

**Forum:** Human Rights Committee

**Issue:** Measures to protect religious diversity in the Middle East

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## Introduction

Religious diversity is essential to human culture. Cultural diversity has provided mankind with opportunities to create a global community, while encouraging the acceptance of the opinions and beliefs of others. Conflicts in the Middle East are occurring because of organizations like ISIL, the Islamic State of the Iraq and Levant. They promote and create a growing sense of religious intolerance around the world. The United Nations wants to show people the great advantage of having different religions in society, so that people can be more open-minded to other cultures and religions.

Groups known to create and breed terrorist organisations such as ISIL and the Taliban develop the opinion that Islam is a violent religion. These terrorist groups are often associated religion with warfare, suicide bombings, and public beheadings. Oversimplification of these actions leads some communities to believe that the Middle East is solely made up of terrorists. This is a common misunderstanding needs to be put to rest. Misunderstanding about the Islamic religion leads to tension between communities and nations. The global community must work together to develop a more thoughtful approach to diverse religious beliefs.

The Middle East has perhaps one the longest recorded history of multi-regional, multi-religious and multi-ethnic people living together in one area. For the majority of the recorded history all of these different groups have co-existed with each other. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Hussein, said "while it [is] easy to portray the Middle East as exceptionally fragmented, its history was marked by long-standing acceptance of multiple identities" (Zeid Ra'ad Hussein). ISIL has destabilized the region with a rudimentary system of government and a sophisticated system of killing of ideological opponents. The thousand-year-old fabric of Middle Eastern diversity has been torn apart in mere decades.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that individuals have the right to their religion and the right to change their religion, and the right to practice their religion, whether alone or in a community. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that all religions should be protected by the the rights and justices set in the Declaration of Human Rights. Freedom of religion

causes problems for many nations, groups and for the members of the United Nations. This is one of the challenges facing this committee.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Minority group

Minority group refers to a group of the population that is differentiated from the social majority. They are most commonly viewed as ethnic or religious minorities. It can be a culturally, ethnically, or racially distinct group that coexists with but is subordinate to a more dominant group. Because the term refers to the subordinancy of a social standard or social distinction, it does not have to correlate directly with a population.

### Shia and Sunni

The Sunni and Shia conflict is at the center of the global Islamic conflict. The Shia and Sunni divide is the longest in Islamic history, and one of the longest in all religion. The two groups have co-existed for centuries, believe in the same god, and practice the same rituals and traditions. The Sunni-Shia conflict is a continuous trouble area for distrust and instability in the Middle East. The two groups differ in laws, theology and organization, and this has caused friction between the two branches. There are roughly 1.5 billion Muslims, around 85% - 90% are believed to be Sunni, the other 10%-15% are Shiite (150 million- 200 million). In the Middle East, Sunnis make up 90% or more of the populations of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Shia Muslims are in the majority in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan and, according to some estimates, Yemen. Historically speaking the Sunni have been in power and are considered wealthy, while the Shia have made up the civilian population (in the Middle East), however ever since the 1970's, the influence of the Shia has been increasingly influential and has received the supported by military groups and revolutionaries, as well as dictatorships.

### Yazidism/Kurd

Yazidism or Yazidi is a Shia influenced sector of the Islamic religion. Yazidi population is also influenced by pre-Islamic Assyrian traditions, Sufi and Shiite Islam, Nestorian Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. It is important to that the Yazidis are primarily are the Kurds. The Kurds have been an overlooked minority in the Middle East. They have no official homeland and no country wants them to give them political power within their borders. Governments and terrorist organization alike violently persecute the Kurdish population. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein is thought to have used Sarin gas as a means of punishing the Kurds. Turkey has relegated the Kurds to second class citizen. Since August 16 2016 Turkish troops have imposed at least 58 curfews in Kurdish regions of Turkey, disrupting the

lives of at least 1.4 million people living in the affected provinces, according to Human Rights Foundation of Turkey. In Syria, the present Civil War is largely a result of the Kurdish people in Syria trying to gain rights and political power in a country where the Kurds represent 15% of the population.

