

LEBANON 2015 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 the public order is not disturbed. The constitution 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 the parliament. Some minority Christian groups complained they were not granted proportionate representation in the cabinet, high level civil service positions, or the parliament. In October Da’esh (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) killed seven Sunni religious figures in Arsal for cooperating with the government, and in November claimed responsibility for two suicide bombings in Beirut, targeted at “heretics.” The bombings killed 43 and injured more than 200 people. The Shia militia Hizballah continued to exercise authority over large parts of the country, limiting access to the area under its control and harassing Sunnis they perceived to be a threat.

In June a special Islamic summit in Beirut publicly condemned violent and discriminatory practices by extremists and the use of coercion in religious matters, while reiterating the principle of pluralism in Muslim-Christian relations and intra-Muslim relations. Religious leaders of Muslim and Christian communities reported places of worship continued to operate in relative peace and security, and that relationships among individual members of different religious groups generally remained amicable.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officers met regularly with government officials to discuss the importance of ending sectarian violence and encouraging tolerance and mutual respect among religious communities. Embassy officers encouraged religious leaders and members of civil society to engage in dialogue and to take steps to counter violent extremism. Embassy public outreach programs emphasized tolerance for all religious faiths, such as an embassy-funded program by the Adyan Foundation which organized discussions and events about religious tolerance for students in 36 public and private high schools.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 6.2 million (July 2015 estimate). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other organizations estimate the total population includes approximately 4.5 million citizens and approximately 1.4 million refugees fleeing the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, as well as a Palestinian refugee population present in Lebanon for nearly fifty years. Although the government has not conducted an official census since 1932, Statistics Lebanon, an independent firm, estimates 56.3 percent of the citizen population is Muslim, 28 percent Sunni and 20.6 percent Shia (“Twelvers”) plus smaller percentages of Alawites and Ismailis (“Sevener” Shia).

Statistics Lebanon estimates 35.5 percent of the population is Christian. The Maronite community, the largest Christian group, maintains its centuries-long affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church but has its own patriarch, liturgy, and ecclesiastical customs. The second-largest Christian group is Greek Orthodox. Other Christian groups include Greek Catholics, Armenian Orthodox (Gregorians), Armenian Catholics, Syriac Orthodox (Jacobites), Syriac Catholics, Assyrians (Nestorians), Chaldeans, Copts, evangelicals (including Baptists and Seventh-day Adventists), Latins (Roman Catholics), and members of The Church of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

According to Statistics Lebanon, 5.2 percent of the population is Druze, who refer to themselves as *al-Muwahhideen*, or “believers in one God,” and are concentrated in the rural, mountainous areas east and south of Beirut. There are small numbers of Jews, Bahais, Buddhists, and Hindus.

There are approximately 1.1 million registered refugees from Syria, of whom approximately 42,000 are Palestinian refugees. Refugees from Syria 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 refugees from previous conflicts in the region. The Palestinian refugee population is largely Sunni.

Refugees and migrants also include largely Sunni Kurds; Sunnis, Shia, and Chaldeans from Iraq; as well as Coptic Christians from Egypt and Sudan. According to the secretary-general of the Syriac League, approximately 10,000 Iraqi Christians 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.” It 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 public order is not disturbed 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 the change is approved by a local senior official of the religious group the person wishes to join. The law does not address the freedom to proselytize.

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.

By law, religious groups may apply to the government for official recognition. A religious group seeking official recognition 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 (Maronites, 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. The government permits recognized religious groups to administer their own family and personal status laws in areas such as 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; there are no formalized procedures for civil marriage. The government recognizes civil marriage ceremonies performed outside the country, however, 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, however, and they have no standing to determine inheritance issues. Members of these groups do not qualify for certain government positions.

The law allows censorship of religious publications under a number of conditions, including if the material is deemed by the government to incite sectarian discord or to be a threat to national security.

According to the constitution, religious communities may have their own schools provided they follow the general rules issued for public schools, which stipulate schools should not incite sectarian discord or be deemed a threat to national security.

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. The parliament is elected on the basis of “equality between Christians and Muslims.” The 1943 National Pact, which the constitution upholds, although it is not an official component of the constitution and is not a formally binding agreement, states the president shall be Maronite Christian, the speaker of parliament shall be Shia Muslim, and the prime minister shall be Sunni Muslim. This distribution of political power operates at both the national and local levels of government.

The Taef Agreement, which ended the country’s 15-year civil war in 1989, also mandates equal Muslim and Christian representation in parliament but reduces the power of the Maronite Christian presidency. In addition, the agreement endorses the constitutional provision of appointing most senior government officials

according to religious affiliation. The Taef Agreement also mandates a cabinet with seats allocated equally between Muslims 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.

By law, each Christian group's bishops' synods elect their patriarchs; the Sunni and Shia electoral bodies elect their respective senior clerical posts; 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. The government does not endorse Christian patriarchs and does not pay the salaries of clergy and officials of Christian groups, including the Maronites, Greek Orthodox, and Roman Catholics.

Citizens have the right to remove the customary notation of their religion from their identity cards and official registry documents or change how it is listed. The government does not require religious affiliation on passports.

The government issues religious workers a one-month visa; in order to stay longer a worker must complete a residency application during the month. A religious worker 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 status has occurred and deport the individual.

