



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# Religious persecution in the Middle East and its effect on the UK

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## Summary

The takeover of large parts of the Levant by ISIS/Daesh in 2014 saw a surge in religious persecution, with Yazidis being particularly vulnerable. Discrimination and violence against people because of their faith (or lack of it) is nothing new in the region, however, although there is a particularly strong tendency for some cynical politicians to use identity politics to shore up their domestic legitimacy in these troubled times; religious persecution has always had a strongly political element in the region.

Religious persecution is one of the causes of the present refugee crisis, with a record number of people displaced, according to the UNHCR, leading to asylum applications in the UK. The UK government says that it is fulfilling its obligations to give refuge to those who are victims of religious persecution in the region, and has policies in place to try to prevent the spread of radicalisation and religious intolerance in the UK.

## 1. Religious persecution in the Middle East

### 1.1 Iraq and Syria

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights produced a report on abuses committed by ISIS/Daesh in October 2015. It highlighted attacks against people in Iraq and Syria for belonging to different religious and ethnic groups and said that some might constitute genocide: "It is reasonable to conclude that some of these incidents, considering the overall information, may constitute genocide."<sup>1</sup> The House of Commons debated this possibility in April 2016.<sup>2</sup>

#### Yazidis

At the time of the ISIS takeover there were about 700,000 Yazidis living mainly in the Sinjar district, Nineveh governorate of northern Iraq. The religion has elements of Christianity, Judaism and Islam and they are close to the Kurds, although the Kurds are generally Muslim; they speak a northern dialect of the Kurdish language. They have been subject to violence and massacres throughout their history, during the Ottoman Empire and during the US occupation of Iraq after 2003, when a bombing campaign by Sunni militants killed hundreds of Yazidis.

The UN report said that the Yazidi community in Iraq, whose identity is based on their religion, were forced to convert to Islam or face death and that ISIS had the intention of wiping out the Yazidi community in areas it controlled. When ISIS invaded the Nineveh plains in August

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<sup>1</sup> [Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the human rights situation in Iraq in the light of abuses committed by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and associated groups](#) (advance unedited version), A/HRC/28/18, 13 March 2015

<sup>2</sup> For more information see the Commons Briefing Paper ['Declaring Daesh massacres genocide'](#), April 2016

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2014, many men were summarily executed, including even those who agreed to convert to Islam. The report recounts how at least 700 men were killed in the village of Kocho in Sinjar governorate. When the Sinjar disaster happened, some 200,000 Yazidis were driven from their homes. The United Nations estimated in 2015 that 5,000 Yazidi men were massacred and 7,000 women and girls were enslaved by ISIS in that period.<sup>3</sup> The figure is likely to have grown since then. The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, Ben Emmerson QC, said in a report in June 2015 that these acts might amount to genocide.<sup>4</sup>

### Christians

Christians were in what is now Iraq and Syria since the first century, some 700 years before the Islamic conquests. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christians still constituted about 20% of the population in the Middle East and were in a majority in the area that is now Lebanon.

Before 2003 there were about 850,000 Christians in Iraq, perhaps more in Syria. But with the invasion and the subsequent violence the numbers gradually dropped.

The [BBC published this map in 2011](#):



<sup>3</sup> [‘The ISIS Victims You Don’t See—World Snoozes as Yazidis Massacred’](#), *Observer*, 18 November 2015

<sup>4</sup> [Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, Ben Emmerson](#), A/HRC/29/51, 16 June 2015

Although Christians are 'People of the Book' according Islam and this means that they should be allowed to practice their religion, subject to certain constraints, ISIS has persecuted Christians. Their treatment, however, has not been as bad as that handed out to the Yazidis, who are not People of the Book. Christians have been forced to pay a tax called *Jizya* or to convert, or be killed. Many decided to flee rather than face such treatment in Mosul in 2014; ISIS claims that it was showing mercy by allowing the Christians to flee.

Not all Christians have been shown any mercy: ISIS-affiliated gunmen in Libya massacred 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians in 2015 and in April of that year released a video which the militants claimed showed them massacring 30 Ethiopian Christians.<sup>5</sup>

Recently, reports emerged of the killing of 21 Christians in Syria in a town recaptured by Syrian government forces – they had broken the terms of their restrictions or tried to escape. Warnings had also been received of Christian girls being enslaved. ISIS militants had destroyed a 1,500 year old monastery along with most of the rest of the town.<sup>6</sup>

## Turkmen and other Shia groups

The Turkmen are Turkic people who live mainly in Central Asia but who form minorities in some Middle Eastern states. They speak a language closely related to Azeri, the Turkic language spoken in Azerbaijan. In Iraq they constitute the third-largest group after Arabs and Kurds and in Syria they are one of the smallest minorities. Most of the Turkmen in the Middle East live in Northern Iraq according to the most recent sources, although many will now have fled areas held by ISIS. There are also Arab Shias in areas controlled by ISIS.

