



INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN

PANDEMIC AND PERSECUTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has initiated global lockdowns, slowing down societies but not religious persecution. In the Middle East, where persecution was once defined by ISIS, the pandemic exposed a transformation of religious freedom violations. Terrorism remains a driver of persecution, especially in conflict areas. However, the pandemic shows that many governments have emerged from the last six years with more authority than before the 2014 rise of ISIS. The threat of extremism allowed societies a type of inoculation regarding “state of emergencies.” By the time the pandemic reached the region, mechanisms were already in place for many governments to act with decisive authority.

Islam is the official religion of most governments in the Middle East. Countries where this is not an official constitutional provision still have strong Islamic political parties influencing policy decisions. As the governments have grown stronger, so also has their influence over the fate of religious freedom. The pandemic reveals those areas where governments can hold Christians under duress, manipulate their financial resources, and create confusion in their regulation of religion. The pandemic also reveals those governments who have failed to follow their own religious freedom “standards.” Since the pandemic overlapped with both Easter and Ramadan, these problems grew in transparency.

The following report measures six categories: how political leaders reacted towards Christians during the pandemic, policy decisions taken which threaten future religious freedom environments, church and mosque lockdown parity, financial impact inequality, responses towards imprisoned Christians, and terrorism. Every country in the Middle East was evaluated under these rubrics, but the report only mentions those countries who were the most egregious in their activities within these categories.

Turkey deserves a notable mention for having the most violations, especially alarming given their military activities throughout the region and support of terrorist groups abroad. Whereas Iran has the most well-known reputation for imprisoning Christians, Egypt’s track record during the pandemic showed Christians were treated worse. A question yet unanswered is whether mosques and churches will reopen equally after the lockdown, an uncertainty of particular importance for Algerians. Terrorists were active throughout this period, but not necessarily in Christian areas.

The Middle East remains a complicated region. But the pandemic made one necessity clear: religious freedom remains missing. This time, governments more than extremists shoulder the blame for persecution.

Leaders Using Pandemic to Justify Persecution

The closure of places of worship was not welcomed by many, and some objections included hate speech toward Christians. In Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), a member of parliament objected to closing both churches and mosques. MP Kawa Abdulkadir said, *"How could a mosque be compared to a church? The numbers on believers of Muslims are much more. This equality is offensive for our Muslim people."*

On May 4th, during a briefing on COVID-19, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan used the derogatory phrase *"the leftovers of the sword."* This is a commonly used slur against the survivors of the Ottoman-era Christian genocide. The full quote from Erdoğan says *"we do not allow terrorist leftovers of the sword in our country to attempt to carry out [terrorist] activities. Their number has decreased a lot but they still exist."* This comment was widely perceived as an attempt to shame Christians. It declares a type of pride in the Christian genocide, which Turkey continuously denies.

This trend was further repeated on May 11th during yet another pandemic briefing. President Erdoğan blamed Armenian and Greek lobbies for weakening the Turkish state during the pandemic.

Iran used similar turns of phrase when speaking about the Christian population. The Tehran Times ran a lengthy interview with Alireza Marandi, head of Iran's Academy of Medical Sciences, about the country's COVID-19 response. His remarks insinuated that Christians are responsible for the pandemic's serious impact within Iran.

Marandi said, *"among Christians, some behaviors might be in contradiction with the health standards. Some of them are reluctant to vaccinate their children; and when a child has jaundice and needs a blood transfusion, the parents refuse and prefer the child dies. In some cases, the judicial system pursues the issue and forces them to save the child."*

Leaders Take Advantage of Pandemic Distraction

Algeria delayed the release of a new draft constitution, using the pandemic crisis as an excuse. This draft was intended for release in March, with a popular referendum potentially scheduled in the late spring / early summer. The constitutional revision process was initiated because of a widespread protest movement that ousted the previous government. The current authorities used the pandemic to restrict protests. Local Christians have repeatedly voiced concerns that the new constitution may not protect religious freedom. Several of their churches were closed between 2017-2019. There was hope that with the new year, the government would address these problems.

On May 12th, the Egyptian Supreme Council for Media Regulation banned journalists and anyone who contributes to website publications from using a pseudonym without first obtaining written approval. This is part of a broader crackdown on free speech across Egypt that effectively prevents anyone from openly making statements perceived as critical against the government. It further deepens a fear within many Egyptian Christians when challenging the government's narrative that religious freedom has significantly

improved. Two Christians who attempted to publish information relating to human rights are currently facing prosecution by the Egyptian authorities.

