

Human Rights Council (HRC)

Research Report



Forum: Human Rights Council

Issue: Ensuring the Protection of Religious Minorities in Politically-Instigated Sectarian Conflicts

Student Officer(s): Karim Mahlab, Sumayya Zewail, Aly Lotfy

Position: Chair and Deputy Chair(s)

Introduction

Throughout history, religious minorities have been persecuted through societal discrimination or from political actors– in the middle of sectarian conflicts. Tensions root from historical differences with institutional divisions between religions. Over the course of the last hundred years, the persecution of religious minorities has been employed as a tool of oppression for the manipulation of groups for political gain through the use of systematic discrimination. Politicians commonly utilize religious discrimination to promote nationalist ideologies or to cloak their political failures and governance malfeasance. Sectarian conflicts directly infringe on the fundamental human right Freedom of religion or belief.

Political and religious narratives which are used against minority populations and millions are displaced or oppressed currently. These minorities undergo violence, forced migration, cultural annihilation, and discrimination endorsed by the state. Weak governance, radical beliefs, lack of justice systems, and perpetrators going unpunished worsen problems faced with sectarian conflicts. Systemic violence and discrimination make it a problem for tensions to be resolved in sectarian disputes.

Key stakeholders include Myanmar, India, Iraq and Pakistan. Numerous human rights NGOs are involved including but not limited to Amnesty international, Human rights watch and the international federation for human rights. Religious minorities include Rohingya, Sikhs, Baha'is and all religions who are found in countries with major religions who face constant persecution.

Definition of Key Terms

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)

A basic human right which allows any person to practice and profess a religion of their choice or to have no religion, without any form of undue coercion, discrimination and persecution. It covers both, the right to hold a belief, and the right to express one's religion or belief through actions and speech publicly or privately.

Sectarian Conflict

Conflicts which are violent in nature and are fought between various groups or sects of a given religion. Such conflicts are often the result of longstanding conflicts of ideology, customs, or even within the political spectrum which lead to civil disorder, oppression or war in extreme cases.

Religious Minority

A small religious population that resides in a region with a majority religion, which is often discriminated against and persecuted.

Persecution

Persistent harassment of a group by a political power or a place of authority.

Ethnic Cleansing

The mass expulsion or killing of members of one ethnic or religious group in an area by those of another.

Politically Instigated-Violence

Violence or persecution to attain political goals can be incorporated systemically as well as socially.

Systemic Oppression

Societal structures and norms that establish and maintain disadvantages for specific groups of people based on their social identity.

Background Information:

The persecution of religious minorities has been a persistent issue in global politics. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 caused the region to destabilize which deepened Sunni-Shia divisions until ISIS emerged as a result. The Yazidi population suffered genocide at the hands of ISIS during 2014 when the group executed people en masse while forcing women into sexual slavery and making them convert to their faith. The military in Myanmar employed Buddhist nationalism to justify their mass atrocities against Rohingya Muslims which clearly exemplified ethnic cleansing.

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) stands as a discriminatory policy in India because it denies Muslim migrants from obtaining fast-tracked citizenship. The northern Muslim-majority states of Nigeria maintain religious tensions with Christian and animist southern populations while terrorist groups like Boko Haram complicate the situation.

The international community has denounced these actions yet their responses have been either delayed or insufficient. International human rights law remains ineffective in protecting religious minorities because of sovereignty concerns and geopolitical interests and insufficient enforcement mechanisms.

Causes of the Issue:

Religious persecution during politically instigated conflicts arises from a combination of political, historical, and institutional factors. Political leaders and ruling parties often exploit religious rhetoric to deepen social divisions, consolidate power, and eliminate political opponents. This manipulation of faith-based identities transforms religion from a cultural or spiritual element into a political tool. In many regions, long-standing religious and ethnic tensions, often reinforced by colonial-era policies that favored one group over another, create fertile ground for political actors to incite violence.

Although many countries have constitutional or legal protections for religious minorities, these safeguards are frequently undermined by corruption, weak institutions, and lack of enforcement. In some cases, government officials are complicit in discrimination or violence,

allowing persecution to continue unchecked. Extremist organizations such as ISIS and Boko Haram further intensify these conflicts by using religious ideology to legitimize violence and target minority populations.

Effects of the Issue:

Religious persecution has wide-ranging effects on individuals, governments, and international stability. Religious minorities often face discrimination, social exclusion, and limited access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and electricity. In many cases, they endure systematic oppression, forced displacement, and targeted acts of violence, including sexual violence and human trafficking. These conditions often compel minority populations to migrate in search of safety, creating large-scale refugee movements.

At the national level, governments become weakened as social unrest and population displacement undermine governance and economic productivity. Declining stability discourages investment and disrupts development, further deepening poverty and inequality.

On an international scale, regional peace and security are threatened by cross-border insurgencies, the spread of extremist ideologies, and uncontrolled refugee flows. This instability contributes to global security challenges such as terrorism, human trafficking, and humanitarian crises, making religious persecution not only a human rights issue but also a major obstacle to international peace and sustainable development.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Myanmar

Myanmar has been at the heart of religious conflict against the religious minority of the Rohingya Muslims. The actions Myanmar commits include dehumanizing and inciting violence against Rohingya people, mass killings, rape, and forced displacement. All examples constitute humanitarian violations, and social living standards unfit for any human.¹

¹ "Rohingya crisis | UNICEF." *Unicef*, <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/rohingya-crisis>. Accessed 31 July 2025.

