

RELIGION AND CONFLICT

1. Central African Republic: Religion and Politics

Central African Republic (CAR) has been embroiled in a religio-political conflict which resulted in the death of thousands of people and the internal displacement of nearly 25% of its population. Tens of thousands of Muslims – mainly women – have been forced to live in UN-protected enclaves. The country descended into violence when François Bozizé, the then President, was ousted by mainly Muslim rebel alliance in 2013. The ouster led to reprisals by Christian militia against Muslims.

There has been a surge in incidents of violence in 2015 on account of disputes over the date for elections. Pope Francis visited the country in November 2015 to call for peace between Muslims and Christians. When elections were finally held on the 30th of December 2015, no one from among the 30 presidential candidates emerged as winner casting aside hopes for a strong government to put an end to violence.

2. ISIS and the Religious 'Others'

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is the most violent terrorist organization today. Notorious for carrying out public execution, the organization declared a caliphate in June of 2014 with its leader as the caliph.

In January 2016 new satellite images showed that ISIS has destroyed the oldest Christian monastery in Iraq. The 1,400 year-old St Elijah's monastery is now one of the many religious and historic sites, like Palmyra and Hatra, that have been destroyed. ISIS, previously also, has been known to destroy monuments, museums and holy shrines of non-Sunnis.

The atrocities committed by ISIS have forced hundreds of thousands of people to migrate from Iraq and Syria and seek refuge in neighboring countries and Europe. The forced migrations have ruptured the plural ethos of the region and have done irreparable damage to Middle Eastern fabric.

3. Myanmar Elections: What does the future hold for the Burmese Muslims?

On November 8, 2015 Myanmar headed for polls. The two frontrunners for the elections were Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), a political recreation of the former military junta, and Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD). Out of the 1,171 seats contested, NLD won a total of 887 seats, lower and upper house combined.

The run up towards democratic transformation has not been positive for all groups in Myanmar. The predominantly Buddhist country stripped many of its Muslim citizens of their right to vote in the country's first free and fair elections in 25 years. Although many

Rohingyas held temporary citizenship documents which allowed them to vote, then President Thein Sein nullified those cards.

The ruling USDP party has a traditional strong support base amongst the Buddhist nationalists. The NLD also tried to appease the influential Buddhist nationalists by excluding all Muslim candidates from its candidate list. The party did not field the Muslims – about 15 of them -- who had applied to become NLD candidates.

RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSIES

1. The “Niqab” and Burqa” Ban in West African Countries

Several West African countries have banned or are considering the ban of the “Niqab” (Full Face Veil) and/ or the “Burqa” (Full Islamic Dress) worn by Muslim women due to rising fears over violent extremism conducted by the Boko Haram terrorist group. The Boko Haram group is seeking to expand its influence outside its Nigerian base and countries like Cameroon and Chad have suffered from Boko Haram’s female suicide bombings.¹ As a means to improving security against such attacks, Cameroon and Chad have enforced bans on the niqab and burqa, together with Niger and the Republic of Congo. Nigeria and Senegal are also considering the enforcement of such bans.

Authorities and analysts believe that the use of female suicide bombers was a tactical change by Boko Haram after being unsuccessful in gaining territory against the coalition forces.² The Niqab and Burqa provide the militants with the ease of disguise since they cover the face of the perpetrators making identification difficult. In addition, the loose-fitting burqa also allows explosives to be concealed under the garment easily.

¹ Boko Haram, officially known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad), was founded in 2002 but began military operations in Nigeria in 2009 with the objective of establishing an Islamic Caliphate, capturing towns and holding territory required for it.¹ The group enforces a version of Islam which forbids Muslims from taking part in any political or social activity associated with Western society, including voting in elections and receiving a secular education. Hence, it does not “recognise” the sovereignty of Nigeria and seeks to overthrow the incumbent government for their Islamic state. They then expanded their military campaign to neighbouring countries such as Cameroon, Chad and Niger. However, as a result of coalition forces comprising armies from Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, they had lost all their territory by March 2015.¹

² Awoniyi, O. and Findlay, S., “W. African Leaders seek ban on full-face veil to prevent attacks” *Yahoo News*, December 17, 2015. <http://news.yahoo.com/west-africa-leaders-see-ban-full-face-veil-173858605.html> (Accessed February 23, 2016).

