



Middle East and North Africa

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Events in the Middle East during the year were again dominated by the militant group *Daesh*, also known as Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Despite losing significant swathes of territory under its control in Iraq and Syria, ISIS nevertheless still controls large areas and subjects millions of civilians to a brutal rule of violence, threats and intimidation. Minorities in particular, such as Christians, Turkmen and Yezidis, have been targeted with human rights abuses including looting, house burning, torture, sexual assault and murder, in the process displacing entire communities from areas where they have lived for centuries. Besides staged executions, such as the release in February 2015 by the group of a filmed beheading of 21 Egyptian Copts in Libya, ISIS has also attracted wide publicity for its destruction of ancient heritage sites such as significant parts of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)-listed Palmyra. However, this is only part of a much broader assault on churches, mosques and shrines belonging to religious and ethnic minorities that continued throughout the year.

Nevertheless, the challenges facing minorities and the survival of their rich cultural traditions are not confined to areas controlled by ISIS, nor are they wholly new. Indeed, the recent rise of violent extremism has been driven in part by longer-term factors, such as official discrimination, legal impunity and even state-led persecution that are evident in many countries across the region. Religious, ethnic and linguistic minorities have frequently faced restrictions on their ability to worship, to engage freely in cultural practices or even speak their native tongue – all symptoms of a wider climate of intolerance that threatens the region's rich diversity.

Egypt

Following the military-backed ousting of former President Mohamed Morsi in 2013 by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, subsequent elections in 2014 handed Sisi a landslide victory. While he enjoyed support among many Egyptians, including minorities, following the suppression of religious freedoms and civil rights during Morsi's

presidency, Sisi's rule has itself been characterized by authoritarianism and widespread human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests, torture and forced disappearances, particularly of perceived supporters of the now outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. While Sisi has publicly stated his commitment to combating religious extremism, throughout the year the government continued to restrict the beliefs and practices of many minorities. Though military operations against ISIS-affiliated insurgents in Sinai were escalated, the risk of targeted violence against religious minorities from other Egyptians – a threat long pre-dating the recent rise of the extremist group – remains high. Sisi's draconian policies have done little to resolve the underlying problem of inter-communal conflict and have arguably deepened divisions within Egyptian society.

This lack of progress is reflected in the situation of Egypt's sizeable Coptic Christian minority, long victims of discrimination and persecution, who to some extent have benefited from recent political reforms under Sisi. For example, Egypt's national elections in October 2015 saw Coptic Christians win 36 parliamentary seats, 6 per cent of the total – an unprecedented achievement that represents an important milestone for the community. This has been accompanied by Sisi's apparent efforts to engage the Coptic church leadership, highlighted by his historic attendance of Coptic Christmas Eve mass in January 2015 – the first time a head of state has done so – as well as his offering of personal condolences to Pope Tawadros II in February after 21 Egyptian Copts were killed by ISIS militants in Libya. Yet despite these conciliatory gestures, Coptic Egyptians remain marginalized by state institutions and face ongoing risks of sectarian violence.

One area where the state has failed in its protection of the community is the continued barriers to constructing houses of worship for non-Muslims, a legacy of Ottoman era legislation. Particularly in Upper Egypt, this has long contributed to the targeting of Coptic congregations and their religious practices. While authorities have reportedly objected less to church construction and renovations since Sisi took power, the community has still faced tremendous difficulties in securing official approval and

support. In the village of al-Galaa, for example, after the reconstruction of a church was blocked by local Muslims, the Coptic community was forced amid rising sectarian tensions to agree to rebuild it without a bell or tower – a typical outcome of coercive reconciliation processes backed by local authorities. In the same week, police raided the Saint Youssef al-Bar prayer house near Maghagha, confiscating religious paraphernalia and accusing occupants of praying in a property illegally without official permission. In Abu Qurqas, police abruptly arrived and shut down reconstruction on part of a village church. These and other incidents have occurred despite Article 235 of the 2014 Constitution requiring the government to draft legislation regulating the building and renovating of churches to ensure that Christians are free to practise their religious rituals. For his part, in a speech in January 2016, Sisi lamented the failure of authorities to repair Coptic properties damaged in violent episodes during 2013, promising that 'by next year there won't be a single church or house that is not restored' – a claim met with scepticism by many.

Copts, their properties and places of worship also remain vulnerable to violent attacks. In January 2015, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant leaders in Minya were forced to cancel Christmas celebrations after two policemen were gunned down while guarding a Coptic church. Later, during Holy Week in April, Easter celebrations were accompanied by heightened sectarian violence in Minya governorate. Copts, their churches and homes in Nasreya were left poorly protected by security personnel – a common occurrence – when attacked by angry villagers after a Coptic teacher and students were accused of insulting Islam after a video was circulated in which they reportedly ridiculed ISIS. Many attacks against the community are enabled by the failure of security forces to provide adequate protection.

While Coptic Christians face these difficulties despite their status as a recognized religion, other minorities lack even legal recognition. Article 64 of the 2014 Constitution, like its predecessors, guarantees freedom of religion only to the three 'Abrahamic faiths' – Christianity, Islam and Judaism – meaning that other groups, such as

Bahá'i and Jehovah's Witnesses, are excluded. Bahá'i still face difficulties when seeking government-issued identification cards and are frequently subjected to public vilification. In December 2014, a public workshop was held by the Ministry of Religious Endowments to warn of the dangers of the spread of the Bahá'i faith in Egypt.

Though adherents of Islam, Shi'a Muslims in the Sunni-majority country are also marginalized and face widespread hostility for their beliefs. Their religious practices have often been presented as a threat to national security, leading to public vilification and official crackdowns – tendencies that continued in 2015. On 22 October, for example, the Ministry of Endowments announced the closure of Shi'a mosques to prevent Ashura celebrations. Despite being deemed a legitimate branch of Islam in 1959 by Al-Azhar, the country's most powerful religious institution, Egypt's current religious establishment considers Shi'a rituals to be in violation of the tenets of Islam. In November, for instance, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar used a weekly television appearance to implore his audience to beware of Shi'a proselytizers.

