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State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2011 - Syria

In the decade since President Bashar al-Assad came to power, Syria's minorities have continued to suffer repression. The country's ethnic Kurdish minority (around 10-15 per cent of the population) has been particularly affected.

The 1962 census stripped around 120,000 Kurds of citizenship, amid state allegations that they had entered the country, settled and registered illegally. HRW and other NGOs have called these allegations false. It is estimated that there are around 300,000 stateless Kurds living in Syria today.

Between August and September, the UN Human Rights Council conducted its first ever mission to the country. Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, reported that Kurds continue to be denied Syrian citizenship, and therefore cannot access publicly subsidized food, cannot travel abroad, and cannot access employment and education in the public sector. Many live in the eastern part of the country, and have experienced severe drought and increasing poverty since 2005, his report said. De Schutter called the situation 'unacceptable' and called on the government to grant Kurds nationality so they may access their full economic, social and cultural rights.

In March, a boy was killed and dozens were injured when Syrian police opened fire on a Kurdish New Year celebration, Amnesty International said. Around 5,000 Kurds had gathered to celebrate Nawrouz, the Kurdish New Year. Some had brought banners protesting the imprisonment in Turkey of Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

A majority Sunni Muslim country, Syria is home to religious minorities including Alawites (a sect of Shi'a Islam), Ismailis and Shi'a, who make up around 13 per cent of the population. Christians form around 10 per cent, and around 3 per cent of the population is Druze. There is a small settled community of Yezidis (around 100,000 people), but the state does not recognize them as belonging to a faith that is distinct from Islam, according to the IRFR 2010. There is also a small population of between 100 and 200 Jews, who are treated with suspicion by the state. They must have government permission to travel, and they are subject to extra state scrutiny and are excluded from employment in the civil service and armed forces.

Though the Constitution provides for freedom of religion, the IRFR 2010 notes that the government continues to impose restrictions on this right, and that Jehovah's Witnesses remained banned and suffer discrimination in accessing employment as a result. The report also notes that though there is no formal legislation forbidding proselytizing in Syria, those who are considered to be doing so risk arrest and detention that can last

from five years to life. In May 2010, one American citizen and two Swedish citizens were detained and eventually deported for distributing Bibles in Aleppo.

Under the Constitution, Muslim women in Syria are forbidden to marry Christian men, and Muslim converts to other religions are still regarded by the state as subject to Sharia law. Christian women, who are permitted to marry Muslim men, cannot be buried in Muslim cemeteries unless they convert to Islam. Changes to the law that would have resulted in further discrimination against women were successfully stymied in 2009.

Refugees

Syria is host to a large refugee population including around 500,000 Palestinians, people from Somalia, Sudan, Iran and Afghanistan, and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. In August 2010, there were 5,102 recognized refugees (not including Iraqis), and 1,103 asylum seekers. Iraqis numbered a total of 151,907.

Iraqi refugees have no legal status within the country, and are considered to be 'guests'. Though they can access basic services such as education and health care, the sheer numbers of refugees have strained Syria's infrastructure and economy, and employment is difficult to access. Many face increasing poverty. Child labour and child sex tourism have been identified as growing problems, and economic imperatives are placing Iraqi refugee women at increasing risk of forced prostitution, kidnapping and sex trafficking, the US State Department Trafficking in Persons Report 2010 noted. Many young girls have been forced by their families to work in nightclubs or forced into *muta'a* marriages, in which the girl's family receives a dowry and the 'marriage' ends at a specified time (effectively prostitution). Refugee families have reportedly abandoned children through economic need, leaving them vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation, the State Department said. In August 2010, UNHCR classified around 8,965 Iraqi women refugees as 'women at risk', a category that can include a number of vulnerabilities. UNHCR has also identified several hundred Iraqi women refugees as survivors of sexual or gender-based violence.

The Iraqi refugee community includes religious minorities such as Iraqi Christians, several thousand Sabeen Mandaean and Yezidis, all fleeing targeted persecution in Iraq. In Syria, Mandaean are able to perform religious rituals and ceremonies, including marriage and baptism, that they cannot currently risk in Iraq.

According to UNHCR, around 433 Iraqi Palestinians were living at Al Hol camp in north-east Syria in October 2010. This included a number of people from Al Tanf camp in the desert border between Iraq and Syria, which was closed in February 2010. Iraqi Palestinians were protected under Saddam Hussein's regime but became particularly vulnerable following the US-led invasion in 2003. The UN reported in late 2010 that there is little hope for resettlement in sight for these people, and that they have started living in the camp 'with a sense of permanence'. They have access to basic education, health and recreation services, and women are receiving some vocational training, although this functions as a means of passing time, rather than as a source of income generation.

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