

Middle East and North Africa

Sarah El Ashmawy, Tom Palmer,
Miriam Puttick and Derek Verbakel



LIBYA

EGYPT

LEBANON

SYRIA

ISRAEL/OT/
Palestinian Authority

JORDAN

IRAQ

KUWAIT

IRAN

SAUDI ARABIA

BAHRAIN

QATAR

U.A.E .

YEMEN

OMAN

ARABIAN
SEA

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region experienced one of its bloodiest years in 2014, with ongoing fighting in Syria between President Bashar al-Assad's army, opposition forces and the increasingly powerful presence of the extremist group *Da'ash*, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). In neighbouring Iraq, ISIS launched a summer offensive in the north of the country which saw their forces overrun large swathes of territory. This area has long been home to many minority communities, including Chaldo-Assyrians, Shabak, Turkmen and Yezidis, who were actively targeted as ISIS captured Mosul, Tal Afar and other major cities, as well as numerous towns and villages with large minority populations. Thousands were killed or abducted, while hundreds of thousands of people were displaced. In addition, ISIS has spread fear across the region with a number of high-profile incidents in other countries, such as the suicide bomb explosion at a Beirut hotel in June 2014,

the beheading of 21 Egyptian Copts in Libya in February 2015 and an attack by armed gunmen in central Tunis in March 2015.

Though some of these attacks may have been intended to exaggerate the actual presence of ISIS in these countries, it is also the case that even religious and ethnic minorities in relatively stable countries in the region routinely experience discrimination, intimidation and violence. In many cases these incidents occur in urban areas where diverse populations have coexisted for centuries. However, ongoing violence, particularly in Iraq and Syria, is increasingly leading to segregation and homogenization in cities. ISIS, besides displacing minority communities in the areas under its control, has also systematically destroyed churches, shrines and non-Sunni mosques. As a result, the historical legacy of centuries of coexistence is being erased. Yet urban centres such as Cairo, despite significant challenges, still offer minorities more opportunities to engage in activism, enjoy personal freedoms



and interact with members of other communities. Ensuring the security and dignity of minorities in urban areas is therefore essential to achieving long-term stability across the region.

Egypt

The year 2014 began with a referendum in January on a new Constitution that prohibits political parties based on religion, with 98 per cent of participants voting in approval, though opposition groups complained of intimidation and partisan media coverage. For the country's most vulnerable social groups, however, the drafting process at least provided an opportunity to promote a more inclusive environment for Egypt's diverse religious and ethnic population. In the preceding months, representatives of long-marginalized communities such as Amazigh and Nubians were able to meet with members of the drafting committee to advocate for various amendments to the text.

The approved version was generally regarded as an improvement on the 2012 Constitution, passed under former President Mohamed Morsi and widely criticized by rights groups for its lack of protections for many minorities. Among other achievements, the 'right to return' of Egyptian Nubians whose lands were flooded during the government-led construction of the Aswan dam in the 1960s, without prior consultation or consent, was recognized for the first time. Furthermore, the 2014 Constitution finally recognized 'incitement to hatred' as a crime, tasking the future legislative body with the creation of a special commission to implement the provision. This is a significant milestone for Egypt's minorities, as in recent years hate speech has been linked with outbreaks of violence against Bahá'í, Copts and Shi'a.

However, the Constitution has also been criticized for perpetuating many of the shortcomings of its predecessor. While Article 64 on religious freedom has been strengthened, its provision on religious practice and places of

worship still refers specifically to the 'Abrahamic' religions – a term that includes Christianity, Islam and Judaism, but potentially excludes Bahá'í and other faiths that are discriminated against. More generally, there is continued scepticism about the government's willingness and ability to tackle the broader context of discrimination towards minorities in the country. Despite some positive signs during the year – culminating in President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's attendance of a Coptic Christmas mass in January 2015, an unprecedented gesture by an Egyptian head of state – many challenges remain. This is particularly the case for Copts and other religious minorities in a country where Islam is still elevated as the state religion and Sharia principles form the main source of legislation.

For example, the fraught issue of regulations on church construction, despite apparently receiving legal approval through the new Constitution – Article 64 stipulates 'the freedom of practising religious rituals and establishing worship places for the followers of Abrahamic religions' – has not yet been resolved. Though steps were taken later in the year to address the existing restrictions on church building, with the Coptic Church and other Christian organizations drafting a proposed law, at the end of the year the restrictions remained in place. The regulations, rooted in Ottoman law, have for decades been used to obstruct the development or renovation of Christian places of worship, and have contributed to the wave of attacks in recent years against Coptic buildings. Though authorities have reportedly been more accommodating in approving church construction since Sisi took power, Coptic communities continue to be targeted by militant groups. In January 2015, for example, two policemen were killed outside a church in Minya, followed by further attacks three months later in Alexandria and Cairo.

Another source of deep concern is the Sisi government's ongoing human rights abuses and repression of civil freedoms. Shortly after staging a coup against Morsi in June 2013, the military were responsible for the killing of more than 1,000 protesters. This served to deepen divisions within the country which Sisi, since securing democratic election in May

Left: A Yezidi girl and her family at a refugee camp in north eastern Syria. Some of the 12,000 Yezidis at the camp walked up to 60km in searing heat to flee Iraq. *Rachel Unkovic/ International Rescue Committee*

Below: Muslim men stand with a Coptic Christian man holding a lit candle in tribute to the 21 Egyptians beheaded in Libya in February 2015. *REUTERS/Mohamad Torokman*

2014, has failed to resolve. In particular, the government's crackdown on supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, involving arbitrary arrests, indefinite detention and killings, has alienated a significant portion of the population and, by extension, may have put Copts and other religious minorities at increasing risk of attack. While minorities have long been targeted by militants, the mass execution of 21 Coptic Egyptians in neighbouring Libya in February 2015 by ISIS was a painful reminder of the community's continued vulnerability. Media investigations revealed that many of the victims came from Upper Egypt villages and had left their homes to financially support their families. The government was criticized by some activists

for its failure to ensure their protection.

Whether they are in search of economic opportunities or displaced due to violence or disruptive development such as the Aswan dam, many members of Egypt's minorities have relocated to towns and cities within Egypt as well. Urban development is therefore a key area of concern for these communities, reflected in the inclusion of Article 235 in the 2014 Constitution, which stipulates that 'the state shall guarantee setting and implementing a plan for the comprehensive economic and urban development of border and underprivileged areas, including Upper Egypt, the Sinai Peninsula, Matrouh and Nubia'. It is hoped that this text will lead to support for Nubians who wish to return to their area of origin.

