

Document #1407043

USDOS – US Department of State

2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Israel and The Occupied Territories

Executive Summary

A report on the Occupied Territories, including areas subject to the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority (PA), is appended at the end of this report.

The Basic Law describes the country as a Jewish state and protects the freedom of conscience, faith, religion, and worship, regardless of an individual's religious affiliation. Violence between Palestinians and Israeli security forces in Israel, Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank continued. During the year seven Israelis, one U.S. citizen, and five Palestinian attackers were killed in terror attacks inside the Green Line, and another 62 Israelis were wounded. Israeli police continued to screen non-Muslims for religious paraphernalia before they enter the site of the Temple Mount (which is the foundation of the first and second Jewish temples) and the Haram al-Sharif (containing the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque), and the Jordanian administrators continued to restrict non-Muslim visitors from entering the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque. Citing security concerns, Israeli police at times restricted broad Muslim access at the site. Some Knesset members and government officials called for reversing the policy of banning non-Muslim prayer and the government's ban on Knesset members at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, but Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly repeated his support for both bans. The government continued to permit non-Jews, including Muslims and Christians, to pray at the Western Wall, but continued to enforce a prohibition on non-Orthodox (including mixed gender) Jewish prayer services. The government and non-Orthodox activists reached a compromise in January to accommodate "egalitarian prayer," i.e., Reform and Conservative Jewish services, near the Western Wall, but the government did not implement it. The government implemented policies based on Orthodox Jewish interpretations of religious law. For example, following a February decision by the Supreme Court ordering public mikvah ritual baths be opened up to non-Orthodox conversion rites, the Knesset passed a law in July bypassing the court ruling and potentially preventing Reform and Conservative Jews from using these facilities for conversions by leaving the decision up to local rabbinate. A ruling by the Supreme Court on March 31 expanded immigration rights under the Law of Return to those who complete private (not sanctioned by the Chief Rabbinate) Orthodox conversions in the country. The government continued to recognize marriages of Jews performed in-country only when performed under the auspices of the Chief Rabbinate, which is an Orthodox institution.

Relations among religious and ethnic groups, including between Muslims and Christians, Arabs and non-Arabs, and secular and religious Jews, continued to be strained. Early in the year, an Arab citizen entered a bar in Tel Aviv and killed two Jewish citizens while injuring several others, then during his escape killed a taxi driver who was an Arab citizen. He was subsequently killed in a shootout with security authorities. On March 8, a Palestinian killed a U.S. citizen and stabbed Israelis and was subsequently killed by security forces. On the same day, an ultra-Orthodox Jew, after he himself was attacked, used the knife of his Palestinian attacker to kill the attacker. On February 4, two 14-year-old girls, Arab citizens of Israel, attacked a security guard in Ramle with knives. The guard suffered slight injuries to his hands and legs. The case was ongoing as of the end of the year. A February 2015 incident involving Jewish assailants beating a Druze Israel Defense Forces (IDF) veteran was brought to court in September but dismissed due to “lack of evidence.” Civil society and religious leaders worked to encourage tolerance and calm.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officers spoke with government officials and Knesset leaders about the importance of maintaining the status quo at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif and not escalating tensions through provocative actions or statements. In meetings with government officials, embassy officers stressed the importance of religious pluralism and respect for non-Orthodox streams of Judaism. Visiting high-level U.S. officials, including the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, the Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs, and the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, met with government officials, religious groups, and civil society leaders to stress tolerance and dialogue and ways to reduce religiously motivated violence. Embassy-supported initiatives focused on interreligious dialogue and community development and advocated for a shared society for Jewish and Arab populations. Embassy officers participated in religious events organized by Jewish, Muslim, Druze, and Christian groups to show U.S. support for religious pluralism.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 8.2 million (June 2016 estimate), which includes Druze residents and Israelis living in the Golan Heights, as well as 200,000 Israelis in East Jerusalem. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) classification system, approximately 75 percent of the population is Jewish, 18 percent Muslim, 2 percent Christian, and 1.6 percent Druze. The remaining 4 percent consists of relatively small communities of Bahais, Samaritans, Karaites, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and those the CBS classifies as “other” – mostly persons, including many immigrants from the former Soviet Union, who identify themselves as Jewish but do not satisfy the Orthodox Jewish definition of “Jewish” the government uses for civil procedures. The majority of non-Jewish citizens are of Arab origin.

According to a poll by the Pew Research Center published in March, 49 percent of Jewish Israeli adults identify themselves as secular, 29 percent as “traditional,” 13 percent as “religious” or “modern Orthodox,” and 9 percent as “ultra-Orthodox/Haredi.” There is also a community of approximately 15,000 Messianic Jews, as reported by the Messianic Jewish community.

Bedouin Muslim communities are concentrated in the Negev (south) and many majority Druze, Christian, and Muslim communities are located in the Galilee region (north), some of which are homogenous and some a mix of these religious groups. There are several Druze communities in the occupied Golan Heights, as well as an Alawite community in Ghajar.

According to government statistics, as of September 30 there were approximately 81,000 legal foreign workers in the country and 16,736 undocumented workers. According to the government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), there are approximately 40,000 African migrants and asylum seekers residing in the country, down from 45,000 the previous year. Foreign workers include Protestants, Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

There is no constitution. The Basic Law describes the country as a “Jewish and democratic state” and references the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, which promises freedom of religion and conscience and full social and political equality, regardless of religious affiliation.

According to Supreme Court rulings, the Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty protects freedom to practice or not practice religious beliefs, including freedom of conscience, faith, religion, and worship, regardless of an individual’s religion. The law incorporates religious freedom provisions of international human rights covenants into the country’s body of domestic law.

The Chief Rabbinate retains the authority to issue certificates of conversion to Judaism within the country under Orthodox rabbinic law. The Council of the Chief Rabbinate consists of Orthodox rabbis chosen by an assembly consisting of rabbis, local government leaders, government ministers, and laypersons appointed by the government.

The government provides funding for both Orthodox and non-Orthodox conversion programs. Relatives of Jewish converts may not receive residency rights, except for the children of male or female converts born after the parent’s conversion is complete. Following a February decision by the Supreme Court ordering public mikvah ritual baths

be opened up to non-Orthodox conversion rites, the Knesset passed a law in July, to take effect in 2017, authorizing local rabbinate to determine who can use their mikvahs, potentially preventing Reform and Conservative Jews from using these facilities for conversions.

The law recognizes the religions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, the Druze, and the Bahai Faith. Christian religious communities recognized according to the adopted Ottoman *millet* (court) system include: Eastern Orthodox, Latin (Roman Catholic), Gregorian-Armenian, Armenian Catholic, Syrian Catholic, Chaldean (Chaldean Uniate Catholic), Greek Catholic Melkite, Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, and Evangelical Episcopal. The Anglican and Bahai communities are recognized through a British Mandate-era law adopted by the government. The government does not recognize other religious communities, including major Protestant denominations with a presence in the country, as distinct ethnoreligious communities. There are two legal pathways to formal recognition, according to laws adopted from the British Mandate period: through a government declaration in response to a petition to the Prime Minister’s Office according to the Order in Council, or by petitioning the Ministry of Interior for recognition. Groups may appeal rejected applications to the Supreme Court.

