/16607/>

¹³ For an overview of the different identities, beliefs and stances within the Christian community, see Eleftheriadou, M. "Christian militias in Syria and Iraq: beyond the neutrality/passivity debate". *Middle East Bulletin*, no. 28, Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies (CEMMIS), (June 2015), pp. 13-19. http://cemmis.edu.gr/files/middle_east_bulletin_28/index.html#/12

For those, who decide to stay or fail in their attempt to leave, there are roughly two options. Different communities within the Christian tradition tend to select, or more often are cast, one of these. The first one, in fact more of a no-option, is captivity or life as a second-class citizen under radical Islamist rule. Kidnappings have long history in Syria's conflict. While, at first, Christians were mostly kidnapped by groups from the moderate opposition and criminal networks for ransom, today the main threat comes from ISIS. In the last months, largely due to the relative stability of the battle lines, no new massive kidnappings have taken place. However, the Christian community is still dealing with last year's wounds. In late February 2016, 40 Assyrian Christian hostages, held by ISIS, were released. These were the last of a total of 230 Christians, who were kidnapped during the February 2015 ISIS offensive.¹⁴ Some of the kidnapped have reported mock IS Islamic courts issuing verdicts to Christian captives, leaving them with the option to leave and "never return... [or risk being] beheaded, and the women enslaved".¹⁵ ISIS benefits in several ways from the kidnappings: it seeds fear and distrust, it imposes population homogeneity and, equally importantly, it benefits financially. Indeed, several millions of dollars are believed to have ended in ISIS coffers, as ransom money for the release of the Christians of Khadur and others.¹⁶

Equally 'lucrative' have been the small number of Christian families, who continued to live under ISIS rule. They were allowed a different and slightly better status than the captive Christian population. The experience of a young Christian, under the alias John, who stayed with his family in Raqqah, after the city was captured by ISIS, offers a rare glimpse inside the self-proclaimed 'Islamic state'. He witnessed the confiscation of abandoned properties by the 'Islamic State' authorities, equally affecting Christians and others, who had fled

¹⁴ Mroue, Bassem, "IS gets millions in ransom for abducted Christians", AP, (22-2-2016), <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/fb20f22a578e4902a36dd583fce58555/frees-last-group-syrian-christians-abducted-2015> For an overview of the February 2015 kidnappings, see Al-Khalidi, Suleiman, "Islamic State in Syria abducts at least 150 Christians", *Reuters*, (24-2-2015), <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-christians-idUSKBN0LS0MH20150224>

¹⁵ Malte Henk and Henning Sußebach, op.cit.

¹⁶ Mroue, Bassem, op.cit.

the city. Further, he confirmed the widespread destruction of churches and other heritage monuments by the 'Islamic State'. The less than fifty families that stayed in Raqqah (out of over 1,500) were faced with three options, according to 'John': "We could [convert and] become Muslims and live a normal life in Raqqah, we could leave, or we could stay and pay the jizya tax".¹⁷ 'John' decided to stay and pay the tax. However, soon jizya tax tripled, "going from 54,000 Syrian pounds up to 164,000 Syrian pounds per man."¹⁸ As the expenses for the Islamic State-building project rose, so were the pressure on the Christians second-class citizen to contribute.

Captivity or life under constant threat and impossible –fiscal- conditions, most often, is the fate that has befallen on individual or small groups of Christians; there is no evidence of entire communities being caught in the 'option' of submitting to the rule of the 'Islamic State' or similar radical Islamist groups. Hence, for those, who decide or are forced to stay in Syria, more common is the 'option' to seek protection under dominant communities or establish self-defence. None option is free of challenges, that are directly linked to religious pluralism in the respective areas, and most importantly, both lead to the militarisation of the Christian communities.

Christians tend to seek refuge among the Ala'wi and other communities in government-held areas, or Kurds in the region of al-Hassaka and the Kurd-declared Rojava area. It's already a great loss for the religious pluralism of Syria that relations –no matter how strenuous- between Christians and Sunni are extremely limited, if compared to the other two major communities. Relations between the Christian local or displaced population and the Kurdish semi-autonomous authorities is not without problems. There have been reports that hold YPG responsible for some of the looting of Christian villages in Khabur.¹⁹

¹⁷ WorldWatch Monitor, "Living as a Christian in the Islamic State", (18-2-2016), <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/02/4307204/>

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Mardean, Isaac, "The Assyrians of Syria: History and Prospects", Syria Comment, (20-12-2015), <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-assyrians-of-syria-history-and-prospets-by-mardean-isaac/>

The Kurdish authorities are believed, also, to adopt policies of land-confiscation, not much different from the one pursued by the 'Islamic State'. According to a statement issued by Assyrian organizations, PYD attempted to pass a law, in September 2015, that would allow the confiscation of empty property.²⁰ Efforts to bring the Christian population under Kurdish control, are not limited to property regulation. Rojava's educational policies, as reflected in the debate around the new school curriculum,²¹ have raised concerns, especially among Christians, regarding its intent to Kurdify, and strip them of their religious identity, the non-Kurdish population.

More alarming are reports that show evidence of forced conscription in YPG or affiliated Christian formations, leading many young to leave the country.²² Land confiscations are not commonly reported in government-held areas, but cases of –nearly- forced conscription, harassment and kidnappings are particularly common. Christians have been forced to join SAA or one of the self-defence groups, operating under the Popular Committees umbrella (later renamed to National Defence Forces –NDF).²³ This forced militarisation not only threatens the lives of the remaining Christians, but it may also lead to sectarian violence. In January 2016, for example, in Qamishli, a clash between YPG forces and men from the (Christian) Sutooro militia, which is affiliated with the Assad government, resulted in 4 deaths.²⁴ This type of violence that rests on competing affiliations and lack of tolerance towards different identities, beliefs and aspirations creates lasting negative legacies for future coexistence.

A number of individuals and organizations try not to let this negative legacy settle. A case in point is Rev. Harout, an Armenian evangelical pastor,

²⁰ AINA, "Assyrian Organizations Issue Joint Statement on Human Rights Violations in North-east Syria", (10-11-2015), <http://www.aina.org/news/20151110161115.htm>

²¹ Syria: Direct, "New PYD curricula in northern Syria reveal ideological, linguistic fault lines", (21-10-2015), <http://syriadirect.org/news/new-pyd-curriculum-in-northern-syria-reveals-ideological-linguistic-fault-lines/>

²² Mardean, Isaac, op.cit

²³ See Eleftheriadou, M. op.cit

²⁴ AINA, "Kurdish YPG Forces Attack Assyrians in Syria, 1 Assyrian, 3 Kurds Killed", (12-1-2016), <http://www.aina.org/news/20160112034707.htm>

who refuses to leave Aleppo, claiming that: “now more than ever it is so important for Christian leaders to be there for all those struggling inside the country”.²⁵ What he does, instead, is to transform his church into a relief centre for the whole community, Christians and Muslims. A similar view is echoed by the head of the Middle East’s Franciscans, Fr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, who insisted that: “Under no circumstances would I encourage the Christians to emigrate”, adding that “both Christian and Muslim communities would need to take responsibility for rebuilding trust between the two faiths... and Christian leaders [should] lead by example and forgive those who had persecuted them”.²⁶

These notions of forgiveness, coexistence and investment in the future are in the core of the initiative of Christian satellite television channel, SAT-7, to broadcast a five-day per week program, called ‘My School’. The program is aimed at refugee children, irrespective of religion, who were forced to stop their education due to the conflict. The future of religious pluralism in Syria rests with these children, who were raised in conflict, equally as much as the policies of the major communities within Syria. If this generation is lost to distrust, hatred and miscommunication, future return and Syria’s rebuilding are void of meaning. That is why initiatives that target the youth, instilling in them notions of tolerance and pluralism, are of utmost importance, if Christians are to stay in Syria, as part of the country’s future.

Shia

The issues of forgiveness and coexistence after a near-death experience, in the hands of one’s former neighbours, are further illustrated in the case of the Shia pockets in the Aleppo area, which were re-captured by the government in

²⁵ Robertson, Abigail (Interviewed by), “‘This Is Not the Time to Leave.’ Why This Pastor Won’t Abandon His Country”, *CBN*, (7-2-2006), <http://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2016/February/This-Is-Not-the-Time-to-Leave-Why-This-Pastor-Wont-Abandon-His-Country>

²⁶ WYM, “More help needed from Europe to sustain Middle East Christians”, (05-02-2016), <http://dowym.com/voices/more-help-needed-from-europe-to-sustain-middle-east-christians/>

February 2016, lifting a three and half year siege by the 'Islamic State' and Al-Nusra Front. The Shia population of Nubul and Zahraa, recount phone-calls from Sunni former colleagues and neighbours, who joined Al-Nusra, threatening to kill them, when the villages are overrun. Thus, it is barely a surprise that the question of forgiving is central. A woman, from one of the liberated villages, claims that "...we are simple people and we can forgive everybody", while another woman is far more sceptical, asserting that it will be "very difficult".²⁷ The answer to this question is particularly important, since the destruction, fear and starvation of the siege was also experienced by around 500 displaced Sunnis, who found refuge in the villages before the siege. Joint suffering might not be the best advocate for pluralism, yet it shows that the case of Nubul and Zahraa is not an outright negative one. In the same vein, one should, also, evaluate the Kurdish efforts to relieve the siege. While desperation pushed some besieged to even call UN headquarters to plead for help but to no avail, Kurdish forces made several unsuccessful attempts to open a corridor to the besieged, in defiance to the sectarian prism dominating the definition of 'worthy' victims.²⁸

The small non-Ala'wi Shia community in Syria, consisting of Twelver and Ismaili branches, has been largely ignored in the discussion on religious pluralism in Syria. It has largely sided with the Ala'wi regime, and by being Shia in a highly sectarian conflict, it is often perceived as the fifth column of Hezbollah and Iran. As a result, dispersed across the country, small Shia pockets, with Nubul and Zahraa being just one example, are victims of a widely underreported ordeal.²⁹ That is the case, also, with Sayyidah Zaynab, a town in the outskirts of Damascus, that is home to the Sayyida Zaynab shrine, which attracts many Shia pilgrims. The area where the shrine is located has been

²⁷ Fisk, Robert, "Syria civil war: The untold story of the siege of two small Shia villages - and how the world turned a blind eye", *Independent*, (22-2-2016), <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/nubl-zahra-a6889921.html>

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Iddon, Paul, "What is the future for the Shiites of Lebanon and Syria?", *Rudaw*, (28-2-2016), <http://rudaw.net/english/analysis/27022016>

repeatedly shelled since 2012 and, recently two attacks, on January 31 and February 21, left over 200 people dead and hundreds injured.⁵⁰

Druzes

The Druze community is another example of an underreported community in Syria's conflict. There is no doubt that they are more well-known to the outside world, compared to Syria's Shia, and that they are not treated as outright allies of the regime, even though they have mostly sided with the regime. Yet, developments in the Druze community rarely reach the frontage of newspapers. Evidence of cases of forced conscription has been around for several years. Nevertheless, there are other new developments that are highly alarming. Reports have indicated that parts of the Druze population are subject to forced conversions or aggressive missionary tactics. Destruction of shrines, property confiscation, forced renunciation of the Druze faith and conversion to Sunni Islam have been reported in Jabal al-Summaq in Idlib, that was brought under al-Nusra control.⁵¹ More recently, Druzes have warned against alleged Shi'ification efforts undertaken in Suwayda, in south-west Syria, including conversions and the relocation of non-Druze population in the area. Similar accusations were directed against Christian missionaries, who allegedly demanded children's participation in religious programs as a condition for aid distribution.⁵²

These attacks on Druze identity, if true, not only threaten the religious pluralism of Syria, but they also contribute to the increasing militarisation of the

⁵⁰ The Guardian, "Dozens killed after suicide bombing at Shia shrine in Damascus ", (31-01-2016), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/31/damascus-syrian-double-suicide-bombing-sayeda-zeinab> ; Middle East Eye, "At least 142 killed as IS bombings rock Damascus and Homs", (21-2-2016), <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/dozens-killed-bombings-south-damascus-hours-after-homs-blasts-1378344789#sthash.zqMHW468.dpuf>

⁵¹ Al-Tamimi, Aymenn Jawad, "Additional Notes on the Druze of Jabal al-Summaq", 6-10-2015), *Middle East Forum*, <http://www.meforum.org/blog/2015/10/druze-jabal-al-summaq> ; Al-Tamimi, Aymenn Jawad, "Harakat al-Hawiya al-Arabiya al-Druziya: Defending Druze Identity in Suwayda", *Syria Comment*, (6-3-2016), <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/harakat-al-hawiya-al-arabiya-al-druziya-defending-druze-identity-in-suwayda/>

⁵² Aymenn Jawad, "Harakat al-Hawiya al-Arabiya al-Druziya...", op.cit.

Druze community. In the face of this perceived threat, groups like Harakat al-Hawiya al-Arabiya al-Druziya (The Arab Druze Identity Movement), which emerged in late 2015, are bound to mushroom.³³ Indicative of the dangers and complications this militarisation can create, is the standoff between Druzes, supporters of the Sheikhs of Dignity movement, and government forces in late February 2016, after one of the movement's leaders was arrested at a regime checkpoint for possession of arms and ammunition.³⁴ The group did not deny that it makes efforts to arm itself, claiming instead that this a necessary step to protect the independence and safety of the Druze community, especially "after the clear failure of certain state apparatuses concerned with protecting the people".³⁵

Syria's pluralist heritage in ruins

Flight or harsh conditions for those left behind, inter-communal distrust, population homogenization and the militarisation of religious communities are the scars of Syria's five-year conflict on the human geography of Syria's pluralist foundations. The destruction of archaeological sites and sites of worship constitute an attack on Syria's pluralist heritage, or what some analysts have dubbed a cultural genocide. No major destructions have taken place in the last months, largely due to the relatively few changes in the battle-lines. Nevertheless, although large destructions, such as that of the Umayyad Great Mosque in 2013 and of Palmyra in 2015, have not occurred, the destruction of Syria's heritage continues. For, instance, damages have been reported in the Central Synagogue of Aleppo³⁶ and the Armenian Evangelical Church of

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Szakola, Albin, Ullin Hope, "Syrian Druze leader asserts right to arm autonomous militia", *NOW*, (24-2-2016), <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/566652-syria-druze-faction-admits-to-arming-itself>

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Haaretz, "Minor Damage Reported to Synagogue in Syria's War-torn Aleppo", (10-2-2016), <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/news/1.702520>

Emmanuel also in Aleppo,³⁷ in the course of the recent fighting. According to SNHR, which focuses mainly on the actions of the government forces, not less than 216 places of worship were targeted in 2015.³⁸

Although, the destruction of Syria's archaeological sites and places of worship has been devastating, several local and international initiatives have been particularly active in their effort to preserve or reconstruct what has been left of Syria's heritage. Efforts have been made across Syria to remove and hide moveable objects of archaeological and religious significance, often risking the fate of Palmyra's chief of antiquities, Khalid al-Asaad, who courageously refused to reveal the location of artefacts, when ISIS overrun Palmyra.³⁹ Moreover, French and Syrian archaeologists have been taking and uploading 3D images of endangered sites, as a last resort to protect the memory and help in the reconstruction of damaged or destroyed sites.⁴⁰ These initiatives, in combination with the recapture of Palmyra by Syrian forces in March 2016, offer some hope that this grand scale destruction will not be irreversible and Syria's pluralist past will continue to inform Syria's future.

³⁷ Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), "Armed opposition targeted Emmanuel Church..." op.cit.

³⁸ Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), "Not Less than 1114 Vital Facilities Targeted in 2015", 17-1-2016, <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2016/01/17/16586/>

³⁹ Harkin, James, "Some Take Massive Risks To Save Syria's Cultural Heritage", *NPR*, (28-2-2016), <http://www.npr.org/2016/02/28/468475094/some-take-massive-risks-to-save-syrias-cultural-heritage>

⁴⁰ Weber, Katherine, "Archaeologists Create 3D Images of Syria's Historic Sites as ISIS Decimate Artifacts", *Christian Post*, (15-3-2016), <http://www.christianpost.com/news/archaeologists-3d-images-syria-historic-sites-isis-159197/#T0b06RbB5vS17mDi.99>

Iraq

Syria's sectarian dynamics have been present in Iraq for over a decade. Open or tacit conflict has been marring the relations between the three large communities in Iraq. Kurdish efforts to carve or maximize their self-rule territories and the tensions arising from, what Fanar Haddad calls, "Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection of this state-building project",⁴¹ are rendering the prospects for the future bleak and place the other religious communities in a precarious situation.

These dynamics are particularly important, after the Islamic State 2014-5 operation of conquest, destruction and expulsion in Iraq's most pluralist areas in the Ninewah region. Population homogenization has been a declared or undeclared policy of all major parts in the conflict. On the one hand, this takes the form of expulsions or deny of entry and, on the other hand, it involves less invasive policies of co-optation, militarisation and denial of separate ethno-religious identity for the smaller communities that reside in areas controlled by one of the major communities.

Furthermore, the interweaving of Shia identity with the state apparatus is squeezing religious communities out of the public space, as extremist forces and elements from the political and religious elite, are pushing towards an increasing islamisation of the government-held areas. Nightclubs and other places where 'immorality and debauchery' is manifested are increasingly the target of attacks and 'interventions'. For instance, on January 25, Baghdad was covered in flyers calling for bans on singing and the use of makeup. This incident is building on numerous other incidents, such as the July 2015 raids of the Iraqi security forces on nightclubs in Baghdad, in order to enforce a ban on

⁴¹ Haddad, Fanar, "Shia-Centric State Building and Sunni Rejection in Post-2003 Iraq", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (7-1-2016), <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/01/07/shia-centric-state-building-and-sunni-rejection-in-post-2003-iraq/istn>

the sale of alcohol.⁴² This is an alarming indication that this type of measures are not limited to the 'Islamic State'.

In late 2015, smaller religious communities of Iraq, such as Christians, Mandaean and Yazidis, decided to respond to the pressures and threats, by creating an alliance between them. It takes the form of the reactivation of the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities (AIM), which was initially created in 2010, but was never fully activated.⁴³ The drive towards greater cooperation between the smaller religious groups increases their collective power and the strength of their voice. Most importantly, it conveys a unity message that sets an important example and precedent, in light of the growing division between and within religious communities in Iraq.

Sunni-Shia divide

The relations between the Shia and the Sunni are the one most affected. The massive mobilising of Shia militias, that have almost replaced the Iraqi army in its fight against ISIS, has led to the creation of a strong largely unsupervised force. Shia militias are believed to be responsible for revenge-attacks on Sunni. According to Human Rights Watch annual report, there have been several instances of government forces or Shia militias demolishing Sunni homes and kidnapping and possibly killing Sunni civilians.⁴⁴ Revenge-based tactics have been, also, acquiring a more institutional undertone. Samarra is a case in point. The project to rebuild the al-Askari shrine, which was destroyed in AQI's massive attacks in 2006 and 2007, has generated a form of population segregation. Some 2,500 Sunni businesses and 1,000 homes in the surrounding area have been closed and the remaining residents are 'encouraged' to sell their

⁴² Bassem, Wassim, "Can Iraq separate religion and state?", Al-Monitor, (16-02-2016), <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/02/iraq-islamic-groups-attack-civic-activities.html>

⁴³ Mamouri, Ali, "What Iraq needs to do to protect minorities", Al-Monitor, (15-12-2015), <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/iraq-minorities-alliance-lack-protection.html>

⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch, World Report 2016, (January 2016), p. 321, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016>

properties and relocate, creating the fear among the Sunni population that expulsion will follow.⁴⁵

Sect-based discrimination is more pronounced in the case of displaced Sunni populations. A sponsorship system has been introduced in government-held areas and to some extent in Kurdish areas, requiring from non-residents to have a resident to guarantee for them before their allowed entrance.⁴⁶ Although all religious communities have been affected by the measure, displaced Sunnis are predominantly targeted, leaving them no option but to return to IS-held territories and risk execution.

Distrust have been guiding the stance of local authorities towards displaced populations, since there is a widespread fear that militants are hiding among the civilians. For example, a group of 500 Sunnis from a small village in Sinjar, among them several women and children, have been stranded between the IS and Kurdish forces, since November 2015, when the area was recaptured by the Kurdish forces. They are denied permission to enter the Kurdish areas, as officials claim that the whole village sided with the IS. Likewise, they are afraid to return to their village, fearing that Yazidis in the area will seek revenge, demonstrating that distrust is not limited to the larger communities. As someone from the group explained: "You know what Daesh did to them... As far as they're concerned, any (Sunni) Arab is either Daesh or related to Daesh".⁴⁷ For the time being, they survive due to the good-will of Arab tribes in the area and Kurdish soldiers, guarding the frontline;⁴⁸ a strong indication that empathy

⁴⁵ Kalin, Stephen and Kareem Raheem, "Samarra's Sunnis fear displacement a decade after Iraq shrine attack", *Reuters*, (15-02-2016), <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-samarra-idUSKCN0VO1OH>

⁴⁶ Salloum, Saad, *At Crossroads: Human Rights Violations Against Iraqi Minorities After ISIS*, Heartland Alliance International (HAI) and Masarat Foundation for Cultural and Media Development (Masarat), (September 2015), <http://masaratiraq.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/AT-CROSSROADS.pdf>

⁴⁷ Coles, Isabel, "Trapped between Iraq frontlines, refugees illustrate Sunni Arab predicament", *Reuters*, (25-02-2016), <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-refugees-idUSKCN0VY0LP>

⁴⁸ Ibid.

and solidarity are still present in the lower echelons and interpersonal relations, in defiance to official policies.

The distrust is not unfounded. Several IS-claimed attacks have taken place in Shia and to a lesser extent Kurdish territories. Since the beginning of the year, only in Baghdad, IS has conducted numerous attacks, the most important of which was an attack in a shopping centre in a Shia district in Baghdad (January 11), an attack on a Shia mosque (February 25), a twin attack on Abu Ghraib prison and an open market (February 28) and an attack on a soccer stadium (March 25),⁴⁹ all resulting in the death of dozens of civilians.