Egypt's Jewish community, long marginalized, faced a further setback when an annual Jewish festival planned for 9–10 January was cancelled due to a ruling by the Alexandria Administrative Court. Though previously called off in 2012 and regularly opposed by locals, the event commemorated the birthday of the prominent nineteenth-century Rabbi Abu Hasira and attracted hundreds of Jews, including many from Israel, to visit his tomb. The Court's ruling deemed the festival contradictory to Islamic traditions and a violation of public order. Located in the Nile Delta village of Damanhour and added to Egypt's antiquities records by the Minister of Culture in 2001, the tomb was ordered to be struck from the list, obliging the government to notify the UNESCO World Heritage Committee as well. Other sites of important Jewish heritage also struggle with dereliction or disuse, with all of the estimated 12 synagogues in Cairo and Alexandria now reportedly closed or falling into disrepair due to lack of funds. The disappearance of Egypt's Jewish cultural heritage is all the more troubling



Left: Nubian women in Egypt. Katie Hunt.

for the fact that this once sizeable religious community, comprising as many as 80,000 in the late 1940s, now reportedly numbers only seven people, the majority elderly women.

Blasphemy accusations and related attacks remain a serious problem for Egypt's religious minorities, particularly Copts and Shi'a. Following 15 similar blasphemy cases earlier in the year for insulting Islam – a crime under the Egyptian Penal Code outlawing ridicule of the three Abrahamic faiths – in July, three Coptic men were arrested for distributing bags of dates containing messages proclaiming their 'Lord's' beneficence. Earlier, in a Beni Suef village at the end of May, a Coptic man was accused of posting cartoons offensive to the Prophet Muhammad on Facebook, resulting in more than ten Coptic homes being attacked with rocks and Molotov cocktails and the eventual forcible displacement of Coptic families from the village. In May a Shi'a dentist from Daqahlia governorate received a six-month prison sentence for contempt of religion after authorities found in his home books and other items supposedly used to perform Shi'a religious rituals. A week later, Shi'a cleric Taher al-Hashimy was arrested following a raid on his apartment where books and other items were confiscated by security forces. An atheist student was also given a three-year prison sentence in January for 'belittl[ing] the divine' through Facebook postings, an increasingly perilous activity.

Ethnic minorities also shared in a struggle for greater social acceptance and political representation. For Egypt's Nubian community, the October parliamentary elections carried particular significance. Due to a reconfiguration of decades-old electoral constituencies three months prior, New Nubia was assigned its own parliamentary seat, which in October was won by Yassine Abdel Sabour, the first Nubian MP in Egypt's new parliament. While viewed as a positive step, many Nubians expressed scepticism as to whether the most urgent issues facing the community would be addressed. During the construction of the Aswan High Dam in the 1960s, the government forcibly relocated Egyptian Nubians from their ancestral homeland

where, as descendants of one of the world's oldest civilizations, fishing and farming had long been fundamental to their culture. Since displacement, the 'right to return' has remained their cardinal demand, coupled with calls to combat unemployment and improve deteriorating services. Abdel Sabour has stated he will push for the implementation of Articles 47 and 50 of the 2014 Constitution, which affirm the state's commitment to preserve the cultural identities and heritage of different groups.

Iraq

The situation of Iraq's minorities remained bleak throughout 2015 as fighting continued between the Iraqi government and allied forces, ISIS, and the Kurdish Peshmerga. While minorities have long suffered discrimination and the threat of targeted attacks, particularly since 2003, the rise of ISIS in 2014 has led to a dramatic deterioration in their situation. After the armed group's capture of Mosul in June 2014 and subsequent expansion into Tel Afar, Sinjar and the Ninewa Plains, entire minority populations were expelled from their historical homelands. In addition, minorities have been targeted for egregious human rights violations, including summary executions, kidnapping, rape, sexual slavery and forced conversion. Large numbers of Iraq's religious minorities, including Armenian and Chaldo-Assyrian Christians, Bahá'i, Kaka'i, Sabeen Mandaean, Shabak, Turkmen and Yezidis, remained displaced from their homes at year's end, living in either the Kurdistan region, the southern and central Iraqi governorates, or outside of the country.

In March 2015, a report released by the UN found that ISIS violations perpetrated against Yezidis may amount to crimes of genocide, as certain acts, including killings and the forcible transfer of members of the community, appear to have represented attempts to destroy the Yezidi minority. Mass graves containing the corpses of Yezidi men and women were discovered throughout the year. In the month of November 2015 alone, at least six mass graves were discovered in Sinjar after the area was retaken from ISIS control, one of which contained more than 120 bodies. At year's end, activists estimated the number of Yezidis still missing or in ISIS



Left: Representatives of the Yezidis in Iraq make a plea for support during a meeting with European Parliament President Martin Schulz in April 2015. *European Union 2015 – European Parliament.*

Another devastating aspect of the conflict for minorities has been the systematic destruction of symbols of their cultural, intellectual and religious heritage, part of the ISIS strategy to eliminate all remnants of diversity in the areas they control. Since the group's takeover of Mosul in 2014, it has destroyed innumerable churches, mosques, shrines, graves and other religious and cultural sites. Throughout 2015, reports continued to emerge of the group looting and destroying mosques and churches in Mosul, in addition to numerous Kaka'i, Shabak and Yezidi shrines in Sinjar and the Ninewa Plains. After destroying an estimated 90 artefacts from Mosul Museum in February, most of them linked to the Assyrian civilization, in March the group sparked international outrage and condemnation from the UN when it proceeded to destroy the ancient city of Hatra and the historical Assyrian capital of Nimrud. On 15 July, the group reportedly ordered staff at the University of Mosul to burn more than a thousand Master's and PhD dissertations authored by Christian, Shabak and Yezidi students.

