

Peoples Under Threat 2009

Despite recent changes in US policy towards the Islamic world, the latest annual global listing of Peoples Under Threat has seen the threat level rise further for communities in Muslim countries affected by international and civil conflicts.

Every year Minority Rights Group International publishes Peoples Under Threat, identifying those groups or peoples around the world most at risk of genocide, mass killing or other systematic violent repression. 2009 is the fourth year that MRG has compiled the list, which is based on current indicators from authoritative sources (see *How is Peoples Under Threat calculated?*).

In the latest listing, published July 2009, minorities in Pakistan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Yemen are all assessed as under greater danger than a year ago, their governments' involvement in regional conflicts compounding the risk of repression at home. Pakistan joins states including Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan at the top of the list, as does Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Violent extremism and identity conflicts

In both his Ankara and Cairo speeches in 2009, US President Barack Obama emphasized that 'America is not – and never will be – at war with Islam'. He went on to seek common cause with the Islamic world: 'The enduring faith of over a billion people is so much bigger than the narrow hatred of a few. Islam is not part of the problem in combating violent extremism – it is an important part of promoting peace.' But he also expressed his determination to continue using military means to confront extremism: '...despite the costs involved, America's commitment will not weaken. Indeed, none of us should tolerate these extremists. They have killed in many countries. They have killed people of different faiths – but more than any other, they have killed Muslims.'

However, the military response to violent extremism in recent years has resulted in a new generation of identity conflicts that have placed whole communities in peril. Since 2001, when after 9/11 the US pursued the Afghanistan Taleban and the al-Qaeda unit led by Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri, the 'violent extremists' to which Obama referred have proliferated. They now operate in many countries in South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, many under the al-Qaeda label. For the civilian populations in such countries – mainly but not exclusively Muslim – the risks do not end there. In those states most affected, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Somalia, the civilian population faces the combined threat of terrorist attacks by armed opposition groups, military operations by national armed forces or by the US or its allies and, most dangerous of all, the wider armed struggle for power that has developed based on sectarian or ethnic identities. It is this combination of

factors, created and sustained by armed conflict, that makes the situation so deadly for both Muslim and non-Muslim minorities.

Communities perceived to share an identity with violent extremists, such as the Pashtun in Pakistan and Afghanistan, or Sunni Arabs in Iraq, are caught between armed opposition groups and the military operations launched to defeat them. Members of smaller sects or non-Muslim minorities, such as Yezidis, Shabak or Chaldo-Assyrians in Iraq, or Sikhs and Hindus in Pakistan, are targeted by Islamic extremists because their beliefs are considered to be un-Islamic. Historically poor or marginalized minorities with no militias to defend them, including the Bantu and Gaboye in Somalia, are particularly vulnerable where there is generalized insecurity. A state of war has also enabled governments to undertake the violent repression of other minorities, such as Baluchis in Pakistan.

Once such identity conflicts have taken hold, the cycles of community mobilization and revenge killings make them difficult to dislodge, and conflict resolution and reconciliation become messy and lengthy processes. As President Obama himself remarked in his Cairo speech, 'It is easier to start wars than to end them'.

The top twenty

The highest five states in the Peoples Under Threat table in 2009 are unchanged in position from last year: Somalia, Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan and Burma/Myanmar. In each of them violence against minorities of a widespread or systematic character is ongoing, as it is in a number of other states near the top of the list, including the Democratic Republic of Congo. The most significant risers in the top ten are Pakistan, Ethiopia, and Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (see *Major risers in 2009*).

Peoples most under threat – highest rated countries 2009			
Rank	Country	Group	Total
1	Somalia	Darood, Hawiye, Issaq and other clans; Ogadenis; Bantu; Gabooye (Midgan) and other 'caste' groups	23.30
2	Iraq	Shia, Sunnis, Kurds, Turkomans, Christians, Mandaens, Yezidis, Shabak, Faili Kurds, Baha'is, Palestinians	22.14
3	Sudan	Fur, Zaghawa, Massalit and others in Darfur; Dinka, Nuer and others in the South; Nuba, Beja	21.65
4	Afghanistan	Hazara, Pashtun, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Baluchis	20.95
5	Burma/Myanmar	Kachin, Karenni, Karen, Mons, Rakhine, Rohingya, Shan, Chin (Zomis), Wa	20.62