Recognized religious communities are exempt from taxation of places of worship and may have separate courts to apply their religion’s personal status law. Some nonrecognized religions, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, receive a property tax exemption on their houses of worship, although others, such as Buddhism and Scientology, do not. While members of recognized religious communities only require approval for visas from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, visas for members of nonrecognized religious communities also require Ministry of Interior (MOI) approval for stays longer than five years. Members of nonrecognized religious groups may practice their beliefs.

Legislation establishes religious councils for Jewish communities and for the Druze. The Ministry of Religious Services (MRS) has jurisdiction over the country’s 133 Jewish religious councils, which oversee the provision of religious services for Jewish communities. The government finances approximately 40 percent of the religious councils’ budgets, and local municipalities fund the remainder. The MOI Department of Non-Jewish Affairs has jurisdiction over religious matters concerning non-Jewish groups and oversees the religious council for the Druze. The Department of Non-Jewish Affairs convenes an interreligious council of all recognized religions, including Judaism, which serves as a discussion forum for recognized religious communities. The MOI maintains a program to provide religious training, and trains those Druze and Muslim clerics who are employees of the state on how to work with government ministries. Approximately 50 percent of Muslim imams are state employees and receive their salaries and continuing religious training through the Ministry of Interior. The salaries of the remaining imams are privately funded.

The law criminalizes willfully and unjustly disturbing any meeting of persons lawfully assembled for religious worship or assaulting someone at such a meeting. It also criminalizes intentionally destroying, damaging, or desecrating any object held sacred by any group of persons, with punishment of three years' imprisonment.

The law requires individuals to obtain a permit from the minister of the interior or the prime minister for travel to “hostile” countries, including Saudi Arabia, which is the destination for those participating in the Hajj. Illegal travel is punishable by a prison sentence or fine if the traveler does not request prior approval.

Proselytizing is legal for all religious groups. The law prohibits offering a material benefit in the course of proselytizing. It is also illegal to proselytize to a person less than 18 years of age without the consent of both parents.

The law criminalizes the damage, destruction, or desecration of religious sites (subject to seven years' imprisonment) and actions to “harm the freedom of access” of worshippers to religious sites (subject to five years' imprisonment). Certain religious sites considered antiquities are provided further protection under the antiquities law. The Ministry of Tourism is responsible for the protection and upkeep of non-Jewish religious sites, while the MRS protects and maintains Jewish religious sites. The law also provides for up to five years' imprisonment for actions “likely to violate the feelings of the members of the different religions” with regard to their religious sites. The law grants the government, not the courts, the authority to decide the scope of the right to worship at certain religious sites, and the Supreme Court has upheld this governmental authority.

Public Hebrew-language state schools teach Jewish history and some basic religious texts. These classes primarily cover Jewish heritage and culture rather than religious belief. Public Arabic-speaking schools with Arab student bodies teach religion classes on the Quran and the Bible to both Muslim and Christian Arab students. A few independent mixed Jewish-Arab schools also exist and offer religion classes. For example, the curriculum at the nonprofit school Hand-in-Hand: Center for Jewish-Arab Education emphasizes commonality and similar storylines in the holy writings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. By law, the state provides the equivalent of public school funding to two systems of ultra-Orthodox religious schools, the United Torah Judaism-affiliated Independent Education system and the Shas-affiliated Fountain of Torah Education system. Minors have the right to choose a public secular school instead of a religious school regardless of parental preference.

The law provides the right for any Jew, or any child or grandchild of a Jew, to immigrate to the country from a foreign country with his or her spouse and children. The minor children of a grandchild of a Jew are granted humanitarian status, but are not automatically granted citizenship. Under the Law of Return those who completed an Orthodox conversion inside or outside Israel are entitled to immigration, citizenship, and registration as Jews in the civil population registry. Those who completed conversion to Judaism outside Israel, regardless of affiliation, are eligible for these

benefits even if they are not recognized as Jewish by the Chief Rabbinate; this would include Reform, Conservative, and other affiliations of Judaism. A ruling by the Supreme Court in March expanded immigration rights (including citizenship) under the Law of Return to those who complete private (non-Rabbinate) Orthodox conversions in Israel. Descendants of Jews qualify for immigration under the Law of Return regardless of the religious beliefs with which they were raised, although the law considers those who as adults convert to other religious groups, including Messianic Judaism, to have “opted out” of the protections of the Law of Return.

The Chief Rabbinate determines who may be buried in Jewish state cemeteries, limiting this right to individuals considered Jewish by Orthodox standards. The law provides for the right of any individual to be buried in a civil ceremony, and requires that civil cemeteries be established in various areas around the country, sufficiently distant from one another so that all those who wish to take advantage of them may reasonably be able to do so. The law criminalizes the intentional desecration of, or trespass on, places of burial, which is punishable by three years’ imprisonment.

Laws inherited from the Ottoman Empire and British Mandate periods give jurisdiction over personal status issues to certain religious communities. Religious courts operated by officially recognized religious communities have legal authority over their members in matters of marriage, divorce, and burial. Jewish, Druze, Muslim, and Christian families may ask for personal status cases, including alimony, child custody, guardianship, domestic violence, paternity, and property division, to be adjudicated in religious or civil courts. Exceptions to this provision include cases of divorce where Jewish women are subject to the exclusive jurisdiction of the rabbinical courts if their spouses file the case there first, and paternity cases among Muslim citizens, which are the exclusive jurisdiction of Islamic law courts. Members of religious groups not permitting divorce, such as Catholics, may not obtain a divorce unless they convert to a different religion that authorizes divorce. Personal status cases in mixed-religion families are usually adjudicated in civil courts.

The law allows for civil registration of two people as a married couple only if both partners are recognized as “lacking religion,” if they married outside the country, or if the partners are of different religions and their respective religious courts do not object to a civil registration. According to the law, persons are classified as “lacking religion” if they do not belong to one of the recognized religions as recorded in the National Registry. This includes approximately 322,000 immigrants and their children, primarily from the former Soviet Union, who gained Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return but are not recognized as Jewish by the Chief Rabbinate, which applies the Orthodox definition of matrilineal descent.

Secular courts have primary jurisdiction over questions of inheritance, but parties may file such cases in religious courts by mutual agreement. Decisions by these bodies are subject to Supreme Court review. The rabbinical courts, when exercising their power in civil matters, apply religious law, which varies from civil law, including in matters relating to the property rights of widows and daughters.