The ban have invited criticism on the obstruction of religious freedom. The proposed burqa ban in Senegal has sparked a debate among commentators on the prioritisation of security imperatives over personal freedom. In an attempt to resolve this security dilemma, researcher Farid Essack has advised that governments should decide on the ban based on evaluations of the national security risk and political context. He found that several perpetrators of suicide bombings in Chad to be males and that there seemed to be no strong justification to ban the Niqab and Burqa except for probable Islamophobia.³

Tajikistan's Battle against Radicalism

Tajikistan forcefully shaved the beards of nearly 13,000 men and banned the wearing of the hijab by Tajik women as part of the country's efforts to counter religious radicalism.⁴ More than 160 shops selling traditional Muslim clothing were also forcibly closed as part of the campaign.

Although a Muslim-majority country, Tajikistan's secular government led by President Emomali Rahmon, is concerned about the Muslim extremist influences spilling over from its neighbour Afghanistan and from insurgency-plagued countries like Iraq and Syria. Hence, as a "precautionary measure", the Tajik government has launched a campaign against the "adoption of Islamic cultural practices in Tajik society, and to preserve secular traditions".⁵ In addition to having men arrested by the Tajik police to have their beards shaved, women were advised not to dress in ways that do not adhere to traditional Tajik culture. Hence, not only was the wearing of hijab banned in all state institutions, women were advised against wearing the black veil associated with conservative Islam.⁶ The President himself issued this warning, stating that such observances were part of an alien culture, and that women should dress in the traditional colours of the Tajik culture.⁷ In early 2016, Tajikistan's

³ Ibid.

⁴ Al Jazeera, "Tajikistan shaves 13,000 beards in 'radicalism' battle," *Al Jazeera*, January 21, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/tajikistan-shaves-13000-men-beards-radicalism-160120133352747.html>. (Accessed February 24, 2016)

⁵ Eurasianet, "Islam-Fearing Tajikistan Says Hijab Is for Prostitutes," *Eurasianet*, April 1, 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/72816>. (Accessed February 24, 2016)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Sarkorova, A., "Tajikistan's battle against beards to 'fight radicalisation'," *BBC Russian Service*, January 21, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35372754>. (Accessed February 24, 2016)

parliament voted to ban the use of Arabic-sounding names and marriage between first cousins, to shed the country's conservative Islamic practices further.⁸

2. "Enforcing" India's Ban against Menstruating Women Entering Temples and Mosques

Comments made by the President of the Travancore Devaswom Board, which manages the famous Sabarimala Temple in Kerala, concerning the Temple's banning of women aged 10 to 50 years old have re-ignited calls for the prohibition of gender discrimination in India's places of worship. Mr Prayar Gopalakrishnan, Devaswom Board President, in defence of the temple's age-old tradition, had commented that women between these ages will only be allowed into the temple if a machine that could detect if a woman was menstruating was invented. His comments sparked outrage on the social media, with many women perceiving his comments as discriminatory against women and activists starting a "Happy to Bleed" campaign on social media for women to display their pride of being a woman and to menstruate as part of that gender. Mr Gopalakrishnan's comments also refocused attention to a decade-old petition filed by the Indian Young Lawyers' Association to the Supreme Court to allow entry to the temple to all women. The upcoming verdict by the Supreme Court would be significant as it would set a precedence in either allowing or denying entry to places of worship to all women, whether they are menstruating or not.

At the same time, the Indian Muslim Women's Movement (Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan, BMMA) had also filed a petition to the Mumbai High Court three years ago against a ban for women to be allowed into the inner sanctorium of a Muslim Saint at Haji Ali dargah.⁹

The underlying controversy here is not limited to whether certain places of worship or religions "discriminate" against women. With the filing of the petition, some doubts have already been cast about the authority of the judiciary in making decisions on religious

⁸ Al Jazeera, "Tajikistan shaves 13,000 beards in 'radicalism' battle," *Al Jazeera*, January 21, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/tajikistan-shaves-13000-men-beards-radicalism-160120133352747.html>. (Accessed February 24, 2016)

⁹ Dhillon, A., "Will India open its temples and mosques to menstruating women?" *The Guardian*, January 13, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/jan/13/menstruation-temples-mosques-india-ban-women>. (Accessed February 25, 2016)

matters. A commentator even went as far as to say that this was a religious practice being diluted by the activist's portrayal of it as an issue of gender discrimination such that it can appear "legitimate" for the judiciary to make decisions on it.¹⁰

