

# PERSECUTION OF MINORITIES IN ALGERIA

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**Abstract:** The largest country in Africa has nearly a uniform population. Arab Sunni Muslims comprise fully 99% of the 41 million strong-populace. Why, then, does its government grapple with fears of separatist movements from its own Sunni population? Further, why does it use suppression and persecution to hold down its meager minority populations that includes ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic denizens whose combined numbers total just 1% and who pose no serious threat to the powerful and often highly corrupt government and military force? The answer may lie in the rise of fundamentalist Islam, a movement that strives to make theocracy and Sharia law replace the current democratic government system. This balance of pleasing and thus containing the fundamentalist movement, which has consumed much of the Middle East and North Africa, has made its mark felt in Algeria, and could threaten to destabilize one of the continent's most powerful.

**Keywords:** Algeria, Muslim-World, Minorities, persecution.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### *Summary Statement:*

A cursory look at the ethnic and religious makeup of Algeria might lead one to believe that this nation, with a population of 42 million comprised of over 99% Arab and 99% Sunni Muslim citizens, would have few occurrences of religious or ethnic persecution. However, that is not the case. Despite their overwhelming majority, government leaders, all of whom are Arab Sunni Muslims, act fearful of uprisings and struggle to co-exist with any group or anyone they perceive may have potential to upend the ironclad rule of the majority.

Increasingly in the past two years, the Algerian government has been castigated in multiple reports by international rights groups for systemic discrimination against its religious, linguistic, and ethnic minorities. Government persecution of minorities is evidenced by visible acts of religious intolerance and maltreatment, which manifest most frequently in police action targeting the *Ahmadi* community often resulting in arrests and imprisonment. This state-imposed oppression bodes poorly for other minorities in the country who have suffered subjugation in the past not only from governmental actors, but also from religious authorities, tribal leaders, amongst the general population.

Though government persecution was mild and even seemed to be transforming into tolerance and acceptance of minorities for a decade starting in 2005, a new era of concern has arisen as arrests and oppression of minorities has again risen to troubling levels, indicating a new and expanding pattern of oppression.

This report will examine the various events, patterns, and threads of oppression that are woven throughout the government, religious leadership, and indeed, the general population. The experience of each minority group, including the afore-mentioned *Ahmadis*, will be examined to ascertain the current level of risk and abuse they endure. We will also examine the history of each group's experience, and opine on potential future risks to each community.

**Country Profile and Overview:**

Situated on the northern seacoast of the African continent between the countries of Morocco on the West, and Tunisia and Libya on the East, Algeria is considered a gateway between Africa and Europe. With a 1600-kilometer long coastline, opportunities abound for European trade, for intercontinental travel, and—as native Algerians poignantly experienced in the past—for colonization. After three centuries under Ottoman rule, France seized the land in 1830, inculcating the Algerian people with French language and culture. French colonizers stayed for 115 years until World War II weakened France toward collapse, raising Algerians hopes for independence. By 1945 those hopes fueled pro-independence demonstrations during which thousands of Algerians were killed. Nine years later, the protests matured into serious battles, and the Algerian War of Independence fully erupted. For eight years brutal fighting continued, with approximately one million Algerians losing their lives. (Algerians claim 1.5 million of their own people died; France claims 400,000 Algerians died.) Ultimately, the Algerian people emerged victorious, and in 1962 Algeria became an independent nation for the first time.

**2. THE ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS MAKEUP OF ALGERIA**

We will first identify the various groups that constitute minority populations inside Algeria, and then examine their various experiences, concerns, and future prospects for persecution.

**Language and Ethnicity:**

As in most post-colonial countries, the language of the colonizing power remains prominent in the culture. While Arabic was formally recognized as Algeria's official language when the Algerian constitution was adopted in 1963, French is also officially recognized, commonly spoken, and considered *lingua franca*, a second language used for trade and communication between different linguistic groups. In 2015, after years of campaigning by the indigenous Berber population who represent less than 1/6 the total population, the Berber language (also known as *Tamazight*) was officially recognized as Algeria's third official language.

This up leveling of Berber to an official state language came as a result of long-harbored and expressed complaints from the Berber population who has ancient roots in the country that predate the ruling Arab population. (Technically, nearly all Algerians are Berber in origin, not Arab, yet most Algerians do not identify as such.) The group of Berbers who have maintained their Berber identity number about 6 million amidst a total population of 41 million, or 15%. They live mainly, though not exclusively, in the mountainous region of Algeria known as Kabuli, located east of the capital city of Algiers.

