

Middle East

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The year 2006 was another year of conflict in the Middle East, marked by a worsening of sectarian and ethnic strife in Iraq; an intensive, month-long war between Israel and Hezbollah that saw widespread destruction in Lebanon; and continuation of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. All of this violence had dire consequences for minority rights.

The Iraq Study Group commissioned by the US Congress warned in December 2006 of a ‘broader regional war’ fuelled by Sunni–Shia violence spilling out of Iraq. Indeed, Iran, Lebanon and Syria all saw a worsening of sectarian relations. Even in usually calm Bahrain, sectarian friction between the ruling Sunni minority and the 60 per cent majority Shia population rose ahead of November parliamentary elections, following the leaking of a government report in September that described the proposals of a government minister to weaken the Shia, including through election manipulation.

The Iraq war also sharpened the plight of Palestinian refugees trying to escape from Iraq without travel documents. As violence in Iraq escalated in 2006, Syria and Jordan both demonstrated reluctance to admit Palestinians camped at their borders. Minority women in Iraq faced the triple threat of targeting on the basis of religion, ethnicity and gender.

Iraq

Violence in Iraq continues to worsen, with a study in the *Lancet* finding that – as of September 2006 – the Iraqi death toll attributable to conflict since the March 2003 American-led invasion had risen to over 650,000. With mounting chaos, the United Nations (UN) estimated that, by October 2006, over 1.6 million Iraqis had fled the country and 100,000 more each month were abandoning their burning homeland. Militants sought to extend their control over land, principally by killing and expelling minority populations. Religious and ethnic minorities throughout Iraq became even more imperilled with acceleration of the cycle of killings and retribution, especially in sectarian violence between Shia and Sunni Arabs. Minority women faced added danger of violence from Islamic extremists, and even their own families, through so-called ‘honour killings’ following sexual violence. Some have stopped attending university in order to avoid coercion.

Muslims make up about 96 per cent of the Iraqi population. This overwhelming majority is mainly divided into a large Shia Arab majority, a Sunni Arab minority estimated at around 20 per cent, and around 6 million ethnic Kurds, who are mostly Sunni. An estimated 10 per cent of the population is not Shia Arab, Sunni Arab or Sunni Kurd, and includes ethnic Shabaks, Turkomans and Faili (Shia) Kurds, as well as Christians, Mandaean-Sabeans, Yezidis and Baha’is.

The Baathist regime of former dictator Saddam Hussein was firmly based in the favoured Sunni Arab minority and became notorious for the repression and even slaughter of Shia, Kurds and many of Iraq’s smaller minorities. Following the ouster of Saddam in 2003, the American-led occupying force installed a transitional government using ethnic and sectarian quotas that left Sunni Arabs feeling under-represented. Elections in January 2005, boycotted by Sunni Arabs, led to establishment of a government dominated by Shia and Kurds. This government oversaw the drafting and ratification of a new constitution in October 2005 that left Sunni Arabs feeling marginalized. Other minorities were also largely excluded from the process, as Western powers concentrated on forging consensus among the three main ethnic/sectarian groups, to which all but five of the 71 constitutional framers belonged.

The Shia Arab majority appeared content to await the post-Saddam transition that would cede them control of the country, and refrained from large-scale retaliation against Sunni Arab attacks until coming to power in the January 2005 elections. But, following those elections, Shia militants associated with the Iranian-backed Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and its Badr Organization, played a major role in the Interior Ministry and committed numerous indiscriminate attacks on Sunni civilians. In November 2005, US forces discovered an underground detention and torture facility run by the Interior Ministry in Baghdad.

Amidst this bloodshed, sectarian and ethnic division marked the campaign ahead of another round of elections in December 2005. The government arising from that vote is divided among the three main factions: President Jalal Talabani is Kurdish, Vice-President Tariq al-Hashemi is Sunni Arab, and Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki is

Shia Arab; yet this power-sharing has not hindered Iraq's slide into sectarian civil war and dark days for its minorities.

Rival political parties within government openly support different militias who patrol various parts of the country in the name of community protection, but are also clearly working to extend their areas of control. These same militias detain, torture and conduct 'trials' of their victims, and summarily execute them with impunity. For example, Prime Minister Maliki depends on a faction allied with radical Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Many Sunni Arab victims of militia assaults report that perpetrators are in police or sometimes army uniforms, use police vehicles and act without interference from local police. Sunni Arab militants have targeted police stations and police recruits in retaliation for Shia Arab militia attacks, and to discourage cooperation with the government and international troops.