Military service is compulsory for Jewish citizens, except for Orthodox women. It is also compulsory for male citizens who are Druze, and male citizens in the 5,000-member Circassian community (Muslims originally from the northwestern Caucasus region who migrated in the late 19th century). Arab Christian and Muslim citizens are exempt from compulsory service, although the government encourages them to volunteer.

In July the Knesset passed a law establishing the penalty for inciting or seeking to persuade a volunteer soldier to desert the military, or for giving shelter to a volunteer who deserts, at three to 15 years in prison, which is equivalent to that already established regarding conscript soldiers. The sponsor of the law said he initiated it to deflect pressures away from Christian Arab soldiers who are volunteering in the military.

The law provides the minister of defense some discretion to provide exemptions from compulsory military service for conscientious objectors. A special committee evaluates applications for conscientious objection and may recommend exemptions if it determines an applicant objects to the inherent use of violent force in the military framework and to war in a way that prevents him or her from serving in the military. The committee is also authorized to recommend certain accommodations to conscientious objectors' concerns, including permission not to hold weapons or wear uniforms. The committee chair is authorized to grant exemptions, and committee decisions may be appealed in writing to the Ministry of Defense or the courts.

To receive benefits similar to those accorded military veterans, Arabs and others exempted from compulsory military service may enlist in an alternative service program run by the Ministry of Science and Technology for one or two years as volunteers in health, education, and welfare with local NGOs and institutions.

Membership in a recognized religion is recorded in the National Registry and passed from parents to children, unless a person changes it through a formal conversion. Membership in a religious group which is not recognized is recorded as “lacking religion.” All Jews are recorded as Jewish, whether Orthodox or not (unless they convert to something else).

The law criminalizes calling for, praising, supporting, or encouraging acts of violence or terrorism where such actions are likely to lead to violence, including calls for violence against religious groups.

The law criminalizing incitement to racism, defined as statements demeaning or degrading or showing violence toward someone on the basis of race, provides an exception for statements citing a religious source, unless an intent to incite racism is proven.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights with a reservation stating that matters of personal status are governed by the religious law of the parties concerned, and the country reserves the right to apply that religious law when inconsistent with its obligations under the Covenant.

Government Practices

Increased violent clashes between Israeli security forces and Palestinians in Israel, Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank began in September 2015 and continued into this year following altercations between Jewish activists and Muslim activists worshipping at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site. As a result of this violence, seven Israelis, one U.S. citizen, and five Palestinian attackers were killed, and 62 Israelis injured, inside the Green Line. Because religion and ethnicity were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize much of this violence as being solely based on religious identity. The number of Jewish visitors, reportedly including Temple Mount activists, to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif increased to record levels during the Jewish holidays and national holidays. In April, June, and August there were incidents of violence at the Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif compound, usually after Muslim visitors or *Waqf* guards (the Jordanian-funded Islamic trust and charitable organization that administers the site) said they observed Jewish visitors praying on the site. In a break from past practices, Israeli authorities that facilitated these visits also permitted non-Muslim visits to the site during some of the last 10 days of Ramadan. Israeli police citing security concerns continued to restrict broad Muslim access at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, albeit for fewer days (two) than in 2015 (27). The *Waqf* continued to restrict non-Muslims who visited the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif from entering the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque. The government allowed both Muslims and Christians to pray at the Western Wall, but with separation of women and men, and did not implement a compromise reached with non-Orthodox Jewish activists regarding “egalitarian prayer,” i.e., Reform and Conservative Jewish services. Israeli security restrictions limited the access of Palestinians to the Western Wall Plaza. The government implemented policies based on Orthodox Jewish interpretations of religious law.

Arab citizen of Israel Nashat Milhem killed two people and injured seven others in a bar on Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv on January 1. He later killed a taxi driver. Evidence of the use of religious material in preparation for the attack was found on his phone along with a video expressing his hatred toward “enemies of Islam.” Security forces killed Milhem in a shootout after a weeklong manhunt.

On March 8, Palestinian Bashar Massalha stabbed to death one U.S. citizen and injured 10 Israelis in attacks in Jaffa. Security forces killed Massalha during his attack.

On June 28, the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif was closed to non-Muslim visitors for three days by Israeli police, citing security concerns after attacks on Jewish visitors during the last few days of Ramadan. Following the closure, *The Jerusalem Post* reported a group of masked Muslim youths threw rocks and other objects at Israeli police officers

stationed at the site and then barricaded themselves in al-Aqsa Mosque. The police arrested dozens of Arabs suspected of throwing objects at Jewish visitors and police officers.

A group of Modern Orthodox rabbis continued to operate a private conversion court for children of families whose Judaism was not recognized by the state or the rabbinical courts. A ruling by the Supreme Court on March 31 expanded immigration rights under the Law of Return to those who completed private (non-Rabbinate) Orthodox conversions in the country. The Chief Rabbinate continued not to recognize non-Orthodox converts to Judaism as Jews, although they continued to be accepted for the purpose of immigration under the Law of Return. In four incidents during the year, the Chief Rabbinate also refused to recognize conversions approved by the chief presiding rabbinical judge of the Rabbinical Council of America (Orthodox).

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) continued to sponsor expedited Orthodox Jewish conversion courses for Jewish soldiers who were not recognized as Jewish by the Chief Rabbinate.

The government rejected applications for official recognition by evangelical Christian churches. The government also rejected an application by the Jehovah's Witnesses in November 2015, noting the government had not recognized any additional religion for over 40 years, although there are many religious groups that would like to gain recognition, because of the “wide-ranging implications” of recognizing new religious groups. The government stated members of nonrecognized religions remained free to practice their religion, and that leaders of these religions are invited and participate along with the leaders of officially recognized religions at official events or ceremonies.

Many mosques continued to lack an imam appointed by the MOI; the government continued to permit nonstate employees to be imams in mosques if the community preferred them.

Pursuant to a 2013 High Court ruling on easing the funding conditions for activities by the Reform and Conservative Jewish communities, the government continued to pay the salaries of 12 non-Orthodox rabbis serving local councils. In addition, the Ministry of Housing provided funding to build non-Orthodox Jewish religious institutions, which it designated “seminaries,” according to the Israel Religious Action Center.

The government continued to control access to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, preventing non-Muslim worship and prayer at the site, and limiting access for visits by non-Muslim groups to specific times. The government said these restrictions were imposed on the basis of maintaining the status quo. The media reported in September that police had extended the ban on non-Muslim prayer to the entire Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem. The government denied this, but noted the police “have prevented provocations intended to incite the local population.”

The INP continued to be responsible for security at the entrances of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, with police stationed both inside the site and outside each entrance. The INP conducted routine patrols on the outdoor plaza and regulated traffic in and out of the site.

