



Policy Forum Report  
**Religious Minorities in Middle East Countries**  
*January 19, 2012*

**Background**

On January 19, 2012, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) and American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) convened a Policy Forum for key young leaders from the Washington policymaking community and selected representatives of the American Muslim community to discuss the role of religious minorities in Middle Eastern countries in transition, specifically in Iraq, Egypt, and Syria. The following is a summary of the insights that emerged from the discussion.

**Current Situation and Overall Recommendations**

Religious minorities in the Muslim world have typically been at greatest risk in times of political or social upheaval. With the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, the regime change in Egypt, and the uprisings in Syria, religious minorities such as Christians, Shias, Alawites, Druze, and Bahai's have often felt increasingly endangered, in some cases losing their lives or being forced to flee the country.

The discussions identified key issues that should be considered when addressing challenges faced by religious minorities, such as the potential impact of linking aid to a country's treatment of religious minorities, the need to develop societal understanding of and appreciation for citizenship versus merely putting in protective measures for minorities, and the essential role of education.

**Iraq**

In Iraq, violence against religious minorities as well as sectarian violence among Muslim groups has increased following the fall of Saddam Hussain's regime, and many minorities have been killed or displaced. Consequently, the Christian community in Iraq has been reduced by half, only a few thousand of the Mandaeans (an ancient people who have lived in Iraq for thousands of years and who recognize John the Baptist as their last great teacher) remain, and the Yazidi (a mostly Kurdish-speaking people with ancient Indo-Iranian roots who practice a combination of local Kurdish beliefs and Islamic Sufi doctrine introduced to the area by Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir in the 12th century) have either become isolated in the North or have left altogether. Disputes between Kurdish authorities and the Iraq government in certain areas have also negatively impacted minority populations. Although the continuing sectarian conflict between Shias and Sunnis is more politically than religiously driven, when political conflict occurs among people identified with different religious groups, differences are exacerbated and others belonging to those religious groups become targets.

While extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda have targeted religious minorities, the reluctance of political leaders to share or relinquish power has also threatened minority rights. Focusing too much on "protection" of minorities can also be problematic, since it can de-emphasize their status as citizens entitled to equal rights. Thus, in addition to enforcing the constitutional and political rights of minority citizens, ensuring their status as full citizens is equally critical.

The potential applicability of the Lebanese "confessional" model—where the highest political offices are proportionately reserved for representatives from different religious communities—to Iraq was discussed. However, some participants questioned the effectiveness of this model in Lebanon, especially with its changing demographics, and favored an Iraqi move toward federalism, with a weaker central government that would have less ability to impose religious preferences.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has designated Iraq as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998. In FY 2010, Congress requested that certain aid money to Iraq be designated to help minorities. However, this creates the risk that America will be seen to be favoring minorities and that minorities, in turn, may be further endangered by their perceived affiliation with the United States (as has been the case with Iraqi Christians). Because security concerns have often precluded greater transparency about where USAID funds have been allocated in Iraq, many have assumed that much of this aid went to minorities. By the same token, numerous other commentators have accused the United States of not doing enough to help minorities.

## **Egypt**

Minorities in Egypt such as the Coptic Christians have suffered discrimination and sometimes violence both during the reign of Mubarak and after the revolution. In 2011, USCIRF placed Egypt on its CPC list of severe violators of religious freedom for the first time. There have been any number of examples where the legal guarantees of minority rights have not been enforced. Indeed, some observers have accused the current military regime of instigating violence or intolerance toward religious minorities to sow division and instability as a way of retaining power. The Salafi Al-Nour party is also seen to be taking a more hard-line stance toward religious minorities. Deputy US Secretary of State Bill Burns met with Mohamed Morsi, the head of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), in early January to reinforce the US expectation that all the major parties will support human rights and uphold Egypt's existing international obligations.

Egyptian Muslims and Christians worked together and protected one another during the revolution, and many continue to do so. Thousands of Muslim Egyptians lit candles for Christians in Tahrir Square on New Year's Eve following attacks against Christian communities. However, some Muslim Egyptians have also attacked Christians and their property without instigation by political leaders. Thus, beyond mere constitutional protections, there is a widespread need to promote peaceful coexistence between diverse constituencies and to provide widespread education on interfaith engagement and in conflict resolution skills. Participants' suggestions included an emphasis on universal (not merely Western-centric) human rights and corresponding Islamic precepts relating to religious tolerance and coexistence. One participant related a story that when the Prophet Mohammad was asked who would go to Heaven—Muslims, Christians, or Jews—he is said to have replied, “Don't talk of things you don't know (i.e. only God knows who will be in Heaven). But (rather) compete in good works.” It was recommended that Islamic and public education be built around such concepts.

Islamic leaders and scholars in countries like Egypt have a critical role to play in promoting religious freedom and interfaith reconciliation and collaboration. Al-Azhar University—Egypt's most prestigious Islamic university—recently created, with the blessing of the Coptic community, a “bill of rights or freedoms” outlining basic rights such as freedom of belief and expression to which “People of the Book” (e.g. Jews, Christians, Sabians) are entitled. While this is a positive development, it is important that such rights also be extended to those not considered “People of the Book”, such as Baha'is, who in Egypt are denied ID cards and other rights. The importance of protecting the rights of the atheist minority, and of addressing the impact of defamation laws, blasphemy laws, and apostasy laws on religious minorities (including Muslim minorities) in various countries, was also discussed.

The issue of whether US aid to Egypt should be conditioned upon its treatment of minorities or possibly designated in part to protect religious minorities and their houses of worship (including historic synagogues) was also discussed. One challenge to doing so is that of accountability, i.e. how to ensure that such funds would be used for the projects for which they are intended and not used for other purposes by the government. Previous conditioning of \$130 million in US aid on the release of political prisoner Saad Ibrahim—who was indeed released—and on improvement in the Egyptian government's attitude

toward human rights was mentioned by one participant as the only case in which the United States has imposed such conditions on its aid to Egypt. With Egypt now in the process of drafting its new constitution and approximately \$1.3 billion in US military aid and \$250 million in economic aid to Egypt at stake, some participants advocated that some of this aid be designated for programs of economic support for minority areas and/or protection of houses of worship. (The more recent decision to try US NGO employees in Egyptian courts for their role in promoting democracy outside the purview of the Egyptian government has become the current overriding consideration in any conditionality imposed on U.S. aid.)

### **Syria**

Given the Assad regime's affiliation with the Alawite branch of Islam and its long oppression of the Syrian Sunni majority, Alawites in Syria risk reprisals from Sunnis if the Assad government falls. Many Syrian Christians—observing the fate of Iraqi Christians after the fall of Saddam Hussain—also fear how they will be treated in a post-Assad Syria. While some Syrian Christians have supported Assad for this reason, this support has also declined in the past 5-6 months. As one Syrian Christian expressed, “Minorities will be better off in a society that adheres to the rule of law than they will under a dictator who claims to be protecting them.” The issue of what will happen to the Syrian Kurdish minority—especially considering their ties with Iraqi and Turkish Kurds—in a post-Assad Syria was also discussed.

\*The International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) is a Washington-based NGO which addresses identity-based conflicts that escape the grasp of traditional diplomacy by incorporating religion as part of the solution. American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) is an informal group of Muslim community leaders and scholars that seeks to foster a constructive partnership between the American Muslim community and the US Government in advancing the national interest. The views expressed in this brief may not necessarily represent the views of ICRD or AMCE.