There are other ethnic groups who have significant Shiite elements, such as the Shabak, who speak a language related to Persian. The Shabak are also concentrated in Sinjar in the Nineveh governorate of Iraq.

ISIS attacked Shia Turkmen villages near Kirkuk in 2014 and committed massacres: 60 people from one village – Bashir – for example.<sup>7</sup>

600 Shia inmates of Badoush prison in Nineveh were separated by ISIS fighters from the Sunni inmates and executed in June 2014.<sup>8</sup>

## ISIS strategy

ISIS is a Sunni Islamic organisation that promotes violent *jihad*. It interprets elements of the Koran and the *Sunnah*, the verbally-transmitted tradition of the teachings and practices of the Prophet

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<sup>5</sup> ['Who are the Yazidis and why is Isis hunting them?'](#), *Guardian*, 11 August 2014

<sup>6</sup> ['Syria war: IS group killed 21 Christians in al-Qaryatayn, says patriarch'](#), *BBC News Online*, 10 April 2016

<sup>7</sup> [Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the human rights situation in Iraq in the light of abuses committed by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and associated groups](#) (advance unedited version), A/HRC/28/18, 13 March 2015

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

Mohammed, to argue that fighting against the heresy of Shiism and against 'devil-worshippers' such as the Yazidis is a religious duty.

*Takfir*, or declaring people who claim to be Muslim not to be such but to be *kafir*, or unbeliever, is therefore fundamental to the ISIS strategy. Violent Sunni *jihadis* are often called '*takfiris*' by other Muslims that disagree with them. *Takfir* has not been invoked often historically, and the Koran otherwise prohibits Muslims from killing each other.<sup>9</sup> Declaring Shiites to be unbelievers and therefore worthy of death is at the root of ISIS massacres of Shiites.

ISIS has also argued in its online magazine Dabiq that the enslavement of the women and children of non-Muslims as spoils of war is also set out in Sharia law,<sup>10</sup> and that it had fallen out of use because of modern deviation from Sharia.

The Sunni/Shia rift has been a potent booster of the fortunes of Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Increasing sectarian tension is therefore at the heart of their strategy, because it makes establishing order in countries where Sunnis, Shiites and other religions live together more difficult, and Sunni *takfiri* terrorism has thrived in the ensuing chaos. But ISIS has pursued the sectarian strategy far more strongly than Al-Qaeda, which tended to avoid excessive Muslim deaths.

ISIS has its roots in Iraq, where the Sunni/Shia schism has melded with the Arab/Persian schism. The legacy of the Saddam regime, the Iran-Iraq war and Saddam's removal has made that country the epicentre of the Sunni/Shia earthquake.

### Shia militias in Iraq

Sunni Muslims are also being attacked in Iraq, where they are in a minority. Shia militias, who have been central to the government's attempts to retake territory from ISIS, have been accused of various atrocities against Sunnis in the areas they have recaptured. According to the US State Department, they have been subjected to abductions, execution, torture, and threats, and the destruction of homes and businesses.<sup>11</sup>

## 1.2 Iran

Iran has a very bad human rights record and is listed as a human rights priority country in the FCO's 2015 [Human Rights and Democracy Report](#).

Shia Muslims who do not follow the state's approved teachings are persecuted; executions have taken place of supposed 'spreaders of corruption on earth' or 'enmity against God'. Other religious minorities – Christians, Baha'is, Sufi and Sunni Muslims and Yarsanis – have been

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<sup>9</sup> [Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State](#), International Crisis Group Special Report, 14 March 2016, p26

<sup>10</sup> '[Islamic State seeks to justify enslaving Yazidi women and girls in Iraq](#)', *Reuters*, 13 October 2014

<sup>11</sup> [International Religious Freedom Report for 2014](#), US State Department

subject to persecution, arrest and detention, discrimination and harassment by the authorities.

While the Iranian constitution recognises Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians as recognised religious minorities and allocates them seats in the Iranian Parliament, the persecution of religious minorities has worsened in recent years, even of followers of these recognised religions. Although there have been fewer discriminatory pronouncements from official sources under the new government of Hassan Rouhani, elected in 2013, the promise to improve the protection of human rights has not been acted upon, partly because Iranian conservatives retain powerful positions in the judiciary.