Waqf officials repeated previous years’ complaints about what they said were violations of the status quo agreements by Israeli police regarding control of access to the site. They stated Israeli police did not coordinate with the *Waqf* on decisions to allow non-Muslim visitors onto the site or to restrict access to broad categories of Muslim worshippers or to individual Palestinians whom police suspected could disrupt the non-Muslim visits. *Waqf* employees remained stationed inside each gate and on the plaza but *Waqf* officials said they were able to exercise only a limited oversight role. They reportedly could object to the presence of particular persons, such as individuals dressed immodestly or causing disturbances, but lacked the authority to remove such persons from the site.

Waqf officials reported the Israeli police on occasion briefly detained *Waqf* guards or expelled them from the site and from the vicinity of visiting Jewish activist groups. The government stated *Waqf* guards involved in disturbances were treated the same as any other individual in such situations, and attributed any instance of police action against a guard to the guard’s activity. Israeli police also arrested *Waqf* maintenance employees conducting renovation work inside the Dome of the Rock for failing to conduct the work under the supervision of the Israel Antiquities Authority (whose authority on the site the *Waqf* does not recognize). Police also prevented the *Waqf* from carrying out routine repairs such as to leaking water pipes as well as 20 major renovation projects, and refused to permit the entry of most maintenance equipment onto the site, according to *Waqf* officials. Police citing security concerns intervened in the delivery of iftar meals during several days of Ramadan. The government said the delivery of 15 trucks filled with meals during Ramadan was successfully coordinated between the *Waqf* and police, and the only deliveries not permitted were those not coordinated ahead of time with the police, including from organizations known for terrorist activity. *Waqf* officials said that the Israel police’s regular use of a small electric “patrol” vehicle on the Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif – beginning during Ramadan and continuing throughout the year – was unprecedented and a violation of the status quo. The government said the vehicle was used to transport supplies between police positions. It also said police vehicles entering the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif were not new and not a violation of the status quo. The government also said the *Waqf* itself used electric vehicles with no objection from the Israeli police.

Israeli police citing security concerns continued to restrict broad Muslim access at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, albeit for fewer days (two) than in 2015 (27). The government continued to permit approximately 100-200 Gazans over the age of 60 to travel to Jerusalem for weekly Friday prayers at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif for most weeks throughout the year. On December 6, Israeli authorities cancelled most of these permits indefinitely, saying some of those receiving permits did not return through Erez the same day.

Muslim officials, including representatives of the *Waqf* and representatives of the Joint List, an alliance of the country's Arab-majority political parties, continued to object to the government's temporary access restrictions on Muslim worshippers at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif and repeated previous years' complaints about what they said were police violations of the status quo agreements regarding control of access to the site, including during Ramadan.

The *Waqf* continued to restrict non-Muslims from entering the Dome of the Rock shrine and the Al-Aqsa Mosque and prohibited individuals from wearing non-Muslim religious symbols on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif.

The INP continued to screen non-Muslims for religious paraphernalia, and generally prohibited them from praying publicly on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. The police continued to have exclusive control of the Mughrabi Gate entrance – the only entrance through which non-Muslims could enter the site – and allowed visitors through the gate during set visiting hours, although the INP sometimes restricted this access because of security concerns. For example, Israeli police continued to enforce a six-month restraining order issued in November 2015 that prohibited a leader of the Return to the Mount, a Jewish Temple Mount activist group, from entering the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif after the group publicly advocated Jewish prayer during visits to the site and offered monetary rewards to activists who were arrested for praying on the site.

Israeli authorities in some instances barred specific individuals from the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site, including Jewish activists believed to have violated rules against non-Muslim prayer, Muslims believed to have acted violently against non-Muslim visitors to the site, and public figures, including members of the Knesset, whose presence authorities feared would inflame tensions. The Supreme Court ruled in December that unofficial, verbal bans by police on Jewish activists ascending the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif were illegal. Some Jewish and non-Jewish members of the Knesset condemned the government's ban on all members of the Knesset from ascending the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. Israeli police continued to enforce “black lists” barring at least 50 Muslim men and women they accused of verbally harassing Jewish visitors, whom Muslim worshippers stated they perceived to have been attempting to break the injunction against non-Muslim prayer on the site.

Many Jewish leaders, including the government-appointed Rabbi of the Western Wall, continued to say Jewish law prohibited Jews from entering the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, a view the ultra-Orthodox community supported. Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi David Lau stated in June, however, that he would like to see a Third Temple built on the site without demolishing Muslim structures. Increasing numbers of the self-identified “national religious” Zionist community stated they found meaning in setting foot on the site. Some government coalition Knesset members called for reversing the policy of banning non-Muslim prayer at the site. NGOs, such as the Temple Institute and Temple Mount Faithful, continued to call on the government to implement a time-sharing plan

at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif to set aside certain hours for Jewish worship, similar to the practice at the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. Muslim authorities continued to oppose this idea.

Prime Minister Netanyahu reiterated his support for the status quo arrangement at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. He reaffirmed the government’s respect for the role of Jordan and the Jordanian king in administering the site, and stated his government had no intention of dividing the site.

The government continued to permit people of all faiths to make individual prayers at the Western Wall, the place of worship nearest the holiest site in Judaism. The Rabbi of the Western Wall continued to set the guidelines for religious observance mandating separation of women and men, with the women’s section being less than half the size of the men’s section, and the government continued to enforce these rules. Authorities continued to prohibit anyone from bringing private Torah scrolls – although the media reported that police issued a special permit to bring private Torah scrolls for a planned act of civil disobedience on November 2 – and to prohibit women from accessing the public Torah scrolls or giving priestly blessings at the site. On June 7, police briefly detained Lesley Sachs, the executive director of the NGO and prayer group Women of the Wall, for questioning on charges of breaching public order after she smuggled a private Torah scroll into the Western Wall Plaza for use in an egalitarian prayer service. The authorities permitted women to pray with tefillin and prayer shawls pursuant to a 2013 Jerusalem District Court ruling stating it was illegal to arrest or fine them for such actions. The police continued to assist Women of the Wall to enter the women’s area of the Western Wall for its monthly service. In April police prevented ultra-Orthodox protesters from disrupting a Passover prayer service, sponsored by Women of the Wall in the women’s section.

The authorities continued to allow use of a platform south of the Mughrabi ramp and adjacent to the Western Wall for religious rituals. The authorities designated the platform for members of the Conservative and Reform movements of Judaism. Non-Orthodox and mixed gender groups also continued to use it for religious ceremonies such as bar and bat mitzvahs. Women of the Wall said the platform, built by the Ministry of Religious Services without the requisite permits, did not constitute a permanent solution for “egalitarian” Jewish prayer (permitting Reform and Conservative or other non-Orthodox Jewish services) at the site.