6	Pakistan	Baluchis, Hindus, Mohhajirs, Pashtun, Sindhis, Ahmadiya, Christians and other religious minorities	19.82
7	Dem. Rep. of the Congo	Hema and Lendu, Hunde, Hutu, Luba, Lunda, Tutsi/Banyamulenge, Twa/Mbuti	19.70
8	Ethiopia	Anuak, Afars, Oromo, Somalis, smaller minorities	18.86
9	Nigeria	Ibo, Ijaw, Ogoni, Yoruba, Hausa (Muslims) and Christians in the North	18.53
10	Israel/OPT	Palestinians in Gaza/West Bank, Israeli Palestinians	18.37
11	Chad	'Black African' groups, Arabs, Southerners	17.95
12	Sri Lanka	Tamils and Muslims	17.76
13	Zimbabwe	Ndebele, Europeans, political/social targets	16.52
14	Iran	Arabs, Azeris, Baha'is, Baluchis, Kurds, Turkomans	16.11
15	Central African Republic	Kaba (Sara), Mboum, Mbororo, Aka	15.62
16	Lebanon	Druze, Maronite Christians, Palestinians, Shia, Sunnis	15.46
17	Cote d'Ivoire	Northern Mande (Dioula), Senoufo, Bete, newly-settled groups	15.00
18	Burundi	Hutu, Tutsi, Twa	14.79
19	Philippines	Indigenous peoples, Moros (Muslims), Chinese	14.71
20	Nepal	Madheshis (Terai), Dalits, indigenous peoples (Janajati) and linguistic minorities	14.09

Although a political re-alignment occurred in Somalia in early 2009, with the so-called Djibouti group of the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia taking control of the government, the war intensified again. The return from exile of Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys and his commitment to armed struggle has reignited the battle for Mogadishu and also led to attempted assassinations and death threats against Hawiye elders. The threat to civilians in much of south and central Somalia remains at crisis point, with those groups outside the clan system, such as the minority Bantu, at particular risk.

Some commentators may be surprised to see Iraq cling stubbornly to its position as second in the table, despite widespread media coverage of a decline in violence in the country over the last year and the new government's relative success in establishing control. However, civilian deaths from violence, although thankfully no longer at the 2006-7 rate of 3,000 a month, were still estimated at 300 – 800 a month over the last year, making it one of the world's most deadly conflicts. Contested areas of Nineveh and Kirkuk where many minority communities live continue to be as dangerous as ever. A recent rise in high profile bombings and the assassination of the leading Sunni Arab politician Harith al-Obeidi are also ominous signs as the US draws down its military presence. Of equal concern is the character of the new

government, where power is held by an increasingly authoritarian faction with a sectarian base.

The Darfur conflict continues in Sudan, although not at the rate of some previous years, despite some predictions of a violent reaction to the indictment of Sudan's President, Omar al-Bashir, by the International Criminal Court. The threat in 2009 remains not just in Darfur but increasingly in the oil-rich south of the country, where tensions are rising with Khartoum in advance of a scheduled referendum on independence in 2011.

Conflict has not left the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo for well over a decade, but escalated in scale again in the second half of 2008, displacing a further 250,000 people. Although the former leader of the rebel CNDP, Laurent Nkunda, was arrested near the Rwanda border in January, a subsequent agreement by the Rwandan and Congolese governments to undertake joint military operations in the Kivus succeeded neither in dislodging murderous Hutu rebel fighters nor in bringing an end to the gross human rights violations that have torn the east of the country.

In last year's listing in 2008, the most significant risers in the table were Pakistan, Ethiopia, Chad, Sri Lanka, Iran, Central African Republic, Lebanon, Zimbabwe, Uzbekistan, Yemen, Djibouti and Kenya. During the following year (2008 - 9) new, increased or continued violence was experienced in at least 10 of those 12 states, perhaps most devastatingly in Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

A steadily-escalating conflict between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam reached endgame in March and April when the Tigers' last territory in the north-east was taken by the Sri Lankan military, at the cost of many thousands of Tamil civilian lives. Although the threat of immediate large-scale military operations has now passed, a continuing serious threat to Tamil and Muslim populations remains in the context of ethno-nationalist statements by leading politicians, a recent history of extra-judicial killings and forced disappearances, and the confinement of over 200,000 people in displaced people's camps.

Major risers in 2009

The most significant risers in the Peoples Under Threat table in 2009 include (rise in rank in brackets): Pakistan (+1), Ethiopia (+1), Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (+46), Zimbabwe (+9), Yemen (+3), Guinea (+8), Georgia (+19), Eritrea (+4), Niger (+12), Kenya (+6), Guinea Bissau (new) and Fiji (new). Note that where indicators are now separately available for Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, it is the latter that have been used for the first time this year (causing a disproportionate rise in rank).

Pakistan and Yemen have risen significantly in the table in each of the last three years, and Ethiopia and Zimbabwe in each of the last two.