**3. MAP OF ALGERIA**

*Kabyles*, as they are often referred, consider themselves as part of a broader group of native peoples that includes other sects in the country, Moroccan Berbers, with whom they share a border, and the *Tuareg*, a nomadic tribe of Berbers who wander to different locations throughout the Saharan desert in the south of the country.

#### ***Berbers:***

Berbers, also known as Amazighs, which means “the freeborn”, are the indigenous inhabitants of Algeria. Berber culture, however, even within Algeria, is not homogenous. Rather, it is made up of four distinct groups: *Kabyles*, *Shawiya*, *Mozabites*, and *Tuaregs*.

About half of the Berber-speaking population is concentrated in the mountainous areas of Kabylie. It is this educated group from which most contentious Berber issues in modern Algeria arise. Over time, the population has dwindled considerably as large numbers of *Kabyles* moved to cities in Algeria and France seeking a higher level of employment.

The second largest Berber group, the *Shawiya*, live primarily in the rugged mountains in eastern Algeria. A third, smaller Berber community, the *Mozabites*, live in north-central Algeria near the city of Ghardaia in the Sahara Desert. The *Tuareg* nomads of the southern Sahara make up the fourth and final group of Algerian Berbers. The 12,000 Tuareg live primarily near the mountainous plateau region of Ajjer and Ahagga, which is now a World Heritage Site due to its 15,000 ancient rock paintings and engravings as old as 12,000 years.

Geographical dispersion of Berber-speakers has hindered the cohesiveness of the community, but has not destroyed their common identity. Kabyles are the most cosmopolitan, and are more likely to speak French than other groups. Regardless of their lack of outward cohesiveness, native roots still bind Berbers, and their religious beliefs are largely, though not entirely, consistent among the four groups.

This Berber bond was likely strengthened by the so-called “Arabization” of the country at the time of independence, when Berber linguistic and cultural expressions, including Berber music and lectures by Berber professors, were outlawed. When the Berber population protested they were met with violent responses; 30 Berbers were killed by government troops and many more were arrested. Arab leaders feared a separatist movement could emerge among Berbers, and took several steps to prevent any chance of that possibility occurring by arresting and jailing Berber leaders in the decades following independence. They completed the effort by passing the *Arabization Bill* in 1990 legislating that the entire government administration be Arab, and added further constraints by legally mandating an all-Arab educational administration in 2000.

Tuaregs, the wandering Berbers who live in the Sahara desert, fought hard to remain independent and nomadic. Though they were aware of country borders and government, they saw themselves as nomads who belonged to a tribe but not a country. Their independence was contrary to the nationalist ideology that emerged following independence. An effort to constrain the roving lifestyle and independent nature of the Tuareg tribes created havoc for the decades following independence. Yet the Tuareg were no match for the strength and power of the newly formed Algerian government. By the end of the first decade following independence, the Tuareg were largely assimilated into the Algerian system.

## 4. RELIGION

#### ***Sunni Muslims:***

Religion constitutes a further source of diversity and the accompanying persecution experienced by many in the minority. Islam first arrived in Algeria in the latter half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and by the 8<sup>th</sup> century nearly all Berbers had converted from Christianity. Today, fully 99% of the country is Sunni Muslim, including Berbers. Berbers, however, practice a far more relaxed form of Islam, which, together with their Berber language makes them suspect by the vast Arab majority who follow a far more dogmatic and rigid interpretation of Islam that requires precise adherence to Islamic principles and practices. Additionally, the vast majority also believe Arabic should be spoken exclusively because it is the language of the Quran, Islam’s holy book.

The afore-mentioned Ahmadis, along with Christians, Bahai, and Jews, make up the remaining religious groups. Together, they represent less than 1% of the population, and yet the government remains threatened by them. We will consider each group individually.

**Ahmadis:**

Ahmadis are part of a Muslim movement, though they are not recognized as such by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, of which Algeria is a member. Rather, they are seen as heretical. Their movement calls for non-violence and tolerance of all faiths. They follow the Quran, but do not believe Mohammed was the final prophet. Rather, they follow the teachings of Ghulam Ahmad, an Indian Muslim born in Punjab in 1835. Ahmad believed himself to have been chosen by Allah to renew Islam, having found the practice of Islam to have “deteriorated to the point where divinely inspired reforms were needed.”

