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Atheists in Muslim world: Silent, resentful and growing in number



Statistics on atheism in the Middle East and North Africa are hazy, but analysts say they represent an increasing trend based on recent developments. (Associated Press/File) more >

By Gilgamesh Nabeel - Special to The Washington Times - - Tuesday, August 1, 2017

BABYLON, Iraq — Lara Ahmed wears a headscarf and behaves like a pious Muslim.

But the 21-year-old Iraqi woman hides a secret from her peers at the University of Babylon: her atheism.

"I was not convinced by the creation story in the Quran," she said.
"Besides, I feel religions are unjust, violate our human rights and devalue women's identities."

She doesn't dare share her strong beliefs with strangers.

"I wear a headscarf despite being an atheist," said Ms. Ahmed, who studies biology at the school, about 115 miles south of Baghdad. "It is difficult not to wear it in southern Iraq. Few women take the risk not to cover their hair. They face harassment everywhere."

Her fears stem from the remarks of powerful politicians such as Ammar al-Hakim, the head of Iraq's Islamic Supreme Council, a major Shiite political party and the president of the National Alliance, a Shiite parliamentary bloc.

"Some are resentful of Iraqi society's adherence to its religious constants and its connection to God Almighty," Mr. al-Hakim said on his party's TV channel in May, claiming a rising tide of atheism was threatening the Arab world. "Combat these foreign ideas."

Statistics on atheism in the Middle East and North Africa are hazy, but analysts say Ms. Ahmed represents an increasing trend based on recent developments.

In 2014, an Egyptian government-run Islamic legal institute, citing a dubious international study, said that only 866 atheists lived in the country of more than 90 million. Recently released court statistics saying thousands of Egyptian women sought divorce in 2015 claiming their husbands were atheists — one of the few ways women can initiate divorce under Islam — suggested the numbers might be far higher.

In 2011, the now-defunct Kurdish news agency AKnews published a survey finding that 67 percent of Iraqis believed in God and 21 percent said God probably existed, while 7 percent said they did not believe in God and 4 percent said God probably did not exist.

Today, the information revolution fueled by the internet, the freedoms released by the Arab Spring, the growing power of sectarian religious parties and the rise of the harsh orthodoxy of the Islamic State have all fueled growing unbelief in God and traditional religions, said atheists and others.

"For youths, who are the majority of new atheists, the savagery of the Islamic caliphate established by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in 2014 created a reaction that [has] shaken the religion's image," said Ali Abdulkareem Majeed, 22, a nonatheist Iraqi sociology student who conducted a study on atheism for a religious body that he asked not to be identified for his safety.

Social media shutdown

Last year, Facebook shut down more than 50 atheist, Arabic-language pages in after extremist Muslim groups campaigned to remove them, according to a petition sent to Facebook by the Atheist Alliance-Middle East and North Africa, a U.S.-based global atheist federation.

Many of those Facebook pages have been since been relaunched.

In March 2015, U.S.-based Iraqi and other Arab atheists launched the Arabic and English-language Free Mind television and magazine websites, which promote atheistic viewpoints and have recorded more than 1 million visits so far.

That led scholars at Al-Azhar University, a pre-eminent Sunni Muslim center of learning in Cairo, to call on Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi to push Free Mind organizers to repent or face execution by beheading. Mr. el-Sissi responded by suggesting that those who insulted religion should lose their Egyptian citizenship.

Even so, online atheist programming is easily available in Arabic now.

Atheism is not illegal in Egypt or Iraq, but officials often level blasphemy or other charges against atheists in those countries. Those rejecting the faith face the death sentence in Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Yemen, Somalia, Sudan and Mauritania.

Many atheists in the region say their bigger fear is not being punished for their beliefs but that they will become targets of violent sectarian groups seeking political support from the faithful.

"It is a distraction from the fact that Islamists were not able to accomplish anything over the past 13 years," said Faisal al-Mutar, a U.S.-based Iraqi human rights activist who heads Ideas Beyond Borders, a nonprofit that

supports minorities in the Middle East. "So they want to create 'an enemy' to keep [the] constituency united against and avoid being held accountable for their mistakes."

Keeping their beliefs secret is the norm for atheists of all backgrounds throughout the region.

In Jordan, an Amman-based writer at the Free Mind Magazine — whose last name is Farouki but who asked to keep her first name secret — said she is nearly estranged from her family, angered by her rebellion against religion. "They see me as insane," said Farouki, 50. "Jordanians cannot accept atheists, and it is highly possible to be killed if you are one."

Social media has provided atheists with a meeting place and source of information.

"Most of my atheist friends have not changed all of a sudden," said Osama Dakhel, 21, a fine arts student in Baghdad. "Some were so devoted at first exploring the religion's minute details. They start to read for Islamic reformers. Then they start to accept other opinions, discuss atheists online and end up atheists."

Ahmed Abdul-Aziz, 22, a medical student in upper Egypt, also writes openly for the Free Mind Magazine on atheism. "It is easier to announce your ideas in Cairo," he said. "Nobody would look after you, but in small rural towns, everyone watches the other."

Even so, Mr. Abdul-Aziz said, he hides his beliefs from his own family.

"They will feel angry even if I call for some modern Islamic ideas," he said. "I am forced to attend the Friday prayers and fast during Ramadan. I feel uneasy to practice things I do not believe in."

Ms. Ahmed paid a price for unwittingly drawing notice for not praying or fasting during Ramadan at the University of Babylon. "A colleague called me an 'infidel' and insisted on waking me up at dawn to pray," she said. "I faced problems even for not using the name of Allah to swear."