It is unclear to what extent Sunni Arab attacks are the work of domestic Baathist forces, or that of foreign insurgents, but it is increasingly clear that Iraqi Sunnis are engaging in sectarian violence. Shia militias have been unwilling to disarm because they say their community would then be endangered by the Sunni insurgency, but these in turn encourage Sunni Arab militancy. Iraqis of many stripes feel increasingly reliant on sectarian and ethnic militias because the American-led international and Iraqi government forces have proved incapable of establishing security.

The 22 February 2006 bombing of a Shia shrine set off a particularly fierce round of sectarian violence, the worst of which came in such mixed Sunni-Shia Arab areas of the country as Baghdad, Tal Afar and Diyala. The violence escalated throughout the year. Iraqi government figures placed the number of civilian dead for September and October 2006 at 7,054, with 5,000 of these killings in Baghdad. Most victims had been tortured. In one October incident, following the abduction and decapitation of 17 Shia civilians in the mixed Sunni-Shia Arab town of Balad, up to 90 Sunni civilians suffered reprisal killings and the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) reported that most remaining Sunnis had fled the town. By November 2006, the UN estimated that 425,000 Iraqis had been displaced in sectarian violence since the February Samarra bombings. On 23 November,

a new assault threatened to intensify the killing further, as a series of car bombs, mortar attacks and rockets killed over 200 civilians in Sadr City, the Shia Arab slum of Baghdad and stronghold of leading Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army militia. In the aftermath, Shia Arab militants launched retaliatory attacks on Sunni civilians and their holy sites.

In September 2006 the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported patterns of displacement that reflected the perceived threat to Shia and Sunni Arabs living as sectarian minorities. Shia Arabs were fleeing the Sunni Arab-dominated central Iraqi governates of Anbar and Salah al Din, as well as the mixed governate of Baghdad for the majority Shia Arab southern governates, while Sunni Arabs were moving from those southern governates into the governates of Baghdad, Diyala and Anbar. IOM also reported high rates of movement by Shia and Sunni Arabs into segregated towns and neighbourhoods within the mixed governates of Baghdad and Diyala.

The overwhelming reality of daily sectarian violence has left Iraq's smaller minorities particularly vulnerable. A report for Minority Rights Group International (MRG), published in early 2007, warned that the impact of the conflict on some minority groups has been so acute that they are in danger of being driven out entirely from a territory they have called home for hundreds – in some cases, thousands – of years. They are targeted on sectarian and/or ethnic grounds, and face added danger from the perception that they cooperate with American-led forces.

Iraq's ethnic Kurdish minority is mostly Sunni and concentrated in the north. Iraqi Kurds suffered greatly under Saddam's rule, but gained wide autonomy and relative prosperity during the sanctions regime, and with the Western air protection from Saddam's forces that preceded the 2003 invasion. Kurds in Iraq strive for greater autonomy and the dream of an independent Kurdistan, which is anathema to Iran, Syria and Turkey, all of which have neighbouring Kurdish minorities who, they fear, would seek to join such a new state. In July 2006, the International Crisis Group warned of a brewing battle for oil-rich Kirkuk in the north, which lies beyond the Erbil-based Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG's) reach, but within its desire. Kurds used their

position in the government elected in January 2005 to secure a process that would reverse the Saddam-era process of Arabization in Kirkuk, moving toward its eventual formal inclusion in the Kurdish region by referendum in late 2007. Turkey has signalled its opposition, as have Iraq's Sunni and Shia Arabs. Similarly, the Kurdish government in Erbil governate has attempted to extend its influence to the likewise disputed city of Mosul. In October 2006, a Kurdish member of parliament and his driver, who had been kidnapped earlier, were found dead – the suspected work of a Shia Arab militia. That same month, a senior member of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan was assassinated in Mosul.

Kurdish claims on Kirkuk and Mosul clash with those of the Turkish-speaking Turkomans, Iraq's third-largest ethnic group, which makes up 3 per cent of the population, and has both Sunni and Shia adherents. Turkomans view Kirkuk as historically theirs and, with Turkish assistance, have formed the Iraqi Turkman Front (ITF) to prevent Kurdish control of Kirkuk. UN reports in 2006 indicated that forces of the KRG and Kurdish militias were policing illegally in Kirkuk and other disputed areas. These militias have abducted Turkomans and Arabs, subjecting them to torture. In June, 20 Turkoman students were killed in Kara Tepe and explosions in Turkoman areas of Kirkuk killed 13. A car bomb at a July parade by the ITF in Kirkuk wounded another 20. Turkomans also remain prone to predominant sectarian violence. Of 17 Turkoman officials arrested in October at a militia checkpoint in Tikrit, two Sunnis were released while 15 Shias disappeared.