Major risers 2009

Rank	Rise in rank since 2008	Country	Group	Total
6	1	Pakistan	Baluchis, Hindus, Mohhajirs, Pashtun, Sindhis, Ahmadiya, Christians and other religious minorities	19.82
8	1	Ethiopia	Anuak, Afars, Oromo, Somalis, smaller minorities	18.86
10	46*	Israel/OPT	Palestinians in Gaza/West Bank, Israeli Palestinians	18.37
13	9	Zimbabwe	Ndebele, Europeans, political/social targets	16.52
25	3	Yemen	Zaydi Shia	13.63
30	8	Guinea	Fulani, Malinke	13.18
33	19	Georgia	Adzhars, Abkhazians, South Ossetians, Georgians in autonomous regions	12.70
40	4	Eritrea	Afars, Saho, Tigre, religious minorities	11.98
43	12	Niger	Djerema-Songhai, Hausa, Tuaregs	11.35
45	6	Kenya	Borana, Kalenjin, Kikuyu, Luhya, Luo, Muslims, Turkana, Endorois, Masai, Ogiek, other indigenous groups	11.22
66	New entry	Guinea Bissau	Balanta, Fula (Fulani), Manjaco, Papel, Diola	9.82
70	New entry	Fiji	Indo-Fijians, Indigenous Fijians	9.07

**Disproportionately high due to change this year in method of calculation*

Pakistan's rise to the sixth position in the table is due to a dangerous combination of a rapidly escalating conflict against different Islamist groups in North-West Frontier Province and the Federally-Administered Tribal Areas, the existing use of violent repression to suppress dissidents in other areas of the country, and growing violence in national politics. In some respects, the crisis in north and west Pakistan can be seen as an extension of the failed tactics used in Afghanistan, with high civilian casualties from military operations, including aerial bombing from un-manned US drones, stoking opposition in Pashtun communities to the government and its allies.

The inconclusive war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza leaves a continuing grave risk to the lives of the civilian population, particularly in the Occupied Palestinian Territories but also in Israel, of a resumption of mass violence. If the current push for peace led by the US administration and Arab states founders, there is a real risk of further radicalization on both sides. Also of serious concern – although rarely reported – are the worrying attempts to curb

the freedom of Israel's own Palestinian minority, who have become increasingly worried by the insistence of the new Israeli government on Israel's character as a specifically Jewish state.

In Yemen, media attention is focused on the growing role of extremist Islamist groups, but an unresolved sense of grievance among the Zaydi Shia population and the continuing Al Houthi insurgency in the north also combine to threaten stability. Ethnic aspects of the crisis in Zimbabwe have again not been widely reported, but given rising political violence and the country's previous history of mass ethnic killing, the threat level has risen. A power-sharing deal in Kenya helped end the wave of violence in the first part of 2008 sparked by a disputed election, but without some resolution of the land issues that underpinned discontent there may be a revival of violence particularly in the Rift Valley and around Mount Elgon.

Both Ethiopia and Eritrea have also risen in the list this year. Border tensions between the two states remain after the expiry of the mandate of the UN mission last year, with a concomitant threat to Afar communities. Both states also continue to support different sides in the war in Somalia, another important factor in the growth of identity conflicts, bringing specific risks to such communities as the Somalis in Ethiopia's Ogaden.

Tuareg rebels in Niger held peace talks with the government in 2009 after two years of fighting, but it is too early to count on de-escalation in a conflict that had led to allegations of widespread human rights abuses. Recent military coups in both Guinea and Guinea-Bissau raise the spectre of wider revenge killings and also of existing ethnic tensions turning violent. Military rule also continues in Fiji, where the government suspended the constitution, arguing *inter alia* that it entrenched ethnic divisions.

In Europe, the most notable development is a rise in temperature in some of the so-called 'frozen conflicts' left from the disintegration of the former Soviet Union. Georgia has climbed significantly in the table this year following the conflict with Russia over South Ossetia. The most pressing threat in 2009 is in Georgia's other breakaway republic of Abkhazia, where Georgian troops clashed with Russian-supported Abkhaz fighters in the Kodori Gorge in August. Abkhaz authorities have closed the administrative border and sought to impose Abkhazian 'citizenship' on ethnic Georgians. In April the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities called for 'an end to the pressure being exercised on the Georgian population in the Gali District through the limitation of their education rights, compulsory "passportization", forced conscription into the Abkhaz military forces and restrictions on their freedom of movement'. Following the declaration of independence by the government of Kosovo in February 2008, there were also signs of heightened tension in other stalled conflicts over autonomy in the region, including in Transdniestra (Moldova) and Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan).

