



UKRAINE WAR BRINGS FLASHBACKS TO SYRIA

Images of Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine, begun on 24 February, have shocked us all. But, to many, the indiscriminate bombings of apartment blocks, hospitals and infrastructure, appeared like flashbacks to events in Syria after 2015 when Russia began assisting President Assad's campaign to crush Syria's rebel populations.

At the time of writing, Russia's attacks have come within 15 miles of NATO territory, but the ripples of this war are also being felt in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Ukraine and Russia are the biggest suppliers of wheat to much of the region. **Egypt** and **Lebanon** respectively import 70 per cent and 66 per cent of their wheat from Ukraine and the threat to supplies has sent them scrambling for alternative sources. **Syria**, most of whose homegrown wheat is now in Kurdish-controlled areas, has announced wheat rationing. **Tunisia** and Egypt have banned exports of pasta, wheat, flour and related foods in order to maintain essential stocks at home.

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Painful separation: a Ukrainian couple say goodbye on the Ukrainian-Slovak border (Yanosh Nemesh/Shutterstock)

THE AGENDA

Faiths equality call in Tunisia



Ahlam Afraoui, Manager of SAT-7's Tunisian production partner, Perpetua, was one of the signatories when Christians in Tunisia joined other minority faiths in a new charter for religious freedom (26 January). Christian, Jewish, Baha'i, Shia and Sufi Muslim representatives called on authorities to enact the freedom of religion promised in Tunisia's constitution.

Watch: www.sat7uk.org/freedom-charter

Some progress on Women's Day



Many MENA nations marked International Women's Day (8 March) by holding awards honouring high achieving women. Positive changes news sources noted included: half of graduates in STEM subjects (Scientific, Technical, Engineering, Maths) in the UAE are women; improved maternity leave and daycare in Turkey; and a 40 per cent fall in female genital mutilation in Egypt.

Read more: www.sat7uk.org/womens-day

Disarming extremism



Morocco will host a "Global Rules to Disarm Religious Extremism" conference on 11-12 May 2022. The conference is part of a campaign calling for a global treaty to ban "all political uses of religion that undermine human equality" and increase discrimination and restrictions on religious grounds.

Read more: www.sat7uk.org/disarm-extremism

IN FOCUS

UK TO HOST GLOBAL FORB SUMMIT

A global summit to promote Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) will be hosted in London from 5-6 July and a national FoRB "Fringe" will allow faith groups and others to take part locally. The Prime Minister's Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Fiona Bruce MP, announced this during an online Contemporary Martyrs Day event (15 February), organised by the Coptic Orthodox Office for Advocacy and Public Policy. (Continued on p4)



Archbishop Angaelos, Coptic Orthodox Archbishop of London, chaired the event

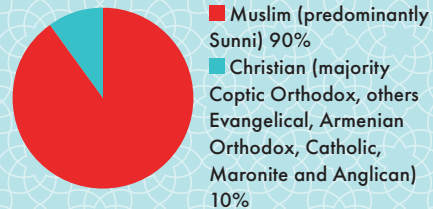
AT A GLANCE

EGYPT

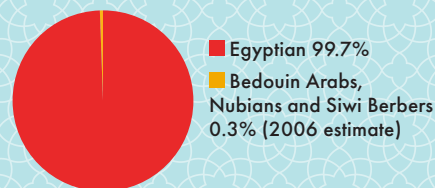
Population

106,437,241 (July 2021 est.)

Religions



Ethnic groups



Languages

Arabic (official)

Modern timeline

- 1914** Becomes a British protectorate
- 1922** Independence
- 1952-1953** Becomes a republic after military coup
- 1956** Israel, Britain and France invade over Suez Canal nationalisation
- 1958-61** Egyptian President Nasser leads United Arab Republic including Syria
- 1967** Israeli attack defeats Egypt, Jordan and Syria
- 1973** Arab-Israeli war led by Egypt and Syria
- 1979** Peace treaty with Israel
- 2011** “Arab Spring” topples President Mubarak
- 2012** Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood narrowly wins presidential election
- 2013** Army removes Morsi after mass demonstrations
- 2014** Abdul Fattah al-Sisi wins presidential election
- 2015-17** Local Islamic State attacks
- 2018** President al-Sisi re-elected



Bakery making traditional bread in Cairo: Egypt has set a fixed price for unsubsidised bread as wheat prices soar (Buhairi Nuwawi/Shutterstock)

MEDIATION AND PEACE CALLS

Two MENA countries with ties to both Russia and Ukraine have acted to mediate in the conflict. The Prime Minister of **Israel** had talks with President Putin in Moscow and follow-up phone calls. **Turkey** hosted a meeting of senior diplomats from Russia and Ukraine and offered to host peace talks between Presidents Zelenskyy and Putin.