These systematic attempts to destroy Iraq's diverse religious culture have had a deep psychological impact on its minorities and affected their perceptions of the possibility of rebuilding a future in Iraq. For some communities, the ISIS campaign is only the latest wave in a long history of forcible displacement and assimilatory cultural policies: for example, under decades of Ba'athist rule, non-Arab minorities, especially Kurds but also Assyrian Christians, Kaka'i and Yezidis, were either forced to identify as Arabs or expelled from their lands, while hundreds of their villages were systematically destroyed. Those displaced within Iraq and the Kurdish region also face multiple challenges to preserving their identity. For example, many minority families now living in the Kurdish region are unable to send their children to schools because of the language barrier and also reportedly face

pressure to assimilate into Kurdish culture or support the political aims of the Kurdish parties. Assyrian Christians have also long complained of Kurdish restrictions on their political and cultural activities. In the southern governorates, too, Shabak have reported being prevented from taking part in religious rituals which they share with Shi'a Muslims.

Human rights groups now report that many minorities are resorting to emigration outside of Iraq as a permanent solution. Despite the fact that many areas that are home to minorities, such as Sinjar, have been recaptured from ISIS control, the numbers of minorities returning to their homes has remained modest. The reality of displacement could pose a threat to the future vitality of certain minority languages and cultures, especially those with a smaller number of adherents. For example, rights groups have warned that the Sabeen Mandaean culture is at risk of extinction due to the mass emigration of community members, including religious leaders, and the difficulty of keeping religious rituals alive in host countries outside of Iraq. As more and more areas are recaptured from ISIS control, it remains to be seen whether the Iraqi and Kurdish governments will commit to addressing these grievances and making minorities full partners in building a more inclusive political order.

Israel/Palestine

Minorities in Israel and Palestine experienced continued hardship during 2015. Ahead of Israel's elections on 17 March subsequently won by Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing Likud Party, Netanyahu issued a much publicized warning that 'Arab voters are coming out in droves to the polls'. This reflected a broader atmosphere of racist incitement against Palestinians that played a critical part in the election's outcome. Nevertheless, the election was unprecedented in the inclusion of a major Palestinian party. Following a January Supreme Court ruling raising the minimum electoral threshold for parties to enter the Knesset, Palestinian citizens of Israel integrated their four main political parties into a Joint List with a common platform in order to achieve political representation. While, encouragingly, their political concerns gained significance in

captivity to be between 3,500 and 4,000. While male Yezidi children have been forced to convert to Islam, indoctrinated in ISIS ideology and trained to become fighters for the group, Yezidi women kidnapped by ISIS have been forced to convert to Islam and marry ISIS fighters, while others have been sold or given away as sex slaves, both in Iraq and Syria. ISIS has also targeted other minority women for kidnapping and sexual violence, including Christian and Shi'a women, albeit in smaller numbers. For example, on 13 March, ISIS reportedly killed nine Turkmen Shi'a women after they refused to marry ISIS fighters.

On several occasions, ISIS retaliated against minorities for engaging in cultural or religious practices deemed inconsistent with their puritanical ideology. For example, on 21 March the armed group abducted 56 Kurdish men for participating in celebrations of Nawroz, the Kurdish New Year, demanding ransom payments for their release. On 15 April, ISIS killed two Yezidi men in Mosul for exchanging greetings to mark the Yezidi New Year. ISIS also undertook a systematic assault on other religious minorities during the year. The UN documented at least 31 houses owned by Christians and destroyed by ISIS in the Mosul area from May to October.

Representatives of the Turkmen community reported hundreds of kidnappings of men and women by ISIS during the year, as well as a massacre of Turkmen civilians in Mosul in August.

The proliferation of Shi'a militias and other paramilitary groups opposed to ISIS has itself contributed to deepening sectarianism. During the month of May, reports emerged that Shi'a militias had set up checkpoints in Diyala and were harassing and assaulting Kurdish drivers and passengers, culminating in the killing of three Kurdish drivers. The Turkmen community reported violations after an attack by the Kurdish Peshmerga on the city of Tuz Khurmatu, including burning and looting of Shi'a Turkmen-owned shops and the removal of Shi'a mourning flags and banners. According to Human Rights Watch, the situation in Tuz Khurmatu worsened after a car bombing in October, with clashes between armed groups drawing in civilians on all sides. Attacks such as these are not isolated incidents. Turkmen leaders have long complained of aggression from both the Iraqi and Kurdish authorities in Turkmen-majority areas, motivated by their desire to extend their control over those areas.

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Case study by Joana Dabaj
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The struggle of Christian communities in the Middle East: an interview with Bishop Ghattas Hazim

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Ghattas Hazim, Greek Orthodox Metropolitan of Baghdad, Kuwait and their dependencies, plays an important role in supporting Christian communities across the Persian Gulf (also known as the Arabian Gulf). Extending across Iraq, Kuwait, Oman and Saudi Arabia, the Orthodox presence was originally established in 1961. Today, however, the difficulties facing Christians in the region are increasingly acute, even in areas where they have long lived in relative stability. Hazim's own home city of Mhardeh in northern Syria, where for centuries tens of thousands of Christians resided, is now at the centre of the Syrian civil war.

Supporting the existence of Christian minorities in the Gulf region is no easy task, particularly with the rise of militant groups such as ISIS. According to the Bishop, more than 90 per cent of Orthodox Christians in Iraq have been displaced, leaving a much reduced community to maintain their historic presence and rich cultural traditions in the country. But the pressures facing Christian communities in Iraq are echoed in other countries too, and the recent rise of extremism is not the only challenge they face.