Turkey approached the pandemic in a way that strengthened the executive's office. Rather than introducing measures through the parliament, measures were introduced by presidential decree and government communiques. This further solidifies a growing trend by the president to gain power in a way that supersedes the voice of the people. Since the president's AK Party relays heavily upon Islamic nationalism, this creates an ever-deepening environment that ostracizes dissent and freedom of conscience. Within their COVID-19 economic aid draft, Turkey buried restrictions that would place social media platforms under the authority of the government's censorship.

The pandemic ignited a fresh source of conflict between the Syrian Government and Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). The World Health Organization (WHO) presented a biased health care approach that favored Damascus and was used by the Assad regime to constrict humanitarian access to AANES. Representatives of AANES have long maintained that their region is a safe zone for persecuted minorities, and indeed does include historically large numbers of various ethnic Christian communities. This situation came to a noted head when the WHO retraced a portion of the appeal before the United Nations. The appeal was supposed to request that aid deliveries resume through the Yaroubia (Iraq) border crossing. This crossing is in an area traditionally home to Armenian and Assyrian Christians.

Turkey has a long track record of cutting the water supply into AANES, but they ignited a fresh controversy by cutting the water supply into Hasakah province just days before Damascus announced its first COVID-19 case. The traditional demographics of this province are extremely diverse, including a number of Christians. This incident reportedly caught local officials by surprise, as it violated a deal Turkey had made four months earlier. The timing of this incident came under harsh international condemnation since the pandemic increased the need for sanitation.

Church and Mosque Lockdown Disparity

Many Christians across the Middle East noted that when mosques closed, it was done in a way that encouraged Muslims to stay home for the sake of Muslims. This was interpreted by many Christians that they should stay home in a stricter fashion, lest they are accused of spreading the virus.

With some notable exceptions, most countries in the Middle East experienced church and mosque closures occurring within the same 24-hour period. The countries with an exception to this practice were Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Iraq. The most extreme example of this exception was Kuwait, where 12 days passed between when churches and mosques first closed. In this case, the churches had closed first.

Since the Middle East is predominately Islamic in governance, Christians and Muslims are often governed under two different standards. This introduced randomization to the processes behind these closures. In most countries, the closure was announced by the highest relevant religious authority figure. This process

became confusing for protestant Christian groups, given their decentralized nature. Those in countries like Tunisia and Turkey were especially affected by this confusion, as they are largely unrecognized by their governments.

With the exception of Yemen, these closures all occurred in March. They interrupted the corporate worship of Christians during the season of Lent, and later Easter. The closures also threatened to interrupt the corporate worship of Muslims during Ramadan. It is worth remembering that Orthodox Christians celebrated Easter just days before the start of Ramadan.

Most countries in the region maintained restrictions during Ramadan. Countries whose announcement of lifting some type of lockdown restrictions coincided with Ramadan's start included Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. As of the time of this writing, only the UAE has not snapped back lockdown restrictions. Most other countries attempted to lift restrictions mid-way through Ramadan, with only two snapping restrictions back before Eid.

Economic Impact Disparity

The economic impact of COVID-19 is felt globally, but the economic disparity between Muslim and Christian groups is apparent throughout the Middle East.

Turkey's response toward the economic impact stands noteworthy in comparison to the region. The government initiated a National Solidarity Campaign and encouraged donations from across the country in support of the crisis response. The government specifically reached out to the Ecumenical Patriarch, the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Metropolitan, and the Armenian Patriarch requesting donations. The Christian community understands that it is not possible to deny requests from the government. Thus, a combined donation of over 400,000 TL (\$58,000) was made to the campaign. Churches in Turkey pay taxes and other fees to the government. But since they lack a clearly defined legal identity, they cannot access benefits made available to Islamic religious institutions in Turkey.

Christian media in Turkey expressed how COVID-19 has placed them under substantial economic burden. The publications of Apoyevmatini (linked to the Greek Orthodox community) and the publications of Agos (linked to the Armenian community) shared how the pandemic has substantially impacted advertising and distribution. Free press is almost non-existent in Turkey, and the possibility of the pandemic eliminating some of the last vestiges of Christian media expression has caused great alarm.

Egypt recorded similar financial duress, although on a smaller scale. An Islamic charity in Minya Governorate announced that they had received Zakat al-Fitr (Ramadan charity funds) from Coptic Christians in Kafr al-Mahdy village for distribution to the village's neediest people under COVID-19. However, Christian officials in Minya countered that any Zakat funds collected are never made available to Christians unless they first convert to Islam. They also stressed that Christians would prefer not to pay Zakat, and instead to help needy families through local churches or Christian charities.

