Forum: United Nations Human Rights Council

Issue: Discussing the security of the religious minorities in the Middle East

Student Officer: Bade Yağmur Can

Position: President Chair

Introduction

The Middle East is home to various religious groups. Even though it is usually viewed as a region mainly consisting of Muslims, it also contains a wide range of different religious groups, such as Christians, Jews, Yazidis, Druze, Bahá´ís, Zoroastrians, and various smaller Islamic denominations. Many of these communities have been living in the region for centuries, contributing to its cultural and social diversity and development.

However, this diversity has not always been responded with tolerance, protection or inclusion. Instead, most of these religious minorities have encountered social exclusion and systemic discrimination. This othering of religious minorities has been happening due to a variety of factors, in particular, authoritarian governments imposing religious beliefs, political instability that causes extremism, and the use of religion as a tool for nationalism. In many states, individuals, who belong to religious minorities, are denied equal rights, struggle to get their voice heard, and face harassment, hate speech or violence.

Circumstances like these not just isolate these communities but also put their security in danger. Religious identity becoming a justification for oppression and persecution paves the way to forced migration, restricted access to public services, destruction of places of worship, and, in extreme cases, even genocide. Armed conflicts in the region have only deepened the danger for religious minorities, since

these communities are often blamed for unrest or simply trapped in the middle of brutal power struggles, which they had no part in creating. The consequences of these dangers even go beyond national borders, as they exacerbate international conflicts over religious freedom and rights, strain international asylum systems, and cause refugee crises.

The UN Human Rights Council, tasked with defending fundamental freedoms and rights worldwide, is responsible for handling these realities. Other international human rights organizations have too repeatedly raised concerns about these conditions, trying to secure the well-being and rights of religious minorities in the Middle East.

It is exactly this mixture of religious diversity, political repression, and insecurity, that makes the protection of religious minorities in the Middle East a matter of humanitarian and political concern. As this guide will further explore, addressing this concern requires a comprehensive understanding of the historical background of the religious persecution in the region, the role of both state and non-state actors, and the existing international frameworks, which are created to protect these vulnerable communities, since it is a complex, multi-faced problem, that requires a fresh perspective.

Definition of Key Terms

Religious Minority: A community that follows a religion that is different from the religion followed by the majority of the people in the place they live.

Example sentence : In Iraq, Yazidis and Christians are religious minorities compared to the Muslim majority.

Sectarianism: Violence, hostility, discrimination or any kind of negative approach that arises from attaching too much importance to a religion.

Example sentence: Religious minorities like Christians in the Middle East are often victims of sectarianism, facing violence and discrimination.

Persecution: The act of treating somebody in a violent and unfair way, especially because of their race, religion or political beliefs.

Example sentence: The persecution of Yazidis by ISIS shows how some minorities in the Middle East are targeted just for following another religion.

Blasphemy laws: Laws that make it illegal to speak or act in a way that is considered disrespectful toward a religion, its symbols, or its leaders. These laws are often used to punish people from religious minorities or those who criticize the dominant religion in the country.

Example Sentence: In Pakistan, blasphemy laws have been used to imprison Christians and Ahmadis who are accused of insulting Islam, sometimes without clear evidence.

Forced Displacement: Forcing individuals or communities to leave their homes, in this context because of their religious beliefs

Example sentence: Many Christian families in Syria have experienced forced displacement, leaving their homes to escape violence from armed groups targeting them for their faith.

Freedom of Religion or Belief: A basic human right that allows people to freely practice, change, or express their religious beliefs without fear of discrimination, violence or punishment.

Example sentence: In many countries, freedom of religion and belief allows people to worship in churches, mosques, or temples without fear of persecution.

Hate Speech : Any kind of communication that is used to express hatred against a group based on their religion.

Example sentence: Online hate speech against religious minorities can eventually lead to violence and discrimination against these communities.

