

## Sunnis

Of the 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide between eighty and ninety percent are followers of Sunni Islam. Sunnis comprise the majority in more than forty countries ranging geographically from Morocco to Indonesia.

The differences between Sunni and Shia Islam can be traced back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, when disagreements within the Muslim community (*Ummah*) arose following the death of Prophet Muhammad. Sunnis believe that Mohammad's father-in-law, Abu Bakr, was elected by the community to succeed the Prophet and to lead the Islamic government (*Caliphate*), whereas the Shia maintain that the Prophet himself chose his cousin, Ali ibn Abi Talib, to be his successor.

Sunni Islam subsequently split into four separate schools which draw from different sources to comprise the rules and conduct of Islam: the Maliki, Hanafi, Hanbali, and Shafi'i, each named for the teachings of its founders. Within the four schools there is little consensus on Islamic rules. The more liberal scholars emphasize an interpretation of Islamic rules based on particular situations and, therefore, reject any *Fatwa*, an edict issued by a religious figure. Some of the more fundamentalist movements within Sunni Islam, however, oppose any secular interpretation of Islam and endeavour to maintain what they consider to be traditional Muslim values. Moreover, Sunni Islam placed greater emphasis on the role of the *Sunna* (tradition of the prophet) and *Hadith* (Islamic oral law) than do the Shia.

## Teachings

Sunni Muslims profess to adhere to the six pillars of *Iman*, those components which are necessary to the faithful practice of Islam: belief in one true God, belief in angels, belief in the authority of the holy books, following God's prophets, belief in the resurrection and the day of judgement, and acceptance of the will of God in all things.

In contrast to Shiites, Sunni believers do not accept the concept of *Wilayat*, where an Islamic jurist is given custodial power over people. Instead, Sunnis entrust leadership to imams and base their authority solely on the Quran and traditions of Mohammed (*Sunna*). For this reason, Sunni religious figures exercise far less authority over their followers in comparison to their Shia counterparts.

As a result, Sunnis place more emphasis on the importance of selecting their local leaders and tend to be less hierarchical in their leadership structures than the Shiites, who have historically viewed Mohammad's choice of Ali as the governing principle of the faith community. This difference in attitude toward authority is exhibited in various ways throughout the Muslim world. For example, in some secular countries with a Muslim majority, such as Turkey, the opinion of religious figures are not considered to be binding and are instead regarded as moral guidelines.

## **Controversies**

Sunnis are repressed the most either in Muslim majority countries where they constitute a minority or in countries where a different branch of Islam is the state religion. Sunnis can also face oppression when it is the majority religion of a minority ethnic group. For example, Muslims of the Uyghur ethnic group in China face are stigmatised and persecuted due to their aspiration for more autonomy and independence from the Chinese state.

In countries that are predominantly Shia, Sunni Islam can be regarded as a religious rival and not representative of true Islam. Sunnis can be seen as a security threat to the state and the central power, such as in Iran, where they are frequently targeted for harassment by the authorities and subjected to arbitrary arrests.

An important driving factor for rights violations is the competition for political, economic, and religious leadership in the Middle East. For instance, Saudi Arabia and Iran both exploit the sectarian conflicts in the region in pursuit of their national interests and use religion as an instrument of policy. As a result, Sunni Muslims in Iran are treated even worse than other religious minorities.

### **Azerbaijan**

In Azerbaijan, thirty-five percent of the population is Sunni and sixty-five percent Shia. The Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) is a state-sanctioned institution that oversees the activities of registered Islamic organisations, including the appointment of those who lead Islamic worship. The Board also periodically monitoring sermons and organises pilgrimages to Mecca. Muslim communities must receive an approval letter from the CMB before submitting a registration application to the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations of Azerbaijan Republic (SCWRA). A religious organisation that fails to register with SCWRA may be outlawed and its activities declared illegal. For some years the authorities have targeted for closure many mosques, especially Sunni ones which refuse to join the CMB. In recent years, they have closed down Sunni mosques on various pretexts in Baku and in Gyanja. The Lezgin Mosque in Baku's Old City has repeatedly been threatened with closure. Five men of the congregation – including the imam – have been jailed.

