

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 7th 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 Shias 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 Shias.

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 opinions of religious figures are not considered to be binding and are instead regarded as moral guidelines.

In the transnational Sunni community, there are groups that primarily identify themselves with a different name, such as the Sufis, the Said Nursi followers and the Tablighi Jamaat followers. These groups have been treated separately in this report.

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 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 respective 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.

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 29th 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 to long prison terms on the grounds of their religious activities or affiliations¹.

Most of the Sunni prisoners who were accused of religious extremism or of being followers of banned movements, are still in prison.

Sunnis in Prison

Iran

The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran published² 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

¹ Source: Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan (IGIHRDU)

² 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 4th March 2015: **Hamed Ahmadi, Jahangir Dehghani, Hadi Hosseini, Kamal Molaee and Pouria Mohammadi**. The following were executed on 2nd August 2016: **Shahram Ahmadi, Khaled Maleki, Bahman Rahimi, Mokhtar Rahimi, Kaveh Sharifi, and Kaveh Veysi**.

The names of those that were still in prison as of 31st December 2017 are: **Alam Barmashti, Seyed Shaho Ebrahimi, Varia Ghaderifard, Mohammad Gharibi, Farzad Honarjo, Mohammad Keyvan Karimi** (released on parole on 19th April 2017), **Taleb Maleki, Pouria Mohammadi, Keyvan Momenifard, Seyed Jamal Mousavi, Teymour Naderizadeh, Farshid Naseri, Ahmad Nasiri, Borzan Nasrollahzadeh, Idris Nemati, Omid Peyvand, Mohammadyavar Rahimi, Abdorahman Sangani, Amjad Salehi, Behrouz Shahnazari, Arash Sharifi, and Farzad Shahnazari**.

Other cases

Others have been indicted for preaching Sunni Islam: **Edrees NEMATI**, arrested in 2011 and sentenced to death; **Tohid GHOREISHI-Hafez** and **Naser PIRI**, both arrested in 2014 and sentenced to ten and five years in prison respectively; **Hassan AL-HAIDARI ABO WALID (Naim al-Haidari)**, arrested on 26th August 2017, and sentenced to prison for an unknown period of time.

On 11th August 2017, thirteen Sunnis were arrested in Ahvaz (Khuzestan Province). They were charged with holding a traditional Sunni prayer group in public. The names of those arrested are: **Riyaz ZOHEIRI, Javad HASHEMI, Hossein HIAVI AL-HAEI, Hassan DALFI, Heidar SARI SAVARI, Milad AFRAVI, Yousef KHASARJI, Yaser SILAVI, Sajjad AL-HAI NASIRI, Ali BAVI, Shaker SHARIFI, Abbas SHARIFI and Ahmad HEIDARI**.

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 activities³. 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.

In 2008, **Abdujilil ABDUGHUPUR, Mewlanjan AHMET, Seydehmet AWUT, Erkin EMET, Dolkun ERKIN, Omerjan MEHMET, Mutelip ROZI** and **Kurbanjan SEMET (Alias Qurbanjan 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.

In 2017, **Horigul NASIR** was arrested and sentenced to ten years in prison for allegedly promoting the wearing of headscarves. Her brother claims that she does not even wear a headscarf. The family was not allowed to attend her trial.

In May 2017, **Hebibulla TOHTI** was arrested for carrying out “illegal” activities while in Egypt: teaching religion to Uyghur students in Egypt without permission from the Chinese authorities, attending a major religious conference in Saudi Arabia in 2015 without permission from the Chinese authorities, and emphasizing the distinct achievements of the Uyghur culture in his dissertation paper. However, there has been no official announcement of his conviction or what charges he had faced. In May 2017, he was sentenced to ten years in prison.

Mauritania

Accused of apostasy, the blogger Mohamed CHEIKH OULD MKHEITIR was arrested in January 2014. During his initial trial, on 24th December 2014, he was sentenced to death. An appeals court released him in November 2017 after spending several years in prison.

³ 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.

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 thirty-eight Sunni Muslims, in its *Prisoners’ Database*.

Zuhriddin ABDURAIMJANOV was arrested on 25th May 2016 at the Dustlik Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan customs border point in Andijan Region. He was accused of possessing "illegal" Islamic religious materials on his mobile phone. On 9th December 2016, he was sentenced to a three-year term of imprisonment in a labour camp. He is an ethnic Uzbek, Russian citizen, born in Kyrgyzstan. Relatives have expressed concern over his health, as shortly before his arrest he had undergone a liver operation.

Mansurkhon AKHMEDOV was sentenced to five years imprisonment on 25th May 2016. He was arrested for possessing a music CD that allegedly contained a sermon on the Islamic Caliphate, and charged under Article 244-2 of the Criminal Code.

Davron Yuldashevich FAYZIYEV was arrested on 3rd November 2016 for allegedly meeting with others in homes and teahouses to discuss their faith, talking about the need to establish an Islamic Caliphate in Uzbekistan and planning to overthrow the government and supporting a banned radical Islamic movement. On 26th May 2017, he was sentenced to six years' imprisonment in an ordinary regime labour camp. He appealed against the verdict, and his sentence was upheld on 25th August 2017. He was tried alongside a number of other Sunni Muslims: **Latip Talipovich YUSUPOV**, **Khusnuddin Tokhtamurodovich RIZAYEV**, **Dilshod Khikmatullayevich KAMILOV**, **Abdurashid Abdulkhayevich RASHIDOV**, **Khusnuddin Abdukhakimovich INAGAMOV**, **Afzaljon Azatovich URUNOV**, **Ravshan**

Mukhamadovich MIRZAYEV, Sobirjon Sotvoldiyevich KHASANOV, Bakhadyr Bakhtiyarovich SADYKOV and Ravshan Bakhtiyarovich SADYKOV.

Conclusions

Sunnis with specific characteristics are oppressed in different political contexts but have one common denominator: they are globally perceived, rightly or wrongly, as a threat to the security or the territorial integrity of the countries where they are repressed.

In the Shia theocracy of Iran, most Sunnis belong to minority ethnic groups.

In Communist China, they belong to the Uyghur ethnic community living in the Western part of the country rich in mineral resources (uranium, oil, Coal...) where an armed group of secessionist political activists (East Turkestan Islamist Movement) claims independence and has made common cause with violent jihadist movements.

In the Muslim Sunni majority Republic of Uzbekistan, the authorities claim that a foreign current of Sunni Islam is instrumentalizing Uzbek Sunnis to overthrow a political regime based on the separation between state and religion and replace it by a Salafist Sunni theocracy.

Last but not least, Sunni Islam is associated to ISIS and all the other jihadist and terrorist groups mainly active in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, Europe and North America.

Human Rights Without Frontiers considers that the aforementioned repressive regimes should not lump together groups involved in political or violent activities and the majority of peaceful believers. They should only prosecute those who use or incite violence and threaten the foundation and the nature of the state to which the majority of the population adheres.