

# Religious Persecution and Mass Displacements

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## Abstract

Mass displacements due to religious persecution continue in several countries around the world. This article, while detailing instances of mass displacements due to religious persecution, emphasizes that religion is often one factor and not necessarily "the" factor in these conflicts. Listed are cases which include Iran, where the "Iranian Diaspora" is estimated at 4 million people in 1999. Of these, 408,000 emigrated or were displaced because of religious persecution. In Egypt, though there are still about 6 million Coptic Christians their numbers are constantly decreasing. Other instances include southern Mexico, where in the last 30 years over 25,000 Chamula Indians, who had become Evangelicals, were expelled from their homes and lands by local "caciques" or informal rulers. What will it take to stop mass displacements due to religious persecution? When will we learn to respect each other and live together, in spite of our differences? These questions still remain unanswered.

## Résumé

Des migrations en masse causées par des persécutions religieuses continuent à se produire dans plusieurs pays du monde. Tout en examinant des cas précis de migrations en masse causées par des persécutions religieuses, cet article souligne le fait que souvent la religion ne constitue qu'un des facteurs - et pas nécessairement le plus

important - dans ces conflits. Parmi les cas mentionnés se trouve l'Iran, où la « diaspora iranienne » était estimée à 4 millions de personnes en 1999. Parmi elles, 408,000 ont migrées, ou furent déplacées, à cause de la persécution religieuse. En Égypte, malgré qu'il y reste encore environ 6 millions de chrétiens coptes, leur nombre est en déclin constant. D'autres exemples concernent la région méridionale du Mexique où plus de 25,000 Indiens Chamula, qui s'étaient joints aux églises évangéliques, furent expulsés de leurs foyers et de leurs terres par les « caciques » locaux, ou chefs officiels. Que faire pour mettre fin aux déplacements en masse causés par les persécutions religieuses? Quand apprendrons-nous à nous respecter les uns les autres et à vivre ensemble en dépit de nos différences? Ces questions restent toujours sans réponses.

## Introduction

During a workshop on psychological approaches to conflict at Harvard, one of the participants identified himself as a Protestant activist from Northern Ireland. During a break I asked him, "Why are Protestants and Catholics still fighting in Northern Ireland if you believe in the same God?" His response still startles me, 12 years later. He simply said, "What God? I don't believe in God. I am an atheist."

Whether it is Northern Ireland, the Arab-Israeli conflict, Quebec, Kosovo, Sudan, East Timor or Kashmir, oftentimes religion is blamed as the source, or at least as a predominant factor for the origination and continuation of these conflicts.

The fact is that while religion, in varying degrees, does play a role in many of these conflicts --whether identified as religion itself or as part of the larger concept of "ethnicity" --there are several other factors such as territorial disputes, access to resources, ancient antagonisms, racial

differences, etc., that can be as prominent as religion in the origination and continuation of these disputes.

Having said that, I would like to highlight specifically the religious aspect present in certain conflicts and within that context the mass displacement that has followed due at least in part to religious persecution. Recently this phenomenon has also been broadly termed "ethnic cleansing."

To this day, religious refugees continue to engross the ranks of the millions of displaced persons (internal displacement alone affects some 25 million people worldwide<sup>1</sup>) all around the world.

I will briefly highlight the situation in the Middle East, Africa and the Western Hemisphere as exemplified by the case studies of Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Sudan, and Mexico.

## Iran

Though the Iranian Constitution declares that "religious minorities" such as Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians are "protected," it also states that the "official religion of Iran is Islam and the sect followed is Ja'fari Shi'ism."<sup>2</sup>

Iranian Christians International, a human rights organization based in Colorado Springs (U.S.) reports that the "Iranian Diaspora" is estimated at 4 million people in 1999. Of these, 408,000 (including Bahai's, Armenians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Muslim converts to Christianity and others) emigrated or were displaced because of religious persecution.<sup>3</sup>

Approximately 90 percent of the population of Iran comprises of Shi'a Muslims. The Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance closely monitors religious activity. Though Christians and Jews are legally permitted to practice their religion and instruct their children, they are forbidden from proselytizing Muslims.