In Iraq, the Orthodox Church is allowed to own land, but in other Gulf countries it is denied property rights and its presence is dependent on the continued allowance of the state. As Hazim highlights, 'Our churches in the Gulf are not owned by us. As a result we are at the mercy of the landlord, since there are no rights

for us to buy in our names.' Furthermore, the Orthodox Church is largely dependent financially on personal donations, and in some areas this source of revenue is increasingly under threat. The lack of fixed legal status for many Christians in the Gulf, such as migrant workers, reinforces the feeling of being a nomad even in one's country of residence. 'Everyone', says Hazim, 'feels they are in a transitory state and may have to move on at any moment.'

Despite the significant cultural contribution Christians have made in the region, Hazim now sees the Christian presence under threat as external migration, much of it forced, has increased. 'We feel there is a project to empty the Middle East of Christian people,' he says, arguing that certain groups are actively attempting to trigger population movements. To halt this, governments in the region must first of all support the agreement of a ceasefire in Syria to halt the violence. Providing adequate humanitarian assistance to those displaced by conflict is also essential in ensuring their survival and the eventual possibility of return. 'The current situation of families who fled their homes – our responsibility lies with providing them with shelter, food, water and medication. The needs are very high and we need to mobilize all organizations, NGOs [non-governmental organizations] and CBOs [community groups] to join these efforts.'

While forced migration is displacing whole communities, the physical destruction of churches, monasteries and shrines by extremists is destroying evidence of their long history in these countries. From Mosul and Nineva in Iraq to Aleppo and Damascus in Syria, the devastation of their unique Christian heritage is designed to permanently erase the identities of these communities. As Hazim highlights, the speed and scale of this assault means that Christians, like other threatened religious minorities in the region, need the full support of governments and the international communities. 'What is needed,' he concludes, 'is far greater than what we could ever provide.' *This article is based on an interview with Bishop Ghattas Hazim, conducted in January 2016 and translated from Arabic to English. ■*

discourse surrounding the election, the Court's ruling also effectively forced the abandonment of their participation through multiple parties with diverse ideologies and agendas. Furthermore, though Palestinian citizens of Israel exercised voting rights, Palestinians living under Israeli rule in the occupied territories – unlike Israeli settlers living in their midst – remained without the right to vote. The grassroots 'Real Democracy' campaign, however, gave small numbers of Palestinians in the occupied territories the ability to vote through volunteer Israeli proxies.

In November, steps were taken by Prime Minister Netanyahu to use legislation to erode the rights of non-Jewish minorities in Israel by advancing the 'Nation-State' bill, which defines Israel as 'the nation-state of the Jewish people', not of its citizens, of whom around one-fifth are non-Jewish Palestinians. Similar ethno-nationalist concerns appeared to guide other official policies during the year, such as a parliamentary vote in June to extend a law that enables the government to refuse granting Israeli citizenship or residency status to Palestinians who are married to Israelis. In December, reports also emerged that the Education Ministry had banned a novel featuring an Arab-Jewish romance from being used in high schools on the basis that it threatened 'the identity and heritage of students in every sector.'

While Palestinians in Israel with recognized citizenship are still subjected to wide ranging discrimination in housing, social welfare, education, criminal justice and other areas of their lives, the difficulties facing Palestinians without Israeli citizenship in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank are even more acute – dispossession of land, restricted movement, prosecution by military courts and above all the pervasive threat of violence from security personnel or ultra-nationalist settlers. This was underlined by the death in July of 18-month old Ali Dawabsha, who was murdered along with three family members in a firebomb attack on their home by settlers.

A rise in violence between Israelis and Palestinians was sparked in Jerusalem on the eve of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, in mid September when Israeli security forces entered the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound and clashed with Palestinian youths protesting increased

arrivals of Jews to pray there. Sovereignty over the religious site, known as the Temple Mount in Judaism, is fiercely contested and of immense cultural importance to both Jews and Muslims. The Israeli government responded to the unrest by placing restrictions on Muslim access to the mosque, including a ban on men under the age of 45 who wish to pray there on Friday – a decision strongly criticized in a resolution adopted by UNESCO's board.

Violence subsequently spread throughout Israel and the occupied territories, with widespread confrontations between Israeli security forces and Palestinians, particularly in East Jerusalem and around Hebron. Near-daily attacks on Israeli security personnel and civilians took place, primarily in the form of stone throwing and stabbings, while systemic violence against Palestinians intensified, with an estimated 4,192 Palestinians – an average of 69 every day – shot by Israeli security forces from 1 October to 30 November. The same period saw 17 Israeli and 102 Palestinian fatalities. Human rights organizations raised concerns about attacks on Israeli civilians by Palestinians and excessive use of force by Israeli military and police, condemning repressive police acts and extra-judicial killings. Amid ongoing tensions, celebrations in Bethlehem, a cherished centre of cultural heritage for Palestinian Christians, were marred by clashes on Christmas Day between Israeli security and local youths.

Throughout the year, numerous attacks against Muslim and Christian holy sites were perpetrated by extremists in Israel and so-called 'price tag' incidents – acts of violence or arson perpetrated by settler youths in the occupied territories. In February, for instance, a Greek Orthodox seminary was set ablaze in Jerusalem, a day after a similar attack on a mosque near Bethlehem. In June, another fire left a church in the Galilee region containing fifth-century mosaics in ruins. Olive trees, an important symbol of Palestinian resilience and rootedness to the land as well as a vital source of livelihood, have also been targeted. In January alone, settlers reportedly uprooted or vandalized around 5,600 trees in the West Bank, representing 60 per cent of those attacked during the whole of 2014, and eventually capped the year by destroying 50 olive trees near Nablus.

While these and other incidents pose a direct threat to the survival of Palestinian heritage in the area, Palestinian cultural life remains vibrant. In 2015, Gaza held its first ever film festival. Focusing on human rights, it took place in the Shujaiyya neighbourhood, which remained badly damaged by heavy fighting and Israeli bombardment during the summer of 2014.