Supporters who urge respect for religious practices comment that some religious traditions in India perceive menstruating women as "impure", "unclean" and that the women will interfere with the "divine energies" of the places of worship and dilute their spiritual atmospheres. In the Sabarimala Temple's example, it is said that the Lord Ayyappa inhabits the temple in the "eternal celibate" state and hence the temple is filled with the energies of "Brahmacharya" (sense-control and celibacy) and "Vairagyam" (dispassion). As a result, these energies can interfere with a woman's "Swadharma" (personal duty) of conceiving by affecting her menstrual cycle and hence ability to conceive.¹¹ On the contrary, the "expulsion" of blood and excess energies of "Doshas" by women during menstruation is believed to inhibit energy harnessing during spiritual practices.¹² Therefore, for them this is strictly a religious and spiritual issue and not a feminist issue.

As a result of the complexity and potential backlash from devotees or extremist groups, the activists and lawyers of the BMMA are not optimistic that the courts will give a verdict in favour of the women. However, there may a glimpse of hope as the Supreme Court found the Sabarimala Temple's ban for women to be unconstitutional, although the temple may still uphold the ban if it is based on religion.¹³ While the verdict of both cases are still pending, it is clear that the effect of the verdict will be significant whether for the religious institutions in favour of upholding religious traditions, or the women who preach gender equality.

3. "Christmas" Banned in Brunei, Iran Somalia and Tajikistan

¹⁰ Sridhar, N., "Why Sabarimala controversy is religious issue, not women's rights issue," *Newsgram*, January 15, 2016, <http://www.newsgram.com/why-sabarimala-controversy-is-religious-issue-not-womens-rights-issue/>. (Accessed February 25, 2016)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ DNA, "Lawyer fighting for women to enter Sabarimala temple complains of death threats; SC refuses to withdraw case," DNA, January 15, 2016, <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-lawyer-fighting-for-women-to-enter-sabarimala-temple-complains-of-death-threats-sc-refuses-to-withdraw-case-2166055>. (Accessed February 25, 2016)

Somalia, Tajikistan and Brunei have banned public celebrations of Christmas in their countries as a means of protecting their dominant faiths and cultures from foreign influences. The underlying motivations of the “Christmas ban” may hint of increasing religious intolerance and also signal the beginning of the repression of Christian-minorities in these countries. Such religious intolerance seems to be more evident in Somalia and Brunei than in Tajikistan where the ban appears to be more a result of “xenophobic tendencies”.

In Iran, the government reportedly arrested a group of nine Christians on Christmas Day for celebrating their faith at an in-house church in the city of Shiraz.¹⁴ These arrests come in light of deteriorating human rights conditions in Iran, with many religious minorities being persecuted on the basis of their faith.

Somalia banned Christmas as it was concerned that the festival with roots in Christianity could dilute the Muslim faith subscribed to by most of the population. The director of Somalia’s Ministry of Justice and Religious Affairs said that celebrating Christmas is an act of abandonment of Islam, especially in a country where there is “no Christian community”, and governed by the Sha’ria law since 2009.¹⁵ However, the country hosts a large number of African Union (AU) peacekeepers including from Christian-majority countries like Kenya and Uganda. It also has a number of returning Somali diaspora after the civil war, who had brought along with them foreign customs and attitudes.¹⁶ While the Somali government allowed foreigners and the AU peacekeepers to celebrate the festival privately, celebrations in public were prohibited to avoid inviting violence from the Al-Shabaab terrorist group, as well as to uphold the beliefs of Islam.¹⁷

¹⁴ The Christian Post, “Iran Arrests 9 Christians on Christmas Day for Celebrating Jesus Christ,” by Stoyan Zaimov, 30 December 2015.