Religious Nationalism: A political ideology that combines national identity with a religion, often leading to the exclusion or oppression of religious minorities.

Example sentence: In some countries, religious nationalism results in policies that favor the majority religion, discriminating against minority religious groups.
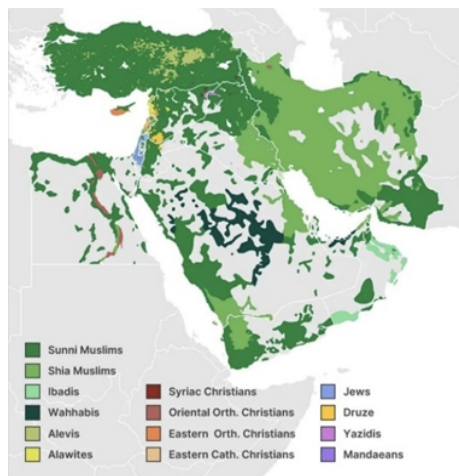
Background Information

Religious diversity in the Middle East

The Middle East is one of the most religiously diverse regions in the world. Although it is often viewed as a Muslim region, the region is home to a wide range of religions that have existed for centuries—and in some cases, even originated there. As the birthplace of major world religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as lesser-known faiths like Zoroastrianism and the Druze tradition, the region holds a central role in global religious history. Historically, there have been eras of different degrees of religious coexistence , where several communities coexisted under shared government, such as the Ottoman Empire or the early Islamic Caliphates.

Today, Muslims make up the majority, with Islam being followed by at least 90% of the population in every Middle Eastern country except for Israel with a Jewish-majority, but significant populations of Christians also live throughout the region. Other religious groups include Jews, Yazidis, Druze, Bahá´ís, Alevis, Alawites, Ibadis, and Mandaeans. With their distinct languages, customs, traditions, and legacy, these communities add to the region's cultural diversity and growth. Despite their long history in the region, many of these communities experience systemic discrimination, persecution, or marginalization. Understanding the historical foundations of this complex religious mosaic is essential to addressing the current social and political struggles faced by religious minorities in the Middle East

This map illustrates the geographic distribution of major religious groups in the Middle East, highlighting both the dominant Islamic denominations and the minority faiths

Historical context of religious coexistence and conflict

The Middle East is where some of the world's oldest and most known religions, such as Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, first emerged, and periods of religious coexistence have influenced much of its history. Under the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258), and later the Ottoman Empire (1299–1922), religious minorities such as Christians and Jews were recognized as dhimmis, who were non-Muslim communities protected by the state. They were allowed to run their own religious affairs despite certain limitations and a special tax known as jizya and they often thrived in trade, education, and science, especially in urban centers like Baghdad and Istanbul, contributing to the government's economic development.

However, The Middle East has been significantly shaped by religious conflict. The Crusades, which unfolded mostly in the Levant, left long-lasting wounds on Christian-Muslim relations. The Sunni–Shia divide, which started as a dispute about who should be in charge of the Muslim community after the Prophet Muhammad's death, has become a major cause of tension in the region, still causing conflicts and rivalries in places like Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon, and Yemen. Many Jewish communities were driven out of Arab nations in the 20th century as a result of violence directed to Jews, especially after Israel was established in 1948. Sunni-Shia tensions increased after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, when Iran started supporting Shia organizations in the region, frightening governments that are Sunni-led and causing even more conflicts. The rise of extremist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS in the 21st century further shattered societies, since these actors did not just target religious minorities but even Muslims who did not conform to their ideology. Today, conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen demonstrate how intertwined religious identity has become with political battles, territorial control, and the survival of communities as well as the government.