The Arabic language, spoken by Palestinians and many Mizrahim (Jews originating from the Middle East and North Africa), has remained intrinsic to the culture and identity of both groups. Since the state's founding in 1948, Arab – including Jewish-Arab – culture and music has been widely censored and suppressed in Israeli society, but for the first time ever, in summer 2015, a Mizrahi Arabic-language song topped the music charts in Israel. While more and more young Arab Jews are now exploring their cultural heritage, Mizrahi culture remains widely denigrated, as evidenced before the March election when openly racist remarks were made about the community by several prominent Ashkenazi (Jews originating from Central or Eastern Europe) leftists. The erasure of Palestinian cultural heritage continued with the removal of Arabic from street signs in Be'er al-Sabe/Be'er Sheva, home to tens of thousands of Palestinian citizens of Israel, and in East Jerusalem where, as tensions mounted in October, the city council approved new Hebrew street names as part of ongoing efforts to assert control over Palestinian neighbourhoods.

Further efforts to dislocate Palestinians from their land came in various forms. Protection and relative impunity granted to settlers by Israeli authorities alongside continuous settlement expansion – over 900 new settlement housing units were approved in July – means destruction and expropriation of Palestinian property is set to continue. A rare victory was won in January, however, when the High Court of Justice indefinitely halted construction of a section of Israel's separation barrier through the ancient agricultural terraces of the UNESCO-recognized West Bank village of Battir. The barrier has more broadly harmed Palestinian cultural rights and heritage by not only isolating and in some cases damaging archaeological sites as well as the natural environment, but also by annexing large swathes of

Palestinian land, restricting access to holy sites and threatening the very existence of affected villages.

Also in the West Bank, Bedouin continuously faced pressure by authorities pushing them off their ancestral land in Area C, where Israel retains exclusive control over security, planning and construction, while communities inside Israel also continued to face home demolitions and dispossession of their traditional semi-nomadic lifestyle, particularly in Naqab/Negev desert villages 'unrecognized' by Israel as legal. A significant Supreme Court ruling in May denied Bedouin indigenous land rights, solidifying legal justification for future expropriation of Palestinian land within Israel and the West Bank. By failing to acknowledge the distinct historical and cultural heritage of the Bedouin, the court failed to recognize the Al-Uqbi family's ownership of a large plot of land including the 'unrecognized' village of Al-Araqib, bulldozed for the 92nd time by the end of 2015. Earlier, in May, the Israeli Supreme Court also approved a state plan to demolish the 'unrecognized' village Umm al-Hieran, to evict its residents and in its place build a new Jewish town, and at the end of November the government approved a plan for five new settlements that threaten to displace thousands more Bedouin. However, in early 2016, when the government declared intentions to develop a town over the ruins of a depopulated Palestinian village, members of Israel's Druze community, intended to be the new inhabitants and having themselves historically faced state confiscation of land, widely rejected the proposal.

Libya

Several years after the 2011 uprising that toppled former dictator Muammar Al-Gaddafi, Libya's political landscape remains fractured. The power vacuum that emerged after the fall of Gaddafi has led to the proliferation of armed groups, each fighting for pockets of control across the country. Conflict escalated into open warfare in mid 2014 and led to the establishment of two rival governments in Tobruk and Tripoli, the former with international recognition and backed by armed militias under the 'Operation Dignity' alliance, and the latter backed by 'Libya Dawn' militias. The continuation of fighting throughout 2015 saw a further deterioration of the human

rights situation, as armed groups carried out violations including kidnappings, arbitrary detentions, torture and unlawful executions with impunity. With the signing of an agreement between the two ruling factions in December 2015 to establish a unity government, Libya's future stability hinges upon the new government's ability to establish an inclusive and functional political system. This includes taking measures to end legacies of exclusion and discrimination against Libya's minority groups.

The state of prolonged conflict afflicting Libya has allowed extremist groups, including militias loyal to ISIS, to carve out an increasing presence in parts of the country. This has created a dangerous situation for religious minorities living in the country. On 15 February 2015, a video released by an ISIS-affiliated group – depicting the massacre of 21 Coptic Christians, mostly Egyptian nationals, on a beach on Libya's northern coast – sent shockwaves through the region. An estimated 800,000–900,000 Egyptian nationals were working in Libya at the time, but numerous reports of kidnapping of Egyptian Copts in late 2014 and early 2015 began to create a climate of fear. News of the February massacre caused at least 33,000 Egyptians to return home and prompted the Egyptian government to launch retaliatory airstrikes.

On 19 April 2015, another video was released showing the beheadings and shooting of 28 Ethiopian and Eritrean Christians. On 3 June 2015, a further 86 Eritrean Christians were kidnapped south of Tripoli. Their whereabouts are still unknown. Incidents such as these illustrate the heightened vulnerability faced by sub-Saharan African migrants in Libya, who can be easily targeted by militias due to their ethnicity, undocumented status or religion. Amnesty International has documented widespread abuses against migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees in Libya, ranging from threats, physical assaults and theft to abduction, torture and killing. Female migrants are particularly prone to sexual exploitation.

There are fears that the increased presence of ISIS-affiliated groups in Libya could lead to attacks on historical and religious sites, in attempts to emulate the campaign of destruction unleashed by the group in Iraq and Syria. There

have already been numerous reports of attacks on Sufi shrines, graves, and celebrations since 2011. On 23 April 2015, militants bombed the ancient Al-Quds mosque in Tripoli, a mosque frequented by Sufis.

Black migrants and Libyans alike have also been targeted by rebels due to the perception that they fought on Gaddafi's side in the uprising, based on claims that he used African mercenaries during the conflict. Following the stationing of government forces in the town of Tawergha in 2011, rebel forces retaliated against the town, forcing more than 30,000 residents to flee and leaving it a ghost town. Ever since, the majority of Tawerghans have been forced to live in displacement camps scattered across the country, and face ongoing harassment. The UN documented multiple cases of abduction of Tawerghan internally displaced people (IDPs) in March and April 2015 after their identities were discovered at checkpoints. In March, eight civilians were reportedly killed when Libyan warplanes bombed a Tawerghan IDP camp. However, in a positive development at the end of the year, the Misrata–Tawergha Joint Committee adopted a Road Map Document providing for the reconstruction of Tawergha and the voluntary return of its residents to their homes. Nevertheless, at the time of writing concrete progress on the principles outlined in the document had yet to be seen.