Sunni marginalisation has been a long debated 'reason' for the current surge in violence. There is a consensus that if Sunnis continue to feel that they have no stakes and that they do not get a fair share of Iraq's economic and political power, the seed of conflict will remain. With Sunni cities, such as Ramadi, totally destroyed and embedded with explosives, return to normal life will take time. According to one estimate, it will take nine months to clear Ramadi of explosives that were placed by the retreating IS forces.⁵⁰ Reconstruction is expected to take much longer, since the Iraqi government struggles with reduced oil revenues and sectarian pressures favour the allocation of funds to Shia areas.

Mistrust and sectarian pressures have been equally responsible for the stalling in the proposed incorporation of Sunnis in the Iraqi security forces. The

⁴⁹ Bradley, Matt and Ghassan Adnan, "Islamic State Claims Responsibility for Pair of Iraq Attacks", *Wall Street Journal*, (12-1-2016), <http://www.wsj.com/articles/at-least-nine-people-killed-in-attack-on-baghdad-shopping-mall-1452532139> ; Paton, Callum, "Baghdad bomb attack: At least 15 killed in double Islamic State suicide blasts at Shia mosque in Iraqi capital", *IB Times*, (25-2-2016), <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/baghdad-bomb-attack-least-12-killed-double-suicide-blasts-shia-mosque-iraqi-capital-1546056> ; El-Ghobashy Tamer and Ghassan Adnan, "Islamic State Launches Attacks in Baghdad", *Wall Street Journal*, (29-2-2016), <http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-militants-fight-iraqi-forces-in-abu-ghraib-1456668706> ; Al-Jazeera, "Suicide bomber kills dozens at football stadium in Iraq", (26-3-2016), <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/suicide-attack-kills-dozens-football-stadium-iraq-160325181900028.html>

⁵⁰ Arango, Tim, "Sunni Resentment Muddles Prospect of Reunifying Iraq After ISIS", *New York Times*, (12-02-2016), http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/13/world/middleeast/sunni-resentment-muddles-prospect-of-reunifying-iraq-after-isis.html?_r=0

actual number of Sunni units in the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMU) falls short of the agreed, in 2015, 50,000. Not more than 16,000 have been accepted and most of them in the largely Sunni Anbar region (9,000). As a commander in Anbar remarked: "There is a lack of trust regarding the individuals who will be incorporated".⁵¹

This apparent lack of progress has persuaded several Sunni political figures to seek an alternative path: autonomy. The idea is promoted by the High Coordination Committee, a new formation of Sunni parliamentary forces that was established in November 2015, under the leadership of the former vice president, Osama al-Nujaifi.⁵² The plan is to take advantage of 2005 constitution's relevant provisions to turn Sunni provinces into semi-autonomous regions, similar but not as 'independent' as KRG. Although no official requests have been made yet, the High Coordination Committee has been active in promoting the idea in Middle Eastern and Western capitals. However, while autonomy within an Iraqi state might be a promising solution, in light of the current situation, it is, nevertheless, destined to create further incentives for population homogenization. While regions with almost exclusively Sunni population, like Anbar, are easy to delimit, the situation is much more complex in several disputed territories with mixed population, such as Mosul and Salaheddin. As the example of Kurdish encroachment in Kirkuk and Nineweh has shown, disputed areas often witness largescale displacement, resentment and conflict.

Nevertheless, while enmity, distrust and sectarianism are overtaking Iraq, some cities and people decide to go against the flow. A case in point is Karbala, which hosts several hundred Sunni families that abandoned their homes in front of advancing IS forces. Many come from mixed Sunni-Shia tribes,

⁵¹ Al-Shibeeba, Dina, "Iraqi Sunnis still feel excluded by anti-ISIS mobilization forces", *Al Arabiya*, (20-01-2016), <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/analysis/2016/01/20/Iraqi-Sunnis-still-feel-excluded-by-anti-ISIS-forces-.html>

⁵² al-Salhy, Suadad, "Unity through division: The Sunni plan to save themselves and Iraq", *Middle East Eye*, (22-02-2016), <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraqi-sunnis-plan-use-law-create-autonomous-regions-1074892889>

demonstrating that religious plurality is part of Iraq history, and the Shia officials express their pride that their Sunni brothers feel safer among the Shia.⁵³ The message of coexistence is also embodied in the case of a mixed Sunni-Shia couple, a relatively rare phenomenon after 2003. Nour and Ahmed's fears for the future of coexistence in Iraq in light of the increasing power of religious figures,⁵⁴ showcase, in the most personal way, the dangers that lie ahead, the face of the casualties of the sunni-shia divide and the ongoing loss of Iraq's religious pluralism.

Christians

"I never want to go back to Iraq, even if they kill all the IS fighters... We must face the truth: In the Middle East, there is no place for us anymore". These are the words of a Christian woman, who fled Iraq and currently resides in Jordan, with the hope to reach Europe in the near future. Describing her experience, she adds: "At a certain point I did not even trust my Muslim neighbours — whom I have known almost my whole life".⁵⁵ These sentiments are shared by a priest in Qosh, a predominately Christian city, few kilometres north of Mosul, who openly declares that, refugees are welcome on the condition that they are not Muslim.⁵⁶

These statements demonstrate the level of desperation and deep distrust that the 'Islamic State' 2014 offensive on the Nineveh has created. Although greatly reduced, due to the recapture of several areas by the Kurdish

⁵³ Steele, Jonathan, "13 million Shia pilgrims descend on Karbala for Arbaeen", *Middle East Eye*, (1-12-2015), <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/arba-karbala-pilgrims-iraq-581628397>

⁵⁴ George, Susannah, "Love in the time of militias: Valentine's Day in Iraq", *Associated Press*, (14-02-2016), <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/777d9fe5c8be40d69310bd3266adf300/love-time-militias-valentines-day-iraq>

⁵⁵ Stoter, Brenda, "Iraqi Christians find safe haven in Jordan's churches", *Al-Monitor*, (19-3-2015), <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/iraq-christians-refugees-jordan-hopeless-islamic-state.html>

⁵⁶ Argentieri, Benedetta, "On the Run From ISIS, Iraqi Assyrians Trying to Save Their Heritage", *Assyrian International News Agency*, (01-02-2016), <http://www.aina.org/news/20160201154942.htm>

Peshmerga, the displacement of Christian and other populations or the destructions of properties and religious sites continue. For example, in early February, ten houses belonging to Christians, who had fled the area, were totally destroyed by IS in an unspecified area north of Iraq.⁵⁷ However, IS's legacy is much more than the rubbles it leaves behind, it is also a legacy of overwhelming terror that leaves the Christian community with the option to leave and never return, as thousands have done since 2003, or stay and face great challenges.

Out of 1,5 million Christians in 2003, less than 300,000 remain. Many are internally displaced. In Mosul, only, around 150,000 Christians were forced to flee when IS captured the city, and only 68 Christians, mostly elders, remained to remind the city's once large Christian community.⁵⁸ According to the Director of the Baghdad Academy of Human Sciences, Fr. Dr. Ameer Jaje al-Dominiki, around 10 -15 Christian families emigrate from Iraq every day.⁵⁹ This estimate illustrates the alarming rate with which Christians are leaving their centuries-long homeland.

For those staying behind distrust and fatigue from unfulfilled promises are predominant. On February 7, a conference was organised by the Iraqi parliament, titled "Conference on the protection of peaceful coexistence". There is no doubt that this was a positive initiative. However, Christian representatives refused to participate, citing the pointlessness of conferences and meetings that lead to nothing concrete.⁶⁰

However, with minimal means for self-defence and inhabiting areas in Nineveh that are disputed between the Shia-dominated central government and

⁵⁷ Mamoun, Abdelhak, "ISIS blows up ten Christian houses north of Mosul", *Iraqi News*, (01-02-2016), <http://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/isis-blows-up-ten-christian-homes-north-of-mosul/>

⁵⁸ Ukodoju, Edris, and Haman Baban, "Most Christians fled Iraq since 2003: Official", *Anadolu Agency*, (10-02-2016), <http://aa.com.tr/en/todays-headlines/most-christians-fled-iraq-since-2003-official/519021>

⁵⁹ Salloum, Saad, *At Crossroads: Human Rights Violations Against Iraqi Minorities After ISIS*, op.cit. p. 21

⁶⁰ Agenzia Fides, "Christians boycott the "conference on peaceful coexistence"; Chaldean Patriarch: we are tired of useless words", (09-02-2016), http://www.fides.org/en/news/59369-ASIA_IRAQ_Christians_boycot_the_conference_on_peaceful_coexistence_Chaldean_Patriarch_we_are_tired_of_useless_words#.VsCG39AXX3u

KRG, Christians have come under increased pressure, in the recent months, to pick sides. This has created a widening rift inside the community, which given that militarisation is a significant part of 'picking sides', it might fuel intra-Christian tensions in the near future. In March, the Chaldean Patriarch Louis Raphael I Sako, rejected the option of creating independent Christian militias, because "this could lead to another 'holocaust'... [similar to what has] happened in the past when Christian militia fought the wars of others", opting instead for the option of embedding Christian fighters in the Iraqi or Kurdish forces.⁶¹ While Patriarch Louis did not show a preference, there is an intense debate regarding the question which side should Christians choose. Some claim that KRG is a more preferable option, since the regional constitution guarantees the rights of the Christians and leave an option for a future autonomous Christian region.⁶² Others, claim that the Kurds are not to be trusted because they abandoned Christians in the Nineweh, when IS forces attacked, and they want the territory for themselves. While others go one step further claiming that Christians should form independent militias that will pave the way for an autonomous or independent region with a self-defence capacity or international protection.⁶³

The idea of an autonomous Christian region has been gaining ground among Iraqi Christians. Back in May 2015, Yaacoub Korkees, a Christian member of the Iraqi parliament said that "all Iraqi minorities in general are against the division of Iraq... [however] if they want to divide this country into Sunni, Kurdish and Shiite states, then we will call for a fourth state:

⁶¹ Agenzia Fides, "Chaldean Patriarch: no "Christian militia " to free land occupied by jihadists", (8-3-2016), http://www.fides.org/en/news/59586-ASIA_IRAQ_Chaldean_Patriarch_no_Christian_militia_to_free_land_occupied_by_jihadists#.VvIySEfMeC4

⁶² See for example the remarks of Romeo Hakari, leader of the Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party. Rikar, Hussein, "Christian Iraqi Forces Join Fight Against IS", *Voice of America*, (08-02-2016), <http://www.voanews.com/content/christian-iraqi-forces-join-fight-against-is/3181940.html>

⁶³ Near East Center for Strategic Engagement, "Is Patriarch Louis Raphael I Sako a religious, political or a military leader of the Assyrian Christian community and forces in Iraq and Syria?", (07-03-2016), <http://nec-se.com/2016/03/07/is-patriarch-louis-raphael-i-sako-a-religious-political-or-a-military-leader-of-the-assyrian-christian-community-and-forces-in-iraq-and-syria/>

a Christian state.”⁶⁴ On March 11, 2016, the European Parliament adopted a resolution that, among others, calls upon the international coalition against ISIS to ensure “a safe haven for the Chaldeans/Assyrians/Syriacs and others at risk in the Nineveh Plains”.⁶⁵ Although the European Parliament did not refer to an autonomous -or more so independent- region, judging from the Kurdish precedent, safe havens tend to lead to autonomous regions. Furthermore, a former member of the US Congress stated, in February, that Congress is considering the option of an autonomous Christian region, and he called for “an into-the-plains, basically a protectorate, whereby Christians, Yazidis and other minorities [will be protected]”.⁶⁶

In the meantime, disagreements among Christians and manipulation from the Kurdish and the Iraqi government unfold on the ground, with a proliferation of armed Christian groups, operating under one of the three point-views. A new military formation, consisting of 800 Christian fighters and operating under the Iraqi government, has been created few weeks ago.⁶⁷ The new force is the second Christian militia to operate under the control of the Iraqi government, after Babylon Brigades were formed and incorporated into PMU, in the summer of 2014. KRG, also, controls a Christian militia, called Nineveh Plain Protection Forces, which was formed in September 2014.

Militarisation is not the only problem that the Christian community faces. According to the Chaldean Patriarch, there is noticeable discrimination against Christians, with examples of “contractors refusing to build homes [and] monasteries... for Christians... [banning] the display of posters, even in public

⁶⁴ Salloum, Saad. “Iraqi Christians take up arms to regain lost land”, *Al Monitor*, (19-8-2015), <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/iraq-nineveh-christians-armed-militias.html>

⁶⁵ European Parliament, “Resolution on recent attacks and abductions by Da’esh in the Middle East, notably of Assyrians”, (11-3-2016), <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+MOTION+P8-RC-2015-0240+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

⁶⁶ Gonzalez, Jose R., “Congress Considering Safe Zone for Persecuted Christians, Yazidis in Iraq”, *CNS News*, (09-02-2016), <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/jose-r-gonzalez/congress-will-push-safe-zone-persecuted-christians-yazidis-iraq#.VrpzMhOeZDU.twitter>

⁶⁷ Rudaw, “Baghdad arms Christian volunteers in volatile Nineveh plains”, (8-2-2016), <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/10022016>

offices, asking Christian girls to wear a veil".⁶⁸ Furthermore, according to a report published by an Iraqi organisation that monitors minority rights in Iraq, kidnappings of Christians, which were reduced in the previous years, are again on the rise, particularly since the formation of PMU.⁶⁹ Violence and threats against Christians have been also reported in connection to the growing problem of seizures of Christian properties. Many abandoned houses have been seized and resold by the government and many of those who returned found their houses occupied by new residents.⁷⁰

In this climate, the message of the Chaldean priest, Douglas al-Bazi, who runs a church in Ainkawa in Kurdistan that hosts several refugee families, might seem out of place. "The people that are in my centre, they are going to stay for another 15 years at least... It is not just about the Islamic State... I believe ISIS, sooner or later, they are going to go out, but how can we build the trust again for people?". His answer is forgiveness: "We are not looking for revenge. We forgive... Without forgiveness the pain will continue from generation to generation".⁷¹

Yazidis

Yazidis, only recently caught the imagination of the world, due to their massacre by the 'Islamic State' in Sinjar. There are wide variations in the estimates of the size of the Yazidi population, bringing their numbers from

⁶⁸ Catholic Philly, "Chaldean patriarch details acts of discrimination against Christians", (28-01-2016),

<http://catholicphilly.com/2016/01/news/world-news/chaldean-patriarch-details-acts-of-discrimination-against-christians/>

⁶⁹ Salloum, Saad, *At Crossroads: Human Rights Violations Against Iraqi Minorities After ISIS*, op.cit., p. 22

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 24-6

⁷¹ Smith, Samuel, "The Word 'Genocide' Fails to Describe What Is Happening to Christians in the Middle East, Chaldean Pastor Says", *The Christian Post*, (10-03-2016),

<http://www.christianpost.com/news/displaced-iraqi-christians-feel-alone-forgotten-chaldean-pastor-douglas-al-bazi-159099/pageall.html>

500,000 up to 800,000, before the onslaught.⁷² In any case, 400,000 have been displaced, hundreds killed and over 3000 women enslaved.⁷³ The recapture of Sinjar, in November 2015, unearthed what many feared. According to a report published by Yazda, on January 28 2016, 35 mass graves have been discovered and many more are expected to be found in the next months.⁷⁴ Furthermore, unverified reports from two Canadian human rights organisations has accused Shia militias of killing 55 Yazidi girls (and several Sunni civilians) during operations for the recapture of Ramadi.⁷⁵

However, the plight of Yazidis is far from over. Many still remain in captivity, mostly women, and occasional abductions still occur. For example, two Yazidis from Sakiniya village were abducted by ISIS in late January, according to ARA News.⁷⁶ The continuing threat from ISIS and the problems they face in the Kurdish areas, to which they fled, have persuaded many to leave Iraq. It is estimated that 10-15 Yazidi families apply for visas to leave Iraq every day.⁷⁷ Most of those leaving, head to Germany because there is already a 100,000 strong Yazidi community there and the German authorities provide asylum to the Yazidis with relative ease. This flight constitutes a major threat for the community, not only because of their dwindling numbers, but also because their religion is tightly-connected to Sinjar and their holy city Lalish.

⁷² The 800,000 estimate is made by the Yazidi Human Rights Organisation, which might slight exaggerate the numbers to highlight the Yazidi plight. Hence, most probably, the size of the community must have been smaller. Smith, Taylor, "In five years there won't be any Yazidis left here", Al-Jazeera, (20-2-2016), <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/02/years-won-yazidis-left-160215061037283.html>

⁷³ ARA News, "ISIS extremists abduct two Yazidis north Iraq", (22-1-2016), <http://aranews.net/2016/01/isis-extremists-abduct-two-yezidis-north-iraq/>

⁷⁴ Yazda, *Mass Graves of Yazidis Killed by the Islamic State Organization or Local Affiliates On or After August 3, 2014*, (28-1-2016), <http://www.yazda.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Yazda-Report-on-Mass-Graves-Jan-28-2016.pdf>

⁷⁵ MacCharles, Tonda, "Canadian groups report allegations of Yazidi 'massacre' in Iraq", *The Star*, (12-2-2016), <http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2016/02/12/canadian-groups-report-allegations-of-yazidi-massacre-in-iraq.html>

⁷⁶ ARA News, "ISIS extremists abduct two Yazidis north Iraq", op.cit.

⁷⁷ Salloum, Saad, *At Crossroads: Human Rights Violations Against Iraqi Minorities After ISIS*, op.cit. p. 16

Many want to leave due to their distrust towards the Iraqi Kurds, which stems from the events surrounding their massacre and their life as displaced people in Kurdish territories. Yazidis blame the Kurdish Peshmerga that it abandoned them when IS entered their areas, despite their reassurances that the Yazidi villages would be protected. In fact, if it wasn't for the Syrian Kurds, who broke through the IS forces and rescued many, the community would be totally annihilated.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, Yazidis face the type of problems the Christian community faces, but to a much larger extent. The main reason is that many Kurds perceive Yazidis as Kurds, which leads to significant pressures to abandon their separate Yazidi identity and self-identify as Kurds. At the same time, however, others dispute their Kurdish identity and some religious figures in Kurdistan go as far as publicly adopt the 'devil-worshippers' label that the 'Islamic State' has used against the Yazidis, while pressures to convert abound.⁷⁸ These perceptions are replicated on the social level too, as Luqman Mahmood, a high school teacher from Mosul who now lives and works in Sheikhan, attests in his account of his interactions with his students.⁷⁹ Likewise, there have been reports about arbitrary arrests of Yazidi activists, discriminations in the workplace, bureaucratic hurdles, especially for the issue of new identity papers, which many Yazidis have lost during their flight. The lack of official papers, also, creates additional restriction in movement that the aforementioned sponsorship measure creates.⁸⁰

More alarming is the militarisation of Yazidis, a trend that affects almost all smaller communities in the region. Like in other similar cases, militarisation creates rifts within the community as separate militias operate under different commands. Three Yazidi militias are believed to exist. The first, called Sinjar Defence Units (HPS), is believed to be funded and controlled by the Iraqi

⁷⁸ Salloum, Saad, *At Crossroads: Human Rights Violations Against Iraqi Minorities After ISIS*, op.cit. p. 13-4

⁷⁹ Smith, Taylor, "In five years there won't be any Yazidis left here", op.cit

⁸⁰ Salloum, Saad, *At Crossroads: Human Rights Violations Against Iraqi Minorities After ISIS*, op.cit. p. 12-3, 16, 17

government. The second, called Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), is considered to be part of PKK and affiliated with YPG. The third, and most recent one, is established under the command of Peshmerga.⁸¹ The rivalry between their sponsors, particularly regarding the disputed status of Sinjar, means that these militias might become tools in the hands of their sponsors, bringing the already precarious status of the community in front of greater threats and intra-communal violence.

Moreover, the harsh conditions and the trauma many suffered have led to a rise of suicides among Yazidis, many of whom are women. The experience of rape and captivity and the de facto ostracism from society that values virginity highly has been a driving motive. The Kurdish authorities were conducting, until recently, highly controversial 'virginity tests' to women that managed to escape IS. After pressures of local and international organisations this practice has now, fortunately, stopped.⁸²

While trauma and distrust are prevailing, there are several initiatives that aim at tackling the problem, each one with different means and different approaches. Nadia Murad, who has become the international face for the plight of Yazidi, is the most widely known example, and the decision by the Iraqi Migration and Displacement Ministry to nominate Murad as Iraq's candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize shows that the Iraqi government seems to acknowledge their predicament.⁸³ Furthermore, an initiative led by AMAR Foundation, focussing on children's education, has produced a number of children books that try to help children deal with the trauma and at the same time make them trust again their neighbours.⁸⁴ Trust and kindness may even come from unexpected sources, as several testimonies of captive women, who managed to

⁸¹ Ibid. p. 75-7

⁸² Al-Araby, "'Virginity tests' on Yazidi rape survivors to end", (28-01-2016), <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2016/1/29/virginity-tests-on-yazidi-rape-survivors-to-end>

⁸³ Sattar, Sardar, "Kurdish Women Support Yazidi Girl for Nobel Peace Prize", BasNews, (25-02-2016), <http://basnews.com/index.php/en/news/kurdistan/260918>

⁸⁴ Haines-Young, James, "After escape from ISIS, Yazidi children turn new page with books", *Al Arabiya*, (27-02-2016), <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/features/2016/02/27/Displaced-Yazidi-children-turn-a-new-page-with-books-project-.html>

escape IS with the help of Sunnis, show.⁸⁵ In the same vein, the underground networks, that operate throughout Iraq with the purpose to secure the release or help the escape of those Yazidis still in captivity, are also an indication that trust can be rebuilt.⁸⁶ So are the frequent operations by the Kurdish and Iraqi forces to free Yazidi hostages. In the most recent operation, conducted near the Syria-Iraq borders, 31 Yazidi, who were held captive for a year, were released.⁸⁷ Although these initiatives do not erase the experiences and the current difficulties Yazidi face, nevertheless they may contribute in reducing the distrust, which is always a prerequisite for coexistence.