Systemic political challenges faced by religious minorities

Across the Middle East political systems prioritize a dominant religious ideology, which is often to the detriment of religious minorities. Constitutions establish a state religion, which usually is a form of Islam, that provides privileged legal and political treatment to the adherents of that faith, leaving religious minorities with limited or no political influence and legal rights. As constitutions and laws openly discriminate against religious minorities, this systemic discrimination can be seen in several ways: certain minority religions may not have legal recognition, people who follow these minority religions may be banned from voting or having jobs in the public sector, and discriminatory election laws often hinder them from participating in politics. In some countries, blasphemy laws or strict religious rules are used to suppress opposing views or penalize those who follow a different religion than the majority of people. Religious minorities might even be forced to vow

to stop following their religion just to be able to have access to fundamental human rights. Through these legal and political mechanisms a hierarchy of religions is created, in which minorities are marginalized and their voice in governance is either limited or fully unheard.

The Bahá'í community, for instance, is not recognized as a religion in Iran, and that's why its members are denied access to higher education, public employment, and even the right to be properly buried. As a result of their exclusion from fundamental political, legal and humanitarian rights, Bahá'ís are permanently placed in a second-class position in society. Similar to this, Saudi Arabia's official policy to only acknowledge Sunni Islam as the only true religion has resulted in the extreme suppression of other religious activities. Building non-Muslim places of worship is strictly forbidden and public worship is considered illegal. These policies hinder coexistence of different religious communities and normalize systemic discrimination. Without political representation or legal protections, minorities frequently find themselves defenseless against social exclusion or abuse by the state, with few options for recourse.

Forced displacement of religious minorities

Forced displacement occurs when individuals or communities have to flee their homes due to violence, persecution, or fear of being targeted. For religious minorities in the Middle East, this has been a devastating and recurring reality, as they often meet with suspicion, hostility and persecution and are usually left with no choice but to escape in search of safety. These displacements are however not just outcomes of war, in many cases they are the intended outcome of policies that try to erase the presence of these groups in the region entirely. Eviction, migration under threat or escaping due to

This image shows a protest advocating for the protection of Christians in the Middle East.

the destruction of religious and cultural heritage all fall under the category of forced displacement. Forced displacement breaks the generational ties of religious minorities to their homeland, erasing their cultural heritage and impacts on the area, leads to poverty, and vulnerability in host countries, safe zones or refugee camps. The scale of the crisis is still staggering: for instance, the percentage of Christians in the Middle East has dropped to around 4% as of 2020, with an estimated 7.7 million Christians now living outside the region, in many cases, diaspora communities outnumber those remaining in their ancestral homelands.

One major example is the Yazidi community's forced displacement from Sinjar, Iraq, following the start of ISIS's genocidal campaign in 2014, which resulted in hundreds of deaths, the abduction of women, and the destruction of holy sites, Another example would be, how Syrian Christians have been threatened, kidnapped, and had their churches destroyed by various fighting factions during the civil war, forcing many of them to leave their homes and migrate. In Iran, members of the Bahá'í Faith are denied access to education and jobs, leading to many of them seeking asylum abroad due to systemic persecution. These cases not only reveal how displacement is not merely a side effect of conflict but often the direct outcome of targeted policies, but also show how systemic discrimination can have devastating humanitarian effects too.

Socioeconomic impacts on religious minorities

In the Middle East, religious minorities encounter systemic obstacles that deny their access to public services such as healthcare, work, education, and others. These restrictions are not only coincidental though, rather, they are often the result of societal exclusion and systemic discrimination.

In many countries, job opportunities in the public sector, specifically in important fields such as the military, law, and government offices, are often reserved only for people, who follow the religion of the majority. That's why religious minorities are left economically insecure and their upward mobility is limited. Additionally, cultural bias

or a fear of political retribution may cause religious minorities to not be picked for jobs or promotions even in private firms.

There are also significant inequalities in access to high-quality education. In many states, minorities are either portrayed negatively or not represented at all in the national curricula, causing prejudices to start from childhood and making it hard for children to get an unbiased education. Others might be made to attend religious classes that go against their beliefs, which would alienate them to their own culture. In more severe cases, minority students are denied the right to get higher education altogether.

