

LEBANON 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states there shall be “absolute freedom of conscience” and guarantees the free exercise of religious rites for all religious groups provided they do not disturb the public order. The constitution also states there shall be a “just and equitable balance” in the apportionment of cabinet and high-level civil service positions among the major religious groups, a situation reaffirmed by the Taef Agreement, which ended the country’s civil war and mandated equal representation between Christians and Muslims in parliament. Parliament approved a new proportional electoral law in June. The government continued to enforce laws against defamation and contempt for religion, but there were no cases of imprisonment under the laws. In November police arrested Ahmad Sbeity, a poet in the southern part of the country, for a Facebook post that reportedly insulted the Virgin Mary. His case was continuing at year’s end. For the second year in a row, there was no judicial action on the 2015 lawsuit filed by Member of Parliament Ziad Aswad of the Free Patriotic Movement against “You Stink” activist Assad Thebian for “defamation and contempt of religion” for comments he had made about Christianity. Some members of unregistered religious groups, such as Bahais and nonrecognized Protestant faiths, continued to list themselves as belonging to recognized religious groups in government records in order to ensure their marriage and other personal status documents remained legally valid. At least 30 cases of civil marriage remained pending following the government’s continuation of the halt on their registration.

Muslim and Christian community leaders reported the continued operation of places of worship in relative peace and security and said relationships among individual members of different religious groups continued to be amicable. Following a July 1 interfaith conference, Christian and Muslim leaders called for establishing the country as an official international center of dialogue among religions “to serve the...Christian-Muslim relations of the world.” The Shia organization Hizballah, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, continued to exercise authority over parts of the country, limiting access to the areas under its control. The Jewish Community Council again reported acts of vandalism at the Jewish cemetery in Beirut.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officers engaged government officials to encourage tolerance and mutual respect among religious communities, and to highlight the importance of combating violent religious extremism. The

Ambassador and other embassy officers met with religious leaders and members of civil society to engage in dialogue on religious tolerance and the role of confessional dynamics in the country's society and politics. Embassy public outreach and assistance programs continued to emphasize tolerance for all religious groups. These included projects to counter violent extremism related to religion, interfaith summer exchange programs, and a social media campaign to counter extremist religious messaging.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 6.2 million (July 2017 estimate). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other organizations estimate the total population includes approximately 4.5 million citizens and an estimated 1.5 million refugees fleeing the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, as well as a Palestinian refugee population present in the country for nearly 70 years. Statistics Lebanon, an independent firm, estimates 57.7 percent of the citizen population is Muslim (28.7 percent Sunni, 28.4 percent Shia, and smaller percentages of Alawites and Ismailis).

Statistics Lebanon estimates that 36.2 percent of the population is Christian. Maronite Catholics are the largest Christian group, followed by Greek Orthodox. Other Christian groups include Greek Catholics (Melkites), Armenian Orthodox (Gregorians), Armenian Catholics, Syriac Orthodox (Jacobites), Syriac Catholics, Assyrians (Nestorians), Chaldeans, Copts, Protestants (including Presbyterians, Baptists, and Seventh-day Adventists), Latins (Roman Catholics), and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

According to Statistics Lebanon, 5.2 percent of the population is Druze and is concentrated in the rural, mountainous areas east and south of Beirut. There are also small numbers of Jews, Bahais, Buddhists, and Hindus.

The government estimates there are approximately 1.5 million refugees from Syria, who are largely Sunni, but include Shia and Christians as well. There are between 250,000 and 300,000 Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank still living in the country as UN-registered refugees, and they are largely Sunni. A census of Palestinians, conducted jointly by the Lebanese and Palestinian statistics authorities, under the auspices of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee, counted 174,535 Palestinian refugees in the country.

The Jewish Community Council, which represents the Lebanese Jewish community, estimates that approximately 100 Jews remain in the country.

