

Freedom of Religion or Belief
World Annual Report
Religious & Belief Communities under Oppression

A report about religious or belief minorities under state oppression

with a focus on FoRB prisoners around the world

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Brussels, 1 March 2018
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Foreword

Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is a universal human right guaranteed by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the UN International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

In 2013, the European Union adopted the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief for which *Human Rights Without Frontiers International* was pleased to be involved in the drafting process along with religious communities and other civil society organisations. The Guidelines are an important reference tool for use by EU institutions in third countries to identify FoRB violations and to assist citizens who have faced discrimination on the basis of their religion or beliefs. The Guidelines also set out actions and measures that the EU can take at multilateral-fora, regional and bi-lateral levels with regard to countries which fail to respect FoRB.

Our 2017 Annual Report on Freedom of Religion or Belief ‘**Religious and Belief Communities Under Oppression**’ covers 17 religious or belief communities. As many of them are unknown to the general public and are often mischaracterized by the oppressing powers, HRWF Int’l has presented each of them in the following way:

- General information about the minority
- Teachings of the minority
- Controversies: analysis of the roots of the political repression
- Information about the imprisonment of believers and atheists country by country
- Conclusion

Our **2017 FoRB Prisoners Database** online completes this report. It is available on our website at <http://www.hrwf.eu/forb-intro/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list>. It comprises over 2200 documented individual cases filed country by country and denomination by denomination.

Willy Fautré

Executive Director of *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int’l*

Introduction

Freedom of religion or belief is protected by Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) which reads:

(1): Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom [...] either individually or in community with others and in public or private to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

(2): No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.

(3): Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.”

According to the 1981 UN Declaration of the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, Article 6, the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief includes, inter alia, the following freedoms:

- (a) To worship or assemble in connection with a religion or belief, and to establish and maintain places for these purposes;
- (b) To establish and maintain appropriate charitable or humanitarian institutions;
- (c) To make, acquire and use to an adequate extent the necessary articles and materials related to the rites or customs of a religion or belief;
- (d) To write, issue and disseminate relevant publications in these areas;
- (e) To teach a religion or belief in places suitable for these purposes;
- (f) To solicit and receive voluntary financial and other contributions from individuals and institutions;
- (g) To train, appoint, elect or designate by succession appropriate leaders called for by the requirements and standards of any religion or belief;
- (h) To observe days of rest and to celebrate holidays and ceremonies in accordance with the precepts of one's religion or belief;
- (i) To establish and maintain communications with individuals and communities in matters of religion and belief at the national and international levels.

State repression of legitimate activities of members of religious or belief groups

Quite a number of UN Member States fail to abide by UN standards and some even criminalise individual and collective rights related to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

State repression may include the **death penalty**, various forms of **physical punishment**, **prison terms** and **exorbitant fines**, sometimes of up to 100 times the minimum monthly salary.

The **death penalty** is a violation of the right to life and usually concerns the change of religion in a number of Muslim majority countries.

Physical punishments such as lashing, flogging, and caning are forms of torture and also fall under inhuman and degrading treatments. They are usually implemented in some Muslim majority countries in cases of change of religion, blasphemy or allegedly offensive statements related to FoRB issues.

Imprisonment is another form of state repression that is often used on the basis of laws which criminalise:

- the mere affiliation to or identification with a specific religious or belief group that may be banned or ostracised;
- the public expression of atheism and agnosticism;
- the questioning of official religious teachings;
- the conversion to a minority religion or denomination;
- proselytising by minority religious or belief groups;
- worship and religious meetings by peaceful groups that are not allowed to operate for they are either not state-sanctioned or have been arbitrarily denied state registration;
- conscientious objection to military service¹.

Victims of imprisonment are usually:

- members and leaders of banned or unregistered religious or belief groups for any of their activities;

¹ In its General Comment 22, par. 11, the United Nations Human Rights Committee said in 1993 that the right to conscientious objection falls within the scope of Article 18:

‘(...) The Covenant does not explicitly refer to a right to conscientious objection, but the Committee believes that such a right can be derived from article 18, inasmuch as the obligation to use lethal force may seriously conflict with the freedom of conscience and the right to manifest one's religion or belief. When this right is recognized by law or practice, there shall be no differentiation among conscientious objectors on the basis of the nature of their particular beliefs; likewise, there shall be no discrimination against conscientious objectors because they have failed to perform military service. (...)’

See the full text of General Comment 22 at <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/gencomm/hrcom22.htm>.

- members and leaders of registered religious or belief groups on the basis of laws restricting the individual freedom to change religion or belief or to carry out missionary activities as well as the collective freedoms of association, worship and assembly;
- people arrested and kept in detention without any charges or court decisions;
- people exercising their freedom of thought and conscience and have been therefore accused of blasphemy;
- conscientious objectors to military service.

People sentenced to death for abuse and misuse of blasphemy laws are usually kept on death row and their penalty is usually converted into prison for life.

Targeted religious or belief minorities

People who are in prison for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief are members of religious or belief minorities. This report has identified a number of such minorities:

Protestants of various denominations (mainly Evangelical & Pentecostal) were in prison in thirteen countries in 2017: China, Eritrea, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Sudan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.

Jehovah's Witnesses were in prison in seven countries: Eritrea, Kazakhstan, Singapore, Russia, South Korea, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

Muslims of various denominations were also in prison:

- **Sunnis** in 4 countries: China, Iran, Mauritania and Uzbekistan
- **Shias** in 3 countries: Azerbaijan, Iran and Saudi Arabia
- **Tablighi Jamaat** in 3 countries: Kazakhstan, Russia and Tajikistan
- **Said Nursi followers** in 2 countries: Russia and Uzbekistan

Ahmadis were in prisons in Algeria and in Pakistan.

Baha'is were detained in Iran and Yemen.

Buddhists were serving prison terms in China and in Vietnam.

Catholics were in jail in China and in Pakistan.

Coptic Orthodox were sentenced in Egypt and Eritrea.

Sufis were detained in Iran and in Uzbekistan.

Six religious or belief communities had people in prison in only one country.

In Iran: **Erfan-e Halghe and Zoroastrians.**

In Indonesia: **Milah Abraham.**

In China: **Falun Gong practitioners.**

In Russia: **Scientists.**

In Egypt: **Atheists.**

Prisoners of conscience: Countries of particular concern

Some countries imprison believers of a wide range of religious communities for the legitimate exercise of their right to freedom of religion or belief.

In **China**, Falun Gong practitioners, Evangelical & Pentecostal Protestants, Uyghur Sunnis, (Tibetan) Buddhists and Roman Catholics are particularly persecuted.

Hundreds of Falun Gong practitioners, whose movement was banned in 1999, are massively imprisoned because of the ban on their movement. We have documented more than six-hundred individual cases. They are usually sentenced to three to seven years in prison but some have been sentenced up to seventeen years.

Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestants belonging to the mushrooming network of underground house churches outside of state control also pay a heavy toll.

Uyghur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists, systematically suspected of separatism and/or terrorism, are particular targets of the regime.

Seven Roman Catholic priests and bishops, who were arrested by police many years ago for their faithfulness to the Pope and their failure to swear allegiance to the Communist Party, remain missing.

In **Iran**, seven denominations are victims of harsh repression: Baha'is, Erfan-e Halghe, Protestants, Shias, Sufis, Sunnis and Zoroastrians. The Baha'is, whose movement is considered a heresy of Islam, provide the highest number of prisoners. They are followed by indigenous Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, who extensively carry out missionary activities among their fellow citizens despite the risk of imprisonment, torture and execution.

Sunnis, Sufis and Shia dissidents, members of Erfan-e-Halghe and Zoroastrians are also repressed by the theocratic regime of Tehran.

In **South Korea**, more than three-hundred Jehovah's Witnesses were in prison in 2017 for refusing to perform military service.

In **Eritrea**, three religious denominations have been repressed for many years. Abune Antonios, Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, has been under house arrest since January 2006 for repeatedly resisting government interference in religious affairs.

As of December 2017, over fifty Jehovah's Witnesses were imprisoned in harsh conditions. They were held in detention for conscientious objection, religious meetings in private houses or for undisclosed reasons.

Some Pentecostals were arrested more than ten years ago because of their proselytising activities. Their whereabouts remain unknown.

In **Pakistan**, at least forty individuals have been sentenced to death or are serving life sentences for blasphemy, according to the annual report published in 2017 by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

In December 2017, Pakistan's Supreme Court exonerated a man convicted of blasphemy for lack of evidence after he served nine years of a life sentence in prison.

Contravening the blasphemy laws can result in death or life imprisonment as it is mentioned in Section 295-A, B, C and 298-A, B, C of the Penal Code. Muslims (Sunnis and Shias), Christians, Ahmadis, Hindus, and others are all victims of these laws.

The use of blasphemy laws has created an environment where some religious fanatics believe that they are entitled to take law into their own hands. There have been many instances where the local administration and police have either colluded with perpetrators or have stood by and done nothing to assist the accused, fearing the crowd. The use of the blasphemy laws has become a quick way of resolving disputes arising from business rivalry, honor disputes, disputes over money and property. The accused are often lynched or languish for years in jail without trial because lawyers are too afraid to defend them. Judges have previously been attacked in Pakistan for acquitting blasphemy defendants and two politicians who discussed reforming the law were shot dead.

In **Uzbekistan**, most of the prisoners in 2017 were Sunni Muslims who have been accused of alleged separatism, extremism, planning to overthrow the government and/or belonging to a banned Islamist movement. They are not known to have committed acts of violence.

Followers of the Turkish theologian Said Nursi were also imprisoned for the same reasons, although they do not use or advocate violence or terrorism. His works are banned for allegedly inciting hatred and enmity against non-believers, which is not the case.

Four Sufi leaders were sentenced to prison terms because their religious group has not been registered by the state and is therefore deemed illegal.

Three Christians were in prison for two weeks in 2017. They do not want their names to be publicized and the charges for the 15-day administrative prison term are unknown.

In **Kazakhstan**, most prisoners were Sunni Muslims who are Tabligh Jamaat followers. This movement has been banned in Kazakhstan since 2013, although it does not use or advocate violence nor does it call for the overthrow of the political regime. Other Sunni Muslims sentenced to prison terms were said to be Salafists or Wahhabis. There is no evidence that they were advocating violence or violent regime change.

Only one Protestant and one Jehovah's Witness were still in prison at the end of 2017.

North Korea, where the *juche* civil religion of the regime excludes the existence of any other competing religion or ideology, is also worth mentioning. This country remains a black hole on the map of religious persecution, as access to information about North Korean religious prisoners of conscience is impossible. According to the 400-page report of the UN Commission of Inquiry into human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea, "Countless numbers of persons in North Korea who attempt to practice their religious beliefs have been severely punished, even unto death"².

Noteworthy is the fact that there were no FoRB prisoners among Jewish communities around the world, nor of mainline Christian Churches, such as the Orthodox Churches or the Anglican and Lutheran Churches.

In all the cases, the FoRB prisoners in 2017 belonged to a religious or belief community in countries with a differing dominant religion.

Identifying FoRB prisoners

FoRB victims versus FoRB defenders

Our report deals with FoRB prisoners belonging to religious communities who were victims of state repression for the legitimate exercise of their freedom of religion or belief.

Believers and clerics may organize petitions, exhibitions, demonstrations, hunger strikes, publish articles in all sorts of media, take interviews, etc., to denounce violations of their own

² www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/.../A.HRC.25.CRP.1_ENG.doc

personal rights, the rights of their religious or belief community and their members. Lawyers, journalists, bloggers, etc. may also be FoRB defenders in some of their activities. However, if they get in trouble with the authorities, it is in their capacity as FoRB defenders, whether they are believers or not, and not as victims of violations of the rights protected by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration.

Believers and clerics may also be sent to prison for fighting for democracy, against autocratic leaders or corruption. If they are detained for such laudable activities, we consider them to be political prisoners and not FoRB prisoners.

About the charges

Another difficulty concerning the identification of FoRB prisoners is related to the official charges that are raised.

The reasons advanced by some states for various prison sentences can be divided into two categories:

- the breach of laws on religion unduly restricting the rights guaranteed by international instruments such as Article 18 of the Universal Declaration and the 1981 UN Declaration of the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief; and
- the misuse of other laws.

A number of official accusations clearly challenge the rights protected by Article 18: the right to change one's religion, the individual right to share one's beliefs in private and in public, the collective right to worship and assembly without state permission, and so on. However, a wide range of other charges are motivated by the political will to stop the activities of some leaders and activists of minority religious or belief groups, to deter others, and to reduce or eliminate minority religious or belief communities.

In **Iran**, Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestants have for example been indicted for: Membership in organisations that aim to disrupt national security; assembly and collusion against national security; undermining national security; propaganda against the system; organising a group to overthrow the regime; enmity against God (Moharebeh), and other crimes.

Dervishes have been accused of violations of public order, involvement in a skirmish causing physical harm, carrying illegal weapons, participating in gatherings with the aim of overthrowing the Islamic Republic, enmity against God, and corruption on earth.

Baha'is have been sentenced for: Organising an illegal group with the goal of aiding the Islamic Republic's enemies; membership in an illegal and perverse sect with the goal of attracting Muslims and preaching against the Islamic Republic; organising assemblies with the intention

to disturb the national security; use, possession and distribution of illegal compact discs containing appalling and offensive material; and using falsely obtained degrees, illegal counselling, running illegal classes, defrauding the public.

In **China**, Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestants belonging to underground house churches have been put in prison for: Fraud and disruption of public order; illegally occupying farmland and disturbing transportation order; suspicion of inciting subversion of state power and leaking state secrets; illegally operating business, and so on.

Catholic clerics have been arrested for refusing to join the state-sanctioned *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association* and to swear allegiance to the Communist regime.

Tibetan Buddhists have been incarcerated for refusing to join the state-controlled *Chinese Buddhist Association* and to swear allegiance to the Communist regime, for defending their ethnic and cultural identity, for allegedly posing security problems, and promoting secessionism.

Uyghur Muslims have been sentenced to life in prison or executed for alleged political and terrorist activities, for advocating separatism, for masterminding a bomb attempt, for illegal possession of firearms and ammunition.

The charges against Falun Gong practitioners usually concern membership in a forbidden cult, spreading lies about organ harvesting and trying to overthrow the regime, but are most of the time the charges are not publicized.

About the access to information

The compilation of the FoRB Prisoners by HRWF Int'l in 2017³ faced the challenge of official charges that were abused and misused for the purpose of repressing religious or belief minorities, in particular for the Baha'is in Iran, the Tibetan Buddhists and Uyghur Muslims in China, the Hmong Christians in Vietnam in addition to certain Muslim denominations in Central Asia and Russia. Many names could not be included in the FoRB Prisoners Database because of the lack of accurate or reliable information.

Another challenge to this report has been the over-reporting by Western media and Christian agencies on prisoners of Christian minorities in the world, even on minuscule religious groups, in comparison to the under-reporting of FoRB prisoners belonging to non-Christian minorities, which often go unreported or poorly represented in Western Europe and America.

³ See HRWF Int'l Prisoners Database 2017 which comprises over 2200 documented individual cases (<http://hrwf.eu/forb-intro/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>)

A final challenge has been the lack of access to information about individual cases due to the secrecy of certain political regimes, such as in North Korea, and linguistic limitations, especially in the case of available data on ethno-religious minorities.

Conclusions

Violations of freedom of religion or belief are mainly a matter concerning members of communities and groups living in a different majority culture. Their otherness may be perceived, wrongly or rightly, as a threat to the identity and the security of the majority.

When freedom of religion or belief is violated, we typically think of actions that have been taken against *individuals*. This is the lens through which people of Western cultures tend to view human rights, since individuals are normally regarded as the primary right-holders in society. It is also typically individuals that are held accountable for infractions of the law or for criminal offenses.

However, many people are in prison or are otherwise sanctioned not for something that they have personally done, despite the charges that have been made against them. They are there because of their religious or belief *identity* and association with a group.

The freedom of association is a hallmark of any democratic system. And the freedom of religion or belief itself is understood to include the freedom to practice one's religion "either individually or in community with others," as it is stated in Article 18 of the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights. It is this *community dimension* – that is present in most religions and that shapes profoundly religious identity – that can make governments and authorities uneasy. It can trigger actions to monitor, control, ban and even suppress that community by violent means, and consequently anyone who is *associated* with that community.

Religious identity can be viewed as dangerous. Much like ethnic or cultural or national identity, religious identity can shape one's worldview, one's ideas, ethics, and even one's politics. Moreover, a religion or a belief is not always quiet and submissive — and this does not escape the notice of those who hold power.

Groups with a particular ethno-religious identity are sometimes considered a more serious threat than purely religious minorities. They are indeed much more different from the majority and a number of their members may have a political agenda threatening the territorial integrity of the country.

Consequently, the repression of religion and belief groups is often as much about power as it is about any doctrine that is propagated by the group itself. Governments tend not to be overly concerned with religious doctrine; however, governments become quite concerned over any threat to their power or influence. Here is where religious identity and group politics become

very important in understanding the restrictions that are placed on religion or belief groups. It is precisely because they are groups – and therefore perceived as potentially dangerous by various sorts of powers – that they can come under fire.

Religious or Belief Communities

Ahmadis

The Ahmadiyya Muslim community, also known as Ahmadis, is a reformist movement within Islam that has at least 12 million adherents in more than twenty countries. It draws its name from its founder, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, a Punjabi religious teacher of the 19th century who claimed to be the Mahdi, the promised Messiah who would come to establish universal peace.

Ahmad wanted to recover what he believed to be Islam's peaceful and tolerant origins. He also appealed for reason and critical thinking to be exercised when reading the Quran. In particular, he cautioned against irrational interpretations and the misapplication of Islamic law. Such pronouncements would evidently run into conflict with the established religious authority in many countries. Indeed, Ahmadiyya has been condemned as blasphemous and non-Muslim by many mainstream Muslims.

Six years after the death of Ahmad, the movement divided into two streams: the Lahore branch, which regards Ahmad as a reformer and not a prophet, and the Qadiani branch, which believes he was indeed a prophet from God. Today the Lahore Ahmadis are a small minority group within the Ahmadiyya community, meaning that the vast majority of Ahmadis would not consider the Prophet Muhammed to be the last prophet, a major point of contention in view of wider acceptance within the Muslim world.

Ahmadiyya is an international movement with large numbers in Pakistan, Indonesia, America, Britain, and Nigeria. There are also significant communities in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Tanzania, Niger, Cameroon, and Ghana.

While Ahmadis consider themselves to be Muslims, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation declared in 1973 that the Ahmadiyya community was not linked to Islam.

Teachings

Ahmad claimed to be God's appointed Prophet and Mahdi, appearing in the likeness of Jesus (Isa) in fulfilment of ancient prophecy. He declared that his was an Islamic movement, although his teachings differ from traditional Islamic doctrine on several key points.

The Ahmadiyya also have a distinctive narrative concerning the death of Jesus. Within Islam there are varying interpretations of Jesus' crucifixion. The mainstream view is that he did not die on a cross but was lifted bodily to heaven and will physically return before the end of time. In contrast, Ahmadis believe that Jesus escaped crucifixion and then later died a natural death. Now in the modern era, Ahmad has come in the likeness of Jesus to restore Islam's true and essential nature, to end all wars and to establish God's reign of justice and peace.

Ahmadis promote an overtly non-violent understanding of *jihad*. They underscore the Quranic principle that there must be no compulsion in religion, strongly rejecting the use of violence

and terrorism in any form and for any reason. For the Ahmadiyya community, violent jihadism is an affront to the peaceful nature of Islam.

The group also endorses a clear separation of state and religion. In fact, Ahmad taught his followers to protect the sanctity of both religion and government by becoming 'righteous souls as well as loyal citizens. Today, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community is a strong advocate for peace, universal human rights and protections for all religions and other minority groups.

Controversies

Ahmadis have faced stiff opposition in several predominantly Muslim countries, primarily for their reformist views on traditional Islam and the need for a more progressive interpretation of Islamic sources. They have been especially targeted in **Pakistan, Indonesia, Algeria** and **Bangladesh**, where openly professing their religious identity can lead to threats to their personal security, and legal restrictions on their rights to basic freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and participation in public life.

In **Pakistan**, Ahmadiyya have been systematically repressed for decades. A 1974 amendment to the Pakistani Constitution declared that the Ahmadis cannot be considered Muslim. An ordinance passed in 1984 made it illegal for Ahmadis to 'pose' as Muslims, prohibiting them from using Islamic greetings in public places or calling their places of worship 'mosques.' To obtain a passport, Ahmadis must declare that their founder is a false prophet. The 1986 blasphemy law has likewise become a tool of repression of the Ahmadiyya community. Anyone convicted of defiling the name of Prophet Muhammed is subject to the death penalty. Life imprisonment can be imposed on anyone found guilty of insulting the Quran.

This legal framework, together with the strong influence of religious extremists within the political system, and a culture of intolerance towards religious diversity, creates a permissive environment for extremist attacks in Pakistan. While violence is generally perpetrated by non-state extremist groups, the police and judiciary are routinely accused of complicity in maintaining a system of discrimination and violence towards the Ahmadiyya community.

Ahmadis in **Indonesia** face similar legal and social hurdles, fuelled by ongoing resistance to Ahmadiyya's teachings from conservative Islamic groups. The repression of religious freedom for Ahmadis was institutionalised by the government's 2008 Joint Ministerial Decree, which explicitly bans Ahmadis from engaging in any activity that spreads or promulgates their teachings or doctrine. Violators are subject to imprisonment of up to five years. Regional and administrative structures followed, further narrowing the scope of legal protections provided to Ahmadis in Indonesia.

In Indonesia, regional regulations and administrative decisions banning the activities of Ahmadiyah have not only increased in number since the introduction of the Joint Ministerial Decision 2008, but they have also grown in intensity and scope. Such regulations issued by

regional authorities reflect the increasingly conservative positions of local governments on the issue of Ahmadiyah. In the absence of initiatives from the national government to protect the rights of Ahmadis, local governments are free to restrict religious freedom, leaving Ahmadis without the protection of the legal system.

Indonesian law forbids the Ahmadiyya from giving deviant interpretations of Islamic teachings and proselytizing their beliefs, but it is often more widely interpreted such that Ahmadis can observe their religion only in their private houses but cannot hold religious gatherings and appear in public showing their beliefs.

A number of radical Muslim movements have proliferated in the last decade and have grown in numbers and influence along with increased intolerance toward the Ahmadiyya community and even incidents of violence. The government response to such incidents has been tepid at best.

Speeches held by mainstream Islamic religious leaders clearly denouncing Ahmadiyah and its teachings as deviant have fomented attacks against the group, frequent and well documented by NGOs. There are many cases in which Ahmadis victims of persecution were jailed, while the perpetrators were left unpunished.

Although the right to religious freedom in theory also applies to religious minorities, in Indonesia it is often used to justify the protection of the rights of the religious majority.

In **Algeria**, Islam is the state religion, where Sunni Muslims make up the majority. The Ahmadi movement did not spread to Algeria until 2007, when an Ahmadi satellite television channel reached the country. It now numbers approximately 2,000 members in the country.

Freedom of religion is guaranteed by law in Algeria, but preachers and places of worship must be licensed by the government. The Ahmadis have never applied, believing they would face certain rejection.

Accused of heresy by Islamist extremists and targeted by the authorities, members of Algeria's small Ahmadi community say they have been forced to go underground to worship. Few in Algeria had even heard of Ahmadis until last year, when the government crackdown began.