Similar restrictions may apply to access to healthcare, particularly in remote areas that are affected by conflict, where services are based on sectarian lines. Fear of harassment or discrimination at medical facilities may also end up with people giving up on asking to get medical care altogether.

Some real world examples demonstrate how these disparities manifest. In Iran, Bahá´ís are can not get into universities or get public sector jobs, effectively cutting off their economic mobility. Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan are banned from identifying themselves as Muslim and face serious obstacles in education and employment, being fully excluded from everyday life.

In conclusion, systematic discrimination and social exclusion in the Middle East can have disastrous socio economic and humanitarian impacts on religious minorities. These consequences restrict access to healthcare, work, and education, creating a repeating cycle of marginalization and poverty. Addressing these inequalities is essential to promote social cohesion, protect human rights, and ensure social growth in the Middle East.

Impact of armed conflict on religious minorities

Armed conflicts, which are common in the Middle East, can also harm religious minorities. In times of conflict governments may reduce or fully withdraw measurements that protect minorities. However, the chaotic environment caused by these conflicts is most often used as an opportunity to target and eliminate these minorities under the cover of instability and commotion, which means that these groups are not just the accidental victims of armed conflicts but they are deliberately attacked in times of war and conflict.

For example, the Christian communities during the Syrian Civil War have faced extreme violence, displacement and their churches and monasteries were fully destroyed, taking advantage of the opportunities given by the chaotic environment. Many historic Christian neighborhoods were bombed and destroyed, ending up with many citizens of the neighborhoods leaving their homes and relocating.

Armed conflicts usually create a commotion in the area, making these minorities easy targets for those who want to eliminate them or destroy their heritage in the region. Long term consequences of these conflicts such as displacement, minorities losing the legal ownership of their homes and not being able to return have also had destructive impacts on these religious minorities.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Iran

Iran has a Shi'a majority government that has been accused of systemic discrimination against religious minorities in the country. With the implementation of blasphemy laws, extreme religious codes, and persecution against non-Shi'a religious communities and

people who convert from Islam to other religions, Iran is a state that systematically suppresses and discriminates against religious minorities.

United States of America

The United States of America is a global advocate for religious freedom and for religious minorities facing persecution and discrimination, providing asylum and refugee status to religious minorities, who have fled their homes in the Middle East. The United States has also established the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in 1998, promoting freedom of religion and belief as a cornerstone of USAs foreign policy. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) plays a central role in monitoring and reporting on the state of religious freedom globally.

Iraq

Before the rise of ISIS, in Iraq various religious groups used to coexist and even minority religious groups used to take an active role in education, economy and everyday life, though occasionally being systematically discriminated against. This situation changed drastically with the rise of ISIS, when ISIS targeted minorities with genocide, forced displacement, forced conversion and violence, leading to mass killings and migration of religious minorities in Iraq. In the aftermath, many minorities still haven't returned due to fear, instability, lack of reconstruction and ongoing threats that make their return very hard.

Syria

Religious minorities in Syria were severely harmed during the Syrian Civil war,especially by extremist groups such as ISIS and al-Nusra, which carried out abductions, mass killings and destruction of holy sites. Especially Christians in Syria were devastated with their ancient churches being bombed and entire Christian neighborhoods being emptied. All of this resulted in many religious minorities fleeing their homes in Syria and still fearing to return due to lasting instability and the lack of protection. Today, Syria's once-rich religious diversity has dramatically declined, and the future of its minority communities still remains in jeopardy.

Saudi Arabia

The Saudi Arabian government only recognizes the Sunni Islam as the true belief, banning all public worship of non-Muslims or Muslims who follow any denominations other than Sunni. All religious minorities in Saudi Arabia must worship privately and are in risk of getting deported or punished for violating religious codes. Discrimination and persecution in Saudi Arabia is however most heavily concentrated on the Shi'a Muslims. The Shi'a minority faces systemic discrimination in education, employment, and religious practice, while their religious gatherings are being restricted and their representation in the government is limited. Shi'a activists have been arrested, imprisoned, or even executed for protesting discrimination, calling for reforms or advocating for their basic human rights.