On January 31, following three years of negotiations, the Cabinet passed an agreement to double the size of the non-Orthodox section immediately south of the main plaza, currently “administered with a pluralistic approach” and used by non-Orthodox Jews for prayer and ceremonies, according to the government. This would have created a single entrance for all worshippers to replace the separate entrance currently used to access the non-Orthodox section. Following condemnations from members of the Knesset from the ultra-Orthodox parties, the government did not implement the agreement, drawing criticism from the Supreme Court in September during its consideration of a related case. After the government did not implement the January agreement, leaders

of the Reform and Conservative Jewish movements joined Women of the Wall on November 2 in bringing publicly available Torah scrolls from the men’s prayer area at the Wall to the women’s prayer area. Ultra-Orthodox Jewish protesters and officials of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation tried to prevent physically the Women of the Wall from moving the public Torah scrolls. The police did not make any arrests. Prime Minister Netanyahu criticized the demonstration but said his government continued to work towards a solution. A September poll by *The Jerusalem Post Magazine* found 61 percent of Jewish Israelis favored establishing an egalitarian prayer plaza at the Western Wall.

The government continued to prohibit Israeli citizens in unofficial capacities from traveling to parts of the West Bank under the civil and security control of the Palestinian Authority (Area A). Jewish leaders said this restriction prevented Jewish Israelis from routinely visiting several Jewish religious sites, although the IDF occasionally provided security escorts for groups to visit some Jewish religious sites.

Although the law included Saudi Arabia as a “hostile” country, religious authorities, including the head of Israel’s sharia court, stated they were not aware of any requirement for a government-issued permit to travel to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj.

Some former mosques, which belonged to a Muslim organization until confiscated by the state in accordance with the Absentee Property Law adopted after the 1948 War of Independence, continued to be used as municipal buildings and entertainment facilities. Muslim community leaders reported Be’er Sheva’s Muslim population of approximately 10,000 had no mosque in which to pray, and the government would neither allow them to use the Ottoman-era mosque, which was converted to a museum of Islamic culture following a 2011 Supreme Court ruling, nor authorize the construction of another mosque.

On December 1, Rabbi Eyal Krim, who previously made controversial comments about women, homosexuals, and Palestinians, became the new IDF Chief Rabbi. The Israeli Supreme Court lifted an injunction preventing his appointment after Rabbi Krim apologized for his previous statements.

After being threatened with a lawsuit, the Histadrut (national labor union) resumed renting a public hall in Petah Tikva to the Jehovah’s Witness community during the year, reversing the Histadrut’s decision in 2015 to stop renting to the community on the basis it was conducting “forbidden missionary work.”

While the government provided the funds legally required to cover the operating costs of the two school systems affiliated with the ultra-Orthodox political parties Shas and United Torah Judaism, the government provided lesser amounts to support other private schools classified as “recognized but not official,” including Christian and other ultra-Orthodox school systems. After successive years of budget cuts for the “recognized but not official” category, which the government said was an effort to

encourage schools to become public, some ultra-Orthodox schools in this category chose to challenge this funding level in court; as of the end of the year this case remained pending. Officials of the Secretariat of Christian Schools, which represent Christian schools in negotiations with the government over support, said they had only received a quarter of the extra funds promised them by the government after a month-long strike in 2015 for funding equal to that of the two politically affiliated ultra-Orthodox school systems.

Government resources available for religious or heritage studies to Arab and non-Orthodox Jewish public schools remained significantly less than those available to Orthodox Jewish public schools. Public and private Arab schools continued to offer studies in both Islam and Christianity, but state funding for such studies remained proportionately lower than the funding for religious education courses in Orthodox Jewish schools.

Many ultra-Orthodox religious schools continued not to offer a basic humanities, math, and science curriculum, and a group of formerly ultra-Orthodox students who graduated from these schools sued the state in December 2015 for allowing them to graduate without the requisite knowledge to participate in the economy. They said they were denied basic education and left lagging far behind secular Israelis in topics such as science, math, history, English, and geography. In April the government filed a Statement of Defense in this case and a Third Party Complaint against the schools and parents. The case remained pending at year's end.

The media reported in September that municipal authorities denied at least 50 school girls entry into Haredi schools to which they had been assigned because of their lack of “spiritual suitability.” The government stated that approximately 25 girls were denied entry. Reportedly, the Ministry of Education effectively used its control of the budget to persuade schools to change their policy towards some of these students, but the cases of other students who continued to be unenrolled remained unresolved as of the end of the year. At year's end, the Ministry of Education was pursuing an administrative appeal in the unresolved cases.

The Custody of the Holy Land, a priory of the Franciscan order, reported local municipalities, such as Tel Aviv, began charging property tax on church property. The government stated only properties that are mainly used for worship and have no business activities were exempt from property tax under the law, while religious organizations were obligated to pay taxes on other property and assets. The government, however, acknowledged that some municipalities which had not previously enforced the collection of taxes had begun to do so.

Authorities continued to enforce rulings by the High Court declaring the segregation of men and women on public streets and sidewalks in the ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighborhood of Mea She'arim in Jerusalem to be illegal. The authorities also enforced the High Court's ruling against the imposition of gender segregation on buses.

Communities could voluntarily self-segregate on public transportation, but could not impose this on others; authorities had to post signs informing passengers they were free by law to sit in any available seat.

The NGO Hiddush reported in May that only 30 percent of local religious councils had at least one female member. In response to a petition from women’s rights organizations regarding the lack of female leadership in the religious establishment, in August the Supreme Court ordered the appointment of a female deputy director-general of the rabbinical courts. As of December 28, no woman had yet been appointed.

The MRS listed 21 Jewish cemeteries with plots for civil burial and 21 dedicated cemeteries for persons the government defined as “lacking religion.” Additionally, 13 cemeteries in 10 agricultural localities were authorized to conduct civil burial for these localities and nearby residents.

The IDF continued to have only Orthodox Jewish chaplains; the government employed civilian non-Jewish clergy as chaplains at military burials when a non-Jewish soldier died in service. The MOI continued to provide imams to conduct military funerals according to Islamic customs.

According to government figures and Hiddush, the 2015 budget for religious services (the latest available) for the Jewish population, including funding for religious councils, salaries for religious personnel, funding for the development of cemeteries, and funding for the construction of synagogues and ritual baths, was approximately 511 million shekels (NIS) (\$133 million). Religious minorities, which constituted slightly more than 20 percent of the population, received approximately NIS 65 million (\$16.92 million), which included NIS 3.6 million (\$937,000) for development of religious sites and structures. In December 2015 the government added additional funds, some of which were rolled over from previous years, for both Jewish communities and religious minorities, increasing the totals to NIS 828 million (\$215.57 million) for religious services for Jewish communities; and NIS 121 million (\$31.5 million) for religious minorities, of which NIS 51.8 million (\$13.49 million) was dedicated to development of religious sites and structures. Some Muslims stated there was insufficient state funding for Islamic affairs, including for building and restoring mosques and cemeteries, although the state provided municipalities with religious development budgets and religious institutions with operational support funds.