Iraq

Conflict between the Sunni and Shi'a Muslims in Iraq has been a longstanding issue, even leading to full civil war between extremists of the 2 groups in the early 2000's. Iraq is made mostly of Shi'a Muslims, with the Sunni minority suffering the consequences of the violence.²

India

India has been in conflict between the Hindu Meiti group and the Kuki-Zo Christian minority in Manipur. This has caused the burning of hundreds of churches, the deaths of hundreds, and displacement of thousands.³

Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief

A Rapporteur mandated by the OHCHR to look into the issues caused by aggression against certain religions and beliefs.⁴

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of Event
1981	Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief: Declaration protecting against racial discrimination.
1992	UN Declaration on Minority Rights: General Assembly declaration to protect religious minorities against discrimination.
1998	Good Friday Agreement: Peace agreement after a major sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland.
2006-2008	Iraqi Civil War: Sectarian-driven civil war between the Sunni and Shi'as in Iraq

² "Did You Know...Sectarian Violence in Iraq." *USCIRF*, Did You Know...Sectarian Violence in Iraq. Accessed 31 July 2025.

³ "India: Ethnic Clashes Restart in Manipur." *Human Rights Watch*, 27 March 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/27/india-ethnic-clashes-restart-manipur>. Accessed 31 July 2025.

⁴ "Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief." *ohchr*, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-religion-or-belief>. Accessed 31 July 2025.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- **UN Declaration of Human Rights** Basic framework on Human Rights, highlighting many important rights such as article 5 protecting against torture or inhumane treatment, and article 18 highlighting the right to free thought, beliefs, and religion. (1948) **(A/RES/217)**
- **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights:** Article 18 specifically, highlighting the right to freedom of religion and worship, and the right to protection from coercion into a specific religion (1966) **(A/RES/2200)**
- **Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief:** Declaration highlighting the rights to religion as well as obligating countries to protect citizens against religious discrimination. (1981)**(General Assembly resolution 36/55)**

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

The European Union Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief (2013)

These guidelines were adopted to inform EU diplomats on promoting religious liberty in the foreign policy agenda. Even though the guidelines provide solid basis for engagement, putting them into practice has been inconsistent and obstructed by geopolitical considerations

Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief – Country Reports (ongoing)

The UN Human Rights Council binds a Special Rapporteur to track abuses of religious freedom globally. Reports have been made by countries like Myanmar, Nigeria, and Pakistan, and they have raised awareness, but there is poor enforcement due to national sovereignty and lack of follow-up action.

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) Doctrine (2005)

R2P was embraced to stop genocide and crimes against humanity, including persecution on the grounds of religion. In spite of its potential, its use has been politically motivated and uneven, and it has only sometimes been deployed to rescue religious minorities in real-time.

UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001)

It emphasized preserving religious and cultural diversity as a heritage of humankind. While it gave a moral context for toleration and respect, it lacked enforceable sanctions and was symbolic in character.

Possible Solutions

Establish a UN-Mandated International Tribunal on Religious Persecution

A global tribunal to prosecute sectarian conflict crimes against religious minorities could deter abuses and deliver justice. It would be similar to the ICC, exercising jurisdiction by Security Council or General Assembly referral. Political resistance and denial of cooperation by offending states are barriers.

Create a Global Early Warning System for Sectarian Violence

With NGOs and the regional blocs (like the AU or ASEAN), the UN would be able to set up an early warning system to spot signs of mounting sectarian tensions. Warnings would be followed by peacekeeping operations or diplomatic efforts. This pre-emptive system would be supported by ground reporting and data analysis.

Increase Humanitarian Aid and Safe Havens for Vulnerable Minorities

The international community and UNHCR must create safe zones within conflict zones where minorities are under attack. These zones would be immediately available for protection, legal aid, and asylum processing. Funding would be supplied through emergency UN appeals and by collaborating with NGOs in the field.

Construct National Legislation with Technical Assistance of OHCHR

OHCHR can provide states with model legislation and technical capacity development to guarantee anti-discrimination law, protection of minority rights, and training of police. This would close the theory and implementation gap, particularly in post-conflict zones.

Useful Links

- OHCHR – Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief
 - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-religion-or-belief>
- Human Rights Watch – Religious Freedom
 - <https://www.hrw.org/topic/free-speech/religious-freedom>
- Amnesty International – Universal Declaration of Human Rights
 - <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/universal-declaration-of-human-rights/>
- UNHCR – Religion-Based Refugee Claim
 - <https://www.unhcr.org/us/media/guidelines-international-protection-no-6-religion-based-refugee-claims-under-article-1a-2>
- International Crisis Group – Reports on Sectarian Conflict
 - <https://www.crisisgroup.org>
- Council on Foreign Relations – Global Conflict Tracker
 - <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker>

Bibliography

“Did You Know...Sectarian Violence in Iraq.” *USCIRF*, Did You Know...Sectarian Violence in Iraq. Accessed 31 July 2025.

“India: Ethnic Clashes Restart in Manipur.” *Human Rights Watch*, 27 March 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/27/india-ethnic-clashes-restart-manipur>. Accessed 31 July 2025.

“Rohingya crisis | UNICEF.” *Unicef*, <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/rohingya-crisis>. Accessed 31 July 2025.

“Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.” *ohchr*, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-religion-or-belief>. Accessed 31 July 2025.