Around three-hundred Ahmadis in Algeria have faced investigation and imprisonment since the beginning of the persecution.

In July 2017, Algeria's Religious Affairs Minister Mohamed Aissa told journalists that the Ahmadis were involved in a plot masterminded by Israel - where the community is allowed to worship openly, with a big mosque in the city of Haifa and a television channel - to destabilise the country. Sirine Rached, an Amnesty International researcher, said these accusations were "baseless" and accused the Algerian government of a crackdown that is unprecedented in the wider region.

Ahmadis are also harshly persecuted in **Bangladesh**, where the Ahmadiyya community is perceived as a conflicting identity with the majority Muslim population. Sporadic violence against them has taken place for some years; however, since 2004 anti-Ahmadiyya extremists have been publicly demanding that the government pass legislation to contain their activities and restrict their daily lives. For instance, doctors and healthcare providers have been pressured to not provide treatment to Ahmadis. Also, many Ahmadiyya families have lost their profession and livelihood due to their religious commitment.

The explanations for Ahmadiyya's persecution and discrimination are multifaceted although interrelated. Some are more related to 'religious unity,' others to 'political interests,' but the reasons converge and are used to gain legitimacy in political and religious discourse.

The Ahmadiyya community has been symbolically constructed by some mainstream Muslims to be not only heretical but also disloyal and traitorous, 'the enemy within' and a threat to the moral stability of the nation. The Ahmadis, even if a relatively small community, threaten the perceived unity of Islam and introduce values and teachings which distort the 'true' religion of Islam. The suppression of Ahmadiyya has therefore become for some Muslims justifiable, as it is done in defence of Islam itself.

Ahmadis in Prison

Algeria

In 2017, Ahmadis were particularly persecuted in Algeria.

Arrests of twelve (unnamed) Ahmadis in February 2017⁴

The Algerian police on 22nd February 2017 announced the arrest of twelve members of the Ahmadiyya religious community who have been accused by authorities for promoting the outlawed movement. The men were arrested in Chief, in the north of the country, and were apparently in possession of documents that promote Ahmadi doctrine. The leader of the group and four other members have been imprisoned, while another four have been placed under court supervision. The three others were released.

Arrests of nineteen (unnamed) Ahmadis in January 2017

In the last two weeks of January 2017, many Ahmadis were arrested during multiple police crackdowns in Algeria. Their names have not been made public. In Sidi Bel Abbès, two individuals were sentenced to three years in prison, three others were arrested in Tipasa, a group

⁴ Source: <http://me-confidential.com/15185-algeria-police-arrests-12-members-of-ahmadiyya-religious-community-for-proselytism.html>

of seven was arrested in Alger, and seven others in Oran. Their sentences remain unknown.

Arrests of nineteen (unnamed) Ahmadis in November 2016

In November 2016, nineteen Ahmadis were arrested and subsequently sentenced to unknown prison terms.

On 25th November, Algerian security forces raided a house in the coastal town of Béni Saf and arrested six Ahmadis while they were performing Friday prayers. Beni Saf is located in the northern province of Aïn Témouchent, around three-hundred miles to the west of capital Algiers. Security personnel seized prayer mats, books, and other documents related to the Ahmadiyya belief as evidence.

Arrests of twenty (unnamed) Ahmadis in September 2016

In early October, **twenty** Ahmadis were arrested in the city of Skikda for performing Friday prayers at a private villa. In November, Skikda's circuit court sentenced the (unnamed) Imam of Ahmadiyya community to eight months in prison and fined him 300,000 Algerian Dinars (approximately €2,568 Euro). The other arrested individuals were sentenced three months in prison and fined 30,000 Algerian Dinars (approximately €256 Euro).

Arrests of nine (unnamed) Ahmadis in June 2016⁵

In June, the Research Division of the National Police (SRGN) shut down the community's main headquarters in the city of Bilda and arrested six Ahmadis from Blida. Soon after the security forces also arrested the National President of Ahmadiyya Community in Algeria from Bou-Ismaïl (Tipasa) and two other individuals from the capital Algiers. The nine individuals were charged with endangering state security and undermining social integrity. Sentences are not known.

Pakistan

In **Pakistan**, five Ahmadis were in prison at the end of 2017.

Three of them were arrested in 2015 for propagating their faith: **Abdul Shakoor** and **Mazhar Sipra** were subsequently sentenced to five years in prison while **Tahir Mahdi Imtiaz** was repeatedly denied release on bail and was to be tried by an anti-terror court.

Qamar Ahmed Tahir was arrested in 2015 for allegedly desecrating the Quran. Tahir was the head of security at a factory. A fellow worker at the factory accused him of throwing copies of

⁵ Source: <https://themuslimtimes.info/2017/02/15/human-rights-without-frontiers-is-calling-upon-the-algerian-authorities-to-stop-harassing-imprisoning-ahmadis-muslims/>

the Qur'an into the boiler. Following his arrest, a mob burned the factory and Ahmadi places of worship.

Idrees Ahmad was arrested in 2017 and sentenced to three years in prison for distributing banned material.

Conclusions

Ahmadis are an unwanted community in several Muslim majority countries. They have been stigmatised and defiled as infidels, not only by society at large but also by the state apparatus. Political interests are obviously at stake, bolstered by extreme religious conservatism and an overall culture of intolerance, all contributing to the creation of a toxic environment in which the majority of Ahmadis are forced to live.

Islamist forces especially target Ahmadiyya, as it is viewed as an offshoot religion, a reformist doctrine that challenges the official understanding of Islam in their countries. The institutionalisation of privileges granted by certain regimes to Islamist groups is linked to their need for political survival. Authorities have felt pressured to adopt policy demands to suppress Ahmadiyya activities just to stay in power.

Ahmadis have endured persecution for many years. Their mosques have been burned, their graves desecrated and their very existence criminalised. As a result, thousands of Ahmadis have fled their countries and sought asylum abroad.

At the same time, the persecution of Ahmadis is proving to be increasingly counter-productive, as the movement has garnered more and more support from the international community. Its growing reputation as a peace loving community in an increasingly hostile and violent world, typified by stark polarisation in the Muslim world, is strong in many places. Governments that propagate or tolerate hostility towards Ahmadis may find themselves increasingly isolated.

Atheists

Atheism (from Greek ἄθεος, meaning ‘without God’) is the critique and denial of the existence of God or gods of any kind. The right *not* to believe is protected by international law as a fundamental right to freedom of thought and conscience. Therefore, atheists have the right to express their beliefs and criticise religious doctrines and practices as much as those who profess a religion.

Atheism has always existed throughout the history of philosophy and religion. In European history, it has often been associated with humanist and anticlerical movements originating in the 18th and 19th centuries. The rise of modern science has also been credited with the rise of atheism. The publication of Charles Darwin’s, *The Origin of Species*, in 1859 was a defining moment in this regard. This scientific discovery challenged religion-based assumptions about the beginning of the universe and established evolutionism as the foundation for modern biology. Moreover, it became more widely acceptable to conceive a world without God at its centre, or even a world without God at all.

The perception that atheism has triumphed in Europe and America has fuelled anti-Western sentiment in some countries that have a strong legacy of theistic religion. The consolidation of secular democracies, where freedom, equality, and reason have become primary values of society - as opposed to theocratic models - has also led to confrontations between conflicting worldviews.

Paradoxically, there has been a corresponding rise in the number of atheists and sceptics in these same countries, as rigid doctrines and religion-based violence have soured public opinion on religions and their institutions.

Since the early 2000s, a philosophical movement known as New Atheism has grown considerably, although actual numbers are difficult to establish. New Atheism has been promoted by popular writers like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, who submit that any notion of God is inconsistent with the standard methods of science. Unlike earlier versions of atheism that were more tolerant of religion, proponents of New Atheism tend to view religion as having a dangerous effect on human societies.

Teachings

One could be tempted to reduce all of atheism to a simple denial of the existence of God; in reality, there are many expressions of atheism and related belief systems, such as agnosticism, scepticism, rationalism, naturalism, positivism, and atheistic humanism. Even still, there are some common principles to which most atheists adhere. For instance, atheists tend to value free and critical thinking. They may regard scientific enquiry as the only vehicle for determining truth.

Atheists may also appeal to the apparent incompatibility between belief in an all-powerful and benevolent god and a world full of evil and suffering. In theology, the attempt to establish a framework which reconciles the existence of God with apparent evil is known as *theodicy*.

However, many atheists argue that theodicy, indeed religion itself, has developed in response to a need for congruity and social order. Belief in God cannot be reached logically and is, therefore, to be rejected.

Controversies

Atheists suffer a wide range of penalties and discrimination in several countries today. Restrictive laws can limit atheists from enjoying fundamental freedoms, such as the right to citizenship, the right to be married, the ability to access public education, or to hold public office. The public expression of atheistic views toward religion can also be criminalised. Laws on blasphemy and apostasy, even the crime of ‘offending religious feelings,’ can draw severe penalties, even prison or death.

The perverse effect of such laws is often manifested in the form of societal prejudice, stigmatisation, and discrimination against atheists. These practices are often legitimised by the state's preference for a particular religion and the relegation of its non-religious citizens to 'second-class' status.

In **Egypt** the state only recognises Islam, Christianity, and Judaism as belief systems, and Islamic Sharia is constitutionally affirmed as ‘the principle source of legislation.’ Together with anti-blasphemy legislation, these laws have created a culture of discrimination against anyone who does not adhere to one of the three Abrahamic faiths. The non-religious are particularly marginalised and even targeted.

Charges of blasphemy and contempt of religion have been used in Egypt to criminalize the freedom of thought: the right to have doubts about some teachings of Islam, to express them publicly and to share them with others.

Imprisonment under such charges is not new. From 2011 to 2013, courts convicted twenty-seven of forty-two defendants on charges of contempt for religion, according to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR). Judges acquitted three defendants and rejected charges against eleven others for lack of standing.

In March 2014, the Interior Ministry official in charge of security in Alexandria said he would form a task force to arrest atheists. In June 2014, following the election of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt’s youth and religious endowments ministries announced a joint campaign to confront the spread of atheism.

A few months later *Al-Shabab*, a government-linked newspaper, stated that atheists were “the country’s second enemy after the Muslim Brotherhood” and quoted a psychologist saying that “atheism leads to mental imbalances and paranoia”.

On 10th December 2014, the *Dar al-Ifta*, a Justice Ministry wing that issues religious edicts, released a survey claiming that Egypt was home to 866 atheists, the highest number of any country in the Middle East. Two aides to the Grand Mufti – the head of the *Dar al-Ifta* – described the supposed increase in atheism as “a dangerous development” that “should ring alarm bells,” *Mada Masr* reported.

In December 2017, the Committee on Religion in the Egyptian Parliament disclosed plans to pass into law, a bill that makes atheism a criminal offence.

Current Egyptian law says atheists can be prosecuted for expressing their disbelief in public but the committee’s proposal would go further and criminalise disbelief itself.

Similarly, **Indonesia**’s constitution stipulates that the state ‘shall be based upon the belief in the One and Only God’ (Article 29). As a consequence, the authorities do not recognise the existence of the non-religious. Indonesian identity cards must declare one’s affiliation to one of six officially recognised religions. Expressing support for atheism is effectively banned by the blasphemy law under the country’s penal code, carrying a penalty of up to five years in prison.

Analogous restrictions on atheists exist in **Pakistan** and **Saudi Arabia**. In 2014, “promotion of atheist thought” became officially classified as an act of terrorism in Saudi Arabia.

Atheists can also face severe discrimination in **Eritrea, Iran, Tunisia, and several other countries**.

The reasons for such legal and social constraints on atheism are complex. Atheism has been associated with extremist ideology, terrorism, and its proliferation is often seen as a threat to the state and society. This position is buttressed by legal structures which state authorities fear changing. Any dissenting voice is quickly suppressed by conservative religious leaders and scholars.

In terms of national security, an atheist may be viewed not only as an enemy of God but of the state as well. From this perspective, the linkage between politics and religion is particularly relevant for understanding the motivations behind the repression of atheism. In states where religion is leveraged as a source of legitimacy, the denial of religion can be seen as undermining the government’s right to exist.

Finally, atheism can be viewed by political leaders as a colonial and western intrusion which may have a negative impact on the fabric of their society and upcoming generations. This phenomenon has been compounded by the advent of newer communication technologies that

provide easy access to information on western values and customs, introducing people to more free and open societies. Many countries are struggling not only with the freedom of religion and conscience but also with the concept of freedom in general. The culture of dialogue, tolerance, and debate is not universally understood or, at least, not understood in the same way. Therefore, atheists who express a non-traditional viewpoint on the religious heritage of their country become particularly vulnerable.

Atheists in Prison

Egypt

In June 2014, an appeals court upheld a **five-year sentence** handed down in absentia to **Karam Saber** for his short story collection entitled “Where is God?”. The accusations against Saber included: Insulting the divine, writing short stories which call for atheism, defaming divinity, and inciting strife. In his defense, Saber claimed that: “[In the stories], I expose the fake religious discourse and detect the scale of contradictions in a patriarchal society that claims religiousness while it practices the opposite, especially in terms of oppressing women. I pose simple questions that seek God amid all this absurdity we are living in”.

He was said to have violated Article 98 of the Egyptian Penal Code which provides a sentence of six months to five years and a fine of 500 to 1,000 Egyptian pounds [approximately €25 to €50 Euro] for anyone who uses religion to propagate ‘extremist ideas’ to incite strife, insult a monotheistic religion, or damage national unity.

In 2016, **Mustafa Abdel-Nabi** was charged with blasphemy for postings about atheism on his Facebook page and was ultimately sentenced in absentia to **three years in prison**.

Conclusions

The freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief – including the right not to believe – is at the core of any democratic society and is protected by international binding instruments. Even still, atheists face discrimination and repression in various spheres of civil, public and private life. Whatever one thinks of atheistic ideologies, any movement that promotes the peaceful exchange of ideas through dialogue and debate should be welcomed and defended. Such exchanges are a means to avoid the violence and social hostilities that can poison any society and impede its development.

Moreover, when religion is used as a tool to legitimise power and control, the result is often authoritarian rule that loses legitimacy and ultimately the support of its people. Obliging any people to adhere to prescribed national religions or ideologies without the possibility of putting them into question or expressing alternative views does not guarantee a nation’s security. Societies that are not free are correspondingly not secure. And to rule through fear is the very antithesis of democracy.

It is clear that the freedom of belief and expression applies equally to people who profess no religion as it does to those who are religious. These are fundamental rights which must be defended and protected in real terms. This is true for domestic policies as well as external policies that impact relations with third countries.

Baha'is

A history of the Baha'i movement often begins in **Iran** with the self-proclamation of Ali-Muhammad in 1844 to be the 'Bàb,' the messianic figure that was anticipated by the Shaykhi School of Twelver Shi'ism. Many Shaykhis joined the new religious movement during this period, triggering conflict with the ruling Shi'a clerical government. The Bàb and his followers were violently repressed from the outset, leading to his exile, and ultimately to his execution in 1850.

The Bàb was succeeded by Baha'u'lláh, who declared himself in 1863 to be the Manifestation of God that was foreseen in the Bàb's writings. Baha'u'lláh was in turn succeeded by his eldest son, 'Abdul'l-Bahá, followed by his eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi, in leading the movement. It was under their leadership that the Baha'i faith spread considerably and established itself as a global religion.

Today the Baha'i community is governed by the Universal House of Justice, a nine-member administrative body that is elected by the all national Baha'i assemblies every five years. The community numbers between five and seven million members worldwide. Although Baha'is do not currently make up the religious majority in any single country, they do represent large religious minorities in several countries. In **Iran**, there are currently about 300,000 Baha'is, mostly concentrated in Tehran and Semnan.

Teachings

Baha'i religion bears the traces of its predecessor movements, 19th-century Shaykhism and Bábism, in its belief that there is one God, who has been revealed progressively through a series of Manifestations throughout history for the uplift of humanity and the advancement of civilisation. These have included the great teachers of religion, such as Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed, all pointing to the one and same world religion, originating from God. Therefore, the world religions represent subsequent chapters of the same religion, as opposed to separate irreconcilable belief systems.

Central to the teaching of Baha'i is the oneness of God, the inherent harmony of all religions and the unity of humankind. Consequently, Baha'i anthropology places strong emphasis on the equality of all humans, who are each made in the image of God and deserving of the same just and equal treatment. Individual conscience is respected, all forms of prejudice are rejected, the equality of women and men is upheld, and human diversity is valued.

Baha'u'lláh is especially revered by the Baha'i, who regard his teachings as foundational to the covenant that God has established through him. These teachings were subsequently passed down through the line of succession which followed him. Baha'u'lláh was a messenger from God, proclaiming a coming age when all of humanity would be united into a single global society. It was this message that drew heavy opposition from the Iranian authorities.

Controversies

In 1848, eighty-one prominent Bábís met in the village of Badasht to discuss the nature of their community and the revelation they had received from the Báb. Did it constitute a new sect within Islam? Or was the revelation something entirely new? The latter position was adopted. The beginning of a new Dispensation was announced, and the Baha’i faith was born.

Violence erupted almost immediately between the Bábís and the Qajar government. The Báb publicly claimed to be a Manifestation of God, a direct affront to official Islamic teaching as this represented a denial of the finality of Prophet Muhammad’s mission. Baha’i adherents were therefore considered to be apostates and ‘enemies of God.’

Aside from religious doctrine, the rapid growth of the early Baha’i movement was perceived to be a threat to clerical and governmental authority. From the beginning, the repression has been singularly cruel. Following a failed assassination attempt in 1852 of the Shah by a small group of Baha’i, several thousands of Baha’i were killed in retaliation.

The Qajar dynasty was replaced by the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925, during which the repression of Baha’is became more institutionalised. The central government presided over a series of measures which would more firmly anchor discrimination against Baha’is as a matter of policy.

Baha’i centres and schools were closed, Baha’i individuals were expelled from the military as well as governmental posts, and the printing of Baha’i literature was officially banned. The primary instrument of repression shifted from mobs to the courts. Many Baha’i served long jail sentences during this period for altogether mundane activities.

The last Shah of the Pahlavi dynasty was overthrown by the 1979 Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The persecution of Baha’is intensified early on and continues to this day.

Since 1979, more than two-hundred Baha’is have been executed. Others have been and remain in Iranian prisons for their faith, including five members of the former leadership team for the Baha’is in Iran arrested in 2008 and sentenced in 2010 to twenty years imprisonment. Two other members of the former leadership team, arrested alongside the five in 2008, were released in 2017.

The charges for which the Baha’is are typically convicted include ‘disturbing national security,’ ‘spreading propaganda against the regime,’ and ‘engaging in espionage.’ It is also typical that Baha’is are told before their conviction that if they deny their Baha’i faith all charges will be dropped and they will be set free. It is clear that the basis for the imprisonment of Baha’i in Iran is not criminal in nature but related to their religious conviction as Baha’i believers.

The post-Revolutionary government of Iran has been especially repressive toward the Baha'i and other religious minorities because their very existence poses a challenge to the legitimacy of the current regime, which is largely based on its interpretation of Twelver Shi'ism. Individuals who identify themselves with groups that fall outside this interpretation are considered a threat to the security of the state and are dealt with accordingly. This is particularly true for the Baha'i community, as it is the largest non-Muslim minority in the country and has historically shown potential for rapid growth within the population.

There were hopes that the 2013 election of President Hassan Rouhani would help to improve the treatment of the Baha'i and other religious minorities. He promised during the campaign to ease religious discrimination and develop a Citizens' Rights Charter that would establish equality for all citizens without discrimination based on religion, race, or sex. The Charter has now been published, but the final version has been disappointing. Moreover, the level of human rights violations has not diminished and by some accounts has even increased. For instance, one measurable increase has been the amount of anti-Baha'i propaganda that is disseminated by the government. During the first six months of Rouhani's presidency, the instances of anti-Baha'i propaganda in government-run media grew exponentially.

Ahmed Shaheed, the then UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, reported in 2015 that the persecutions and prosecutions against Baha'i 'appear to be mainly rooted in the unrecognized status of the faith, as well as a pervasive view held within the Government that Baha'is represent a heretical sect with ties to foreign enemies.'

This was illustrated by a statement in 2014 by a high-ranking cleric and former member of Supreme Judicial Council, Ayatollah Bojnourdi, that Baha'is have no right to education, as they 'don't even have citizenship rights.'⁶ After negative reactions, he later backtracked, saying that Baha'is who cooperate with Israel or advocate against Islam are not entitled to certain citizenship rights, such as going to university in Iran.⁷ Regardless of attempts by Iranian officials to position themselves in respect to the treatment of Baha'is in their country, it is clear that Baha'is continue to face discrimination, arrest and arbitrary detention in connection with their religion.

Baha'is in Prison

Iran

In **Iran**, Baha'is are sentenced to prison terms because of their religious identity or their activities related to their faith and their community life.

⁶International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, 18 December 2014, <http://persian.iranhumanrights.org/1393/09/bojnoordi-bahais/>

⁷ Semi-official Tasnim News, 18 December 2014, <http://www.tasnimnews.com/Home/Single/592485>

The 2017 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran stated that **90 Baha'is were in detention as of 2017**. In April, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruled that the detention of twenty-four members of the Baha'i community were arbitrary and in violation of their human rights.⁸ Mahvesh Sabet and Fariba Kamalabadi of the Baha'i Seven (a group of seven Baha'i leaders arrested in 2010 and sentenced to heavy prison terms) were released on 18th of September 2017 and 31st of October 2017, respectively.

Human Rights Without Frontiers has documented sixty-six cases of Baha'is imprisoned in Iran in 2017. Of the sixty-six arrests, twenty were made in the city of Yazd in 2014 after previously leveled charges were re-opened.⁹ All twenty were sentenced to prison, notwithstanding the judge's admission that they were being treated unjustly.

The official charges for Baha'i prisoners in Iran are usually: forming an illegal cult, acting against national security, espionage, propaganda against the regime, posing a threat to the holy regime of the Islamic Republic by teaching Baha'i ideas through communication with the usurper country of Israel, plotting overthrow, membership in an anti-Islamic group, membership in illegal groups and assemblies, and membership in the deviant sect of Baha'ism with the goal of taking action against the security of the country, in order to further the aims of the deviant sect and those of organizations outside the country.

In June 2017, **Farahnaz Tebyanian** surrendered herself to Amir Abad Prison in Gorgan. She was charged with being a member of the Baha'i faith and was originally sentenced to nine years in prison. A court of appeal reduced her sentence to **one year**, which she began serving on the 13th of June.

On 16th May 2017, **Zarrin Aghaie** was sentenced to **six-months in prison**, along with six months of suspended prison sentence. He had been arrested in November 2015. He was charged with organizing illegal meetings opposing the Islamic Republic, active membership and participation in organized (illegal) institutions and meetings, effective teaching and propagation activities, promotion of anti-cultural values, creation and distribution of illegal multimedia materials, and encouraging and exhortation of Muslims. He was prosecuted under Penal Code Articles 499, which bans joining prohibited groups and 500, which bans propaganda against the state.

On 28th June 2016, **Afshin Seyyed-Ahmad** was arrested in Evin and charged with promoting propaganda against the regime, assembly and conspiracy. He was sentenced to **three years imprisonment**.