The government continued to implement policies based on Orthodox Jewish interpretations of religious law. For example, the only in-country marriages the government recognized for Jews were those performed by the Chief Rabbinate, which refused to perform marriages involving citizens without maternal Jewish lineage, because the Chief Rabbinate did not consider them Jewish according to *halacha* (Jewish law). Likewise, men with ancestry in the Jewish priesthood (*cohanim*) were not allowed to marry converts or divorcees, in accordance with *halacha*. The Chief Rabbinate

required individuals who qualified to marry to follow a procedure which included sessions with a rabbi and classes for the bride to learn about her duties and responsibilities under *halacha*.

Those who self-identify but are not recognized by the Chief Rabbinate as Jewish, including Reform and Conservative converts to Judaism and others without Jewish matrilineage, were prohibited from accessing official Jewish marriage, divorce, and burial services in the country, although some Orthodox and non-Orthodox rabbis did officiate at these ceremonies outside of the Rabbinate.

The MRS continued to authorize the civil registration of the marriages performed by some nonrecognized religious communities, such as the evangelical Christian community, but in general the only domestic marriages which had legal standing and could be registered were marriages performed according to the religious statutes of recognized religious communities. Members of other nonrecognized groups could attempt to process their personal status documents, including marriage licenses, through the authorities of one of the recognized religious communities if those authorities agreed. The MRS was in the final stages of drafting a marriage registration procedure for nonrecognized religious groups as of the end of the year. The government allowed civil registration of marriages held outside the country.

According to NGOs working with women of all religious backgrounds, although women could choose between civil and religious courts to adjudicate personal status matters other than marriage or divorce, societal pressures at times prevented Muslim women from adjudicating personal status issues in civil courts.

Although the government continued to exempt Christian and Muslim citizens from compulsory military service, the government continued to encourage Christian citizens to volunteer for military service.

The government continued to approve annual “delays” of conscription to military service for individual Jehovah’s Witnesses upon presentation of documentation of their continued affiliation with their religious community, although without acknowledgment of their right to conscientious objection. Since members of the community have not been technically exempt from military service, they could not participate in the national civil service program as an alternative service.

Official identity cards noted only the name and the birthdate. Religious identification was listed in the National Registry. Other forms, such as some school enrollments, listed “nationality,” e.g. Jewish or Arab. In response to a petition to require the government to issue an official birth document listing both parents’ names, the Supreme Court ruled on June 1 that until the government’s transition to computerized hospital birth notices was complete, the Ministry of Interior should issue birth certificates showing all details

listed in the birth notices currently prepared by the hospital, including the father's name if declared at the time of the birth. Previously the ministry had not recorded the names of fathers it considered non-Jewish in the case of mixed marriages.

The government continued to allow Christians and individuals who spoke Aramaic to register with their national or ethnic group listed as Aramean instead of Arab.

Christian leaders reported visas for clergy to serve in the country became increasingly difficult to obtain, especially for those holding citizenship of an Arab-majority country, but also for clergy from Africa and Europe. The government denied any change regarding visas for clergy, and stated that the government did not receive any such complaints.

Asylum seeker and monk Aba Samrab, the head of the Eritrean Orthodox Church in Tel Aviv, throughout the year appealed his summons to the Holot detention facility as an irregular migrant because his religious vows prevented him from sleeping, eating, or praying among nonmonks. The judge in a municipal court hearing on September 18 recommended the government make special accommodations for him in Holot, but did not cancel the summons. Soon after this ruling, the Interior Ministry used its discretion to grant him an exemption from Holot on humanitarian grounds rather than make the accommodations suggested by the judge.

The MOI continued to rely on the guidance of the Jewish Agency, a nonprofit NGO with strong ties to the government, to determine who qualified to immigrate as a Jew. Prospective immigrants faced questioning about their religious beliefs to determine their qualifications for citizenship. The government continued to deny immigration benefits to individuals based on their religious beliefs, and also denied or delayed family reunification to some citizens based on their religious beliefs. This included cases of individuals who immigrated under the Law of Return as Jews but were discovered to hold Messianic or Christian beliefs.

The government operated a special department in the state attorney's office for prosecution of “incitement-related” crimes and a police unit based in Jerusalem for the investigation of such crimes in Israel and the West Bank, including “price tag” attacks (violence by Jewish individuals and groups against non-Jewish individuals and property with the stated purpose of exacting a “price” for actions the government had taken against the group committing the violence). The most common offenses, according to police, were attacks on vehicles, defacement of real estate, harm to Islamic and Christian holy sites, assault, and damage to agricultural lands. In July the nationalist crimes unit of the police arrested three Jewish minors on suspicion of burning cars and spray-painting in the Arab village of Yafia one month earlier. According to the police, two of the suspects admitted committing the vandalism as revenge for the June 8 attack by Palestinians at Sarona marketplace in Tel Aviv that left four people dead. Authorities indicted two of the minors for arson, malicious damage due to nationalistic motives, and obstruction of justice, and indicted the third for failure to prevent a crime. The case was ongoing as of the end of the year.

The Church of the Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes on the Sea of Galilee in Tabgha still had not received full compensation from the government under a property tax law for victims of violence committed “on account of national-ethnic affiliation.” The government agreed to pay 3.9 million NIS (\$1.02 million) to restore the site. As of the end of the year, the government had transferred 1.5 million NIS (\$391,000) and negotiations were ongoing for another 800,000 NIS (\$208,000). In June 2015, arsonists burned a large section of the church and defaced the walls of the building with comments denigrating Christians. As of the end of 2016, one of the suspects was under arrest and another was under house arrest until the end of the court proceedings. The investigation of the incident also led to the sentencing of another suspect for two years on charges of sedition (possessing a publication that incites violence or terror, according to the government), but an appeal of the sentence was ongoing at the end of the year.

A Supreme Court ruling in June confirmed the Chief Rabbinate had sole legal authority to issue certificates of *kashrut*, which certify a restaurant’s adherence to Jewish dietary laws. The Chief Rabbinate did not issue certificates to restaurants that remained open on the Jewish Sabbath or holidays, even if the food was kosher. In addition, some nonkosher restaurants that opened on the Sabbath paid fines that varied according to local laws.

In October the Petah Tikva Magistrate Court issued a restraining order against a Be’er Sheva resident after he allegedly made threatening phone calls to Deputy Defense Minister Eli Ben-Dahan for his work promoting ultra-Orthodox enlistment to the IDF.

In September the government postponed maintenance on the public train system from a Saturday to the workweek because of objections from ultra-Orthodox political parties. The decision led to a disruption in commuter traffic and drew criticism from secular parties and civil society groups. Following this incident, the NGO Be Free Israel stated that the media company holding the contract to place advertisements on public buses refused to place its ads calling for public transportation on the Sabbath, out of fear of offending passengers and vandalism.