Other religious communities

Less known religious communities, such as Zoroastrians, Kakais, Mandaean and Shabaks, are facing their share of challenges in conflict-ridden Iraq. Many have been targeted by the 'Islamic State' on the same grounds that Yazidis were and many are displaced within Iraq or are refugees. A significant development for the status of these religious communities, is the Law of Protecting Components of Iraqi Kurdistan, which was voted in May 2015 by the Kurdish Parliament, since for some of these communities this is the first time their status as separate religious communities is identified. This is particularly important for Zoroastrians, the Kakais and the Shabaks, who, for decades or even centuries, were forced to hide their true identity or self-identify as Muslims. Problems still remain, as some communities still are not allowed to have representatives in the Kurdish or Iraqi parliamentary bodies under the quota system. However, a

⁸⁵ Solomon, Erika, "The spoils of war", *Gulf News*, (24-02-2016), <http://gulfnews.com/culture/people/the-spoils-of-war-1.1678692>

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Cheleng, Sozbin, "Kurdish forces free 31 Yazidi abductees after storming ISIS detention center on Syria-Iraq border", *ARA News*, (5-3-2016), <http://aranews.net/2016/03/kurdish-forces-free-31-yezidi-abductees-isis/>

quota for Kakais was recently set in the Halabja provincial council, for the first time in Iraqi history,⁸⁸ which can create a precedent for the future.

These religious communities are, also, affected by the militarisation. Kakais and Shabaks,⁸⁹ in particular, experience wide schisms within their communities regarding their identity. For the Kakais, the question of disagreement is whether Kakais are Muslims or not. For the Shabaks, the question is whether the main attribute of their identity is Kurdish or Shia; an issue that is magnified by the fact that some Shabaks have found refuge in Kurdish areas and others in south Iraq. These rifts are exploited by the Shia-led Iraqi government and KRG, who try to bring these communities under their fold and the creation of militias is a basic tool for this purpose. A Kakai militia was formed in summer 2015, after months of debate regarding who will lead the force, since the Kurdish authorities wanted a Kurd to be the commander. In the case of Shabaks, different militias have been established, one operating under the Peshmerga and the other as part of PMU.⁹⁰

Mandaeans⁹¹ and Zoroastrians have largely avoided the militarisation path. Mandaeans, prima facie, seem to be in a better position than the other communities, since they are recognized by the Iraqi constitution and there is a quota allocated to the community. However, 90% of the community have left Iraq over the years, many of whom are religious leaders, leaving, thus, the remaining Mandaeans without religious authority and no means to perform

⁸⁸ Salloum, Saad, "Who are Iraq's Kakai?", *Al Monitor*, (09-02-2016),

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/02/iraq-kakai-religious-minority-kurdistan-quota.html#ixzz3zqFFTfKQ>

⁸⁹ For an overview of the history and the religious beliefs of Kakais and Shabaks see M.M.Leezenberg, "Between Assimilation and Deportation: History of the Shabak and the Kakais in Northern Iraq," in *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*, ed. B.Kellner-Heinkele and K.Kehl-Bodrogi, Leiden, 1997, pp. 155-74.

⁹⁰ Salloum, Saad, *At Crossroad*, op.cit. p. 78-80

⁹¹ For an overview of the Mandaean history and beliefs see Encyclopedia Iranica, "Mandaeans I: History" and "Mandaeans II: The Mandaean Religion",

<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/mandaeans-1> ,

<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/mandaeans-2-religion> For a more detailed account see Buckley, Jorunn Jacobsen, *The Mandaeans: ancient texts and modern people*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002

their religious rituals.⁹² Zoroastrians, on the contrary, is a growing community; the only one of those examined. The recognition of their religion by KRG and the generally favourable climate in Kurdish areas, have allowed many adherents, who hid their religion for decades, to engage with the beliefs of their fathers and grandfathers. The Zoroastrian Cultural and Heritage Center was established, in Sulaimaniyah, which contains a temple in its premises, where Zoroastrian rituals are held for the first in Iraq, even though it has not been yet recognised officially as a place of worship.⁹³

The example of the Zoroastrian revival in Iraq offers some hope for the future of religious pluralism in Iraq, but there is need for many more positive changes. In the words of Peer Luqman Haji, the spiritual leader of Iraqi Zoroastrians, *“we have to spread love and repair the house [Iraq] we live in, without any discrimination. Therefore, clerics must preach reform and build societies on the basis of cooperation... When religion turns into a strict ideology that rejects any debate or reform while clerics claim they speak in the name of God — believing that their word and interpretation are the word of God — society will be brought to ruins. Reform is an imperative and starting point for us representatives of Zoroastrianism to propagate our message... So it is our duty to start this cultural revolution. We do not only mean the concept of religious freedom or the return to an old religion, but the choice of a new ideology that can suit and reconcile with the spirit of this age. This is why I call this ‘a cultural and Reformist revolution’.”*⁹⁴

Iraq’s heritage

Attacks against archaeological sites and places of worship still continue, although since the unthinkable destruction in Hatra and Nimrud, destructions of

⁹² Ibid. p. 64-6

⁹³ Salloum, Saad, “Zoroastrianism in Iraq seeks official recognition”, Al- Monitor, (17-02-2016), <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/02/iraq-kurdistan-religious-minorities-zoroastrianism.html>

⁹⁴ Ibid

Iraqi heritage has diminished. The most important heritage loss, in the last months, was the destruction of the monastery of St. Elijah, the oldest monastery in Iraq, which was destroyed by ISIS on January 20, 2016.⁹⁵ Earlier, another monastery was bombed in the Tel Keppe village in North Iraq, while destructions have been also reported in the ancient site of Qalat Sharqat.⁹⁶ Mosques, such as the Ammar bin Yasser Mosque and al-Fath al-Mubeen/Fateh Mosque in Babil Governorate, have been targeted, as well.⁹⁷

While ISIS continues its project of destruction of Iraq's pluralist heritage, stories of people, who refuse to submit to IS worldview of havoc and make every effort to preserve Iraq's heritage, have come to light. Sami Nasir, a resident of the predominantly Christian city of al-Qosh, takes care of an abandoned synagogue, like his father did before him. Although, the Jewish population of the city, and as a matter of fact of the country (only 6 are believed to have remained), are long gone, Sami meticulously tends the synagogue.⁹⁸ A similar effort to preserve Iraq's heritage is undertaken by two Christians, a priest called Gabriel Tooma and a monk called Friar Najeeb Michael. Both go to great lengths to save ancient manuscripts and relics, which they hide in secure places and, with the help of Italian NGO, scan and save in digital format. According to Father Gabriel, "If Daesh burns down a church we can rebuild it, but the manuscripts are our history. They trace back our roots; they are part of our civilization. If they get destroyed, then we are lost, and our culture will be forgotten."⁹⁹

⁹⁵ BBC, "Iraq's oldest Christian monastery destroyed by Islamic State", (20-1-2016), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35360415>

⁹⁶ Danti, Michael D. et.al. "Weekly Report 73-74", *ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives*, (December 23, 2015 – January 5, 2016), <http://www.asor-syrianheritage.org/asor-cultural-heritage-initiatives-weekly-report-73-74-december-23-2015-january-5-2016/>

⁹⁷ Ibid

⁹⁸ DiCenzo, Andrea, "On IS front line, Iraqi Christians left to care for abandoned synagogue", *Middle East Eye*, (18-12-2016), <http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/local-iraqi-christians-left-care-abandoned-synagogue-1723336704>

⁹⁹ Argentieri, Benedetta, "On the Run From ISIS, Iraqi Assyrians Trying to Save Their Heritage", op.cit

Lebanon: Religious Coexistence in the Face of Threat

Lebanon is a small country with 18 religious confessions, which are officially recognized in the Constitution, since the Ta'ef Agreement in 1989. According to the power-sharing system that is confession, the President is always Christian, the Prime Minister Sunni and the Speaker of the Parliament Shia. Lebanon has been an example for fostering religious pluralism and has become the 'mosaic of religions'. It is of no coincidence that Lebanon hosted an international seminar—sponsored by the Al Quds Center for Political Studies and the Danish Det Arabiske Initiative organisation—on *how Christians and other non-Muslim social groups are portrayed in official school programmes in Arab countries*, bringing political figures, education experts and members of “different Christian communities from various Arab countries”.¹⁰⁰

Religious pluralism does not only exist between Christians and Muslims communities but also within the two large communities. According to a statistic published in the Harvard Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy, Christians in Lebanon today have a share of approximately 32% of the population, meaning they have declined from being the dominate confession for many decades to comprising only a third of the population. The Christians in Lebanon include Catholic, Orthodox, Oriental and Evangelical communities. The Catholics comprise Greek Catholics, Chaldeans, Armenian Catholics, Latins and in particular the Maronite Church, which is central in Lebanon. Lebanon also hosts Eastern Churches such as the Assyrian, Syriac Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Coptic communities, and the Greek Orthodox, the biggest after the Maronites, all of which have found a place to practice their faith and traditions freely. By the same token, the Muslim communities are also internally pluralistic, and comprise of Sunnis, Shiites, Alawites and Druze. Interestingly, there is a tiny Jewish community in Lebanon that comprises of approximately 100-200 persons.

¹⁰⁰ Agenzia Fides, “International Seminar: how Christians and other non-Muslim social groups are portrayed in official school programmes in Arab countries”, (4/3/2016) <http://goo.gl/VqtHku>

According to the Preliminary findings of Country Visit to Lebanon by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief (UNHR) “Lebanon has successfully managed to keep the society together, across religious boundaries ... [...] its tradition of religious pluralism, which makes the country unique, in particular in the Middle East but also beyond this region.” The report further concluded that “[r]eligious diversity is a visible and audible reality, as Churches and Mosques often stand in close vicinity and the ringing of bells at times blends with the Muslim prayer call [...] Lebanon’s pluralistic heritage represents a counter-point to aggressive agendas of sectarian homogenization”.¹⁰¹ Yet, the amalgam of religion and politics exposes religious pluralism to political turbulence, both domestically and regionally. Lebanon is facing multiple challenges, from the absence of President since 2014, the ongoing war in Syria that has brought fear of a spill over, the large influx of Syrian refugees – which are predominantly Sunni—, affecting the demographic balance of Lebanon between the Muslim and Christian communities, to the alliances of each party with external forces.

This renders the Lebanese society and its religious pluralistic status vulnerable, justifying the fear that Lebanon is constantly being on the ‘edge of a civil war’. However, the regional and domestic political problems in Lebanon have not—yet—tipped the balance of religious pluralism and coexistence. In the past months, both politicians and the society as a whole seem to be resilient to the impact of sectarianism in Lebanon.

Lebanon’s religious pluralism is threatened to a large extent by the Syrian crisis but also from extremists inspired by it at home. Northern Lebanon has witnessed sectarian violence between the Sunni’s and Shia’s, especially since the Syrian crisis. Reports on infiltration of ISIS fighters have raised reasonable concerns among the Lebanese. In mid-March 2016, ISIS released a video expressing their intention to invade Lebanon and threatening not only

¹⁰¹ The official report will be presented to the 31st session of the Human Rights Council in March 2016; United Nations Human Rights Office of High Commissioner, “Preliminary finding of Country Visit to Lebanon”, (2/4/2015)

<http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15791&LangID=E>

Hezbollah—who has been fighting in Syria since 2013—but also the Christians, urging them to convert and asking Sunnis to “revolt”. As the ISIS members—who seem of Lebanese origin—stated, “we will cross over to Jerusalem over your remains”.¹⁰² Already from early February 2016, the Governor of North Lebanon, Ramzi Nohra, had all the political banners removed from the city, in an attempt to deescalate the sectarian tension and deter a Sunni-Shia rift that could damage the fragile mosaic of religion and preserve the Lebanon’s religious coexistence. It was a decision following an agreement between Hezbollah (Shia party) and the Future Movement (Sunni party), despite it causing protests by controversial figures and the Muslim Scholars Committee, a gathering of Salafist sheikhs.¹⁰³

What has brought to question the durability of Lebanon’s legacy of religious pluralism and coexistence is the country’s dependency on foreign powers; namely, Saudi Arabia and Iran. The religious background of the foreign powers with domestic parties, has caused the sectarianisation of political and economic manoeuvres. Particularly, Saudi Arabia—which supports Lebanon’s Sunni politicians but also some Christians—suspended \$4 million in funding to the Lebanese army and security forces, because it objects to Hezbollah which is supported by its rival Iran. The sectarian politics of foreign powers seem to inject sectarian tension in the Lebanese political arena, and probably to the society itself. Nevertheless, the fact that both Sunni and Shia parties are also supported by Christians, renders sectarian tension, less likely to occur on a high scale. A couple of weeks after Saudi Arabia’s suspension of the funding, the GCC labelled Hezbollah a terrorist organisation, causing reactions from all political parties in Lebanon, not only from the Shia community but also from the Christian communities; namely the Free Patriotic Movement, the biggest

¹⁰² Naharnet, “Islamic State threatens Hizbullah, Lebanese officials and urges Christians to convert to Islam”, (12/3/2016) <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/204361-islamic-state-threatens-hizbullah-lebanese-officials-urges-christians-to-convert-to-islam>

¹⁰³ Amrieh, Antoine, “Tripoli rattled by removal of religious posters”, *Daily Star*, (8/2/2016) <http://goo.gl/FKounC>

Christian bloc in Lebanon.¹⁰⁴ Even the Sunni MP Hariri is cautious and fearful of a Sunni-Shia rift, who vowed to protect Lebanon from 'region blaze', as the Sunni-Shia strife, according to him, is a 'Red Line'; he further added that in order to maintain civic peace in Lebanon and prevent the country from slipping into a Sunni-Shia rift, dialogue should continue with Hezbollah.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, on the one hand, the fear of sectarian problems resulting from the Saudi-Hezbollah tensions has added pressure to the Sunni community, which may fuel some Sunni extremist elements. On the other hand, all the parties' reaction across religion lines, shows their awareness and necessity of maintaining a balance and staying away from sectarian based friction that would destroy the legacy of religious pluralism and coexistence in Lebanon.

While the country is trying to contain the Saudi-Iranian tension away from its mosaic society, Christians have been very wary of their position in the confessional system given that since 2014 the Presidential position is vacant. In an effort to nominate a Christian President in Lebanon, non-Christian parties, regardless of religious backgrounds, have attempted to mediate among Lebanon's Christian parties. For instance, Hezbollah has supported the Geagea-Aoun meeting which was a historic rapprochement between two Christian foes.¹⁰⁶ By the same token, Al-Mustaqbal movement leader ex-PM Saad Hariri met with MP Jumblat (representative and Chief of the Druze community, the Democratic Gathering), who stressed that the presidential post is for "all Christians" and "all Lebanese", warning that the political vacuum is damaging the society.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, the Lebanese Christians have been alarmed by the

¹⁰⁴ The Economist, "When elephants battle", (5/3/2016)

<http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21693898-little-guy-gets-hurt-saudi-arabia-and-iran-squabble-over-lebanon>

¹⁰⁵ Naharnet, "Hariri Vows to Protect Lebanon from Region Blaze says Sunni-Shiite Strife a Red Line", (3/3/2016) <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/203596-hariri-vows-to-protect-lebanon-from-region-blaze-says-sunni-shiite-strife-a-red-line>

¹⁰⁶ Aziz, Jean, "Lebanon's Christian foes become friends", *Al-Monitor*, (translated by Pascale el-Khoury), (19/1/2016) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/lebanon-christian-leaders-aoun-geagea-meeting.html>

¹⁰⁷ Naharnet, "Hariri meets Jumblat presidential post for All Christians, All Lebanese", (19/2/2016)

appointment of a senior government official at the Ministry of Finance, which based on the constitution should be assigned to a Maronite Christian,¹⁰⁸ while the Minister gave it to a Shia. This caused further fears of sectarianism and raised concerns.¹⁰⁹ According to the report, the Minister of Finance Khalil mentioned that his team has four Christians and rejected the accusation of sectarianism. The incident caused the reaction of the Maronite Church which called for the 'participation of all sects in state institutions after several officials complained about the alleged exclusion of Christians from key posts'. Following this incident, a meeting was summoned in Bkirki, the See of the Maronite Catholic Patriarchate regarding the Marginalization of Christians in state institutions. Other Shia Ministers, particularly from the Amal party, have been accused of favouritism and of the promotion of projects in expense of Christians.¹¹⁰ All the accusations and fear may be seen under a sectarian lens, especially due to fear of the all-decreasing numbers of Christians and of the extremist threats in and next to Lebanon. Yet the issues aforementioned, have more of a political undertone rather than a religious one, but in a confessional system it may be argued that political manoeuvres are swiftly interpreted as religious and sectarian tension.

In many instances Christians seem to reassert that they also have a role to play in maintaining and fostering religious pluralism and religious

<http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/202604-hariri-meets-jumblat-presidential-post-for-all-christians-all-lebanese>

¹⁰⁸ Ya Libnan, "Maronite Bishops decry alleged exclusion of Christians from key state posts", (3/2/2016) <http://yalibnan.com/2016/02/03/maronite-bishops-decry-alleged-exclusion-of-christians-from-key-state-posts/>

¹⁰⁹ Kechichian, Joseph A., "As Lebanon's Demographics shift, Christians bear the brunt", *Gulf News*, (4/2/2016) <http://gulfnews.com/news/mena/lebanon/as-lebanon-s-demographics-shift-christians-bear-the-brunt-1.1666213>

¹¹⁰ Naharnet, "Bkirki meeting on marginalization of Christians postponed", (11/2/2016) <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/201826-bkirki-meeting-on-marginalization-of-christians-postponed>; Naharnet, "Christians posts presidential elections at center of discussion in Bkirki", (12/2/2016) <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/201957-christian-posts-presidential-elections-at-center-of-discussions-in-bkirki>; Plakas, Yiannis, "Do Christians really have raw political deal in Lebanon?", *Middle East Eye*, (1/2/2016) <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/do-christians-really-have-raw-political-deal-lebanon-1362274734>

coexistence in Lebanon. When Russia intervened in the Syrian war, the Russian Orthodox Church declared on October 16, 2015 Russia's "holy war", which instilled a remarkable negative impression in Lebanon not only to the Muslims but also to the Christians, who consider such positions dangerous and unnecessary. Even if there may be popular support for Russia's intervention in Syria among Christian groups in Lebanon, due to their support of Bashar al-Assad, the religious connotations were not necessarily welcomed. The Greek Orthodox Church for the Archdiocese of Beirut, denounced the term 'holy', particularly, the metropolitan bishop, Elias Audi, stated that "[t]he church does not bless wars and does not qualify them as sacred. It does not sanctify wars and does not accept such statements."¹¹¹ Christian intellectuals such as Tarek Mitri, who is also "close to the church, issued a set of positions against the church as a propaganda tool for the politically powerful and highlighted Moscow's contradictory positions on foreign intervention", who later tweeted "Russian intervention is to defend Assad or bring him to negotiation in a position of strength. Defence of Christians is domestic propaganda."¹¹² The denouncement of the Russian Orthodox Church statement did not stop there, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt echoed the words of Metropolitan Audi and Georges Khodr, Greek Orthodox bishop of Mount Lebanon, whom he considers to "represent the conscience of the Eastern Orthodox Church, its free voice and broad horizon at a time when isolation and extremism are sweeping across the whole world and the Arab and Islamic region in particular", adding that ISIS "cannot be confronted with a Christian IS".¹¹³ The manner in which all parties responded, despite their religious background, challenges and counters the attempts that may disturb the religious pluralism, demonstrating the high resilience of the Lebanese to preserve their religious coexistence. This resilience is not only evident among state and religion officials but also within in the society and among the numerous religious communities.

¹¹¹ Nader, Sami, "Syria's Holy War", *Al-Monitor*, (28/10/2015)

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/10/church-holy-war-russia-syria-lebanon.html>

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

By the same token, the tendency of sectarian codification does not occur only in the political arena but also in the social arena of Lebanon. Various social issues are portrayed with a sectarian undertone and with religious underpinnings that may misrepresent the Lebanese mosaic of religions, as having many cracks. In order to avoid sectarian codification, the Lebanese have to constantly reaffirm their non-sectarian intensions. Less than four months ago, there was a protest in front of the main church in Maghdoushe in the Southern Lebanon against the selling of land to non-Christians and Lebanese from areas outside of Sidon and its suburbs. As one of the organizers of the protests Fadi Safi said, the “protest is neither sectarian nor political, but is against Maghdoushe residents themselves who are selling their land and their properties”.¹¹⁴ Similarly, the issue of waste landfills location and distribution in Lebanon that has attracted a lot of attention, has also been subjected to sectarian coding.¹¹⁵ Despite the turbulence and the domestic and regional challenges, Lebanon remains a prominent example of pluralism and the society – at least its majority – underlines the values of religious coexistence.

In Tripoli, Rola Sleiman, one of the few – if not the only – female pastors of the Evangelical church since 2007, shares the common spirit of religious pluralism of the society. She stated that “regardless of their faith: hospitality, helping the needy, generosity and close family bonds. Our role as church members is to live a true Christian life, being a model for the truth and goodness of God and his acceptance of everyone”. She further added that “terrorist movements are political movements with a religious cover,” unlike *moderate Muslims*. Pastor Rola made a point to highlight the coexistence with Muslims, “who practice all the Islamic duties, however they respect me as a Christian. They protected our house when we had to leave it during the civil war, they shared with me the cruelty and the destruction of the war [with Israel], they

¹¹⁴ Ya Libnan, “Christians protest against sale of land to non-Christians in South Lebanon”, (25/12/2015) <http://yalibnan.com/2015/12/25/christians-protest-against-sale-of-land-to-non-christians-in-south-lebanon/>

¹¹⁵ Nader, Sami, “Will religiously divided landfills solve Lebanon’s trash crisis?”, (Translated by Sami-Joe Abboud), (5/11/2015) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/11/lebanon-waste-crisis-sectarian-landfills.html#>

believe in the democracy [...] [t]hese Muslims are the majority of Islam and they are very upset about all the distortions that is happening to their religion".¹¹⁶ It is these common values that constitute Lebanon a country where religious pluralism prospers, when the same concepts are becoming all more limited in neighbouring countries.