Refugees and foreign migrants also include largely Sunni Kurds; Sunni and Shia Muslims and Chaldeans from Iraq; and Coptic Christians from Egypt and Sudan. According to the secretary-general of the Syriac League, an NGO that advocates for Syriac Christians in the country, approximately 10,000 Iraqi Christians of all denominations and 3,000 to 4,000 Coptic Christians reside in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states there shall be “absolute freedom of conscience” and declares the state will respect all religious groups and denominations, as well as the personal status and religious interests of persons of every religious group. The constitution guarantees free exercise of religious rites provided they do not disturb the public order, and declares the equality of rights and duties for all citizens without discrimination or preference.

By law, an individual is free to convert to a different religion if a local senior official of the religious group the person wishes to join approves the change. The newly joined religious group issues a document confirming the convert's new religion, and allowing the convert to register her or his new religion with the Ministry of Interior’s Personal Status Directorate. The new religion is included thereafter on government-issued civil registration documents, along with mention of the original religion.

Citizens have the right to remove the customary notation of their religion from government-issued civil registration documents or change how it is listed. Changing the documents does not require approval of religious officials (although the religious act of conversion does require such permission).

The penal code stipulates a maximum prison term of one year for anyone convicted of “blaspheming God publicly.” It does not provide a definition of what this entails.

The penal code also criminalizes defamation and contempt for religion, and stipulates a maximum prison term of three years.

By law, religious groups may apply to the government for official recognition. To do so, it must submit a statement of its doctrine and moral principles to the cabinet, which evaluates whether the group's principles are in accord with the government's perception of popular values and the constitution. Alternatively, an unrecognized religious group may apply for recognition by applying to a recognized religious group. In doing so, the unrecognized group does not gain recognition as a separate group, but becomes an affiliate of the group through which it applies. This process has the same requirements as applying for recognition directly with the government.

There are 18 officially recognized religious groups. These include four Muslim groups (Shia, Sunni, Alawites and Ismaili), 12 Christian groups (Maronite, Greek Orthodox, and 10 smaller groups), Druze, and Jews. Groups the government does not recognize include Bahais, Buddhists, Hindus, and several Protestant groups.

Official recognition of a religious group allows baptisms and marriages performed by the group to receive government sanction. Official recognition also conveys other benefits, such as tax-exempt status and the right to apply the religious group's codes to personal status matters. By law, the government permits recognized religious groups to administer their own rules on family and personal status issues including marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Shia, Sunni, recognized Christian, and Druze groups have state-appointed, government-subsidized clerical courts to administer family and personal status law.

Religious groups perform all marriages and divorces; there are no formalized procedures for civil marriage or divorce. The government recognizes civil marriage ceremonies performed outside the country irrespective of the religious affiliation of each partner in the marriage.

Nonrecognized religious groups may own property and may assemble for worship and perform their religious rites freely. They may not perform legally recognized marriage or divorce proceedings and they have no standing to determine inheritance issues. Members of these groups do not qualify for certain government positions, including ministerial, parliamentary, secretary-general, and director general positions.

The government requires Protestant churches to register with the Evangelical Synod, a self-governing advisory group overseeing religious matters for Protestant congregations, and representing those churches to the government.

The law allows censorship of religious publications under a number of conditions, including if the government deems the material incites sectarian discord or threatens national security.

According to the constitution, recognized religious communities may have their own schools, provided they follow the general rules issued for public schools, which stipulate schools must not incite sectarian discord or threaten national security. Approximately 70 percent of students attend private schools, which despite many having ties to confessional groups, are often open to children of other religions as well. The Ministry of Education does not require or encourage religious education in public schools.

The constitution states “sectarian groups” shall be represented in a “just and equitable balance” in the cabinet and high-level civil service positions, which includes the ministry ranks of secretary-general and director general. It also states these posts shall be distributed proportionately among the recognized religious groups. This distribution of positions among religious groups is based on the unwritten 1943 National Pact, which used religious affiliation data from the 1932 census (the last conducted in the country), and also applies to the civil service, the judiciary, military and security institutions, and public agencies at both the national and local levels of government. Parliament is elected on the basis of “equality between Christians and Muslims.” Druze and Alawites are included in this allocation with the Muslim communities.