### **The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant**

ISIL stands for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and is also known as ISIL, The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. ISIL is a religious driven terrorist group, and is one of the largest and most successful terrorist groups in the 21st century. ISIL is an extremist militant group that practices its version Wahhabi/Salafi law. Presently, ISIL occupies large parts of Syria and Iraq, causing civil war and conflict between governments and armed rebels. ISIL operations have remained in tact because they have controlled and exploited many different oil fields in the Iraq and Syria. They have also captured a number of strategic centers in the region, particularly Ramadi and Aleppo and Mosul. ISIL also threatened Baghdad. ISIL have successfully taken advantage of the chaos in the region, including occupying significant parts of Iraq and Syria.

### **Terrorism**

There is no universal definition for terrorism, because of the vast complexities that lay within the issue. Generally terrorism is “the use of violence and intimidation in the pursuit of goals.” These aims are not limited to politics, as they could include economic, religious, or other social goals. The United Nations recognizes that terrorism “attacks the values that lie at the heart of the Charter of the United Nations: respect for human rights; the rule of law; rules of war that protect civilians; tolerance among peoples and nations; and the peaceful resolution of conflict”. Terrorism is a threat to religious freedom and diversity around the world.

### **Fundamental Human Rights**

All human beings are entitled to fundamental human rights. The United Nations is based on preserving individual human rights. The United Nations believes that all individuals deserve to be treated with dignity. Among the fundamental human rights are freedom of conscience, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. Freedom of religious conviction is a combination of all of these freedoms. The United Nations is committed to supporting fundamental human rights including the fundamental right to religious freedom.

## Background Information

### Religion in the Middle East

In the 2015 annual report of the United States Commission on Religious Freedom there are 17 “Countries of Particular Concern” (CPCs) identified, where religious persecution is especially severe. In the 2014 report the number of CPCs was only nine: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The Commission still regards those countries as CPCs, but has now added eight more: Central African Republic, Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria, Tajikistan, and Vietnam.

The Middle East is home to many different religions and ethnic groups. Within each of these religions there are also many different ‘sects’ or divisions. Much of the fighting between involving religion is not cross religion but within these religions. The three most prominent religious groups in the Middle East are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. There are also plenty of smaller sects of these religion’s like; Bahá’í Faith, Druze, **Yazidism**, Mandaism, Gnosticism, Yarsanism, Samaritanism, Shabakism, Ishikism. Often the smaller religious groups are persecuted and have to take up arms to defend themselves against oppression. The Yazidis’ are struggling to maintain their unity as they are not welcomed in either Turkey or Syria. In Egypt, the Copts, a Christian minority experienced oppression at the hands of the Sunni majority after the Arab Spring in 2013.

### *Diversity*

There are over 350 million people living in the Middle East. The Middle East includes the following countries; Syria, Turkey, Lebanon Jordan, Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iran, Iraq. There is a great deal of religious diversity in the Middle East. This diversity leads to religious conflict. Some countries like Afghanistan populations are made up of a single religion, 99% Islam. However despite being 99% Islam, it is an 80% Sunni and 20% Shiite this is where the main problem lays. There are also countries in the Middle East that are multi religious, like Lebanon which is 60% Islamic and 39% Christian (plus a small 1% of minor religions). Religious identity plays an important part of regional politics. There are many religious conflicts facing this region.

### Perception of ISIL and Threat to Islam around the world

A recent Pew Research center survey of residents in predominantly Islamic countries from Afghanistan to Nigeria, from Iraq to Indonesia have shown an overwhelmingly negative reaction towards ISIL. ISIL and other groups use that violence to restrict religious freedom are not effective representatives of global Islam. Many citizens of these Islamic countries, do not believe

that ISIL and other terrorist group represent them and the goals of their religion. They hope that the global community can intervene and reinstall peace in the region.