Amid the upheaval that has characterized Libya's tumultuous transition, the country's main ethnic minorities have become more active and begun to assert an independent voice after decades of marginalization under the Gaddafi regime. This includes Tuaregs, who are nomadic pastoralist tribes living along Libya's western border, and black African Tebu tribes inhabiting southern Libya. Nevertheless, relations between minorities have at times turned violent. In the southern town of Awbari, where Tuareg and Tebu live side by side, conflict that began in September 2014 culminated in the displacement of 18,500 people, most of whom were women, children and the elderly. The conflict has been driven by disputes between Tebu and Tuareg militias, who overlap in Awbari, over oil and water resources, as well as control of the lucrative smuggling trade in arms, drugs and migrants. In July, a week of

Increasing recognition for Libya's Imazhigen

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While Libya's fledgling democracy has struggled to establish a stable transition from Gaddafi's dictatorship, there have nevertheless been some positive developments for the country's minority and indigenous communities, specifically in terms of securing recognition of their distinct cultural identity and language rights. This is particularly the case for the Imazighen (Berbers; singular Amazigh), long marginalized under the Gaddafi regime. For decades, the existence of the Imazighen as a distinct indigenous group was denied: the Tamazight language could not be taught in schools, children could not be registered with non-Arab names and books written in Tamazight were destroyed.

Since the fall of Gaddafi, bolstered by Amazigh activism, there has been a revival in use of the language as schools offering Tamazight lessons have been established, language textbooks have been printed and Tamazight media outlets have flourished. A law passed in 2013 recognized the Tamazight, Tuareg and Tebu languages and upheld the right of minorities to receive education in their mother tongue as a voluntary option. In August 2015, the first democratic elections for the Amazigh Supreme Council were held, and a body formed equally of men and women was created.

The challenge of Amazigh leaders remains securing recognition for their rights at the national and societal level, including by ensuring that the future Constitution includes Tamazight as an official language. Imazighen have already boycotted the Constitutional Drafting Committee, followed recently by Tuaregs and Tebu, due to what they see as the assembly's exclusionary approach and lack of commitment to minority rights. ■

clashes between Tuareg and Tebu in the town of Sebha left over 40 people dead. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), there are also 4,800 IDPs in protracted displacement who have been unable to return to their homes since the January 2014 clashes between the Tebu and Awlad Suleiman tribe, who may have been re-displaced during the renewed conflict. Although a ceasefire negotiated with the help of Qatar in November promises to end fighting and provide for the return of displaced people to Awbari, sporadic clashes have continued to erupt.

Syria

Syria's diverse ethnic and religious minorities include Alawites, Christians, Druze, Ismailis, Kurds, Turkmen, Twelver Shi'a and Yezidis. Since the outbreak of armed conflict in 2011, Syria's minorities have suffered alongside the majority Sunni Muslim population from spiralling violence and the humanitarian crisis caused by the war. While government forces have deliberately and indiscriminately targeted densely populated areas, leading to devastating civilian death tolls and the destruction of vital infrastructure including hospitals and schools, armed groups fighting against the government have also targeted civilians and obstructed humanitarian aid flows. Hundreds of civilians have also been killed or injured in international coalition airstrikes against ISIS. As of October 2015, more than 250,000 people had been killed in the conflict, of which nearly half were civilians. Over 4 million Syrians have been made refugees, while a further 7.5 million are internally displaced.

Targeted attacks against minorities were not a central part of the conflict in its early stages, although certain minorities may have been more exposed to violence. For example, due to their concentration in urban centres such as Aleppo, Damascus and Homs, which have been the scene of intense fighting, a large number of Syria's Christians have fled the country. However, many argue that the actions of the government led by President Bashar Al-Assad escalated the sectarian dimensions of the conflict, leading to indiscriminate attacks against civilians on the basis of their identity and perceived association

with the government or the opposition. The increased involvement of international actors in Syria, including Saudi Arabia and Iran, has further amplified these tensions. The launching of Russian airstrikes in support of the Assad government, a key development in 2015, has also led to shockingly high civilian casualty levels, leading rights groups to criticize Russia's apparent targeting of residential areas in which no military targets were present. Turkmen community representatives also accused Russia of targeting Turkmen civilians in an attempt to ethnically cleanse their community from the north-west of the country.

Minorities have been caught in the middle of this sectarian climate and their loyalties are divided. While many have sided with the Assad government, viewing it as the only viable guarantor of their security, other members of minorities have been vocal members of the opposition. Minority activists have been arbitrarily arrested, detained incommunicado and tortured in Assad's prisons alongside their Sunni Muslim counterparts. Some minority detainees have reported being subjected to particularly harsh treatment by interrogators on account of their identity, in addition to religious and ethnic slurs.

Since 2014, the rising power of extremist armed groups and their expansion into increasingly large swathes of the country has meant that minorities are increasingly prone to grave human rights violations from militants. Groups such as ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra have imposed a reign of terror on minorities in the areas they control, suppressing freedom of religion and singling them out for attack, while imposing harsh punishments on all those who oppose their control. Moreover, they have systematically destroyed innumerable historical and religious sites in an attempt to destroy all traces of minority cultural heritage.