The authorities continued in 2015 to destroy religious sites of Baha'is, Sufis and Sunnis, according to Amnesty International.<sup>12</sup> As in other countries, religious persecution is intertwined with ethnic identity and politics. Iranian Sunnis tend to not to be Persians. Arabs from the remote Khuzestan region, over the border from Iraq are largely Sunnis. A separatist conflict there claimed six lives in 2015. The Kurds in north western Iran are also majority Sunnis and there is an armed insurgency against the Iranian state. Several Kurds are awaiting death sentences in Iran.

### 1.3 Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is "unique in the extent to which it restricts the public expression of any religion other than Islam," according to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom.<sup>13</sup> The country is listed as a human rights priority country in the FCO's 2015 *Human Rights and Democracy Report*.

Nevertheless, the Saudi Government made some improvements in recent years, withdrawing prejudicial teaching materials, for example. On the other hand, a new law classifying atheism and the promotion of atheism as forms of terrorism was passed in 2014.<sup>14</sup>

Political and religious persecution remain very much intertwined in Saudi Arabia, as in other countries of the Middle East. Some of those awaiting the death sentence in Saudi Arabia are Shia activists whose activities the authorities view as subversive and inspired by the regional rival, Iran. The execution of Shia cleric and political leader Nimr al-Nimr in January 2016 caused a sharp rise in inter-communal tensions in Saudi Arabia, the ransacking of the Saudi Embassy in Iran and the rupture of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. One observer described the escalation of tensions as the "cynical manipulation of identity politics by regimes seeking to advance their domestic and foreign policy interests":

The idea of an unending, primordial conflict between Sunnis and Shiites explains little about the ebbs and flows of regional politics.

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<sup>12</sup> [Amnesty International Report 2015/16 - Iran](#)

<sup>13</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom *Annual Report 2015*, p57

<sup>14</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom *Annual Report 2015*, p57



This is not a resurgence of a 1,400-year-old conflict. Sectarianism today is intense, but that is because of politics. The continuing reverberations of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, the Syrian civil war and the Iranian nuclear deal have far more to do with the current spike in sectarianism than some timeless essence of religious difference.<sup>15</sup>

### 1.4 Bahrain

The situation in Bahrain is comparable to that in Saudi Arabia, except that Shia Muslims are probably in a majority in Bahrain. So in this case the alleged persecution is of a religious majority, not a minority. The ruling family in Bahrain is Sunni Muslim and alleged persecution of Shias is very much a political matter, since the authorities worry that their control of the country is threatened by the Shia political movement. Nevertheless, the authorities arrested individuals for denigrating religious figures and five individuals were arrested in 2014 for attempting to pray at the site of a mosque that had been demolished in 2011 during the political unrest.

Shia Muslims are widely regarded as suffering from general discrimination in Bahrain, with access to jobs and higher education far more difficult than for Sunnis, while Shias are also strongly under-represented in the political system.<sup>16</sup>

### 1.5 Egypt

The government of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has made pronouncements in favour of religious tolerance, presenting that in opposition to the previous Islamist government He was the first Egyptian head of state to attend a Coptic Christian mass on Christmas Eve.

Nevertheless, Egypt remains a point of concern for religious persecution. Repressive laws remain in place in Egypt and Coptic Christians, particularly, remain subject to discrimination and harassment and their property is at risk. The government has cracked down aggressively on supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, but Coptic Christians have often been the target for extremist Muslims in the country, with 52 churches being destroyed in the violence that erupted in 2013 and scores of Copts killed in sectarian killings.<sup>17</sup>

Egyptian courts prosecute and convict Egyptians for blasphemy. There has also been a new government campaign against atheism, with a special police unit being set up to deal with the supposed problem.<sup>18</sup>

Shia Muslims have also been sentenced for blasphemy for attempting to pursue their religion. Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses are also banned in Egypt.

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<sup>15</sup> Marc Lynch, '[Why Saudi Arabia escalated the Middle East's sectarian conflict](#)', *Washington Post*, 4 January 2016

<sup>16</sup> US Department of State International Religious Freedom report 2014, [Bahrain](#)

<sup>17</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom [Annual Report 2015](#), p90

<sup>18</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom [Annual Report 2015](#)



## 1.6 Libya

Although its interim constitution bans discrimination on religious grounds and sets out the freedom for non-Muslims to practice their religion, the Libya has been the scene of abuses of religious minorities and of violence against those who do not adhere to particular visions of religious practice. In February 2014, seven Egyptian Coptic Christians were executed on a beach near Benghazi. Several Sufi Islamic religious sites have been destroyed by Islamic fundamentalists. In much of the country there is no effective government to enforce constitutional provisions on the freedom of religion.