Cairo is not only Egypt's capital, but also the largest megacity in the MENA region. Rapid and largely unmanaged urban growth has led to large swathes of informal settlements across the



city, with many sheltering in makeshift housing and unsanitary living conditions. These issues are especially pronounced, however, for the city's '*Zabbalin*' – the Arabic word for garbage collectors – a large community whose livelihood is based on the collection and recycling of solid waste. Operating in the informal sector, the majority are Coptic and originally migrated from Upper Egypt with their families in search of a source of income. Though their activities provided Cairo with a highly efficient system of waste collection, in 2004 the community was dealt a blow when authorities contracted their work out to corporations. While in practice they continued to earn a living informally from this activity, their income was greatly reduced. However, authorities have now officially reinstituted the involvement of the community in waste collection and, despite continued discrimination, the community has developed strong solidarity networks to support each other.

Iraq

The spread of armed conflict during 2014, propelled by the rise of ISIS, has taken an enormous toll on the civilian population. Over the course of the year, over 17,000 civilians were killed and more than 2 million displaced, with minorities disproportionately affected. After ISIS took control of the Ninewa plains, traditionally home to many of Iraq's diverse ethnic and religious minority groups, militants carried out a brutal campaign of executions, abductions and expulsions. Entire minority communities, including Armenian Christians, Chaldo-Assyrians, Sabean Mandaeans, Shabak, Turkmen and Yezidis, have been uprooted from areas where they have been living in some cases for thousands of years. Minority women have been the targets of particularly horrific forms of sexual and gender-based violence, including kidnapping, rape, forced marriage, sexual slavery and trafficking.

The spread of the conflict over the course of the year assumed increasingly urban dimensions as ISIS took control of major cities previously thought to be firmly under the control of the Iraqi government. In January, ISIS seized Fallujah and Ramadi in Al-Anbar governorate before moving into Mosul in Ninewa governorate in June as the Iraqi Security Forces collapsed.

As the country's second largest city, Mosul was previously home to a wide array of minority groups. Hundreds of Christian families and other minorities joined the exodus of civilians leaving Mosul, with the UN estimating that 500,000 people fled in the first week following the entry of ISIS into the city. The remaining Christian families received an ultimatum to either convert to Islam, pay *jizya* (a tribute levied on non-Muslims) or be killed. In June ISIS also took control of Tikrit and then Tal Afar, causing the displacement of approximately 200,000 Turkmen. Further massacres of civilians in Shi'a Turkmen and Shabak villages took place as ISIS's advance continued, with hundreds also taken captive and towns such as the Turkmen-majority town of Amerli besieged. ISIS also took control of many Assyrian areas in the Ninewa plains in early August, forcing thousands more to flee for their lives, leaving behind everything they owned.

Among the worst affected by this advance are Iraq's Yezidis. In the beginning of August ISIS reached Sinjar, home to a large portion of the community. The Kurdish *peshmerga* forces, who had been protecting the area, withdrew without warning, leaving the local population defenceless. An estimated 200,000 Yezidi civilians fled for their lives, with at least 50,000 heading to Sinjar mountain, where they were trapped in the scorching summer heat for days without food or water. Those unable to escape or who attempted to defend their villages from ISIS fighters were subsequently murdered or abducted, with large-scale massacres of Yezidi men and boys in the villages of Qiniyeh, Kocho and Jdali. Meanwhile, thousands of Yezidi women and girls were abducted for the purpose of forced marriage or sexual slavery. Large numbers of women were subsequently transported to Syria to be sold or forcibly married to ISIS fighters. As of the end of 2014, only about 300 had managed to escape.

ISIS has imposed a new order in urban areas under its control, marked by the imposition of strict interpretations of religious law, the silencing of all forms of opposition and the destruction of any traces of minority culture and heritage. In Mosul, ISIS issued orders mandating women to wear the veil and instructing them not to leave the house unless accompanied by a man. Residents of the city have been tried in

Below: A Yezidi woman hauls water containers toward a Yezidi refugee camp in the Sinjar mountains, Iraq, March 2015.
Panos/Noriko Hayashi.

self-styled Sharia courts for violating or opposing the group's ideology, with many sentenced to public executions and other punishments. ISIS also expropriated houses belonging to Christians and other minorities before looting them of their contents.

In addition, militants have destroyed or defaced sites of enormous religious, cultural and historical value, including several churches and monuments in Mosul, the Assyrian Green Church in Tikrit, the oldest and largest library in Tel Afar and countless mosques, shrines and tombs of religious importance to Shabak, Turkmen and Yezidis. Evidence of the region's historic diversity, reflected in the wealth of churches, mosques and other buildings in its urban areas, has been systematically eradicated

in a process described by Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO, as a campaign of 'cultural cleansing'.

Most Iraqis displaced by the recent wave of violence are currently living in desperate conditions. The majority have fled to urban centres in the Iraqi Kurdistan region, where around 930,000 IDPs, or 47 per cent of Iraq's total IDP population, were based by late 2014. While a few have been able to find accommodation with friends and relatives or are using their savings to rent apartments, the majority are living in overcrowded camps, unfinished building structures, churches, malls, schools and other public buildings. The influx of IDPs raises difficult dilemmas related to informal and illegal housing occupancy in Kurdish cities. It also risks creating future conflicts over lands and properties that IDPs were forced to leave behind, in some cases exacerbating unresolved land claims dating back to the Ba'athist era.

Adapting to life in displacement in cities or



camps in the Kurdish region has been particularly difficult for minorities. In addition to lacking all the basic necessities of life, including food, drinking water, clothing, medicines and hygienic products, many are suffering from the effects of severe trauma and have little access to support services such as psychosocial counselling to help them to deal with experiences such as sexual violence. The prospect of accessing employment and public services is bleak for many IDPs, due to high competition, language barriers and discrimination by Kurdish authorities against minorities. IDP women are also especially vulnerable to sexual harassment, assault and other forms of exploitation.

Although the latest crisis has greatly compounded the suffering of Iraq's minorities, the struggle for recognition and access to basic rights in the urban context is not new. In the context of spiralling sectarian violence in the years following the US-led invasion, Iraq's urban centres have long been unsafe for minorities. Formerly mixed neighbourhoods in major cities such as Baghdad have become segregated along sectarian lines, leaving minorities especially vulnerable to targeted violence. Faced with the government's unwillingness to protect minorities or prosecute those responsible for attacks against them, many minorities have left and resettled elsewhere, especially in the Ninewa plains. However, living in minority areas has meant facing the reality of neglect in public service provision from the Iraqi government. In the past, the government has allocated the Ninewa governorate less than its legally required share of the federal budget, and many towns lack basic public services. In the southern and central regions of Iraq, areas inhabited by black and Roma minorities are marked by deplorable living conditions, including lack of suitable housing and inadequate access to drinking water or sanitation.