The small ethnic Shabak minority, among which are both Sunni and Shia, has lived in the Nineveh Plains of the north for hundreds of years, but faces harassment from Kurdish militants. Despite Shabaks' distinct language and recognition as an ethnic group, Kurds wishing to extend land claims into the Nineveh governate claim that Shabaks are really Kurds. The Faili Kurds, who follow Shia Islam, live along the Iran/Iraq border and in Baghdad. Repressed as 'Iranians' under the Saddam regime, they are now targeted for ethnic and religious reasons. In November 2005, two Faili Kurdish mosques in the town of Khanaqin were bombed. The Yezidi are ethnically and linguistically Kurdish but have their own 4,000-year-old religion.

They face persecution by religious extremists as 'devil worshippers'. A Yezidi council member for the Nineveh Plains was assassinated in April 2006, one of 11 Yezidis reported murdered between September 2005 and September 2006.

Iraq is home to many Christian groups, including Chaldo-Assyrians, Syriac-speaking Orthodox Christians, Catholic and Oriental Orthodox Armenians, and Protestants. Chaldo-Assyrians and Syriac Christians both speak the ancient Syriac language and have been in the region since the earliest days of Christianity's spread in the region; they consider themselves Arabs but are not recognized as such by the government. Armenians have been in Mesopotamia since the days of Babylon, their numbers bolstered following the Armenian genocide of 1915. In its September–October human rights report, UNAMI reported increasing violence against all Christians, with a spike in attacks on Christians following the Pope's controversial remarks on Islam in September 2006. Churches and convents were attacked by rocket and gunfire, and a Syriac Orthodox priest was kidnapped and decapitated in October. With mounting violence, many Iraqi churches have cancelled services and the UN reports that Iraqi Christians are fleeing in disproportionate numbers to Syria, Jordan and beyond.

The Mandaean-Sabeans are Gnostics who have practised their faith in Iraq for over 2,000 years and speak an endangered language. Their religion forbids the use of violence, which makes them easy targets for Islamic extremists. The state offers no protection from attacks, such as one that killed four Mandaean-Sabeans in October 2006. As members of the community flee abroad, the number of Mandaean-Sabeans estimated to remain in Iraq in late 2006 was 13,000, down two-thirds since the American-led invasion.

Followers of the Baha'i faith in Iraq are targeted by Islamic extremists because they don't believe Mohammed was the last prophet. For the past 30 years, Baha'i have not been allowed to have citizenship papers or travel documents, which makes it difficult for them to leave the country. Almost entirely gone from Iraq are Jews, who have a 2,600-year history in the country and once numbered 150,000. In October 2005, the UN reported that the only Jews left in Iraq were in Baghdad, and their numbers had shrunk to 20.

Below: An old man talks to a younger man during prayers in the synagogue on Philistine Street, Tehran. There are approximately 25,000 Jews in Iran, their number ever decreasing.
Jeroen Oerlemans/Panos Pictures

Although an estimated 4,000–15,000 Palestinian refugees have left Iraq since 2003, some 20,000 remain and are subject to attack by militias in Baghdad. Favoured as political pawns under Saddam, this mostly Sunni minority now face retaliatory attacks, including by Iraqi security services. Militias have also been seizing Palestinian homes, often for their ethnic kin, who have been displaced by other militias elsewhere in Iraq. The UN received reports of at least six Palestinians killed

in June 2006 and the refugee agency reported that many Palestinians were encamped at the Syrian border, trying to flee the country.

Subject to the same sectarian and ethnic targeting as Iraqi men, women face the added burden of gender discrimination. The number of widows in the country is increasing, and Islamic militants leave few opportunities for women to make money, let alone drive or move around without a male relative. The Iraqi government estimates that mixed marriages between Sunni and Shia Arabs account for nearly a third of all marriages in Iraq. In November 2006, the local Peace for Iraqis Association reported that hundreds of Iraqis in mixed sectarian marriages were being forced by militias or their families to divorce, throwing more



women into economic uncertainty. Short-term marriages of convenience, known as Muta'a, were on the rise in 2006; these may serve immediate economic needs of women, but afford them no rights when the marriage is over.

Women across Iraq, many of them non-Muslims, have reported numerous death threats for failing to fully cover their heads and bodies in line with strict Islamic teachings. The Women's Rights Association of Baghdad reported in March 2006 that, since the 2003 invasion, the number of women attacked for failing to cover their heads and faces had more than tripled.