## 2. Effects on the UK

### 2.1 Extremism

There is concern that the climate of persecution and religious intolerance in the Middle East could spread to the UK. Religious persecution is associated with radical jihadism and, while concern is focussed on the spread of violence against Western targets, any such trend might well include inter-religious violence in the UK, whether against Christian targets or against other religious minorities. The possible spread of Sunni-Shia violence to the UK is a particular concern.

In the context of high numbers of hate crimes being reported in the country, the UK Government seeks to combat the spread of religious intolerance in the UK in a number of ways.

#### Government policy

In May 2015, the newly formed Conservative Government announced the introduction of a forthcoming Extremism Bill which would implement measures put forward at the 2014 Party Conference and in the Conservative election manifesto aimed at addressing non-violent forms of extremism. These included new civil orders to ban extremist groups, restrict the behaviour of extremist individuals, and to close down premises used for extremist purposes. The Bill would also provide Ofcom with powers to censor extremist content, and enable employers to conduct checks on employees for involvement in extremism.

The proposals proved controversial and the Bill did not materialise as expected. In October 2015 a new Counter-Extremism Strategy was published. This made further mention of the measures announced in the 2015 Queen's Speech, but did not reveal when legislation might be expected.

In May 2016 a Counter-Extremism and Safeguarding Bill was announced in the Queen's Speech including a range of similar measures. Two elements of the Bill – a new civil order regime to restrict extremist activity, and powers to intervene where local councils have failed to tackle extremism – will be subject to consultation. The Government will also consider whether there is a need for further

legislative measures following the conclusion of a review into community integration.<sup>19</sup>

## 2.2 Refugees

Religious persecution in the Middle East is one of the drivers of the displacement of refugees, both internally and internationally. The United Nations' refugee agency, the UNHCR, reported in June 2016 that a record number of people were forced out of their homes in 2015 by war and persecution – 65.3 million of them, or one in 113 of the world's population.<sup>20</sup> Of Middle Eastern countries it was from Syria that most refugees came.

The UK government's policy is to grant protection to those who genuinely need it, in accordance with international obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).<sup>21</sup> A well-founded fear of persecution on account of religion is one of the grounds on which asylum can be granted as per the Refugee Convention.

The Home Office does not, however, maintain statistics on the basis of claims for asylum,<sup>22</sup> so it is not possible to say how many of those seeking or granted asylum in the UK are fleeing religious persecution in the Middle East.<sup>23</sup>

In the year to March 2016 the largest number of applications for UK asylum came from nationals of Iran (4,305), followed by Eritrea (3,321), Iraq (2,805), Sudan (2,769), Pakistan (2,669) and Syria (2,539).<sup>24</sup>

Information for officers on the recognition of religious persecution in asylum applications is provided in Home office guidance.<sup>25</sup>

### Syria scheme

Although the eligibility criteria for the UK's [Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme](#) (which is separate to the asylum process) does not specifically cater for particular religious groups (for example Yazidis), they may be eligible for resettlement under the scheme if they meet other criteria set out by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees: women and girls at risk; survivors of violence and/or torture; refugees with legal and/or physical protection needs; refugees with medical needs or disabilities; children and adolescents at risk; persons at risk due to their sexual orientation or gender identity; and refugees with family links in resettlement countries.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For more information see the Library Briefing Paper [Counter-extremism policy: an overview](#), May 2016

<sup>20</sup> 'Global forced displacement hits record high', UNHCR press release, 20 June 2016

<sup>21</sup> [HC Written question – 40387, 13 June 2016](#)

<sup>22</sup> [Written question - HL5795, 17 March 2015](#)

<sup>23</sup> For more information on, see the Library Briefing Papers [Asylum seekers: Social Indicators page](#), and [Sources of statistics: migration](#)

<sup>24</sup> Home Office: immigration Statistics January to March 2016: [Summary](#)

<sup>25</sup> Asylum Policy Instruction, [Assessing credibility and refugee status](#), 6 January 2015

<sup>26</sup> [HC Written question – 15220](#), 6 November 2015

## All-Party group report

In June 2016, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief published a report on the UK asylum system for those fleeing religious persecution.<sup>27</sup> The report recommended strengthening the system by keeping statistics on different grounds for asylum applications, giving better training to assessors, improving supervision of religious persecution asylum cases, improving the information provided to assessors on global developments and speeding up the system.

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<sup>27</sup> [\*Fleeing Persecution: Asylum Claims in the UK on Religious Freedom Grounds\*](#), Report of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, June 2016

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