After years of persecution by orthodox Muslims in India, Ahmadis moved their headquarters to Pakistan in 1947. However, this did not result in any relief, as *Ahmadis* quickly became the most persecuted community in Pakistan based on their “heretical beliefs”. After a law was enacted in Pakistan in 1974 deeming *Ahmadis* “non-Muslims”, and preventing them from propagating their faith, they again moved their headquarters, this time to the non-Muslim United Kingdom.

Since 1974, *Ahmadis* proselytized their way across Europe, Africa, America, and some parts of Asia. Today they number about 10 million, spread across 190 nations.

They arrived *en force* in Algeria via an *Ahmadi* satellite television station channel in 2007, and began accruing converts. For a decade Ahmadis worshipped as they wished in Algeria, and their practice flew largely under the radar of government forces and the general public, until a finally a government crackdown began in 2016.

*Ahmadi* persecution in Algeria is representative of the norm in Muslim-dominant nations across Africa and Asia.

**Christians:**

Before the arrival of Islam, Christians were a 99% majority in the region now known as Algeria. Today Christians in Algeria number fewer than 70,000. Their tiny percentage of the population, less than one-tenth of a percent, opens them up to routine pressure from their Muslim neighbors who are intolerant of their faith. Though technically protected by Algerian law to practice their faith, it remains illegal to convert to Christianity. It is also difficult to impossible to repair or build Christian churches. One source of discord is the fact that many Christian churches were built by the French, whose legacy is considered in a very negative light in Algeria. The process of restoring and maintaining places of worship built by a former oppressor is highly unpopular. Most Christians in Algeria today, if not all, are not descendants of early, 8<sup>th</sup> century Christians, but are rather children and grandchildren of French colonizers. In a country that harbors intense hatred and animosity for their former overlords who were responsible for the death of millions of Algerians, it is difficult for most to tolerate the reminders of the past in the form of their French, Christian neighbors.

There is no question that the greatest incidence of persecution among Algerian Christians falls on Muslims who convert to Christianity, an act considered a crime and an affront to Islam. This act of conversion, known as apostasy, has occurred most often in the Kabylie region, which as we have seen is an area already under persecution for ethnic reasons.

Despite legal punishment, persecution, and ostracization of Muslim converts to Christianity, recent years have seen a growing number of conversions across North Africa. A 2015 study by the United Nations estimated that 380,000 Muslims had converted to Christianity in the past decade.

**Jews:**

After decades of social and political discrimination, persecution, and the conversion of Jewish synagogues into mosques, there was complete silence about Jews who remained in Algeria. There was little evidence at all indicating any Jews still lived in Algeria, despite centuries of inhabitation and a long and thriving cultural presence.

However, beginning in 2005, the Algerian government tried to reduce discrimination against what turned out to be a hidden Jewish population of about 1000. The government established a Jewish association, and passed a law to recognize freedom of religion. They also allowed a re-launching of Jewish pilgrimages to the most holy Jewish sites in North Africa. In 2014, Mohammed Eissa, the Minister of Religious Affairs, announced that the Algerian government would foster the reopening of Jewish synagogues. This did not transpire, however, with so few Jews left to attend. Today, the U.S State Department claims there are 2000 Jews living in Algeria, mostly in Algiers. Other estimates put the number closer to 50.

The remaining Jews, whatever their number, are likely to be happily hidden amongst the Muslim populations. Accounts of collusion between Jews of Algeria and Israeli Jews against Muslim nations are based on pure conjecture and rumors, and create havoc for Jews who remain.

#### ***Bahai:***

Unlike Jews and Christians whose history in Algeria dates back centuries, the Bahai faith only as recently as the 1950's. The religion was entirely banned in 1968; still, about 3800 Bahai followers remain in Algeria today. Like the Jewish population, Bahai are nearly invisible as a distinct religion. Like Algeria's other minority religions, Bahai followers keep a very low profile and are often circumspect about their beliefs, living and worshipping within in extremely small and tight knit communities.

### **5. AN ERA OF PERSECUTION RESURGES**

Following an unprecedented decade of tolerance for minorities in Algeria that began in 2005, the tide shifted back to suppression not long after the Arab Spring shook the foundation of North Africa in country after country, enveloping Algeria in the process.