<http://www.christianpost.com/news/iran-arrests-nine-christians-christmas-day-celebrating-jesus-christ-153745/>

¹⁵ Woolf, N., “Christmas celebrations banned in Somalia, Tajikistan and Brunei,” *The Guardian*, December 23, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/23/christmas-banned-somalia-tajikistan-brunei>. (Accessed February 25, 2016)

¹⁶ BBC, “Somalia bans Christmas celebrations,” BBC Africa, December 23, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35167726>. (Accessed February 25, 2016)

¹⁷ Woolf, N., “Christmas celebrations banned in Somalia, Tajikistan and Brunei,” *The Guardian*, December 23, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/23/christmas-banned-somalia-tajikistan-brunei>. (Accessed February 25, 2016)

Brunei has also banned the public celebration of Christmas as there were concerns that the celebrations of other religious festivals could “damage” the Islamic beliefs. The country has even gone a step further to establish laws that would imprison a Muslim celebrating Christmas or a non-Muslim organising Christmas celebrations for up to five years, after enforcing Sha’ria law in 2014.¹⁸ Unlike Somalia in which almost all residents are Muslims, Brunei’s population consists of about twenty percent of non-Muslims, with sizeable Christian and Buddhist communities.¹⁹ Hence, the degree of controversy and potential for social alienation and instability is much larger in Brunei, especially when its constitution guarantees the freedom of religion to the population.

Tajikistan, a secular and moderate Muslim country, banned Christmas and New Year celebrations for a relatively more “xenophobic” reason. The banning of the use of fireworks, festive meals, gift-giving and raising money over New Year as well as the installation of a Christmas tree either living (felled wood) or artificial in schools and universities²⁰ by Tajikistan’s Education Ministry is seen as an attempt to rid the country of Soviet/ Russian influences. The Tajik government’s “xenophobic tendencies” are consistent across the banning of Halloween celebrations, restrictions to occasions like weddings and funerals and the shaving of beards and prohibition of hijabs²¹ to prevent extremist influences from Afghanistan.

4. Donald Trump's Proposed Temporary Ban of Muslims Entering the US

The US Republican Party presidential candidate, Donald Trump courted controversy when he proposed a temporary ban on the entry of Muslims into the United States (US). His

¹⁸ Calderwood, I. and McLaughlin, K., “The super-rich ruler who stones gays, now bans Christmas: Sultan of Brunei threatens Muslims who celebrate it with up to five years in prison while Christians must keep their secret,” *Mail Online*, December 21, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3369213/Brunei-BANS-Christmas-threatens-Muslims-celebrate-five-years-prison-Christians-organising-celebrations-warned-jailed.html>. (Accessed February 25, 2016)

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Agence France-Presse, “Tajikistan bans Christmas and new year celebrations,” *The Guardian*, December 23, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/23/tajikistan-bans-christmas-and-new-year>. (Accessed February 25, 2015)

²¹ Al Jazeera, “Tajikistan shaves 13,000 beards in 'radicalism' battle,” *Al Jazeera*, January 21, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/tajikistan-shaves-13000-men-beards-radicalism-160120133352747.html>. (Accessed February 24, 2016)

comments were made in the wake of the San Bernardino shootings by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) sympathisers, which killed 14 people.²² In his news release, he stated that, "Until we are able to determine and understand this problem and the dangerous threat it poses, our country cannot be the victims of horrendous attacks by people that believe only in jihad, and have no sense of reason or respect for human life."²³ This statement invited much criticism quickly across the US, especially from Muslim religious leaders, and even from the British Prime Minister David Cameron and the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon.²⁴

This proposal is also detrimental for social harmony it sparks backlash against the Muslim community and contributes to members of different communities viewing each other with suspicion. A representative from the Muslim Association of Virginia commented that Muslims have felt intense scrutiny from members of other communities (and some mosques have either been attacked or received threats) since Mr Trump announced his proposal.²⁵ Just hours after Mr Trump's news release, a Somali restaurant in Grand Forks, North Dakota, was set on fire by a beer bottle filled with petrol. Although the motive of the attack had not been established yet, the restaurant had a history of being vandalised with anti-Somali and anti-Muslim messages.

SECULARISM, RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

1. Egyptian Coptic Pope goes to Jerusalem

Pope Tawadros II arrived in Jerusalem on 26 November 2015 in a historic visit. It was the first time that a head of the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church had visited the city since Israel's occupation of East Jerusalem in 1967. The purpose of his visit, as stated by the Church, was to pay his last respects to Bishop of Jerusalem Anba Abraham, the head of the

²² Aisch, G, et al., "What Investigators Know About the San Bernardino Shooting," *The New York Times*, December 10, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/12/02/us/california-mass-shooting-san-bernardino.html?_r=0. (Accessed February 26, 2016)