### **Iran**

Ten percent of Iran's total population are Sunni Muslims that live in the far west and eastern regions of the country. Although Sunnis have the right to freely exercise their religion according to Article 12 of the Iranian constitution, they remain the target of much discrimination in the region. Complicating the situation further is the fact that most Sunni Muslims in Iran are also

members of ethnic minorities, such as Kurds, Balouches or Arabs, in addition to being a religious minority.

Despite the supposed freedoms granted to Sunni Muslims in Iran, there is little opportunity for integration into the government, as Sunnis are almost entirely banned from high ranking positions. It took more than thirty-five years after the Islamic revolution in Iran for the first Sunni ambassador to be appointed.

Even now, more than three decades after the Islamic revolution, Sunnis are still banned from constructing mosques in the capital city of Tehran. On the 29<sup>th</sup> July 2015, a Sunni prayer hall in Tehran was destroyed, drawing outrage amongst Sunni leaders in Iran. One such leader, Mowlavi Abdulhamid, wrote to President Rouhani saying that ‘intolerance towards even a single ordinary prayer hall and its destruction in a city that does not allow Sunnis to build a mosque ... not only hurts the sentiments of Iran’s Sunni community but also offends all Muslims of the world.’ The Rouhani government has repeatedly dismissed any question of harsh treatment of Sunnis in Iran. Regarding the prohibition of Sunni mosques in the capital, the government says that this is a preventative measure against extremism and that Sunnis are free to participate in Shia mosques, if they wish.

## **China**

It is estimated that around twenty million Muslims live in China, with the majority of them belonging to the Hui ethnic group. Because they share a similar culture and language with the majority Han ethnic group, the Hui and Han have generally enjoyed good relations with one another. Another predominantly Muslim ethnic group, the Uyghurs, accounts for 6-8 million people of a Turkic descent.

Human rights groups have reported that Chinese authorities have inflicted arrests, arbitrary detention, torture and other grave restrictions to the Uyghurs’ right to religious freedom, all of which are part the government’s ‘counter-terrorism’ and ‘anti-separatism’ campaign against the Uyghurs. Like other religious groups, Uyghur youth are prohibited from attending public religious activities. In Uyghur regions, restaurants are ordered to remain open during Ramadan, and students are prohibited from fasting.

## **Uzbekistan**

In Uzbekistan, where ninety-three percent of the Muslim population are Sunnis of the Hanafi School, just one percent are Shia. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom

released in 2013 a list of ninety-nine Muslims sentenced on the grounds of their religious activities or affiliations<sup>1</sup>:

- One prison term of eighteen years; six prison terms of twelve years; three prison terms of ten years; forty-six prison terms ranging from three years to eight and a half years.
- One was granted amnesty; one died in custody; three were sentenced to a fine; twelve suspended sentences; seven probation sentences; three fines; fifteen unknown sentence; one prison term of fifteen days.

Most of the prisoners were Sunnis who were accused of religious extremism or studying the works of the Turkish theologian Said Nursi, which are banned in the country.

## **Sunnis in Prison**

### **Azerbaijan**

**Azad GAFAROV, Eyvaz MAMMADOV, Habibulla OMAROV, Imam Mubariz and QARAYEV Salim QASIMOV**, who were connected with the Sunni Lezghi Mosque in Baku's Old City, were arrested and put in pre-trial detention in February 2015 for selling religious material without authorisation. They were accused of violating Article 167-2.1 of the Criminal Code which prohibits the production, sale and distribution of religious literature and materials without appropriate authorisation. In July 2015, they were sentenced to prison terms ranging from six to nine months.

