

The Middle East

By Paul Stenhouse, MSC

According to *The Pew Research Center*, social hostilities involving religion reached a six year peak in 2012, in every major region of the world except the Americas. The same 2012 report said that Christians were denied freedom of religion in 151 countries and Muslims in 135 countries. As in previous years social hostilities involving religion were highest in 2012 across the Middle East and North Africa, with the median score rising from 3.7 in 2007 to 6.4 in 2012. The global median was 2.0.¹

Some *caveats* may be helpful, as readers scan the data contained in this biennial report on Religious Freedom in the Middle East and North Africa covering the period 2012 to 2013.

1. As religious freedom is connected closely with human rights, it should be noted that Muslims' attitudes towards human rights 'run the gamut from total rejection to wholehearted embrace.'² There is, for example, no religious freedom in Saudi Arabia. Oman, on the other hand, guarantees equality before the law for all citizens, and permits no discrimination on grounds of religion.

2. 'Political correctness' has led many in the West to be complicit in the denial of human rights to Muslims and non-Muslim minorities in Islamic societies, based on false assumptions about Islamic legal traditions and culture concerning rights and freedoms permitted by Shari'a. Such skewed rationales, usually advanced by ultra-conservative individuals and governments opposed to any granting of rights, trade on the ignorance of Western politicians and media.³

3. U.S. and Western countries continue to show naïve confidence in the benefits of U.S.-style 'Democracy,' imposed – sometimes by force – on developing countries. 'Democracy' like 'Islam' is an equivocal term. Even the idea of a 'nation-state' as embodied, more or less, in the Islamic states described in this report, emerged in Islam only recently and was not even contemplated by Islamic jurists in former times.⁴

4. Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey alone among the states that we reviewed, were never colonised by, or subjected to long-term foreign occupation by Europeans. Iran and Afghanistan had, of course, been conquered and colonised by Muslim Arab armies. The former Byzantine Empire [Turkey] had been colonised by the Muslim Seljuk and Ottoman forces. With the exception of Turkey, they entered the modern era with their tribal structures, political cultures and economies, more or less intact. Turkey, for its part, inherited a legacy of repeated Ottoman attempts at reform.⁵

5. Of all Islamic countries surveyed for this Report, Saudi Arabia alone has no Constitution, and admits no freedom of religion, though Christians are, according to the UK's Foreign Office website⁶, reportedly allowed to own a Bible for purely private use. It has no political parties or trade unions.⁷

6. Turkey has severely restricted freedom of religion, recognising Jews, Greek Orthodox or Armenian Apostolic Christians but limiting their access to public office. Catholics of the Assyrian-Chaldean, Armenian, Maronite or Latin Rites, or Protestants, have no legal status.

7. Iran deserves special mention. By its Constitution, Zoroastrians, Christians and Jews enjoy Freedom of Religion. Desecration and destruction of churches or synagogues – a feature of Islamist extremism in many Sunni states – is notably absent from Shi'a communities and societies. In Iran ongoing efforts at reform, while respecting the nature of the Shi'a state have set in motion liberal reformist forces that promote human rights and democratisation in the Islamic Republic. The 2013 election of the reformist candidate,

Hassan Ruhani, as President, disproved claims that former President Ahmadinejad's offensive rhetoric represented the mindset of the whole Iranian nation.

8. 'Rome wasn't built in a day' is not some trite saw. For 'Rome' read 'Democracy,' and 'Liberal reforms in countries with little or no experience of democracy'. These cannot be 'built' in a day. Yet good and bad decisions taken by Western secular governments, always seeking what is in their own best economic or military interest, brook no delays under pressure from self-interested lobbyists. Generation 'Y,' thriving on so-called 'social media' and permanently connected to one another and the internet, are by definition impatient.

9. Countries where religious freedom is safeguarded have a bulwark against the rise of terrorism. Countries where religious freedom is systematically denied become unstable breeding grounds for extremism and terrorism.⁸

Note

This analysis forms part of Aid to the Church in Need's *Religious Freedom in the World Report – 2014*. To view the report in full please visit: www.religion-freedom-report.org

¹ <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high/> [accessed July 18, 2014]. *The Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, January 14, 2014.

² Ann Elizabeth Mayer, *Islam and Human Rights: Tradition and Politics*, Westview Press, 1991, p. xi.

³ *ibid.* p.xiv.

⁴ <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/book/islam-9780195107999/islam-9780195107999-chapter-13> [accessed July 18, 2014]. Also, see Mayer, *op.cit.* p.12.

⁵ See among many other sources, Youssef M. Choueiri, *Islamic Fundamentalism*, Pinter, London, 1990 p. 64.

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/saudi-arabia/local-laws-and-customs>

⁷ *ibid.* p.76.

⁸ Timothy Samuel Shah et al., *Religious Freedom, Why Now? Defending an Embattled Human Right*, The Witherspoon Foundation, Princeton, NJ, 2012.