In Iraq, officials restricted access to communal housing areas where Christians displaced by ISIS reside.

This was part of an attempt to reinforce social distancing. However, it also had the consequence of restricting NGOs from accessing those most in need of humanitarian assistance. The need was highly exaggerated in Baghdad, where Christian IDPs are already forced to survive without access to foreign NGOs. The Nineveh Governorate snapped back lockdown restrictions a month after attempting to open when a COVID-19 case was reported in Qeraqosh. This predominately Christian city was destroyed by ISIS and is in the process of rebuilding. Reinstating the lockdown further alienated Christian returnees from having access to humanitarian assistance.

The Wrongfully Imprisoned

The following list details the names of some individuals who remained wrongfully imprisoned in their home countries during the pandemic. Petitions for these individuals' release were denied by the relevant authorities even as their governments took some steps to release other prisoners. Petitions were made as part of an appeal for medical compassion because of poor prison conditions. While not an exhaustive list, it is representative of those names where public advocacy steps have been taken. It is noteworthy that the two countries that are significantly different can produce such a comparable list of prisoners during the pandemic.

Iran	Egypt
Nasser Navard Gol Tapeh	Abd Adel Bebawy
Yousef Nadarkhani	Ramy Kamel
Mohammad Reza Yohan Omidi	Patrick Zaki
Zaman Saheb Fadaei	

During the pandemic, Iran did release some Christian prisoners and canceled the sentences of others. While this only impacted a small number of Christians, it was at least a positive step that was not taken at all by Egypt. The cases of imprisoned Christians in Egypt have simply not moved.

Terrorist Activity Increases

Multiple reports across the region have documented an increase of terrorist activity that took advantage of COVID-19 lockdowns coinciding with Ramadan. These activities largely occurred in disputed territories. During the month of March, Syria saw a 97% decrease in terrorist arrests. This was representative of a decrease of counterterrorism operations. ISIS also attempted a prison break in Hasakah. A similar situation was reported in Iraq. The International Coalition against ISIS decided for the second time this year to pause its operations. This was in part because of COVID-19; there was also a relevancy question since ISIS was militarily declared defeated three years ago.

In Syria, it was reported that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) had clamped down on Christian properties. These properties were considered spoils of war and handled under Sharia law. Christian properties in Western Idlib were especially impacted. HTS sold these properties and used the income to support the families of

fighters. While HTS is distinct from ISIS, it is a practice shared by both extremist groups.

In Iraq, activities specific to ISIS increased throughout the country but not necessarily within Christian areas. When increasing their attacks, ISIS took advantage of security gaps. Many of the attacks occurred along the boundaries of governorates, in remote areas, and in areas where the disputed status of territories is elevated. While the Nineveh Governorate is officially disputed, the territory is strongly controlled by PMF militias and does have a strong western NGO presence. Although there were some ISIS-related incidents in Nineveh, most occurred elsewhere in Iraq. Nevertheless, the confidence of Christians regarding the security of their homeland remained shaken.

Conclusion

Turkey has emerged from the pandemic as the most significant violator of religious freedom. It is also alarming given its track record of territorial expansion throughout the rest of the region. Egypt also made a noteworthy appearance for several religious freedom violations during the pandemic. For the first time, Egypt stood more strongly against current Christian prisoners than Iran. Countries in conflict used the pandemic to further their own political goals. It was those countries where an increase of terrorist activity has increased.

The pandemic exposes just how much persecution has changed in the region. Whereas terrorism, specifically through ISIS, has defined persecution for the past six years, that is no longer the case. Governments have strengthened their roles during this time, enforcing a need for greater diplomatic engagement with these countries regarding religious freedom.

The Middle East has not fully resumed normal activities following the pandemic, with several countries reinstating some version of the lockdown. As the region moves forward, key areas remain important when observing the status of religious freedom. The question of whether mosques and churches will have parity when reopening is important. Equally key is whether countries will continue with curfews and the implementation of these restrictions. Places of worship may eventually open, but since Islam and Christianity worship on different days, curfews could restrict the ability of believers to actually make an appearance at churches. Economic inequality between Christians and Muslims is expected to worsen, as well as hate speech towards religious minorities. The threat of terrorism looms in the background.

The pandemic has exposed the depth of how the region has transformed since the rise of ISIS. The question remains: where in this environment are religious freedom protections and advocacy most needed?

