



ONE CRISIS AFTER ANOTHER IN LEBANON

A devastating explosion in Beirut on 4 August briefly brought wall-to-wall news coverage of a country that has been reeling from one crisis after another.

The port blast inflicted massive damage, injuries and loss of life across the **Lebanese** capital and wrecked its main export and import hub. As details emerged of the mass storage over six years of a combustible material close to the city centre, the signs once again pointed to gross negligence among a political and bureaucratic class that fails to take responsibility for its citizens. Meanwhile, poverty and hunger in the country, caused by economic collapse and exacerbated by COVID-19, reached levels unseen since the 1940s.

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Beirut vigil 4 September: candles remember victims of the 4 August explosion (Simon Haddad/Shutterstock)

THE AGENDA

SAT-7 joins FoRB Forum

Over 70 UK and overseas participants took part in the inaugural meeting of the FoRB (Freedom of Religion or Belief) Forum, held virtually on 15 September and chaired by the Bishop of Truro.

The Forum is a working group for government departments and civil society actors to engage on issues of persecution and FoRB for Christians and people of other faiths. It is the result of one of 22 recommendations made last year in the Bishop's Independent Review for the UK Foreign Secretary of Foreign and Commonwealth Office Support for Persecuted Christians (christianpersecutionreview.org.uk/recommendations). As a Middle East-based organisation seeking to raise awareness of FoRB through our programmes, SAT-7 is delighted to be a stakeholder organisation in the Forum and looks forward to learning from and sharing our experiences with all involved.



Puzzling together

Filmed in Lebanon, the first season of SAT-7's *Puzzle* programme brought together pre- and young teens from different national and faith backgrounds to learn about human rights through games, problem-solving and creative collaboration. As barriers fell, contestants learned they are capable of more than they had been led to believe, and parents were challenged by music videos the youngsters made on children's rights.



More: sat7uk.org/puzzle

IN FOCUS

Iranians: losing or changing religion

A new online survey of 50,000 Iranians by Netherlands-based research group GAMAAN found that 46.8% described themselves as "no longer religious"; 5.8% said they had changed their religion and 1.5% identified as Christian. UK advocacy group Article 18 said that, extrapolated across the whole population, this amounts to over 1 million Christians, in addition to the 300,000 "recognised" Christians of Armenian or Assyrian descent. Another 7.7% said they followed Persia's ancient Zoroastrian faith. Some 41% said people of all faiths should be able to propagate their beliefs.

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Worship at an Iranian house fellowship (documentary simulation)

Q&A

The *Briefing* quizzed Ziya Meral, Director of the Centre on Religion and Global Affairs, on the current state of FoRB in the MENA region

Which MENA countries should concern us most over the lack of FoRB at this time?

Christians and other ethno-religious minorities are facing a difficult time across the region. In Turkey, we have a shift towards religious nationalism from recent, more accommodating attitudes toward religious difference. The conversion of Hagia Sophia, expulsion of foreign church workers and an increasing role for religious conservatives is worrying Turkish Christians. In Iran, Christians and Baha'is continue to face imprisonment, mistreatment, seizing of assets, denial of education and intimidation. In Iraq, many report being denied access to work, funds and education. In Algeria, we have seen a deterioration of the religious freedom witnessed 10 years ago.

What changes and trends do you see?

Since the 1960s, Christians and other minorities have been squeezed from above and below. From below, Islamist movements smeared them as the root of societal problems; from above, authoritarian states restricted them while claiming to protect them. Since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, nation states have been weakened and militant groups have laboured to establish ethno-separatist territories or Islamist zones. Religious minorities found themselves victims of ethnic cleansing, displacement and terror attacks. Now, on top of this, global and regional geopolitical shifts and competition for influence and revenue make religious minorities vulnerable from many directions.

Where is religious co-existence most under threat?

Sadly, across most of the region. The relationships are more accurately described as a powerful majority versus a vulnerable minority, not co-existence. One exception has been Lebanon, with a sizable Christian population and other minorities sharing political and social structures. Sadly, recent developments have brought the country to its knees.

Where do you see positive changes?

The UAE has always accommodated religious differences, especially for migrant workers. It has promoted a lot of religious harmony initiatives in the last few years. The recent rapprochement between Israel and UAE is welcome. Religious conversion from Islam will remain difficult if not impossible for any Emirati, but there is a lot to cherish in these developments.

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On a visit to mark the centenary of the declaration of the State of Greater Lebanon, **French** President Macron urged the country's leaders to implement political and economic reforms. Whether his "carrot or stick" promise of aid or sanctions will be effective is unclear. The disaster saw off the second Lebanese government in a year and resulted in the appointment of a third Prime Minister. The number of those who plan to leave the country is worrying. The energetic commitment of churches, youth volunteers, and Christian and other agencies who are supporting people in crisis is one optimistic sign.