²³ Burke, D., "American Muslims accuse Donald Trump of leading 'lynch mob'", *Cable News Network*, December 8, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/07/politics/american-muslims-donald-trump/index.html>. (Accessed February 26, 2016)

²⁴ Colvin, J., and Smith, B., "Trump shrugs off widespread outrage over proposed Muslim ban," *Associated Press*, December 9, 2015, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/58497b9b039e422cacb6af43505f7da4/trump-calls-complete-shutdown-muslims-entering-us>. (Accessed February 26, 2016)

²⁵ Goldmacher, S., "Trump plan pushes Muslim Republicans toward exit," *Politico*, December 10, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/12/donald-trump-muslims-republicans-216623>. (Accessed February 26, 2016)

Coptic Church in the Holy Land, who died on 25 November 2015.²⁶ It was a controversial move, considering a ban imposed in 1979 by his predecessor, the late Pope Shenouda III, on Egyptian Copts from making pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The ban was imposed in light of the Camp David peace accords between Egypt and Israel, and the stand that Israel had wrongfully occupied the historic city of Jerusalem.

This visit is significant for several reasons. First, the controversy surrounding the visit illustrated the various opinions surrounding the legitimacy of the state of Israel. Some members of the Egyptian Coptic Church had labelled it a “betrayal” by their leader.²⁷ Joining some Coptic Christians in denouncing the visit were non-Christian political leaders, social activists, and Muslims who disapproved of what they saw as an attempt to normalize relations with Israel.²⁸ Conversely, Palestinians were mostly welcoming of the visit as such visits would help boost the local economy and political position of the Arabs.²⁹

Peace, Reconciliation and Interfaith Dialogue

1. Interfaith Rally in Jakarta

On 17 January 2016, four days after the Jakarta attacks, more than ten thousand people from different religious backgrounds gathered in Lapangan Banteng (Banteng Field), Jakarta to condemn the terror attack and to show that the country is still peace loving and tolerant despite the threat of terrorism.³⁰ Immediately after the attack, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) claimed responsibility for the gunfire and seven explosions, including one attack at a cafe near the United Nations building. The death toll stands at eight, including four civilians; twenty others were injured including four Europeans.³¹

²⁶ Al Jazeera, “Egyptian Coptic pope pays historic visit to Jerusalem,” 26 November 2015. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/11/egyptian-coptic-pope-pays-historic-visit-jerusalem-151126122043456.html>

²⁷ The Times of Israel, “Coptic Pope breaks Israel taboo to attend Jerusalem funeral,” 28 November 2015. <http://www.timesofisrael.com/coptic-pope-attends-jerusalem-funeral-on-rare-visit-to-israel/>

²⁸ Al Monitor, “Coptic Pope's Jerusalem visit sparks backlash in Egypt,” by George Mikhail, 2 December 2015. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/egypt-coptic-pope-tawadros-visit-jerusalem-israel-dispute.html>

²⁹ The Arab Weekly, “Controversy over Coptic pope’s visit to Jerusalem,” by Hassan Abdel Zaher, 18 December 2015. <http://www.theArabweekly.com/?id=3135>

³⁰ Hariyadi, M., “Ten thousand people from all religions rally in Jakarta against terrorism,” *Asia News*, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Ten-thousand-people-from-all-religions-rally-in-Jakarta-against-terrorism-36425.html> (accessed 25 February 2016)

³¹ Erviani, K., Network Writers and News Corp Australia Network, “Terror threat for Balinese cities,” *News.com.au*, <http://www.news.com.au/world/pacific/terror-threat-for-balinese-cities/news-story/d17f1755a793f4d1182c72465bd14343> (accessed 25 February 2016)

A major interfaith rally was held in Jakarta, organised by the country's largest Islamic movement, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), just few days before the attack took place. A number of minority religious groups also took part, including the Indonesian Communion of Churches (PGI), the Indonesian Bishops Conference (KWI), the High Council of Confucianism in Indonesia (Matakin) and the Indonesian Buddhist Association (Walubi).³² The rally was aimed at launching a nationwide grassroots movement against the growing extremism and fundamentalism across the archipelagos.