In February 2016, **Shahnam Jadhvani** was sentenced to **eleven years in prison**. He was charged with propaganda in favour of the Baha'i faith and against the Islamic Republic by being a member of an illegal organization, implementing proselytizing projects in Golestan

⁸ https://www.bic.org/sites/default/files/170814_report_of_sr_on_hr_in_iran_to_unga_2017.pdf

⁹ <http://news.bahai.org/story/1015/>

Province, and collaborating with enemy states by actively promoting sectarian, anti-Islamic and anti-Shia objectives.

On 11th October 2015, **Shahram Eshraghi**, one of twenty Baha'is who were sentenced by the Revolutionary Court of Yazd in 2014, began his **three-year sentence**. He became ill from lung complications in March of 2016 and was denied leave because of his alleged “security crimes” against the state.¹⁰

On 24th April 2013, **Elham Faharani** was sentenced to **four years in prison** by branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court.

On 16th June 2013, the Revolutionary Court of Yazd sentenced **Shamin Ettehad** to **five years in prison**. Arrested in Yazd in March 2013, he was accused of propaganda against the regime and acting against national security. He claimed that he was arrested because he broadcasted a video of the destruction of the Baha'i graveyard to a foreign TV channel.

In August 2010, **Fariba Kamalabadi**, was sentenced to twenty years in prison (the longest terms of any current prisoners of conscience in Iran). In November 2015, her sentence was reduced to **ten years in prison**.

On 21st September 2015, **the Baha'i International Community (BIC)** delivered a statement to the UN Human Rights Council on the situation of the Baha'is in Iran, stressing that arbitrary arrests and detentions are continuing. Diane Ala'i, the representative of the BIC to the United Nations in Geneva, said that ‘Baha'is in Iran are not only subject to arbitrary detention—since 2005, there have been over 820 of such arrests, which are in violation human rights norms—but throughout the judicial process they face an unjust treatment that clearly violates Iran's own Penal and Criminal Procedure codes.’

For more information about the persecution of Baha'is in Iran, see our website <http://hrwf.eu/newsletters/forb/>. For more information about Baha'i prisoners, see <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>.

Yemen

On 29th September 2017, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution titled, “*Human Rights, Technical Assistance and Capacity-building in Yemen*” which called for the release of all Baha'i detainees in the country.¹¹ There are currently seven Baha'is imprisoned in Yemen: one of whom has been held for four years. The Baha'is continue to be persecuted by Houthi-Saleh authorities but recent reports claim that Iran may be behind the persecutions.¹²

¹⁰ <http://iranpresswatch.org/post/14166/shahram-eshraghi-in-poor-health-denied-medical-leave/>

¹¹ <https://www.bic.org/news/unprecedented-un-resolution-demands-end-harassment-bahais-yemen>

¹² <https://www.bic.org/news/unprecedented-un-resolution-demands-end-harassment-bahais-yemen>

Human Rights Without Frontiers has documented five cases of Baha'i detainees in 2017. Charges against Baha'i prisoners are often connected with spreading the Baha'i faith.

In April 2017, authorities called for the arrest of over twenty-five Baha'is, many of whom are prominent members of the Baha'i community. On 10th August 2017, at least eight Baha'is - most unnamed by media reports - were arrested in Sana'a and imprisoned; a number of them were released in September 2017.

In May 2017, **Badi'u'llah Sanai**, a civil engineer, was arrested after appearing for a court summons. His charges, sentence, and whereabouts are unknown.

In April 2017, **Walid Ayyash**, a prominent member of a well-known Yemeni tribe, was arrested alongside **Mahmoud Humaid** near the city border of Hudiedah. After helping poor families, they were charged with displaying rectitude of conduct in order to attract people to the Baha'i faith. Their current whereabouts are unknown.

On 3rd December 2013, **Hamed Kamal Muhammad bin HAYDARA**, was arrested for allegedly violating several articles of the Yemeni Criminal Code: Article 125 (Violating the independence, unity or territorial integrity of the Republic shall be punished by death), Article 128 (Working in the interests of a foreign state, provision or exchanging of information with a foreign government is punishable by death.), Article 195 (Ridicule, contempt or claiming inferiority of the Islamic religion is punishable by imprisonment of five years or a fine.), and Article 259 (Anyone who turns back from or denounces the religion of Islam is punished by the death penalty after being questioned for repentance three times and after giving him a respite of thirty days; apostasy in public by speech or acts is considered contradictory to the principles of Islam). As of December 2017, Haydara was still being detained without a conclusive trial.

For more information about the persecution of Baha'is in Iran, see our website <http://hrwf.eu/newsletters/forb/>. For more information about Baha'i prisoners in Yemen, see <http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Yemen-FBL-2017.pdf>.

Conclusions

Change comes slowly in Iran. This is especially true when a figure like Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, is at the wheel. In 2013, Khamenei issued a fatwa against the Baha'i, describing them as a 'deviant and misleading sect.'

Historically, it has been the vitality of the Baha'i movement itself that has provoked the sharpest reaction from Tehran. Whenever the government passes through a period of instability or transition, hard-liners have tended to exert their authority by doubling up pressure on perceived threats to power. In such times, the Baha'is become easy targets and scapegoats for

the preservation of ‘national security.’ Iran’s anti-Baha’i policies are largely driven by fear: the fear that the religion’s popularity could outrun the regime’s ability to maintain control.

One possible avenue for engagement could be to pressure the government to no longer require its citizens to identify their religion when seeking to enter university or starting a business. The revelation that the applicant is a follower of Baha’i has been an obstacle to higher education or to full participation in Iran’s economy.

Such discriminatory practices create an ongoing hostile environment for the Baha’is, who wish to live their faith freely in Iran and without legal consequences.

Buddhists

Buddhism traces its roots to the life and teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the ‘Awakened One’ (*Buddha*). Although it is difficult to construct a historical record of Siddhartha’s life by modern standards, it is likely that he lived in India between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE and that he renounced his noble status in order to embrace an ascetic lifestyle in pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. Buddhists believe that Siddhartha achieved this state of spiritual enlightenment, and most believe that it is likewise achievable for all those determined to follow the same path toward buddhahood and liberation.

Various schools of Buddhism differ on the specific teachings and practices that lead to enlightenment. There are two major branches of Buddhism that are generally acknowledged by scholars: Theravada Buddhism (*School of the Elders*), which emphasises foundational texts and teachings, and Mahayana Buddhism (*The Great Vehicle*), which places more importance upon the experience of being on the Buddhist path. The Mahayana tradition accounts for 53.2% of Buddhists today, mostly in East Asia, compared to 35.8% for Theravada, which is found primarily in Southeast Asia. Vajrayana Buddhism, which is sometimes referred to as the ‘third turning of the wheel of dharma’, is largely based upon ancient tantric teachings and comprises only 5.7%.

In total, there are approximately 488 million Buddhists worldwide, according to the Pew Research Center, about half of which are in China, where Tibetan Buddhists are particularly repressed. Members of the United Buddhist Sangha, Hòa Hào Buddhists, and other Buddhist groups are also persecuted in Vietnam. In both **China** and **Vietnam**, Buddhists are in prison for exercising their freedom of religion.

Teachings

Buddhist teachings elaborate the trainings and methods necessary to overcome ignorance, achieve enlightenment, and ensure favourable *samsara*, the endless cycle of rebirth that leads to a state of buddhahood.

The Four Noble Truths are regarded as central to the teachings of Buddhism and provide a conceptual framework for Buddhist thought. They explain the nature of *dukkha* (often translated as ‘suffering’), its causes, its relation to craving, and how *dukkha* is to be overcome by following the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Noble Eightfold Path describes the interconnected practices and conditions which can lead to the cessation of *dukkha*. They are Right View (or Right Understanding), Right Intention (or Right Thought), Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. These elements are not to be understood as successive stages of Buddhist practice but rather essential qualities to be cultivated together on the path toward buddhahood.

Controversies

While it is not possible to link Buddhism too closely to the modern Western concept of human rights, some scholars have referenced Buddhist attitudes of respect, human dignity, and freedom as common markers with human rights thought. These attitudes have fuelled opposition movements inside Tibetan Buddhists in China and Buddhist groups in Vietnam, two countries which strictly control religious activity within their borders and view any political dissent as a threat to the stability of their governments.

The status of **Tibet** as an independent state or autonomous region has long been the subject of controversy and sometimes violent struggle. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Tibet was invaded, and Chinese socialism was harshly imposed. The Dalai Lama and more than 80,000 Tibetans went into exile, mostly in India and Nepal. Attempts to resolve the Tibetan issue have yet to reach a political solution.

It is the Dalai Lama's identification with the liberation struggle of Tibet that has led to the government's repression of Tibetan Buddhism. China tightened its control over monasteries via a campaign aimed at undermining the Dalai Lama's influence as a political and spiritual leader. Since 1949, the Chinese have destroyed over six-thousand Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and shrines. By 1978 only eight monasteries and 970 monks and nuns remained in the Tibet Autonomous Region. Moreover, spiritual leaders have faced difficulties in re-establishing historical monasteries previously destroyed.

In 1995, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima was selected by the Dalai Lama to succeed him and become the eleventh Panchen Lama. He was six years old at that time. Three days later, he and his family disappeared and have not been seen in public since. Another child, Gyancaïn Norbu, was later named as the Panchen Lama by the People's Republic of China, a choice rejected by most Tibetan Buddhists. The spiritual void China created by the disappearance of the legitimate Panchen Lama remains a clear example of China's attempt to suppress Tibetan culture and identity.

In Vietnam, government restrictions have sharply limited all religious activities for both registered and non-registered groups. In 1981, all Buddhist organisations came under the government-controlled Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam. Those who refused the official mandate to operate as such instead organised the United Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam. However, the group was subsequently banned and its activities suppressed.

Buddhists in Prison

China

In the long struggle for Tibetan self-determination, it is very difficult to distinguish between activities that are primarily motivated by religion or belief and those that are more rightly considered politically motivated. For this reason *Human Rights Without Frontiers* here

documents only a limited number of cases (approximately twenty) that are more clearly related to the exercise of freedom of religion according to the available information.¹³

Gedhun Choekyi Nyima and his parents are still detained in a secret location, despite sustained condemnation from the international community. On 17th May 1995, Gendun Choekyi Nyima was kidnapped with his parents by the Chinese authorities three days after he was announced to be the reincarnation of the 10th Panchen Lama. They have not been seen in public since.

Lobsang Sonam, twenty-three years old, was arrested in September 2015 and charged with having disclosed state secrets. On 9th November 2016, he was sentenced to **six years in prison**. He was detained incommunicado for more than one year. Until the hearing of his sentence, his family was given no information on the details of his arrest or whereabouts.

Thardhod Gyaltzen, who was arrested in December 2013, was sentenced to **eighteen years in prison** for possession of banned images and teachings of the Dalai Lama.

Phurbu Tsering was arrested in May 2008 during a nuns' demonstration in Ganzi in opposition to an official campaign to impose 'patriotic re-education' on their convents in which they were required to denounce the Dalai Lama. He was charged of illegal possession of ammunition and embezzlement. He denied the charges.

Phurbu Tsering Rinpoche was the first reincarnated lama to be charged with a serious crime since Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, who died in prison after serving thirteen of his twenty-year sentence. Phurbu Tsering Rinpoche was heading the Pangri and Puruna Nunneries when he was arrested. On 23rd December 2009, he was sentenced to **8 years and 6 months in prison**.

In November 2015, eight Buddhists were arrested and later sentenced on 6th December 2016 for unknown charges: Drudka (fourteen years in prison), Lobsang Gephel (twelve years in prison), **Lobsang Khedrup** (thirteen years in prison), **Bonko Kyi** (seven years in prison), **Lodroe** (nine years in prison), **Tarey** (eight years in prison), **Tsendra** (eight years in prison) and **Tsultrim** (six years in prison).

For more information about the persecution of Buddhists in China in 2017, see our website <http://hrwf.eu/newsletters/forb/>. For more information about Buddhist prisoners, see <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>.

¹³ Others have been arrested and sentenced to long prison terms or to death for their involvement in political non-violent or violent activities, according to the Chinese authorities, or as human rights defenders, however the lack of access to reliable information did not allow HRWF Int'l to check the nature of their activities and the veracity of the official accusations. It was difficult to identify cases in which the victims were imprisoned for purely exercising their freedom of religion. A margin of error is not excluded. See the documented cases at <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>. Another database that documents Chinese Tibetan and non-Tibetan Buddhists is the Congressional-Executive Commission on China's Annual Report 2017: <http://bit.ly/2y4bL17>

Vietnam

Several Buddhist denominations have been the target of persecution in Vietnam. These include members of the **Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam**, and other Buddhist denominations (**An Dan Dai Dao, Bia Son, Hoa Hoa** and **Khmer Krom**).¹⁴ These individuals have been arrested for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. *Human Rights Without Frontiers* has documented approximately thirty cases across Vietnam.¹⁵

Thich Quang Do, the 87-year old leader of the banned **United Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam**, has been held **under house arrest at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Saigon since 1998**, although he has not been formally convicted of any crime.

In 1982, he was sent into internal exile in northern Vietnam for protesting against the creation of a state-sponsored Buddhist Church. In 1995, he was charged with ‘undermining national solidarity’ and sentenced to five years in prison. After international pressure, he was released in 1998 but placed directly under house arrest without any formal charges or indictment. He has spent over thirty years of his life in detention for his advocacy for religious freedom, democracy, and human rights. He was named the Fifth Supreme Patriarch of the Unified Church of Vietnam in November 2011.

Nguyen Van Huu, a **Bia Son Buddhist**, was arrested in September 2014. He was accused of allegedly storing, using, and trading explosive materials to overthrow the government. He was ultimately sentenced to **six years in prison**.

Nguyen Dinh was arrested on 23rd November 2012 for allegedly plotting to overthrow the government. He was sentenced to **fourteen years in prison**, followed by a five-year probationary period. He is a member of the **An Dan Dai Dao Buddhist** denomination, which was founded in 1969 and prohibited in April 1975 after the Communist regime took over South Vietnam.

Thach Thuol, a **Khmer Krom Buddhist**, was arrested in May 2013 for allegedly fleeing abroad to act against the people’s government. In September 2013 he was sentenced to **six years in prison**. He was the head monk of Ta Set Pagoda, often speaking against the authorities’ mistreatment of Khmer Krom Buddhists. This led to an order of the government to defrock him.

Nguyen Van Minh, a **Hoa Hao Buddhist**, was arrested in July 2011 and sentenced to **eleven years in prison** for allegedly ‘carrying out activities aimed at overthrowing the people’s administration’ (Penal Code Article 79). Despite the fact that he suffers from low-blood

¹⁴ Other Buddhists have been arrested and sentenced to prison terms as human rights defenders but the lack of access to reliable information did not allow *Human Rights Without Frontiers* to check the nature of their activities and the veracity of the official accusations. It was also difficult to identify cases in which the victims were imprisoned for purely exercising their freedom of religion. A margin of error is not excluded in the selected cases.

¹⁵ Twenty-one, including: One Dan Dai Dao, one Bia Son, five Hoa Hao, two Khmer Krom, one member of the Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam and others.

pressure and other illnesses, his family has been prohibited from visiting and supplying him with the minimal necessities.

For more information about the persecution of Buddhists in Vietnam in 2017, see our website <http://hrwf.eu/newsletters/forb/>. For more information about Buddhist prisoners, see <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>.

Conclusions

China's suppression of the teachings and practices of Tibetan Buddhism aims to eliminate an integral part of Tibet's cultural and national identity. In this sense, the Tibetans' claim to self-determination and independence for their people is closely linked to the preservation of their cultural and religious identity. At the same time, China asserts that Tibet is a part of the People's Republic and that it rightfully maintains control over the region. In order to ensure this power, China considers it necessary to police all political and religious activities in Tibet. Any mass movement that could lead to Tibet's independence could ruin business and public relations between the two countries in the future.

Regardless of the political status of Tibet in respect to the Chinese government, it is clear that freedom of religion or belief is systematically curtailed by the Chinese authorities in the region today. The government actively promotes atheism in an attempt to undermine the Dalai Lama's influence. Severe controls are imposed on monasteries and nunneries, religious pilgrimages are limited, and acquiring a religious education remains difficult. Freedom of speech, press, association, and religion are methodically obstructed and restricted.

Moreover, the discrimination faced by Tibetans in terms of education, employment, health care, and legal representation is a consequence of the concerted campaign to marginalise, isolate, and assimilate Tibetans in ways that allow the Chinese authorities to control them politically. The Tibetan flag and national anthem are strictly banned. Anyone found in possession of a picture of the Dalai Lama can be subjected to arrest, torture and imprisonment.

Vietnam has repressive policies toward Buddhists whom authorities consider to be dissident influences in society. Thich Quang Do, the leader of the banned United Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam, under house arrest since 1998, stresses that his situation is not unique for religious and civil society activists in Vietnam: *'All who dare to speak out for human rights face harassment, intimidation, surveillance or detention,'* he said during an interview. *'Plain-clothed security agents ruthlessly beat young men and women in order to frighten them and reduce them to silence.'* Any threat to power, real or perceived, is summarily suppressed.

Authorities sometimes raise the objection that a state has a responsibility to ensure the stability of its government and the security of its citizens. However, whenever the state sacrifices fundamental freedoms in order to maintain power, it is a serious breach of democratic principles, at the expense of the people it professes to protect.

Roman Catholics

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest body of Christians with more than 1.2 billion members worldwide. The term ‘Catholic’ (from Greek καθολικισμός, meaning ‘throughout the whole’) applies broadly to the beliefs and practices of particular churches that claim continuity with the apostles. The term ‘Roman’ designates those Catholics who are in full communion with the Bishop of Rome, widely known as the Pope.

The Pope (Latin *papa* for ‘father’) is the jurisdictional head of the Catholic Church in Rome, an authority that the Church claims has been handed down in unbroken succession from apostolic times. The Gospel of Matthew (16:19) asserts that Jesus entrusted St Peter with ‘the keys of the kingdom of heaven,’ thereby designating him the chief apostle who would eventually become the first Bishop of Rome. Roman Catholics accept the supremacy of the Pope on all matters of faith and doctrine.

However, the doctrine of papal supremacy has been vigorously contested over the course of its history, leading to conflicts, schisms, and harsh measures to contain dissent. Not surprisingly, any claim to universal authority is bound to draw the ire of conflicting interests, whether in the religious sphere or the political. Historically, the papacy has fostered a climate that allowed the Church to amass considerable power and form unsavoury alliances with monarchs, tyrants and oppressive institutions. In effect, the Roman Catholic Church has perpetuated the culture of imperial Rome, from which it acquired its institutional character.

In modern times, the power that the Church once wielded has been sharply reduced. Even still, its image as a powerful and influential institution persists, whether real or perceived. In fact, the ‘Holy See’ (*Sancta Sedes* in Latin) functions as a sovereign state, maintains diplomatic relations with other states and is recognised as a sovereign entity under international law. This has been problematic for governments that host Roman Catholics in their countries and view loyalty to the Holy See as incompatible with loyalty to the state.

Teachings

The principal teachings of the Roman Catholic Church are shared by other Catholic traditions, which are summarised in the Nicene Creed and the Apostles’ Creed. These include a belief in one God, the Holy Trinity, and the centrality of Christ, the Son of God and Redeemer of the world.

The Church also shares with other Catholic traditions a liturgical and sacramental approach to its common worship, allowing for wide variances in its cultural expression. The central celebration of all Catholics is the Holy Eucharist, the sacrament in which believers are said to share in the very life of Christ, who is present in the bread and the wine that is shared.

Catholic social teaching places great emphasis on works of mercy and justice, which finds lively and diverse expression in many countries throughout the world. The Roman Church is the largest non-governmental provider of education and medical services in the world.

However, the most clearly definable difference between Roman Catholicism and all other Christian traditions is one of authority. The Church maintains that Christ gave authority to his apostles and their successors to defend ‘the deposit of faith,’ which circumscribes matters of doctrine and practice for the faithful.

Controversies

The Roman Catholic Church is one of the oldest religious institutions in the world and has played a prominent role in the history of Western civilisation. This alone has drawn suspicion of the Church being an agent of Western influence and, consequently, a target for suppression. Moreover, the Church acts as a sovereign state entity in the form of the Holy See, having a centralised government, keeping diplomatic relations with other states, and even having its own sovereign territory, officially known as the Vatican City State.

It is the Church’s position as a sovereign state in international affairs that has provoked friction with some other states in the modern era. Notably, the government in **China** established in 1957 the *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association* (CCPA), a group which seeks to place all Catholic Church structures under the sole authority of the Chinese state. The following year Pope Pius XII condemned the activities of the CCPA and declared that Roman Catholic bishops participating in the consecration of CCPA-appointed bishops would be excommunicated.

Religious associations in China must be registered with the government or else face the possibility of suppression. The Religious Affairs Bureau exercises supervision over the activities of the CCPA. All Catholic structures that remain loyal to Rome are under ‘foreign influence’ and, therefore, outlawed. The Chinese authorities only recognise those clerics who openly declare their independence from the Vatican and swear allegiance to the communist regime. As a result, all other Roman Catholic churches and clerics have been forced underground.

In **Pakistan**, Roman Catholics are also victims, alongside other Christians and Muslims, of the social abuse of the blasphemy laws.

Roman Catholics in Prison

China

In **China**, most Catholic clerics, priests and bishops who were arrested have been missing for many years. There were no official charges and no trial. Their whereabouts are unknown. They had prioritized their loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church in Rome and the Pope and/or refused to join the *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association* controlled by the Communist Party.

Fr. CUI Tai, an underground priest of the diocese of Xuanhua (Hebei), disappeared while in police custody on 22nd June 2011 after members of the government's Religious Affairs Bureau dragged him away from home. Since that time there has been no information on his whereabouts.

Fr. GAO Jiangping was arrested on 31st January 2012. He is the diocesan administrator of the Diocese of Suiyuan (Inner Mongolia), a structure of the Catholic Church that refuses to join the state-sanctioned *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association*. He has been missing since his arrest. The charges are unknown.

Msgr. James Su ZHIMIN (85), an underground bishop of Baoding (Hebei), was arrested in Baoding (Hebei Province) in 1997. The charges remain unknown, but he was considered a 'counter-revolutionary.' Since the 1950s he has refused to join the *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association*. In all he has already spent 40 years in captivity. He was last seen by his relatives in 2003 in a hospital surrounded by police.

Fr. LIU Honggen, an underground priest of the diocese of Baoding (Hebei), was arrested in December 2006 for refusing to join the *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association*. He was released in August 2015 after spending eight years in prison without trial. He was reportedly arrested again later on and has not been seen since.

Thaddeus MA Daqin (Bishop of Shanghai), former vice-chair of the *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association*, has been under house arrest at the Sheshan Regional Seminary in a Shanghai suburb since 7th July 2012 after resigning from the *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association*.

TIAN Dalong was arrested in October 2013 for organizing catechism classes for adults in Qinyuan county, Baoding municipality, Hebei province. He has been missing since his arrest.

Shao ZHUMIN Peter (54) from Wenzhou (Zhejiang) disappeared on 18th May 2017 after being invited to the office for religious affairs in the city. His whereabouts remain unknown.

Pakistan

Muslims, Christians and others have all been victimised by Pakistan's blasphemy laws. Contravening these laws can result in death or life imprisonment as stipulated in Section 295-A, B, C and 298-A, B, C of the Penal Code. In practice people are sentenced to death are not put to death but incarcerated indefinitely.