The long-term process of marginalization of Iraq's minorities, compounded by recent events, has opened up the possibility that the existence of these historical communities in Iraq could be coming to an end. The latest crisis has led many to abandon hope of a safe return to their homes and focus instead on restarting their lives elsewhere. However, given the deep roots of minorities in Iraq and their centrality to the

country's history and culture, many minority leaders emphasize the importance of establishing safe areas allowing minorities to return to their lands, with reconciliation measures to enable reintegration with other faiths and ethnic backgrounds.

Israel/Palestine

For the marginalized and besieged communities of Israel and the State of Palestine, 2014 was the most deadly year in recent history. Over a seven-week period in July and August, Israel's aerial and ground assault against militant groups in the occupied and blockaded Gaza Strip, known as Operation Protective Edge, resulted in the deaths of at least 1,486 Palestinian civilians, including 513 children, and the displacement during the hostilities of around 500,000 people. This was the latest episode in a series of violent escalations in recent years, set against a backdrop defined by unstable progress towards the reconciliation of the two main Palestinian factions, another failed round of US-convened peace talks and unprecedented Israeli settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

The unstable political situation led to rising tensions in the West Bank at the start of the summer, triggered in part by the abduction of three Israeli teenagers who, it later transpired, had been murdered by two members of Hamas. In the wake of their disappearance, Israeli military shot and killed five Palestinians, and detained at least 150 more during raids on Palestinian towns and villages in search of the missing boys – actions condemned by Human Rights Watch (HRW) as amounting to 'collective punishment' of the Palestinian population.

Incitement to violence and racist language on social media directed at the Arab minority in Israel also rose dramatically during Operation Protective Edge, as did incidents of abusive graffiti and attacks on private property. Arabs were also harassed and physically attacked by ultra-nationalist gangs during demonstrations against Operation Protective Edge. The hostile atmosphere was aggravated by provocative statements from public figures and by attempts to pass legislation undermining the rights of the Arab minority. This was exemplified by the endorsement of the so-called 'nation-state

bill' by a majority vote in the Israeli cabinet in November. If enacted, the bill will limit collective rights to Jewish citizens of the country and could pave the way for other discriminatory policies against non-Jewish populations.

Israeli civilians were also attacked by militants on a number of occasions during the year. Besides the abduction of the three Israeli teenagers, there were several other incidents, including two in which Palestinian drivers targeted Israeli pedestrians at Jerusalem light rail stations located in Palestinian neighbourhoods. The series of attacks against Israeli civilians culminated in an armed assault in November by two Palestinians on a West Jerusalem synagogue, killing five civilians and injuring six others. Israeli authorities responded by conducting large-scale arrests, including hundreds of children, and reinstating their policy of demolishing the homes of the families of the Palestinians involved. This was again condemned by HRW as tantamount to collective punishment and a policy liable to stoke the cycle of violence.

The Israeli army was also criticized for its excessive use of force in response to demonstrations by Palestinians throughout the year. This included, in December, the death of Ziad Abu Ein, a senior minister in the Palestinian Authority, following an assault by an Israeli soldier during a peaceful protest against illegal Israeli settlements. On the same day, during protests against Abu Ein's killing, a 14-year-old Palestinian boy was seriously wounded in Jalazone Refugee Camp by a gunshot to the head fired by Israeli security personnel. The UN reported that a total of 56 Palestinians had been killed during incidents with Israel's security forces in the West Bank during 2014, double the number for 2013, and 5,868 injured – the highest annual figure since records began in 2005. Almost half of these injuries were recorded in Jerusalem, where tensions were stoked by the murder of a 16-year-old Palestinian by Israeli settlers in retaliation for the murder of the three Israeli teenagers. Israel's suppression of Palestinian protests and decision to limit access for Muslims to the city's holy sites led to an increased number of violent clashes between Palestinian youth and the Israeli military.

House demolitions in general also increased to unprecedented levels in 2014, with more than

Right: Bedouin children play on a rooftop in the 'unrecognized' village of Um Al-Hiram in southern Israel's Negev desert, October 2014. *REUTERS/Finbarr O'Reilly*

1,200 people displaced in the West Bank, the highest figure recorded by the UN since it began tracking incidents in 2008. A large number of these concern buildings and shelters erected by Palestinian communities in land assigned under the 1993 Oslo Accords as Area C, where Israel has control over law enforcement, planning and construction. Area C makes up over 60 per cent of the West Bank, with the remainder divided and designated either as Area A or Area B, which nominally fall under full and partial Palestinian administration respectively. The 300,000 Palestinian residents of Area C are especially vulnerable to displacement due to discriminatory planning policies and the threat of violence from groups of religious and nationalist extremists living in neighbouring Israeli settlements. Large swathes of Area C have been designated as nature reserves or closed military areas, and are therefore off-limits for Palestinian construction. Additionally, over 6,000 Palestinians live in 38 communities located within Israeli-designated 'firing zones' allocated for military training.

While only 1 per cent of Area C is slated for Palestinian development, Israeli settlements continue to expand in violation of international law. There are currently 340,000 Israelis living in these illegal settlements in Area C and that number is set to rise. The Israeli NGO PeaceNow has reported that during the peace talks that spanned August 2013 to March 2014 the Israeli government promoted plans and tenders for at least 13,851 housing units in the settlements in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem – a significant increase on the same period from the previous year. Settlement growth comes at the expense of living standards for Palestinians throughout the West Bank, and communities in Area C are particularly vulnerable to the neglectful provision of public services and infrastructure, specifically electricity, water and sewerage. According to the UN, more than 70 per cent of these communities are not connected to the water network and depend on tankered water, at significantly greater expense.



Daily water consumption in some areas is as little as 20 litres per capita, just a fifth of the World Health Organization's recommended minimum.

At even greater risk of displacement due to Israel's settlement expansion policies are the Bedouin communities of the West Bank. There are around 7,000 Palestinian Bedouins and herders, some 60 per cent of them children, living in 46 small residential areas in Area C. Over 3,600 have been displaced since 2008. In September, Israel published plans to move six communities from the vicinities of Jericho, Ramallah and Jerusalem. Over a dozen others are also under threat of displacement and have endured months of eviction orders, as well as the destruction of their homes and livelihood

structures. The designated 'relocation' sites include three new townships to be developed in Area C. As there is limited grazing land at the proposed sites, the resettlement will likely threaten the traditional livelihoods and culture. These communities have been specifically targeted as they are in an area designated for the expansion of Israeli settlements as part of the so-called E1 Plan. This controversial proposal, which has been widely condemned by the UN and rights groups for violating international humanitarian law, would see the construction of thousands of residential and commercial units linking settlements in East Jerusalem to the large Ma'ale Adumim settlement, creating a bloc spanning much of the central West Bank.

