

DISCRIMINATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST – FOUR CASE STUDIES

LEBANON

People of Palestinian Arab origin are only able to practice most professions or own businesses inside the twelve official camps in which they are forced to live, but not outside of them. (This in many ways mirrors how South African blacks were permitted to practice any profession they chose inside the “independent homeland” to which they were assigned but were limited to low-paying, menial jobs in the rest of South Africa).

In Lebanon until very recently, dozens of professions and trades were restricted to Lebanese nationals. Thus, Palestinians could not legally work as accountants, secretaries, salespersons, pharmacists, electricians, guards, drivers, cooks or hairdressers and were also barred from owning a business involved in trading, currency exchange, gold, printing, publishing, car repair, engineering or health services. In all, the law prohibited Palestinians from working in 72 professions.

PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

Palestinian land laws are equally racist in nature and far more draconian in their consequences than those of apartheid South Africa. In the Palestinian territories, a 1997 Palestinian Authority law authorizes the execution of Palestinians who sell land to Jews. A number of summary executions in this regard have indeed taken place. Under Palestinian law, it is a capital offence for an Arab to sell land to a Jew, not just in the West Bank and Gaza, but in all the territory of the pre-partition Palestine Mandate, meaning all of Israel.

SYRIA

The primary victims of ethnic discrimination in Syria are members of the Kurdish minority, who face severe restrictions on cultural and linguistic expression. Numbering about 200,000, Syrian Kurds are deprived of citizenship and unable to obtain passports, identity cards, or birth certificates. This in turn prevents them from owning land, obtaining government employment, and voting. Syrian law also requires that owners and top editors of publications be Arabs. The few remaining Jews in Syria “are generally barred from government employment and do not have military service obligations. They are the only minority whose passports and identity cards note their religion”.

YEMEN

Yemen’s Constitution provides for equal rights and equal opportunity for all citizens, in practice discrimination based on race, religion, sex, and disability still exists. All non-Muslims are banned from running for Parliament in Yemen. This policy dates back to 2001, after the ruling party tried to run a Jewish candidate. There also remain traditional restrictions on Jews with regard to places of residence and choice of employment.