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is a UN agency tasked with protecting human rights worldwide. It is responsible for monitoring violations against vulnerable minorities, including religious minorities, and publishing regular reports or statements encouraging countries to protect these minorities. Through reports, investigations, and advocacy, the OHCHR urges all states worldwide to uphold international human rights standards. It works to document and expose violations against religious communities. It aims to hold governments accountable for systemic persecution against minorities and protect human rights globally.

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is an independent body of the U.S. government, established to promote religious freedom worldwide. The USCIRF reports states violating the rights of religious minorities and encourages actions within the U.S. policy such as sanctions or diplomatic pressure. Monitoring religious freedom violations worldwide, it aims to raise awareness, influence states policy on religious freedom and urge international efforts to protect religious minorities, advocating for persecuted religious minorities all over the world.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
20 March 2003	U.S. Invasion of Iraq which led to sectarian violence and minorities being targeted.
15 March 2011	Outbreak of the Syrian Civil War
3 August 2014	ISIS Genocide Against Yazidis in Sinjar, Iraq
2015	Destruction of Religious Sites by ISIS
9 December 2017	Iraq Declares Victory Over ISIS.
October 2019	Iran increases pressure on Bahá´ís.
2020	Christian Population in the Middle East Drops Below 4% as a consequence of years of pressure and conflict.

Relevant UN Resolutions and Other Documents

- [UN General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief](), Adopted: 25 November 1981. This declaration by the UN General Assembly calls on states to end discrimination based on religion or belief and affirms the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief.

- [UN Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18 – Combating Intolerance Based on Religion or Belief](), Adopted: 24 March 2011. This resolution urges states to address religious intolerance through interfaith dialogue, education, and legal protections. It condemns discrimination against people based on their religion or beliefs as well as provoking violence, while also providing governments with guidelines on how they can promote religious tolerance and sfaeguard places of worship.

- [Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)](#), Adopted: 10 December 1948. This foundational declaration affirms the right of every individual to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. It establishes that everyone is entitled to hold beliefs without getting interfered or restricted and to practice their religion or belief publicly or privately, setting the global standard for religious freedom and human rights protection.

- [UN Human Rights Council Resolution on the Protection of Minorities](#), Adopted: 24 December 2019. This resolution emphasizes the importance of protecting minorities, including religious minorities, especially in conflict-affected areas. It encourages states to implement inclusive policies that promote their safety, rights, and full participation and representation in society while addressing discrimination and violence against these vulnerable groups.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Humanitarian and Protection Programs

Religious minorities who have been displaced by conflict and persecution have received active assistance from various UN agencies such as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Their programs provide emergency shelter, legal protection, food aid, and mental support to affected populations in conflict zones. Additionally, NGOs have collaborated with the UN to manage refugee camps and safe areas for vulnerable religious communities. These programs seek to support long-term resettlement and recovery in addition to providing immediate relief. Despite funding and access challenges, these efforts remain vital in protecting those at risk of religious persecution.

Human Rights Monitoring and Reporting

Monitoring bodies like the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief detect and report on violations against religious minorities in the Middle East. These reports help increase awareness around the world by exposing violence, discrimination, and restrictions on religious practices. These reports are submitted to UN bodies such as the Human Rights Council and serve as guidelines for recommendations for a better international response to the issue. Even though they are not legally binding, they take a big part in putting pressure on governments to improve conditions and protect religious minorities.

Legal Frameworks and Advocacy

Legal frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) guarantee the right to freedom of religion and being protected from discrimination and persecution. These frameworks have been used by the UN and some other international legal advocates to draw attention to violations against religious minorities in the Middle East, push for justice for these religious minorities and demand legal reforms. Legal tools have also been used to protect religious sites and advance anti-discrimination policies. These initiatives seek to enhance legal protections and frameworks for religious minorities and demand justice for them.