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Case study by *Tom Palmer*
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Life in a divided city – one Palestinian community under threat in East Jerusalem

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While 35 per cent of land in East Jerusalem has been expropriated for the establishment of a dozen Jewish settlements, housing around 200,000 Israeli citizens, under the current Israeli master plan only 13 per cent of East Jerusalem is zoned for Palestinian construction, even though 300,000 Palestinians reside in the area. Decisions regarding planning policy are unofficially based on the Jerusalem 2000 Outline Plan, despite the fact that it has not been submitted for public review. While it does allocate areas for expansion, these tend to be places that are already built up due to unpermitted construction. In combination with the deliberately labyrinthine application procedures, this has led to a third of Palestinian homes being built without the mandatory Israeli-issued building permit, placing over 90,000 residents at risk of eviction. As well as causing practical problems, this has a considerable psychological impact.

The practical effects of these policies can perhaps be best appreciated at a local level. A typical example of a once thriving village, dating back centuries, is the Palestinian village of Al-Isawiyyah. A large part of the district, including the built-up area, fell under Israeli control from 1967 and much of this area has since been expropriated from residents. Today, cut off from other areas of East Jerusalem by a web of Israeli-built development that includes military camps, the Hebrew University campus and the Eastern Ring Road, it is a crowded enclave with a population density 2.5 times higher than neighbouring Israeli settlements. Blocked

off on three sides and with little land zoned for construction, there is a severe housing shortage and residents have no choice but to build without permits. Many have been issued with demolition orders and some have lost their homes already.

In this regard, conditions in Al-Isawiyyah are typical of many Palestinian neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem and their struggle with Israel's draconian planning restrictions. However, the village also faces the threat of another form of Israeli planning that has been used repeatedly to limit the development of Palestinian neighbourhoods and even expel Palestinians from their land – the zoning of supposedly 'vacant' areas in East Jerusalem as parks and protected green spaces.

In September 2014, the Israeli National Planning Committee announced controversial plans to build a new 'national park' on the slopes of Mount Scopus, where Al-Isawiyyah is based. The plans as they currently stand would lead to the confiscation of 700,000 square metres of land belonging to Al-Isawiyyah and another Palestinian neighbourhood, At-Tur. News of the proposal provoked widespread condemnation from rights groups and community residents.

Though the committee has so far refused to cancel the park, it has conceded that its boundaries should be re-examined due to insufficient consideration of the needs of the two adjacent Palestinian neighbourhoods.



The decision regarding these boundaries has been referred back to a lower-level planning committee. The Israeli non-profit organization, BIMKOM – Planners for Planning Rights, which provides legal representation for an association of Al-Isawiyyah residents – is now hopeful that the plans for the park will be curtailed.

If this is the case, it will be a rare positive development in a history of long-running disputes with Israeli authorities, whose planning policies have been a recurring source of tension for the community. In 2008 the Jerusalem Municipality began to advance plans for a solid waste dump to the north which would leave the community completely surrounded. And should the E1 Plan be implemented, the result will be even more exclusionary development – leaving it more isolated and overcrowded than ever.

Though the story of Al-Isawiyyah would be tragic even if it was unique, the problems facing the community are shared by many other Palestinian neighbourhoods – problems that, without a significant shift in Israel's urban policy, will only become worse in future. ■

Below: A Palestinian boy walks on the rubble of his demolished house in an East Jerusalem neighbourhood, November 2014. *REUTERS/Ammar Awad*



Israel's barrier has intensified the separation of East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank, incorporating 13 checkpoints through which Palestinian residents in the remainder of the Palestine require special permits to cross. The barrier's circuitous route has been planned as such in order to include the large majority of Israeli settlements. As a result, some Palestinian communities such as Kafr 'Aqab and Shu'fat refugee camp are now situated within the Jerusalem municipal boundary, on the West Bank side of the barrier, and therefore required to pass through checkpoints to access health care and other services. On the other hand, an estimated 1,400 West Bank residents are now caught on the Jerusalem side of the barrier, but still denied residency rights, employment or services in East Jerusalem.

The barrier is not the only example of divisive Israeli infrastructure. The light rail has also been a target of Palestinian anger and resentment since its completion in 2011, reflected in multiple attacks against rail commuters during the year. Running from West Jerusalem to the Israeli settlement of Pisgat Ze'ev on the eastern edge of the municipality, the light rail was initially portrayed by Israel's leadership as a symbol of coexistence and unity. However, its importance to the projection of Israeli sovereignty over the entirety of Jerusalem has since been explicitly stated by public figures such as the city's mayor Nir Barkat. For Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem, the light rail has been seen as another expression of the occupation, and a 2010 resolution from the UN Human Rights Council declared its route to be in clear violation of international law.

The lack of government investment in East Jerusalem has resulted in significant discrimination and overcrowding for Palestinian residents. Besides neglected municipal services such as rubbish collection and lighting, there is a severe shortage of public buildings and facilities like schools or playgrounds. The June announcement of a five-year plan for East Jerusalem was only a partial step forward: NIS200 million will be invested in infrastructure, education, welfare and employment, while NIS95.4 million will go towards security. And commentators noted

that the government's express intention is to strengthen its control over East Jerusalem, rather than to secure the rights of Palestinians living there.

In densely populated Gaza, on the other hand, restrictions on the importing of construction materials imposed by blockade, enforced by both Israel and Egypt, make any systematic planning very difficult. To make matters worse, 118,000 housing units were destroyed or damaged during Operation Protective Edge in addition to schools, hospitals and the enclave's sole power plant. Their repair will depend on all parties upholding the terms of the ceasefire and implementing the temporary Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism which has since been set in place. Ultimately, Israel will have the final say about what materials will be allowed into Gaza and who will supply them. However, as HRW has reported, Israel's policy in the past has been to impose blanket restrictions 'unconnected or disproportionate to security considerations [which] unnecessarily harm people's access to food, water, education, and other fundamental rights in Gaza'.

Israel has also employed discriminatory planning policies to marginalize minorities within its own borders. Despite the welcome freezing towards the end of 2013 of the legislative process behind the Praver plan to forcibly remove 70,000 Bedouin living in unrecognized villages in the Negev (*Naqab* in Arabic), civil rights groups fear that they are still in danger of displacement due to the appropriation of large parts of their land. Amnesty International reports that the enactment of the Regional Master Plan for the Be'er Sheva Metropolitan Area, approved in August 2012 despite outstanding objections by the Bedouin community, would result in the eviction and destruction of most of the 35 unrecognized villages. In the meantime, the Bedouin and herding communities are prone to house demolitions because of the obstacles to obtaining building permits.