The constitution also states there is no legitimacy for any authorities that contradict the “pact of communal existence,” thereby giving force of law to the unwritten 1943 National Pact, although that agreement is neither an official component of the constitution nor a formally binding agreement. According to the pact, the president shall be a Maronite Christian, the speaker of parliament shall be a Shia Muslim, and the prime minister shall be a Sunni Muslim.

The Taef Agreement, which ended the country’s 15-year civil war in 1989, also mandates equal Muslim and Christian representation in parliament, but makes changes to the powers of the Maronite Christian presidency, including subjecting the designations of the prime minister and other cabinet ministers to consultations with parliament. In addition, the agreement endorses the constitutional provision of appointing most senior government officials according to religious affiliation, including senior positions within the military and other security forces. The Taef Agreement mandates a cabinet with seats allocated equally between Muslims (to include Druze and Alawites) and Christians. The Taef Agreement’s stipulations on

equality of representation between members of different confessions do not apply to citizens who do not list a religious affiliation on their national registration, and thus may not hold a seat designated for a specific confession.

On June 14, parliament approved a new electoral law replacing the country's winner-take-all system for parliamentary elections with a proportional vote. The law does not affect the Christian-Muslim proportionality of parliament.

By law, the synod of each Christian group elects its patriarchs; the Sunni and Shia electoral bodies elect their respective senior clerics; and the Druze community elects its *sheikh al-aql*. The government council of ministers must endorse the nomination of Sunni and Shia muftis, as well as the Druze *sheikh al-aql*, and pay their salaries. The government also appoints and pays the salaries of Muslim and Druze clerical judges. By law, the government does not endorse Christian patriarchs and does not pay the salaries of Christian clergy and officials of Christian groups.

The government issues religious workers a one-month visa; in order to stay longer, a worker must complete a residency application during the month. Religious workers also must sign a "commitment of responsibility" form before receiving a visa, which subjects the worker to legal prosecution and immediate deportation for any activity involving religious or other criticism directed against the state or any other country, except Israel. If the government finds an individual engaging in religious activity while on a tourist visa, the government may determine a violation of the visa category has occurred and deport the individual.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The government continued to enforce laws against defamation and contempt for religion, but there were no cases of imprisonment under the laws. On November 28, police arrested Ahmad Sbeity, a poet in the southern part of the country, for a Facebook post that reportedly insulted the Virgin Mary. His case was in progress at year's end. For the second year in a row, there was no judicial action on the lawsuit filed in 2015 by Member of Parliament Ziad Aswad of the Free Patriotic Movement against "You Stink" activist Assad Thebian for "defamation and contempt of religion" for comments he made about Christianity.

Some members of unregistered religious groups, such as Bahais and members of nonrecognized Protestant faiths, continued to list themselves as belonging to recognized religious groups in government records in order to ensure their marriage and other personal status documents remained legally valid. For instance, many Bahais said they chose to list themselves as Shia in order to effectively manage civil matters officially administered by Shia institutions.

The government's refusal to approve a request from the Jewish community to change its official name to the Jewish Community Council from the Israeli Communal Council remained in place.

Minority non-Maronite Christian groups continued to state the government made little progress toward the Taef Agreement's goal of eliminating political sectarianism in favor of “expertise and competence.” Members of these groups, which include Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, and Chaldeans, among others, stated their lack of representation in the cabinet, and the fact the government allotted them only one of the 64 Christian seats in parliament, constituted government discrimination. The Syriac League continued to call for more representation for minority Christians in parliament and high-level civil service positions.

Some Maronite Christian politicians, including members of the Free Patriotic Movement party, said Maronites remained marginalized despite filling their quota of designated government seats. They called for a new electoral law with the aim of having predominantly Christian areas voting for Christian-allotted seats. Parliament addressed these concerns with the passage of the new electoral law in June.