In October, top Jewish and Palestinian Muslim religious leaders met with President Reuven Rivlin to promote peace and affirm their opposition to all forms of religiously inspired violence. Participants included Sephardic Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef and Palestinian Supreme Sharia Court judge Sheikh Mahmoud Habbash. President Rivlin also hosted Buddhist, Hindu, and Sikh leaders from India, Japan, China, Burma, and South Korea in September to promote interfaith dialogue.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Actions by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

According to the government, Palestinian militants fired 27 rockets and mortars into Israel from Gaza, and there were over 120 incidents of mortar fire or cross-border shooting from Syria. Militant and terrorist groups, including Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, issued anti-Semitic statements in conjunction with attacks launched at Israel from the Gaza Strip. For example, the media reported in October that a Salafi militant group in Gaza announced after launching a rocket at the southern town of Sderot that the attack was part of the “jihad against Jews.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

On March 8, Palestinian Abed el-Rahman Mahmoud Radad stabbed in the neck an ultra-Orthodox Jewish man who was collecting for charity in Petah Tikvah. The man used Radad’s own knife to kill him as he was attacking others.

On February 4, two 14-year-old girls, Arab citizens of Israel, attacked a security guard in Ramle with knives. The guard suffered slight injuries to his hands and legs. Authorities indicted the girls a week later on charges of attempted murder, conspiracy, and possession of a knife. Police said the attack had nationalistic motives. The case was ongoing as of the end of the year.

On June 8, Palestinian cousins Khaled and Mahmoud Mahamrah opened fire on customers in a popular Tel Aviv marketplace, killing four Israelis. The two gunmen were captured and indicted for murder on July 4 in Tel Aviv District Court. Yunis Aish Musa Zin, from the same West Bank town as the cousins, was indicted on charges of aiding and abetting a terrorist attack. The cases were ongoing as of the end of the year.

On June 30, a Palestinian man stabbed two Israelis in the city of Netanya. One of the wounded was a 40-year-old ultra-Orthodox man and the other was a 62-year-old woman. The attacker, Wa’il Abu Saleh, was shot and killed by an armed civilian.

Religious freedom and democracy monitoring organizations reported continued tension between the ultra-Orthodox community and other Israelis, including concerns related to housing, public transportation, service in the IDF, and participation in the workforce. There continued to be reports of Haredi men spitting at non-Haredi Jews and persons of other faiths, including those wearing Christian clerical clothing. In September the Rabbi of Kiryat Gat was attacked in his home by ultra-Orthodox men reportedly because of his support for military conscription.

In September police closed without charges the investigation into the January 2015 beating of Druze IDF veteran Tommy Hasson by 10 Jewish assailants suspected of being activists from the anti-assimilation group Lehava, reportedly after they overheard him speaking Arabic. Police did not file charges because of insufficient evidence following

the loss of investigative files by police. According to the news outlet *Ynet*, after police arrested several suspects, a judge found the attack was committed with nationalistic motivations. Hasson was subsequently recognized by Israel's National Insurance Institute as someone who survived “enemy hostilities.”

Also in September, Lehava activists disrupted a performance by the Armenian Church Choir at a mall in Jerusalem. Police removed two of the Lehava protesters when they refused to disperse after reportedly shouting at the choir, “Christians, go to Syria!” and “Jew murderers!”

Jehovah's Witnesses were subject to multiple incidents of societal violence. For example, Church leaders said that on January 9, two young men attacked two Church members who were preaching in a park. Police closed the investigation because they were unable to identify the perpetrators. On June 16, the neighbor of a man with whom a Jehovah's Witness member was speaking allegedly threw the Jehovah's Witness to the floor and beat him. The police notified Church leaders that they closed their investigation into the incident because “the circumstances of the case do not justify continuation of the investigation.”

Panel Politics research institute conducted a survey of 1,000 Jews on May 8 regarding perceived contributions of different groups to Israeli society. The Jews surveyed gave the highest marks to soldiers, Ashkenazim, and secular Jews, and the lowest marks to left-wing political party supporters, ultra-Orthodox, and Muslims.

In March Sephardic Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef said non-Jews should not live in the country if they do not follow seven *Noahide* laws mandated by Judaism. In December he stated women should not serve in the military or the civilian National Service alternative because it was inconsistent with “the Torah's way.”

Although many rabbis of all denominations continued to discourage Jewish visits to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site, some Orthodox rabbis continued to say entering the site was permissible. Media reported over 11,000 Jews visited the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif from January to October, including more than 3,000 during the period of Jewish holidays in October. Groups such as the Temple Mount Faithful and the Temple Institute continued to call for increased Jewish access and prayer there, as well as the construction of a third Jewish temple on the site. On November 7, for the first time, Member of Knesset Yehuda Glick held the annual Temple Mount conference in the Knesset and announced the creation of a Temple Mount lobby. The northern branch of the Islamic Movement, which the government declared illegal in November 2015, continued to speak of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif as “under attack.” Individuals affiliated with the group reportedly entered the compound as worshippers to “defend” the Al-Aqsa Mosque from those they perceived as attempting to take control away from Muslims.

The ultra-Orthodox organization Yad L'Achim reportedly continued to pressure Jewish women not to date non-Jewish men and offered Jewish women what it termed “escape” assistance from cohabitation with Arab men, i.e. facilitating the covert departure of women and their children from the homes they shared with their Arab spouses, sometimes by “launching military-like rescues from hostile Arab villages,” according to the organization. Lehava continued to operate a hotline for citizens to inform on Jewish women who were suspected of having romantic relationships with Arab or other non-Jewish men and reportedly made public the names and phone numbers of the men involved to discourage intermarriage.

According to the *Religion and State Index* published by Hiddush, a local NGO, 66 percent of Israelis surveyed (up 2 percent from 2015) supported recognizing all types of marriage, including civil, Reform, and Conservative. The proportion of Israeli Jews who preferred a non-Orthodox wedding for themselves or their children increased from 37 percent in 2015 to 47 percent. A majority expressed dissatisfaction over the Chief Rabbinate’s monopoly on *kashrut* certifications and opposed making these certifications conditional upon businesses’ observance of the Sabbath. Eighty-four percent of Israelis surveyed (down 2 percent) supported the general principle of freedom of religion and conscience.

According to media reports, in December 2015, at a conference in Bnei Brak, leading rabbis in the Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox community issued an order to the principals of ultra-Orthodox institutions not to recognize the degrees of women who study in academic institutions. They also banned ultra-Orthodox women from attending colleges and universities, saying a woman’s higher pay resulting from higher education was “a danger to the entire structure of the household.”