President Macron also threw himself into another explosive development, this time in the Eastern Mediterranean. Longstanding tensions over energy exploration between **Greece, Turkey and Cyprus** have been mounting in recent months. Ankara has been incensed as energy deals made by Greece, Cyprus, **Israel** and **Egypt** (backed by France and the **UAE**), sidelined Turkey in the Aegean and Mediterranean. Turkey reacted by despatching hydrocarbon exploration vessels and naval ships to waters claimed by Greece, prompting Greece and France to deploy ships of their own. **Italy** – another big player in the Mediterranean with its own interests – is the country most likely to resist.

PEACE ACCORDS

In contrast to these tensions, **Israel** signed two peace accords with the **UAE** and **Bahrain**. These normalisations of relations are the first between Arab nations and Israel in 25 years. Hailed as historic, in reality they make public good relationships that had been concealed due to their sensitivities. The agreements will allow open trading for the two Gulf states and will mean less isolation for Israel. **Palestinians**, however, felt further isolated. The long-held Arab consensus has been that normalised relations with Israel would come only with Palestinian independence. For the moment, Israel has paused its promised further expansion of the settlements in the West Bank.

Another driver behind the agreements is a shared fear of Iran, something that also weighs heavily on minds in Washington. While Iran has pushed on with its nuclear enrichment programme, US calls to reimpose international sanctions on Iran were rejected by US allies on the UN Security Council, the UK, France and Germany.

On the health front, Israel and **Iran** have a common enemy. The coronavirus forced Israel to begin a second national lockdown at the start



Covid-era Iran: Rasht, Gilan Province (Mojtaba Msayebzadeh/Unsplash)

of the Jewish New Year (18 September), while Iran, at the same time, experienced a third wave of the virus and a record rate of daily infections. The vulnerability of Iran's prison inmates to the virus was highlighted in a hunger strike by jailed human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh. Sotoudeh (57) began her protest in August to demand the release of political prisoners at risk from COVID-19. Her own condition has deteriorated dangerously.

To Iran's north, decades-long tensions reignited in the mountainous Nagorno-Karabakh region, which is recognised as part of **Azerbaijan** although the majority of its people are ethnic **Armenians**. Both countries blamed each other for the escalation. Turkey is openly supporting Azerbaijan while Russia, which has military bases in Armenia, called for a ceasefire.

The situation in Yemen remains dire. Almost 80 per cent of the population depend on aid to survive while there are reports of Houthi rebels blocking aid distribution and the Saudi-led coalition continues its bombing. More civilians were killed in August than in any month this year, according to UN Head of Humanitarian Affairs, Mark Lowcock.



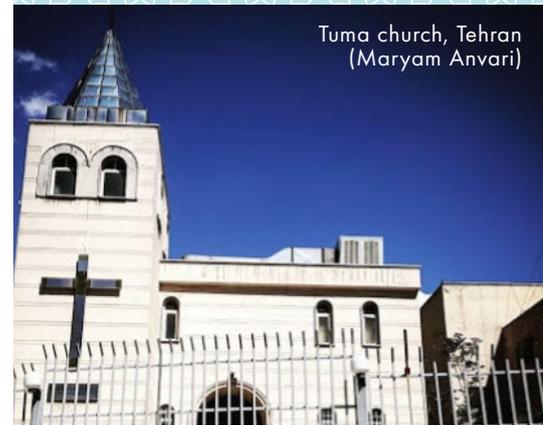
Collecting water, Taiz, Yemen, August 2020 (Akram Al-Rasny/Flickr Commons)

Afghanistan, meanwhile, was urged to seize an historic opportunity for peace as talks in Qatar brought together government and Taliban leaders for the first time in 19 years. Sadly, the Taliban had not reduced its attacks and the two sides remain far apart.

PROGRESS IN SUDAN

Thankfully, the peace process in **Sudan** is advancing well. On 31 August the transitional government and an umbrella organisation of most rebel groups signed a new peace framework. The peace process addresses many key issues, from power-sharing to the legacies of decades-long conflict. It is welcome that the framework reverses ousted President Al-Bashir's policy of Islamisation, commits the country to a "separation of religion and state" and scraps the apostasy law. FGM has also been outlawed. Changes like these can put Sudan on a far more humane and inclusive road if the international community commits to supporting it.

Kuwait has been an important mediator in the Arab world, thanks to its non-aligned political position and a policy of religious tolerance. These enabled Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, Kuwait's ruler and an experienced former foreign minister, to maintain the support of the country's Shia minority as well as its Sunni population. Sheikh Sabah's death last month leaves his brother, Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf, a challenging example to follow.