During the year, there was no movement on the 30 or more cases of civil marriage that awaited registration with the Ministry of Interior since 2013. The cases remained unresolved, with no evidence of forthcoming action.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

The Shia organization Hizballah, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, continued to exercise authority over territory, particularly the southern suburbs of Beirut and southern areas of the country, both of which are predominantly Shia, where it provided a number of basic services, such as health care, education, food aid, infrastructure repair, and internal security. There continued to be reports of Hizballah controlling access to the neighborhoods and localities under its control.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Leaders of Sunni, Shia, and Christian groups continued to condemn extremism and violence perpetrated in the name of religion following terrorist attacks by both ISIS and Jabhat Fath al-Sham (JFS, formerly al-Nusra Front) in countries in the region. For example, Sheikh Abdul Latif Derian, the country's Sunni grand mufti, publicly condemned April 9 bomb attacks against two Coptic Orthodox Christian churches in Egypt. In his condemnation, the grand mufti offered his condolences to the pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt and said the attacks were an attempt to "ignite confessional strife between Muslims and Christians."

Religious leaders stated that relationships among individual members of different religious groups remained amicable. At a July 1 conference at Notre Dame University Louaize in Zouk Mosbeh, Christian and Muslim leaders, along with government representatives, agreed the country should be held up as an example of peaceful coexistence, noting, "The deepening of democracy in Lebanon sends a message of hope to the Arabs, and to the world." The participants, headed by Maronite Patriarch Cardinal Mar Bechara Boutros Rai, issued a joint statement calling for establishing the country as an official international center of dialogue among religions, cultures, and civilizations "to serve the Arab world and Christian-Muslim relations of the world." President Michel Aoun later reiterated this statement in his September 21 remarks to the UN General Assembly.

Christian and Muslim religious leaders from the major denominations continued to participate in interfaith dialogues throughout the year and to call for unity against extremism. On November 14, Patriarch Rai became the first Lebanese Christian Patriarch to visit Saudi Arabia where, according to an official Saudi press statement, the patriarch and King Salman "stressed the importance of the role of various religions and cultures in promoting tolerance, and renouncing violent extremism and terrorism." In his July 25 Eid al-Fitr remarks, the Sunni grand mufti urged all citizens of the country to focus on "boosting national unity, the national state, and coexistence."

While the country's small remaining Jewish community stated it generally enjoyed a respectful relationship with the greater population, the Jewish Community Council reported continued acts of vandalism at the Jewish cemetery in Beirut during the year. The council's 2011 lawsuit against individuals who constructed buildings in the Jewish cemetery in Tripoli was continuing, pending additional court-ordered analysis of the site, and had not been resolved by year's end.

Additionally, the Jewish community faced difficulty importing material for religious rites, such as wine and Torahs, as customs agents were reportedly wary of allowing imports containing the Hebrew script.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to engage government officials on the need to encourage tolerance, dialogue, and mutual respect among religious groups.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers met with individual politicians representing different religious groups to discuss the views of their constituents and to promote religious tolerance. The Ambassador met with the leadership of the Sunni, Shia, Druze, and many Christian communities to promote interfaith dialogue and to urge them to take steps to counter violent extremism. Embassy officers met with civil society representatives to convey similar messages. The Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to work with local religious and community leaders to support their efforts to reduce sectarian tensions spilling over from the violence in Syria.

Other embassy outreach and assistance programs continued to emphasize tolerance for all religious faiths. The embassy supported an interreligious academy, which trained youth on tolerance, religious freedom, and counteracting religious extremism. The embassy continued to support the *Alwan* project, which aimed to build students' knowledge and understanding of religious diversity and improve their critical thinking skills through activities on religious pluralism. The embassy again selected five students to participate in an annual summer exchange program in the United States focused on religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue. The embassy also sponsored a workshop and other programs on countering violent extremism related to religion for local government officials and civil society actors. The embassy funded a project that disseminated moderate messages of peace and tolerance through social media, mainly on Facebook, to counter extremist online messaging. The project included the formation of an advisory board of Sunni and Shia religious leaders along with academics to design the framework of the tolerance messages.