Urgent calls for an end to violence have been made by Middle East Christians, including by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, the Istanbul-based leader of the world's Eastern Orthodox Christians.

Another repercussion of the war has been a pause on talks with Iran to revive the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on limiting **Iran's** nuclear enrichment. Recent months had produced promising signs, yet talks stalled when Moscow, a signatory to the accord, told Washington it will only support an agreement if Russia is exempted from Ukraine-related sanctions.

EXECUTIONS

From **Saudi Arabia** came shocking news of 81 executions in a single day (12 March). All were men sentenced to a range of crimes including terrorism. The news came amidst a push in the US and Europe to rebuild bridges with the Saudi Crown Prince who has been shunned since the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the kingdom's Istanbul consulate. The change in relations has been driven by hopes that Saudi Arabia will increase oil production to counter rocketing energy prices – another result of the war in Ukraine and wide dependence on Russian supplies.

One government that appeared out of step with others was the ruling council in **Sudan**. General Hamdan Dagalo, the deputy head of the government that removed civilian members of the transitional government last October, visited Moscow and signed an agreement that will allow Russia a naval base near Port Sudan. The move was driven by Khartoum's need for economic aid after the West cut assistance following the 25 October coup. On the streets of Sudan, meanwhile, medics say that more than 80 people have been killed by security forces in anti-coup protests that have continued over the last four months.

HOUSE CHURCH CHRISTIANS ACQUITTED

Iran watchers took heart from an Appeal Court ruling (28 February) that overturned the conviction of nine Christians arrested for attending a house church.

The review was ordered in November in a surprise decision by the Supreme Court. This judged that house church attendance and Christian evangelism did not constitute “gathering and collusion against internal or external security”, the basis on which many Christians have been sentenced. The subsequent ruling said that “the defendants, according to the teachings of Christianity, worshipped and praised in the house church, and there was no positive evidence to validate the crime of acting against the security of the country”. However, Mansour Borji, Director of human rights organisation, Article 18, cautioned against expecting consistency in future cases. Only one day after the nine were acquitted, another believer serving ten years for a similar offence had his appeal summarily dismissed.

In neighbouring **Iraq** there was both positive and tragic news for the Christian community. A state committee announced that over 120 properties that had been expropriated by gangs would be returned to Christians and to Iraq's indigenous Sabeen minority. The committee said it hoped to see the “prompt return” to Iraq of Christians and other minorities after the return of these lands and buildings.



Anti-coup rally in North Khartoum, December 2021. Despite use of tear gas and live rounds by security forces, protests continue (Ayman Ibrahim/Shutterstock)

CHRISTIAN INFLUENCER MURDERED

In Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan, however, church leaders called for prayer after the murder of a 20-year-old Christian convert. The body of Iman Sami, the daughter of a Muslim cleric, was found on 7 March after she posted a TikTok video in which she sang Christian worship songs. Iman, who had been preparing to be baptised, was an activist in women's rights whose social media posts were followed by hundreds of thousands.

Algeria continues to prosecute Christians for the free exercise of their religious beliefs. A verdict in March brings to 12 the number of Christians who have been sentenced to prison and fines in the last 18 months. SAT-7's Arabic Channels Director, George Makeen, asked for urgent prayer that the sentences will be overturned in an appeal hearing.

In **Afghanistan**, the Persian New Year was to be marked by the reopening of secondary schools for girls after seven months of closure. But within hours, girls were sent home after senior Taliban leadership apparently overruled the Taliban Ministry of Education.

Read Middle East Briefings every month at www.sat7uk.org/briefings

AT A GLANCE

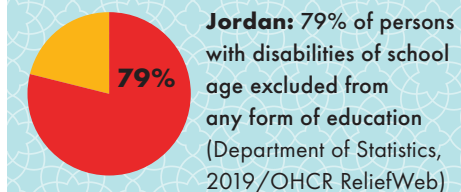
DISABILITY AND INTEGRATION

- All MENA states are party to the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) Implementation, however, often falls well below these commitments.
- SAT-7 addresses disability issues through programmes made in partnership with local disability NGOs. These include an Arabic language series that demonstrates the inclusion of children with disabilities and a Turkish language series in which people with disabilities speak about challenges and achievements.
- Disability suffers from different definitions and a shortage of studies and reliable statistics in the MENA region.