Across Iraq, kidnappings, rapes and sexual slavery of women have increased. UNAMI, in its September–October human rights report, mentions a 'worrying trend of female "suicides" and "attempted suicides" as a result of family conflicts' in the KRG. The government has not aggressively pursued the perpetrators of such 'honour killings', who receive light sentences when they are apprehended and tried. In October, an activist for women's and Arab rights in the Kurdistan region was murdered following threats accusing her of collaboration with international forces. In response to their targeting by militants, many girls' schools did not open this fall.

Although aiming to serve the cause of transitional justice, it appeared that the trial of Saddam Hussein only provided more fodder for sectarian tensions. When Saddam and two co-defendants were sentenced to death on 5 November 2006 for a 1982 massacre of Shia in Dujail, Shia Arabs and Kurds celebrated, while Sunni Arabs saw it as further evidence of their endangerment and loss of privilege. Human Rights Watch criticized the trial's conduct and the verdict's 'suspect' timing, two days before US mid-term Congressional elections. In the course of the trial, three defence attorneys and a witness were assassinated. Although the 'Anfal' trial against Saddam and others for the killing of some 180,000 Kurds was ongoing, Saddam was hanged on 30 December 2006 – the first day of the Muslim holiday Eid-al-Adha as observed by Sunnis.

As Iraqi civil war raged, the report of the Iraq Study Group, commissioned by the US Congress and released in December 2006, stirred enormous controversy in the US and UK but offered few new ideas for Iraq. It was not clear that the weak Iraqi government would be able to establish security for anyone, especially the country's minorities.

Iran

Iran is an ethnically and religiously diverse country whose Shia Persian majority amounts to only slightly more than 50 per cent of the population. In 2006, the Iranian government was embroiled in controversies over its nuclear programme and its backing of Shia militants in neighbouring Iraq, as well as Hezbollah in Lebanon. Receiving less attention was the country's ongoing repression of its many minority groups.

Sunni Arabs make up around 5 per cent of the Iranian population and are concentrated in the south-western, oil-rich province of Khuzistan along the Iraqi border. Over 2006, sectarian civil war in Iraq has led to enhanced calls for Sunni Arab autonomy within Iran, and even independence. Human Rights Watch reported rioting in April 2005 among Sunni Arabs in Khuzistan following a purported letter from a presidential adviser that recommended dispersal of the Arab population. The violence between protesters and police was followed by a series of bombings attributed to Sunni Arab activists in Tehran and Ahwaz in June and October 2005, and January 2006, which killed some 20 people and injured many more. Renewed confrontation between Sunni Arab protesters and Iranian police in March 2006 resulted in three deaths and hundreds of arrests. The Iranian government claims that unrest in Khuzistan is being stirred by British intelligence services across the border.

Kurds, who are mostly Sunni Muslims, make up around 10 per cent of the Iranian population and are concentrated in the north-west, adjacent to the Kurdish populations of Iraq and Turkey. The Iranian government has watched nervously over the course of 2006 as Iraqi Kurds have moved towards greater autonomy, fearing that its Kurds may seek to join an independent Kurdistan. Iranian security forces shot a young Kurd in July 2005, sparking a round of confrontations with the Kurdish minority, and tensions remained palpable through 2006.

Azeris form the largest ethnic minority in Iran at about 25 per cent. These Turkic-speaking Shias live concentrated along the border with Azerbaijan in the north-west of the country and in the capital Tehran. They are relatively well integrated into Iranian society, and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei is ethnic Azeri. Nonetheless tensions became evident in May 2006 when thousands of Azeris protested in north-west Iran following

publication in a government newspaper of a cartoon insulting to Azeris. Government security forces fired on the protesters, killing five and injuring dozens.