Even with communities such as the tiny Jewish one, which is also a very controversial one due to Lebanon's relations with Israel, both the Lebanese state and its society seem to extend the values of respect and coexistence. This is not to say that the Jewish community does not face issues of concern, but religious pluralism – despite its complexities – has found ways to burgeon. In 2015, the last-standing Jewish Synagogue 'Maghen Abraham' in the Lebanon's downtown Beirut, was renovated. The lawyer who represents the interests of the Jewish community is a Muslim, who even expressed concerns of security. According to the lawyer, "[w]e are waiting for the struggle [of Syria and Iraq] to end [...] the region is on fire".¹¹⁷ Despite the constant challenges that the Lebanese society faces, the constant effort to contain any repercussions of regional and domestic extremism breeds faith and hope in spreading religious pluralism across the MENA region.

¹¹⁶ The author of the article seems to provocative the Pastor by stating that 'she feels uncomfortable with the term moderate Muslim'; thus, the Pastor defines to the author what she believes is Islam and Muslim values; Argo, Victor Argo, "Lebanon's Female Pastor and her struggle to keep the Middle East a land of diversity", *Your Middle East*, (1/1/2016)

http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/culture/lebanons-female-pastor-and-her-struggle-to-keep-the-middle-east-a-land-of-diversity_37484

¹¹⁷ Gallagher, Ash, "Lebanon's last Synagogue", *Al-Monitor*, (15/5/2015) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/contents/articles/originals/2015/05/lebanon-israel-beirut-jew-synagogue-coexistence-palestine.html#>

Turkey

The Jewish community

2015 was often labelled as a “landmark year” when “taboos were shattered” for the Jewish minority currently residing in Turkey.¹¹⁸ Although they number merely 23,000 people, their rights are promoted by a non-negligible number of Jewish associations worldwide. Notwithstanding the Turkish-Israeli tensions that came to the forefront since May 2010 with the Mavi Marmara incident, the Chairman of the Jewish Association stated that the “*Turkish Jews feel safe and secure*”, and are considered a separate entity from Israel, as well as an important part of the Turkish historical and cultural heritage.¹¹⁹ As evidenced by the relocation and grand reopening of the Quincentennial Foundation Museum for Turkish Jews, there is widespread consensus – at least amongst government officials – that Turkish Jews are Turkish citizens with equal rights and obligations as any Turkish citizen.¹²⁰ Memorials were also held in 2015 and 2016 for the Holocaust and the Struma tragedy of 1942 (during which the Struma ship carrying Jews fleeing from Romania was sunk in the Black Sea) with government officials in attendance.

On the religious aspect of things, the Hanukkah celebrations were held publicly in December 2015, for the first time in the history of the Turkish state. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan went one step further and extended holiday greetings and his best wishes to the Jewish community. In early 2016, the Neve

¹¹⁸ Ordukaya, Elif, “2015 demonstrates progressive developments for Turkish Jews”, *Today’s Zaman*, (30/1/2016) <http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/turkey/2015-demonstrates-progressive-developments-for-turkish-jews>

¹¹⁹ Sokol, Sam, “Turkish Jewry feels ‘safe and secure,’ says Conference of Presidents heads”, *The Jerusalem Post*, (14/2/2016) <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Turkish-Jewry-feels-safe-and-secure-says-Conference-of-Presidents-heads-444897>

¹²⁰ Daily Sabah, “500-year history of Turkish jews on display”, (29/2/2016) <http://www.dailysabah.com/arts-culture/2016/03/01/500-year-history-of-turkish-jews-on-display>

Hurriyet Daily News, “Official praises Jewish citizens’ role in founding of the Republic of Turkey”, (16/3/2016) <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/official-praises-jewish-citizens-role-in-founding-of-republic-of-turkey.aspx?pageID=238&nid=96532>

Shalom Synagogue in Istanbul reopened after 65 years, and, in a historic first, a Jewish wedding was officiated.¹²¹

Nonetheless, tensions tend to run high within the general population where the Jewish community is concerned. Despite the assurances of local governments, Turkish Jews are not disassociated from Israel. This remains an important issue that stems from the rebirth of the “Sèvres Syndrome” in Turkey, as well as the use of anti-Semitism in the months leading up to electoral confrontations. More often than not, political party leaders refer to their opponents as pro-Israeli or pro-Jewish, essentially fueling a divide within Turkey. As a result, the above-mentioned reopening of the Neve Shalom Synagogue was soon followed by offensive graffiti on the temple’s walls.¹²² Hence, it should not be much of a surprise that Adolf Hitler’s “Mein Kampf” is being republished since it went on to become a best-seller during 2005 in Turkey.¹²³ Despite the fact that fear and prejudice towards Jews are still present within Turkish society, the Hanukkah celebrations coupled with declarations from the political spectrum of mutual respect and understanding are a step in the right direction.

The Alevi community

The Alevis are estimated to make up around 15% (about 10 million) of a population of approximately 77 million people in Turkey. The situation regarding their religious rights has been a hot topic of discussion at many occasions in recent years. Especially after the AKP’s rise to power, talks and initiatives were promoted for making progress on the Alevi rights front. They

¹²¹ Hurriyet Daily News, “Ottoman-era synagogue in Istanbul reopens with Tefila”, (8/1/2016) <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ottoman-era-synagogue-in-istanbul-reopens-with-teffila.aspx?pageID=238&nID=93590&NewsCatID=393>

¹²² JNS, “Turkish Synagogue vandalized after holding first prayer service in 65 years”, (20/1/2016) <http://www.jns.org/news-briefs/2016/1/20/turkish-synagogue-vandalized-after-holding-first-prayer-service-in-65-years#.VuqZ4fl97IV>

¹²³ Daily Sabah, “Hitler's 'Mein Kampf' back in Turkey amid Jewish protestations”, (6/3/2016) <http://www.dailysabah.com/life/2016/03/07/hitlers-mein-kampf-back-in-turkey-amid-jewish-protestations>

were nicknamed “Alevi openings”.¹²⁴ The November elections of 2015 led to elections pledges and promises by Prime Minister Ahmed Davutoglu that would be fulfilled by the end of March 2016.¹²⁵ The issue at hand was twofold: firstly, the Alevi cemevis would be recognized as official houses of religious worship, a status that is already granted for churches, synagogues and mosques. Secondly, the Alevi religion would have to be officially recognized as separate from the Shia one, and not only as one of its branches.

For the time being, Alevi cemevis are considered by the state and the Religious Affairs Directorate (the Diyanet) as “cultural houses” and not places of worship equal or alternative to mosques. The considered reform would exempt cemevis from energy bills as well as offer a number of tax-related special benefits.¹²⁶ Furthermore, by recognizing Alevism as a distinct religion, and essentially strengthening the Alevi identity, mandated Sunni-based religious school courses would become optional for Alevi students. As stated above, this is a hot topic but not a new one. The issue has been brought up in the past, and, more recently in 2014, by a ruling of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) that effectively pressured for a more immediate solution to the problem.

Nevertheless, the Diyanet and its head Mehmet Gormez have often considered the Alevi reform package, and specifically rendering cemevis equal to mosques, as a red line. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Mehmet Gormez made waves recently when calling for a more autonomous Religious

¹²⁴ Armstrong, William, “Interview: Markus Dressler on the formation of modern Turkish Alevism”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, (28/11/2016) <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/interview-markus-dressler-on-the-formation-of-modern-turkish-alevism.aspx?pageID=238&nID=91790&NewsCatID=386>

¹²⁵ Yaman, Alev, “Can Turkey deliver a landmark religious reform for the Alevi community?”, *Middle East Eye*, (18/1/2016) <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/can-turkey-deliver-landmark-religious-reform-alevi-community-1266443921>

Aydogan, Merve, “Turkish gov’t to fulfill remaining election pledges by March 21”, *Daily Sabah*, (29/2/2016) <http://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2016/03/01/turkish-govt-to-fulfill-remaining-election-pledges-by-march-21>

¹²⁶ Yeginsu, Ceylan, “Turkey expands rights of Alevis, a Muslim Minority”, *The New York Times*, (10/12/2015) http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/11/world/europe/turkey-expands-alevi-rights.html?_r=2

Directorate from the state.¹²⁷ However, this point of view does not seem to be shared by other government officials, or even President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. A wind of change seems to be on the horizon for the Alevi community, as Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu has reiterated his pledge his support for the reform during his visits to Alevi cemevis, while the former hosted an iftar (fast breaking dinner) for Alevi delegates during the month of the remembrance of Muharram.

The Christian community

Christians officially amount to around 100,000 people in Turkey. They are mostly composed of the following Christian denominations: Armenian Orthodox, Aramean Orthodox, Chaldean Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Protestants. The Aramean Christian community specifically has grown in numbers due to the ongoing Syrian civil war and the influx of Aramean refugees. The latter have found shelter in churches – mainly in Istanbul – with their fellow faithful. As a result, their numbers have been ranging between 10 and 20,000 people. In the South-East of Turkey, the remaining Aramean community as well as their cultural heritage has been caught in the crossfire between the Turkish government forces, the rebel Kurdish forces and, to an extent, the Islamic State. Most recently, the St Mary church in the Sur district of Diyarbakir city was heavily damaged, bringing, at the same, some much needed publicity to the issue at hand, due to the church's 1,800 year old historical and cultural value and the mass exodus of Aramean families from the region.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, the Aramean cultural and religious identity is frequently mistaken internationally with the Syrian or the Armenian one, despite efforts by the

¹²⁷ Turkish Weekly, "Turkey's top cleric calls for autonomous religious directorate", (8/3/2016) <http://www.turkishweekly.net/2016/03/08/news/turkey-s-top-cleric-calls-for-autonomous-religious-directorate/>

¹²⁸ Spencer, Richard, "One of the world's oldest churches damaged in Turkey's renewed violence", *Telegraph*, (5/2/2016) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/12142552/One-of-the-worlds-oldest-churches-damaged-in-Turkeys-renewed-violence.html>

World Council of Arameans (WCA). The WCA has been active in trying to establish a dialogue with the Turkish government, effectively prompting Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu to reassure that

“we will continue to do what we can to make the Aramean refugees from Syria and Iraq feel at home in Turkey”.

According to the “2015 Human Rights Violations Report”, Turkey’s Protestant community is facing a wide variety of problems, ranging from cyber threats and physical attacks to a lack of official recognition from the state as a religious community.¹²⁹ Therefore, they struggle with some of the same problems as the Alevi community when it comes to the lack of recognition of their houses of worship.¹³⁰ To work around this vacuum, Protestants have organized around association buildings and offices. However, in contrast with the “Alevi opening”, no official dialogue has taken place to remedy the problem.

In retrospect, the Greek Orthodox community has seen its religious rights respected in greater effect, with the state taking some steps during 2015 and early 2016. The first, since 1922, Epiphany celebrations took place in Izmir on January 2016, and on February 10th a divine liturgy was performed by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in Krini.¹³¹ Meanwhile, the order for the closing of the only Orthodox Church in Bursa was rescinded swiftly in late

¹²⁹ Association of Protestant Churches, “2015 Human Rights Violations Report”, (30/1/2016) <http://www.worldevangelicals.org/2015RightsViolationsreport.pdf>

¹³⁰ Hurtas, Sibel, “Is Turkey doing enough to protect its protestants?”, *Al-Monitor*, (9/2/2016) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/02/turkey-protestants-threats-right-violations.html>

¹³¹ Zikakou, Ioanna, “Ecumenical Patriarch Performs Liturgy in the Cesme Greek Orthodox Church”, *EU Reporter*, (11/2/2016) <http://eu.greekreporter.com/2016/02/11/ecumenical-patriarch-performs-liturgy-in-the-cesme-greek-orthodox-church/>

February.¹³² The Halki Seminary remains closed since 1971, although the Turkish authorities have repeatedly pledged for its reopening.¹³³

Nevertheless, when it comes to the domestic political scene, religious identity can sometimes turn into a trigger for conflict as well as a tool for political propaganda. For instance, during the month of February 2016, a slander campaign began against the spokesperson of the Republican Party (CHP) and her Orthodox Christian background.¹³⁴ Although this particular campaign was contained within the political spectrum, it is nonetheless representative of the religious division and alienation within Turkish society. However, a positive development that casts a brighter light on the Turkish political scene is the decision by the Parliament's Planning and Budget Commission to regulate its sessions accordingly in order to accommodate Christian deputies to perform their religious duties.¹³⁵

During the past few months, a rise in interest on religious cultural heritage has been observed in Turkey. Plans for restorations and reopenings of museums, houses of worship and cultural sites that were on the government's agenda, have been activated or have even come to fruition. Most recently, a map was drawn pointing out Christian heritage in Turkey. This initiative was soon followed by declarations of support and interest in restoring cultural sites by volunteer researchers all over the world, and especially from Greece, Armenia and Turkey.¹³⁶ At the same time, Byzantine churches long holding the

¹³² World Watch Monitor, "Turkey backs down on closing Bursa's only church", (24/2/2016) <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/02/4318459/>

¹³³ Hurriyet Daily News, "Turkey's top religious official backs reopening of Halki Seminary 'in principle'", (28/2/2016) <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkeys-top-religious-official-backs-reopening-of-halki-seminary-in-principle.aspx?pageID=238&nID=95815&NewsCatID=393>

¹³⁴ Tremblay, Pinar, "CHP's rising Christian star subjected to hate speech", *Al-Monitor*, (19/2/2016) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/02/turkey-opposition-lawmaker-becomes-victim-hate-speech.html>

¹³⁵ Daily Sabah, "Turkish Parliament commission adjusts meeting hours for Christian MP to attend Sunday prayers", (12/2/2016) <http://www.crpmc.gr/news/turkish-parliament-commission-adjusts-meeting-hours-for-christian-mp-to-attend-sunday-prayers>

¹³⁶ Kazanci, Handan, "Experts volunteer to save non-Muslim heritage in Turkey", *Anadolu Agency*, (11/3/2016) <http://aa.com.tr/en/culture-and-art/experts-volunteer-to-save-non-muslim-heritage-in-turkey-535221>

status of state museums and cultural heritage sites, such as St. John Stoudios in Istanbul and Hagia Sophia in Nicea, are in the process of or have been converted into mosques. This effort has been gaining momentum ever since the rise to power of the AKP party in the early 2000's, and came to prominence with the conversion process of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. By effectively downgrading their cultural and religious significance to communities within Turkey as well as worldwide, this controversial policy seems to indicate a precarious future for the remaining cultural heritage of non-Muslim communities in Turkey. Despite reassurances to the contrary by the Turkish government, it remains to be seen which tendency – i.e. preserving or alienating cultural heritage – will prevail.

Nonetheless, during the anniversary celebrations for the conquest of Constantinople on May 29th 2016, prayers and demonstrations – amidst other festivities – were held in front of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. The thousands of Muslims in attendance were demonstrating for the right to pray inside the ancient Christian Basilica and for it to be converted into a mosque. It is worth pointing out that although these anniversary celebrations were discontinued after the 1960s, the AKP governments following the early 2000s revived them via the use of party slogans, swiftly and effectively bridging neo-Ottoman aspirations with political ambitions.

Egypt

The Jewish community

Egyptian Jews have seen their numbers decrease for the better part of the 20th century. No longer the vibrant community in Egypt that it used to be, its surviving members are not getting any younger. Officially, they number less than a few dozen citizens and are over the age of 70. Current Jewish Community Council (JCC) leader Magda Haroun stated that:

*“there is very little I can do, I am all by myself. In 2-3 years, there will no longer be Jews in Egypt, so it is up to Egyptians who survive us to preserve their country’s heritage, because it would be the biggest testament to what a pluralistic, vibrant and colourful society we once were”.*¹³⁷

However, while the Egyptian Jews’ presence in the country is nearly one of the past, efforts are being made by both non-governmental organizations as well as from the government itself to preserve Jewish cultural and religious heritage. Following the collapse of Alexandria’s old synagogue, the government of Cairo decided to move forward with renovations worth \$1.5 million.¹³⁸ Furthermore, the American Jewish Committee – along with other Jewish institutions – has petitioned the Egyptian government for the preservation of Jewish Synagogues and institutions. These efforts were given a new lease of life after President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi met with American Jewish leaders in early February 2016.

Although tensions have run high recently regarding a “rapprochement” between Egypt and Israel, the various outbursts within the political spectrum are mainly directed at the Israeli state (with which Egypt has maintained neutral if

¹³⁷ Ghoneim, Niveen, “Magda Haroun: The Egyptian Community’s vibrant past and macabre present”, *Cairo Scene*, (4/2/2016) <http://www.cairoscene.com/In-Depth/Magda-Haroun-Egypt-Jewish-Community-s-Vibrant-Past-and-Macabre-Present>

¹³⁸ Waked, Ali, “Egypt to spend \$1.5 million renovating Alexandria Synagogue”, *Breitbart*, (28/2/2016) <http://www.breitbart.com/jerusalem/2016/02/28/egypt-to-invest-1-5m-to-renovate-alexandria-synagogue/>

not good relations since the 1980s) and not the Jewish Egyptian community in particular.¹³⁹

The Shia community

Nowadays, the Shia community in Egypt represents 1% of a population of approximately 82 million people. The main source of tension between the Sunni and the Shia population in Egypt reveals itself in the difference in interpretation of the Quran, and especially when commemorating the day of Ashura (marking the death of al-Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed). Practising Shiism publicly may lead to detention and imprisonment if the blasphemy of religion law comes into play.¹⁴⁰ The fear is that Shia Islam might, one day, supplant Sunni Islam as the official and leading religion of the Egyptian state. Although unfounded, this perception is cause for concern, and particularly effective and common among Sunni extremists.

Nonetheless, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Shaikh Ahmad al-Tayyeb, recently broke new ground by promoting, in more than one occasion, a message of tolerance and peaceful coexistence between different schools and doctrines of Islam, specifically indicating the Sunni-Shia divide as the root of the problem.¹⁴¹ Moreover, the Grand Imam referred to the Sunni and Shia religions as “the two wings of Islam”, forbade the killing of Muslims of any denomination, and called for solidarity for moderate Shias. This development, if channeled appropriately, could be an initiative that triggers a renewed era of religious coexistence between the Egyptian Sunni and Shia communities.

¹³⁹ Reuters, “Egyptian lawmaker attacked with shoe for dining with Israeli ambassador”, (28/2/2016) <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-parliament-israel-idUSKCN0W10HO>

¹⁴⁰ Zaher, Abdel Hassan, “Egyptians fret over growing Shia influence”, *The Arab Weekly*, (27/11/2016) <http://www.thearabweekly.com/?id=2939>

¹⁴¹ Salama, Samir, “Al Azhar urges tolerance between Muslim sects”, *Gulf News*, (22/2/2016) <http://gulfnews.com/news/mena/syria/al-azhar-urges-tolerance-between-muslim-sects-1.1677391>

Daily News Egypt, “Grand Imam of Al-Azhar advocates peacefulness of Islam at Reichstag”, (16/3/2016) <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2016/03/16/grand-imam-al-azhar-advocates-peacefulness-islam-reichstag/>

The Coptic Christian community

Christian Copts make up about 10% of Egypt's population, but their numbers are gradually diminishing ever since the uprisings of 2011. Following their strong support for President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, discrimination against Copts remains an issue that needs to be addressed in Egypt today. Nevertheless, several important steps have been taken, both from the Egyptian government and the country's highest religious institution, al-Azhar.

Blasphemy prosecutions have been on the rise ever since the Arab uprisings of 2011. Last year, in May 2015, four underage Egyptian Copts and their teacher were arrested for insulting Islam and using words found in Muslim prayers while parodying, in a video that was disseminated online, the atrocities perpetrated by Islamic State militants during the well-publicized beheadings of 21 Egyptian Copts on February 15th, 2015 in Libya. Despite the immediate apology from the Coptic Church, the young Copts were held on remand for 90 days. Nevertheless, tensions rose in the al-Minya area, specifically the village of Bani Mazar. After nearly a year of trial postponements, the Egyptian courts delivered, on February 25th, a verdict charging them for contempt of religion and sentencing them to five years in prison. The international media uproar that immediately followed the courts' decision, coupled with the demand by non-governmental organizations – such as the European Union of Coptic Organization for Human Rights – to abolish the contempt of religion law and to grant amnesty to the condemned adolescents, was widely publicized.¹⁴² As of yet, the reaction to the court's decision has only led to the reassurances by Egypt's Minister of Justice that a solution to the case will be found without reigniting tensions in the area of al-Minya.¹⁴³ On March 13th 2016, Human Rights Watch called the Egyptian government to “*reverse the blasphemy sentences*

¹⁴² Copts United, “EUCOHR demands the abolition of contempt of religion law”, (29/2/2016) <http://www.copts-united.com/English/Details.php?I=1585&A=22453>

¹⁴³ Fides, “Justice Minister promises “solution” for Coptic student offenders of Islam”, (8/3/2016) [http://fides.org/en/news/59589-
AFRICA_EGYPT_Justice_Minister_promises_solution_for_Coptic_student_offenders_of_Islam#.VuRxPuJ96M9](http://fides.org/en/news/59589-
AFRICA_EGYPT_Justice_Minister_promises_solution_for_Coptic_student_offenders_of_Islam#.VuRxPuJ96M9)

against Christian children”, stating “*how can you try someone for mocking ISIS?*”.¹⁴⁴ It is of note that this case is part of a broader issue. Trials on blasphemy of religion have been on the rise ever since former President Mubarak’s oust from power. As a result, the case of the four Copts cannot simply be perceived as an isolated event. Although this case directly affects Egyptian Copts, the law for blasphemy of religion encompasses Egyptians from all walks of life. For instance, journalist Fatima Naaot, television host Islam al-Buhairi and novelist Ahmed Naji have also been placed under scrutiny and sentenced to heavy fines and prison time, ranging from one to three years. These trials have been coined as “hisbah lawsuits” (i.e. accountability lawsuits).¹⁴⁵

It should be pointed out that the blasphemy of religion law does not apply only to the religion of Islam, but to all three officially recognised religions by the Egyptian state: Islam, Christianity and Judaism. The people that are usually concerned under the blasphemy law are Coptic Christians, Shia Islam followers and atheists. Although the “hisbah lawsuits” pertain to Islam-related acts, Christianity and Judaism are not left out of the loop. The reality is that Islam-related cases are more preponderant and make for better headlines. Recently, the Justice Minister of Egypt was quoted claiming that he would imprison any wrongdoer if he was found guilty of a crime, even if that wrongdoer was the Prophet Mohammed. Despite the fact that he was subsequently dismissed from his position by the Egyptian Prime Minister, the former Justice Minister has not yet been brought before a judge.¹⁴⁶ Nevertheless, perhaps a light can be glimpsed at the end of the tunnel: on March 14th 2016, a Coptic teacher serving time in prison since 2012 for insulting Islam on social media was acquitted by the Court of appeals. Although this decision might not

¹⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch, “Egypt: Reverse Blasphemy Sentences Against Christian Children”, (13/3/2016) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/03/13/egypt-reverse-blasphemy-sentences-against-christian-children>

¹⁴⁵ Saied, Mohamed, “Blasphemy trials on the rise in Egypt”, *Al-Monitor*, (1/3/2016) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/03/egypt-lawsuits-religious-hisbah-freedom-expression.html>

¹⁴⁶ Ball, Sam, “Egypt justice minister sacked for saying he would arrest Prophet Mohammed”, *France 24*, (13/3/2016) <http://www.france24.com/en/20160314-egypt-justice-minister-al-zend-sacked-saying-he-would-arrest-prophet-mohammed>

mark the moment when the tide is turning regarding “hisbah lawsuits”, it is certainly a step in the right direction.