According to NGOs, societal attitudes toward missionary activities and conversion to other religions continued to be negative. Many Jews continued to oppose missionary activity directed at Jews, saying it amounted to religious harassment and reacted with hostility toward Jewish converts to Christianity. Religious groups including the Messianic Jews and Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to proselytize and invited members of the public to participate in peaceful religious observances in public spaces such as parks and public walkways, according to observers. Those perceived as attempting to proselytize Jews faced harassment by the anti-assimilation groups Lehava and Yad L'Achim. In June hundreds of demonstrators organized by Yad L'Achim gathered outside a hall in Rishon LeZion where Jehovah’s Witnesses had scheduled a “Bible lecture,” preventing many participants from entering the premises. Police launched an investigation into the incident but the investigation was closed in August with no charges being filed. Reportedly Yad L'Achim encouraged Jews not to attend a Christian-sponsored sightseeing tour on September 24 that Yad L'Achim activists said was a missionary event. Several Jews did not board the tour buses and reportedly thousands left the final event in Caesarea when Christian preachers began to speak.

A vandal spray-painted black crosses on a synagogue in southern Jerusalem in September and October. Media reported in October that a Jewish resident of Jerusalem was arrested in connection with both incidents. The motive was unknown. Investigations into the two incidents were ongoing as of the end of the year.

On November 24, three weeks after the November 2 protest at the Western Wall, an unknown vandal painted graffiti and death threats against Reform Jewish leaders on a reform synagogue in Ra'anana. Prime Minister Netanyahu quickly condemned the vandalism, as did Minister of Education and Diaspora Affairs Naftali Bennett. In response to the vandalism, Women of the Wall said Orthodox rabbinical leaders had been demonizing and delegitimizing progressive Jewish movements over the past several years, and said Prime Minister Netanyahu remained silent even when those verbal attacks came from within his coalition.

In January vandals knocked over dozens of tombstones at a Christian cemetery west of Jerusalem, and wrote anti-Christian graffiti on the walls and doors of the Dormition Abbey, a Catholic monastery in the Jerusalem area. Government officials, including the prime minister, condemned the vandalism. In February arsonist(s) burned the tomb of military commander Hussam al-Din Abu al-Hija, considered an important figure in Islamic history, but did not write any anti-Muslim graffiti. An unknown person or persons attacked the Church of Transfiguration on Mount Tabor in Israel's Lower Galilee on October 24. The attacker destroyed the tabernacle, scattered hosts (sacramental bread) on the floor, vandalized statues, and stole the contents of the donation box. The motive of the attack was unknown.

A variety of NGOs continued to try to build understanding and create dialogue among religious groups and between religious and secular Jewish communities, including Neve Shalom-Wahat al-Salam, the Abraham Fund Initiative, Givat Haviva, the Hagar and Hand-in-Hand bilingual schools, Hiddush, the Israeli Religious Action Center of the Reform Movement, Mosaica, and Interfaith Encounters.

On November 17, a group of prominent Israeli and Palestinian religious figures met at a summit in Spain and issued a joint denunciation of religious violence and incitement. Among the participants were Israeli Chief Rabbi David Lau, Sheikh Raed Badir – a leading sharia scholar and member of the Palestinian Ulama Council, Sheikh Imad Falouji, one of the founders of the Izzadin Kassam armed wing of Hamas who now serves as the chairman of the Adam Center for Dialogue of Civilizations in Gaza, Melchite Archbishop George Bakuni; the Latin Bishop of Jerusalem William Shomali; the Lutheran Bishop Munib Younan; and the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Timotheos Margaritis.

The NGO Tag Meir continued to organize visits to areas where “price tag” attacks occurred and sponsored activities to promote tolerance in response to the attacks.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Following the continued tensions at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif and violent incidents between Israelis and Palestinians, the Ambassador and embassy officers spoke with government officials and Knesset leaders about the importance of maintaining the agreed-upon status quo at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif and not escalating tensions through provocative actions or statements. In meetings with government officials, visiting high-level U.S. government officials and embassy officers also stressed the importance of religious pluralism and respect for all streams of Judaism.

During a visit in February, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations met with the prime minister and other government officials, members of the Knesset, UN agencies, and civil society organizations working on religious pluralism issues. Discussions included the equal treatment of religious communities, combating acts of extremism, and strategies for calming tensions at religious sites. She visited religious sites and the Yad Vashem memorial for Holocaust victims in Jerusalem, as well as the Max Rayne Hand-in-Hand School, an institution dedicated to the education of Muslim and Jewish students together, which experienced an arson attack in 2014.

In April the Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs visited Jerusalem and Tel Aviv for discussions with government officials, UN officials, and human rights experts, including on topics relating to religious minorities. In a May visit to Israel, Jerusalem, and the West Bank, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor met with government officials, Members of the Knesset, and NGOs to discuss a wide range of human rights issues, including issues related to religious minority groups, “price tag” attacks, and other instances of religiously motivated violence. Also in May a senior advisor in the office of the U.S. Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs met with the Bahai religious minority and civil society groups working to promote religious pluralism.

Embassy-supported initiatives focused on interreligious dialogue and community development, and advocated a shared society for Arab and Jewish populations, including conferences at which embassy officers spoke out in support of the right of persons of all faiths to practice their religion peacefully, while also respecting the beliefs and customs of their neighbors.

Embassy officers participated in religious events organized by Jewish, Muslim, Druze, and Christian communities and used embassy social media channels to express U.S. support for tolerance and openness to other religions.

Embassy-hosted events, including an interfaith Ramadan iftar and an interfaith Thanksgiving dinner, promoted the reduction of tensions between religious communities and an increase in interreligious communication and partnership within society by bringing together representatives of many faith communities to advance shared goals and exchange knowledge and experience. Embassy programs supported mixed Jewish-Arab educational and community initiatives to reduce societal tensions

and violence, including a project by the Citizens Accord Forum that brought together ultra-Orthodox and Arab citizens to create a shared civic agenda and implement activities related to social issues of common concern in their communities, in addition to a project supporting deliberative dialogue between religious Jewish and Arab women.

The embassy provided grants to organizations advocating religious tolerance among different ethnic groups, such as a three-year project by the NGO Sikkuy, which arranged a series of cultural tours to Arab majority towns in the Galilee and Wadi Ara during Ramadan for the purpose of introducing 2,000 Jews to Arab culture and religious practices during the Muslim holiday season.

The embassy also supported NGO Tsofen’s project to mitigate the interreligious and intercommunal tensions between Israel’s Arab and Jewish citizens through economic integration of the two communities and the creation of sustainable cycles of intergroup collaboration. The project’s activities promote the participation of Arab citizens in Israel’s high-technology industry, diversifying work environments, and facilitating intergroup collaboration.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2016)



Country:

Israel

Source:

USDOS – US Department of State (</en/source/11558.html>)

Original link:

<https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2016/nea/268894.htm> (<https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2016/nea/268894.htm>)

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

15 August 2017

Document ID:

1407043 (former ID [345224](/en/document/345224) (</en/document/345224>))

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