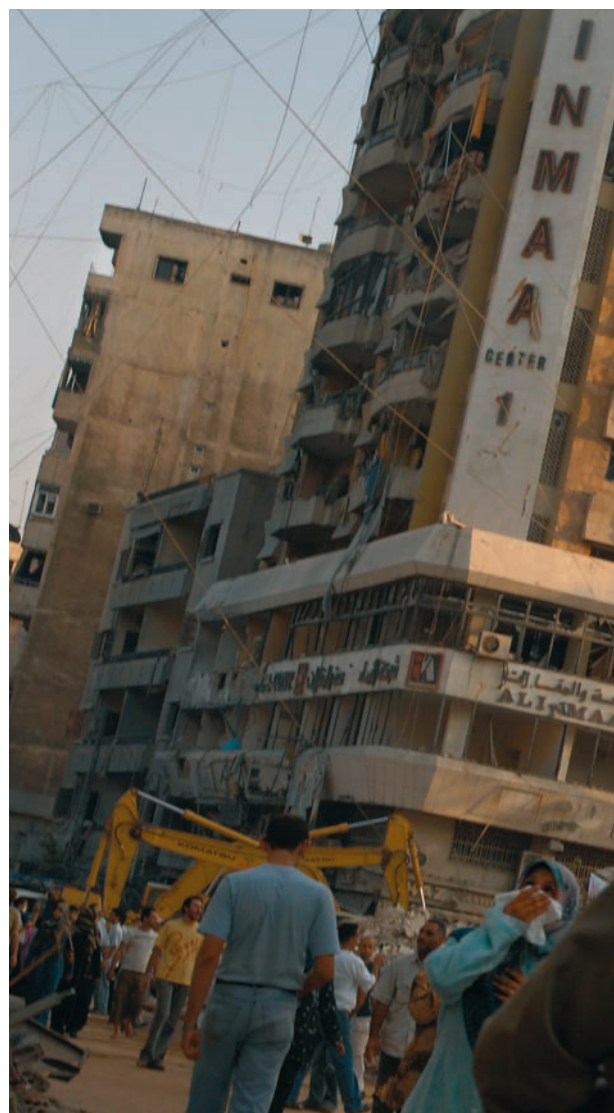
The mostly Sunni Baluchi ethnic minority comprises around 2 per cent of the Iranian population, and lives in the impoverished Baluchistan region that straddles the Pakistani border. As Tehran opened a new military base in the area, Baluchi militants attacked a government motorcade in March 2006, killing over 20 people and taking others hostage.

Iran's record on religious freedom continued to be dismal. Baluchis, Kurds and Sunni Arabs decried the fact that not a single Sunni mosque has been permitted in the country, and public displays of Sunni religion remain banned. The 300,000 Baha'i of Iran remain subject to severe state discrimination. In September 2005, state-controlled media began an intense campaign against the Baha'i, whom Islamic clerics decry as heretics for believing that other prophets came after Mohammed. In March 2006, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion said she had received an October 2005 document in which Ayatollah Khamenei ordered the Iranian military to identify and monitor members of the Baha'i community. In May 2006, Human Rights Watch reported the arrests of 54 Baha'i youth volunteers in Shiraz. In February 2006, police and organized gangs broke up a peaceful protest among Nematollahi Sufis (dervishes) in Qom, who complained of a state order to relinquish their place of worship. Hundreds were injured and over a thousand detained. Amnesty International reported that, as of March, at least 173 Sufis remained in detention and that their lawyer had been arrested. The 25,000 Jews of Iran, the largest population in the Middle East outside Israel, continued their coexistence with the Shia Persian majority despite some provocations. In July 2006, during the Lebanon war, an Iranian newspaper falsely reported that Iranian Jews were celebrating Israeli independence day, which prompted extremists to target two synagogues. The community has watched nervously as new Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has threatened to 'wipe Israel off the map' and questioned the dimensions of the Holocaust. His campaign promoting Holocaust denial culminated in an international conference held in Tehran in December 2006 – a

Below: Residents return to find that large areas of southern Beirut had been reduced to rubble by Israeli bombardment during 34 days of conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. Sean Sutton/MAG

move that met with widespread condemnation in Europe and the US.

Women in Iran remained subject to severe restrictions on their rights in accordance with Iran's interpretation of the tenets of *Sharia* law, including the requirement that married women receive their husbands' permission to work. Iran's ruling clerics rejected a suggestion from President Ahmadinejad at



the time of the 2006 World Cup that women be allowed to attend football matches, ruling that it was un-Islamic for women to look at strange men's legs. Human Rights Watch reported that, in June 2006, police brutally assaulted hundreds of peaceful protesters in Tehran who were demanding an end to legally sanctioned discrimination against women.

Lebanon

In late 2006, identity politics and sectarian tensions were rising in Lebanon following political assassinations and the fall-out from the July war between Hezbollah and Israel that resulted in over

1,000 civilian deaths, the displacement of over 1 million Lebanese, and the widespread destruction of the country's infrastructure, especially in the south.

Lebanon's Islamic majority is sharply divided into Sunni and Shia groupings that have usually been on opposite sides of political divides, leaving the country without an effective majority. Lebanon's minority groups also display internal political divisions.