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## Iraq

Reportedly some 15,000 Iraqi Christians have fled Iraq over the past five years to nearby Turkey, Greece and Jordan.<sup>4</sup> Many of these Christians who have sought refugee status with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), have been denied that status and were forcibly returned to Iraq.

In cases involving Muslim converts to Christianity and as Islamization rises, Iraqi courts are less likely to show leniency to repatriated Christians. Moreover, violent retaliation by Muslim family members against converts to Christianity is less likely to result in criminal charges. The government has taken measures to curb Islamic extremism by providing an ostensible protection for religious minorities. However, these protections are less likely to be enforced as Islamization becomes widespread.

## Egypt

There are still about 6 million Coptic Christians in Egypt. But their numbers are constantly decreasing. Freedom House reports that due to terrorism from radical Muslim groups, abuses by local police and security forces and government policies that restrict and discriminate against Christians, the latter have "an emigration rate three to four times that of Muslims."<sup>5</sup> It is estimated that over a million Copts have left Egypt in the past thirty years.

The U.S. State Department states that under the Egyptian Constitution "Islam is the official state religion" and that "religious practices that conflict with Islamic law are prohibited."<sup>6</sup>

## Sudan

Since 1986, the Arab-Islamic government in Khartoum has openly declared "holy war" against Christians and other non-Muslims of southern Sudan. At one point in 1989, Uganda was hosting about 225,000 Sudanese refugees who left when fighting escalated between Sudanese forces and the government army (many of them have since

returned to Sudan. Another 50,000 were internally displaced in Sudan.<sup>7</sup>

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The Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Sudan reported that "an estimated 1.3 million persons" have been killed since 1983 and that the civil war "resulted in the displacement of some 4 million southerners and hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing to neighboring countries."<sup>8</sup> Incidents of persecution against Christians include withholding food from Christians who will not convert to Islam, as well as widespread reports of slavery and rape.<sup>9</sup>

## Mexico

Mexico has seen one of the most extreme cases of mass displacement in the Western Hemisphere, largely due to religious intolerance. In the last 30 years, over 25,000 Chamula Indians in the south of Mexico, who had become Evangelicals, were expelled from their homes and lands by local "caciques" or informal rulers.<sup>10</sup>

Much of this conflict was due to religious differences between members of the traditional Catholic church and newer Evangelical churches that have seen rapid growth, especially in the southern states of Chiapas, Oaxaca and Hidalgo.

Only recently, the situation for the Chamula Indians has eased, partly as a result of the international attention given to the insurgence of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), which is not connected to the Evangelical churches in the region.

## Conclusion

Though the situation has considerably improved in Mexico and mass displacements due to religious persecution are becoming relatively less frequent and acute in other regions of the world, the outlook is still bleak for the

other countries cited as case studies where religious persecution continues unabated.

What will it take to stop it? When will we learn to respect each other and live together, in spite of our differences? These questions still remain unanswered.

In the meantime, our task is to at least bring these instances to light and work so that these atrocities will not continue to go unnoticed and unaddressed. ■

## Notes

1. United Nations, ECOSOC, Further Promotion and Encouragement of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Including the Question of the Programme and Methods of Work of the Commission on Human Rights Mass Exoduses and Displaced Persons, February 11, 1998.
2. Iran Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998, U.S. State Department, Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, February 26, 1999.
3. Iranian Christians International, "Iranian Diaspora Due to Religious Persecution," undated document and telephone interview with Abe Ghaffari, head of ICI.
4. Source material for the Sudan and Iraq sections was taken from the International Christian Concern website - [www.persecution.org](http://www.persecution.org)
5. Country Reports, Egypt, Freedom House, New York, March 1999.
6. Egypt Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998, U.S. Department of State, February 26, 1999.
7. Journal of Humanitarian Assistance, IRIN Emergency Update No. 135 on the Great Lakes, March 25, 1997.
8. United Nations, ECOSOC, Human Rights, Mass Exoduses and Displaced Persons, January 30, 1998.
9. Handbook on Religious Liberty Around the World, Sudan, at 36-37, Pedro C. Moreno, Editor, published by The Rutherford Institute, 1996.
10. Evangelical Churches, chapter by Pedro C. Moreno, at 57-58, in Religious Freedom and Evangelization in Latin America: The Challenge of Religious Pluralism, Paul E. Sigmund, Editor, Orbis Books, 1999. □