Signs of trouble in North Africa began to surround Algeria on all sides in in 2011, when protests erupted in neighboring Morocco. This gave rise to Moroccan Berbers demanding recognition of their language and culture. Just months later, they were victorious. A new constitution, drafted in 2011, proclaimed Morocco's ethnic diversity and added Berber as an official language of Morocco, alongside Arabic.

On the Eastern flank of Algeria, Berbers in Libya had been battling President Qaddafi for decades as he had tried to destroy them and their culture from the landscape for decades. With the strength and momentum of the Arab Spring all around them, Libyan Berbers were the first to rise up against Qaddafi, forming militias that eventually helped oust him, and win the civil war in that country.

In another neighboring country, Tunisia, Berbers also began agitating for cultural recognition of their language. Tiny numbers prevented them from any notable victories, however.

This movement for Berber recognition and dignity across much of North Africa awoke the fear and response among fundamentalist Muslims, who saw a challenge, however miniscule, to their overwhelming presence in Algeria. Despite the victory of the Berber language being added to the official national roster, the backlash was palpable and violent.

The first well-documented occurrence of violence erupted after a long period of tension simmered between Algerian Arabs and one of the Berber communities, the Mozabites, after a Mozabite cemetery was desecrated. In a struggle over land, jobs, and houses, the two groups, who share neither ethnic, linguistic, or religious backgrounds and beliefs, erupted in physical violence, and over 22 people were killed in the fighting and hundreds more were injured. While not a sign of government persecution, the eruption seemed to open up tensions throughout the country. In 2013, Algerian security forces arrested three young people who were eating in public during the holy month of Ramadan, a time when devout Muslims fast from dawn to dusk. The youth were Berbers from the Kabylie region who do not adhere to the stricter rules of Islam. In response to their arrest, 300 Kabylie Berbers staged an open lunch to "denounce the inquisition and persecution of citizens who, because of their beliefs, refuse to observe the fast."

While many occurrences of arrests, harassment, and persecution against the Berber minority continue to this day, including the August, 2018, conviction and jail sentence of a Berber human rights activist for denouncing "Islam-Arab violence" his Berber community, more severe and targeted persecution, particularly by Islamist extremists, has centered on the tiny Ahmadiyya community.

As described earlier in this report, Ahmadis are Muslims who believe strongly in the separation of church and state. They are growing in ranks as a reaction to Islamic fundamentalism, and many say they were having a crisis of faith as they witnessed the expansion of fundamentalist Islam, which many blame on the radical Wahabists in Saudi Arabia. Ahmadis believe in tolerance and acceptance of all religions, and practice non-violence. They further believe Mohammad was not the last prophet, but rather Ghulam Ahmad, an Indian Muslim who preached peace and coexistence was. Since 2016, when the persecution became visible, more than 10% of the roughly 2000 Ahmadis in Algeria have been arrested and jailed as of August, 2017. Senior government officials have at times claimed that Ahmadis represent a threat to the majority Sunni Muslim faith, and accused them of collusion with foreign powers.



According to Mohamed Fali, president of the Algeria's Ahmadiyya community, authorities have arrested and tried Ahmadis under one or more of the following charges: denigrating the dogma or precepts of Islam; participation in an unauthorized association; collecting donations without a license; and possession and distribution of documents from foreign sources that endanger national security. At least 20 have faced a charge of practicing religion in an unauthorized place of worship under Algeria's 2006 law governing non-Muslim religions, Fali told Human Rights Watch, even though Ahmadis consider themselves Muslim.

In an escalation, Mohamed Fali himself was arrested in August of 2017 on the basis of an *in absentia* judgment 6 months earlier that had sentenced him to 3 months in prison.

According to Human Rights Watch, who have interviewed scores of persecuted Ahmadis:

*Authorities have also denied Ahmadis the right to form an association, using broad language in the Associations Law that they had previously used to restrict the rights of other Algerian groups to form associations. They demolished a building in Larbaa, in the province of Blida, that Ahmadis were intending to use as a place of worship and as the headquarters for their association, on the pretext that it was an "unauthorized place of worship." Several Ahmadis told Human Rights Watch that authorities confiscate religious books, documents about the Ahmadiyya faith, computers, identity cards, and passports during searches. One Ahmadi said that they confiscated his university diplomas and never returned them.*

## 6. CHRISTIANS AND JEWS IN ALGERIA

Along with Islam, Christians and Jews share Abrahamic roots. Abraham fathered Isaac and Ishmael, who went on to start the two branches that grew into Judaism, (which branched into Christianity) and Islam. The monotheistic worldview unites the three faiths, and that reality has sheltered Jews and Christians *in varying degrees* from Islamic abuse for centuries. Additionally, Jews and Christians are considered 'People of the Book', which means they live according to holy teachings secured in sacred texts that were divinely inspired.