Lebanon's largest group is Shia Muslims, making up 32 per cent of the population, which has generally felt more drawn to Arab traditions and ties, and thus more open to influence and support from Syria and Iran. Maronite Christians (16 per cent) and Sunni



Muslims (18 per cent) have long dominated Lebanese government and maintained closer relationships with former colonizer France and other Western countries. Smaller minority groups are Palestinians (10 per cent), Druze (7 per cent), Greek Orthodox (5 per cent), Greek Catholic (5 per cent), Armenians (3 per cent), Alawis (3 per cent) and Kurds (1 per cent).

Following its 1975–90 sectarian civil war, Lebanon returned to a modified form of political confessionalism, whereby government positions are apportioned among the main religious groups of the country. This system has led to under-representation of smaller minorities in government, with the Druze community in particular chafing at its limitations.

Palestinian refugees have been particularly marginalized in Lebanon. About half of the country's 400,000 Palestinians live in the south and half of them live in camps. Palestinians are denied citizenship and, although restrictions were loosened in June 2005, they remain barred from many professions and relegated to manual labour.

The country's ethnic and religious groups live largely segregated throughout the country. Shia, concentrated in the south, felt neglected by successive Maronite–Sunni governments in Beirut, and formed Hezbollah with Iranian and Syrian backing in response to the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Following the February 2005 assassination of the Sunni former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, Sunni, Christian and Druze opponents of broad Syrian influence in Lebanon took to the streets to launch the March 2005 'Cedar Revolution', while Hezbollah and the Shia community demonstrated in support of Syria. Hezbollah complained bitterly when anti-Syrian forces won control of parliament two months later and, with the support of the UN Security Council, prodded Syria to end its 30-year military occupation.

In July 2006, Hezbollah abducted two Israeli soldiers along the border, sparking a fierce Israeli military assault on Lebanon. While the brunt of the attack came in the Hezbollah stronghold in southern Lebanon, from where the organization had long fired rockets indiscriminately into northern Israel, it extended to most parts of Lebanon. Lebanon was cut off from the outside world through a naval blockade and the bombing of runways at Beirut airport and strategic road infrastructure throughout the country, ostensibly to prevent Hezbollah's re-supply from Syria. The

bombings, and an Israeli ground invasion, continued until 14 August, as did Hezbollah rocket fire into Israel. Human rights organizations blamed both sides for the indiscriminate nature of their attacks, which killed over 1,000 Lebanese and 43 Israeli civilians. The United Nations estimated that, as of 1 November 2006, 150,000–200,000 Lebanese remained displaced as a result of the conflict.

The already vulnerable Palestinian refugee community in southern Lebanon was particularly hard hit by the war. Not only were some of their camps and homes damaged or destroyed by Israeli air raids, but many lost their livelihoods. Israel made broad use of cluster bombs during the war, and hundreds of thousands of unexploded munitions now litter southern Lebanese agricultural fields on which many Palestinian labourers depend for their income.

In September 2006, Refugees International warned that displaced Christians and Sunni Muslims in the majority Shia south were reluctant to return home for fear of discrimination by Hezbollah. Indeed, Hezbollah appeared to be more effective than the government in providing cash assistance to those residents of the south whose homes had been destroyed in the bombing.

During the war, as Israel targeted all parts of Lebanon, destroying its booming tourist season and setting back its economic development by years, many Lebanese of all communities rallied around Hezbollah in their anger. However, shortly after the war, representatives of non-Shia communities were loud in their remonstrations against Hezbollah for having provoked Israel and having brought such destruction to Lebanon.

On 11 November 2006, all Shia members of government resigned, ending its ethnic balance. Subsequent parliamentary approval of an international investigation into the Hariri assassination fuelled Hezbollah demands that the government step down to pave the way for new elections that the organization felt should end Shia under-representation.

The assassination of Industry Minister and Maronite Christian leader Pierre Gemayel on 21 November 2006 resulted in the further sharpening of sectarian tensions. Many Sunni, Druze and Christians, and, internationally, the United States, immediately suspected Syrian involvement, and the UN Security Council approved the establishment of an international criminal tribunal to investigate the

Hariri and Gemayel assassinations, as well as other killings of prominent anti-Syrian figures since early 2005. Political leaders and Lebanese citizens alike appeared to be balancing their anger and sense of injustice with wariness about nearing the abyss of war.

Israel

Israel continued to be pulled between its foundation as a 'Jewish state' and its claim to full democracy, inherent to which is respect for the rights of Palestinian Arabs who comprise 20 per cent of the Israeli population. Around 85 per cent of these are Muslim, and they are the fastest growing community in Israel, which many Jews regard as a threat to the Jewish identity of Israel. Continued attacks on Israel from the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip have further complicated efforts to secure the rights of this minority.