Other discriminated communities include Ethiopian Israelis and Mizrahim, who are Jews from Arab countries. A lack of investment or policies directed at improving social cohesion in urban areas, such as south Tel Aviv, where large numbers from these groups reside, has resulted in poor living conditions, high levels of crime

and social unrest. This has been exacerbated by Israel's policy towards African migrants and asylum seekers, who are assigned to social housing in neglected neighbourhoods that lack the necessary welfare services, infrastructure or personal safety measures to cater for the increased population.

More broadly, Arab minorities in Israel have been subjected to policies resulting in significant housing inequality. The most recent statistics show that in 2013, the Israel Land Authority issued tenders for the construction of more housing units in the illegal settlements in the Palestine than it did in the Arab communities in Israel, despite there being more than double the number of inhabitants in these villages than Jewish residents living in the occupied West Bank. Arab communities make up just 2.5 per cent of the territory of Israel and this has barely increased since 1948. Annually, 12,000 new housing units are required to close the housing gap; in 2013, however, only 3,547 housing units in Arab communities were marketed out of a total of 27,840. As a result, in contrast to the extensive planning and development of Jewish localities, Arab neighbourhoods in Israel have urbanized without any overarching strategy in place to meet the needs of the population.

Saudi Arabia

Sunni Muslim-majority Saudi Arabia is home to a large Shi'a minority, comprising an estimated 10–15 per cent of the population. Most belong to the Twelver sect and are concentrated in the country's oil-rich Eastern province, although there are also an estimated 700,000 Isma'ilis and smaller numbers of Zaydis living primarily in Najran and other areas along the Yemeni border. In a country where Sunni Islam is the official religion and other forms of religious expression are strictly prohibited, Shi'a Muslims are subject to restrictions on their religious practice and widespread discrimination. Shi'a are also officially discriminated against in public sector employment – a key component of social status in Saudi Arabia – including in the judiciary, military and education. For Shi'a women, religious discrimination compounds the problem of finding a job in a country in which employment opportunities for women are already

severely limited by strict gender segregation policies, restricted mobility and cultural mores.

The Saudi government has a zero-tolerance policy for dissent and has cracked down harshly on Shi'a activists and others calling for reform. In a troubling development, authorities passed a sweeping anti-terrorism law in January 2014 that made a host of vague and undefined charges, such as 'insulting the reputation of the state', prosecutable offences. Throughout the year, the Saudi authorities imposed harsh prison sentences on a number of minority rights activists. In April, Fadhil al-Manasif, who documented abuses against protesters in the Eastern province in 2011, was sentenced to 15 years in prison, a lengthy travel ban and a fine. In August, Shi'a cleric Tawfiq Al-Amer was sentenced to eight years in prison, as well as a travel ban and a prohibition on giving sermons. Al-Amer had called for political reforms in his speeches, including moving towards a constitutional monarchy, and better treatment of Shi'a citizens. In November, Mikhilif al-Shammari, a Sunni activist who advocated for equality between Sunni and Shi'a citizens, was sentenced to two years in prison and 200 lashes following accusations which included meeting with Shi'a activists in the Eastern province.

Several activists were also sentenced to death during the year for their activities, including Rida Al-Rubh, the son of a Shi'a cleric, in May, for his involvement in protests in 2011 and for allegedly shooting at security officers. The same week, Ali Mohammed Baqir Al-Nimr also received the death sentence in connection with the protests, despite the fact that he was 17 years old at the time. HRW asserts that the trials of these activists were rife with due process violations, including forced confessions. On 15 October, prominent Shi'a cleric and activist Sheikh Nimr Baqir Al-Nimr was sentenced to death. Al-Nimr had a wide following and often criticized the government's treatment of the Shi'a minority in his sermons. He called on Shi'a citizens to resist discrimination through peaceful means and was involved in organizing protests in 2011. News of his sentencing sparked street riots in the Eastern province. The following week, two more activists were sentenced to death in connection to the 2011 protests and a third was given a 12-year

prison term.

There are fears that the atmosphere of increased polarization of sectarian identities that has taken hold of the wider region over the last year could have negative repercussions for Saudi Arabia's Shi'a minority. On 3 November, a bloody attack carried out against Shi'a worshippers observing the religious occasion of Ashura in Al-Ahsa governorate confirmed some of these fears. Masked gunmen attacked the worshippers as they were leaving their place of worship in al-Dalwa village, killing at least seven, including children, and leaving dozens injured. The Saudi authorities arrested a number of people in connection with the incident and have indicated that the attackers were led by a Saudi national who had recently returned from fighting in Iraq and Syria. However, in a positive development, the Saudi public, as well as leading government and religious figures, were unanimous in condemning the attack and presenting a united front of solidarity with the victims. Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef visited the wounded in the hospital and paid his condolences to the families of those killed.

While sectarian violence in Iraq and Syria has added a new dimension of fear, the marginalization of Saudi Arabia's Shi'a citizens is much more deep-seated in nature and has long-term roots. Driven by the discovery of oil, Saudi Arabia has undergone massive social and economic changes over the last few decades, including a rapid transformation over several decades into a largely urban population. However, this development process has been uneven, with Saudi Shi'a claiming that the government has favoured Sunni-majority areas for development projects while neglecting cities such as Qatif, which has a large Shi'a population. Residents claim that there is only one government hospital to serve the population, exceeding half a million, whereas Sunni towns of a similar size typically have many more hospitals and specialized health centres. Shi'a-majority cities also lack universities, whereas even small Sunni towns boast new university campuses. Moreover, Shi'a face difficulties in obtaining permits to build mosques, constraining their religious practices in many areas.

Migrant workers represent another excluded sector of the population. Despite forming the backbone of the private sector workforce and playing a vital role in construction, they are often the last to benefit from urban development. In Saudi cities, migrants are often segregated from other residents and confined to overcrowded, low-cost living arrangements. In Mecca, for instance, multi-billion-dollar projects to expand and modernize the Holy Mosque, the Masjid al-Haram, and surrounding areas have transformed the city centre into a haven for wealthy pilgrims, replete with luxury hotels, restaurants and shopping malls, while marginalizing the city's poorer inhabitants and destroying much ancient heritage in the process, including numerous Sufi shrines. Rents in the city have skyrocketed and the government has not invested in affordable housing, leading to the growth of slums populated largely by migrants. Migrant workers in Saudi Arabia already live a precarious existence due to the sponsorship system, which leaves them vulnerable to exploitation, violence and sexual abuse by their Saudi employers, as they do not benefit from minimum wage regulations and other protections afforded to Saudi nationals.