Possible Solutions

Strengthening Enforcement and Monitoring of Minority Protections

One possible solution would be the enhancement of monitoring bodies or creating a new independent international body under the UN, specifically tasked with monitoring and reporting on violations against religious minorities. Through integration with current UN mechanisms, this body could be able to make legally binding recommendations, and a violation detected by it could lead to international legal actions or sanctions, ensuring enforceability. Enforcement could be further

enhanced by making cooperation a requirement for receiving aid or diplomatic privilege.

Promoting Unbiased and Inclusive Education

Delegates could also focus on providing schools worldwide with an inclusive and unbiased education system, especially in the Middle East, to fight stereotypes and foster mutual understanding from an early age, promoting an inclusive and peaceful approach. National curricula of states could be expanded to include accurate, respectful information aboıut diverse beliefs and the history, heritage and coexistence of various religious communities, the curricula expansion being guided by an international educational body under the UN. Teacher training could be encouraged as well to ensure religious topics are handled without bias.

Encouraging Legal Reforms Through Technical Assistance

Through providing technical assistance by international bodies such as UN agencies these bodies can collaborate with states to revise and enhance their legal frameworks as well as help with drafting and implementing new minority-friendly legal reforms to ensure fair representation, inclusivity of all religious groups, and their fair access to public services.

Establishment of a Minority Protection Fund

Delegates could work on establishing a Minority Protection Fund, which could be funded by contributions from UN Member States or international donors, to finance programs supporting religious minorities. This fund could focus on providing grants for education, legal aid, and community development projects as well as financially supporting emergency relief programs for a rapid response to protect affected religious minorities from arising conflicts. This fund should be managed by an independent governing body to ensure transparency and effective allocation of resources.

Promoting Interfaith Dialogue

Interfaith dialogue can facilitate understanding and respect between different religious groups in the Middle East. Through interfaith dialogue initiatives, which could be tasked with organizing regular workshops, conferences, and community events that bring people from various religions together, we can promote mutual respect and empathy. Collaborative projects and educational programs would also further strengthen relationships between religious groups.

Bibliography

- Payind, Alam, Melinda McClimans. *Diverse Religious Identities of the Middle East*. 2016. *ohio state.pressbooks.pub*, https://ohiostate.pressbooks.pub/key2mideast/chapter/diverse-religious-identities-of-the-middle-east/

- Anderson, Carl. A Mass Christian Exodus from the Middle East Would Be a Catastrophe. 15 December 2019, https://nypost.com/2019/11/15/a-mass-christian-exodus-from-the-middle-east-would-be-a-catastrophe/

- Religious Freedom Conditions Around the World | USCIRF. 1803:54:30 2025, https://www.uscirf.gov/countries

- Shareef, Sanh. "Redefining Protection: Challenges and Solutions in Safeguarding Religious Minorities within International and Regional Legal

Frameworks". The Age of Human Rights Journal, sy 23, October 2024, ss. e8659-e8659. revistas electronicas.ujaen.es
https://doi.org/10.17561/tahrj.v23.8659

- "Supporting the Rights to Peace, Security and Justice in the Middle East." OHCHR, 2024,
www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2024/10/supporting-rights-peace-security-and-justice-middle-east

- Amnesty International. "Everything You Need to Know about Human Rights in Human Rights in Middle East and North Africa - Review in 2020." Amnesty International, 2022,
www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/report-middle-east-and-north-africa/

- Mitchell, Travis. "3. Middle East Still Home to Highest Levels of Restrictions on Religion, Although Levels Have Declined since 2016." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, 15 July 2019,
www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/07/15/middle-east-still-home-to-highest-levels-of-restrictions-on-religion-although-levels-have-declined-since-2016/