Human Rights Without Frontiers has identified a series of cases concerning Christians who were sentenced to life imprisonment in blasphemy cases; however, the sources of information often fail to mention if they were Roman Catholic, Anglican or Protestant Christians. See details at <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>

Conclusions

Over the centuries Roman Catholics have had a long history of suffering and repression for multiple reasons. In our times it is especially in China that they are officially restricted in their activities for their purely religious activities. According to Chinese officials, these restrictions are necessary to contain the potential threat which Catholics remaining loyal to Rome pose to the ideology and authority of the state. It is extremely doubtful that the Roman Catholic Church or the Vatican City State could mount a significant challenge to China; however, Chinese policy is sometimes more strongly shaped by political paranoia than it is by good sense. More than half century on from the hardening of government restrictions on religion, a review of China's position toward such groups is long overdue.

Erfan-e Halghe Followers

Inter-universal mysticism (Erfan-e Halghe) is a spiritual movement that was developed more than thirty years ago in Iran by Mohammad Ali Taheri. This new movement promotes awareness and methodologies for achieving Inter-universal consciousness, which are consistent with the teachings of Islam, says Taheri. Even still, the Iranian government has sought to actively repress the spread of Erfan-e Halghe, claiming that Taheri is ‘acting against national security’ and guilty of ‘corruption on earth.’

Iran imposes its own interpretation of Islamic rules and teachings, leaving no room for divergent viewpoints on religion. Erfan-e Halghe teachings go beyond the formal and official practices of Shia Islam and seek to provide more depth and spiritual vitality to its followers. Taheri has known considerable success in propagating his ideas, even in the face of government opposition which perceives the movement as a threat to the stability and power of the state.

Erfan-e Halghe may have as many as 20,000 trainers worldwide. Millions of people have been exposed to the practical applications of Inter-universal mysticism. In 2006, Taheri established an art and culture institute in Tehran to more effectively transmit his teachings as well as to treat patients. However, the institute was forcibly closed in August 2010.

Teachings

Part of Erfan-e Halghe’s appeal is its integrative approach that brings together both the theory and practice of mystical experience. It does not negate the importance of formal prayers but urges practitioners to go deeper into the meaning of the prayers beyond their mere recitation. In this way, the movement reveals the influence of Sufism. Its teachings are universal in scope and accessible to anyone, irrespective of race, nationality, education or religious beliefs.

Erfan-e Halghe features two complementary approaches to healing: Faradarmani, which focuses on the treatment of physical disease, and Psymtology, which uses holistic psychology to address psychiatric disorders. The final aim of Taheri’s teachings is to help people achieve *Kamal*: spiritual wholeness and collective awareness. *Kamal* is only achieved collectively, says Taheri; it cannot be pursued as just an individual affair. Each follower of Erfan-e Halghe must take care to tend the overall well-being of the community and society at large to reach the state of *Kamal*.

Taheri insists that his teachings correspond perfectly to the ideals and teachings of Islam. His writings are peppered with references to Islamic literature and verse, while offering a fresh and in-depth interpretation of what has always been part of Islamic tradition. His website declares that he is ready to defend his ideas to anyone who wishes to discuss them. However, the day following this post, Mohammad Ali Taheri was arrested.

Controversies

Objections to Inter-universalism have been mainly of a theological character. The teachings of Mohammad Ali Taheri mount a challenge to many religious matters on which the Iranian government has taken a position. In general, he has taught that Muslims should not be content to fulfil the outward requirements of religious practice but should also tend to the condition of their inner selves. Taheri has also placed himself at odds with the official Iranian interpretation of the application of Islamic criminal law, including apostasy and blasphemy.

The popularity and expansion of the Erfan-e Halghe movement has been perceived as a threat by the authorities. Taheri has tried to present a non-violent and peaceful image of Islam, frequently referring to God's mercy and love. Of course, Iranian clerics would not reject the idea of God's goodness or mercy, but they would also underscore the principle of divine judgement in their attempts to uphold Islamic rule.

Taheri's teachings have had particular appeal to youth, who perceive the official position on these matters to be violent and intrusive. Shortly after the forced closure of the offices of Erfan-e Halghe in 2010, Ayatollah Khamenei gave a speech where he stated that fake schools of mysticism are enemies and tools that undermine religion among youth in the society.

States-funded news agencies have described Taheri's movement as "*fergh-e zalle*" (false cult), and government websites have defamed Taheri and his followers in various ways. For example, Erfan-e Halghe followers have been accused of practicing exorcism and explaining disease and illness by the presence of a ghost in the body.

Erfan-e Halghe Leader and Followers in Prison

Mohammad Ali Taheri was arrested on 4th May 2011 by officials linked to Iran's Revolutionary Guards and held incommunicado for nine months in Section 2A of Evin Prison. On 30th October 2011, Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran convicted him of 'insulting Islamic sanctities' and sentenced him to five years' imprisonment. In addition to his prison term, Taheri was sentenced to seventy-four lashes on the charge of 'committing a religiously forbidden act' by holding the hands of one of his female followers in the course of a healing session.

Article 513 of Iran's Islamic Penal Code provides that 'anyone who insults Islamic sanctities or any of the Great Prophets or [12] Shia Imams or the Holy Fatima shall be executed if the insult is considered *saab ul-nabi*; otherwise, they shall be sentenced to one to five years' imprisonment.' Such offences do not directly involve *saab ul-nabi* (deliberately denigrating Prophet Mohammad), a crime punishable by death under the Islamic Penal Code; however, the authorities have continued to threaten Taheri with death, apparently based on religious fatwas that order the killing of apostates.

According to Fars News Agency, forty followers of Erfan-e Halghe were arrested on 6th February 2015. Among them, sixteen instructors of movement were convicted of committing

crimes. They were sentenced to a total of thirty-seven years in prison for insulting the sacred and to fines amounting to 130 million Toman for acquiring illicit wealth. According to HRANA News Agency, on 24th August 2015, a group of Erfan-e Halghe activists was also arrested in Qom after nine days of peaceful protest against the death sentence of Taheri.

Other Erfan-e Halghe followers have also been arrested at various different times and places: **Mohammadreza AFSHAR, Fahime A'RAFI, Saeed ARDESHIR, Ziba POUR-HABIB, Ardeshir SHAHNAVAZ, and Masoumeh ZIA.** These have been accused of insulting the sacred, corruption of earth, blasphemy, obtaining illicit wealth and interference in medical affairs. They were sentenced to prison terms from two to five years. For more details, see our Prisoners' List at <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>.

Conclusions

Erfan-e Halghe is a new religious movement within Islam. It does not advocate violence or directly challenge the legitimacy of the ruling authorities. It represents no threat to the political and social order of Iranian society. However, in a theocratic political regime such as Iran's, any deviation from the official theology of the regime is subjected to harsh repression.

Because Iran is a State Party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, it should respect its obligations under this instrument. According to article 18 of the ICCPR, States Parties are obliged to respect and protect the freedom of religion and belief of all citizens.

According to General Comment number 29, the principle of legality requires that 'both criminal liability and punishment being limited to clear and precise provisions in the law that were in place and applicable at the time the act or omission took place.'¹⁶ Iranian criminal law does not clearly define apostasy.

Moreover, according to paragraph 48 of General Comment 34 released by the Human Rights Committee, 'prohibition of displays of lack of respect for a religion or other belief system, including blasphemy laws, are incompatible with the Covenant...' also 'it would be impermissible for any such laws to discriminate in favour of or against one or certain religions or belief systems, or their adherents over another, or religious believers over non-believers. Nor would it be permissible for such prohibitions to be used to prevent or punish criticism of religious leaders or commentary on religious doctrine and tenets of faith.'

On 14th October 2015, members of the International Organisation to Preserve Human Rights in Iran met with Members of the European Parliament and ask them to sign a petition demanding the Iranian government stop the illegal execution of Mr. Taheri.¹⁷

¹⁶ <https://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/gencomm/hrc29.html>

¹⁷ <http://hriiran.com/en/section-blog/58-meetings/6303-members-of-iophr-meet-meps-to-demand-release-of-dr-taheri-and-stop-human-rights-violations-in-iran.html>

In its negotiations with Iran, the EU should raise the dire situation of human rights in Iran. Paragraph 53 of the EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief provides that ‘the EU will ensure that EU institutions and Member States visiting third countries are fully briefed on the situation of freedom of religion or belief.’ According to paragraph 57 of this document EU Member States will consider the violations of freedom of religion or belief in their agreements with third countries. They can include suspension of cooperation as a measure under human rights clauses in the agreement.¹⁸

¹⁸ http://eu-un.europa.eu/articles/en/article_13685_en.htm

Falun Gong

The Falun Gong movement (or *Falun Dafa*) began in 1992 in north-eastern China, where Master Li Hongzhi presented teachings on the healing and health benefits of the ancient Chinese practice of Qigong. When he first revealed his way of thinking he was a government-registered teacher of Qigong. Li appealed to the teachings of classical religious traditions – to Taoism and Buddhism in particular – to construct in Falun Gong a system of beliefs and practices which focus on the cultivation of compassion and virtue in pursuit of human wholeness. He incorporated much of that teaching in his own work but also emphasized moral values and the development of character. He focused on three tenets: truthfulness, compassion and forbearance.

In the 1990s, Li travelled across China, giving classes in Falun Gong to audiences ranging from a few hundred to several thousand. Li's first book appeared in 1993 and his first teaching video in 1994. His reputation spread with astonishing speed. By 1999, the government estimated the number of Falun Gong practitioners at 70 million.

At that time, Falun Gong was not politically controversial but China, as a totalitarian state, considers any unofficial and unauthorized organization a menace. It could develop as a parallel power within the one-party state. With its commitment to truthfulness, it could begin denouncing the rampant corruption across the country. Such thoughts triggered Beijing to start a propaganda campaign against Falun Gong in 1999. It closed down Internet access to websites that mentioned Falun Gong and denounced Falun Gong as a “heretical organization,” and a threat to social stability.

When those initial measures failed to stunt the movement, the government imprisoned hundreds of thousands of practitioners, subjecting them to forced labor and sometimes torture.

By the late 1990s, Li's movement had spread to most Chinese cities and to overseas centres in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and the United States. Li Hongzhi left China in 1995 to give lectures to large crowds in several major cities around the world. In 1996, he settled in New York, where the Falun Gong movement has established a global media presence through its newspaper, website *Epoch Times*, and *New Tang Dynasty* Television station.

As there are no formalised membership records maintained by Falun Gong, only rough estimates are available for the numbers of practitioners worldwide. At the peak of its popularity in China, there were an estimated seventy million adherents. Inside China today, some sources estimate that tens of millions continue to practice Falun Gong in spite of harsh persecution.

Hundreds of thousands are estimated to practice it outside China in over seventy countries worldwide. Li often lectures at conferences of Falun Gong Experience Sharing. In May 2017, in Brooklyn, he led a conference of 10,000 practitioners from fifty-eight countries.

Teachings

Falun Gong traces its roots to practices that reach far into Chinese antiquity. These techniques focus on the transformation of the individual through the cultivation of *qi*, the life force that permeates the universe. Master Li's teachings focus on letting go of negative attachments, cultivating virtue, and countering harmful karma. Through one's own intentional effort and everyday experiences, practitioners can increase in virtue and find spiritual resources for surmounting difficulties and positively influencing society.

Li teaches that the aim of the founders of world religions, such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity, sought not to establish religions per se but to 'guide cultivation techniques,' which Falun Gong continues and surpasses in depth. Master Li is presented as a Buddha figure that has come to guide humanity in this age of social degradation towards enlightenment and peace.

It is not uncommon for Falun Gong practitioners to meet regularly for group exercises, the study of Master Li's teachings, and to discuss their experiences.

Controversies

Chinese policy on religion is governed by the State Administration for Religious Affairs, which requires all religious groups and venues to affiliate with a government-approved association.

The Qigong movement was considered distinct from religion and beneficial to society. The China Qigong Research Society (CQRS) was established, and Falun Gong was admitted as a sub-branch.

Despite this initial involvement, Master Li declined later requests to strengthen state ties through the formation of a Falun Gong patriotic organisation. Under mounting pressure to do so, Falun Gong withdrew from the CQRS in 1996.

The turn of the new century brought growing scepticism regarding Qigong and related practices in China, which the state media increasingly reported as superstitious and harmful to practitioners and society. Falun Gong adherents mobilised to peacefully petition for media sources to retract their criticism of the movement. Other practitioners of Qigong-related groups did likewise; however, the Falun Gong proved to be the most organised and frequently successful campaigners, making them particularly susceptible to government repression.

On 25th April 1999, the week after a demonstration was broken up by police, some 10,000 protesters sat quietly outside of the Chinese Communist Party headquarters in Beijing to call for an end to the harassment of Falun Gong and the release of Falun Gong detainees.

Representatives of the group met with the Chinese Premier, Zhu Rongji, and demonstrators dispersed the following day.

On 22nd July 1999, Falun Gong was banned in China as an ‘illegal organisation’ and an ‘evil cult.’

In the three months prior to the ban, the Central Committee had established the ‘6-10 Office’ with the sole mission of cracking down on the movement. Falun Gong was said to have overstepped the boundaries of religious freedom, and a plan was adopted for its dissolution and the ‘transformation’ of its followers. The appellation 6-10 made reference to the date of the agency’s creation.

The 6-10 Office was given powers well beyond what is authorised under the Chinese Constitution. Its authority reached to every administrative level in the Party and all other political and judicial systems. It also reached all Chinese cities, villages, governmental agencies, institutions, and schools. Its duties have since expanded to include other ‘heretical cult organisations.’

The office began ‘detoxifying’ party members that had become partial to Falun Gong, either practitioners themselves or merely sympathisers. Numerous arrests were made of suspected Falun Gong leaders. In the first month after the ban, an aggressive media campaign criticised the group in state-run newspapers and on television.

In January 2000, several individuals attempted to commit suicide by self-immolation in Tiananmen Square, a practice that has been employed by Tibetan Buddhist to protest the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Two of them subsequently died. The state media reported that they were Falun Gong practitioners. Falun Gong spokespersons overseas denied that the protesters could be authentic members of their movement since their principles uphold the sanctity of life. Regardless, wide media reporting of this incident contributed to discredit the group in the minds of many Chinese citizens.

Practitioners are often confronted in their workplace and targeted in academic settings. School books denounce the movement, students can be expelled for practicing Falun Gong or for being related to someone who does, and questions regarding Falun Gong have reportedly appeared in college entrance examinations.

Since the ban, numerous followers have been imprisoned. Independent sources have confirmed tens of thousands of arrests, while acknowledging that the actual amount is likely to be much higher. Practitioners are often detained without any official charges, although when declared, they are usually brought under Article 300 of the criminal code, which prohibits the formation of ‘superstitious sects, secret societies and weird religious organisations.’ Sentences are between three and seven years imprisonment, even longer in ‘especially serious’ circumstances. It is not uncommon for Falun Gong practitioners to be sentenced with little to no legal representation and many trials are held in secret.

Considerable alarm has risen over Falun Gong prisoners held in ‘black jails’, drug rehabilitation centres, and ‘brainwashing centres,’ which fall directly under the authority of the

6-10 Office. The Falun Dafa Information Centre has documented over 63,000 cases in which re-education has included hard labour, physical beatings, sexual abuse, psychological trauma and psychiatric and physical torture.

Accusations have also been made against the government of China for systematically participating in the killing of prisoners for the purpose of selling their organs for high profit on the transplant market. In fact, the organ transplant trade has been booming in China since the beginning of the Falun Gong suppression in 1999.

In 2006, two Canadian human rights authors, David Kilgour and David Matas, conducted an investigation of widely believed stories that Chinese authorities had been responsible for “large-scale organ seizures from unwilling Falun Gong practitioners” to supply the Chinese implant trade. China has consistently denied this charge but Kilgour and Matas discovered among other facts that the authorities could not, or would not, explain the source of some 41,500 organs transplanted by Chinese surgeons. For years, Falun Gong practitioners have been denouncing this practice. They have engaged in an international propaganda war with the Chinese Communist Party and have become some of the most ardent critics of the Chinese government.

Some analysts have suggested that the persecution of Falun Gong is part ideological and part political. As a metaphysical system, Falun Gong is a direct affront to the communist-atheist ideology of the Chinese state. It is also political in that the movement, although posing no substantial threat to the Chinese government, lies nonetheless outside the control of the communist centralised system and is therefore suspect and perceived as dangerous.

Falun Gong Practitioners in Prison

The Falun Gong movement is the world’s most persecuted religious/ spiritual denomination by a single country. For years, their website minghui.org¹⁹ has been documenting thousands of cases of arrest, imprisonment, disappearance, torture, killing, and organ harvesting.

China is the only country where Falun Gong practitioners are perceived as a threat by the state, repressed and put in prison.

Human Rights Without Frontiers has documented over 1200 cases (more than twice the amount of cases recorded during 2016) of detained Falun Gong practitioners in our Prisoners’ List (See <http://hrwf.eu/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>). The usual sentence is between three and seven years, but in certain circumstances individuals have received sentences as long as twelve or seventeen years.

¹⁹ English version: <http://en.minghui.org/cc/10/>

Ye Jianguo arrested five times and sentenced to more than eleven years in prison

Ye Jianguo was sentenced to 11½ years in prison by the Jianyang District Court in 2013 for his affiliation with Falun Gong. In Jiazhou Prison, the guards have attempted to re-educate him by forcing him to listen to and read materials defaming Falun Gong. They ordered him to write statements denouncing his belief.

Since 1999, he had been arrested at least five times.

Twin sisters arrested and imprisoned in Xinjiang for five years

Twin sisters Wang Wen and Wang Jing from Changji City in Xinjiang Autonomous Region were arrested on 6th March 2015 for practicing Falun Gong. The 51-year-old sisters both work as accountants.

Wang Jing was tried on 13th October and Wang Wen on 6th November. The prosecutor alleged that Wang Jing had sent text messages promoting Falun Gong. She told the judge that practicing Falun Gong is not a crime. Her lawyer disputed the evidence against Wang Jing, for the prosecution could not provide a key piece of evidence: the SIM card that Ms. Wang Jing allegedly used to send the messages.

Despite the holes in the evidence, Wang Wen was detained in Liudaowan Detention Center in Urumqi City and Wang Jing in Changji Detention Center.

This has not been the first time the sisters have faced sanctions for their belief in Falun Gong. In 2003 officers from the Changji 6-10 Office had sent them to re-education classes, where various torture methods are used to force practitioners into renouncing their beliefs. Wang Wen was also sentenced in 2010 to fifteen days in detention after she had talked to a security guard about Falun Gong.

The twins' elder sister, Gong Xiaojuan, a former mathematics teacher at Changji Teachers' University, was sentenced to five years in prison in 2015 for practicing Falun Gong.

Li Kai: Sentenced to 3 ½ years and harassed by the police

Li Kai has been arrested several times in the last five years for practicing Falun Gong. Most recently, in July 2015, he was watching TV at home when a group of police officers broke in and took him away. Less than two months later, he was sentenced to 3 ½ years in prison for refusing to give up his Falun Gong spiritual practice.

The police refused to disclose where Mr. Li was detained, despite repeated requests from his family. The court did not notify the family of his two hearings in September 2015.

Gao Qinmei: 4 years in prison and family visits denied

As of 31st December 2017, Ms. Gao Qinmei has already spent a total of eight years in prison. As a practitioner of Falun Gong, she has been constantly harassed, arrested, detained and sent to prison several times throughout her life. During her most recent court trial, in July 2013, she

was sentenced to **four years in prison** and was sent to Shanghai Women's Prison. Visits from her family have been repeatedly denied.

Liang Baofan: 4 years in prison and pressure to renounce his faith

Mr. Liang Baofan, a 52-year-old man, was arrested on 17th June 2015, and sentenced to four years in prison during a secret trial that took place on 4th March 2016. His family had no knowledge of his whereabouts until early 2017, when they discovered that he was held in Gongzhuling Prison in Jilin Province. Thereafter, his family tried on several occasions to visit him but were repeatedly denied access because he would refuse to renounce his belief in Falun Gong. It was not until September 2017 that his wife was allowed to visit him – for *five* minutes.

Four Falun Gong practitioners imprisoned for 3 years for “talking to people about the persecution of Falun Gong”

On 22nd April 2014, Mr. Wang Zhanqing, Ms. Wen Jie, Mr. Ma Weishan, and Mr. Kang Jingtai from Sanhe City, Hebei Province, were arrested for speaking about the harassment and oppression suffered by Falun Gong. Nineteen months after their arrest, they received the following sentences: Wang Zhanqing (six years in prison), Wen Jie and Ma Weishan (five years in prison) and Kang Jingtai (three years in prison, with three years of probation). All their appeals were dismissed on 13th May 2016.

Conclusions

The severe repression of Falun Gong by the Chinese government has not shown signs of slowing. Indeed, the 2015 National Security Law has further tightened control on illegal ‘cult organisations,’ contributing to the troubling state of human rights overall in China. Movements like Falun Gong carry an enormous appeal for the millions of Chinese citizens who have grown weary of their country's limitations on basic freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This is precisely the fear that persists in Beijing's corridors of power.

Jehovah's Witnesses

Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916) is regarded as the originator of the Bible Student movement of the late 19th century in the United States. Russell believed that traditional churches had abandoned the faith of the 'primitive church', and restoration of true Christianity could be achieved through a more literal reading of the Bible and a sincere devotion to following its teachings. The Bible Student movement spawned several independent student associations, including one which would later become the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Jehovah's Witnesses take their name from what was once believed to be the holy name of God referenced in the Hebrew Bible. In the 19th century 'Jehovah' was thought to be the pronunciation of YHWH or JHVH, an English transliteration of the divine name which appears frequently in the Old Testament. Joining this term with a passage from the prophet Isaiah, 'You are my witnesses that I am God' (43:12), the organisation would eventually be known as Jehovah's Witnesses.

Jehovah's Witnesses are now present in 240 countries and territories, with a worldwide membership of more than 8.2 million active evangelists. In Europe, there are more than 16,000 congregations and 1.5 million active members.

Witnesses are especially known for their door-to-door evangelism and the wide distribution of the group's literature, notably *The Watchtower* magazine and *Awake!*. Attendance at conventions can reach more than 15 million, and the denomination's annual Memorial attendance, observing Christ's death, nearly 20 million.

Jehovah's Witnesses are directed by its Governing Body, based in Brooklyn, New York, which establishes all doctrines and interpretations of the Bible. They prefer to use their own translation, calling them the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*.

Since their beginnings, Jehovah's Witnesses have been repressed by several governments, most notably:

- the Nazi regime in Germany and in countries under Nazi control between 1933 and 1945. They were sent to concentration camps and sentenced to death, sometimes by decapitation.
- Communist regimes between 1917 and 1989;
- the fascist regimes in Spain and Portugal until the 1970s;
- and the imperial regime of Japan and other dictatorships.

Jehovah's Witnesses are mostly imprisoned for their refusal to perform military service in countries where there is no alternative civilian service, for sharing their beliefs in the public space, and for proselytising.

Where there are victims of arrests, prison sentences and discrimination, Witnesses will actively litigate, thus helping to shape jurisprudence related to freedom of religion or belief in many countries throughout the world.

Teachings

Consistent with its origins in the teachings of Charles Taze Russell, Jehovah's Witnesses claim to recover the truths of the 'primitive church.' They place particular emphasis on the Second Coming of Christ and the final judgement of those who reject his message. They believe that one day the earth will be destroyed and Paradise will be restored according to God's plan for creation.