In 2006, race continued to form the basis for many Israeli government actions. In 2003, Israeli legislators instituted race-based discrimination against Palestinian Arab citizens seeking to acquire citizenship for spouses in the occupied territories, forcing thousands of families to separate. In May 2006, the Israeli Supreme Court narrowly rejected a challenge to the law. Bedouins, who make up an estimated 8.5 per cent of the Israeli Palestinian population, faced continued Israeli government efforts to change the demographics in southern Israel through the support of Jewish settlements and neglect of services to and demolition of Arab Bedouin homes in the Naqab (Negev) desert region. In August and September 2006, courts issued orders for the destruction of 12 Bedouin homes in 'unrecognized' villages. Following the July 2006 war with Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Israeli Finance Minister issued an order for compensation for Israeli border towns that suffered during the war, but systematically excluded Arab communities from the scheme. In November 2006, a draft action plan to close the gap between Jewish and Arab Israelis in educational resources had the broad agreement of Israel's Union of Local Authorities and the Higher Arab Monitoring Committee, but had received only a tepid response from the Israeli Education Ministry, which wanted to spread the resources for the project over a longer time-frame. Arab Druze, the only ethnic minority subject to military conscription, make up around 1.5 per cent of the Israeli population, and have chafed at military service out of opposition to Israeli policy in the

occupied territories. The Arab Druze Initiative, an organization of conscientious objectors to military service, estimated in April 2006 that the number of Druze youth refusing military service had climbed to 40 per cent, despite the threat of arrest.

Palestine

The Israeli-occupied territories of the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and Gaza are home to 2.3 million indigenous Palestinians and 280,000 Jewish settlers. To the extent that Israel continues to exercise authority over the territories, it assumes much responsibility under international law for public order and safety, the rule of law and the rights of the population.

The election of a Hamas-led government in January 2006 by Palestinians fed up with the long-ruling Fatah Party's corruption and its inability to move the political process forward led Western countries to impose strict economic sanctions on the Palestinian Authority in an attempt to bring about its recognition of Israel, acceptance of past peace agreements and renunciation of violence. Meanwhile, violence between Hamas and Fatah factions escalated during 2006, especially in Gaza, as both adjusted to their new roles in government and opposition, respectively.

Following the abduction of an Israeli soldier by Palestinian militants and repeated and indiscriminate firing of home-made missiles from the occupied territories into Israel, Israel launched a new military incursion into Gaza on 25 June 2006. Israeli forces bombed Gaza's only independent power station, cutting 43 per cent of the territory's electricity supply. According to an Israeli human rights organization, B'Tselem, through October 2006, over 375 Palestinians had been killed in the sustained assault, including 199 civilians. A tenuous ceasefire in November 2006 provided some hope that negotiations might soon begin.

In the West Bank, the separation barrier that Israel began building in 2002 with the stated intent to enhance its defences against terrorist attacks had reached a length of 670 km by late 2006. The wall carves off 10 per cent of the West Bank to the Israeli side, including settlements on Palestinian land, and in July 2004 the International Court of Justice found that it gravely infringed Palestinian rights. 200,000 Palestinians caught on the western side of the wall are effectively imprisoned between the hours of 10 pm and 6 am, denied entry if they miss the curfew,

and denied access to emergency services during these hours. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour remarked, in November 2006, 'Here you have one people balancing their right to security against another people's right to freedom.' Palestinian freedom of movement between the West Bank and Gaza, as well as the passage of goods at Karni crossing, also remained curtailed, with drastic economic consequences.

In July 2005 Israeli law-makers barred Palestinians in the occupied territories from seeking compensation for deaths, injury or damages caused by Israeli security forces since the beginning of the Second Intifada in September 2000. Israeli and Palestinian human rights organizations filed a challenge to the law before the Israeli Supreme Court in September 2005. The Court rejected part of the law in December 2006, ruling that Palestinians could seek redress for damages stemming from non-combat military operations.

Just under 2 per cent of indigenous Palestinians in the occupied territories are Christian, and these reside largely in Bethlehem, Jerusalem and Ramallah. Following the Pope's controversial remarks on Islam in September 2006, seven churches in the Palestinian territories were set on fire. While Hamas leader and Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Ismail Haniya condemned the Pope's statement, he also denounced the attacks on Christian churches in the occupied territories.