EDUCATION ACCESS

Algeria: Disability advocates report that children with disabilities rarely attend school past secondary level (USDS, 2017)

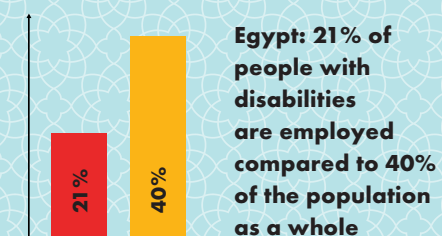
Egypt: SETI Caritas believes that just 2% of individuals with disabilities benefit from educational, recreational or rehabilitative programmes



Libya: 39.7% of people with disabilities are illiterate (compared to 12.2% of the total population)

LABOUR MARKET

Quotas for employing people with disability (typically 2%-7%) are often not enforced



Morocco: Persons with disabilities are three times less likely to be employed

Tunisia: People with disabilities are three times less likely to be employed and earn a 40% lower income than others

UK TO HOST **GLOBAL FORB SUMMIT**

(Continued from p1) The event also heard a gloomy assessment of the persecution of Christians by Rt Revd Philip Mountstephen, author of the 2019 Review of Foreign and Commonwealth Office Support for Persecuted Christians. He said the situation "is getting steadily worse globally and has worsened since my report over two-and-a-half years ago." He urged the UK government to "redouble its efforts" to ensure that the report's recommendations, due for review in July, are "implemented in full". **READ MORE:** www.sat7uk.org/forb-summit



Kafy, from Yemen, told her story in *Refugee Tales*

CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARDS REFUGEES

Arabic-speaking countries Syria, Sudan and Iraq are among the nations producing the largest number of refugees globally. The experiences of over two dozen who fled to Egypt from these and two other nations were filmed in a series of short SAT-7 documentaries and screened on social media to stimulate public conversation and promote smooth integration.

Some 227,000 watched at least one episode of *Refugee Tales* in full and their response was overwhelmingly positive. Social media pages were flooded with messages of encouragement, prayers and offers of support. The series was produced as part of a wider SAT-7 project designed to improve the rights of marginalised people in the Arab world.

READ MORE: www.sat7uk.org/refugee-survivors

REPEALING THE **DEATH PENALTY**

"I was on death row for the crime of apostasy." Mariam Ibraheem, whose 2014 death sentence under Sudan's apostasy law drew global attention before she was eventually granted amnesty, was one of the speakers at a side event at this year's UN Human Rights Council session.

The event reviewed the work of the UN, member states and civil society groups to repeal the death penalty for apostasy and blasphemy. While Sudan's transitional government abolished the apostasy law in 2020, apostasy is still punishable by death in 11 nations, including Afghanistan, Iran, Mauritania, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Yemen.

Lawyers, religious scholars and other experts, explained how the laws create a climate of fear and, in some countries, a context for mob violence and extra-judicial killings. For this reason, repealing legislation was not enough; "We need to involve religious actors at grassroots level," said Dr Ibrahim Salama, of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.



Mariam Ibraheem
(Tahrir Alnisa Foundation)

OUT AND ABOUT

MAY
28

Dare to Believe!
Stories of Faith
from the Middle
East

SAT-7 Founder and President, Dr Terence Ascott, will share the story of SAT-7, the courageous witness of Middle East Christians and explosion of interest in Christianity in parts of the region.

BRISTOL 28 May

1-5pm, Woodlands Church, Woodland Road, Bristol, BS8 2AA

BROMLEY 18 June

1-5pm, Crofton Baptist Church, Crofton Lane, Orpington, BR5 1HD

Find out more: sat7uk.org/daretobelieve

JUL
23-
AUG
3

New Wine United
Weeks A and B

Main seminars with Archbishop Angaelos

In both weeks Archbishop Angaelos will speak about the Middle East context, the situation of its Christian communities and issues of freedom of religion and belief in the region.

Week A: Tuesday 26 July, 4pm

Week B: Sunday 31 July, 4pm

East of England Showground, Peterborough PE2 6SH

www.sat7uk.org/events



WHO ARE **SAT-7**?

SAT-7 is an international Christian media ministry, bringing life-changing joy to the people of the Middle East & North Africa through powerful, faith-filled television and digital media programmes. In a region marked by conflict, SAT-7 presents a positive vision for life and society. Our programmes are holistic and inclusive, seeking to meet the needs of the whole person – often through education, health and social inclusion – as our response to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

BRINGING JOY TO THE MIDDLE EAST
THROUGH FAITH-FILLED TELEVISION
AND DIGITAL MEDIA

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