## Key Issues

### Religious Diversity

Because of the vast Religious diversity in the Middle East there is often controversies created between religious sects and with governmental organizations. This is huge conflict in the region because this leads to minority populations being persecuted because of their religious beliefs. The member nations of the UNHRC must come to some understanding about how to protect the rights of religious minorities.

#### *Kurdish Minority*

The Kurdish minority has been a troubled minority in the region for many years due to the fact that they have no land to call their own. Turkish, Syrian Iraqi and Russian governments all struggle to find a place for the Kurdish minority in their midst. The Kurds are often viewed as a displaced people. The Kurdish population is small yet they spread a vast amount of mountainous land that sprawls between the northern borders of Syria, Iraq, and Iran, and the southern border of Turkey. Because of their undetermined location in these countries along with the fact that they align with the Yazidi religion has made them an easy target for abusive neighbors. They are not helpless to fight back. There are many Kurdish nationalistic organizations that are fighting for the Kurdish people. The **PKK** (Kurdistan Workers Party), and the **Peshmerga**, are the most common and mostly popular Kurdish Nationalistic Organization. A number of western nations support the PKK and the Peshmerga.

#### *Assumptions about Religious Groups*

One of the major problems in the fight to protect religion in the Middle East is that there are a lot of religious assumptions about the religious identities.. These stereotypical assumptions lead to great misunderstandings about different religions. It is very important for countries to develop non-violent avenues for conflict prevention, such as education and conflict resolution. Education can decrease the risk of radicalization. International education both minimizes religious stereotyping and discourages radical recruitment. Education is the key to ending the growth of global terrorism. Member nations must address the failing education systems that breed terrorism. Furthermore improved education would lead to a better understanding of the true nature of Islam. Education can play in a major role countering terrorist narratives.

## The Call of Religion

Men and women flock to religion as a salve from economic and social issues and hardships. However terrorist groups use the problems as bait to attract more young people to join their radical cause. The Internet has become a new tool to which people are recruited to become Jihadist. It is crucial that terrorism and religion are not identified as one. They need to be separate entities. The terrorist cells have ruthlessly hijacked a two-thousand-year old religion and turned it into a justification to fight and kill innocent people. According to the United Nations to start conflict in the name of religion is not justified. This problem is hard to avoid since in the Middle East because the established governments and the religious institutions are deeply connected. People feel like religion is a way of life. However the moment religion is justified as a means for conflict it is not a way of life, it is a crime.

## Islam and governments

The role of Islam and national governments is a key issue for the United Nations. There are many different government systems in countries that have large Islamic populations. Saudi Arabia is geographically close to the conflict, but as a nation has not been drawn into the conflict. The United Nations encourages Saudi Arabia to actively try to remain out of conflict. This will not only benefit the Kingdom of Saudi, but also help peace in the Middle East. However, the fact that the Saudi Arabian government still practices capital punishment in the name of the Quran increases the public assumption that terror and Islam are closely related. These brutal tactics of Saudi justice feed a misconstrued perception of Middle Eastern society.

## Major Parties Involved and Their Views

### France

France is struggling with the fight against terrorism. It is experiencing an overflow of refugees seeking asylum in the country. France is trying to accommodate refugees. There is no acceptable way of vetting asylum seekers in a manner that respects religion and guarantees the security of the French people. France is a very diverse country that is home to approximately 5 million Muslims. This population is both French and Muslim. This diversity presents a challenge for France. France must find a way to secure its population from terrorist attacks while guaranteeing the freedoms that French people have enjoyed for many years.