Syria's Christians have faced kidnappings of their religious leaders throughout the conflict, while some of their towns have been consumed by fighting between government and anti-government forces. The advance of ISIS into further Christian-majority areas in 2015 led to an upsurge in kidnappings and other violations. On 23 February, ISIS attacked 35 Assyrian

Christian villages along the Khabour River in the north-eastern Al-Hasakah governorate. According to Assyrian news outlets, the armed group kidnapped 253 Assyrians, including many women and children, caused an estimated 3,000 to flee the area and destroyed 11 churches. Although the villages were subsequently recaptured from ISIS, very few Assyrian Christians returned. On 23 September, ISIS released a video showing the execution of three Assyrian Christian men kidnapped in February. As of December 2015, 105 still remained in captivity. On 6 August, ISIS captured the town of Qaryatain, near Homs, kidnapping at least 230 civilians, including dozens of Assyrian Christians. ISIS later released a charter for the town's Christian inhabitants, imposing *jizya* (tribute) payments and restricting their rights to religious expression.

Anti-government armed groups have reserved some of their most vicious treatment for Alawites and other Shi'a minorities, due to their perceived association with the Assad government. Towards the end of March, Jabhat Al-Nusra and Free Syrian Army forces took control of Busra Al-Sham in Daraa governorate. Killings and kidnappings of Shi'a civilians were documented in the previous months, while Shi'a married to Sunnis were threatened with death or sexual violence once the town fell. On 31 March, ISIS attacked Mabouja in Hama governorate, a town with a large Ismaili population, killing an estimated 46 civilians and abducting 50 others, including 10 Ismailis. In April, Jabhat Al-Nusra and other armed groups attacked the predominantly Alawite village of Ishtabraq in Idlib Governorate, killing civilians as they fled and blowing up Alawite shrines. After capturing the city of Deir Ez-Zour in May, ISIS carried out public executions of Alawite and Shi'a men accused of fighting for the government.

Syria's Druze population, concentrated in the southern governorate of Suweida as well as Idlib, has largely avoided openly taking sides in the conflict. Most have been reluctant to enlist in Assad's army, fearing they would be sent to fight on distant battlefronts and risk creating tensions with their Sunni neighbours. The community's increasingly vocal resistance to conscription throughout 2015 has left it at loggerheads with the government, while opening it to attack by

anti-government armed groups. On 10 June, Jabhat Al-Nusra fighters killed 30 Druze in the village of Qalba Loza, Idlib governorate. Inhabitants of the village had previously faced pressures by the armed group to renounce their faith. Militants also destroyed shrines and dug up Druze graves.

As in Iraq, the course of the conflict in Syria has involved the widespread destruction of places of worship and other sites of cultural heritage. While the demolition of large sections of Palmyra, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, by ISIS between May and October attracted international condemnation, it was only part of a wider assault by militants on heritage that has seen the destruction of countless places of worship, statues and other artifacts associated with religious minorities. These have also provided the group with an important source of revenue, with some reports suggesting that illegal trade in antiquities was the second-largest source of finance for ISIS after oil, reaching volumes of over US\$100 million a year. Nevertheless, despite the notoriety ISIS has created through these acts, the Syrian Network for Human Rights reported during the year that government forces were in fact responsible for the majority of attacks on houses of worship. By the end of April 2015, of the 63 targeted churches documented by the monitoring group, 40 were attacked by government forces compared to 14 by ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra and other extremist organizations, as well as another 14 by armed opposition groups. Moreover, as early as June 2013 the group recorded that government forces had already attacked 1,451 mosques, of which 348 were completely destroyed.

Yemen

Yemen's conflict escalated further during 2015, with devastating consequences for its civilian population. In the wake of significant advances during 2014 by rebel Houthi forces, culminating in the capture of the capital Sana'a in September, President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi resigned in January 2015 before fleeing south in February to Aden. An international coalition led by Saudi Arabia subsequently launched 'Operation Decisive Storm' at the end of March in support of Hadi, including aerial bombings and an

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Case study by *Kat Eghdamian*
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Jordan: experiences of Syria's Christian and Druze refugees

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Of the more than 4 million Syrians internationally displaced by the crisis, little is known about the fate of religious minorities among the refugee population. This is of growing concern since the Syrian conflict is increasingly being waged across sectarian lines, directly influencing the experiences of displaced Syrians both within and outside its borders. Due to the lack of reliable figures on the number of Syrian refugees from different religious communities, it is unclear exactly how many religious minorities have been displaced by the conflict, though unofficial estimates based on the country's pre-conflict population equates to hundreds of thousands of people.

A recent study, published by the UCL Migration Unit, on the situation of Syrian Christian and Syrian Druze refugees living in urban centres across Jordan found that religious minorities face specific vulnerabilities and challenges in displacement. For instance, out of fear of targeted attacks, many are not entering refugee camps or registering with UN agencies. Instead, a large proportion choose to live in private homes or gather together in religious buildings such as monasteries, restricting their access to humanitarian services and protection. With rent prices rising with the influx of refugees, many are forced to move to the peripheries of cities.

For those who remain in Jordan and do not make the journey onward to Europe and elsewhere, many face social exclusion, stigmatization and discrimination. In particular, Syrian Christian and Syrian Druze refugees are regularly subjected to verbal and physical harassment, including being called *kafir* (infidel) and refused service at local

supermarkets. In turn, the children of these families face bullying at school and compulsory religious training in Islam, while women have reported being questioned by neighbours and other refugees as to why they are not veiled.

Despite initial hopes of return to their homeland, many now feel there is no home to return to. Syrian neighbourhoods that were previously well known as Christian havens or clusters for Druze communities have either been razed to the ground or remain battlegrounds between different sides of the conflict. From the castle of Krak des Chevaliers in Homs to the ancient Saint Elian Monastery near Qaryatain founded over 1,500 years ago, many of the physical sites associated with ancient Christianity are being destroyed. In this context, the importance of maintaining religious freedom and cultural heritage is more important than ever, with minority refugees playing a vital role as carriers and preservers of their traditions.