While Coptic discrimination does not seem to be on the current government’s agenda, there are several widely publicized instances where a select few have managed to undermine the rights of freedom of religion and religious coexistence. Coptic cemeteries are vandalized and are regarded as “garbage dumps”, while local authorities seem unable to manage the deteriorating situation.¹⁴⁷ In another case, a schoolteacher of Christian Coptic faith in al-Minya was denied the opportunity to be promoted and assume her position as headmistress due to vocal protests and demonstrations by the local Muslim community.¹⁴⁸ It is noteworthy that her promotion was approved by the Ministry of Education. The above-mentioned al-Minya region is located in Upper Egypt, near the south of Cairo, and accounts for nearly half of the Coptic population of Egypt. As a result, tensions in the region manifest often, but nowhere near the frequency which one can attest to, when one reaches the South of Egypt, where radical Islamic groups operate.¹⁴⁹ Generally, it seems that in the parts of Egypt where the government maintains a strong grip of things, Copts feel safer.

The well-publicized friendship between the Egyptian President and Coptic Pope Tawadros II of Alexandria, coupled with the electoral developments of 2015 certainly seem to have borne fruit during the recent months.¹⁵⁰ Firstly, the October 2015 elections marked a new high in Coptic parliamentary candidates, originating particularly from the al-Minya region. A new electoral law for “marginalized groups” provided Coptic Christians,

¹⁴⁷ Ibrahim, Raymond, “Egypt: Coptic Christian Tombs Turned into Garbage Dumps”, *Raymond Ibrahim*, (5/2/2016) <http://www.raymondibrahim.com/2016/02/05/egypt-coptic-christian-tombs-turned-into-garbage-dumps/>

¹⁴⁸ World Watch Monitor, “Coptic headmistress denied promotion for being Christian”, (2/3/2016) <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/03/4329221/>

¹⁴⁹ Refworld, “Egypt: Situation of Coptic Christians, including treatment; state protection available (2014-May 2015)”, (8/5/2015) <http://www.refworld.org/docid/557e7e814.html>

¹⁵⁰ Al-Ahram Weekly, “For a communal council”, (4/2/2016) <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/NewsQ/15395.aspx>

women, the disabled and youth with the opportunity for special representation amounting to one-third of the seats of the parliament.¹⁵¹ This law led to 36 Copts gaining seats and to the first Coptic woman in Egyptian history, Mona Gaballah, winning a seat in the newly-assembled parliament. Secondly, four community service projects operated by the Coptic Orthodox Church were inaugurated in early 2016. Namely, the establishing of the Centre for Egyptian Coptic Art Heritage, a Coptic Orthodox School, and the upgrading of the al-Shifaa Hospital and the Mar-Mina orphanage in Islamailiya.¹⁵² Although these projects were financed by the United Arab Emirates, it goes without saying that if the Egyptian government was opposed to their completion, they would not have moved forward. Thirdly, near the end of 2015, President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi – the first in Egyptian history President to do so – attended the Coptic Christmas mass and pledged that the Egyptian military would rebuild, at the expense of the State and within 2016, the churches, monasteries and buildings that were destroyed during and in the aftermath of the Muslim Brotherhood’s rise and fall from power.¹⁵³ Soon after, the construction of two new Coptic churches was approved by Presidential decree, in the cities of New Cairo and Assiut. Furthermore, Egyptian Mufti Shawky Allam, during the Christmas celebrations, offered his greetings to Egyptian Copts and prompted the followers of Islam to act accordingly.¹⁵⁴

The evolution of Coptic cinema could be considered an indicator as to where things are heading as regards the social developments for Copts in Egypt. Taken as the embodiment of freedom of expression, it is an art form that can,

¹⁵¹ Fouad, Ahmed, “Can women, Copts make it to parliament without the quota?”, *Al-Monitor*, (20/11/2015) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/11/egypt-parliament-elections-quota-women-copts.html>

¹⁵² Salama, Victor, “Pope Tawandros opens Emirati-financed Church projects”, *Watani International*, (31/1/2016) <http://en.wataninet.com/coptic-affairs-coptic-affairs/coptic-affairs/pope-tawadros-opens-emirati-financed-church-projects/15617/>

¹⁵³ Chastain, Mary, “In Christmas message, Egyptian President vows to restore all Coptic churches”, *Breitbart*, (8/1/2016) <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2016/01/08/abdel-fattah-al-sisi-celebrates-christmas-with-coptic-christians/>

¹⁵⁴ Mada Masr, “Offering Christmas greetings to Copts is a 'good deed', says mufti”, (23/12/2015) <http://www.madamasr.com/news/offering-christmas-greetings-copts-good-deed-says-mufti>

more often than not, delimit the ways with which Copts and Coptic life are accepted socially. Therefore, prime examples of Coptic social marginalization can be found mainly in documentaries or films. However, the former cannot be shown in Egyptian cinemas, due to the blasphemy of religion law, which forbids God, his prophets or his disciples from being depicted. As a result, films and documentaries dealing with religion can only be screened in churches, in private, or in privately-operated venues, such as the Cairo Opera House Creativity Centre.¹⁵⁵ On the other hand, and on another visual medium, television networks have recently started creating supporting characters of Coptic origin and religion in their weekly shows.¹⁵⁶ Although the religious freedom of the Copts and social coexistence are not directly impacted by these shows, one can only consider the emergence of Coptic characters as a positive step forward, from which society can benefit in the future. Examples of the social impact of diversification in film and television can be found in the recent history of the 20th and the 21st century, ranging from the humane depiction of blacks, women to the homosexual lifestyle. The reach of film, and especially television, is one that should not be neglected. Their appeal can play an essential part in educating, or at least familiarizing the masses with what they perhaps consider alien, and, if placed in the correct context, can be as much of an important factor for change as any government directive.

¹⁵⁵Atef, Mohamed, "Egyptian cinema takes a new approach toward Coptic Christians", *Al-Bawaba*, (28/12/2015) <http://www.albawaba.com/entertainment/egyptian-cinema-takes-new-approach-toward-coptic-christians-786584>

¹⁵⁶ Egypt Today, "How Egyptian Cinema Tackles Coptic Issues", (31/1/2016) <http://egypttoday.com/blog/2016/01/31/how-egyptian-cinema-tackles-coptic-issues/>

Israel

Israel holds a rather ambiguous stance regarding its policies on religious freedom. While on the one hand, Israel operates as a civic democracy, where freedom of religion is protected by the constitution, on the other hand recent governments have emphasized on the Jewish nature of the state, as its main identity. The former administration, also led by Benjamin Netanyahu, attempted in 2014 to change the nature of the state, by proposing the “Nation State” law, a bill that would define the state of Israel’s identity as “nation-state of the Jewish people” and therefore exclude from that identity 20% of the country’s population, i.e. Israeli Arabs, who are predominantly Muslims. Although the bill has not been brought before the Ministerial Committee of Legislation for approval yet, it remains in the agenda of the current government coalition, indicating that certain political trends are now predominating the Israeli society.

In the current government the policies implemented towards religious minorities are fueled both by political and religious reasons. Such is the case in Israel, that the two are often intertwined in a way that makes it quite difficult to distinguish them. A case in point is the bill proposed in Knesset by MKs Moti Yogev, Miki Zohar and Merav Ben Ari, all members of the governing coalition, which would ban mosques from using public announcement systems to call for prayer for Muslim worshippers.¹⁵⁷ While the argumentation behind the bill concentrated on the alleged noise pollution produced by the P.A.S., it is apparent that the bill aimed at the restriction of daily mosque activity, and it essentially undermined freedom of religion, through the increasingly exclusion of the non-Jewish cultural element. While the bill didn’t pass the Ministerial Committee on Legislation, however it is indicative of the mindset of the government. In December 2015, Education minister Naftali Bennett of the Habayit Hayehudi party, excluded a novel about a love affair between a Jewish

¹⁵⁷ Moore, Jack, “Israel to vote on banning mosques from using P.A.S. for call to Prayer”, *Newsweek*, (4/3/2016) <http://europe.newsweek.com/israel-vote-banning-mosques-using-pas-call-prayer-433318?rx=eu>

woman and a Palestinian man from the school curriculum, because it was dimmed “threatening to the Jewish identity”.¹⁵⁸ Although this trend of segregation in Israeli politics is not new, the current government has intensified its attempts at it.

The religious map of Israel is one of cultural diversity. Judaism is the predominant religion, with 75% of the population being Jewish. Muslim Arabs constitute the largest minority in the country, approximately 17% of the population. The Christians, who are mainly Arabs, are an extremely active community, although they number just 120,000 people. There is also a substantial Russian Orthodox community, comprising of non-Jewish Russian immigrants that arrived in Israel, in early 1990’s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Other faiths and ethnic groups that form the multi-religion mosaic of Israel are the Druze, the Circassians, the Arameans and even smaller creeds, like Buddhists and Baha’i.

The Muslims of Israel are comprised principally by Sunni Muslims, and they have the freedom to exercise their religion, and Muslim youths are not obliged to serve in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), as Druze are. Mosques exist across the country, and there is no institutionalized restriction on their religious practices. However, in light of the ongoing occupation and the policies of discrimination of the Israeli government towards Palestinians, one could say that Muslims, from a socioeconomic point of view, exist in the lower strata of the Israeli society, even though Israeli Arabs are full citizens of the State of Israel, and share theoretically the same rights as the Israeli Jews. In general, the Muslim neighborhoods in towns are poorly maintained, the Muslim schools are well underfunded. This trend of discrimination spreads in other areas of

¹⁵⁸ Gillman, Ollie, “Israel bans novel on Arab-Jewish romance from schools for ‘threatening Jewish identity’”, *Daily Mail*, (31/12/2015) <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3379974/Israel-rejects-book-Jew-Arab-love-school-curriculum.html>

everyday life, such as the job market. A recent poll showed that 39% of Israeli Arabs feel discriminated against in terms of job availability.¹⁵⁹

The Druze are another Muslim group, distinct in its ethnic and religious origins, in relation to the rest of the Muslims in Israel. They are some 120,000 living mostly to the north of the country, in either exclusively Druze towns and villages, or in some cases in mixed villages, where mainly Christians and Muslims chose to settle in. The Druze consider themselves to be “Druze Israelis”, and are as a community fully integrated in the Israeli society. Almost ever since 1948, and the founding of the Israeli state, Druze have been serving in the IDF. Moreover, many Druze have reached high-level positions in politics, military and administration. A unique characteristic of the Druze philosophy is the concept of *taqiyya*, a notion that calls for the Druze people to be loyal to the country they live in. The Israeli Druze, having a deep attachment with the state of Israel feel as part of the Israeli society. In that context, in Summer 2015, after the massacre of twenty Syrian Druze by Jabhatt al-Nusra, Druze demonstrated in their towns in the thousands, demanding that Israeli government take action to help their Druze brothers in Syria, help that the government seemingly did not deny. Prime Minister Netanyahu reached out to the US and urged them to assist the Syrian Druze community.¹⁶⁰ The Druze loyalty to the state has been cause for tension between their community and the Muslim Arabs. Although, the two communities have shared the same land for decades, the fact that the Druze serve in the IDF, the same army that oppresses Palestinians daily, is reason enough to create friction between them. Another small Muslim community are the Circassians. This is a small community of 4,000 people living in two villages in the north of Israel. They are not of Arab origin, but their roots lie in Caucasus, from where they arrived in Israel, after they were expelled in the 19th century by the Czarist Russia. The Circassians also enlist in the IDF, like the Druze, and

¹⁵⁹ Yaaron, Lee, ‘39% of Israeli Arabs feel discriminated Against in te Job Market, Poll Shows’, *Haaretz*, (9/12/2015) <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-1.690679>

¹⁶⁰ Ynet News, ‘Thousands call on Israel to save Syrian Drouze in mass protest’, (13/6/2015) <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4667999,00.html>

participate in the socioeconomic life of the country, without shedding their unique ethnic identity.

The third largest religious group in Israel are the Christians. Being mostly Arabs, they form a colourful mosaic of different creeds and denominations. The Israeli state has recognised more than ten different Christian churches, which function independently.¹⁶¹ The Christian population resides mostly to the western Galilee, in the towns of Haifa and Nazareth, while the rest live in other urban areas, like Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Christians are not marginalised in the Israeli society, i.e. they do not live in villages or towns mainly for Christians, as is the case for Druze, but rather they are spread all across Israel intermixed with the Jewish population. They excel in education, and are more or less fully integrated in society. Christians, like the Druze and the Circassians, serve their military service in the IDF, constituting the third religious minority, which sees this service as a measure of integration in society. In 2016, the enlistment of Christians in the IDF is expected to reach record high numbers, indicating a tendency in the Christian community for deeper involvement in the Israeli society, and therefore an internalization of their Israeli identity.

The Russian Orthodox Israelis comprise another significant minority of Israel. They number approximately between 60-100.000 people, although exact figures do not exist, as reports claim that many avoid revealing their religious beliefs out of fear of ostracization from the Israeli society.¹⁶² A constant demand of the Russian Orthodox community has been its acknowledgment by the other churches. While there is a certain estrangement from the Arab churches due to linguistic barriers, the Russian Orthodox claim that they have not been welcomed by the Greek Patriarchate either. There are but a few Russian-speaking churches to the north of the country, while almost none to the south. This leaves a large part of the community without religious services or even

¹⁶¹ These are the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Maronite, Syrian Catholic, Syriac Orthodox churches and the Anglican Church.

¹⁶² Svetlova, Ksenia, 'A different sort of orthodoxy', The Jerusalem Post, (4/2/2010) <http://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Features/A-different-sort-of-orthodoxy>

their own cemeteries, while the Greek Patriarchate, according to them, continually neglects their needs. A smaller Christian community of Israel that is worth mentioning are the Arameans. They number roughly 200 families and in 2014 the Israeli government recognised them as a unique ethnic/religious minority, labeling them as Arameans Christians, instead of Christian Arabs, as they were perceived until then. This decision has caused some controversy, as it was perceived by Palestinians and Christian churches alike, as an attempt by the Israeli government to divide Christian Arabs.

Notwithstanding their fairly decent stand in Israeli society, Christians are facing discrimination in Israel. There is a general and steady demand for equality by the Christian population. In the beginning of the school year, in September 2015, all 47 Christian schools organised a strike, to protest the reduction of funds allocated to these schools by the ministry of Education. While in previous years the Christian schools (of which half the pupils are Muslims) received around 75% of the annual cost, in the last two years the allocation of funds for these schools has dropped down to 34%. As a measure of comparison, ultra-orthodox Jewish schools, which also have an independent school program, are funded every year from the Israeli state 100%.¹⁶⁵ Christians accused the government of discrimination and that its main goal is to eventually shut down every non-Jewish school system in the country. After the attention the strike garnered both in Israel, and internationally, the Ministry of Education agreed to fund the Christian schools with 50 million shekels for one year. This way the government terminated the strike, but essentially left the issue unresolved, as there was no long-term solution given to the problem.

Jerusalem and the Status Quo

The current wave of violence that has engulfed Israel and the West Bank for the past six months has already claimed the lives of more than 200 Palestinians and

¹⁶⁵ Deutsche Welle, 'Arab Christians in Israel stage school strike to protest funding cuts', (6/9/2015) <http://www.dw.com/en/arab-christians-in-israel-stage-school-strike-to-protest-funding-cuts/a-18696704>

30 Israelis since October last year. The so-called Third Intifada began in September 2015, when clashes erupted around the Temple Mount compound in Jerusalem. In recent months, Jewish religious leaders have visited Temple Mount to pray. The provocation of those visits sparked clashes between Palestinians and Israeli security forces, which then spread to the entire West Bank, taking the form mainly of stabbing attacks. The visits were facilitated by the Israeli government by offering police escort to the rabbis. The rising tension caused the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to state that “radical right-wing Jewish groups are violating the status quo¹⁶⁴ in Temple Mount, in an attempt to alter it”.¹⁶⁵ Israel has been strongly opposing any such notion, that it attempts to alter the status quo, and has been putting the blame for the ongoing violence on the other side. However, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which often criticizes Israeli policies, blamed Israel entirely for the escalation of violence. In a statement issued on February, 18 it declared that “it is the siege of Jerusalem [...] the all-inclusive accusation of terrorism against all Palestinians and the collective punishment that results from it. Today the situation has become a new intifada, in which Palestinians plunge to their death out of despair”.¹⁶⁶ On March 1, radical right-wing rabbi Yehuda Glick visited the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound under armed protection, a day after an order banning him from entering was lifted. This visit created uproar anew, and was strongly condemned by the Palestinian Authority, as it accused Israel of incitement.¹⁶⁷

While all this is happening, the Israeli government made a surprise move in January, when it announced the creation of an egalitarian praying space in the Western Wall, where men and women will be able to pray together. This was

¹⁶⁴ According to the arrangement between the Israeli government and Jordan in 1967, the Jordanian government maintained the administrative control of the compound. Jews ever since were prohibited from praying at the Temple Mount, and may only enter as visitors and only Muslims are allowed to pray there.

¹⁶⁵ Tzidkiyahu, Erin, “It’s all about Jerusalem’s Holy Esplanade”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, (16/10/2015) <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=61654>

¹⁶⁶ ICEJ, ‘Latin Patriarchate blames Israel for terrorist attacks’, (18/2/2016) <http://int.icej.org/news/headlines/catholic-patriarchate-blames-israel-terrorist-attacks>

¹⁶⁷ Middle East Monitor, ‘Far right Rabbi storms al-Aqsa’, (1/3/2016) <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/middle-east/24251-far-right-rabbi-storms-al-aqsa>

a standing request and a great victory for the non-Orthodox streams of Judaism (Conservative and Reform Judaism). Reactions to the plan came from several sides, albeit for different reasons. The ultra-Orthodox opposed the plan all along. Shmuel Rabinowitz, a rabbi of the Western Wall and ultra-Orthodox said that “it was a sad day for the Western Wall and the Jewish people”.¹⁶⁸ Despite the fact that he initially compromised and agreed to the creation of the egalitarian space, on March 14, he denounced the plan and urged Haredi orthodox party leaders in the Knesset to oppose what he described as “holy site desecration at the Western Wall, whose spiritual damage is beyond imagination”.¹⁶⁹ The Palestinian Minister for Waqf and Religious Affairs, Sheikh Yusef Edais, also condemned the proposed plan, but as “part of an attempt to change the status quo at the Haram Al-Sharif”.