Syria

Sectarian tension in Syria is rising as the majority Sunni Arab country grows alarmed at the fate of the Sunni minority in Iraq, and increasingly sympathetic to such Sunni militant organizations as al-Qaeda, who purport to defend Sunnis and bring retribution to Shia. Iraqi refugees, including Shia, have streamed into Syria, and in June 2006 sectarian rioting erupted in a largely Iraqi Damascus suburb.

There are an estimated 1.5 million Kurds in Syria, although an estimated 300,000 remain stateless following a 1962 decision that stripped many Kurds and their descendants of their citizenship, and the presence of many more without official papers. Police violently prevented an October 2006 rally in Damascus in support of these stateless Kurds, who are barred from property ownership, admission to university and public sector employment. Amnesty International raised alarm over the arrest in

November 2006 of a Syrian Kurdish activist who had been demanding an investigation into the May 2005 torture and murder of his father – allegedly by Syrian Military Intelligence officers.

Saudi Arabia

During 2006, Saudi Arabia remained an abyss in the area of religious freedom. The absolute monarchy, though itself the target of al-Qaeda attacks in recent years, continued to foster Sunni extremism directed toward the West, religious minorities and women.

Despite some recent efforts at their revision, educational materials used in Saudi schools still fan religious intolerance toward Jews, Shia Muslims and Christians. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom reported that, in 2006, clerics authorized by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs continued to engage in hate speech. In April 2006, the government arrested a Saudi journalist for criticism of the government's strict interpretation of Islam.

Since the founding of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the country's minority Shia – comprising around 10 per cent of the population – have faced restrictions on religious practice and discrimination in education, employment and representation in government. King Abdullah formally took power in August 2005 and has taken some steps to ease tension with the Shia minority by releasing political prisoners and allowing greater political participation by Shia. Nevertheless, the International Crisis Group reported in September 2005 that the sectarian war in Iraq had worsened relations between Sunnis and Shia in Saudi Arabia.

The 700,000 Ismaili Muslims in Saudi Arabia likewise have faced rampant discrimination, as the government has closed their mosques and accused them of blasphemy, apostasy and witchcraft. In November 2006, King Abdullah pardoned a group of Ismailis jailed after rioting in 2000, but the Saudi-based Human Rights First Society reported that at least two other Ismailis remained imprisoned for insulting the Prophet Mohammed. It was not clear whether this included Hadi al Mutif, an Ismaili sentenced to death in 1996 for allegedly committing that offence in 1993.

Kuwait

Pressure on the government from the National Assembly may improve the situation of 'Bidouns'

(meaning 'without' in Arabic) in Kuwait, who number 100,000–120,000, or around 5 per cent of the population. Bidouns are Arabs who have long been resident in Kuwait but are denied citizenship rights as the Kuwaiti government maintains they are really Saudi or other nationals who seek citizenship to take advantage of generous Kuwaiti social benefits. Despite some improvements in 2005, notably provision of health care to the children of Bidouns, this minority still faces discrimination in employment, freedom of movement and education. In November 2006, a number of MPs attended a Bidoun rights forum hosted by the Kuwaiti Human Rights Society, where they urged the government to grant greater citizenship rights to Bidouns and indicated that formal parliamentary hearings on the issue were in the offing. The MPs were particularly concerned that Bidouns who have served in the Kuwaiti military, and the families of Bidoun soldiers who have died for Kuwait, are still denied basic rights of citizenship.

Gulf States: migrant workers

The oil-producing Gulf States rely heavily for labour on migrant workers, mostly from South and South-East Asia, as well as other Arab countries. Lax or non-existent labour laws have led to widespread exploitative work conditions and restricted freedom of movement for migrants, which led to unheard-of strikes in the oil industry. Women migrant workers are especially subject to physical and sexual violence. Human Rights Watch released a report in November 2006 detailing the reliance on exploitative labour of 600,000 Asian migrants to fuel the building boom in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). On the eve of the report's release, the UAE announced sweeping labour reforms. There were also some moves toward reform in Saudi Arabia, where migrant workers make up around 33 per cent of the population; King Abdullah signed a new labour law in September 2005 that entitles migrant workers to one day off per week, and 21 days for holidays per year. Oman and Bahrain enacted legislation in 2006 to legalize labour unions.

Many migrant workers arrive in the region through human traffickers and are surprised to find themselves in exploitative situations. In November 2006, a Special Rapporteur on trafficking for the UN Human Rights Council travelled through the Gulf States. She criticized Oman and Qatar for

treating trafficked migrant workers as criminals rather than victims, and noted a pending anti-trafficking bill in Bahrain, as well as its establishment of safe houses for abused migrant workers. ■