Syria

Fighting in Syria intensified throughout 2014, with at least 7.6 million Syrians internally displaced and another 3.7 million refugees by the end of the year. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that more than 76,000 people had died during the year, bringing the death toll of the conflict so far to over 200,000. The conflict has been strongly urban in nature, focused particularly on cities such as Aleppo and Damascus, with civilians especially vulnerable as regime forces deliberately target schools, hospitals, mosques and other non-military targets. Both the government and armed opposition groups have also denied civilians in besieged areas access to food, water, electricity, medical care and other essential services. Women are at particular risk due to the increasing use of gender-based violence as a weapon of war in the conflict.

The brutal and destructive nature of the conflict in Syria has caused untold suffering for

all civilians, majority and minority communities alike. At times, however, minorities including Alawis, Christians, Druze, Ismailis, Kurds, Turkmen, Twelver Shi'a and Yezidis have been targeted by opposition militias on the assumption, whether accurate or not, that they support the regime. Alawis are among the groups most in danger of violent persecution by armed opposition groups due to their perceived association with the Assad regime, although in general minority



Below: Women mourn near graves of Kurdish fighters who died in Kobane, Syria. *REUTERS/Kai Pfaffenbach/Files*

political allegiances are divided between support and opposition. Alawis and other Shi'a Muslims were exposed to several brutal attacks during the year. In February, rebel fighters attacked the village of Maan in Hama province, killing 40 Alawis. In May, an entire Alawi family was

executed in Zanuba, Hama province, while a series of car bombings in Alawi areas of Homs between March and June led to high civilian casualties. Many Alawis worry for their future in Syria, fearing they will be reduced to second-class citizens if a Sunni-dominated regime takes power or forced to negotiate their minority status along with the rest of Syria's religious minorities. The Assad regime has been accused of attempting to manipulate minorities by encouraging fears of



sectarian division.

Furthermore, as extremist groups such as Jabhat an-Nusra and ISIS have risen in influence over the year, minorities have been targeted because of their faith. Since some of these communities are already small in number, there are fears that continued attacks could lead to their exodus from the country. Members of Syria's Yezidi minority, for instance, are at risk following ISIS's brutal campaign against community members in Iraq. ISIS has smuggled unknown numbers of abducted Yezidi women and girls from Sinjar into Syria, where they have been sold as commodities, enslaved, raped and forcibly married to ISIS fighters.

Among the many areas subjected to intense fighting over the year were several Christian-majority towns, where attacks led to the displacement of the civilian population and irreparable damage to historic archaeological and religious sites. In May, the Armenian Christian town of Kesseb was attacked and taken over by opposition fighters, causing approximately 2,500 Armenians to flee for their lives. The Assyrian Christian town of Ma'aloula, one of the few places in Syria where the Aramaic language is still spoken, switched hands between government and opposition forces four times between the end of 2013 and April 2014, when it was retaken by the government. According to the regime, many of the town's churches and monasteries were vandalized, destroyed or looted: some of the churches were found with extremist slogans scrawled on their walls and icons removed or defaced, although it is unclear who was responsible for these actions.

Armed groups have continued to target Christian religious leaders for abduction and assassination. Father Frans van der Lugt, a 75-year-old Dutch Jesuit priest, was shot and killed in his monastery in Homs in April by an unknown assailant. Van der Lugt had been living in Syria for several decades and was the founder of a community centre to help people with disabilities from all religions. Meanwhile, the whereabouts of the kidnapped Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim, Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi and Jesuit priest Father Paolo Dall'Oglio are still unknown. Thirteen nuns and three maids, who were kidnapped from

Ma'aloula in December 2013, were released in March following negotiations between Jabhat an-Nusra, which was holding them captive, and Syrian, Lebanese and Qatari officials.

The Druze community, whose adherents follow a monotheistic religion with roots in Islam, has largely attempted to stay removed from the conflict but were nonetheless drawn into the fighting this year. In August, Druze fighters clashed with Bedouin Arabs backed by Jabhat an-Nusra, leading to at least a dozen deaths, including those of three spiritual leaders.

As for Syria's ethnic Kurdish minority, long disenfranchised by Baa'thist rule, the conflict has provided an opportunity to carve out a sphere of autonomy. In January, Syrian Kurds established an Interim Transitional Administration in the cantons of Jazira, Kobane and Afrin. However, as fighting with Sunni Arab factions for control of territory is ongoing, Kurdish civilians continue to pay a high price. When ISIS entered the village of Tel Akhader in March, the group issued an ultimatum to the Kurdish residents to leave or be killed. In May, the group kidnapped nearly 200 Kurdish civilians from the village of Qabasin. The same month, they kidnapped 153 Kurdish schoolboys, held nearly all of them captive in Minbij for five months, and showed them violent videos while imbuing them with the group's ideology. Beginning in September 2014, ISIS besieged the Kurdish city of Kobane, cutting off food supplies, water and electricity from the city and causing over 200,000 people to flee.

The sharpening of sectarian identities, which continues to increase as the conflict progresses, represents a significant shift in Syria's social dynamics. For much of its recent history, Syria's various religious and ethnic minorities have to some extent been concentrated in different parts of the country. However, cities such as Damascus were places where people from all sects congregated. In this sense, cities often played a positive role in reducing barriers and enabling some interaction between different groups. However, urbanization also contributed to increasing social discontent. The years preceding the outbreak of protests were marked by large-scale population movements from the countryside into the cities, following some of the worst droughts and crop failures in recent history. The

Everywhere but invisible – the continued marginalization of Dubai's migrant construction workers

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Dubai's construction boom has transformed this desert city into a dense urban landscape of skyscrapers, shopping malls, roads and swimming pools. This extraordinary development has been made possible by the labour of many hundreds of thousands of migrant construction workers, who first began arriving in the city in the 1960s and now number around a quarter of its population. Hailing mostly from Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, they typically work six days a week and 11 or 12 hours each day to earn the equivalent of just US\$100–300 every month.

Though a ubiquitous presence on its construction sites, Dubai's migrant workers are largely invisible in the city centre. Largely sequestered in labour camps guarded by private security on the outskirts of the city, migrant construction workers have little choice but to suffer sub-standard living conditions. Settlements such as Sonapur, with some 300,000 inhabitants – the world's largest labour camp – are populated almost exclusively by men, who live in overcrowded rooms in cramped and unsanitary conditions. Each day, workers are bussed from their living quarters to construction sites, then back again. Workplace accidents are not uncommon and deaths tend to go unreported, as safety oversight is lax and conditions are harsh. Relaxation can also be hard

to come by, as workers have been accused of harassing tourists and arrested just for resting on public beaches, while shopping malls have frequently turned away migrant workers.