Jewish religious extremism

The extremist religious elements in Israeli society were always present, but lately they have increased their influence and scope. The settler movement, comprised mainly by religious right-wing members, has given birth to extremist groups, which have in recent years repeatedly attacked Christian sites and churches, in what has been known as “price-tag” attacks. The latest (and less severe compared to attacks in the past, where churches were burned to the ground) incident took place on January 17, when the slogans “Christians to Hell” and “Death to the heathen Christians Enemies of Israel” were scrawled on a wall of the Dormition Abbey, outside the Old City of Jerusalem. This act was strongly condemned by the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, by the Israeli government, and other religious and political actors in the country. Public

¹⁶⁸ Goldman, Mordechai, ‘After 27 years, men and women will be able to pray together at the Western Wall’, *AI Monitor*, (11/2/2016) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/02/western-wall-progressive-judaism-ultra-orthodox-praying.html>

¹⁶⁹ Jewish Telegraphic Agency, ‘Western Wall rabbi reportedly withdraws support for egalitarian praying space’, (14/3/2016) <http://www.jta.org/2016/03/14/news-opinion/israel-middle-east/western-wall-rabbi-withdraws-support-for-egalitarian-prayer-space>

Security Minister Gilad Erdan stated that “we will not allow anyone to undermine religious coexistence in Israel. We have zero tolerance for those who undercut our fundamental democratic principles and freedom of religion”.¹⁷⁰ On January 30, three Israeli teens were indicted for the vandalism of the church and were charged with religiously motivated destruction of property.¹⁷¹

These attacks are perpetrated mostly by groups of settler youths, like the Hilltop Youth. This is a small group of young men with radical religious ideas, who believe they alone are the genuine successors to the religious Zionist movement, they have a proclaimed goal of re-establishing the ancient Kingdom of Israel and Judea in the land of Israel, and oppose the presence of “gentiles” (whether Christians or Muslims) in the land of Israel. They see Christian sites as centers of heretical idol worship, and therefore are targeted often. There is an ongoing public discussion in Israel about this new form of Jewish religious terrorism, which some analysts, like Gadi Gvanyahu of the Tag Meir organisation, consider it “a serious threat not only for Christians and Muslims, but also for the state of Israel itself”.¹⁷² A point that must be emphasized is that most of these terror acts go unpunished. Few arrests have been made by Israel, and even fewer convictions. This trend creates a feeling of impunity among these groups, which may operate independently, but still have a network of radical rabbis and far right religious leaders behind them, that supports and protects them. Moreover, they offer a moral justification to their actions. On Christmas Eve 2015, Benzi Gopstein, leader of the group “Lahava”, a radical right-wing group, called for a ban on Christmas in Israel and for the expulsion of

¹⁷⁰ Eisenbud, Daniel K., ‘Jerusalem church vandalised with crude anti-Christian slogans’, *Jerusalem Post*, (17/1/2016) <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Jerusalem-church-vandalized-with-crude-anti-Christian-slogans-441762>

¹⁷¹ Pileggi, Tamar, ‘3 Jewish teens indicted for vandalising Jerusalem church’, *The Times of Israel*, (31/1/2016) <http://www.timesofisrael.com/3-jewish-teens-indicted-for-vandalizing-jerusalem-church/>

¹⁷² Lawler, Andrew, ‘Jewish Extremists’ Attacks Rattle Christians in Holy Land’, *National Geographic*, (24/12/2015) <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/12/151224-israel-jewish-terrorism-arson-christian-church-multiplication/>

Christians, whom he described as “blood-sucking vampires”.¹⁷³ The culture of violence, to which these groups adhere, is accentuated by the belief that they possess a divine right on the land. This culture is often endorsed not just by radical religious leaders in the settler movement, but even by high-ranking religious figures. On 12 March, Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef said in a statement that “a person is obligated according to law to kill a terrorist who is armed with a knife and is trying to commit a violent attack”.¹⁷⁴ These statements were strongly condemned by the more liberal elements of the Israeli public, such as Yair Sheleg of the Israel Democracy Institute, who said that “[Chief Rabbi Yosef], as the head of Israel’s rabbinical court, he must not take public stances on controversial non-religious issues [...] his position is not just the private stance of an average citizen, but a religious edict that is intended to obligate those who follow him”.¹⁷⁵

The division of Israeli society

The Israeli society in recent years has regressed to more conservative political views, and this trend has severe implications on the Muslim minorities in the country. This notion was accentuated in March 2016, with the publication of a new survey by the Pew Research Center, a Washington-based non-partisan fact tank. The survey was conducted among more than 5000 Israelis, in late 2014 and early 2015. This means that the findings of the survey do not reflect the attitudes of the Israeli public, in relation to the recent wave of violence in the country. One could assume that this new outbreak of violence will only exacerbate the already existing tendencies. The most important find of the

¹⁷³ Younes, Ali, ‘Jewish leader demands expulsion of ‘Christian vampires’’, *Al Jazeera*, (24/12/2015) <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/jewish-leader-demands-expulsion-christian-vampires-151223163251568.html>

¹⁷⁴ Sharon, Jeremy, ‘Chief Rabbi Yosef: If a terrorist is trying to commit an attack, it is a mitzvah to kill him’, *Jerusalem Post*, (13/3/2016) <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Chief-Rabbi-Yosef-If-a-terrorist-is-trying-to-commit-an-attack-it-is-a-mitzvah-to-kill-him-447734>

¹⁷⁵ The Israel Democracy Institute, ‘IDI Program Director Response to Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef’, (13/3/2016) <http://en.idi.org.il/about-idi/news-and-updates/idi-response-to-chief-rabbi-yitzhak-yosef/>

survey is that almost 1 in 2 Israelis (48%) favor the expulsion or transfer of Israeli Arabs from Israel.¹⁷⁶ This is a troubling trend that indicates that the government policies towards the Arab minority are endorsed by the Israeli public. There is an interconnection between the state and the society, in that regard. The survey paints a picture of Israeli society, where all Israelis are united under the idea of Israel as a homeland for Jews across the world (98%). Nevertheless, at the same time it presents a society that is deeply divided along religious lines. There are four major religious subgroups, Haredi (ultra-orthodox), Dati (religious), Masorti (traditional) and Hiloni (secular). These groups, while sharing the same land, are living simultaneously in completely separate social environments. The animosity between the different communities is quite often expressed in the public discourse, and especially by ultra-orthodox Jews. The Chief Rabbinate on February, 25 accused the reform and conservative denominations of “uprooting Judaism”, and having “no connection to authentic Judaism”.¹⁷⁷ Another interesting find of the survey is that 79% of the public opinion believes that Jews should have preferential treatment over non-Jews by the state of Israel. If this is a common stance among ultra-Orthodox Jews (97%), it is surprising that the percentage of secular Jews, who agree to that notion, is also impressively high (69%).¹⁷⁸ If we could sum up the findings of the research, we could say that while the Israeli society is divided, and different social environments are formulated according to the level of religiosity, a sense of unity and belonging exists, especially regarding the idea of Israel as a Jewish state. The differences of opinion on social and/or political issues (like whether there should be transportation services on Sabbath or not) are not capable of fracturing the Israeli identity, as it is perceived by the Israeli society in its entirety.

¹⁷⁶ Pew Research Center, ‘Israel’s Religiously Divided Society’, (8/3/2016) <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/03/08/israels-religiously-divided-society/>

¹⁷⁷ Sharon, Jeremy and Sokol, Sam, ‘Chief Rabbinate in fierce attack on Reform, Conservative movements’, *Jerusalem Post*, (25/2/2016) <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Chief-Rabbinate-in-fierce-attack-on-Reform-Conservative-movements-446143>

¹⁷⁸ Pew Research Center, op.cit.

Despite the right-wing dominance in public discourse and in the political arena in Israel, there are still liberal, democratic elements in the society that oppose segregation and the occupation, which struggle for promoting coexistence and tolerance. The initiative “Simply Sing” is a prime example of that. This is a cross-cultural project based in Jerusalem, where Jews and Arabs meet regularly for an evening of music and singing. Although there has been criticism from both sides, this did not deter the organizers from continuing their effort. Khaled Aqham, a Palestinian Jerusalemite, participant in the project, says that “such projects are the best way to make progress as normal people who simply want to live”.¹⁷⁹ Except for organized initiatives, there have been moments and occasions, where Jews and Arabs came together in protest, as was the case in Abu Tor, one of the few remaining mixed Jewish-Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem. A protest was held there against plans to build luxury buildings on a famous hilltop with significant archaeological sites.¹⁸⁰ Protesters included both Arabs and Jews, who were protesting for the preservation of the archaeological site in their district.

The Israeli state, even in contradiction to many of its policies, has at times made efforts at integrating the non-Jewish population in the country. On February, 26 Israeli Police Commissioner Roni Alsheich, announced the state’s intent to begin recruitment among Israeli Muslims officers.¹⁸¹ Also, the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews declared that an academic scholarship would be awarded to forty Christians, who served in the Israeli Defense Forces, in an attempt to encourage the integration of Christians in the IDF and the Israeli society.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ Bachner, Michael, ‘Jews and Arabs ‘simply singing’ in Jerusalem’, *Ynet News*, (16/2/2016) <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4766007,00.html>

¹⁸⁰ Maltz, Judy, ‘Arabs and Jews join forces to oppose development on historic Jerusalem hilltop’, *Haaretz*, (17/2/2016) <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.703933>

¹⁸¹ Raved, Ahiya, ‘Alsheich: Police recruiting massive numbers of Muslim officers’, *Ynet News*, (23/2/2016) <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4769815,00.html>

¹⁸² Grave-Lazi, Lidar, ‘In historic first, Israel to award academic prizes to 40 IDF Christian veterans’, *Jerusalem Post*, (9/3/2016) <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4769815,00.html>

The Christian Churches in Israel

The Christian community in Israel, given the deep bond of Christians with the Holy Land, is very vibrant. The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem has a strong presence in Israel. It frequently organizes symposia and conferences, while its charity work in Israel, Jordan and elsewhere has helped many, especially Christian refugees, fleeing persecution. In face of difficult times for Christians in the Middle East, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem continues to support religious coexistence and the interreligious dialogue between Christians, Muslims and Jews. Notwithstanding its humanitarian action, the Patriarchate has been at the center of a heated controversy in the past, that has generated friction between the clergy and the Christian Arab community. In 2009, it was accused of an alleged leasing of 18 acres of land to an Israeli company. The Greek Orthodox community is very sensitive on the issue of the handling of the Church's land, so naturally this move caused an uproar among Palestinian Christians, who accused the Patriarchate of serving the interests of the settlers. The former Patriarch Irineos was led to abdication in 2005, because, among other reasons, he was also accused of leasing land to Jewish groups. This controversy has added fuel to the fire burning in the Palestinian territories over Israel's policy of confiscating church land. This is a constant tactic of the Israeli government in Palestine in the last years. The latest incident was on January, 2016, when Israeli Defense Minister Mose Ya'alon approved the annexation of the Beit al-Baraka church compound to the Gush Etzion settlements, to the south of the West Bank. The land belongs and is supervised by the Presbyterian Church in Palestine, but recently settlers installed a fence and security cameras there, claiming that they bought the land legally.¹⁸³

Despite the internal disputes of the local Christian churches in Jerusalem, when needed they have come together to form a concrete block. On April 20, the heads of the churches addressed a letter to US President Barack Obama, in

¹⁸³ Melhem, Ahmad, 'Israeli land grab threatens Palestinian church', *Al Monitor*, (26/1/2016) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/israel-land-grab-west-bank-church-endowments.html>

which they urged him not to veto a potential UN resolution on a two-state solution for Palestine. “As Holy Land church leaders, we approach you, Mr. President, to stress to you the gravity of the situation in the region. The hopes and aspirations of many of the faithful in the two-state solution on the basis of the 1967 borders are quickly fading”. “We plead to you”, continues the letter “during the remainder of your term, to invest in a just peace and to refrain from exercising the US veto rights in the United Nations Security Council in order to deliver new hopes for a just peace in the region and an end to extremism, terrorism, death and destruction in the entire Middle East”.¹⁸⁴ The letter was signed by Greek Orthodox Patriarch Theofilos III, Armenian Patriarch Nourhan Manogian, Latin (Catholic) Patriarch Fuad Twal, Anglican Archbishop Suheil Dawani, Evangelical Lutheran Church Bishop Munib Younan and (Franciscan) Custos Pierbatista Pizzaballa.

Promotion of diversity towards a more tolerant society

Israel’s social stratification is quite complicated. Overlapping identities among social subgroups, religious and ethnic, often create confrontations, not just between Jews and Arabs in the country, but among Jewish groups as well. The discrimination faced by the Muslim minorities in the country stems from a combination of political and religious reasons. The continuation of the occupation intermixes with the firm belief of a significant part of the political establishment of Israel in a messianic mission to reconquer the land of Eretz Israel, which leads in practice to the attempted segregation of Muslims in Israeli society. This means that other faiths, such as Christianity, are not particularly targeted by state policies, though still are regarded as enemies of the faith, by radical religious groups and certain segments of the political establishment. Nevertheless, there are forces in Israel that believe in coexistence. It is

¹⁸⁴ Pecquet, Julian, ‘Jerusalem Churches: Don’t veto Palestine resolution’, *Al Monitor*, (22/4/2016) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/04/jerusalem-church-leaders-obama-veto-palestine-two-state.html>

imperative that these elements of society are reinforced, in order to resist the ongoing radicalisation of Israeli society. Specific actions can be taken in order to promote diversity, tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

Palestine

There are approximately 52,000 Palestinian Christians, who mostly reside in the West Bank, in the towns of Bethlehem, Ramallah and Nablus. In the Gaza Strip, where once lived more than 3,000, now just over 1,000 live there, constituting less than 1% of the population. The Christian community was once thriving in Palestine, but in recent years it was dwindled significantly. Conditions have not been easy for Christians, as the Israeli occupation and the blockade imposed on the Gaza Strip by Israel, has rendered life in the Palestinian territories almost unlivable. What is an important characteristic of the Palestinian Christians, is that they acknowledge themselves as part of the Palestinian nation, sharing the same plight with their Muslim compatriots.¹⁸⁵ There have never been any serious issues about the integration of Palestinian Christians in the national narrative. In that sense, the Palestinian society is very tolerant towards religious diversity. The political aspect of the Palestinian struggle has ultimately rendered this issue unimportant. However, the small Christian community, in Gaza particularly, faced with extremely harsh living conditions, continues to shrink rapidly. 5% of the population leaves the community each year, mostly young people who see no future in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip.¹⁸⁶

The Greek Orthodox Church is the largest denomination in Palestine, with 50% of the Palestinian Christians belonging to that creed. Patriarch Theofilos III has had to this day a troubled relation with a significant part of its congregation, due to his management of church land in Palestine, and other church affairs. In early 2015, the Arab Central Orthodox Council started a campaign against Theofilos, deeming him “unworthy”, and requesting his removal. The main arguments against him are the attempted leasing of land to a

¹⁸⁵ Kaplan, Michael, 'As Christmas Looms, Gaza's Fading Christian Community Eyes Life Outside Besieged Palestinian Territory', *International Business Times*, (23/12/2015), <http://www.ibtimes.com/christmas-looms-gazas-fading-christian-community-eyes-life-outside-besieged-2235275>

¹⁸⁶ Vickery, Matthew, 'After 2,000 years, Christians disappearing from Gaza', *USA Today*, (20/12/2015), <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/12/20/after-2000-years-christians-gaza-disappearing/77503936/>

Jewish company in 2009, and the mistreatment of Arab monks and clergy. The movement against him considers these actions by the Patriarch as “racist and wasteful”, and has organised demonstrations and sit-ins in Bethlehem to protest. Their declared goal is to rid the Patriarchate of the so-called Greek hegemony over it since the 16th century. As Alif Sabbagh, member of the Central Orthodox Council in Israel says “[there is a] long-term strategic plan to reform the Orthodox Church and restore its Arab’s flock right to manage its affairs”.¹⁸⁷ However, this dispute’s root causes are found not in real estate matters, but elsewhere. For more than one century, the demand for the “re-arabization” of the Greek Orthodox church has been resurfacing as a source of friction in the community. Some Arab Christians have traditionally been opposed to the handling of church affairs by “foreigners” as they see them, i.e. clergy, mostly of Greek origin. The recent removal from office of Archimandrite Christophoros has steered this anti-Greek sentiment in part of the community. While there are indeed few Arab priests in high places in the Greek Orthodox community, the Patriarchate dismisses any notion of discrimination against Arab Christians. In 2005, Atallah Hanna, a Palestinian cleric, was appointed Archbishop of Sebastia, a move that refuted the claim that there is a systematic discrimination against Arab clergy.

The predicament of Christians in Palestine, and especially in Gaza, among other reasons, is also a result of a certain level of discrimination they are facing. Notwithstanding the common national struggle, Christians have been subjected to the aggression of rising Islamist groups in the Strip. As Fr. Mario Da Silva, the Parish priest of the Holy Family church in Gaza, described in an interview last October, there are elements targeting Christians in Gaza. There have been graffiti on the streets urging people not to talk to Christians, while two years ago his church was vandalized with hateful graffiti spray-painted on

¹⁸⁷ Melhem, Ahmad, ‘Palestinians push to end Greek ‘occupation’ of Patriarchate’, *Al Monitor*, (20/1/2015) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/01/arab-orthodox-accuse-patriarch-selling-church-land-israel.html>

the walls.¹⁸⁸ What is striking is the fact, that this persecution does not stem from the Hamas government, i.e. it is not endorsed by the official administration in Gaza, but derives mostly by Islamist organizations that have risen, particularly after the electoral victory of Hamas in Gaza in 2006. Since then, these groups have managed to gain some influence in Palestinian society. The “Jihadi Salafi Stream”, especially, has been on the rise, mostly among the younger generations of Palestinians. The Salafi movement rejects Hamas for being more of a “national” movement” that participates in legislative procedures, rather than an “Islamic movement” that upholds the Sharia law. Hamas has imposed or attempted to impose several Islamic laws in the Gaza Strip, throughout its ten-year rule, including dress code for women, banning books and prohibiting certain types of music as “immoral”. Nonetheless, Hamas has repeatedly stated that it does not wish to establish an Islamic state in Gaza, a position forcefully rejected by Salafist, who accuse Hamas of failing to adequately impose religious law in Gaza. Hamas has been cracking down on the Salafist groups, as it considers them a major threat to its rule. In early 2015 a series of raids in Salafi strongholds led to the arrest of many of their leaders and the closing down of their recruiting offices.¹⁸⁹

Despite the hardships Christians encounter in Palestine, they still form a vibrant community that fights to preserve its Christian identity. In the Gaza Strip the Latin Catholic Parish led by Fr. Mario Da Silva regularly distributes food packages to families in need, while more than ten different projects aim in providing aid and assistance. Also, there are regular praying meetings, catechism classes and community recreation activities.¹⁹⁰ In the West Bank, in many cases the Palestinian Authority itself facilitates the efforts of the Christian

¹⁸⁸ Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, ‘To be Christian in Gaza: Interview with Fr Mario Da Silva’, (14/10/2015) <http://en.lpi.org/2015/10/14/to-be-christian-in-gaza-interview-with-fr-mario-da-silva/>

¹⁸⁹ Abu Amer, Adnan, ‘Jihadi Salafis’: A New Component in the Palestinian Political Context’, *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture*, (Vol. 20, no.4 & Vol.21 No.1, 2015) <http://www.pij.org/details.php?id=1631>

¹⁹⁰ Bergamini, Anders, ‘Number of Christians in the Gaza Strip continues to dwindle’, *Abouna*, (29/2/2016) <http://en.abouna.org/en/holylands/number-christians-gaza-strip-continues-dwindle>

community to uphold its culture and values. In February 2016, it was announced that a restoration project at the Church of the Nativity had completed its initial phase. The work done on the 4th century church has revealed under layers of dust, invaluable mosaics that date back to the Crusades. This project was partially funded by the Palestinian Authority, and President Mahmoud Abbas was involved in the project.¹⁹¹ Setting the example of how religious coexistence can be achieved, is a Christian school in Jericho, in the West Bank, where Muslim and Christian students attend together. Out of 580 pupils, only 38 are Christians, the rest of the students are Muslim. The “Holy Land” school is managed by the Franciscans of the Custody of the Holy Land, and has been growing in reputation for being an open-minded institution, that fosters peaceful coexistence and tolerance. As Headmaster of the school, Fr. Mario Hadchity says “[t]eaching has no limits [...] we educate them to live together peacefully, to love and to respect one another, protecting them from hatred. We all work together to build a more just world”.¹⁹²

The case of the Christians in Palestine is somewhat different than that of Christians in other Muslim countries. While elsewhere, Christians are persecuted for their faith, in Palestine their plight does not derive so much from religious reasons, but from the same source all Palestinians, Muslims and Christians, suffer, i.e. the occupation of the Palestinian Territories by Israel. While the national struggle gives all Palestinians a sense of unity, the prolongment of the occupation only leads to a vicious circle that can ultimately affect the Christians in the country as a community. The deterioration of living conditions leads to the radicalisation of the youth especially, giving fertile ground to extreme Islamist groups to grow. As there is no hope for the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians to recommence any time soon, it is very likely that

¹⁹¹ Al Arabiya English, ‘Palestinians renovate church at Jesus’ birthplace’, (16/2/2016) <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/features/2016/02/16/Palestinians-renovate-church-at-Jesus-birthplace.html>

¹⁹² Uguccioni, Cristina, ‘The Catholic school in Jericho that is also attended by Muslims’, *Vatican Insider*, (18/3/2016) <http://www.lastampa.it/2016/03/18/vaticaninsider/eng/world-news/the-catholic-school-in-gericho-that-is-also-attended-by-muslims-aHG5HRDQFX1YiTCRAUWjLJ/pagina.html>

conditions will continue to deteriorate, and the trend of escapism among Christians will continue to grow.

Jordan

In terms of freedom of religion and religious tolerance Jordan is one of the most tolerant countries in the Middle East. Its Christians constitute approximately 2.2% of the overall population, which is predominantly Muslim (97.2%), and which includes also small minorities of Shi'a Muslims (2%), Druze and Baha'I.¹⁹³ Although the numbers of Christians have dwindled in recent decades (in 1950 they constituted 30% of the population of the country) they enjoy relative freedom in exercising their religion, as the country's constitution ordains. While there are some reports of isolated discrimination, e.g. in the area of employment, these do not indicate a trend in societal behavior towards non-Muslims in Jordan.

The good relations among the various creeds in Jordan are evident by the freedom, with which Christian institutions function in the country. The Catholic Centre for Studies and Media that was established a few years back in Amman, is supported in its many activities by the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, and has been quite active in promoting Christian values, but also supporting interreligious dialogue and coexistence. In February 17, Fr. Rif'at Bader, director of The Catholic Center for Studies and Media gave a speech in the "Spiritual and Intellectual Safety in the Light of Religious Doctrines" conference that took place in Doha, Qatar. In it he praised Jordan's role in promoting religious tolerance, not only in Jordan, but in the whole region, in general. "Jordan's welcoming" he said, "of the forcibly displaced from Mosul, and other Iraqi cities and villages, has increased Jordan's role which is designed to block attempts to vacate the Christians of the Orient".¹⁹⁴

The Syrian war has put a huge burden on Jordan, both economically and socially. With more than one million refugees finding shelter in Jordan, many of

¹⁹³ U.S. Department of State, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2014', <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dliid=238462#wrapper>

¹⁹⁴ Abouna, 'Fr. Bader highlights Jordan's role regarding dialogue among followers of religions', (18/2/2016) <http://en.abouna.org/en/holylands/fr-bader-highlights-jordan's-role-regarding-dialogue-among-followers-religions>

whom are Christians, it is remarkable how religious fundamentalism has not managed to take root in Jordan. This is due mainly to the way the government has reacted to such threats. The Hashemite Kingdom has been extremely vigilant against infiltrations in its soil of Islamist militants of ISIS or Al-Qaeda. In March 1, a raid by the Jordanian forces on a suspected IS cell in the city of Irbid, close to the Syrian border, resulted to the death of seven suspected militants and one officer. Statements by government officials declared that the operation managed to foil planned attacks by IS against civilians in the country, in an attempt to destabilize it. The government has been steadfast in not allowing Islamist groups to grow out of its control in the country. Despite the government's vigilance however, there are small cells of Salafi Jihadi fighters in the country, who have been fighting in Syria for the last few years and are still crossing the borders to fight there. These groups, while in previous years were affiliated to Jabhat al-Nusra, Al-Qaeda's affiliate organization in Syria, are beginning to switch allegiance to ISIS. The existence of such cells could prove to be a problem to be reckoned with by the Jordanian government, after the eventual end of the Syrian war, when these Salafi fighters return from Syria, with jihadi networks in place and valuable combat experience.