History shows this is not an ironclad protection, and certainly Christians and Jews continue to be suppressed by Muslim majority rulers, increasingly so in these times of Muslim fundamentalism.

### *Algerian Christians:*

Christians, the pressure comes largely from fundamentalist Muslims in the community who are intolerant of having Christians live among them. However, Christians in Algeria suffer from various restrictions and challenges imposed by both the state and society. Laws regulate all non-Muslim worship; they ban conversion to Christianity, and they prohibit so-called *blasphemy*, (any form of criticizing Islam, Mohammed, or a number of other Islamic *hadiths* (rulings), all of which makes proselytizing and public expression of the Christian faith dangerous. In fact, something as mild as a casual conversation between friends and family members regarding faith can be grounds for blasphemy charges.

The penalties for all these restrictions can be draconian. For example, in July of 2016, a Christian Algerian man named Sliming Bouhafs was arrested for "insulting Islam". He was sentenced to prison, where he remains today. Not only is the penalty severe, but he must also endure extreme harassment from fellow prisoners.

Other examples of Christian persecution include being forced to bury relatives according to Islamic religious rites, as opposed to Christian burial rites, which can be deeply disturbing to religious family members at a time of sorrow.

Further, in the last few years, several Christian churches have been ordered to cease all religious activities if their followers include members with Muslim backgrounds.

Christians in all parts of the country also suffer harassment and discrimination at the hands of family and neighbors who pressure or force them to adhere to Islamic norms and rites surrounding marriage, burial and other life events.

### *Algerian Jews:*

The conflation of Zionism, a modern political movement that thrives in Israel, with ancient religious Judaism, is the greatest problem facing Algerian Jews today. Accusations of spying and aligning with the enemy, Israel, are the primary issue that elicits Jewish persecution in modern day Algeria.

When, in 2015, Algeria's Minister of Religious Affairs suggested reopening 25 synagogues, which had been closed in the late 1990's, Muslim protests won the day. It seemed a moot point, however, as nearly all Jews in Algeria hide their Jewish identity. One Algerian journalist opined:

*Today, Jews are like ghosts in Algeria; we hear about them living among us, but we never see them. Some say Jews still live in Algeria under strict surveillance, but most Algerians are confused: is there still a Jewish-Algerian community? And if so, is it safe to speak about it? Many suspect that the community exists, but fear that this is a matter of state security about which they should not comment.*

The Arab-Israeli conflict has undermined hopes for any resurgence of a healthy Jewish community in Algeria. Unless and until that decades long conflict is resolved, it is likely that Jews in Algeria, as in many if not most Arab countries, will cease to live and worship openly.

## 7. SUMMARY

In recent years, a rising tide of concern regarding Algeria's treatments of its minority populations by Western countries, including the United States, the UK, France, and others, has highlighted a growing concern for minorities of all kinds: cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic. A preponderance of negative reporting by the world press, by human rights NGO's, by churches, and other religious groups has highlighted the very real and growing concern that freedom and life itself is tenuous for tens of thousands of individuals who call Algeria home.

Looking to the future, concern must continue. A recent summary report produced by Human Rights Watch states:

*Despite constitutional amendments passed in 2016, Algerian authorities continued to resort to criminal prosecutions for peaceful speech, using articles in the penal code criminalizing "offending the president," "insulting state officials," and "denigrating Islam. An indefinite blanket ban on demonstrations in Algiers, the capital, imposed in 2001, is enforced with few exceptions. Perpetrators of torture, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial executions during the internal strife of the 1990s enjoy impunity. The Algerian government blocks the registration of many Algerian nongovernmental organizations working on women's, ethnic, and human rights, and has maintained its non-cooperation with several UN human rights experts and mechanisms.*

The current direction of Algeria's government must be closely observed, and the treatment of its minorities must be monitored to ensure their freedom and safety. The trajectory of Algeria's religious dominance shows an adherence to the principles of fundamentalist Islam, and a rejection of separation of church and state. As long this government operates guided by this principle, care must be taken to protect those individuals and communities who the government perceives to be a risk and a threat to its power.

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