Government Practices

The rarely-invoked blasphemy provision of the penal code was not applied during the year, although the media reported Ziad Aswad, Member of Parliament (MP) of the Free Patriotic Movement, filed a lawsuit against You Stink activist Assad Thebian for "defamation and contempt of religion." Thebian reportedly had made comments about Christianity on Facebook several years ago. As of the end of the year, no action had been taken with regard to the lawsuit.

The government continued to require Protestant evangelical churches to register with the Evangelical Synod, a self-governing advisory group overseeing religious

matters for Protestant congregations and representing those churches with the government.

Some members of unregistered religious groups said they continued to choose to list themselves as belonging to recognized religious groups in government records to ensure their marriage and other personal status documents remained legally valid.

The government continued to refuse to give approval to the request from the Jewish community, repeated over several years, to change its official name from the Israeli Communal Council to the Jewish Community Council.

Continuing its practice of rarely invoking the censorship provision of the law, the government permitted the publication of religious materials of every religious group in different languages.

Minority Christian groups stated the government continued to make little progress towards the goal called for in the Taef Agreement to eliminate political sectarianism in favor of “expertise and competence.” Members of these groups stated the government discriminated against them by continuing not to appoint someone from one of their groups to a ministerial position. While some of their members had served in high level civil service positions, such as director general, they said Maronite and Greek Orthodox individuals filled most high level positions. Minority Christian leaders stated their allocation of seats in the parliament remained disproportionately low at only one seat out of the 64 seats allocated to all Christian groups, because their estimated membership of 50,000 individuals represented a higher percentage of the overall Christian population.

Despite registering a civil marriage for the first time in 2013, the practice was unofficially halted by the Ministry of Interior following the formation of a new cabinet. At year’s end, at least 30 cases were pending registration with the ministry.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Non-State Actors

In November Da’esh claimed responsibility for two suicide bombings, killing 43 and injuring more than 200 in the Burj al-Barajeneh neighborhood (Dahiyeh suburbs) of Beirut. Da’esh claimed the attack specifically targeted “heretics” in a predominantly Shiite area and vowed to continue such attacks.

In October Da'esh killed seven Sunni religious figures in Arsal for what it said was their cooperation with the government over hostage negotiations related to a 2014 attack in Arsal by Da'esh and al-Nusra leading to the capture of 29 government soldiers, four of whom were later killed. On December 1, the government and al-Nusra engaged in a prisoner exchange involving the release of 16 Lebanese security officers by al-Nusra in exchange for the government's release of 13 al-Nusra members. The remaining prisoners had not been released as of the end of the year.

Hizballah, a Shia terrorist militia, continued to exercise authority over large areas of territory. There were credible reports of Hizballah and other Shia militias continuing to control access to neighborhoods under their authority and continuing to harass Sunnis they perceived to be a threat.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Following terrorist attacks by Da'esh and al-Nusra, leaders of Sunni, Shia, and many Christian groups condemned extremism and violence perpetrated in the name of religion. On June 3, a special Islamic summit held in Beirut at the headquarters of Dar el-Fatwa, Sunni Islam's main body, issued a press release condemning violent and discriminatory practices by extremists, condemning coercion in religious matters, calling for respect of private and public rights, and reiterating the principle of pluralism in Muslim-Christian relations and intra-Muslim relations.

In February the media reported that societal criticism of remarks by Future Movement MP Khaled Daher suggesting Christian religious symbols should be taken down from outside churches had led the MP to make an apology and state his remarks had been taken out of context. Daher had criticized the removal of black flags bearing the slogan "there is no God but God" from a main square in Tripoli, saying the removal of the flags was an affront to the Sunni community. He was reported as saying a Christ the King statue and posters of Christian saints should be removed instead. The media reported the flags had been taken down because of their resemblance to Da'esh banners.

Religious leaders reported places of worship of every religious group continued to operate in relative peace and security, and that relationships among individual members of different religious groups generally remained amicable. Christian and

Muslim religious leaders from the major denominations stated they continued to meet regularly to discuss issues of common concern and to try to quell conflict between religious groups at conferences hosted by the National Committee for Muslim-Christian Dialogue and similar events.

On June 15, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) MARCH embarked on a conflict resolution project in Tripoli in hopes of uniting youth from different religious communities around art and culture, and launched a comedy play titled “Love and War on the Rooftops—A Tripolitan Tale.” A part of the project was aimed at uniting youth from different religious communities around art and culture. The actors included 16 young adults of different faiths from the villages of Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh.

A television show broadcast on May 20 showed footage of a Syrian man destroying statues of naked or half naked women located on the coastal road of Amchit village north of Beirut. Upon his arrest, he stated he had destroyed the statues because they were against Islamic doctrine. There was no further information on the disposition of his case as of year’s end.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officers continued to meet regularly with government officials to discuss the importance of ending sectarian violence and encouraging tolerance, dialogue, and mutual respect among religious groups.

Embassy officers encouraged religious leaders and members of civil society to engage in dialogue and to take steps to counter violent extremism. The Ambassador met with the leadership of the Sunni, Shia, Druze, and many Christian communities to promote a similar message. The Ambassador and embassy officers also continued to work with local religious and community leaders to support their efforts to reduce sectarian tensions spilling over from the violence in Syria.

Embassy public outreach programs emphasized tolerance for all religious faiths. For example, the embassy renewed funding for the Adyan Foundation’s (a local NGO) Alwan program. Alwan operated in 36 public and private high schools throughout the country to provide a non-formal education program on religious pluralism, citizenship, and coexistence. The embassy also sponsored the visit of a Lebanese scholar to the United States to study religious pluralism.