Although religious communities, such as churches, offer extra support and help to these refugees, many express despair about their plight in Jordan and the prospects for the future. Recognizing the need to maintain their culture, local religious communities are offering language and culture classes for Syrian Christian refugees – a great source of support and familiarity. However, for Syrian Druze refugees, there appear to be few or no religious or cultural support networks directly available. Many also lamented the discrimination they experienced in their host communities as a result of misunderstandings about their religious beliefs.

As Jordan continues to host over 600,000 Syrian refugees, there is a need to ensure the divisions causing the displacement into the country do not continue to brew discontent and conflict within its borders. Targeted strategies are urgently required to support tolerance and religious freedom among refugee population. Indeed, the treatment of Syria's religious minorities will have wider implications, beyond security concerns, for the future of religious diversity and cultural heritage in the Middle East. ■

extended blockade that prevented essential food, medicine and fuel supplies from entering the country. Amid widespread allegations of human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law by all parties to the conflict, Yemen has been consumed by a major humanitarian crisis. Between March and the end of the year there were over 6,000 deaths and 28,000 injuries, with more than 2.5 million people internally displaced and an estimated 21.2 million Yemenis – more than four-fifths of the population – in need of humanitarian assistance.

The Houthi movement, rooted in long-standing grievances about the perceived socio-economic marginalization of Yemen's underdeveloped north, is named after the late Hussein Al Houthi, a former member of parliament who subsequently led the insurgency against the government at the beginning of what became known as the Saada war before his death in 2004. While conflict has been ongoing, the group's activities escalated in 2011 and in ensuing years forces gained control over large swathes of the country. While the Houthi rebellion has presented its grievances as primarily political rather than religious, the fact that the large majority of its members are Zaidi Shi'a, fighting against a Sunni-dominated government, has meant the conflict has taken on increasingly sectarian dimensions. This has been exacerbated by the military involvement of Saudi Arabia, and its hostility towards Iran. As a result, in areas such as Sana'a where different Muslim groups previously coexisted with relatively little friction, sectarian tensions within communities have reportedly become more common.

The conflict has also resulted in the damage and destruction of significant cultural sites and heritage in Yemen, including those connected to minority communities, such as the 1,200-year-old Al-Hadi mosque in Saada, the oldest Shi'a centre of learning on the Arabian Peninsula, which was struck by coalition airstrikes in May. In June the Director-General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, condemned coalition airstrikes for repeatedly striking cultural heritage sites, and on 22 July UNESCO announced an emergency plan to safeguard the country's unique cultural heritage from damage caused by fighting, shelling and bombing.



Left: Yemeni Jews. *BBC World Service.*

Anti-Israeli sentiment has also driven the persecution of Bahá'í, who number around 1,000 people in Yemen. On January 2015, a formal indictment was issued against Hamed Kamal bin Haydara, a Bahá'í Yemeni, accusing him of being an Iranian citizen working on behalf of the Israeli government – a common accusation levelled at members of the community due to the location of the Bahá'í World Centre in the cities of 'Akká and Haifa in Israel. The charges come following more than a year in detention without trial following Haydara's arrest in December 2013, during which he has reportedly been subjected to sustained torture by prison guards.

Ethnic discrimination is also entrenched within Yemeni society. As the conflict has intensified, the situation of Yemen's Muhamasheen – 'marginalized ones' in Arabic – has become even more precarious. A visible minority commonly believed to be of African descent and also known pejoratively as *Akhdam* ('servants'), their lives have long been characterized by deep-seated poverty and exclusion. Having largely made their homes in shantytowns on the outskirts of urban centres, many Muhamasheen were concentrated in the cities worst affected by the conflict. Aden, Saada and Taiz had especially large numbers of Muhamasheen, who became internally displaced when coalition airstrikes began pounding their neighbourhoods in those cities in March and April.

In the absence of access to tribal or other informal networks of patronage, with the deepening humanitarian crisis Muhamasheen have struggled to access basic services or other support mechanisms. While the risk for all civilians is high, the experience of displacement for Muhamasheen has differed considerably from that of other Yemenis, with community members facing discrimination and in some cases even denial of access to aid distribution. Displaced Muhamasheen have been forced to find shelter on open ground or in disused buildings. Activists and community members have also reported young girls being coerced into early marriages to support their families, as well as the forcible recruitment of boys to fight for various armed groups. ■

Extremist groups such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Islamic State (IS) in Yemen have also exploited rising insecurity to expand their influence in the south, where, alongside other acts of destruction, AQAP militants reportedly left the 800-year-old tomb of Sufi scholar Sufyan bin Abdullah in Lahij in ruins. Mosques in Sana'a frequented by Houthi supporters were also targeted by IS bomb attacks throughout the year, including an attack on 20 March in which at least 137 people were killed in a series of coordinated attacks on Shi'a mosques in the capital. This incident was followed by similar attacks throughout the year, including a suicide bombing in September that reportedly left at least 25 people dead. In July IS also claimed responsibility for a car bomb in Sana'a striking a Dawoodi Ismaili mosque, in reprisal for what the group claimed was Ismaili support for the Houthis. Similar incidents have occurred in the south of the country, including the demolition of an empty Catholic church in Aden by suspected militants in December.

The conflict has also placed increasing pressure on Yemen's Jewish community. The ancient community, numbering as many as 50,000 in the 1940s, has now shrunk to a few dozen, who face widespread hostility from large sections of Yemeni society, due in part to the conflation of the Jewish faith with Zionism. For many within the community, fears of attack have also intensified since the Houthi takeover. Due to fear of harassment, Jews have tended to conceal visible markers of their identity in public, such as sidelocks, and have been confined to practising religious rituals in the privacy of their homes. The unique cultural traditions for which the community has historically been renowned in Yemen and further afield, such as metalworking and, in particular, the handcrafting of silver jewellery, are close to disappearing. In this context, many of those remaining now wish to leave the country. In March 2016, reports emerged that the Israeli government had secretly airlifted 17 Yemeni Jews out of the country, leaving just 50 community members in Yemen.