Another issue important to Jordan is the state and administration of the Holy City in Jerusalem. Jordan has always been very sensitive on the issue of the Haram al-Sharif management. In recent years there have been many accusations against Israel, by Palestinians and Jordanians, of attempting to alter the status quo of the Holy Places in Jerusalem, and this has also been one of the causes of erupting violence in the city. Jordan, being the main caretaker of the site, through the Jordanian-controlled Islamic Waqf, has opposed Israeli policies, concerning the site, in many occasions. In February 2016, and in face of the ongoing violence between Israelis and Palestinians, in Jerusalem and the West Bank, reports surfaced, which claimed that an agreement was reached between Jordan and Israel about the installation of cameras, for security

reasons, on the Temple Mount.¹⁹⁵ The Islamic Waqf minister Hail Daoud denied that any such negotiations ever took place, claiming that “Jordan will still have authority related to the installation of surveillance cameras, their transmissions and the inspections on them, due to its special role as al-Aqsa’s defender”.¹⁹⁶ This is not the first time this dispute has come to the forefront. In October there was another minor incident, where Israeli police did not allow a crew to install cameras at the entrance of the compound, despite an agreement reached in Amman. Israel’s argument was that the move to install them was “too premature”.¹⁹⁷ On March, 18 the Jordanian government announced officially the installation of security cameras on the Temple Mount with a declared goal of “monitoring Israeli violations”, as Government Spokesperson and Minister of State for Media Affairs and Communications Mohammad Momani said.¹⁹⁸

Jordan’s conviction in preserving its role as custodian of the Holy Mosque and therefore, maintaining its involvement in the Temple Mount affairs, was reiterated recently at the 5th Extraordinary Islamic Summit on Palestine and Jerusalem that occurred in Jakarta of Indonesia in early March. There, King Abdullah, represented by Prince Hassan, delivered a speech in which he reiterated Jordan’s determination to stand by its “commitment to the Hashemite Custodianship of the Holy city’s sites, we will continue addressing Israeli violations [...] and we will relentlessly perform our duties until the liberation of East Jerusalem and its holy sites”. The King also attacked Israel for “Israeli occupation forces violations and assaults in occupied Jerusalem which”, he stressed, “aim at imposing new realities by changing the Holy city’s

¹⁹⁵ Ravid, Barak, ‘Progress made in Israel-Jordan negotiations over surveillance cameras on Temple Mount’, *Haaretz*, (28/2/2016), <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-1.706038>

¹⁹⁶ Groisman, Maayan, ‘Jordanian Waqf Minister: No negotiations with Israel over Temple mount cameras’, *Jerusalem Post*, (1/3/2016), <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Jordanian-Waqf-minister-No-negotiations-with-Israel-over-Temple-Mount-cameras-446527>

¹⁹⁷ Younes, Ali, ‘Dispute erupts over Al-Aqsa mosque security cameras’, *Al Jazeera*, (27/10/2015), <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/10/israel-stops-aqsa-administrator-installing-cameras-151026140713886.html>

¹⁹⁸ Jordan Times, ‘Al Aqsa cameras to be installed ‘in coming few days’ to document Israeli violations-Momani’, (18/3/2016) <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/al-aqsa-cameras-be-installed-coming-few-days-document-israeli-violations---momani>

demography, Islamic and Arab identity”.¹⁹⁹ Given the strong language used by the King against Israel, it is evident that Jordan desires to maintain a strong presence in the affairs of the Temple Mount, and also preserve a role for itself, if only verbally, as a warrantor of the rights of Palestinians in the City.

An important aspect of Jordan's policies is its commitment to the promotion of interfaith dialogue. Through various organizations and several initiatives, some from the highest levels of power, Jordan has been at the forefront of the fight for religious tolerance and coexistence in the Middle East and the world. One such initiative has been the establishment of the “World Interfaith Harmony Week” in 2010. It was an idea, that was first proposed by King Abdullah and was adopted by the UN General Assembly. According to the initiative, the first week of February is to be observe as “World Interfaith Harmony Week”. Its goal is to spread awareness and mutual respect among different religious groups and to promote understanding and dialogue. This type of activism for interfaith dialogue does not stem solely from the highest echelons of power in the country, but is a lasting trend in Jordanian society, with several grassroots organizations dedicated to the promotion of peace and tolerance between faiths. Such is the case of the Jordanian Interfaith Coexistence Research Center, a non-governmental organization that was first established in 2003. Through conferences, publications and other programs it aims at fighting extremism and promoting the values of respect and coexistence. Another important organization is the Royal Institute of Interfaith Studies, which also strives for the promotion of interfaith dialogue and understanding. Jordan is, perhaps, the most active Middle Eastern country, in matters of religious freedom. The government's initiatives seem to stem in this particular case, from a broader social trend towards dialogue and coexistence. In other words, the Jordanian society is one of relative tolerance, and these societal attitudes are reflected in the government's policies.

¹⁹⁹ Jordan Times, 'Jordan committed to defending Jerusalem, peacemaking', (7/3/2016), <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/jordan-committed-defending-jerusalem-peacemaking%E2%80%99>

Iran

Iranian reformists and moderates gained a significant victory in recent elections, on 26 February, 2016, winning all 30 seats in Tehran. They also scored another important victory, winning 59% of the seats on the 88-member Assembly of Experts, one of the most important bodies in Iran's government. The Assembly of Experts for the Leadership is an 88-member body of Islamic jurists, elected by direct popular vote every eight years and holds the power to appoint, monitor and dismiss (if appropriate) the supreme leader. The elected Assembly, including President Hassan Rouhani and former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who both won seats in the assembly, is expected to choose the next supreme leader after 76-year-old Ayatollah Ali Khamenei becomes unable to perform his duties.²⁰⁰

The formerly dominated by hardliners Assembly of Experts is expected to choose the third supreme leader in the Islamic Republic's history, shaping its political and religious landscape for the eight critical coming years, as the supreme leader supposed to be one of the most powerful leaders of Iran. Consequently, a moderate Assembly of Experts could put pressure on the Supreme Leader toward more moderate policies, including the decline of religious violations and discriminations.²⁰¹

Actually, Iran's elections raising hopes that the persecution of religious minorities and especially of Christians would rather decrease. Paul Robinson, Chief executive of Anti-persecution charity Release International, told that the results of the Iran's election could "signal an end to the current crackdown on Christians", adding "with Iran now voting for reform, now is the time to end the

²⁰⁰ Sabet, Farzan, "Why Iran's Assembly of Experts election is the real race to be watching", *The Washington Post*, (24/02/2016) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/02/24/why-irans-assembly-of-experts-election-is-the-real-race-to-be-watching/>

²⁰¹ Fisher, Max, "4 reasons Iran's election is a bigger deal than you think", *Vox*, (01/03/2016) <http://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11139970/iran-elections>

crackdown on the church and set free prisoners who are behind bars for their religious beliefs".²⁰²

Christians are one of the three religious minorities recognized by the Iranian constitution as protected. Jews and Zoroastrians are the other two. All of them, according to article 13 of Iran's constitution, can have direct representatives in parliament, two for the Armenian community, one in the north and one in the south, one for Chaldeans and Assyrians, who can jointly elect one representative and one each for Jews and Zoroastrians.²⁰³

The Twelver (Shi'a) Jaafari School of Islam is the official religion of the theocratic Iran and the majority of Iranians are Shi'ite Muslims (80% of the population). Around 18 percent are Sunni and Sufi Muslims and the remaining two percent are made up of religious minorities (Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians including Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Armenians).²⁰⁴

During the last years there were serious allegations for poor religious freedom conditions for religious minorities, especially for Baha'is, Christian converts, and Sunni Muslims, nevertheless, President Hassan Rouhani, promised, with his June election 2013, that he will strengthen civil liberties for religious minorities. Today we could say that there is a gradual progress in this domain. Through this perspective, on February 2015, the Iranian Government decided that was not any longer necessary for Jewish students to attend classes on the Sabbath, after a long period, in which they were forced to do it.²⁰⁵

This was a positive step toward the Iranian Jewish community, which according to Annual Report 2015 of United States Commission on International

²⁰² Bushfield, Antony, "Hopes Iranian elections will end Christianity crack down", *Premier*, (01/03/2016) <https://www.premier.org.uk/News/World/Hopes-Iranian-elections-will-end-Christianity-crack-down>

²⁰³ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Annual Report 2015", Iran, pp.45-50
<http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%202015%20%282%29.pdf>

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Meir, Javedanfar, "Rouhani accommodates Iran's Jewish students", *Al Monitor*, (17/02/2015)
<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/iran-hassan-rouhani-iranian-jews.html>

Religious Freedom, numbered approximately, 20.000 members and constitutes the largest Jewish minority in the Islamic world. In Tehran there are 10 synagogues and one of them the Abrishami Synagogue is a focal point for Jewish families in the capital, as is located in central Tehran and it has capacity to hold 500 people. Recently, Jews actively took part in Iran's election and they voted at one of these synagogues.²⁰⁶ Mr. Siamak Moreh Sedq, is the elected Jewish representative to the Iranian parliament, with 2.449 votes.

Along with the Jewish community Zoroastrians too, elected Mr. Esfandiar Ekhtiari as their representative, with 3.966 votes.²⁰⁷ Zoroastrianism one of the world's oldest monotheistic religions was the official religion of Persia (Iran) from 600 BC to 650 AC. Today, Zoroastrians in Iran, numbering about 30.000 people and although they are few in numbers their rituals are widespread in Iran.²⁰⁸

In fact, last January about 4.000 people gathered to Pir-e Rahgozar temple in the Yazd province, in central Iran, to celebrate the ancient Sadeh Festival, a Zoroastrian mid-winter ritual. The attendees of the ceremony were not only Zoroastrians but also domestic tourists and people, who are interested in Zoroastrianism and have traveled across the country to celebrate Sadeh in Cham.²⁰⁹

Finally, Christians are the third and the largest recognized religious minority in Iran with approximately 250.000 members. Among them there are the Assyrians and the Chaldeans, who recently elected as their representative Mr. Younatan Betkolia, with 2,212 votes.²¹⁰ Armenians constitutes the largest

²⁰⁶ Haaretz, "With Tehran synagogue doubling as polling station, Jews vote in Iran elections", (28/02/2016) <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/1.705897>

²⁰⁷ Iran Daily, "Iran Religious minorities lawmakers elected", (01/03/2016) <http://www.iran-daily.com/News/137621.html?catid=3&title=Iran-religious-minorities-lawmakers-elected>

²⁰⁸ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Annual Report 2015", Iran, op.cit.

²⁰⁹ Varzi, Changiz M., "Zoroastrian village comes to life for ancient winter festival", *Middle East Eye*, (05/02/2016) <http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/journey-heart-iran-zoroastrians-ancient-feast-1789877481>

²¹⁰ Iran Daily, op.cit.

Christian group in Iran.²¹¹ On February Elections, 2016, the Armenian community has actively participated and around 12.000 Armenians headed to the polls, electing Mr. Karen Khanlarian in the north and Mr. George Abrahamian in the south.²¹² It is worth to mention at this point that Mr. Karen Khanlarian just after the elections said that he is satisfied with both the voter turnout and the election result, and that he expects many changes to come.²¹³

In the same line, Armenian archbishop of Tehran Sebouh Sarkissian told reporters that Armenians are eager to help their country's progress through voting and he has encouraged Armenians to take part in Iran's elections, in order "to show to the world that they can freely practice their duties in the Iranian society."²¹⁴

At the same time, H.H. Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians, in a meeting with the head of Iran's Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO) Abuzar Ebrahimi Torkaman in Yerevan on February 22, 2016 has thanked the Iranian government for the freedom of Armenians in performing their religious ceremonies in Iran. In addition, he thanked the Iranian government for preserving the Armenian artifacts in Iran and for the registration of Armenians' churches in the UNESCO's list of world heritage.²¹⁵ Indeed, the historical Vank cathedral in Isfahan is restored periodically under an agreement between the provincial Organization of

²¹¹ Euro News, "Iran's religious minorities ready to vote in general election", (25/02/2016) <http://www.euronews.com/2016/02/25/iran-s-religious-minorities-ready-to-vote-in-general-election/>

²¹² The Armenian Weekly, "Two Armenians Elected to Iran's Parliament", (29/02/2016) <http://armenianweekly.com/2016/02/29/armenians-elected-irans-parliament/>

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Golpira, Marjan, "Religious minorities vote in elections", *MEHR News Agency*, (01/03/2016) <http://en.mehrnews.com/news/114911/Religious-minorities-vote-in-elections>

²¹⁵ Ghazanchyan, Siranush, "Iran's religious dialogue spreading peace in the region, Armenian Supreme Patriarch says", *Public Radio of Armenia*, (22/02/2016) <http://www.armradio.am/en/2016/02/22/irans-religious-dialogue-spreading-peace-in-the-region-armenian-supreme-patriarch-says/>

Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism and Isfahan Armenian Caliphate Council.²¹⁶

At this point, it is worth mentioning that, on January 26, 2016, the first meeting between a Pope and an Iranian leader, took place, after 17 years. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani during his European tour, which was primarily aimed to reestablish trade and business ties with the West, after the lifting of sanctions, met Pope Francis at the Vatican.

The two leaders highlighted the importance of inter-religious dialogue and the responsibility of religious communities in promoting reconciliation, tolerance and peace, emphasizing the important role of Iran to counter extremism in the region.²¹⁷ Also, the Vatican statement spoke of “the common spiritual values and the good state of relations between the Holy See and the Islamic Republic of Iran, the life of the Church in the country and the action of the Holy See to favour the promotion of the dignity of the human person and religious freedom”.²¹⁸

Although, there was no mention in the Vatican statement of any specific group, CNN reported “that no doubt the agenda included talk about the years-long war and humanitarian crisis in Syria and Christians endangered by Islamist extremists such as ISIS in that country, neighboring Iraq and elsewhere”.²¹⁹

In conclusion, we could say that Iranian president’s visit to Pope was a positive step towards tolerance within the “new era” of Iran, promoted recently by Iranian government. In this context, now that the nuclear deal is succeeded it

²¹⁶ The Iran Project, “Isfahan Armenian Caliphate Council takes unearthed artifacts”, (06/03/2016) <http://theiranproject.com/blog/2016/03/07/isfahan-armenian-caliphate-council-takes-unearthed-artifacts/>

²¹⁷ Povoledo, Elisabetta, “Pope Francis and Hassan Rouhani of Iran Discuss Mideast Unrest”, *The New York Times*, (26/01/2016) http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/27/world/middleeast/pope-francis-hassan-rouhani-meeting.html?_r=0

²¹⁸ Vatican Radio, “Pope Francis meets Iranian President Rouhani”, (26/01/2016) http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/01/26/pope_francis_meets_iranian_president_rouhani/1203813

²¹⁹ Botelho, Greg, “Pope Francis, Iranian President meet face-to-face at the Vatican”, *CNN*, (26/01/2016) <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/01/26/world/pope-iran-rouhani/>

is time for Iran to establish strong relations with the West, not only in economic terms, but also by improving the human and religious rights situation in the country, as a new era for Iran would mean a more tolerate, open and democratic nation.

Saudi Arabia

In contrast to Iran, Saudi Arabia is an Islamic Sunni state. 85-90% of citizens are Sunni and 10-15% are Shia. Also, there are other religions, as eastern Orthodox, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh.²²⁰ Saudi Arabia has a large proportion of expatriate workers of various faiths, despite the fact that public expressions inconsistent with the Sunni Islam are restricted. Moreover, non-Muslim places of worship are not permitted in Saudi Arabia and non-Muslims are not allowed to have Saudi citizenship.²²¹

King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud who succeeded his brother king Abdullah, on January 2015, promised continuity of many of his predecessor's policies, especially regarding the country's Shariah legal system. As a matter of fact, on March 11, 2016, Faisal bin Hassan Trad, Saudi ambassador to the United Nations told the United Nations Human Rights Council that Saudi Arabia would not accept any recommendations that contravene Islamic law. He added that "the country's laws ensure that everyone has the freedom and right to worship in their special places and on the premises of their diplomatic missions".²²²

These statements came just few months after Saudi Arabia executed, on January 2, 2016, 47 people on terrorism charges, including a prominent Shia cleric, Nimr al-Nimr. The executions led to a significant agitation in the human rights community about death penalties in the country. Shia cleric, Nimr al-Nimr was convicted for speaking out against the Saudi Arabian regime and calling for more rights for the country's Shiite minority. His execution sparked

²²⁰ Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Fact book – Saudi Arabia", (09/03/2016) <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html>

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Arab News, 'Shariah is sacrosanct', (11/03/2016) <http://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/news/893451>

the anger of Shia population in the area and also in Iran, provoking deepen sectarian tensions.²²³

Saudi Arabia has long been accused of promoting religious discrimination against religious minorities and especially against Shia Islam, nevertheless Saudi authorities say they are working intensively to promote tolerance and to counter extremist messages. In this context, the Riyadh-based King Abdul Aziz Centre for National Dialogue (KACND) looks to bring Sunni and Shiites together, in order to promote mutual understanding, through contact and to counter hate speech.²²⁴ This Saudi centre is also making a push on social media to stop jihadist propaganda through its own online campaigns and through short films in you tube, promoting national unity and tolerance, and opposing extremism.²²⁵

Recently, Saudi Arabia's highest religious body, in an official statement, said that allows executions of hardened criminals, especially of those of the "Daesh terrorist group" and urged members of the public "to cooperate with the authorities to report about individuals wanted by the state as part of cooperation in righteousness and piety that eventually protects society".²²⁶

In this perspective, last December, amid criticism from the West that Arab countries have not done enough to fight ISIS, Saudi Arabia has formed a coalition of 34 mainly Muslim countries to coordinate a fight against "terrorist organisations". The coalition's joint operations center is based in Riyadh and the initiative will have two distinct tracks: security and military and combating

²²³ El-Badawy, Emman, "Saudi Arabia's Executions: Why Now?", *The Tony Blair Faith Foundation*, (05/01/2016) <http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/opinion/saudi-arabias-executions-why-now>

²²⁴ Timberlake, Ian, "Saudi centre looks to online videos to bring Sunnis and Shiites together", *Your Middle East*, (07/03/2016) http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/culture/saudi-centre-looks-to-online-videos-to-bring-sunnis-and-shiites-together_39446

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Arab News, "Daesh acts inhuman, against Islam, say senior scholars", (29/02/2016) <http://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/news/888021>

ideology, involving the use of religious scholars and others to combat extremist messages.²²⁷

Certainly, this Islamic coalition is an important step for Saudis to counter Islamic extremism in the area, but it is also the beginning. Furthermore, we could say that the leadership changes in Saudi Arabia did not lead to significant human and religious right changes yet, as discriminations against religious minorities continues.

²²⁷ Payne, Ed and Abdelaziz, Salma, "Muslim nations form coalition to fight terror, call Islamic extremism 'disease'", *CNN News*, (22/12/2015)
<http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/14/middleeast/islamic-coalition-isis-saudi-arabia/>

United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates is a federation of seven emirates and one of the leading oil producers of the world. The legal system of UAE is based both on civil laws and Islamic legislation and quite often religion penetrates into legal and political sphere. Islam is the official religion and approximately 80% of Emiratis are Sunni, 9% are Christians and 15% are other religions including Hindu and Buddhist, Parsi Baha'i, Druze, Sikh, Ahmadi, Ismaili, Jews and others as almost 90% of the total population (9,157,000) are immigrants.²²⁸

In United Arab Emirates proselytizing is banned, conversion from Islam is illegal, and evidence of Christian worship on buildings, such as crosses or icons, may not be visible from the street. Nevertheless, during the last years the number of churches is growing and today there are about 40 churches in UAE, usually supported by the emirates' rulers as Bishop Paul Hinder, vicar apostolic of the Roman Catholic Church's Vicariate of Southern Arabia said.²²⁹

Last June, the second Catholic Church inaugurated in Abu Dhabi and several religious and political leaders including Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's secretary of state and the Minister of Culture, Youth and Community Development Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak attended the opening.²³⁰ Few months earlier, Armenians in Abu Dhabi built their own new church, in Mussaffah and another Christian orthodox church of Saint Elia is already building for Greek Orthodox Christians in Abu Dhabi.²³¹

²²⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Fact book –United Arab Emirates", (25/02/2016) <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ae.html>

²²⁹ Ghafour, Hamida "Christian churches flourishing in United Arab Emirates", *The Star*, (17/11/2015) <http://www.thestar.com/news/world/2015/11/17/christian-churches-flourishing-in-united-arab-emirates.html>

²³⁰ Ruiz, Ramona, "Mussaffah's new Roman Catholic church 'highlights UAE leaders' religious tolerance'", *The National - UAE*, (14/06/2015) <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/heritage/20150611/mussaffahs-new-roman-catholic-church-highlights-uae-leaders-religious-tolerance>

²³¹ Dajani, Haneen, "New church a haven for Abu Dhabi's Armenian population", *The National-UAE*, (04/01/2015) <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/heritage/new-church-a-haven-for-abu-dhabis-armenian-population> and Malek, Caline, "Greek Orthodox expanding the faith in UAE", *The*

In this context of religious pluralism and tolerance in the UAE, on July 20, 2015 a new anti-discrimination law has passed, which bans all forms of discrimination based on religion, caste, creed, doctrine, race, color or ethnic origin. The new law is also an anti-blasphemy law as it prohibits any insult of "God, his prophets or apostles or holy books or houses of worship or graveyards, any act that amounts to abuse of religion or vandalism of religious rituals and bans speech inciting religious hatred, particularly calling other people infidels or unbelievers."²³²

This new law was a positive step towards tolerance, amid numerous allegations, from all over the world, for poor human right conditions in the UAE, where over 200 nationalities co-exist. In the same line, on January 18, 2016 the first Arab Thinkers Forum at the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research took place in Abu Dhabi. Scholars, intellectuals and religious leaders from around the world gathered in Abu Dhabi, in order to promote interreligious dialogue and to counter religious extremism. The only non-Muslim speaker was Fr. Miguel Angel Ayuso Guixot, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, who also emphasized the need of a sincere dialogue of religious leaders to fight extremism.²³³

In the same context, on February 8, 2016 the Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates, Shaikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum has announced several changes in UAE administration, as the creation of new ministries, including Ministry of Happiness, Youth and Tolerance. Especially the minister of state for Tolerance would promote the virtue "as a fundamental value in UAE society", Sheikh Mohammed tweeted.