### *Paris Action Plan*

After all of the recent terrorist attack in Europe, France has thrown its full force behind the Paris Action Plan. The Paris Action Plan was drafted up on September 8th, 2015 at the International Conference on the Victims of Ethnic and Religious Violence in the Middle East. It is posed to outline the individual's part in communities who are in danger because of ISIL, and offer them a network of support to insure that the culture and religion is protected. It follows a 3 part plan; "PART 1 : Supporting affected populations and facilitating durable solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons, including voluntary return and reintegration. PART 2 : Fighting impunity and ensuring justice PART 3 : Preserving the diversity and plurality of the Middle East".

### *African Strategy*

France plans to raise state capacity to combat terrorism, trafficking and radicalization, as well as facilitating regional cooperation. This will represent \$500 million of bilateral aid annually. France wants to focus on regional and sub regional efforts, as well as continuing the UNODC projects. If there are proper infrastructures and aid in place for countries then threat containment can work fast and more efficiently.

## **United States of America**

### *Military Action*

The United States has taken a large role in funding and fighting ISIL. Trying to rebuild stability in the region. 62% of the nations across the world say they support U.S. Military actions in Iraq and Syria, 24% are opposed. The nation that opposes US military intervention the most is Russia; 67% of Russians believe that US involvement with Syria is unjustified.

The United States views that the most successful way to protect those who need to be protected is by eliminating the ones who pose a threat. The United States thinks that one of the most efficient ways to go about taking out the Islamic State of the Iraq and the Levant is eliminating their financial support. The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant/Sham (ISIL) has been increasingly operating like a profit-driven criminal organization, extorting money from local businesses and robbing from local banks and households. ISIL netted \$1 million a day through black market oil sales. .ISIL also benefited from "blood antiquities" in Syria. The United States plans to use the Security Council to break apart these networks and cause fissures in the support system of these terrorist organizations.

## Syria

Syria is currently in a civil war against rebels trying to overthrow the Syrian government. Syria is also struggling with religious turmoil. The Civil War pits Sunni vs. Shiite, meanwhile The Christian population is also in danger in Syria. Christians make up 1% of the Syrian population, however this 1% is endangered. This has led to a large portion of the fighting taking place right in the midst of these populations. This has led to endless persecution of the Christian faith and torture and forced conversion. Syria is a failing state. Most citizens are caught between warring factions. The UNHRC should be a key actor in finding solutions to this problem.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is an Alawite. Assad is a member of a very powerful elite class of the Shi'a sect of Islam. Assad's family has controlled Syria for nearly 40 years. The Assad regime has maintained power by consolidating political and economic power and by persecuting the Sunni Minority. Since the Civil War began nearly 500,000 people have died and another 6.5 million have been displaced. The Syrian Civil War is clearly a Human Rights issue.

## Islamic State of the Levant and Iraq

In 2006 the Islamic State of the Levant and Iraq produced a paper saying that the quality of the people's religion was more important than the quality of their lives. This sums up ISIL policy regarding other religions and minority groups. ISIL believes that individuals should join ISIL willingly. If these people don't convert, ISIL believes it has the moral and legal authority to force conversion. Often individuals are murdered in this process. ISIL is governing in cruel and unjust ways. ISIL completely violates the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. ISIL has also been accused with extorting taxes on the Christian and different minorities, that do not comply immediately. ISIL's policies have radically decreased the population of Christians in Iraq. In 2003 there were 1.5 million Christians in Iraq, by 2015 there were only 200,000 Christians in Iraq. Clearly ISIL has not had a positive impact on religious diversity in the region.

## Russia

Russia is actively engaged in supporting the Syrian government in this conflict. On Oct 20th 2015 Bashar Al Assad and Russian President Vladimir Putin met at the Kremlin. After this meeting the Russian Army began regularly bombing rebel forces in Syria. The Russian have also targeted ISIL. The Russian have launched 5240 missions in Syria on behalf of Assad's government. The presence of the Russian military forces in the region adds another layer of complexity to solving the human rights crisis in the region.