**Zohrab SHIKHALIYEV** was arrested on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2014 in Sumgait for allegedly keeping illegal weapons and ammunition in his home. He said they had been planted to incriminate him, as the authorities were looking for a way to shut down the prayer room he operated from his home. On 18<sup>th</sup> February 2015, he was sentenced to six months in prison by Sumgait City Court.

### **Iran**

The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran published<sup>2</sup> a list eighty-eight Sunni Muslims (thirteen Baluchis and seventy-five Kurds) who were in prison in 2014: thirty-one were sentenced to death and remain on death row; eight are serving prison terms

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan (IGIHRDU)

<sup>2</sup> See <http://shaheedoniran.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/A-HRC-25-61-updated.pdf>

ranging between ten and twenty years; twenty-five received prison terms from five to nine years and all others less than five years.

The official charges are typically: Enmity against God (Clauses 183, 186 & 187) – Assembly and collusion against national security (Clause 610) – Undermining national security (Clause 498) - Membership in organisations that aim to disrupt national security (Clause 499) – Espionage (Clause 501) – Involvement in Salafi and terrorist groups.

In June and July 2009, thirty-three Sunnis were arrested for preaching Sunni Islam and sentenced to death. The following were executed on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2015: **Hamed Ahmadi, Jahangir Dehghani, Hadi Hosseini, Kamal Molaee and Pouria Mohammadi.**

The others are still detained and on death row: **Shahram Ahmadi, Alam Barmashti, Jamshid Dehghani, Seyed Shaho Ebrahimi, Varia Ghaderifard, Mohammad Gharibi, Seyed Abdol Farzad Honarjo, Mohammad Keyvan Karimi, Taleb Maleki, Keyvan Momenifard, Sedigh Mohammadi, Seyed Jamal Mousavi, Teymour Naderizadeh, Farshid Naseri, Ahmad Nasiri, Borzan Nasrollahzadeh, Idris Nemati, Omid Peyvand, Bahman Rahimi, Mokhtar Rahimi, Mohammadyavar Rahimi, Abdorahman Sangani, Amjad Salehi, Behrouz Shahnazari, Arash Sharifi, Kaveh Sharifi, Farzad Shahnazari and Kaveh Veysi.**

Others were arrested in the same year and still have not be officially indicted: **Davud ABDULLAHI, Khosro BESHARAT, Kamran SHEIKHA, Mamousta (Sheikh) Farhad SALIMI, Ghasem ABESTE, Ayub KARIMI and Anvar KHEZRI.**

Those who have been indicted for preaching Sunni Islam: **Edrees NEMATI**, arrested in 2011 and sentenced to death; **Malek Mohammad ABADIAN**, arrested the following year and likewise sentenced to death; and **Tohid GHOREISHI-Hafez** and **Naser PIRI**, both arrested in 2014 and sentenced to ten and five years in prison respectively.

## China

Numerous Muslims belonging to the Uyghur ethnic group in China have been arrested and imprisoned for their religious and/or other non-violent protest activities<sup>3</sup>. However, HRWF has been able to document only a limited number of cases related to the exercise of freedom of religion, as detailed information is usually not available.

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<sup>3</sup> Others have been arrested and sentenced to long prison terms or to death for their involvement in separatist non-violent or violent activities, according to the Chinese authorities, but the lack of access to reliable information did not allow Human Rights Without Frontiers to check the veracity of the accusations. It was also difficult to identify cases in which the victims were imprisoned for purely exercising their freedom of religion.

In 2006, **Ablikim ABDUREHIM** was accused of engaging in secessionist activities and in 2007 sentenced to nine years in prison. He is the son of Rebiya Kadeer, a prominent Uyghur activist, whose family has been targeted by the authorities since she was detained as a prisoner of conscience in 1999. This grew worse after she was released on medical leave in 2005 and left China for the USA. On 27 November 2006, the day after Rebiya Kadeer was elected president of the World Uyghur Congress, a court sentenced her two sons who had been arrested in 2006, apparently in retaliation for her human rights activism.