The interfaith rally explicitly focused on three concerns. First, the interfaith movement called for more efforts on countering terrorism given that ISIS has extended operations to Southeast Asia.³³ Second, it aimed at preventing the intrusion of extremism from abroad. Radical ideologies from abroad have been fostering an exclusivist approach of interpreting the Islam in the country. Thus, more collective efforts should be made to tackle the growing extremism based upon the official philosophical foundation, *Pancasila*. Finally, it was an attempt to warn the society of the threat from veteran terrorist militants. The group expressed concern that the growing extremism is a result of the government's failure to deal with the Indonesians returning from Syria.³⁴ According to the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT), the 149 IS returnees from Syria will not cause security problems.³⁵

2. The Marrakesh Declaration: Protecting religious minorities in Muslim states, held in Morocco

The rise of the Islamic State [of Iraq and Syria \(ISIS\)](#) and other Islamist extremist groups in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia has brought horrific persecution of non-Muslims, including Christians, Jews and other religious minorities. Given this, about 300 muftis, theologians and scholars from different religious traditions gathered in Marrakesh, on 25-27 January, promising to work together to protect minorities in Muslim-majority countries and reiterating the belief that Islam forbids religious persecution.³⁶ The gathering, sponsored by the Moroccan government and the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, was attended by representatives from more than 100 countries.³⁷

³² The Jakarta Post, "Groups join interfaith movement against extremism," *The Jakarta Post*, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/01/07/groups-join-interfaith-movement-against-extremism.html> (accessed 25 February 2016)

³³ Kumar Ramakrishna, "The Jakarta Attacks: Coping with the ISIS Threat," RSIS Commentary, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co16010-the-jakarta-attacks-coping-with-the-isis-threat/#.VtVZSZN97dQ> (accessed 24 February 2016)

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁶ Alami, A., "Muslim Conference Calls for Protection of Religious Minorities," *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/03/world/africa/muslim-conference-calls-for-protection-of-religious-minorities.html?_r=0 (accessed 25 February 2016)

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Speaking at the conference, King Mohammed VI of Morocco reiterated the fact that “the kingdom of Morocco will not tolerate the violation of the rights of religious minorities in the name of Islam.”³⁸ The king while referring to the Qur’an and the Sunnah concluded that the religious rights of Muslims and non-Muslims, and the peaceful coexistence with other faiths are “all rooted in the proper understanding of religious principles and in the cultural heritage.”³⁹

During the conference, religious scholars, including muftis, Christian clerics, rabbis, Iraqi Yazidi representatives also delivered speeches. Scholars and religious clerics recognised the worldwide crisis caused by ISIS and called for greater respect for minorities. As an important outcome, the conference unveiled the Marrakesh Declaration, addressing the plight of religious minorities living in Muslim-majority countries, among them Christians, Jews, Hindus and Bahais as well as Yazidis and Sabians.⁴⁰ While drafting the declaration, they cited the Charter of Medina which historically mandated peaceful coexistence and religious freedom for all residents in the city of Medina.⁴¹ Sheikh Abdullah bin Bayyah held that the Charter established the idea of common citizenship regardless of religious belief,⁴² the spirit of which should be imbibed by the contemporary leaders.

Meanwhile, another group of scholars doubted the real impact of these traditional Muslim scholars and clerics on young Muslims. Farid Esack, a Muslim scholar from South Africa has challenged Morocco as a model for protecting minorities’ rights, pointing out its strict policy on conversion from Islam.⁴³

3. G20 Interfaith Summit 2015: Religion, Harmony and Sustainable Development

The G20 Interfaith Summit 2015, held on 16-18 November in Istanbul, was the second time religious leaders had gathered on the sidelines of the G20 summit. This year, the event brought together scholars, lawyers and political leaders with faith and interfaith leaders from around the world for three days of discussion and dialogue as a substantial

³⁸ Morocco World News, “King Mohammed VI’s Message to Conference on ‘Rights of Religious Minorities in Muslim Countries,’” <http://www.morocoworldnews.com/2016/01/178185/king-mohammed-vis-message-to-conference-on-rights-of-religious-minorities-in-muslim-countries/> (accessed 25 February 2016)

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 14.

⁴¹ Gjelten, T., “Muslim Leaders Vow To Protect Rights Of Religious Minorities,” *NPR*, <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/01/28/464688623/muslim-leaders-vow-to-protect-rights-of-religious-minorities> (accessed 26 February 2016)

⁴² Ibid., 14.