The Jehovah's Witnesses adhere to several distinctive doctrines and practices which differ significantly from those of the majority of professing Christians. For example, they reject the orthodox Christian belief in the Trinity and refuse to observe traditionally Christian holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, which they consider to be of pagan origins or otherwise incompatible with the Christian faith.

Witnesses are generally moderate in their lifestyle and refrain from smoking, the abuse of alcohol, and sexual relations outside of marriage. They strive to be good citizens, respectful toward authorities, and law-abiding, except in cases where the law conflicts with their conscience as Christians. They usually cooperate with government efforts to promote the general welfare of society.

Controversies

A number of beliefs and practices of Jehovah's Witnesses have been perceived negatively by governments and societies, leading to various types of hostility.

Military service: Jehovah's Witnesses seek to remain politically neutral and conscientiously refuse to participate in military service. They refuse to kill and receive training on how to kill.

They do, however, accept to perform alternative civilian service in hospitals, homes for elderly people, and other institutions serving society on the condition that it is not under the authority of the ministry of defence. They also refuse to salute national flags.

Proselytising: Discussions about the Bible on doorsteps and public distribution of their religious publications are well-known activities of Jehovah's Witnesses. They develop missionary activities in their close social environment but also publicly and from house to house. To share their faith and values with others is an essential part of their commitment. This right is recognized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights. The right to proselytise has been recognised by the European Court of Human Rights in the case *Kokkinakis v. Greece* (1993).

Blood transfusion: Jehovah's Witnesses do not teach their members to refuse medical treatment, but they reject transfusions of another person's blood for religious reasons. They claim that medical research currently encourages effective alternatives to blood transfusions.

In the case of minors, medical doctors can ignore the opposition of the parents in the best interest of the child, with or without a court decision, according to the legislation of the country. There are no recent known cases of Jehovah's Witnesses who would have been sentenced by a court for non-assistance to a minor in such situations.

The basis for this position is a scriptural admonition to 'abstain from blood.' National branches of the movement have identified hospitals and medical staff that practice bloodless surgery to which their members can be referred in order to receive the healthcare corresponding to their beliefs. Jehovah's Witnesses encourage and promote research about bloodless surgery and have been involved in the formulation of scientific, ethical, and legal documentation in this field.

The European Court and domestic courts of EU member states recognise the right of adult patients to freely choose their medical treatment and not to be submitted to coercive medical treatment.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Prison

In 2017, most Jehovah's Witnesses were in prison for refusing to perform military service, organising religious meetings in private homes, and sharing their beliefs with others.

As of October 2017, fifty-five Jehovah's Witnesses were imprisoned in harsh conditions in **Eritrea**. They were held in detention for conscientious objection, religious meetings in private houses or for undisclosed reasons.

As of September 2017, nine young Jehovah's Witnesses in **Singapore** were still serving prison sentences of thirty-nine months in the Armed Forces Detention Barracks for their conscientious objection to military service.

As of 31st August 2017, 318 young Jehovah's Witnesses²⁰ in **South Korea** were serving **18-month prison terms for conscientious objection to military service**. From the Korean War period to the present, South Korea has relentlessly prosecuted young Witness men who refuse military service and has not provided an alternative to resolve the issue. During this period, South Korea has sentenced more than 18,000 Witnesses to a combined total of around 35,000 years in prison for refusing to perform military service. No provision is made for alternative service.

²⁰ See full list of prisoners here <http://www.jw.org/en/news/legal/by-region/south-korea/jehovahs-witnesses-in-prison/>

In **Turkmenistan**, two Jehovah's Witnesses were still in prison in 2017. **Bahram Hemdemov** was arrested on 14th March 2015 for allegedly fomenting social, national or religious strife. He claims that he was hosting a religious meeting. On 19th May 2015, he was sentenced to **four years in a labour camp**.

Mansur Masharipov was arrested on 30th June 2016 for allegedly assaulting a police officer. He denies the charges and says that he was targeted for his faith. On 18th August 2016, he was sentenced to **one year in prison**. He was released on 12th May 2017.

In **Kazakhstan**, Teymur Akhmedov (61 years old) was arrested on 18th January 2017 for allegedly inciting religious discord and advocating religious superiority. He denies the charges, claiming they were fabricated. On 2nd May 2017 he was sentenced to **five years in prison in a general regime labour camp**. The Judge also banned him from conducting "ideological/preaching activity in the area of religion" for three years after the end of his sentence. On 20th June 2017, his appeal was rejected. He is suffering from cancer and needs hospitalisation.

In **Russia**, **Dennis Christensen** (44 years old), a Danish national and EU citizen, was arrested on 25th May 2017 by armed officers from the Federal Security Service (FSB) in a raid on a private worship service of Jehovah's Witnesses. He was arrested alongside some fifty other worshippers who were later released without charge.

The raid and arrest came after Russia's Supreme Court banned the Jehovah's Witnesses in April, designating the group as an "extremist organization." Christensen is the first person to be detained following this ruling. This is also the first time that a Jehovah's Witness has been jailed in the country since the Soviet Union era.

According to a Jehovah's Witnesses spokesman in Russia: "They arrested him merely for reading the Bible". If convicted of being a member of an extremist organization, Dennis could face between six and ten years in prison under Article 282.2, part 1 of the Criminal Code.

In May 2017, the Sovietsky District Court ordered him to be held in pre-trial detention for two months. An appeal was lodged to a higher court following that decision. Since his arrest, his pre-trial detention has been extended several times and at the end of the year, he remained in detention.

For more information about the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in 2017, see our website <http://hrwf.eu/newsletters/forb/>. For more information about Jehovah's Witnesses prisoners, see <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>.

Conclusions

Jehovah's Witnesses are not engaged politically and do not pose any security threat to society. Generally, they obey the law of the land and respect authorities. At the same time, like most religious traditions, there are limits to that obedience. Jehovah's Witnesses will practice civil disobedience when laws conflict with their conscience. This has resulted in harassment, fines, and imprisonment in some countries.

Authorities in countries where Jehovah's Witnesses are present would do well to review their legal framework for such groups within their borders. Non-violent dissenters have historically brought a much-needed critique that can benefit the whole of society. When governments have tried to repress such dissent, out of fear or ignorance, they have often found themselves fighting against the tide of history. Whatever one might think of the doctrine or methods of Jehovah's Witnesses, respect and the freedom to practice their faith are clearly due them in accordance with international law and standards of human rights.

Milah Abraham/ Gafatar

Milah Abraham, also (wrongly) known as Gafatar, is a new religious movement²¹ based in Indonesia²² with roots in Islam. Milah Abraham describes itself as a new, vibrant faith that replaces fallen Islam, which in turn had replaced a decadent Christianity that had similarly supplanted Judaism. The movement claims to have over 50,000 members. Its teachings have also spread to nearby Malaysia.

The founder of this religious community is Ahmad Mushaddeq. He was born in Jakarta in 1945, in the last years of the Dutch colonial rule. During World War II, his father was taken as a forced laborer by the Japanese and never returned, while his mother abandoned him after she married another man. Ahmad Mushaddeq was raised by his deaf grandmother.

Mushaddeq studied sports science in school. He was a talented athlete. At one point, he was a coach on the Indonesian National badminton team. Though he had no formal religious education, he taught himself to read Arabic.

In 1987 he was recruited as a leader of the Islamic State of Indonesia, a hardline movement that wanted Islamic law established throughout the country, but by the turn of the millennium, he said he had a revelation conveying him that he was the Son of God.²³

Teachings

By the early 2000s, Mushaddeq proclaimed a version of a new ideology, ultimately called Milah Abraham, which argued that every Abrahamic faith eventually lost its way. Just as Judaism had given way to Christianity, and Christianity to Islam, it was Islam's turn now to give way to a new, vibrant faith, Milah Abraham. This new faith would in turn be superseded by a new iteration of Abrahamic faith centuries from now.

²¹ According to Prof. Al Makin, there are hundreds of new religious movements in Indonesia and many have faced increasing persecution since the country began transitioning to democracy in 1998. Radical and conservative Muslim groups have used hate speech towards such so-called heretical religious groups.

²² Six religious groups have been granted an official status by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Indonesia: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism.

²³ Indonesia's Sentencing of 'Son of God' Adds to Alarm Over Crackdown (New York Times, 9th March 2017)

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/world/asia/indonesia-blasphemy-laws.html?_r=1

Controversies

Fajar Nusantara Movement, or Gafatar, is a back-to-the-land communitarian movement that promoted organic farming and agricultural self-sufficiency²⁴. Its founders regarded Ahmad Mushaddeq as the Messiah who was to succeed Muhammad. Those who joined Gafatar are not all followers of Ahmad Mushaddeq, but they were encouraged to learn the teachings of Milah Abraham.

Gafatar is a Civil Society Organization (CSO) established on 14th August 2011. Gafatar was a fast-growing movement. In December 2013, it claimed to have representatives at the Regional Leadership Council (DPD) in all provinces throughout Indonesia. Gafatar was accused of having links with Al Qiyadah Al Islamiyah (Islamic Leadership)²⁵, which was declared heretical by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) and disbanded in 2007.

Human Rights Watch researcher on Indonesia Andreas Harsono²⁶ said the government and media should not mislead the public by calling Gafatar a radical Muslim group "They are exclusive, but they are not advocating violence," he told Fairfax Media. "They want to live by themselves, they want to have their own community like the Amish."

Disappearances

In 2015, objections to the movement arose over the alleged disappearance of local Indonesians. Many had left their families, without informing them, to move to the Kalimantan Province and participate in the communal agricultural project of Gafatar. This caused uproar among the public and the authorities.²⁷

On 26th January 2016, the Sydney Morning Herald²⁸ published an article about the police crackdown of the Gafatar community and mentioned that "a doctor and her six-month-old son disappeared from Yogyakarta in December. She was found two weeks later, living in a Gafatar community in West Kalimantan that had been established four months ago."

²⁴ Gafatar owned 5,000 hectares of lands in Kalimantan. The organization purchased some of them while others were voluntarily donated: <https://en.tempo.co/read/news/2016/01/20/055737834/Gafatar-Has-5000-Hectares-Land-for-Food-Security-Program>

²⁵ In 2008, al Qiyadah's leader was prosecuted under Article 156(a) of the Indonesian Penal Code (KUHP) in relation to blasphemy, and he was sentenced to four years' imprisonment.

²⁶Indonesia's Sentencing of 'Son of God' Adds to Alarm Over Crackdown (New York Times, 9th March 2017)
https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/world/asia/indonesia-blasphemy-laws.html?_r=1

²⁷ https://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1930_1458822047_g1603134.pdf

²⁸ Indonesia cracks down on 'deviant' sect Gafatar (The Sydney Morning Herald, 26th January 2016) :
<http://bit.ly/1PS3jAc>

Mr Supriyadi²⁹, another member of the movement, said he came to Monton Panjang from his home in Surabaya at the end of 2015 in order to farm: “We grow string beans and water spinach. We never stopped communicating with our family, they knew where we were. We practice the Quran just like other Muslims, we pray five times a day. We just finished building our mushola’ (Islamic prayer room).”

According to Yudhistira, a former leader of Gafatar, the people who were reported missing were participating in their agricultural program. “They were not missing, they were just participating in the program on their own voluntarily,” he said in a newspaper³⁰. Yudhistira also reminded the members who would go to Kalimantan to notify their families and relatives. However, it is up to each member to decide what to do, he said.

So far, there are about 20,000 members of Gafatar, from various religious, professional and organizational backgrounds, spread in 34 provinces. “Gafatar has also never participated in the members’ religious beliefs. That is their privacy,” said Yudhistira.

Abuse of weakness

Adi, a former Gafatar caretaker of Central Java, said Gafatar’s funding comes from donations of the members³¹. Every month, there are voluntary contributions and they can donate any amount, starting from Rp5,000 to Rp10 million, “as long as it’s sincere.”

Dwi Adiyanto³², 32, a farmer who sold his belongings to buy land with Gafatar in West Kalimantan Province on Borneo, said Milah Abraham provided him with a community and allowed him to “discover the true path for himself.” In late December 2015, Mr. Dwi was called to a local police station and was told to leave the province because Gafatar’s presence was angering locals. Not long after, Mr. Dwi’s new homestead was burned to the ground by mobs. The police then forced him and about 7,000 other members of the movement to return to their homes on other islands.

Deprogramming

The government set up a program aimed at 'deradicalizing' their members in order to reintegrate them back into their respective communities across the country. The Coordinating Human Development and Culture Ministry's acting secretary-general, Agus Sartono, said that the government would instruct respective local authorities to provide shelter for former members of Gafatar before progressing with the counselling program.³³

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ <https://en.tempoco/read/news/2016/01/20/055737834/Gafatar-Has-5000-Hectares-Land-for-Food-Security-Program>

³¹ Indonesia’s Sentencing of ‘Son of God’ Adds to Alarm Over Crackdown (New York Times, 9th March 2017) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/world/asia/indonesia-blasphemy-laws.html? r=1>

³² Ibid.

³³ Deradicalization for Gafatar, Jakarta Post, 23rd January 2016.

See <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/01/23/deradicalization-gafatar.html>

Al Makin, a professor at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University in Yogyakarta, testified as an expert witness on behalf of Milah Abraham at the trial of three leaders of the movement in 2017³⁴. “If the government keeps this policy of arresting people who are different from the mainstream, it means the government denies pluralism,” he said.

Human Rights Watch researcher Andreas Harsono³⁵ said in the aftermath of the police crackdown on the movement on 19th January 2016: "This is religious persecution. It is disturbing. Why should they be re-educated in Islam?"

Milah Abraham Members in Prison

Since 2004, more than 106 people were convicted on blasphemy charges in Indonesia. More than 25 members of the Milah Abraham movement have been convicted on blasphemy charges over the last decade, including 11 who spent time in prison. In 2016, the three leaders of the movement were sentenced to prison terms³⁶.

Detainees are often charged under:

Article 155a which punishes any person who disseminates, openly demonstrates or posts writing in which feelings of hostility, hatred or contempt against the Government of Indonesia are expressed (maximum imprisonment of four years and six months or a maximum fine of three-hundred Rupiahs³⁷);

Article 156a.b which prescribes a maximum prison sentence of five years to those who deliberately give expression to feelings or commit an act in public that intend to prevent a person from adhering to any religion;

Article 107 which punishes intent to cause a revolution, punished by a maximum imprisonment of fifteen years, with leaders and originators receiving life imprisonment or a maximum imprisonment of twenty years, and;

Article 110 which targets intent or preparation to commit a crime related to rebellion, attempt to obstruct or defeat a measure taken by the government to prevent or suppress such a crime, or attempt to coerce others to become involved in such a crime, punishable by a maximum imprisonment of six years.

Ahmad MUSHADDEQ was imprisoned for blasphemy for the first time in 2008, but was released halfway through his four-year term after he signed a letter renouncing his claim to be Muhammad’s successor. He was arrested again on 25 May 2016 alongside **Mahful Muis**

³⁴ Indonesia’s Sentencing of ‘Son of God’ Adds to Alarm Over Crackdown (New York Times, 9 March 2017) https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/world/asia/indonesia-blasphemy-laws.html?_r=1

³⁵ Deradicalization for Gafatar, Jakarta Post, 23 January 2016.

See <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/01/23/deradicalization-gafatar.html>

³⁶ <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/05/26/legal-aid-lawyers-protest-against-detention-of-ex-gafatar-members.html> ; <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/indonesia-imprisons-leaders-deviant-religious-group-blasphemy-charges-1610334>.

³⁷ Approximately €4.

TUMANURUNG and Andri CAHYA, two other leaders of the movement, for blasphemy, treason and membership in the banned Fajar Nusantara Movement (Gafatar).

On **7th March 2017**, the East Jakarta District Court sentenced **Ahmad MUSHADDEQ** to a **five-year prison term**. He was indicted on the basis of Articles 155a and 156a.b of the Criminal Code.

Andri CAHYA and **Mahful Muis TUMANURUNG** were indicted on the basis of Articles 107 and 110 of the Criminal Code. On **7th March 2017**, they were **respectively sentenced to three and five years in prison** by the East Jakarta District Court.

In **October 2016**, the Sleman District Court sentenced a couple, **Eko PURNOMO and Veni ORINANDA**, to **two years and one year in prison respectively**, for allegedly abducting a physician, Rica Tri Handayani, and luring her to join the ‘illegal’ group³⁸. They had been arrested on **30th December 2015** in Yogyakarta.

They were indicted on the basis of Articles 332 of the Criminal Code (Being guilty of an abduction of a female, (a) with a maximum punishment of seven years in prison if the abductee is underage, taken without consent of her parents, but with consent from the abductee, whether or not the intent was to control the abductee either within or outside of a marriage; (b) with a maximum punishment of nine years in prison if the abduction was conducted using tricks, force, threat of force, whether or not the intent was to control the abductee either within or outside of a marriage)

Rica Tri Handayani denied the kidnapping. She testified in court that she was not abducted but that she went to West Kalimantan of her own free will and even bought her own plane ticket.

Conclusions

A clear distinction must be made between the new religious movement Milah Abraham and the social organization Gafatar although the membership of both entities seems to largely overlap.

Article 18 of the ICCPR reads:

(1): Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom [...] either individually or in community with others and in public or private to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

(2): No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.

³⁸ <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/10/01/gafatar-couple-sentenced-prison.html>

(3): Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.'

Milah Abraham and its members are entitled to enjoy the rights protected by Article 18 of the ICCPR and Article 6 of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

Milah Abraham does not represent any threat for the state and society in Indonesia.

Coptic Orthodox

The Orthodox Churches are among the oldest Christian bodies in the world. The Coptic Orthodox Church, which is the particular focus of this chapter, traces its origins to Saint Mark, one of Jesus' apostles in the first century CE. It is led by the Patriarch of Alexandria, also known as the Coptic Pope.

The Egyptian port city of Alexandria was an important intellectual and cultural centre for centuries. It was also a prominent Christian centre until the Arab conquest of the seventh century. Even the word 'Copt' is derived from the word for 'Egypt' in the ancient language of the Egyptians. The Copts are the indigenous Christian people of Egypt. With about twelve million adherents, it is the country's largest church, although today it comprises less than eight percent of the overall population.

There is also a sizable diaspora of Coptic Orthodox in several African and Middle Eastern countries. Worldwide the Church has nearly twenty million members.

Coptic Christians played a visible role in the 2011 Arab Spring revolt which demanded the resignation of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. They were frequently caught in the crossfire of the various political groups vying for power during that turbulent period.

When Pope Shenouda III died the following year, there was widespread speculation over the future of Muslim-Coptic relations, as tensions remained high at that time. In November 2012, the 118th Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Tawadros II, was chosen according to ancient tradition, in which his name was picked by a blindfolded child from a glass bowl where the names of two other candidates had also been placed.

Relations between the Coptic Church and the majority Muslim population remain fragile, especially with the rise of extremist narratives in the region over the past few years. In February 2015, militants claiming loyalty to ISIS beheaded twenty-one Coptic Christians on a beachfront in Libya. They were Egyptian workers and are now considered saints and martyrs by the Church.

Teachings

At the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, the Coptic Church took a different position over a fine point of Christology that led to its separation from the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, a schism which exists to this day. The precise nature of the conflict is still disputed by historians.

What is *not* under dispute is that the Coptic tradition has remained firmly rooted in the historic Orthodox Christian faith with an ardent devotion to its apostolic origins. It emphasises the foundational teachings of the Church Fathers, creeds, early Church councils and the centrality

of the Sacraments, holiness of life, and the importance of prayer. Monasticism is still a prominent dimension of Coptic faith. Like in other Orthodox traditions, priests are permitted to be married and bishops are drawn from monastic communities and remain celibate.

Throughout its history, the Coptic Church has known great suffering for its beliefs. Under the Emperor Diocletian, nearly one million men, women, and children were killed. Other waves of persecution and mass killings were to follow. Notably, the Church has consistently refused any favoured relationship with successive governments of Egypt, upholding in principle the separation of religion and the state.

Controversies

Orthodox Christians find themselves in an increasingly hostile religious environment in two countries: Egypt and Eritrea.

In **Egypt**, the current degraded situation of the Copts, who are in majority Orthodox Christians, is the result of a process which started with the unilaterally proclaimed independence of the country in 1922 and the end of the UK's protection of "foreigners" (minorities) in 1936.

After, they lost their 'protective status' of *dhimmis* at the end of the 19th century, they had to face more popular vindictiveness. A major movement, gathering one million members and sympathizers, emerged in the political arena in 1945: the Party of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was created in 1928. This movement contributed to inspiring Egyptian nationalism with an Islamist influence.

Throughout the following decades, Christians were progressively ousted from the administration, media, school system, and nationalized companies. This process accelerated under the rule of President Nasser (1956-1970).

After Nasser, President Sadat (1970-1981) followed a different political course. On the one hand, he gave a free hand to the Muslim Brotherhood suppressed by Nasser and released violent Islamists from prison who had developed a hostile strategy towards Christians, attacking them in Middle and Northern Egypt. On the other hand, the Christian community benefitted from Sadat's general economic policy. Moreover, he modified the Constitutional clause, adding that "Islam is the religion of the state, the Arabic language is its official language and the principles of Islamic Sharia are the main source of legislation." In September 1981, Sadat rescinded the presidential decree of 1971 recognizing Shenouda as Pope of Alexandria and banished him to an ancient desert monastery.

President Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011) continued these policies until 1985. Under his rule, the islamization of society and public space continued inexorably.

In 2011, the Arab Spring reached Egypt. The Egyptian military assumed the power to govern.

In 2012, Mohammed Morsi was elected president and social hostility against Christians dramatically increased. One year later, Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood government was removed by the military.

In 2014, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the head of the Egyptian Armed Forces, who at that time was in control of the country, resigned from the military and was elected president. He worked to repress the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists, but this did not cause violent attempts against the Christian community to cease.

Throughout the last decades, the Coptic Orthodox Church has become particularly vulnerable. The Copts' historic presence in Egypt provides scant protection against Islamist violence and a failed judicial system that rarely brings perpetrators to justice.

Another phenomenon that has been hitting the Coptic Orthodox Christians is the prosecution and the imprisonment of members under vaguely-worded criminal charges, such as blasphemy, insulting the Prophet or 'causing harm or damage to the public interest.' Accusations of this nature have led to angry reactions, massive riots, and pogroms against the Copts fuelled by Islamists and sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Even when no offense is intended, any hint of mockery towards Islam or discussions over the life of Prophet Muhammad can trigger an extreme response from people who are looking for places to vent their rage.

In **Eritrea**, the Orthodox Christians cannot be regarded as Coptic since the Coptic Pope granted autocephalous status to their church in 1994. Even still, the Eritrean Orthodox Church has been historically under the Patriarch of Alexandria. The Church has known severe restrictions since the current government in Eritrea took power following the war for independence from Ethiopia. After persistent objections to state interference in religious affairs, the government deposed Patriarch Abune Antonios in January 2006 and placed him under house arrest. Another patriarch, selected by the regime, has governed the Church since that time.

Orthodox in Prison

Egypt

In 2017, two Coptic Orthodox Christians, sentenced in 2012 and 2015, were still in prison on fabricated or false blasphemy charges.

Kirollos Shawki ATALLAH was arrested in 2014 and sentenced to three years in prison in 2015 for posting photos on Facebook deemed defamatory to Islam.

Makram DIAB was arrested in 2012 and sentenced to six years in prison for telling a Salafi Muslim that Muhammad had more than four wives, which resulted in an argument. In March and April 2012, two appeals were rejected.