## Timeline of Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

Date	Description of event
10 December 1948	<p><b>Universal Declaration of Human Rights</b></p> <p>A ground-breaking document that laid out the fundamental human rights for all people. It is the most signed and passed document in the history of the United Nations. The only countries that have not signed it are South Sudan, America</p>
1981	<p><b>A/RES/36/55 25 November 1981</b></p> <p>United Nations declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief. A speech/declaration given by the United nations in 1981 reaffirming the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.</p>
24 September 2014	<p><b>Resolution Unanimously Passed (7272nd Meeting)</b></p> <p>Security Council unanimously adopts resolution condemning violent extremism, underscoring need to prevent travel, support for foreign terrorist fighters</p>
19 December 2014	<p><b>Resolution 2195 (2014)</b></p> <p>Security Council, Adopting Resolution 2195 (2014), urges international action to break links between terrorists, transnational organized crime.</p>
September 9, 2015	<p><b>The Paris Action Plan</b></p> <p>A plan presented at an international conference to address the dramatic issue of people parts of communities that are targeted or threatened for religious reasons. It is looking to benefit all victims of conflict and violence; there is a pressing necessity to protect and preserve those communities and cultures whose very existence is threatened in Iraq and Syria.</p>

## Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- Protecting Human rights and fundamental freedoms whilst countering terrorism, 16 December 2006 ([RA/RES/60/158](#))
- Plan of Action to prevent Violent extremism, 24 December 2015 ([A/70/674](#))
- The International Bill of Human Rights, 8 December 1948 ([A/RES/217\(III\)](#))
- The Paris Action Plan, 9th August 2015
- The Treaty Protection of Religious Rights: U.N. Draft Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, 1972-1981 ([1-1-1972](#))

## Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The Kurdish population has been constantly abused by many Middle Eastern nations. The United Nations efforts to provide them with care have only been successful when using aid and supply drops. The Kurdish population is small yet they occupy a vast amount of mountainous land that sprawls between the northern borders of Syria, Iraq, and Iran, and the southern border of Turkey. Because of their undetermined location in these countries along with the fact that they align with the Yazidi religion has made them an easy target for abusive neighbors. They have been targeted by the governments of all 4 countries, as well as terrorist groups within each country. At the moment they are being relentlessly and unjustly persecuted and attacked by the Turkish people, and the Islamic State of the Levant and Iraq.

Other attempts to slow the growth of ISIL has not been successful. Diplomatic attempts are not considered a viable approach to dealing with ISIL. A military solution has not been successful. The global community has been reluctant to intervene in what has been perceived as a domestic political situation. There are nearly 13 million Syrians have been displaced from their homes. This is a human rights crisis of global proportion.

## Possible Solutions

There are many possible solutions for this issue. Education is a direct route to rectify the core of the problem. Education can curb the biased judgments that cast upon the Islamic community and can deter young Islamic people from joining radical organizations. Education is key because, as the United

Nations, it is the job of the organization to identify the difference between what the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant represent and its views and what the Islamic religion represents. It is important to realize that this Jihadist radicalism is not what Islam is trying to preach. Western nations must come together to build a stable region where Islamic people can practice their religion.

Possible solutions could also be creating a state for the Kurdish population. This way this small population could have a land where they could rule, govern, and establish sanctuary for their people. This Kurdish Refugee state could also work as a refugee center for people fleeing the Syrian Civil War as well as those escaping the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. However, this is rather risky considering the rapid and dangerous rate at which the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant is growing and showing more aggressive behaviors.

More efforts that mirror the Paris Plan would be very beneficial towards the international community. By creating plans that unite the global front on countering terrorism the world could solve issues in way that all member nations could agree upon. A multilateral pronged attack with backing from all nations could end ISIL in a swift blow. This accomplishment would resonate all around the world, and unite the efforts on the war on terrorism.

The Syrian Civil War must be concluded. A stable and secure Syrian government that respects human rights must be established. Syrian exiles must be returned to their homes. The rights of religious and political minorities must be respected.

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