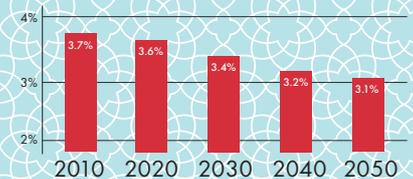
Tuma church, Tehran
(Maryam Anvari)

AT A GLANCE

Declining religious minorities

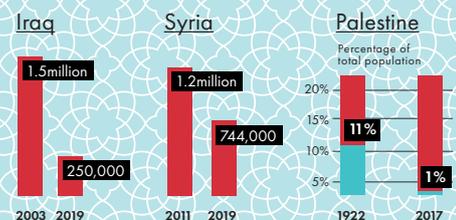
MENA Christian population projections

Forecasts by the Pew Research Centre of Christians as a percentage of population (April 2015):



ForB is covered by several UN Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 10.2 ("Promote social, economic and political inclusion to all irrespective of religion [and other differences]") and SDG 16.10 ("Protect fundamental freedoms") and 16.16 ("Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies")

Examples of declining Christian populations



Yazidi genocide

The Yazidis are a distinct religious group in northern Iraq. From a population of around 500,000, 3,000-5,000 were executed or died of hunger, and 6,000-7,000 women and girls were kidnapped into sexual slavery after the 2014 IS attack



Iranians: losing or changing religion

(Continued from p1) The survey is significant in several ways. University of Bradford Middle East lecturer Afshin Shahi commented: "The survey highlights the fact that a very large segment of the population no longer identifies with Shia Islam, which is used as the ideology of domination by the state." The percentage who claimed a Christian faith also confirms estimates of the growth of the "underground church" made by many expatriate Iranian Christian leaders, despite the routine harassment, arrests and punitive sentences experienced by Christian converts.

Source: articleeighteen.com/news/6701

Persian channel highlights freedom of belief

SAT-7's Persian language TV service, SAT-7 PARS, is partnering with the FoRB Learning Platform and creating Persian/Farsi language versions of its online video clips. The web-based platform is an initiative of the Nordic Ecumenical Network on Freedom of Religion or Belief (NORFORB) in association with many secular and faith-based organisations. Its video animations and articles aim to educate users about FoRB. When the clips are complete, SAT-7 will screen them on its *Insiders* talk show and on social media. The latest season of *Insiders* is focused heavily on human rights, including freedom of religion.

About FoRB Learning Platform: forb-learning.org | About SAT-7 PARS: sat7pars.com

FoRB now a parliamentary priority



Rehman Chishti MP

Attendees of a fringe seminar organised by SAT-7 and the Conservative Christian Fellowship (CCF) at the Conservative Party Conference heard that issues of religious freedom are now much higher on the UK parliamentary agenda. Rehman Chishti MP, until recently the Prime Minister's Envoy on Religious Freedom, said that support from concerned colleagues and NGOs had enabled delivery or progress on 17 of the 22

recommendations in the Bishop of Truro's 2019 Review of Foreign Office Support for Persecuted Christians. Fiona Bruce MP said that the combined advocacy of MPs, NGOs, church leaders and people writing to their representatives has meant that religious freedom is "now a mainstream issue" that "Parliament takes seriously". She hoped that the merger of the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development (DfID) would lead officials responsible for development to recognise religious persecution as the Foreign Office has done. Archbishop Angaelos of the Coptic Orthodox Church, SAT-7 international board chair, joined other panel members in stressing the need for government departments to work together in targeting the issue. The seminar was held online on 5 October. Other panellists included Middle East expert Ziya Meral, SAT-7 Arabic Programmes Director George Makeen and SAT-7 PARS broadcaster Roshin Soodmand, who told how her Christian convert father was executed in Iran for apostasy in 1989. Meral and Archbishop Angaelos spoke passionately about how sensitively SAT-7 addresses FoRB in its programming.

"Believers need to be freed from fear of being rejected by society and their families for their faith. Many believers are hiding their faith because they are afraid of being outcast. We try to encourage them to be light and a testimony to others." – Salah Kessai, SAT-7 producer, Algeria

Changing perceptions with comedy and drama

SAT-7 is using drama to invite viewers to rethink attitudes to issues of religious and racial discrimination, gender equality, disability and minority rights. New comedy show *The Wall* follows a couple who run a counselling practice and discover a technique that enables them to enter into the experiences of others, while forthcoming drama *Backstage* is set in the world of office politics.

Read more: sat7uk.org/thewall



WHO ARE SAT-7?

SAT-7 provides inspirational, informative and educational television services, by satellite and online, throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

We seek to strengthen the churches of the region in their faith and witness and in service to their communities.

But we also address wider society directly through a range of social development programmes that promote education, health and social inclusion, in pursuit of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

Contacts

Martin Thomas
Director, External Engagement
mthomas@sat7uk.org



Dave Mann
Partnership Executive
dmann@sat7uk.org



Lindsay Shaw
Press & Communications Officer
lshaw@sat7uk.org



SAT-7 UK Trust
PO Box 3941
Chippenham SN15 9HQ
Email: respond@sat7uk.org
Phone: +44 (0)1249 765865

www.sat7uk.org