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2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Lebanon

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. Maronite Christians stated the current allotment of seats did not reflect the intent of the National Pact and they felt marginalized. At least 30 cases of civil marriage remained pending following the government's continuation of its halt on their registration. On June 27, eight suicide bombers attacked the predominantly Christian village of Qaa near the Syrian border, killing five and wounding at least 28 others. The Shia militia Hizballah continued to exercise authority over large parts of the country, limiting access to the areas under its control.

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. The Jewish Community Council reported acts of vandalism against the Jewish cemetery in Beirut throughout the year.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officers engaged government officials on the importance of ending sectarian violence and encouraging tolerance and mutual respect among religious communities. The Ambassador and other embassy officers met with religious leaders and members of civil society to engage in dialogue on religious tolerance and dynamics. Embassy public outreach programs continued to emphasize tolerance for all religious faiths, and embassy officials and programming continued to focus on countering violent extremism in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 6.2 million (July 2016 estimate). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 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 60 years. Although the government has not conducted an official census since 1932, Statistics Lebanon, an independent firm, estimates 57.6 percent of the citizen population is Muslim, 28.52 percent Sunni and 28.34 percent Shia ("Twelvers") plus smaller percentages of Alawites and Ismailis ("Sevener" Shia).

Statistics Lebanon estimates 36.8 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, evangelical Protestants (including Baptists and Seventh-day Adventists), Latins (Roman Catholics), and members of The Church of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

According to Statistics Lebanon, 5.6 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 one million registered refugees from Syria, of whom approximately 30,000 are Palestinian refugees from Syria. 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, living in formal refugee camps dating back to 1948. The Palestinian refugee population is largely Sunni.

Refugees and migrants also include largely Sunni Kurds; Sunni and Shia Muslims 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 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 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 (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 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 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 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, recognized 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. This distribution of positions among religious groups also applies to the civil service, the judiciary, military and security institutions, and public agencies at both

the national and local levels of government. The parliament is elected on the basis of “equality between Christians and Muslims.”

The constitution also states there is no legitimacy for any authorities which contradict the “pact of communal existence,” thereby giving force of law to the unwritten 1943 National Pact, although that document is not an official component of the constitution nor a formally binding agreement. The pact states 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 in the powers of the Maronite Christian presidency, including by making the designation of the prime minister and other cabinet ministers subject to consultations with the 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 security forces. The Taef Agreement 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 and may not hold a seat designated for a specific confession.

By law, the synod of each Christian group elects its 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. By law, 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. Changing the document does not require the approval of a religious official from the religion from which the individual is converting, nor does changing the document require the approval of a religious official from the religion to which the individual is converting (although the act of conversion does require such permission). 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.

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

Government Practices

There continued to be 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 had made about Christianity. There were no reports of government prosecutions for blasphemy during the year.

The government requirement continued for evangelical Protestant 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 in order to confirm their marriage and other personal status documents remained legally valid. Other individuals continued the practice of crossing out the religion listed on their identity cards to express their desire for a secular state.

The government 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 had made 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 continued government discrimination against them manifested itself in a lack of representation in the cabinet. They also continued to assert their allocation of seats in the parliament remained disproportionately low, with only one seat out of the 64 seats allocated to all Christian groups. The Syriac League, a nongovernmental organization (NGO), called for more representation for minority Christians in parliament and high-level civil service positions.

Some Maronite Christian politicians stated Maronites were marginalized despite filling their designated government seats. They said the current allotment of power did not reflect the intent of the National Pact, even though Christians occupied their constitutionally allotted seats. Many called for a new electoral law with the aim of having predominantly Christian areas voting for Christian allotted seats. Observers ascribed this proposal to political infighting, saying it was a means of favoring specific Christian political parties at the expense of others, who might have benefited from votes potentially cast by Muslim

members of the electorate. In their monthly meeting in February Maronite bishops expressed concern over what they said was discrimination against Christians in terms of access to public offices and state financial resources.

At year's end, at least 30 cases of civil marriage continued to await registration with the Ministry of Interior after an unofficial halt in registration by the ministry in 2013.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

On June 27, eight suicide bombers attacked the predominantly Christian village of Qaa near the Syrian border, killing five and wounding at least 28 others. The media quoted security officials and other experts as believing ISIS was responsible for the attacks, although there was no official claim of responsibility by any group.

Nine government security personnel remained in the hands of the al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaida affiliate, despite a prisoner exchange between the government and al-Nusra in December 2015 involving the release of some of the prisoners.

Hizballah continued to exercise authority over large areas of territory. There continued to be reports of Hizballah controlling access to the neighborhoods under its authority. For example, there were reports of Hizballah checkpoints controlling access to the Dahiyah, a southern suburb of Beirut.

In September Hizballah announced a boycott of the Hajj and threatened to expel any party members who traveled to Mecca.

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 in countries in the region by both ISIS and al-Nusra.

Religious leaders continued to report the operation of places of worship of every religious group in relative peace and security. They stated relationships among individual members of different religious groups remained amicable. In statements made throughout the year, the Maronite patriarch and the Sunni grand mufti both praised the country as a model of coexistence between religious groups.

Christian and Muslim religious leaders from the major denominations continued to meet regularly at conferences hosted by the National Committee for Muslim-Christian Dialogue and similar events to discuss issues of common concern and to try to alleviate potential conflicts between religious groups. On September 20, following a call by Pope Francis for a world prayer ceremony, representatives of the country's religious communities gathered for an interfaith prayer for peace at the Virgin Mary's shrine in Harissa.

The Jewish Community Council reported continued acts of vandalism against the Jewish cemetery in Beirut during the year. Construction rubble and trash were also thrown into the cemetery. The council complained to the security forces but stated they took no action. Three individuals built rooms, shops, a parking lot, and a gas station on the land of the Jewish cemetery in Tripoli. The Jewish Community Council filed a lawsuit against the individuals, but prosecuting authorities reportedly had taken no action by year's end.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Ambassador and embassy officers continued to engage government officials on the importance of ending sectarian violence and 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 a similar message. The Ambassador and 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.

Embassy public outreach programs continued to emphasize tolerance for all religious faiths. The embassy renewed funding for a local NGO's program focusing on religious pluralism and operating in 36 public and private high schools throughout the country. The embassy also continued its program of bringing women from different regions and religious groups together for religious dialogue and celebrations. 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.