National-UAE, (06/01/2015) <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/greek-orthodox-expanding-the-faith-in-uae>

²³² RT, "New UAE anti-discrimination law prohibits insulting God, prophets, holy books", (22/07/2015) <https://www.rt.com/news/310471-uae-bans-insulting-god/>

²³³ Vatican Radio, "Vatican official: Dialogue only way to counter extremism", (19/01/2016), http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/01/19/vatican_official_dialogue_only_way_to_counter_extremism/1202124

Recently, the Minister of State for Tolerance, Shaikha Lubna underlined too, the value of tolerance in the UAE, not only for nationals but for everyone who leaves there, in order to coexist peacefully. For this reason she said that she is aiming to interact and communicate with the public in order to better understand the policies and regulations needed to reinforce tolerance in the UAE.²³⁴

It is worth mentioning at this point that Ms Irina Bokova, UNESCO Director-General met with Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates, on March 13, 2016 and she praised the priority of UAE on youth and tolerance. She also expressed deep appreciation to His Highness Sheikh Al Maktoum for his contribution to tolerance in the UAE and praised the need of more work on interfaith and intercultural dialogue in order to combat intolerance in the area that is holding everyone back.²³⁵

Certainly, all these steps from the UAE administration are progressives and positives, in order to create a tolerate society with religious pluralism and in order to combat religious extremism. Yet, the real challenge for the UAE is to deal with the incredible large number of immigrants of various cultural and religious descents living and working there, that it is impossible for them to gain the citizenship and to have the same rights as a nation's citizens.

²³⁴ Khamis, Jumana, "Shaikha Lubna: Tolerance is a value, not a service" *Gulf News*, (24/02/2016) <http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/government/shaikha-lubna-tolerance-is-a-value-not-a-service-1.1678601>

²³⁵ UNESCO, "Director-General Meets Ruler of Dubai", (15/03/2016) http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/director_general_meets_ruler_of_dubai/#.VuqBckcXX3t

Bahrain

In Bahrain too, a large proportion of its population are immigrants, approximately 50% of the total population (1,346,613), according to UN data, 2015. The religious demographic of Bahraini citizens is estimated at 60-65% Shi'a and 30-35% Sunni, with approximately 1-2% non-Muslims, including Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, and Baha'is. Some Christian denominations, Jews Hindus, Sikhs, as well as a small Baha'i community are recognized officially by the government. Although, the Shia Islam is the majority in Bahrain, the country is ruled by a Sunni king, Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, whose family holds the main political and military posts.²³⁶

Over the past five years Bahrain has seen dramatic increases in Shia Muslim sectarian protests and political unrest resulting from a lack of democratic reforms with the ruling Sunni Al -Khalifa family. Nevertheless, the Bahraini government has managed to crackdown the sectarian protests, especially after 2011 uprising in Bahrain, with the help of the Saudi army, leaving an open gap between the Shia opposition and the ruling family.

To date, Shias continue to claim that there is a systematic discrimination against them. In fact, on March 8, 2016 dozens of Shia clerics called with a statement for citizenship equality, without any discrimination based on ethnicity, color, religion or sect, in Bahrain. They also demanded for the right to have free elections and urged protection for the freedom to practice religious rites.²³⁷

Recently, the Special Procedures of the United Nations Human Rights Council released the 13th iteration of their joint communications report on February 25, 2016 citing Bahraini violations, especially of Shia clerics, adding that the "Bahraini government had engaged in systemic discrimination against

²³⁶ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Annual Report 2015", *Bahrain*, pp.191-192
<http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%202015%20%282%29.pdf>

²³⁷ The Express Tribune, "Shia clerics in Sunni-ruled Bahrain demand equality", (08/03/2016)
<http://tribune.com.pk/story/1061722/shia-clerics-in-sunni-ruled-bahrain-demand-equality/>

its Shia citizens, through cultural, economic, educational, and social policies." The report also expressed concern regarding the arbitrary detention of Shia religious figure Sheikh Ali Salman, who heads Bahrain's main opposition bloc, al-Wefaq National Islamic Society.

In the same context, on March 16, 2016, hundreds of Bahrainis protested against Al Khalifa regime demanded their democratic rights and the immediate release of Sheikh Ali Salman, who has been jailed for inciting violence. In June 2015, a Bahraini court sentenced Salman to four years in prison of charges of inciting disobedience and hatred in the Sunni-ruled kingdom. His arrest drew condemnation from human rights groups from all over the world, as well as from both the US and Iran.²³⁸

²³⁸ The Guardian, "Bahrain opposition leader Ali Salman sentenced to four years in jail", (16/06/2016) <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/16/bahrain-opposition-leader-ali-salman-sentenced-to-four-years-in-jail> and ABNA News Agency, "Hundreds of Bahrainis protest against Al Khalifa regime crackdown", (17/03/2016) <http://en.abna24.com/service/bahrain/archive/2016/03/17/741648/story.html>

The Different Shades of Tolerance in Maghreb

As Islamic extremism is rising in the Middle East and North Africa, the Maghreb countries – Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, which are predominately Muslim Sunni's – are actively endorsing religious pluralism. Even though, the Maghreb countries have higher religious tolerance compared to other Arab countries in the region, the governments of Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, have actively undertaken various initiatives to promote religious pluralism and protect their small Jewish, Christian and Shia communities. During the past months, the Maghreb states have invested in the preservation and/or restoration of churches and synagogues indicating their good will and serious intention of creating a more pluralistic society in terms of religion. In addition, there have been important constitutional changes and laws that to some extent aim at the endorsement of religious pluralism and freedom of religion.

Morocco

An even more active initiative towards the obstruction of extremism and, at the same time, the enhancement of religious pluralism was undertaken by the Kingdom of Morocco. King Muhammad VI of Morocco, hosted a conference in Marrakesh 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., between the 25th and 27th January, which concluded with the Marrakesh Declaration. The Declaration provides a framework for religious pluralism and encourages the values of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. With scholars, politicians and Muslim leaders from 100 countries, the conference addressed the need to develop a more inclusive concept of citizenship and to promote education in schools to deter extremism “that instigates aggression [...] leads to war and chaos, and results in the destruction of our shared societies”.²³⁹ Interestingly, the pluralism pursued by Morocco seems to be directed to include not only the non-Sunnis religious communities, but also the Salafi community, as they are a potential threat of extremism. In this sense, it may be argued that Morocco is approaching the notion of religious pluralism in a different way. While the notion of religious pluralism is assumed to imply opening the space of the public sphere for other non-dominate religious communities to participate, Morocco is opening space to neutralize extremist elements within its dominate Sunni community before it opens the space for the former.

Indeed, Morocco has translated the concept of religious pluralism that was proposed at the conference into practice. King Mohammad VI personally chaired the council of ministers to discuss the educational curriculum and instructed the minister of national education and the minister of endowment and Islamic affairs to review religious teachings and textbooks in Moroccan schools; to rewrite its curricula, and revisit the Islamic values that call for

²³⁹ Gjelten, Tome, “Muslim Leaders Vow to Protect rights of religious minorities”, *NPR*, (28/1/2016) <http://goo.gl/fG048Q>

“centrism, moderation, tolerance and co-existence with different cultures and civilizations”.²⁴⁰

It should be mentioned that this is not the first attempt by Morocco to create a more inclusive society by re-examining the conceptualisation of Islam among its most conservative followers. In the past, Morocco attempted to hinder extremism by containing Salafism, especially after the terrorist attacks in 2003. One way the government attempted to counter extremism—either foreign or domestic—was by promoting Moroccan forms of Sufism as an alternative ideology to the takfiri one, via educational and government institutions, especially among fragile social groups. Yet, given that this policy has fallen short to address extremism, the government has decided to pursue a more inclusive policy with the Salafists. On November 6, 2015, Salafi detainees, who had been convicted of terrorism charges, were pardoned after “they officially declared their loyalty to principles of the nation, its holy sites, and national institutions, and after [reviewing] their ideological positions and tendencies and [...] renounced extremism and terrorism”.²⁴¹ Additionally, the official religious Morocco model, seems to promote an open dialogue with the Salafi youth and in a way to ‘correct’ their understanding of the Salafi values and shift them away from violence. Simultaneously, religious pluralism in Morocco also includes non-Sunni religious groups, which historically have a rather good record of coexistence with their Sunni compatriots.

Sustaining the Jewish community in Morocco

Despite the fact that the Jewish community in Morocco were numbered to more than 200,000 people prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, now there

²⁴⁰ Al-Rashed, Abdulrahman, “Morocco’s Attempt to Reform Islamic teachings could impact the world”, *Al-Arabiya English*, (8/2/2016)

<https://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/2016/02/08/Morocco-s-attempt-to-reform-Islamic-teachings-could-impact-the-world.html>

²⁴¹ Hmimnat, Salim, “Recalibrating Morocco’s Approach to Salafism”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace-Sada*, (14/1/2016) <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=62463>

are between 2,500 and 4,000 Jews.²⁴² The report on *International Religious Freedom Report for 2014* stresses that Jews practice their religion freely in Morocco, in coherence with the Moroccan constitution, which guarantees the freedom of thought and practice of one's religious affairs.²⁴³ Months before the Marrakesh Conference, Morocco proceeded in the "restoration of 167 Jewish graveyards", which according to the president of the Council of Jewish Communities of Morocco, Serge Berdugo, the restoration is "a very sacred mission".²⁴⁴ Occasional restorations of holy sites of the religious community may be interpreted as hollow, since they might be acts that do not reflect a deeper sense of religious pluralism within the society.

Yet, Morocco's religious pluralism is embedded in its constitution and laws, which reflects the essence of religious pluralism in the country, the freedom of religion, and religious coexistence within society. Moroccan law allows Jewish private schools to teach Judaism. The Jewish community also has their "separate set of laws and courts with authority over personal status matters for Jews, covering issues such as marriage, inheritance, and other family matters," according to the *International Religious Freedom Report for 2014*.

On the social level, Moroccan Jews do not seem to suffer any prosecution, even though, there have been some incidents of attacks of Moroccan Jews. In the past, singly cases of Moroccan Jews were attacked in response to the Israeli attack of Gaza in 2014. The perpetrators were sentenced with imprisonment and anti-Semitic charges.²⁴⁵ The Israeli aggression in Palestine is sometimes interpreted as a religious one, affecting the image of the Jewish people in the region. The Moroccan state's intolerant stance to anti-

²⁴² McCluskey, Molly, "In the restoration of Moroccan Jewish cemeteries, interfaith calls for peace", *Middle East Eye*, (19/11/2015) <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/restoration-moroccan-jewish-cemeteries-interfaith-calls-peace-1346466132>

²⁴³ Allilou, Aziz, "Jews Practice Their Religion Freely in Morocco, Anti-Semitism Rising", *Moroccan World News*, (16/10/2015) <http://www.morocoworldnews.com/2015/10/170496/jews-practice-their-religion-freely-in-morocco-anti-semitism-rising-2/>

²⁴⁴ Hmimnat, Salim, "Recalibrating Morocco's Approach to Salafism", op. cit.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

Semitic acts decreases prejudice against the Moroccan Jews and fosters religious pluralism.

Christians in Morocco

Similarly, the Christian community in Morocco, which is slightly larger than the Jewish one, numbered approximately, between 5,000 and 25,000 persons, can also practice their religion freely. However, there are a number of reports that claim that Christians have been prosecuted. These reports should be thoroughly examined. Particularly, the prosecution of Christians in Morocco does not concern the indigenous Christian believers but rather the converts. An issue that preoccupies the Maghreb in general. While Morocco allows the conversion of religion – including from the Islamic one to another –, the conversion is illegal if a Muslim is forced to convert by any means. As the Justice Minister of Morocco, Mustapha Ramid, said during a conference in July 2015, “[t]here is no article in the Moroccan criminal code that punishes converting to another religion”; but any attempt to convert a Muslim to another religion – or in other words, "shaking the faith of a Muslim" – is a crime punishable under Article 220 of the criminal code.²⁴⁶ “Under the article, a proselytizer may face six months to three years prison and a fine of 100 to 500 Dirhams for using the means of seduction in order to convert a Muslim to another religion, either by exploiting his/her weakness or his/her needs, or using for these purposes education, health, asylums and orphanage institutions”.²⁴⁷ The discourse of forced or voluntary conversion stems from various missionary groups (either by the Anglican or the Evangelic churches) from abroad, which are viewed as persuading Muslims to convert.

These missionary groups that have a foreign element of religiosity might be seen as a threat by the governments and to the public order. Given this

²⁴⁶ Allilou, Aziz, “Jews Practice Their Religion Freely in Morocco, Anti-Semitism Rising”, op. cit.

²⁴⁷ Graves, Kacie, “Christians in Morocco: A Crisis of Faith”, *U.S. News*, (30/9-2015)
<http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/09/30/christians-in-morocco-a-crisis-of-faith>

perception, some Churches discourage Moroccans from visiting.²⁴⁸ To counter the alarming presence of foreign churches, King Mohammed VI organized a conference in February 2016, at the university of Al-Akhawayn, (the two Brothers) titled, *The rights of religious minorities in Muslim countries: The legal framework and the call to action*. Pastor Karen Smith, representative of the Protestant Church in Morocco (President of the Protestant Church in Morocco (Eglise Evangélique au Maroc) mentioned that the majority of Moroccan Christians, “more than 90%, are young sub-Saharan Africans – [mainly students], [a] phenomenon, which began in 1980, has quite literally put a different face on Christianity [...] fast growing community of young sub-Saharans”.²⁴⁹ The Pastor revealed the need of the Churches to engage with the Churches prejudice against Muslims and “refuse to consider Muslims as the competition to beat, enemies to be vanquished, or targets for evangelism programs, but rather as neighbours to be loved” and further emphasising the need of inter-faith and ecumenical dialogue from both sides.²⁵⁰ Pastor Karen Smith speech regarding the role of the Churches in Morocco seems to acknowledge the fact that they are preserved as an alarming foreign religious element in Morocco. To clarify the position of the foreign churches, the Pastor concluded by saying that “the greatest question facing Morocco with respect to Christian minorities is that of Moroccan Christians, a delicate social and political question which is not ours, as foreigners and guests in this country, to take up”.²⁵¹ It is worth noting that conversions pursued by foreign missionary churches is an issue in Tunisia²⁵² and Algeria as well.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Al Akhawayn University Blog, “From the Christian Churches”, (12/2/2016)

<https://alakhawaynuniversity.wordpress.com/2016/02/12/from-the-christian-churches/>

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Marzouk, Zeinab, “Crossing over: The Struggles of a Tunisian ‘Apostate’ ”, *tunisia-live*, (15/6/2015) <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2015/06/15/crossing-apostate-tunisia/#sthash.a29QSSWJ.dpuf>

Generally, religious communities in Algeria and Tunisia are free to organize cultural and religious activities. The number of Roman Catholics in Algeria is estimated to be around 15,000, mostly foreigners, while the Evangelical churches are more popular among the Kabyle-speaking Berber people.²⁵³ The Catholic Church has approximately 20,000 followers in Tunisia, and has an agreement with the state to refrain from proselytizing. In all Maghreb countries, the issue of conversion is central and usually alarming to the locals. It is debateable whether the missionary churches' promotion of Christianity expands religious pluralism, as the foreign element in their mission alarms both the state and society.

²⁵³ Wazala, "Religious freedom amendment welcomed in Algeria", (2/2016)
<http://www.wazala.org/2016-02-religious-freedom-amendment-welcomed-in-algeria/>

Tunisia

The disproportional relation between religious pluralism and extremism is demonstrated in a survey conducted in 2015, revealing that Tunisia is witnessing an increase of religious tolerance, while extremism seems to be significantly declining and particularly Salafism, compared to a survey in 2013.²⁵⁴ Religious pluralism has many shades of tolerance in Tunisia as well. There is some ambiguity in its laws that foster religious pluralism, which may reflect the uncertainty and limitations of how religious pluralism is perceived in the Tunisian society.

While Tunisia is known for its distinct civic principles, there are issues that expose the vagueness of religious pluralism. In the family law of Tunisia, the issue of interfaith marriage is very controversial and vague, particularly the marriage of Muslim women to non-Muslim men. There are two opposing camps that posit that the interfaith marriages between people of the book (Muslims, Christians and Jews) are allowed, but with no clear ruling over which camp is right, as the law itself is vague.²⁵⁵ Seen through the lens of religious pluralism, the contradictions that occur in this issue with the legal framework, may not foster coexistence. At the same time, the very fact that interfaith marriage is attempted to be regulated by the state within a civic framework does not necessarily hinder religious pluralism. The very existence of laws that do not limit interfaith marriage – regardless of how it may be perceived by the society – shows a tendency towards tolerance.

Furthermore, Tunisia, similarly to Morocco, has a history of religious pluralism, particularly the coexistence between the Jewish and Muslims communities in the Island of Djerba, off the coast of Tunisia. The island has historical and religious significance to the Jewish community, as according to

²⁵⁴ University of Maryland, “Survey reveals religious tolerance and declining extremism”, *Phys.org*, (23/12/2015) <http://phys.org/news/2015-12-survey-reveals-religious-tolerance-declining.html>

²⁵⁵ Jaidi, Mohamed Afif, “Interfaith Marriage in Tunisian: A Clash of Court Opinion”, *Legal Agenda*, (9/10/2014) <http://english.legal-agenda.com/article.php?id=655&lang=en>

their belief “after the destruction of the first temple of Solomon, around 410 BC, [...] the El Ghriba synagogue in the village of Er-Riadh, at the centre of the island, was actually built with stones of the destroyed temple brought by Jewish refugees,” making it the oldest synagogue in Africa that is still open.²⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the Jewish community has decreased significantly from a hundred thousand to only 1,400 persons (mostly living in Djerba). Following some attacks over a decade ago, the Tunisian authorities in cooperation with the community have procured for the security of the Synagogue.

The Maghreb is threatened by the rise of extremism in the region, and its countries seem to have found the best antidote, i.e. religious pluralism. However, given the small range of religious communities, religious pluralism is mostly directed internally within the Sunni-dominant community, rather than with other religious communities. This positive trend of internal inclusion inbreeds a logic of religious tolerance and coexistence, as opposed to exclusionary practices that may expand to other religious groups.

²⁵⁶ Goverde, Rik, “The Jewish and Muslim merchants of Djerba”, *Middle East Eye*, (1/10/2015)
<http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/merchants-djerba-65609773>

Policy Recommendations

There are three sets of policy recommendations that could be made:

The first are the immediate measures that should be taken in order to stop the bloodshed and to guarantee minimum security of not only the Christian communities, their homes, churches and monasteries but on an equal footing the security of all religious communities such as the Yezidi community in both Syria and Iraq or the ethno-religious community of Mandaeans in Iraq.²⁵⁷ The international community, particularly Europe cannot stay aloof allowing the massacre of historic communities and ancient civilizations as history would not be merciful to such negligence. Thus the immediate set of recommendations are those connected with the peace process in Syria and the protection of the minorities in both Syria and Iraq.

- Working towards the necessary all-inclusive regional consensus for establishing humanitarian corridors in both Syria and Iraq in order to shield and shelter endangered non-Muslim minorities.
- Christian communities should be encouraged to participate in ongoing discussions on the future of Syria.
- The peace process in Syria should be inclusive and should preserve pluralism and the unity of the country.
- All necessary steps should be taken in order to ensure that the perpetrators of religious massacres would face International Justice and also that all those who have assisted them in any form would be also held accountable for their deeds.

The second kind/stage of recommendations is connected to issues of human and civil rights and freedoms of religious communities

²⁵⁷Human Rights Watch, *On Vulnerable Ground: Violence against Minority Communities in Nineveh Province's Disputed Territories*, NY 2009, 18. Elise H. Karam, "Locked out of Baghdad: The Faili Saga", *Asfar e-Journal* December 2013, <http://www.asfar.org.uk/locked-out-of-baghdad-the-faili-saga.html> (last assessed 3/8/2014).

- Governments of the region should be assisted in upholding the rights of religious communities
- Democracy is not enough; respect for human and religious rights should be enshrined either in the constitution or in a bill of rights. Equality before the law is essential and no church law should be beyond appeal to civil courts.
- OSCE experience in programs on monitoring and promoting religious tolerance and rights of religious minorities could be utilised through formats such as the OSCE's Mediterranean Partnership.

The last kind/stage of recommendations addresses long-standing strategic issues. They aim in addressing socio-economic and cultural issues which can inflame religious intolerance, suspicion and hatred.

- Educational reforms that support interreligious understanding and mutual respect.
- Programs addressing the positive role of the media in promoting a culture of tolerance and mutual respect.
- Interreligious dialogue should be encouraged: all religious groups should cooperate in solving the problems of some of them.
- Programs addressing extreme poverty and reducing women's vulnerability should be encouraged.



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