Making possible these conditions is the *kafala* system. Introduced by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) government in 1971, this sponsorship scheme exposes migrant construction workers to systemic abuse in many forms. Under *kafala*, a migrant's residence and work visas are tied to their sole sponsoring employer. Despite slight reforms in 2010, the ability to switch employers remains severely restricted. Migrant construction workers are often recruited largely in poor, rural areas in their home countries and then obliged to make sizeable down-payments to their prospective employer to cover the cost of their flights and visa. On arrival in Dubai the terms of agreement frequently change, however, with many employers confiscating migrant passports and forcing them to accept lower wages, longer hours and worse work conditions than promised. This can leave many workers without documents and in a limbo of unpaid debt.

Workers are also prohibited from undertaking strikes, collective bargaining or forming associations to advocate for their rights. Strikes are very rare, but in May 2013, striking workers from Dubai's largest construction firm, Arabtec, mobilized in their thousands, resulting in nearly 500 deportations. Reports also emerged in May 2014 of a similar incident that had occurred in October 2013, when more than 3,000 employees of a major UK-based construction company working on Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island went on strike to protest over low pay. Some, having stayed in their accommodations at Camp 42 in Dubai's Jebel Ali industrial zone, were handed over to police by company management and subsequently deported. In this context, many migrants have turned to work in the informal economy, rather than reporting abuse and taking their chances with the biased judicial system.

The UAE government has largely failed to address any of these issues and continues

to obstruct rights organizations working on behalf of migrant workers from monitoring or documenting these abuses. Nevertheless, a small number of informal civil society groups have had some success in pushing for positive developments and providing social services to those migrants most in need.

These organizations have also aided migrant construction workers in navigating the complex legal issues surrounding visas and supported those accused of 'absconding' or attempting to reclaim withheld wages from employers. They also raise funds to provide transport to hospitals in case of emergencies and plane



tickets to return home for those trapped without means. One example is the Indian Workers Resource Centre, a welfare centre for Indians connected to the Embassy of India, which has targeted construction workers with information campaigns on rights, financial issues and health care. ■

Below: Arabtec workers on strike in Dubai, in protest of low wages.

Getty Images/Brent Stirton



largely Sunni rural migrants settled down in sprawling, overcrowded neighbourhoods which grew out of the suburbs of Syria's major cities, increasing the strain on urban infrastructure and public resources such as water. Meanwhile, government-led, modified neoliberal policies created enormous wealth for the ruling elite, in stark contrast to the neglected countryside. After protests against the regime began in rural Dera'a in 2011, these resentments fed into the uprising.

The rising influence of extremist groups over the course of 2014, especially ISIS, has dramatically changed the urban landscape in cities under their control. The town of Al-Raqqa has become the informal capital of ISIS's self-declared caliphate. In February, ISIS released an edict giving the small number of Christians living in the town one of three choices: conversion to Islam, the payment of a tribute or the risk of death. Those under ISIS rule are subject to a host of restrictions on their religious practice, with prohibitions on church renovation, the display of crosses and other acts of public worship. ISIS also subjects the Muslim population of the town to a brutal regime of control, regularly carrying out public beheadings, stonings, crucifixions and amputations for transgressing the group's authority. In addition, militants have destroyed cultural and religious sites belonging to minorities, including the Shi'a mosque of Uwais Al-Qarni and tombs dating back to the 7th century in Al-Raqqa in May. The control of extremist groups over urban centres and districts has had particularly severe consequences for women, with restrictions on their dress and movement in areas under their control.

With continued waves of displacement, many Syrians face the challenge of adapting to new urban environments, both inside and outside of Syria. Outside the country, an estimated 70 per cent of Syrian refugees are based in urban areas. Only a small proportion of minorities have registered with UNHCR, with more than 90 per cent of refugees identifying as Sunni Muslims. However, fear of attacks from other groups or reprisals by the government on their return may be discouraging minority refugees from registering. Some receiving countries have made special arrangements to protect minorities, with Jordan and Turkey establishing separate procedures for Alawi and Turkmen refugees

respectively. Towards the end of 2014, news also emerged of plans by the Canadian government to prioritize Syrian refugees from minorities for resettlement, on the basis that these groups experienced higher levels of persecution. The proposal was strongly criticized by rights groups, who argued that preferential selection would be discriminatory and could further inflame sectarian tensions within Syria.

Yemen

The year 2014 began with the completion of Yemen's ten-month-long National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in January. With 565 representatives invited to attend and the final outcomes of the process agreed for inclusion in the country's new Constitution, scheduled for a referendum by 25 January 2015, the NDC's conclusion was welcomed by many observers as an important milestone in the country's transition to democracy. However, the process was undermined by the failure to fully represent the country's various minorities, including Yemen's tiny Jewish minority, which was left out despite previous promises that they would be included. Also sidelined were Yemen's Muhamasheen, literally 'marginalized ones', a visible and much discriminated minority known commonly as Akhdam or 'servants'. Despite accounting for around 10 per cent of the population, they were represented by just a single delegate in the NDC proceedings. Nonetheless, one of the NDC outcomes stipulated the establishment of 'fair national policies and procedures to ensure marginalized persons' access to decent housing, basic public services, free health care, and job opportunities', including placement in 10 per cent of public jobs. The NDC Final Communiqué also affirmed the need to preserve elements of national heritage and cultural rights, such as the Mahari and Socotri languages.

However, the NDC received a fatal blow with the withdrawal of the Houthi movement from the process and the subsequent spread of its armed insurgency across Yemen. The Houthis, based in the north, are comprised overwhelmingly of Zaydis, a branch of Shi'a Islam that represents the country's largest minority group and accounts for a quarter to a third of the country's population. Houthis have

Below: An abandoned Jewish village on the southern outskirts of the Yemeni capital Sana'a, April 2014. *REUTERS/Khaled Abdullah*

presented their rebellion as an effort to challenge years of marginalization by the government in Sana'a, as well as an attempt to counter the growing influence of ultraconservative Sunni Salafism in the north. The uprising has tipped the country into a state of profound upheaval and led to the effective withdrawal of government control over large parts of the country.

The advance of the armed group in the months following their departure from the NDC saw Houthi forces overtake a number of key strategic positions in the centre and south of the country. By September, they had taken control of a number of cities including Sana'a, seizing ministries and other government buildings, and severely weakened the leadership of Yemen's president Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Their progress continued into 2015, with Houthi forces advancing through southern Yemen all the way

to Aden, where they battled forces loyal to the president, whose government they had effectively deposed. With mounting air strikes on Houthi targets by a Saudi-led coalition of Arab states, by the beginning of April, Yemen – already the Arab world's poorest country – was in the throes of a major humanitarian crisis. As of January 2015, an estimated 334,100 people were internally displaced, with numbers rising further in the months that followed.