Eritrea

Eritrea is a one-party state with the distinction of having the poorest human rights record in the world after North Korea. All religious activities in Eritrea are strictly repressed.

ABUNE ANTONIOS, Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, has been under house arrest since January 2006 for resisting government interference in religious affairs. He is 87 years old and in bad health. In 2004, he had protested the secret imprisonment of three Orthodox priests. The following year church authorities removed his executive powers. On 27th May 2007, the government appointed a new Patriarch, Abuna Discoros I. The Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria does not recognize the state-appointed Patriarch of Eritrea and condemns the non-canonical disposition of Patriarch Abune Antonios.

Conclusions

Salafist influence in the Middle East and beyond has contributed to the fragmentation of Egyptian society. The toxic environment of political rivalry, deep social hostility, restrictive government policies and abusive practices of police and security forces has made the country untenable for many Egyptians today and especially minority groups such as Coptic Orthodox Christians.

This has limited freedoms for Copts to practice their faith without fear of judicial or violent consequences. The current Egyptian government has a particular role to play in ensuring the freedom of religion or belief as guaranteed by its constitutional law. This can only be safeguarded by a judiciary that functions independently of any partisan or state influence. Judicial reform of this nature must become a greater priority of the el-Sisi government if it is to achieve the progress toward democracy to which it aspires.

Protestants

The label 'Protestant' has been applied to a wide range of Christian groups. In Western countries it is popularly used for any Christian who is not Roman Catholic, in part because of the dominance of Roman Catholicism in the West, and also partly due to the complex array of non-Roman church bodies that have emerged in the modern world, precipitating a shorthand term for easy reference.

The word Protestant first came into use when referring to the 16th century movement in Europe that called for reforms in the Catholic Church. It was especially applied to Martin Luther, a German monk, who protested against corruption and abuses in the Church and publicly appealed for the reform of a number of beliefs and practices.

Other reform-minded theologians and Christian humanists preceded Luther, such as Erasmus, William Tyndale, and Jan Hus. These figures raised similar concerns from within the Church in the centuries leading up to the Protestant Reformation; however, it was specifically the reform movements of the 16th century which introduced the word 'Protestant' into the lexicon of Western religion.

Subsequently, the term has been used to reference any of the numerous Christian denominations in the West that do not accept the authority of Rome. They may call themselves Reformed, Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Evangelicals, Pentecostals or use some other appellation; however, most of these groups would self-identify as Protestant. The distinctions between them often reveal differences in theology, polity and practice.

For instance, John Calvin was a French humanist and doctor of law, who envisioned a system of church governance by elected office holders, pastors and elders (*presbyters*). This *presbyterian* structure was established in contrast to the traditional *episcopal* system of the Catholic Church where authority resided in a bishop (*episcopos*). Calvin's teachings had an enduring impact on Reformed theology, which became especially influential in Eastern Europe, Scotland and the Americas.

Another Reformed leader was Ulrich Zwingli of Switzerland, who pressed for even more radical changes to be made in church doctrine and practice. Zwingli supported the creation of a theocratic state, where the Bible would carry authority in civil as well as religious life.

The Protestant Reformation faced substantial opposition from the Roman Catholic Church and from European nobility that benefited from its favoured status with the Church. States and cities that sided with the Protestant movement became battlegrounds for increased religious and political autonomy, as some nobles perceived an opportunity for consolidating their influence in a time of rising nationalism while others supported the status quo.

After years of struggle and even civil war, many countries established state religions and afforded tolerance to minority religions. The Reformation period had produced a range of denominations, each emphasizing particular doctrines, practices, or church governance. The influence of Lutheranism and Calvinism had left their mark. Later, the Evangelical movement would also establish itself, emphasising the importance of personal conversion, preaching of the Gospel, the centrality of the Bible and active evangelism. The Pentecostal wing of Evangelicals placed particular emphasis on the experience of faith as opposed to just an intellectual assent to certain doctrines.

Evangelical revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries spurred a lively commitment to missionary work in foreign lands, often facilitated by colonial interests. The growth of European and American missions to influence ideologies of populations around the globe in the 19th century allowed for the most expansive period of Protestantism.

Today Protestantism has a worldwide presence, accounting for approximately one-third of the world's 2.18 billion Christians. Protestants are highly concentrated in the Americas and sub-Saharan Africa, with significant numbers throughout Europe, Asia, and the Pacific. They also constitute small minorities in Northern Africa and the Middle East.

Teachings

Protestant teachings, as shared by Christianity in general, centre on Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Redeemer of the world. The Reformation produced several defining characteristics of Protestant faith, including justification by faith (*sola fida*) through grace (*sola gratia*), the priesthood of all believers and the authority of the Bible over 'human' traditions.

Rejecting the authority of Rome, Protestants sought to establish the Bible as the ultimate source of authority. Many advocate the principle of *sola scriptura*, affirming the Bible's singular authority in all matters of faith and practice. Other Protestant traditions give the Bible priority as an authoritative source (*prima scriptura*), while acknowledging other influences that have shaped the interpretation of Christian beliefs. Prior to the Reformation, the Bible was available exclusively in Latin and therefore accessible only to an educated elite. Reformers worked to translate scriptural texts into the common vernacular and disseminate copies.

Tracing a middle way (*via media*) between Catholicism and Protestantism, the Anglican tradition has sought to forge a path that is authentically Catholic while adopting many of the changes brought about by the Reformation. Like Roman Catholics, Anglicans point to the visible and historic succession of the apostles as the source of authority. In regard to doctrines and liturgy, Anglicanism, in many aspects, more closely resembles Roman Catholicism than 'Protestant' denominations. The case is frequently made that Anglicanism is not adequately defined as a 'Protestant' faith.

Protestant liturgies vary widely by denomination. Lutheranism and Anglicanism have maintained liturgy most similar to that of the Roman Catholic Church. Along the spectrum of more Protestant-minded denominations there is a greater emphasis on preaching and a persistent reaction to Roman Catholic beliefs and practices.

Controversies

Protestant Christians, mostly Evangelicals and Pentecostal groups, face a number of restrictions on their activities in many countries today. At the heart of the challenges they face are often their evangelistic activities in different cultures and the ‘self-defence’ ideology of states with a non-Christian majority population. In many Muslim-majority countries, apostasy laws impose harsh penalties on converts from Islam to other faiths. Strict prohibitions of proselytising are similarly forbidden by law. In **Iran**, for instance, those found guilty of such crimes can receive lashings, up to eight years imprisonment, or even the death penalty. In **Saudi Arabia**, where missionary activities and proselytising are forbidden, apostasy and blasphemy are likewise punishable by death.

In the **former Soviet republics of Eurasia**, religious practice can be systematically oppressed. Rigid conditions for the registration of religious activities have made it impossible for many churches to operate legally. The impact of functioning as a non-registered entity is more readily felt by smaller religious minorities. State-sponsored discrimination often parallels that of society, falling hardest on ‘new Christians’: predominantly Protestant groups, missionaries and converts whose evangelisation efforts are perceived as a threat.

The generally decentralised and simple church structure of Presbyterian and Congregationalist Protestant churches have contributed to their persistence – and even growth at times – in adverse environments. Such was the case for Baptist churches in the USSR. However, the same decentralisation can also place members of these churches in precarious situations.

In countries like **China** and **Vietnam**, where religious organisations are strictly regulated by the government, Evangelical and Pentecostal house churches can be forced to meet in secret or become subject to raids, arrests and detention. They are charged with dubious offenses such as disruption of public order, undermining state security, illegally operating a business or leaking state secrets. A Chinese government campaign to ‘expose and remove illegal structures’ led to the demolition or defacement of an estimated 1,700 churches.

In **Iran**, Evangelicals and Pentecostals have been indicted for membership in organisations that aim to disrupt national security, propaganda against the system, organising a group to overthrow the regime and even enmity against God.

In addition to official government-sanctioned repression, Evangelicals and Pentecostals have suffered persecution by non-state actors who are opposed to their missionary activities on various grounds. In some regions of **India**, discrimination and violence against Protestants

have been on the rise, spurred by a wave of nationalist rhetoric calling for a return to an India unified in Hinduism. Those who belong to religious minorities have been misrepresented as having been converted forcibly. Coercive tactics have been increasingly employed to ‘reconvert’ Christians, along with members of other faiths. Anti-conversion laws, which are supposedly in place to protect religious minorities, have instead been applied against them in a discriminatory manner.

Protestants in Prison

Very few believers belonging to the historic Protestant denominations are in prison. The main victims of state repression are believers and groups that are part of the Evangelical and Pentecostal families involved in missionary activities, such as in **China, Eritrea, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Sudan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.**

Concerning **China**, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* has documented more than thirty individual cases of sentences to prison terms. The charges which are mainly related to freedom of worship and assembly are routinely phrased as follows:

- Organising a religious service in a private home (house church)
- Illegal assembly
- Participation in demonstrations and illegal assembly
- Engaging in illegal religious activity
- Disturbing public order
- Using religion to disturb social order
- Gathering a crowd to disturb public order

In addition, legislation on ‘evil cults’ is also used to put believers behind bars for several years. Accusations are usually phrased as follows:

- Belonging to a forbidden cult
- Organising cult activities
- Spreading cult teachings
- Using a cult organization to undermine law enforcement
- Organising and using a religious cult to break laws

Finally, security concerns are frequently cited in charges such as:

- Inciting subversion of state power and leaking state secrets
- Engaging in illegal religious infiltration, including preaching Christianity among the Uyghur ethnic group
- Gathering, stealing, buying or illegally providing state secrets and espionage

These are serious offences for which sentences up to fifteen years in prison were imposed.

For further information about individual cases of arrest and imprisonment in China, see our Database of FORB Prisoners at <http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/China-FBL-2017.pdf>

Concerning **Iran**, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* has documented approximately fifteen individual cases of sentences to prison terms.

Leaders and members of Evangelical and Pentecostal communities as well as from the Church of Iran, a non-Trinitarian Christian movement, have been particularly targeted.

The usual charges for missionary activities are very serious and entail very heavy prison sentences (generally three to six years):

- Conspiring against the Islamic regime and evangelism
- Collusion against national security
- Undermining national security
- Membership in organisations that aim to disrupt national security
- Propaganda against the regime
- Organising a group to overthrow the regime
- Promoting Christianity
- Encouraging conversion from Islam to Christianity
- Evangelism
- Proselytising Farsi-speaking citizens
- Organising house church meetings

For further information about individual cases of arrest and imprisonment in Iran, see our Database of FORB Prisoners at <http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Iran-FBL-2017.pdf>

In **Eritrea**, between 2,500 and 3,000 Protestants are detained indefinitely, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide's submission to the United Nations UPR process in 2014.

Some were arrested between 2004 and 2005 for evangelizing activities, and even a decade later, their whereabouts remain unknown, these prisoners include: **Rev. Ogbamichael Teklehaimanot, Pastor Meron Gebreselasie, Pastor Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel, Haile Nayzgi and Pastor Kidane Weldou**. Other evangelists known by name are **Mussie Ezaz** and **Mussie Eyob**.

Although some are released after pledging to renounce their faith, none of those in prison have been formally charged or tried, and all are held pending denials of faith.

In May 2017, 122 Eritrean Christians were detained in a series of round-ups of members of unregistered denominations in various locations around the country. **Fikadu Debesay**, who was detained with her husband in May during raids targeting Evangelical Christians in Adi Quala town, died in incarceration in early August.³⁹

In **India**, seven Protestants were arrested in December 2017 and sentenced to fourteen days in judicial custody for alleged forcible conversion campaigns. Others were accused of unlawful

³⁹ <http://www.csw.org.uk/2017/06/15/press/3583/article.htm>

assembly and released on bail after a week of deprivation of freedom. Seven Protestants were sentenced to life imprisonment in 2008 for allegedly killing the Hindu leader Laxamananda Saraswati, despite their denials and a statement of Maoists claiming the murder.

For further information about individual cases of arrest and imprisonment in India, see our Database of FORB Prisoners at <http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/India-FBL-2017.pdf>

In **Indonesia**, **Basuki Tjahaja PURNAMA (AHOK)**, the governor of Jakarta until the local elections in 2017 was accused of blasphemy for making reference to a Quranic verse to highlight political and religious discrimination. During the election campaign, he quoted a verse from the Quran in a political speech about voting. Some were offended and reported him to the police.

On 9th May 2017, he was sentenced to two years in prison by the North Jakarta District court on the basis of Article 156a of the criminal code which reads that “by a maximum imprisonment of five years shall be punished any person who deliberately in public gives expression to feelings or commits an act, a. which principally have the character of being at enmity with, abusing or staining a religion, adhered to in Indonesia”.

In **Kazakhstan**, **Yklas Kabduakasov** was sentenced on 28th December 2015 to two years imprisonment in a labour camp. He had been arrested on 14th August 2015 while discussing his faith and offering Christian books. He was officially convicted of inciting religious hatred, a charge that he denies.

In **North Korea**, four foreign Christians (one Canadian and three South Korean pastors) were serving prison terms for attempting to carry out missionary activities in North Korea. **Kim Jeong-Wook** was condemned to hard labour for life for attempting to overthrow the government by spying and setting up underground churches. South Korean pastors **Kim Kuk Gi** and **Choe Chun Gil** were accused of espionage. In December 2015, **Hyeon Soo Lim** from Toronto was sentenced to life imprisonment for harming the dignity of the supreme leadership and trying to use religion to destroy the North Korean system. He was released on ‘sick bail’ on 9th August 2017. According to the 400-page report of the UN Commission of Inquiry into Human Rights in North Korea, ‘Countless numbers of persons in North Korea who attempt to practice their religious beliefs have been severely punished, even unto death.’

In **Nepal**, five Christians were arrested in 2016, reportedly for missionary activities. Four of them were sentenced to five years in prison but were released fifteen months later after a higher court overturned the previous judgment. As of 21st December 2017, the situation of **Pratik Sunar** remains unknown.

In **Pakistan**, **Asia Bibi**, was arrested in 2009 for allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad during an argument with some Muslim neighbours after she drank water from a well with an allegedly ‘unclean’ cup used by Muslim women. She was sentenced to death one year later. Three politicians took up her case to call for reform of the country’s rigid blasphemy code.

Two of them were assassinated, and the third one is in hiding. As of 31st December 2017, her situation remains unchanged.

Shafqat and Shagufta Emmanuel (husband and wife) were arrested in July 2013 in the city of Gojra for allegedly sending a text message in English deemed insulting to the Prophet Mohammed to an imam. Shagufta told the police that her cell phone had been lost for a month and that she did not know who could have sent the messages. The couple are uneducated and do not speak English. On 4th April 2014, a court handed death sentence to the Christian couple. As of 31st December 2017, their situation remains unchanged.

Muhammad Asghar, a seventy-year-old British Protestant from Edinburgh, was sentenced to death in 2014 for allegedly writing letters to several people claiming to be a prophet. His lawyers claimed that he had a history of mental illness but the court did not accept UK medical reports. As of 31st December 2017, his situation remains unchanged.

Muslims, Christians and others have all been victimised by Pakistan's blasphemy laws. Contravening these laws can result in death or life imprisonment as stipulated in Section 295-A, B, C and 298-A, B, C of the Penal Code. In practice people are sentenced to death are not put to death but incarcerated indefinitely.

The use of blasphemy laws has created an environment where some religious fanatics believe that they are entitled to take law into their own hands. There have been many instances where local administration and police have either colluded with perpetrators or have stood by and done nothing to assist the accused, fearing the crowd. The use of the blasphemy laws has become a quick way of resolving disputes arising from business rivalry, honor disputes, disputes over money and property. The accused are often lynched or languish for years in jail without trial, for lawyers are too afraid to defend them. Judges have previously been attacked in Pakistan for acquitting blasphemy defendants and two politicians who discussed reforming the law were shot dead.

Human Rights Without Frontiers has identified a series of cases concerning Christians who were sentenced to life imprisonment in blasphemy cases; however, the sources of information often fail to mention if they were Roman Catholic, Anglican or Protestant Christians. See details at <http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Pakistan-FBL-2017.pdf>

In **Sudan**, four Protestants arrested in 2015 were released in 2017: **Rev. Hassan Abduraheem, Rev. Kwa Shamal Abdulmonem, Issa Abdumawla and Petr Jasek.**

In **Tajikistan**, Pastor **Bakhrom Kholmatov** was sentenced to three years in prison in July 2017. He was accused of singing extremist songs in church and inciting 'religious hatred'. The National Security Committee (NSC) claimed that songs based on Biblical passages, such as "Praise God, oh the godless country", "God's army is marching", and "Our fight is not against flesh and blood" are "extremist and call on people to overthrow the government".

In **Uzbekistan**, five Christians were arrested in 2017 for holding religious meetings without prior authorization. Three of them were sentenced to 15-day administrative detention and two

others to one week. As of 31st December 2017, no Christian remained imprisoned in Uzbekistan.

In **Vietnam**, a number of members of the Montagnard ethnic group were sentenced to heavy prison terms on the grounds of undermining the unity policy: **Am Ilh** (eight years in 2009), **Kpa Sinh** (eight years of house arrest in 2011) and **Ksor Y Du** (three years of house arrest also in 2011). In 2012, four members of the Hmongs ethnic group were arrested and sentenced to prison terms for alleged activities aimed at overthrowing the government: seven years for **Trang A Cho** and three years for **Giang A Long, LiA Di, and Hau A Giang**. The Vietnamese authorities perceive these ethnic groups, which were evangelized by Protestant missionaries, as a potential threat to the territorial integrity and the security of the country, in which the majority religion is Buddhism.

In all *Human Rights Without Frontiers* documented thirty-five cases of Protestants sentenced to prison terms - most of them ranging from five to eighteen years in prison – on spurious charges, including: plotting to overthrow the government, activities aimed at overthrowing the People's Government, and undermining national unity, etc.

For further information about individual cases of arrest and imprisonment in Vietnam, see our Database of FORB Prisoners at <http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Vietnam-FBL-2017.pdf>

Conclusions

It would be much too simplistic to relegate all repression of Evangelical-Pentecostal Protestants to government resistance to proselytising activities such as public preaching and the distribution of literature. Other elements are also present that have deeper roots in the culture, history and politics of the country. For instance, the fact that many of these groups hail from America and Europe makes it difficult to separate the message from the messenger.

It is not surprising that some governments resist the 'foreign influence' that comes with missionary activities that originate in countries, claiming that they are corrupt or immoral. Especially in countries where there is already a prominent ethno-religious identity, evangelising activities from abroad can be perceived as invasive or disruptive to national unity. This is also the case for many Communist and post-Communist societies, where religion is sometimes considered divisive and retrograde.

If missionaries come from a former coloniser or from countries that promote policies in the receiving country that are deemed harmful, this too can provoke hostilities on the part of governments.

For these reasons and more, several states have decided to ban foreign missionary activities altogether. Sometimes such policies reflect more paranoia than good sense. There is an enormous difference between distributing a religious tract and 'conspiring to overthrow the

regime.’ Even still, it is clear that governments are charged with looking after the general welfare of society and to protect their citizens from harmful influences. It is equally clear that not all religion is harmless in nature.

However, any resistance to proselytising must also be viewed within the framework of international norms of freedom of religion or belief. These norms include ‘the freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his [or her] religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance’ (UDHR, Article 18). States must find ways to balance the need for societal stability with their commitment to ensure democratic freedoms for all its citizens.

Said Nursi Followers

Said Nursi was a Turkish religious scholar, opinion leader and activist concerned with the acute problems the society of his time. Throughout his life, he desperately attempted to conciliate religion, modernity and politics. His books inspired a faith movement that played a vital role in the revival of Islam in Turkey throughout much of the 20th century and now has several millions of followers worldwide, including in Russia and other post-Soviet countries with a Muslim majority.

Said Nursi was born into a Kurdish family in Nurs, a small village in Eastern Anatolia, Turkey, in the 1870s. His parents were pious peasants who had been in close contact with local Sufi leaders. He received an unconventional educational training.

In the 1890s, the governor of the Turkish province of Bitlis, Ömer Pasha, gave him the opportunity to continue his studies and meet regional governors, bureaucrats and politicians who were eager to modernize the Ottoman Empire. Through these contacts, Nursi developed an interest in social, economic and political problems of the empire and also became familiar with modern ideologies that were more critical of a religious worldview. He studied modern sciences and philosophy, through which he became more cognizant of positivism and materialism. He realized that modern scepticism arising from Western scientific discoveries and technical developments was rapidly prevailing with the Ottoman intelligentsia and was alienating people from religion. He disapproved of such dichotomies as ‘reason v. revelation’ and ‘science v. spirituality’.

Teachings & Controversies

Said Nursi’s educational and political commitments

A fierce critic of both the outdated religious *medrese*, which ignores scientific achievements and the modernist educational system excluding religion, he conceptualized a new and holistic educational model attempting to reconcile the various opposing views by jointly teaching both religious and modern sciences under the same roof.

Despite the suspicions of Sultan Abdülhamid II about his teachings, he managed in a short time to get the attention of the intellectual elite. Because of his writings urging reform and his critique of the imperial regime, he was arrested, briefly imprisoned and then sent to a mental institution. He was later released by a medical report clearing him from any mental problem, although he remained under strict surveillance.

When the Second Constitutional Rule was declared in July 1908, Nursi delivered fervent public speeches and published articles supporting the new constitutional regime. In his opinion, real freedom could only flourish if the regime followed the ordinances and moral and conduct

outlined by divine revelation. If freedom is abused, he maintained, it would be lost and end up in despotism.

Frustrated by his political experience in Istanbul, Nursi decided to go back to his native Anatolia in 1910. There he published a book on the principles of contemporary Quranic exegesis. In his public discussions he addressed more regional problems such as ignorance, fanaticism and the need for good relations with Armenians.

First World War

With approval from the central government, Nursi became the leader of a militia force during the First World War. The group was mainly comprised of his students from his former *medrese* in Van. From 1914 to 1916, he fought in the Special Organisation of the Ottoman Empire⁴⁰ against the Russian army. He was captured by the Russians on 3rd March 1916 and sent to a camp in Kostroma, a city located at the confluence of the Volga and Kostroma rivers. He remained in captivity in Tsarist Russia during two years and took the advantage of the political chaos of the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917 to escape from the war camp.

Said Nursi and Kemalism

Said Nursi was welcomed as a hero in Istanbul. He was soon nominated to be a member of the Academy for Islamic Wisdom. Disappointed by the lack of success in his political and social involvement, he was also depressed by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, decline of Muslim communities and occupation of Istanbul by the British forces in March 1920. He issued defying statements against this occupation and supported the Ankara-based independence movement. When the Turks recovered their sovereignty in 1922, they abolished the Sultanate.

Nursi's political vision was of a new political entity based on the Quran and promoting religious understanding. However, the new governing body led by Mustafa Kemal had a totally different agenda: nationalism and anti-religious secularism. The Caliphate was abolished in 1924, and over the next decade traces of religious influence in the public sphere were dismantled. All *medrese* establishments and Sufi brotherhoods were outlawed, *shariah* courts were replaced by civil courts, the tombs of the saints were closed, Arabic was banned and replaced by Latin, and the Arabic call to prayer was forbidden. This was the beginning of Nursi's split from Kemalist ideology.

⁴⁰ Enver Pasha assumed the primary role in the direction of the Special Organization. Kemal Ataturk was one of its notable members. Most of its 30,000 members were drawn from trained specialists such as doctors, engineers, and journalists but the organisation also employed criminals released from prison in 1913 through an amnesty. Many members of this organisation who had played particular roles in the Armenian Genocide also participated in the Turkish national movement. The Special Organisation, assisted by government and army officials, deported all Greek men of military age to labour brigades beginning in summer 1914 and lasting through 1916.

