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July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report - Lebanon

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
September 13, 2011

[Covers six-month period from 1 July 2010 to 31 December 2010 (USDOS is shifting to a calendar year reporting period)]

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. The constitution declares equality of rights and duties for all citizens without discrimination or preference but establishes a balance of power among the major religious groups.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There was tension among religious groups, attributable to competition for political power, and citizens continued to struggle along sectarian lines with the legacy of a 15-year civil war (1975-90). Despite tensions generated by the competition for political power, places of worship of every confession continued to exist side by side, reflecting the country's centuries-old heritage as a place of refuge for those fleeing religious intolerance.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 4,035 square miles and a population of four million. Because the relative size of confessional groups remains a sensitive issue, a national census has not been conducted since 1932. However, the most recent demographic study conducted by Statistics Lebanon, a Beirut-based research firm, indicates 27 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, 27 percent Shia Muslim, 21 percent Maronite Christian, 8 percent Greek Orthodox, 5 percent Druze, and 5 percent Greek Catholic, with the remaining 7 percent belonging to smaller Christian denominations. Over the past 60 years, there has been a steady decline in the proportion of Christians relative to Muslims, mostly due to emigration of large numbers of Maronite Christians and a higher-than-average Muslim birth rate. There are also very small numbers of Jews, Bahais, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Buddhists, and Hindus.

The 18 officially recognized religious groups include four Muslim sects, 12 Christian sects, the Druze sect, and Judaism. The main branches of Islam practiced are Shia and Sunni. The Alawites and the Isma'ili ("Sevener") Shia order are the smallest Muslim communities. 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 sect is Greek Orthodox. Other Christians are divided among Greek Catholics, Armenian Orthodox (Gregorians), Armenian Catholics, Syriac Orthodox (Jacobites), Syriac Catholics, Assyrians (Nestorians), Chaldeans, Copts, evangelicals (including Protestant groups such as Baptists and Seventh-day Adventists), and Latins (Roman Catholic). The Druze, who refer to themselves as al-Muwahhideen, or "believers in one God," are concentrated in the

rural, mountainous areas east and south of Beirut. Divisions and rivalries among various groups have existed for many centuries and, while relationships among adherents of different confessions were generally amicable, group identity was highly significant in most aspects of cultural interaction.

Many persons fleeing religious mistreatment and discrimination in neighboring states have immigrated to the country, including Kurds, Shia, and Chaldeans from Iraq, as well as Coptic Christians from Egypt and Sudan. According to the secretary-general of the Syriac League, 50,000 Iraqi Christians and approximately 3,000 to 4,000 Coptic Christians reside in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. The constitution requires the state to respect all religious groups and denominations and declares respect for the personal status and religious interests of persons of every religious sect. The constitution declares equality of rights and duties for all citizens without discrimination or preference but stipulates a balance of power distributed among the major religious groups. The government generally respected these rights in practice; however, there were some restrictions. A constitutional provision apportions political offices according to religious affiliation.

The constitution provides that Christians and Muslims be represented equally in parliament, the cabinet, and high-level civil service positions, which include the ministry ranks of secretary general and director general. It also provides that these posts be distributed proportionally among the recognized religious groups. The constitutional provision for the distribution of political power and positions according to the principle of religious representation is designed to prevent a single confessional group from gaining a dominant position. The 1943 "National Pact" stipulates that the president, prime minister, and speaker of parliament be Maronite Christian, Sunni Muslim, and Shia Muslim, respectively. This distribution of political power operates at both the national and local levels of government.

The 1989 Ta'if Agreement, which ended the country's 15-year civil war, reaffirmed this arrangement while mandating equal Muslim and Christian representation in parliament and reducing the power of the Maronite Christian presidency. In addition the agreement endorsed the constitutional provision of appointing most senior government officials according to religious affiliation. This practice functions in all three branches of government. The Ta'if Agreement also stipulated a cabinet with power allocated equally between Muslims and Christians.

The leadership councils for Christians and Druze nominated candidates for their respective senior clerical posts; however, the nomination of Sunni and Shia muftis was officially endorsed by the government's council of ministers, and they received monthly salaries from the government. The government appointed and paid the salaries of Muslim and Druze clerical judges. The leaders of other religious groups, such as Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholics, did not receive salaries from the government.

In most cases the government permitted recognized religious groups to administer their own family and personal status laws, such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. The "Twelver" Shia, Sunni, Christian, and Druze confessions have state-appointed, government-subsidized clerical courts that administered family and personal status law.

The penal code stipulates a maximum prison term of one year for anyone convicted of "blaspheming God publicly." There were no prosecutions reported under this law during the reporting period.

Many families have relatives who belong to different religious communities, and intermarriage was not uncommon; however, interfaith marriage was difficult to arrange in practice between members of some groups. Islamic law, which applies to personal status matters of Muslims, forbids the marriage of a non-Muslim man to a Muslim woman. Druze religious leaders will perform marriages only of Druze couples. There were no procedures for civil marriage; however, the government recognized civil marriage ceremonies performed outside the country.

