

# Network for Inter faith Concerns

## Christian-Muslim News Digest Issue 2 2008

### In Lebanon

In the past, Lebanon's civil war, from 1975 to the early 1990s, was divided along Christian-Muslim lines. However, tension in recent years, and the last 19 months in particular, has been largely political and divided between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, with groups such as Lebanese Christians on the margins. From November 2007 to May 2008 Lebanon was without a president, an absence that only exacerbated these already present political tensions. According to [Lebanese law](#), the president is required to be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, the deputy prime minister an Orthodox Christian, and the speaker of Parliament a Shi'a Muslim. Sunnis and Shi'a's have struggled to select a president who will represent their respective concerns, but have since compromised, and they settled on former general Michel Suleiman in May 2008.

Lebanese Christians have not gone unnoticed in this political debate. Yet instead of playing a major role in the conflict, many of them have "[marginalized](#)" themselves leaving tensions split largely between Sunni and Shi'a camps. The [divided groups consist of](#) pro-government forces on the one side, including Sunni Muslims backed by the West. On the other side, Hizbollah, backed by Iran, are supported by Shi'as and pro-Syrians. Lebanese Christians (along with the country's Druze community) find themselves on both sides of the conflict. It is in this sense that the Christian community has marginalized itself – while they have managed to remain distant from violence, without any strong sense of unity, they are left without a consolidated voice in politics. As a result, various Christians maintain allegiance to one particular side or the other. While this indicates that Christian-Muslim religious allegiances have been made secondary in order to accommodate political views, it may jeopardize the once powerful position Christians held in the country. Other Christians have simply left Lebanon. As has been the case in other Middle Eastern countries, this sort of emigration can make Christian-Muslim relations, at times already tenuous, strained for those Christians who choose to remain.

Nevertheless, Lebanon's new president, along with Muslim and Christian religious leaders, hopes to regain a sense of unity by organizing [a Muslim-Christian summit](#) to take place at the presidential palace. Participants also hope to promote dialogue as a part of much-needed reconciliation.

## **In Pakistan**

In a number of countries, there has been religious tension between Muslims and Christians. In Pakistan, a [Christian doctor was jailed](#) after being accused of blasphemy against Muhammad and the Qur'an. His wife and six children remained in hiding after their home was attacked by an angry mob. Similarly, a [Christian man disappeared after being kidnapped by his Muslim colleagues](#). According to sources, which rely completely on the Christian's relatives, the victim complained that Muslims were mocking his Christian faith. After remaining silent for several days, he finally requested that they refrain from religious discussion at work. As a result, his colleagues were disgruntled by his request and subsequently kidnapped him. He has been missing since May 15, 2008.

The violence, however, does not stem from Muslims alone. Christian family members suffered the loss of their mother when her son killed her for allowing her [daughter to convert to Islam and marry a Muslim man](#).

While many Muslims feel the victims of religious blasphemy, Christians also feel that they themselves have been [victimized by the blasphemy law](#). Thus, a cycle ensues. Christians, sensing the strain of what to them is an unfair law, oppose the law; Muslims react to this sensitivity with their own opposition. From the Muslims' perspective, their religion is blasphemed and so they seek to resist the defamation; Christians, in turn, react to this resistance and increased pressure. This cycle continues uninterrupted and only contributes to already existing tensions between Pakistan's minority population of Christians and its majority of Muslims.

## **In Nigeria**

Inter-religious violence also continues to erupt in Nigeria. [In the country's northern city of Kano](#), hundreds of Muslim rioters burned vehicles and attacked Christians and their shops. The mob was responding to the actions of one Christian who allegedly painted an inscription blaspheming the prophet Muhammad. Police guarded the individual in their station, but not before he was attacked. Other Christians found refuge in nearby churches and police barracks.

In spite of such inter-religious violence, Christian and Muslim religious leaders [met recently in Maiduguri](#) in northern Nigeria in order to discuss ways in which relationships between adherents of the two faiths might be mended. Likewise, Christians and Muslims held an [inter-faith](#)

[dialogue and mediation workshop](#) for women of faith-based development organizations. The women met for three days to consider how they might work together to bring peace and security to the country.

### **In Qatar**

This Gulf state recently opened [one of the region's first centres for interfaith dialogue](#). The centre is intended as a place of interaction between Muslims, Christians, and Jews, and to mark the occasion of its opening, Muslim scholars met with a number of Jewish rabbis and Christian priests.

The opening of the interfaith centre came as yet another effort by Muslims in Qatar to "promote joint studies of academics from three faiths to foster understanding and peace." Such efforts have been largely encouraged by Sheik Hamad bin Jassem bin Jabr al Thani. Earlier, he granted permission for five Christian denominations to open churches in Qatar. On March 14, 2008, [Our Lady of the Rosary Catholic church became the first to open its doors](#). Though such changes have not come without controversy, they are a result of a re-examination of laws governing non-Muslims as a consequence of waves of non-Arab immigrants who come to the Gulf region for employment.

### **In Saudi Arabia**

In June, [Muslim scholars met in Mecca](#) to discuss intra-faith issues between Sunnis and Shi'as hoping to ease tension between the two branches of Islam. The [event was also meant to set the stage](#) for a future interfaith conference between Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Saudi Arabia's king, Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud, wanted to ". . . reach a consensus within Islam. . ." first, and then move toward ". . . a trilateral meeting later on with Christians and Jews."

This trilateral meeting is now set to take place [in July in Madrid, Spain](#).