Alarmed by the growing popularity of his teachings, which had spread even among the intellectuals and the military officers, the government repeatedly arrested Nursi for allegedly exploiting religion for political ends, forming a clandestine political organisation, giving instruction in Sufism and opposing secular republican reforms. He was repeatedly harassed, placed under strict surveillance and sentenced to prison terms and internal exile. In 1956 he was cleared of all charges, although the authorities continued their campaign against him for many years afterwards.

From the Democrat Party rule to the junta regime

In May 1950, the Democrat Party won the first free multi-party elections with an absolute majority in the Parliament. The new party supported more liberal and democratic governance, abolished the ban on Arabic and declared a general amnesty from which Said Nursi benefitted.

The government supported a religion-friendly secularism and aimed to firmly fight against Communism; policies which aligned with Nursi's ideas of an alliance between Muslims and Christians to combat Communism. Nursi was in full support of the domestic and foreign policies of the new regime.

Said Nursi died in his eighties in Urfa, the legendary city of Abraham, on 23rd March 1960. He was buried the next day with a great funeral ceremony; however, his body was not left in peace in his grave for long. Two months later, a coup d'état took place in Turkey and the junta regime overthrew the ruling Democratic Party. On 12th July 1960, Nursi's corpse was exhumed and buried in an unknown place in order to prevent popular veneration.

His works

Said Nursi was a prolific preacher and writer. His major work is a collection of texts named *Risale-i Nur* ("Letters of Divine Light"), a body of Quranic commentary exceeding six thousand pages.

Despite constant surveillance by the authorities, he continued to contact people whilst in exile. Out of them emerged a small group of loyal followers who became the forerunners of the *Nur* movement, which would eventually become the most dynamic and influential community in modern Turkey. The first portions of *Risale-i Nur* were produced in the 1950s and were copied by hand. These first hand-copied editions were reported to have reached more than 600,000 copies throughout Anatolia. Nursi's works have been published in Latin script by publishing houses from 1956 on.

There are now followers of Said Nursi worldwide. They continue to be persecuted in a number of Muslim majority countries, even though they do not commit or advocate violence or terrorism. Nursi's works are banned in **Azerbaijan, Russia and Uzbekistan** for allegedly inciting hatred and enmity against non-believers. Nursi followers have been subjected in these countries to police raids, confiscation of literature and court sentences of fines and prison terms.

Said Nursi Followers in Prison

Russia

The followers of Said Nursi are particularly repressed in Russia. The first significant ruling against Nursi readers came in May 2007 when a Moscow court declared Russian translations of portions of Nursi's *Risale-i Nur* to be extremist. This decision was based solely on linguistic textual analysis and ignored the counsel of Russia's Ombudsperson for Human Rights, Vladimir Lukin, and even Russia's most pro-Kremlin Muslim leader, Talgat Tadzhuddin. In 2001, Tadzhuddin had declared that *Risale-i Nur* was 'far from religious extremism and fanaticism.'

In April 2008, Russia's Supreme Court went on to ban Nurdzhular – a russification of the Turkish for 'Nursi followers' - as an extremist organisation, although Russian Nursi followers have repeatedly insisted that no such organisation exists.

In 2014, the Mufti of a mosque in Saransk was fined 5,000 Roubles for possession of a copy of Said Nursi's 'Guidebook for Women,' during an inspection that was conducted without warrant.

On 9th April 2014, a court decision was issued to ban the Russian-language website for the study of Nursi's works, www.nurru.com.

Cases

Ilgar Vagif-ogly Aliyev was arrested on 19th April 2017 in the city of Izberbash (Dagestan) for allegedly holding classes involving a group of adherents of Nurdzhular. He denies the charges and assures that such an organization does not exist. As of 31st December, he was still being held in **pre-trial detention**.

Ziyavdin Dapayev was arrested in March 2016 in Makhachkala. He was accused of being involved with the banned Nurdzhular organisation. Denying the charges, he sustains that such an organisation does not exist. His first full hearing took place on 3rd April 2017 at Makhachkala's Lenin District Court. Awaiting his sentence, he was detained at the Investigation Prison No. 1, located in the Dagestan capital Makachkala. His name has been added to the Rosfinmonitoring list of "terrorists and extremists".

Andrei Dedkov was arrested on 13th March 2016 in Krasnoyarsk. He was accused of being involved with the banned Nurdzhular organization, forming a "cell of adherents" and holding study groups. He also claims that the Nurdzhular organization does not exist. He was held in **pre-trial detention** for almost a year, until 3rd March 2017, before being released under travel restrictions ahead of his trial. He also appears on the Rosfinmonitoring list of "terrorists and extremists".

On 25th February 2015, 31-year-old **Bagir Kazikhanov** was found guilty under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 ('Organisation of the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation

or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity’) at Lenin District Court in Ulyanovsk. Judge Natalya Damayeva sentenced him to **three and half years' imprisonment**. Judge Maksim Maksimov of Russia’s Ulyanovsk Regional Court upheld his sentence in Mays 2015.

Yevgeny Lvovich Kim was arrested on 26th December 2015 in Blagoveshchensk. Although he denies the charges, he was found guilty for disseminating religious ideas of the banned religious association Nurdzhular. On 19th June 2017, he was sentenced to **three years and nine months in an ordinary-regime correctional colony**, followed by one year of “restrictions on freedom”. During this time, he will not be allowed to move or travel outside his place of residence without permission, and may have to report regularly to probation authorities. On 24th August 2017, his appeal was unsuccessful. He has lodged a cassation appeal at Amur Regional Court.

Uzbekistan

In Uzbekistan, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* has documented five cases of imprisonment.

Nutfullo Aminov, Ilkhom Rajabov and Tukhtakul Shodiyev were arrested in early 2010, accused of participating in an extremist organization. In June 2010, **Nutfullo Aminov and Ilkhom Rajabov** were sentenced to **eight years imprisonment** and **Tukhtakul Shodiyev** was sentenced to **seven years**.

Ikrom Merajov, a university lecturer who studied works written by Said Nursi, was arrested on 22nd December 2008 in Bukhara for allegedly participating in an extremist organization. He was sentenced to **nine years in prison** and detained in a labour camp.

Botir Tukhtamurodov was arrested in April 2009 in Bukhara. He was accused of participating in an extremist organization. He was initially sentenced to **six years in prison**. In 2015, his term of imprisonment was extended to an **additional three years in a labour camp**. Officials told him and his family that he will not be freed until the authorities get back his brother Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov from Russia, where he sought refuge in January 2010.

Conclusions

Said Nursi followers are prosecuted for religious activities that do not pose any public danger. Nursi himself never advocated or incited violence, called for the overthrow of the regime or favoured the establishment of a caliphate. Nursi's teachings were moderate in character and appeal to Muslims wishing to reconcile Islamic teaching and modernity. Followers meet to discuss his works in private homes and do not pose any threat.

The reasons and the operations behind the campaign against Nursi followers in **Russia** are unclear. Official statements point to government paranoia that Nursi readers form a pan-Turkic ‘fifth column’ that seeks to realign Turkish Muslims among Russia’s Turkic-speaking

minorities, such as Tatars, Bashkirs, and Kumyks. Interestingly, his works are prohibited in Russia – but not in Turkey – and Russia has banned the Nurdzhular movement although Nursi followers deny the existence of such a movement.

Uzbekistan is the country which has arrested and imprisoned Said Nursi followers for allegedly participating in an extremist organisation.

Scientology

According to *Religions of the World, A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Beliefs and Practices* edited by Gordon Melton & Martin Baumann and published by ABC-CLIO, “Scientology is a religious and therapeutic system of ideas and ritual practices” created in the early 1950s by American writer, adventurer and philosopher Ron Hubbard 1911-1986).

The Church of Scientology International (CSI) based in Los Angeles (USA) is officially the Church of Scientology's parent organization, and is responsible for guiding its churches in other countries. At a local level, every church is a separate corporate entity set up as a licensed franchise and has its own board of directors and executives.

It is difficult to obtain reliable membership statistics. The Church estimates that 8 million people worldwide are, in some way, using Hubbard’s life-improvement techniques, but not all of these people are active members. Most of them are buying books and taking courses in the church facilities on a regular basis without considering themselves devotees. Religious scholar Gordon Melton has said that the church's estimates of its membership numbers are exaggerated.

Teachings

During the late 1930s and 1940s Ron Hubbard developed his do-it yourself therapy, *Dianetics*, according to which every human being is suffering from severe mental and psychosomatic traumas because of the functions of what Hubbard calls the reactive mind. In the memory bank of this mind are stored the engrams, that is, all the pieces of a person’s memory involving mental and physical pain. In the book *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*, published in May 1950, Hubbard presents his ideas on how one can eliminate the engrams through a dianetic therapy, called auditing.

From 1951 on Hubbard carried his ideas further and began the transformation of the therapy to a fully developed religious soteriological system by including metaphysical ideas and axioms about the individual and the universe in his representations. In 1954, Hubbard announced the full transformation into a religion. The new religion was given the name ‘Scientology’.

The basic idea in Scientology is that the human being, a composite of body, mind and spirit is a spiritual individual being, called a Thetan. Each individual, or Thetan, has existed through an endless number of incarnations on this and other planets through hundreds of millions of years.

Scientology, inspired by many thoughts and religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Western Esotericism, science fiction and psychotherapy, offers an individual salvation to its practitioners. The path to salvation, to ultimate spiritual salvation, called the Bridge to Total Freedom, represents an extensive soteriological hierarchy of ritual steps to which each individual is gradually initiated in a codified prescribed sequence. Through these initiations,

one can move oneself into higher and higher states of awareness and orders of existence toward an ultimate recognition of oneself as a spiritual being and of the universe.⁴¹

Controversies

Though it has attained some credibility as a religion in many countries, Scientology has also been described by its detractors as both a cult and a commercial enterprise.

The organization has been accused of controlling its parishioners financially and mentally, as well as of having an opaque organizational structure and using shady financial transactions between the different organizational units. For years, a number of former members and anti-cult organizations have organized campaigns against the Church of Scientology.

Many cases regarding a variety of issues against national branches of the Church of Scientology have been brought to court. In Europe, the Church won important cases in Belgium (2016)⁴², UK (2013)⁴³, Spain (2007 and 2001)⁴⁴ and Italy (1997)⁴⁵.

In 2013, the Church of Scientology in France was charged with gang fraud and was condemned to heavy fines. Moreover, suspended prison sentences were imposed on five of its members. Although this was a final judgment in France, the case is still being examined by a supra-national jurisdiction.

In two cases concerning Russia, the European Court of Human Rights issued a decision in favor of a Russian branch of the Church of Scientology. In the first case, the Church of Scientology of Moscow, which had first been registered as a religious association and granted a legal status in 1994, was denied re-registration after a new Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations was promulgated in 1997. In 2007, the European Court considered that the Church had been a victim of a violation of Article 11 of the European Convention in the light of Article 9, and ruled that Russia was to pay 10,000 EUR to the applicant.

Another case in Russia concerned the application for registration of the Church of Scientology of St Petersburg. After the application was rejected several times, the Church and six of its members filed a complaint with the European Court. In 2014, the Court ruled there had been

⁴¹ *Religions of the World, A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Beliefs and Practices* edited by Gordon Melton & Martin Baumann and published by ABC-CLIO, 2002

⁴² <http://www.scientologyreligion.org/landmark-decisions/belgium-trial-court-dismisses-all-charges-against-church-of-scientology.html>

⁴³ <http://www.scientologyreligion.org/landmark-decisions/uk-supreme-court-issues-landmark-decision-regarding-the-scientology-religion.html>

⁴⁴ <http://www.scientologyreligion.org/landmark-decisions/national-church-of-scientology-of-spain-officially-recognized-as-world-religion.html> - <http://www.freedommag.org/english/canada/vol004i1/page07.htm>

⁴⁵ <http://www.scientologyreligion.org/landmark-decisions/italian-supreme-court-ruling-recognizing-the-scientology-religion.html>

“a violation of Article 9 of the Convention, interpreted in the light of Article 11” and Russia was to pay 7,500 EUR to the applicants.

Despite the opposition of anti-sect movements and some states, the Church has been recognized as a religion, has been registered as a religious organization, or has gained some form of state recognition as a religious community in quite a number of countries, for example: Canada, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Spain, the United States⁴⁶, etc.

Scientologists in Prison

Russia

On 6th June 2017, **Sakhil Aliev** was arrested alongside **Ivan Matsitskiy**, **Galina Shurinova**, and **Anastasia Terentieva** in St. Petersburg and charged with participating in an extremist organization, illegal business, inciting hatred, and violation of human dignity. They were charged under article 171 of the criminal code, which prohibits commercial activity without registration and under articles 282 and 282.1, which punish participation in an extremist organization or carrying out related activity. On 7th June 2017, they were sentenced to two months in pre-trial detention. As of 31st December 2017, they were still in prison as their pre-trial detention had been repeatedly extended.

Conclusions

In over thirty countries, the Church of Scientology has been recognized as a religious organization. In the cases “*Church of Scientology of Moscow v. Russia*” and “*Church of Scientology and Others v. Russia*”, the European Court confirmed that the Church had been a victim of a violation of Article 9 of the European Convention, which constitutes an official recognition of its religious nature.

If a national branch of the Church of Scientology International, its leaders or its members have (allegedly) violated articles of the civil code or the criminal code, they must be treated as any other religious or non-religious organization or as any other individual.

⁴⁶ <http://www.scientologyreligion.org/religious-recognitions/>

Shias

Shortly after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE, Islam split into two main branches, a division that persists to this day. A disagreement arose concerning the legitimate successor (*caliph*) of the Prophet. Some supported Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib as the caliph, and others Abu Bakr, the Prophet's father-in-law. Those who consider Ali to be the divinely-appointed first *Imam* after Muhammad and his descendants became known as the Shias (from the Arabic word for 'partisan'). The opposing group, who holds Abu Bakr as caliph, are known as Sunnis.

The chief difference between Shias (who number just about ten to thirteen percent of all Muslims globally) and the much larger majority of Sunni Muslims is therefore a matter of authority. This is expressed not only in the question of succession to the Prophet but also in the literary sources from which authority is derived and the manner in which Islamic law is interpreted.

Although they account for a small percentage globally, Shias represent majority populations in **Iran, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and Iraq**. Four countries – Iran, Pakistan, Iraq, and India – account for sixty-eight to eighty percent of Shias worldwide. There are altogether about 120 million Shias in the world.

There are many subgroups within Shia, the most prominent being the Twelvers, so called because of their belief in the Twelve Imams that have been chosen to bear the true message of Islam. For this group the last Imam is the promised *Mahdi*, who will appear one day to establish justice and peace on the earth.

Teachings

All of Islam teaches that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is the Prophet of God. Shia Muslims consider the *Imams* to be the rightful successors of the Prophet and therefore the authentic representatives of Islam. The Imams are exemplary individuals, free from sin and error, who interpret *sharia* and the hidden meaning of Quran correctly.

Some Shia clerics believe that the Imam should be not only a spiritual leader but should also assume the powers of government as Guardian of the Jurist (*Velayat-e-Faghih*). This notion provides a foundation for theocratic government; however, the extent of those powers is a matter of sharp debate among Muslim scholars.

In 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini became the first Shia cleric to establish a government based on this Shia concept, *Velayat-e-Faghih*, in Iran.

Aside from the unique politico-religious beliefs of Shia, there are particular observances that are practiced. For example, Shia Islam includes pilgrimages to the shrines of the Twelve Imams

and their relatives. Many towns and villages in Iran also maintain secondary shrines (*imamzadehs*), which commemorate those who have led especially saintly lives.

The holy day of Ashura, which marks the climax of the Remembrance of Muharram, is an occasion for great devotion and recommitment to the faith for Shia. Ashura commemorates the death of Imam Husayn ibn Ali, the son of Ali and Fatima, and grandson of the Prophet. He was killed at Karbala in 680 CE, a decisive event in the historical divide between Sunni and Shia Muslims.

Controversies

Shia Muslims are most often the victims of religious intolerance in countries where Sunni Muslims are an overwhelming majority. In Sunni dominated countries, the existence of Shia Islam can be seen as a threat to the central government, capable of challenging the political and economic power of the state.

For instance, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where Wahhabi Sunnis are the majority, the government exerts pressure on the small Shia population in an effort to strengthen its hegemony over the country's political and economic affairs. Shias in **Saudi Arabia** live mostly in the Eastern Province, a region known for its rich oil resources. The Shias are systematically marginalised and discriminated against in political, educational and vocational settings. When protests erupted in 2011 to address these inequalities, the government responded with mass arrests and even death sentences.

Even in Shiism dominant countries, such as **Iran**, the Shia population can face oppression, notably in regards to debates on theocratic models. When these political institutions are called into question on ideological bases, the government often regards these critiques as a threat to the central power and legitimacy of the state.

Other countries cite security concerns, claiming that the activities of certain religious groups must be restricted when state security has potentially come under threat. This is the reason cited by the government of **Malaysia** for the repression of Shia in that country. The sectarian conflicts in the Middle East have become justification for banning Shia for fear that similar conflicts may be imported from the region. The 1996 fatwa outlawing the Shia is currently enforced in eleven out of fourteen Malaysian states.

In **Indonesia**, violence perpetrated against Shia has escalated in recent years and generally goes unprosecuted due to the central government's preferential policies in favour of Sunni Muslims.

In 2012, a mob attacked and burned Shiite homes in Sampang, forcing hundreds to relocate. In April 2014, the world's first convention of the 'Anti-Shia Alliance' was organized in the capital city of Jakarta. More than one thousand people attended the event which called for a *jihad* against Shia Muslims.

In **Pakistan**, Shias are similarly targeted for violent attacks. Prosecution of the individuals responsible for the attacks is rare.

In **Azerbaijan**, the authorities regularly target a number of Shia clerics who refuse to join the state-recognized Caucasus Muslim Board, who propagate views and practices imported from Iran or who actively promote the establishment of an Islamic Republic of Azerbaijan.

Finally, in **Bahrain**, where the majority population is Shia, the country is governed by a Sunni royal family that opposes what it believes to be interference into its internal affairs by Iran. Deeply rooted discrimination has provoked protests and demonstrations in recent years, which have often been met by government repression, arrests and torture.

Shias in Prison

Iran

In Iran, some Shias have been sentenced to prisoner terms for professing unorthodox or dissenting views.

In January 2015, **Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Nekounam** was arrested in Qom on charges of insulting a religious figure. He was sentenced to **five years in prison** by a Special Clerical Court. Nekounam claims he criticized the fatwa that was issued by Ayatollah Makaram Shirazi against high speed internet.

In 2014, **Hesameddin Farzizadeh** was sentenced to **seven years of prison, seventy-four lashes and death penalty (for apostasy)** for writing a book titled “From Islam to Islam” in which he examines the history of Shia Islam and raises questions about certain facets of Shia beliefs. He was charged with insulting the prophet Mohammed and Ayatollah Khomeini and was sentenced by the Criminal Court of Meshkinshahr in Ardabil province.

Ayatollah Mohammad Kazemeini Boroujerdi was sentenced to an **eleven-year prison term** in 2006 on multiple charges, primarily related to his defending the separation of religion from the state. Such a declaration is a denial of the cornerstone doctrine of the Islamic republic (*velayat-e-faghih*). In addition to the imprisonment, the government banned him from practicing his clerical duties and confiscated his home and belongings.

On 20th August 2013, **Amir Golestani** was sentenced to **twenty years and one day in prison** by Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court. He was charged with propaganda against the regime, insulting the Supreme Leader, publishing obscene photographs, conspiracy, and blasphemy. His verdict was upheld by an appeals court.

On 23rd November 2013, **Seyed Masoud Seyed Talebi** was arrested and charged with collusion against national security, propaganda against the regime, and blasphemy. He was originally sentenced to fifteen years and one day in prison but in a revised sentence by Branch

28 of the Islamic Revolutionary Court, he received **twenty years and one day in prison** due to an additional blasphemy charge.

Azerbaijan

On 22nd February 2017, **Sardar Babayev** was arrested in the Masalli District and charged with leading worship after gaining theological education outside of Azerbaijan. Babayev was tried in accordance with penal code article 168-1.3.1, which mandates internal religious education for Muslim leaders, and was sentenced to **three-year prison term** in July 2017. He was held at the Justice Ministry Investigation Prison in Kurdakhani in Baku and awaits a date for his appeal.

In December 2014, **Elshan Mustagaoglu Mustafayev** was arrested in Baku and charged with treason and spying for Iran. He rejected the accusations but was tried under article 274 of the criminal code, which punishes espionage with property confiscation and twelve years to life imprisonment. Mustafayev was originally sent by Azerbaijan's Education Ministry to study in Iran in the 1990s and had worked with state-backed organizations before his arrest.

The Muslim Unity Movement in Azerbaijan

On 5th February 2016, General Prosecutor Zakir Qaralov announced that sixty-eight Shias had been arrested as part of the crackdown on the Muslim Unity Movement, fifty-seven of which were arrested in and around Baku, and another eleven in Gyanja and elsewhere. The Muslim Unity Movement is not a religious association but a socio-political organization.

Since the movement started in November-December 2015, authorities have repeatedly claimed that supporters of the movement have been preparing to overthrow the government and have been storing weapons and ammunition. This could not be confirmed by third parties.

This signals that the movement is a civil society organization and not a religious entity likely to enjoy the protection of Article 18 of the ICCPR, Article 6 of the 1981 UN Declaration of the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981) or Article 9 of the European Convention in case an application would be filed with the European Court of Human Rights.

Consequently, HRWF does not recognize those members of the Muslim Unity Movement as FoRB prisoners but considers that they have the right to a fair trial and not to be tortured or subjected to inhumane treatment. See more details at <http://bit.ly/2ccqOgL>.

The Muslim Unity Movement is mainly based in Nardaran, a stronghold of conservative Shia Islam on the outskirts of Baku, where about 8,000 residents follow and share the teachings of Imam Taleh Bagirzadeh. They regard Iranian Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as their supreme religious leader, and reject the authority of the state-recognized Caucasian Muslim Board of

Azerbaijan (CMBA) and its chairman, Sheikh-ul-Islam Allakh-Shukur Pashazade. They often criticize the CMBA for its subservience to the political authorities.

Saudi Arabia

On 3rd August 2011, Sheik Tawfiq al-Amr was arrested and charged with defaming the country's ruling system, defaming its leaders, inciting sectarianism, and apostasy. He denied the charges and claims he was criticizing discrimination against Saudi Arabia's Shia population. On 17th December 2012, he was sentenced to **three years in prison**, with a five-year travel ban and a ban on sermons. In February of 2016, a Saudi court imposed an eight-year prison term and eight-hundred lashes, along with an official statement of repentance in state media.

Conclusions

Iran and **Azerbaijan** are Shia majority countries but the Shias who profess dissenting opinions about the official doctrines and practices of their faith risk various sorts of punishment, including imprisonment. Moreover, **Azerbaijan**, a secular country, suspects Shia clerics who have studied theology in Iran of wanting to overthrow the regime in order to introduce a theocratic system of governance. In **Saudi Arabia**, Shias are in the minority and may also be convicted for the peaceful exercise of one's right to freedom of thought and conscience, and freedom of expression in religious matters.