⁴³ Alami, A., “Morocco summit pushes Muslim clerics to improve the lot of religious minorities,” *Religious News Service*, <http://www.religionnews.com/2016/01/27/morocco-summit-pushes-muslim-clerics-improve-lot-religious-minorities/> (accessed 26 February 2016)

contribution to the G20 Economic Forum.⁴⁴ Against the backdrop of the United Nation's post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals, which were adopted earlier in November, the summit highlighted the key role that religion played in contributing to sustainable development.

Throughout the parallel sessions conducted during the summit, participants from both monotheistic religions and non-monotheistic religions presented their perspectives. Moreover, attendees were encouraged to strengthen ties with others and initiate cross-disciplinary collaborations.

4. "Know Your Neighbour" Project: Religious Leaders Stand Up for Peace amid Anti-Muslim Attacks

In the United States, a project called "Know Your Neighbour" was newly launched in December by an interfaith coalition, which aimed at reinvigorating American traditions of harmonious co-existence. Conceived by the National Sikh Campaign (NSC), "Know Your Neighbour" calls for promoting inclusion, freedom, respect, and cooperation among people of different faiths. The project encourages people to share their own belief, learn about the beliefs of others, and speak out against hatred and misinformation.⁴⁵

Due to the traditional beards and turbans worn by some Sikh men, the minority group has been targeted by anti-Muslim or xenophobic crimes in the US, particularly after the 9/11 attacks. Recently, American Sikhs, once again, witnessed a new wave of harassment, violence, and vandalism as backlash after the San Bernardino attacks.⁴⁶ In this regard, "'Know Your Neighbour' started out as a concept we had at NSC to increase dialogue with other faith communities that were doing the similar work," said Gurwin Singh Ahuja, NSC co-founder.⁴⁷

The coalition, consisting of some of the top religious and advocacy organisations throughout the country, expressed concerns about the recent rise in anti-Muslim rhetoric, which drew a national spotlight onto the religious minorities. In the wake of the Paris terror attacks of 13 November, which led to 130 dead and the San Bernardino, Calif. terror attack of 2 December that killed 14,⁴⁸ Muslim Americans and mosques throughout the country have

⁴⁴ Krause, B., "Why Religious Freedom is an Economic Plus Worldwide," *Charisma News*, <http://www.charismanews.com/politics/issues/53489-why-religious-freedom-is-an-economic-plus-worldwide> (accessed 08 March 2016)

⁴⁵ Frances, Wang., "Interfaith Coalition, White House Pledge to 'Know Your Neighbor'," *NBC News*, <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/interfaith-coalition-white-house-pledge-know-your-neighbor-n491656> (accessed 06 March 2016)

⁴⁶ Schuessler, R., "Years after a white supremacist's mass shooting, Sikhs in US remain on guard," *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/28/mass-shooting-sikh-americans-oak-creek-wisconsin> (accessed 06 March 2016)

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁸ Levin, B., "Study: In Wake of Terror, Anti-Muslim Crimes Escalating," *The Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brian-levin-jd/study-in-wake-of-terror-a_b_8838670.html (accessed 24 February 2016)

been targeted with threat and violence. A long list of anti-Muslim hate crimes has even been released and widely covered by the media.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, the White House Convening, representing the official stance, clearly condemned that “hate-motivated violence and discrimination deserve no place in civilised society,”⁵⁰ and further emphasised that combating discrimination based on one’s religion “remains fundamental not only protecting our values but also to defending our freedom.” Since December 2015, a series of interfaith gatherings have been organised by different religious communities or institutions across the country under the banner of “Know Your Neighbour”, involving lots of local churches, mosques and synagogues.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Macneal, C., “The Stunningly Long List of Anti-Muslim Hate Crimes Since San Bernardino,” *TPM News*, <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/news/anti-muslim-attacks-after-san-bernardino> (accessed 24 February 2016)

⁵⁰ Department of Justice, the United States, “Head of the Civil Rights Division Vanita Gupta Delivers Remarks at the White House Convening Celebrating and Protecting America’s Tradition of Religious Pluralism,” <https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/head-civil-rights-division-vanita-gupta-delivers-remarks-white-house-convening> (accessed 04 March 2016)

⁵¹ Kaleem, J., “Religious Leaders Stand Up For Peace Amid Anti-Muslim Attacks,” *The Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/interfaith-rally-muslims-christians-jews_us_567878ffe4b0b958f657a51f (accessed 24 February 2016)