

RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION IN ARAB COUNTRIES - SOME FAST FACTS

Saudi Arabia:

- Only Muslims can acquire citizenship
- Non-Muslims cannot serve in the judiciary or as members of government.
- The public practice of non-Muslim religions is prohibited (even when worshipping in private, non-Muslims are frequently harassed and intimidated without recourse to protection from the State.
- Converts from Islam to another religion are subject to the death penalty unless they recant.
- Jews cannot become citizens of Saudi Arabia, or even visit it. In February 2004 Saudi Arabia, to attract more foreign visitors, began issuing visas to non-Muslim tourists for the first time. "Jewish people" were explicitly excluded from obtaining visas.

Iran:

Members of non-Muslim minorities in Iran cannot hold senior government or military positions, face restrictions in employment, education, and property ownership and are barred from election to representative bodies.

The Bahá'í in Israel practice their faith without fear of persecution. Indeed, the spiritual and administrative heart of the Bahá'í community, the Bahá'í World Centre, is located in the twin cities of 'Akká and Haifa in northern Israel.

By contrast in Iran, the 350 000-strong Bahá'í community has been subjected to constant religious persecution. This has worsened since the establishment of an Islamic Republic in 1979. Tens of thousands of Bahá'í have been deprived of jobs, pensions, businesses, and educational opportunities (such as being banned from attending public and private universities). National Bahá'í administrative structures were likewise banned and Bahá'í holy places, shrines, and cemeteries were confiscated, vandalized, or destroyed. In addition, more than 200 Bahá'ís were killed and hundreds more imprisoned after 1979.

Syria

Jews and Kurds are the only minorities not allowed to participate in the political system. Numbering about 200,000, Syrian Kurds are deprived of citizenship and unable to obtain passports, identity cards, or birth certificates. This in turn prevents them from owning land, obtaining government employment, and voting. Syrian law also requires that owners and top editors of publications be Arabs. In addition, the few remaining Jews in the country “are generally barred from government employment and do not have military service obligations. They are the only minority whose passports and identity cards note their religion”.

Members of the Baha’i faith also face severe discrimination in Egypt, where they are denied such civil documents as identity cards, birth certificates, and marriage licenses. Employment discrimination against Christians is evident in Egypt’s public sector, especially the security services and military, and the government frequently denies or delays authorization of applications to build and repair churches.

While Yemen’s Constitution provides for equal rights and equal opportunity for all citizens, in practice discrimination based on race, religion, sex, and disability still exists. All non-Muslims are banned from running for Parliament in Yemen. This policy dates back to 2001, after the ruling party tried to run a Jewish candidate. There also remain traditional restrictions on Jews with regard to places of residence and choice of employment.

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