

Western Foreign Policy and the Persecuted Minority

In *An Introduction to Islamic Law*, Professor Wael B. Hallaq traces the historical relationship between the rise of Western colonialism and the dismantling of the *Shari'a* as a societal system in the Muslim world. One of the strategies employed by Western powers to justify political and economic interference in the Ottoman Caliphate/Uthmani Khilafah was the utilisation of the status of religious minorities, under the guise of promoting equality and a “civilizing” mission.

Western powers, particularly France, Britain, and Austria, pressured the Ottoman government to grant non-Muslim minorities formal legal rights that were defined according to Western conceptions of governance. They claimed these groups required protection and a status equal to that of Muslim subjects. These claims were made with Western powers portraying themselves as “advocates of causes” that were humanitarian. They claimed the Ottoman legal system (*shari'a*) was “lacking” in terms of modern “order”, “regularity”, and “law”. Consequently, they framed their intervention as a necessary effort to bring the Ottoman *khilafah* in line with “European culture, science, and capital”.

Thus, the Western powers championed “distributive freedoms” for Christians and Jews within the Ottoman *khilafah*. The Ottoman government was pressured into enacting major reforms, such as the ‘Gülhane Decree’ of 1839 and the ‘Humayun Decree’ of 1856. These decrees granted formal equality to all subjects regardless of their religion, a move that was largely a European imposition rather than a result of internal Ottoman policy. The reforms had little to do with an actual interest in democracy, and were instead a strategy to cultivate a segment of the population that would serve as “middlemen” for European economic and political interests. Furthermore, the decrees, ‘Gülhane’ in particular, opened the Ottoman markets to European exploitation, effectively turning the Ottoman empire into a provider of raw materials for Western industry.

Professor Wael B. Hallaq states on Page 99 of his book, “With the conclusion of the Crimean Wars of 1853–56, the Ottomans incurred further debts to France and Britain, both politically (for their military support against the Russians) and financially (for the major loans the British made to Istanbul). These debts translated into further, intense hegemonic pressures on Istanbul, resulting in another series of concessions embodied in the Humayun Decree of 1856. Unlike its 1839 predecessor, which was compiled by Ottoman senior statesmen, the 1856 Decree was drafted after intensive consultation with the French, British and Austrian ambassadors. It moved further away from the Islamic principles of governance, not mentioning the Quran or the *Shari'a* once, for instance. It emphasized European-style representative government and furthermore gave non-Muslim minorities formal rights (again, defined by Western conceptions of governance) equal to those enjoyed by the Muslim subjects of the Empire.”

This was not the first time in history that a Western power or ruler justified its foreign policy by expressing concern for religious minorities. We see the same strategy in Pope Urban II's call for the First Crusade. One of the reasons he cited was

the persecution that Eastern Christians allegedly faced under Islamic rule. If we study history, we see this strategy employed time and time again by Western powers. So much so that in the modern age, it has become a staple of American foreign policy.

In *Martyrs and Migrants*, Professor Candace Lukasik presents a detailed study on how the “persecuted minority” trope is used in American foreign policy to justify imperial expansion and to frame a post-Cold War “civilisational battle between Christianity and Islam”. The trope facilitated a shift in US national security and missionary focus from communism to Islam. While evangelical narratives previously centred on Christians under Soviet rule, the end of the Cold War allowed for a remapping, with the focus now on a “10/40 window,” (a reference to the geographical area between 10 degrees and 40 degrees north of the equator, which encompasses the Middle East and much of Asia), where Islam was depicted as a social system “enslaving” billions. This “New World Order” positioned the United States as a redemptive force tasked with “saving” others from tyranny, particularly under radical Islam.

The trope was formally institutionalised through the US ‘International Religious Freedom Act’ (IRFA) of 1998. This act created the Office of International Religious Freedom within the State Department and was championed by a coalition of Middle Eastern Christian activists, conservative politicians, and fellows from think tanks like the Hudson Institute and Freedom House. The act allowed the US to use religious freedom as a metric for censuring other nations, although it provided waivers for strategic allies like Saudi Arabia and ‘Israel’.

This use of the “persecuted minority” trope, however, is not applied only to religious minorities. In his book, *Islam in Liberalism*, Professor Joseph Massad shows how Western liberalism employs a “rescue mission” for LGBTQ individuals in the Muslim world that is like the tropes used for religious minorities (and women, as we see in the case of Afghanistan). This rescue trope has been institutionalised in US government policy. For instance, the 2011 announcement by the Obama administration linked US foreign aid to a country’s adherence to Western visions of “sexual rights” and the protection of specific sexual identities. Sexual rights are used as a pretext for interference in the Global South.

All these cases demonstrate a deliberate strategy in which an appeal to the protection of minority groups is accompanied by broader geopolitical and economic objectives. If anything, it exposes the hypocritical nature of international politics, by showing that claims of “rescue” and “liberation” for the West only serve strategic interests.

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