In 2008, **Abdujilil ABDUGHUPUR, Mewlanjan AHMET, Seydehmet AWUT, Erkin EMET, Dolkun ERKIN, Omerjan MEHMET, Mutelip ROZI** and **Kurbanjan SEMET (Alias Kurbanjan Abdusemet)** were arrested for teaching Islam and in 2009 sentenced to ten years in prison for ‘attempting to split the state.’

In 2009, **Armetjan EMET** was sentenced to fifteen years in prison under the same charges.

In 2012, **Sadike KU'ERBAN** was sentenced to a prison term of fifteen years for organising ‘illegal’ religious schools or religious instruction (illegal for not being registered under the state-controlled *Chinese Islamic Patriotic Association*). More specifically, Sadike Ku'erban was accused of ‘extremist religious thought and inciting others to wage a holy war.’ For more than ten years, Sadike Ku'erban had been running a network of home schools for children and teenagers in four different parts of Xinjiang.

## **Uzbekistan**

Charges in Uzbekistan are usually based on the following four articles of the Criminal Code:

Article 159: ‘Attempts to change the constitutional order of Uzbekistan’

Article 216: ‘Illegal establishment or reactivation of illegal public associations or religious organisations, as well as active participation in their activities’

Article 244-1

Part 1: ‘Creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations’

Part 3: (a) ‘Production and dissemination of materials containing a threat to public security and public order’

Article 244-2: Part 1 (‘Creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations’)

*Human Rights Without Frontiers* has documented the cases of more than twenty Sunni Muslims, including over a dozen Said Nursi followers, in its Prisoners' List<sup>4</sup>: **Olmosbek ERKABOYEV, Furkat ABDULLAYEV, Nodyr BARNAYEV, Mehrinisso HAMDAMOVA, Zulhumor HAMDAMOVA, Abdugani KAMOLOV, Zukhriddin KAMOLOV, Rakhmatillo KHAMDAMOV, Shakirzhon KHAMDAMOV, Bobur KHATAMOV, Gayrat KHUSANOV, Rakhmatilla MAKHMUDOV, Zoirjon MIRZAYEV, Ulugbek OTAKUZIYEV, Ravshan RAHMATULLAYEV, Shahlo RAKHMANOVA, Mukhmadin SOTIVOLDIYEV, Avazbek TURAYEV, Rakhmonzhon TURABAYEV, Khayrullo TURSUNOV, Ravshanbek UMARBAYEV and Shuhrat YUNUSOV.**

The Said Nursi followers were usually accused of participation in an extremist organisation and sentenced to six years of detention or more: **Akmal ABDULLAYEV, Nutfullo AMINOV, Mukhtar HOTAMOV, Umidjon JUMAYEV, Ikrom MERAJOV, Kamal ODILOV, Ahmadjon PRIMKULOV, Ahmad RAKHMONOV, Ilkhom RAJABOV, Rashid SHARIPOV, Tukhtakul SHODIYEV, Botir TUKHTAMURODOV, Iskandar UBAYDOV and Anvar ZARIPOV.**

## **Conclusions**

The dominant role that Sunni clerics can play in the consolidation of peace and the respect for human dignity cannot be overestimated in today's world. Media projections of extremist violence have become part of the narrative that Islamic faith – or any sort – has lost legitimacy in the minds of many as a vehicle for promoting these values. This is true not only in the West but also in the Arab world. Clearly, an alternative narrative is sorely needed at this time.

Increasing inter-Muslim tolerance and cooperation are also welcome signs of a more peaceable future for the Islamic world. For instance, Iraq's senior Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Sistani, took a bold step in issuing a 2013 *fatwa* forbidding attacks on Sunni holy places. Clerics can play a much needed role in promoting religious tolerance and respect for ideological differences in their societies.

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Uzbekistan-FBL-2015.pdf>