Sufis

Sufism refers to the spiritual and esoteric dimension of Islam, asserting that union with God is the ultimate truth and goal of religion. The expression ‘Sufi’ is likely derived from the Arabic word for wool, *suf*, and indicates the coarse woollen garments that were historically worn by Muslim ascetics. The word ‘sufi’ as the common designation for Islamic mysticism is thought to have been used as early as the 8th-9th centuries CE.

Sufi orders (*tariqa*) were especially significant in the spread of Islam along trade routes in West Africa and later into Central Asia and China. *Tariqa* are typically formed around spiritual masters who trace their teachings back to the Prophet Muhammad and what they consider to have been the original intent of Islam. Some Sufi orders observe ecstatic practices, such as the physical exertions and whirling dance of dervishes in the Mevlevi Order.

Sufis have also made notable contributions to literature and poetry, in particular. Sufi poetry has left a significant legacy that has made Islamic philosophy and spirituality known to a readership well beyond the Muslim world. For instance, Jalaladdin Rumi, a Persian Sufi of the 13th century, is one of the most widely read poets in the Western world.

The nature of Sufism makes it impossible to obtain reliable statistics of how many Muslims self-identify as Sufis in the world today. Sufis have had a deep and enduring influence on Islam across many countries and cultures for more than a millennium. However, relatively few Muslims would name themselves as Sufi per se.

Teachings

Sufism places particular importance on the acquisition of spiritual truth through the cultivation of the inner life of the believer. The *murid* (student) engages in the pursuit of self-discovery and spiritual practices with the help of a guide. Sufi masters can teach different methods for pursuing this path, but the ultimate goal remains the same: finding divine truth at the heart of one’s being.

Classical Sufi teaching recommends the repetition of the names of God as a way to deepen prayer. Certain ascetic disciplines, such as fasting, were also encouraged for focusing one’s attention on God. Rituals, such as the hypnotic dance of dervishes, are intended to join body, mind, and spirit to arrive at a deeper state of consciousness and a passionate longing for the divine.

Sufi shrines are dedicated to various saints and poets across the Muslim world. Pilgrimages (*ziyarat*) to these holy sites and commemorations are also part of Sufi practice. This serves as a regular remembrance of the inevitability of death, leading *murids* to reassess their lives and guiding them to live more mindfully in this earthly existence.

Sufism is also associated with more progressive Islamic attitudes toward social and cultural development, human rights, and non-violence. As consciousness of God pervades one's entire life, the desire for transformation occurs not only on a personal level but also for society and the world. For instance, Sufis have supported the right to education for women and women's wider participation in society. Sufism is also regarded as a peaceful religious path which opposes the use of violence and any degrading treatment.

Controversies

Sufism has met opposition in Muslim-majority countries that have strong public resistance to religious and cultural pluralism. Although Sufism originated within Islam, some Sufi teachers have argued that it cannot be limited to one single religious system. It is therefore conceivable that Christians, Hindus, and others could also follow the Sufi path toward union with God. For this reason, some Muslims consider Sufism to be outside the realm of Islam. Governments that seek to maintain power and national unity through the propagation of a single religious-political ideology respond to Sufism with repression.

In **Iran**, Sufi teachings have sometimes been interpreted as a method to question the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic and advocate for a clear separation of religion and state. Dervishes of the Nematollahi Gonabadi Sufi order⁴⁷ have been particularly targeted by Iranian authorities, subjecting them to unfair trials, long prison terms, and excessive security surveillance. Iran remains the state which imprisons the most dervishes.

Other Iranian Sufis have faced arrest, intimidation, and the destruction of their houses of worship. As they are not specifically recognised by constitutional law, they are generally considered to be a 'false cult' (*Fergh-e Zale*), and, therefore, susceptible to persecution.

Numerous Shia and Sufi shrines have been destroyed in **Saudi Arabia** by Wahhabis, Salafists and other hardliners, who say the Sufi practice of building these shrines over gravesites is forbidden. In recent years, the destruction of such shrines has spread to other regions, such as Egypt and Pakistan. These regions had been traditionally tolerant toward those who revered the shrines as holy sites, but this is less and less the case.

Likewise, **Indonesia** has a growing anti-Sufi sentiment. In 2008, a religious opinion (*fatwa*) was issued by the Indonesian Ulama Council against a local Sufi organisation. The group was deemed a heretical sect, and its leaders were arrested, two of which were sentenced to three-year prison terms in West Sumatra for blasphemy. Sufis are also on the list of banned religious

⁴⁷ The order is named after its 14th century CE founder Shah Nimatullah (Nūr ad-Din Ni'matullāh *Wali*), who settled in and is buried in Mahan, Kerman Province, Iran, where his tomb is still an important pilgrimage site. The number of Sufis was estimated to be between 50,000 and 350,000 before the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Due to the repression by the Islamic regime, many emigrated to Europe and the United States.

minorities in Aceh Province, where they have suffered an increasing number of attacks in recent years.

Sufis in Prison

Iran

More than twenty cases of detained Sufis are documented in the **Prisoners' Database of Human Rights Without Frontiers** (See <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>). Most of them have been arrested and sentenced to several years in prison because of their affiliation to the Nematollahi Gonabadi order or their activities related to *Majzooban Noor*, a website that reports news and articles on Gonabadi Sufis.

Bakhshali Mohammadi was arrested in 2004 and was charged with enmity against God. He was initially **sentenced to death**, but in September 2007 the Supreme Court commuted his sentence to **thirteen years in prison**.

Hamid-Reza Moradi Sarvestani was arrested in 2011 and charged with: membership in a sect endangering national security; propaganda against the system (Clause 500 of the criminal code); insulting the Supreme Leader (Clause 514); disturbing the public consciousness (Clause 698) and disrupting public order (Clause 618). Hamid-Reza Moradi Sarvestani thinks his condemnation was politically motivated and due to his contribution to the Sufi website *Majzooban-e Noor*. Branch 15 of Tehran's Revolutionary Court sentenced him to **ten and a half years in prison**.

Hamid-Reza Arayesh and Kazem Dehghan and others were arrested in 2011 and charged with: spreading corruption on the earth; membership of illegal group (affiliation with the Nematollahi Gonabadi Sufi Order); assembly and collusion with the intent to disrupt national security; causing physical harm and violation of public order; carrying illegal weapons and *Moharebeh* (enmity with God). They were sentenced to **four years in prison** in 2014.

Omid Behrouzi was arrested in 2011 and charged with: membership in a sect; endangering national security; propaganda against the state; insulting the Supreme Leader; establishing and membership in a deviant group; disrupting the public order. In fact, Omid Behrouzi was targeted for his contribution to the Sufi website *Majzooban-e Noor*. Branch 15 of Tehran's Revolutionary Court sentenced him to **seven and a half years in prison**.

Uzbekistan

There are four documented arrests of Sufis in the **Prisoners' Database of Human Rights Without Frontiers** (See <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>).

On 1st June 2016, four Sufi leaders were arrested in Bukharan Region for participation in a non-state sanctioned religious group. They were charged under criminal code article 216, which prohibits the establishment or reactivation of illegal public associations or religious organization. Each individual was sentenced to **four years in prison**. Their names are currently unknown.

Conclusions

In Iran, Sufis exercise their freedom of speech and religion by making critical remarks directed toward the regime. This is part of any functioning democracy and evidence of the crucial role that civil society plays in strengthening that democracy. International interlocutors with Iran should underscore the importance of the country's international obligations in regard to human rights standards. Iran's systematic abuse of its Sufi and dervish citizens is certainly cause for reflection and remedial action on the part of the country's authorities.

Despite the sporadic declarations of its clerical class, the Iranian government is hard-pressed to regard Sufis as non-Muslims. Sufis have contributed to the development of Persian culture for centuries and are today part of its social fabric. Article 14 of the Constitution declares that 'the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and all Muslims are duty-bound to treat non-Muslims in conformity with ethical norms and the principles of Islamic justice and equity and to respect their human rights.' Even if one regards Sufis as non-Muslims, respect and tolerance are required by the rule of law.

The Indonesian government must also exercise its authority and order the cessation of hostilities toward Sufis within the country. Especially reprehensible is the fact that regional and local authorities have disregarded Indonesia's publicly declared commitment to religious freedom for all of its citizens. When religious minorities, such as the Sufis, suffer violence and have no hope of recourse to the law, this commitment is deeply compromised.

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 affiliations⁴⁸.

Most of the prisoners are now still Sunnis who were accused of religious extremism or of being followers of banned movements.

Sunnis in Prison

Iran

The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran published⁴⁹ 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

⁴⁸ Source: Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan (IGIHRDU)

⁴⁹ 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 activities⁵⁰. However, HRWF

⁵⁰ 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

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.

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’

accusations. It was also difficult to identify cases in which the victims were imprisoned for purely exercising their freedom of religion.

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.

Tabligh Jamaat

Tabligh Jamaat is a revivalist missionary movement within Islam, founded in India in the early 20th century. The term means ‘those who preach’ and is sometimes called the ‘Society for Spreading Faith.’ Adherents do not proselytise non-Muslims. They want only to revive the faith of weaker Muslims and to follow Islamic religious practices more vigorously.

Tabligh Jamaat originated in the Deobandi School of Sunni Islam⁵¹ in Uttar Pradesh in north India. Muhammad Ilyas Kandhlawi (1885-1944), an Islamic scholar and Sufi teacher, is credited as its founder. Its world headquarters are located in the New Delhi suburb of Basti Nizamuddin.

The movement has grown significantly over time. It is said to have around 80 million followers in 150 countries of Asia, Africa and Europe⁵² but it is particularly prevalent in South and Central Asia.

In Europe its headquarters, complete with a *madrasah*, are operating in the UK with about 50,000 followers in Dewsbury (Yorkshire), with further centers in London, Glasgow, Leicester, and Birmingham. In France, Tabligh Jamaat has been able to attract a significant number of Muslims of Arabian and African extraction (about 100,000 followers). Its activity is concentrated in the larger Paris region. In Spain it operates from Barcelona among a quickly growing number of Muslim migrants.

In North America, Tabligh Jamaat has met with some success in gaining converts among African-Americans and Caribbean immigrants. Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Atlanta, New York, and Washington, D.C., are the major centers of Tabligh Jama'at activities in the United States.

Tabligh Jamaat adherents never constitute themselves into formal ‘trusts’ or ‘companies’ and shun political, legal, or social engagement with the wider world. There are—intentionally—few formal points of contact at all.

Annual gatherings (called *ijtima*) are held in various countries and attract large crowds. The largest ones occur in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The annual World Gathering in Tongi, Bangladesh, (called *Bishwa Ijtima*) is the most popular Tabligh Jamaat pilgrimage in the world with approximately five million people attending each year, significantly larger than the traditional *Hajj* to Mecca.

⁵¹ Zacharias Pieri, ‘Tablighi Jamaat – Handy Books on Religion in World Affairs’ (*Lapidomedia*, 2012) [http://www.lapidomedia.com/sites/default/files/resources/Tablighi Jamaat Introduction.pdf](http://www.lapidomedia.com/sites/default/files/resources/Tablighi%20Jamaat%20Introduction.pdf) accessed 30.01.2015.

⁵² “Understanding and engaging with the Tabligh Jamaat” by Jenny Taylor. <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lga/2015-11/understanding-and-engaging-with-the-tablighi-jamaat>

Teachings

Tablighi Jamaat's doctrine is based on six principles, commonly referred to as the *Six Points*. They are:

- Faith in the oneness of Allah (the *Kalima*)
- The offering of the five prayers daily (*Salat*)
- The knowledge and the remembrance of Allah (*‘Ilm & Dhikr*)
- Respect for every Muslim (*Ikram al Muslim*)
- Sincerity of intention (*Ekhlas*)
- Time set aside for this work (*Dawah & Tabligh*)

Those six points act as a perimeter fence on both the experience and the critical faculties of the devotees. They include 'respect for Muslims'—but not for non-Muslims⁵³.

Tablighi Jamaat followers try to imitate the life of Prophet Muhammad and adopt a lifestyle of personal piety and austerity. Members are expected to proselytize at least three times per month (approximately 130 days per year) as well as study at Tablighi Jamaat's central mosque in Pakistan for a month.

Controversies

The controversies mainly concern their teachings about the role of women in their communities, their relations with political Islam and accusations of alleged links to terrorism.

Women

Women are under male control in Tablighi Jamaat. They are required to practice complete seclusion and segregation in everyday life⁵⁴, and to cover themselves entirely in public with a *burka* or face veil. Tablighi Jamaat has been strongly criticised on these points.

Women are encouraged to share their Islamic beliefs with other women and may travel for this purpose. However, only married women are allowed to have such missionary activities and they must always be accompanied by a male relative, preferably their husband.

In their daily lives, they are locked into a medieval system of patronage that results in illiteracy and disaffection. Female literacy rate in Mewat, a region of Haryana and Rajasthan states in northwestern India, where the movement started, is just 5% today. They still live in *zenanas*

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ More information about the status of women in the movement in "The Tablighi Jamaat and Gender: Women, Narrative, and the Religious Discourse of Struggle in an Indian Muslim Reform Movement" by Megan Adamson Sijapati.

(harems) there and are normally forbidden, even in Britain, from leaving the house unaccompanied by a male. Marriages are conducted in their name, not in their presence.⁵⁵

Politics

Tablighi Jamaat claims to be apolitical⁵⁶ and does not advocate the use of violence, the overthrow of the political leaders in Muslim majority countries or the establishment of a caliphate.

Tablighi Jamaat's loose internal structure means that people associated with it may have diverse views and practices in different parts of the world. The movement has sometimes been regarded as a gateway and a fertile recruiting ground for political Islam, violent activities and terrorism because some of its young zealots were vulnerable to shadowy jihadi-groomers infiltrating its ranks.

In some countries, Tablighi Jamaat is perceived as rather innocuous whilst other states consider it a dangerous hotbed for radicalism and have banned it.

Dr Taj Hargey, an *imam* in Oxford who is persona non grata for criticizing Tablighi Jamaat publicly, says of them: 'They encourage Muslims already disenchanted with life in the West . . . to disassociate from the world by pursuing a trans-national, self-imagined construct that can be exploited by extremists.' 'They are', he adds, 'scornful of secular democracy and Western values' and espouse 'voluntary apartheid as not merely beneficial, but crucial.'⁵⁷

Bans on Tablighi Jamaat

The movement is prohibited in **Iran**, **Uzbekistan** (2004), **Tajikistan** (2006), **Turkmenistan**, **Russia** (2009) and **Kazakhstan** (2013).

In **Russia**, on 7th May 2009, the Constitutional Court held that Tablighi Jamaat is an extremist organisation and prohibited it from operating on Russian territory. No adherent to that movement is currently known to be in prison.

In **Kazakhstan**, a court in Astana banned Tablighi Jamaat as an 'extremist' organisation on 26th February 2013 although the court did not specify which of the movement's teachings were considered extremist. Most religious prisoners in that country are Sunni Muslims accused of involvement in the Tablighi Jamaat movement. Similar vague judgements have led to Tablighi Jamaat's banning in **Iran**, **Uzbekistan**, **Tajikistan**, and **Turkmenistan**.

⁵⁵ This and other facts can be found in Zacharias Pieri, *Tablighi Jamaat* (Lapido Media), available from Amazon in paperback or Kindle at <http://amzn.to/2DO5bQp>

⁵⁶ Political scientist Mumtaz Ahmad has written: 'In fact, the Tablighi Jamaat detests politics and does not involve itself in any issues of socio-political importance.'

⁵⁷ Pieri, *Tablighi Jamaat*, 40f

In **Tajikistan**, a number of Muslims found to be suspicious of membership of the banned Tablighi Jamaat movement are in prison.

In recent years, there has been debate in **Kyrgyzstan**, where there are an estimated 10,000 Tablighi Jamaat adherents, on whether the movement should be banned. The State Commission on Religious Affairs has frequently referred to Tablighi Jamaat as an ‘extremist organisation’; however, the head of the Spiritual Directorate for Muslims has declared that it is not a militant movement and it should be accepted with more tolerance. Similarly, Kadyr Malikov, the director of the independent Kyrgyz think-tank *Religion, Law and Politics*, stated that Tablighi Jamaat ‘is neither extremist nor terrorist or political.’

Even still, there are some in Kyrgyzstan who oppose the movement, objecting to Tablighi Jamaat’s missionary approach and noting its appeal to poorly educated youth at risk of joining Islamist organisations.

Tablighi Jamaat Muslims in Prison

Kazakhstan

Forty-five cases of Tablighi Jamaat Muslims arrested and detained are documented in the **Prisoners’ Database** of *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (See <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>). Of these cases, eight arrests were made in 2017.

Prisoners were charged under article 405, Part 1 and/or Part 2. Part 1, which prohibits *organizing* activities of a social or religious association or other organization after a court decision banning their activity or their liquidation in connection with extremism or terrorism. Part 2 prohibits the *participation* in the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation after a court decision banning their activity or their liquidation in connection with extremism or terrorism.

Sentences include one to four years imprisonment in either a regime labour camp or prison, with a two-year ban on practicing their religion after their term.

The Case of Saken Tulbayev (2015)

On 11th February 2015, police raided the four-room flat in Almaty's Bostandyk District which **Saken Tulbayev**, a Tablighi Jamaat Muslim, shares with his eighty-two-year-old mother, his wife Rumina Fakhrudinova, two of his three children, his sister Feruza Tulbayeva and her child. During their three-hour search, officers confiscated notes and booklets. On leaving the flat, they also claimed to have found forty-three copies of a leaflet which Tulbayev said they had planted.

After being held in pre-trial detention, he was transferred to Almaty's Investigation Prison. He was charged under Criminal Code Article 174, Part 1 (incitement of social, national, clan,

racial, or religious hatred or antagonism' with imprisonment of two to seven years) and Criminal Code Article 405, Part 2 (participating in the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation after a court decision banning their activity or their liquidation in connection with extremism or terrorism with a fine or up to two years' imprisonment). Like most of the new Criminal Code, these articles came into force on 1st January 2015.

On 2nd July 2015, Saken Tulbayev was sentenced to a **four-year and eight-month term in a labour camp** and was banned from conducting any religious activity for three years following his release, until the end of 2022. On 6th September 2016, the Supreme Court lifted Tulbayev's ban, but imposed two new conditions instead: He will be banned from sharing his faith with others and banned from membership of "extremist" organisations.

On 6th of September 2016, the Supreme Court lifted Tulbayev's ban, but imposed two new conditions instead: He will be banned from sharing his faith with others and from membership with "extremist" organizations.

The Case of Iliyan Raiymzhan (2017)

Iliyan Raimzhan, an ethnic Khazak born in China, was arrested in April of 2017 after his case was initiated by the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police. Prosecutors claim Raiymzhan was a member of Tablighi Jamaat and had studied at its centres abroad, including in India, Bangladesh and elsewhere.

For his involvement in Tablighi Jamaat, **Raiymzhan** was charged under Article 405, Part 1 of the criminal code ("organizing the activity of a religious association after a court decision banning their activity or their liquidation in connection with extremism or terrorism") and Part 2 ("participation in the activity of a religious association after a court decision banning their activity in connection with extremism or terrorism").

On the 1st of August 2017, Iliyan Raiymzhan was sentenced to **four years in prison** by Tekeli Court in the Almaty Region. The Judge also banned him from exercising freedom of religion or belief for two and a half years after his prison term.

On the 19th of September 2017, Raiymzhan lost his appeal in Almaty Region. The 25-year-old leaves behind his wife and two young children.

Russia

In late October 2016, it was reported that a court in Nizhny Novgorod recognized a citizen of Uzbekistan, a team leader in a cleaning company, guilty under Article 282.2 Part 2 of participation in the activities of Tablighi Jamaat and sentenced her to 1 year of imprisonment to be served in a settlement colony.

The criminal case under Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code for involvement in the activities of Tablighi Jamaat was initiated in Crimea. Several homes on the peninsula were searched, and four people were arrested.

In late September 2016, the Supreme Court of the Republic of Tatarstan changed the verdict, issued by the Naberezhnye Chelny City Court under Part 2 of Article 282.2 in April with respect to nine Tablighi Jamaat supporters. The reference to an aggravating circumstance in the form of committing a crime by a group of persons was excluded from the verdict, and, therefore, the prison terms were reduced.

Tajikistan

Five cases of Tablighi Jamaat Muslims arrested and detained are documented in the **Prisoners' Database** of *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (See <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>). Of these cases, four arrests were made in 2015, with one in 2009.

This movement has been banned in Tajikistan since 2006, although it does not use or advocate violence. It does not call for the overthrow of the political regime in Tajikistan.

Cases

Amrokhon Ergashov, a Tajik national from Kulob, was arrested in 2015 on suspicion of his membership to Tablighi Jamaat. He was charged under article 187 (Organizing a criminal community or organisation), article 195 (Illegal buying, selling, keeping, transportation or carrying of weapons, ammunitions or explosives), and article 307 (Public calls for extremist activity) of the country's criminal code. He was sentenced to **twelve years in prison**.

In January 2015, **Mulloh Abdulloh, Abdulloh Ishogov, Payravjon Ashurov, and Zarif Nuriffinov** were arrested on suspicion of membership in the banned Tablighi Jamaat. They were sentenced to **three years in prison** on the basis of Criminal Code Article 307 (Public calls for extremist activity)

Conclusions

Opinions differ on whether Tablighi Jamaat actually encourages or indirectly contributes to violent jihadism through its teachings and preaching.

With origins in a particularly exclusionary and restrictive form of Sunni Islam, Tablighi Jamaat has been hastily suspected of links to Islamic terrorism. French sociologist of religion Marc Gaborieau contends that Tablighi Jamaat's aim to conquer the world for Islam would not preclude violent jihad to achieve that goal. Others have pointed to the fact that Tablighi Jamaat-sponsored trips to Pakistan have served to put young Muslims in touch with fundamentalist

groups. However, secondary links of this sort are insufficient to make a direct connection to violent jihadism.

Members of Tabligh Jamaat may be vulnerable to exploitation by militant or terrorist organisations just like many other groups. Unfortunately, this has led to media and government authorities moving to ban Tabligh Jamaat, portraying it as a breeding ground for extremism and not viewing the movement as a whole.

Tabligh Jamaat's claim to be apolitical would suggest that the movement itself cannot be blamed for inspiring some of its members to engage in terrorist activities. Tabligh Jamaat can however not entirely prevent some of its followers from becoming disillusioned with the movement's officially neutral position and being lured by Islamist extremist groups, such as Al Qaeda or the Talibans. That Tabligh Jamaat 'harboured terrorists does not necessarily mean that it is therefore a hotbed of terrorism,' commented Jenny Taylor of the Centre for Religious Literacy in World Affairs.⁵⁸

Human Rights Without Frontiers and *Sova-Center* (Moscow) view the ban of the religious association Tabligh Jamaat in several post-Soviet countries and the criminalization of its members' activities inappropriate, since the organisation was engaged in promotion of Islam by increased spiritual edification of its followers and was never implicated in incitements to violence. *Human Rights Without Frontiers* and *Sova-Center* (Moscow) consider the repression of the Tabligh Jamaat members to be unjustified, inefficient and counter-productive.

⁵⁸ Jenny Taylor 'What is the Tablighi Jamaat?' *The Guardian* (September 2009)
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- Christian Aggression (<http://www.christianaggression.org>)
- Christian Solidarity Worldwide (<http://www.csw.org>)
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- International Christian Concern (<http://www.persecution.org>)
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