Following their initial successes, Houthis were also targeted by suicide bombings and clashed with al-Qaeda-affiliated Sunni extremists towards the end of 2014. One of the deadliest attacks, however, took place on 20 March 2015, when two suicide bombings targeted Shi'a mosques in Sana'a frequented by Houthi supporters, killing 137 people in the first major attacks in Yemen claimed by ISIS. Incidents such as these have raised concerns about the threat of the country sliding into sectarian violence.

However, largely excluded from this picture are Yemen's other minorities, including its Jewish



population. Long-established as a historical presence in the country, and reaching a peak population of more than 50,000 in the early-to-mid 20th century, Yemen's Jewish community has dwindled severely in recent years to less than 100 people, due in part to harassment and persecution. This situation has not improved in the wake of Houthi political gains due to the conflation among Houthi sympathizers, as well as Yemenis more generally, of the Jewish faith with Zionism. In a rare show of official support, however, Yemen's Minister of Culture, Arwa Othman, dedicated a major human rights award she received in September to Yemen's Jewish population and called for greater tolerance in the country.

Other religious minorities also continued to face discrimination during the year. A Yemeni Bahá'í named Hamed Kamal bin Haydara remained in prison throughout 2014, where he faced various forms of torture and abuse. In not the first case of its kind, he was accused of committing the crimes of proselytizing the Bahá'í faith and collaborating with Israel. It was not until January 2015 that he was finally indicted.

Muhamasheen continued to struggle during the year for greater political inclusion, access to justice and an end to discrimination. In April 2014, dozens of Muhamasheen staged a demonstration near Jabal Habshi, Ta'izz, to protest government inaction regarding the demolition and torching of 16 Muhamasheen homes eight months prior. According to the National Organization for Defending Rights and Freedoms (HOOD), the attacks were a response to the intended marriage of a young Muhamasheen man with a young woman from a nearby tribe, and were believed to be carried out as a gesture of disapproval by members of the girl's tribe. Following the demonstration, some Muhamasheen families fled the area due to fears of further attacks.

One factor in their ongoing exclusion is the lack of national identification cards and birth certificates issued to Muhamasheen who, when located at both the social and geographical margins of Yemen's urban centres, have faced difficulties accessing state institutions. While urban centres can offer opportunities for upward mobility and improved access to services such as education and health care, for

Muhamasheen and other minorities they have often deepened existing forms of discrimination while also creating new patterns of exclusion. Urbanization in Yemen has been fuelled by the country's population growth, one of the highest rates worldwide, as well as rising investment, construction and labour migration in recent years. This has led to acute pressure on basic services and housing in major urban centres such as Sana'a, one of the world's fastest growing cities, with some projections suggesting it could be the first national capital to run out of a viable water supply.

In this context, minorities, migrants and other marginalized groups have been disproportionately affected. Yemen's Muhamasheen have been forced to make their homes overwhelmingly in slums, within or on the outskirts of the country's expanding urban centres, often in settlements housing many inhabitants in a single room and lacking basic amenities such as plumbing and electricity. Squalid living conditions, including unsafe drinking water, with only nine per cent of Muhamasheen homes having a piped supply, have contributed to widespread health problems.

While there have been instances of integration into the Yemeni working and middle classes, Muhamasheen have largely faced protracted urban poverty and limited livelihood opportunities, with many engaged in menial labour such as street sweeping and trash collection. Yet as rural poor, other migrants and those uprooted by conflict have in recent years rushed to Yemen's urban centres in greater numbers, competition for even these low-level jobs is growing.

Yemen's Jewish community has also been forced to migrate to urban areas due to insecurity, with the majority having moved from the north to Sana'a in 2007 after being driven from their homes in the wake of the Houthi takeover of Sa'dah. Those in Sana'a are now living in a guarded compound, and at the end of 2014 the only other Jewish community in Yemen, numbering no more than a dozen or so families, remained in the town of Raida in 'Amran governorate. ■

The disappearance of Wadi Abu Jmil, Beirut's Jewish district

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Lebanon's wars have had a lasting impact on the country's urban fabric. The infamous 'green line' which divided Beirut into East and West between 1975 and 1990 forced various religious groups – primarily Muslims and Christians, but also other smaller minorities who found themselves drawn into the conflict – to resettle on either side of the city for their own safety. With a few exceptions, many of the city's once diverse neighbourhoods were left homogenized by the increasingly sectarian nature of the conflict – a legacy that sadly persists to this day.

Beirut as a city has always been a haven for refugees, dating back to the arrival of persecuted Armenians in 1915, the subsequent wave of Palestinians from 1948 and more recently, an influx of Syrians displaced since 2011. The Lebanese war also caused a large wave of internal displacement, accompanied by an exodus from rural areas. All of these movements led to the multiplication of informal settlements and the occupation of land within or on the fringes of Beirut. Due to Lebanon's religious diversity, these migrations contributed to the remapping of the city into increasingly segregated districts. The confinement of particular religious groups in different parts of Beirut, such as the largely Shi'a southern suburbs of Dahieh or the predominantly Sunni Palestinian camps of Shatila, Bouj Al Barajneh and Mar Elias, has reinforced their separation.

Meanwhile the smaller religious minorities, particularly the Jewish population of Beirut, became undocumented casualties of the war. During the 1960s, Lebanon's Jewish population numbered a few thousand and even grew as a

result of migration from neighbouring Arab countries where they were declared *personae non gratae* following the 1948 creation of the state of Israel. In Beirut, the city's Jewish population was centred in the neighbourhood of Wadi Abu Jmil, west of the city centre. The eruption of the war in 1975 led the last of the city's Jewish population into exile, while an unknown number – estimated by some to be between 200 and 500 individuals – remained, but disguised their religious identity, or in some cases converted, to avoid being targeted during the years of civil war. Wadi Abu Jmil was emptied of its population and the beautiful synagogue of Maguen Abraham, once the centre of the community, was closed down and subsequently damaged by Israeli bombardment during the war.

In 1994, the privately owned Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut Central District, otherwise known as Solidere, took on the task of reconstructing and developing the city centre. Since then, the controversial organization has been strongly criticized for its role in exacerbating social divides in Beirut as well as displacing yet again the original inhabitants and shop owners in the city's downtown. Although it is impossible to know the exact number of Lebanese Jews who still live around Wadi Abu Jmil or own property within the area, Solidere's reconstruction of Wadi Abu Jmil has transformed it, like other parts of central Beirut, into an upmarket 'urban village' with clubs and other facilities that are unattainable for anyone but the city's most affluent population. Despite numerous efforts to complete its restoration, the area's synagogue has yet to be opened to the public.

The city centre, as a result of Solidere's policies, has therefore become a ghost town, deprived of its original religious diversity and the many inhabitants who once gave it life. Redevelopment, like the conflict before it, continues to erase the rich history of Beirut's Jewish community – a process that, if it continues, could make its disappearance complete. ■