Religion was generally, but not required to be, encoded on national identity cards and noted on ikhraaj qaid (official registry) documents. Citizens have the right to remove their religion or change religion on their identity cards and official registry documents. The government does not require citizens' religious affiliations to be indicated on passports. Following the Ministry of Interior's February 2009 circular, citizens were not required to have their religious affiliation encoded on national identity cards or official registry documents.

Government documents referred to Jewish-Lebanese citizens as Israelis, although they are not Israeli citizens.

Formal recognition by the government was a legal requirement for religious groups to conduct most religious activities. A group that seeks official recognition must submit a statement of its doctrine and moral principles for government review to determine that such principles do not contradict popular values or the constitution. Alternatively, religious groups may apply for recognition through recognized religious groups. In doing so, however, they would not be recognized as separate sects, but instead they would be recognized as part of the sect through which they applied. This process has the same requirements as registering through the government. Official recognition conveyed certain benefits, such as tax-exempt status and the right to apply the religion's codes to personal status matters.

Unrecognized groups may own property and assemble for worship without government interference; however, they are disadvantaged under the law because they may not perform legally recognized marriage or divorce proceedings, and they have no standing to determine inheritance issues. An individual may change religions if the head of the religious group the person wishes to join approves of this change. Refusal was not reported to occur in practice.

The government permitted the publication of religious materials of every religious group in different languages.

Religious workers not working under the auspices of a government-registered religious organization and found to be working while on tourist visas may be deemed to have violated their visa status and deported. The government issued religious workers a one-month visa; if they planned to stay longer, they must complete their residency permits during that one month. Religious workers were also obliged to sign a "commitment of responsibility" form before being issued their visa that committed them to legal prosecution and immediate deportation if they carried out any activity that may prompt community, confessional, or religious instigation and criticism against the Lebanese state or any other country except Israel.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Armenian Christmas, Eid al-Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice), Saint Maroun Day, Islamic New Year, Ashura, Good Friday, Easter (both Western and Eastern rites), Mawlid al-Nabi (the Prophet Muhammad's birthday), All Saints' Day, Feast of the Assumption, Annunciation, Eid al-Fitr (end of Ramadan), and Christmas. The government also excused Armenian public sector employees from work on Saint Vartan Day.

Some religious groups did not enjoy official recognition, such as Bahais, Buddhists, Hindus, and unregistered Protestant Christian groups. These groups were disadvantaged under the law as their members did not qualify for certain government positions, but they were permitted to perform their religious rites freely. However, a number of members of unregistered religious groups were recorded in government records under recognized religions. Government decisions on granting official recognition to those religious groups that applied were timely and did not appear to be arbitrary.

Protestant evangelical churches were required to register with the Evangelical Synod, a nongovernmental advisory group that represents those churches with the government. It is self-governing and oversees religious matters for Protestant congregations. Representatives of some churches complained that the synod has refused to accept new Protestant groups into its membership since 1975, thereby disadvantaging those groups' adherents.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

The 1989 Ta'if Agreement calls for the eventual elimination of political sectarianism in favor of "expertise and competence"; however, little progress has been made in this regard. Representatives from the lesser represented, or "minority," Christian groups, such as Syriac Christians, stated that the government discriminated against them because no one from their religious classification has been appointed a minister. While they have served in some high-level civil service positions, such as director general, these groups stated that most positions were filled by Maronites and Greek Orthodox. These groups further stated that while they estimated their population at 54,000, they were allocated only one representative in parliament.

There were no reports of abuses, including religious prisoners or detainees, in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were periodic reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Political tension between religious groups decreased after Sunni Prime

Minister Saad Hariri formed a national unity government that included representatives of Shia opposition parties. On August 24, fighting broke out between Hizballah and the Sunni militia Ahbash in the Beirut neighborhood of Burj Abi Haidar. A Sunni mosque was set ablaze during the fighting, and three persons were killed. While there were periodic reports of tension and occasional confrontations between religious groups during the reporting period, some may attribute this to political differences and the legacy of the civil war.

During the reporting period, Hizballah directed strong rhetoric against Israel, with which the country remained in a state of war, and its Jewish population.

Representatives from the Israeli Communal Council, a legally registered Jewish organization, reported continued vandalism of a Jewish-owned cemetery in downtown Beirut, including damage to a cemetery structure and theft of iron objects there in late May.

In August an anti-Semitism organization alleged that the Iranian-produced television series *Jesus*, which the Amal-affiliated NBN television station and Hizballah's Al-Manar television station showed, contained anti-Christian and anti-Semitic portrayals. The broadcast was cancelled after the first few episodes following protests by Christian leaders and organizations.

There were no legal barriers to proselytizing; however, traditional attitudes of the clerical establishment strongly discouraged such activity.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. embassy advanced this goal through contacts at all levels of society, public remarks, embassy public diplomacy programs, and funding projects designed to increase cross-confessional dialogue.

The ambassador and embassy officers met regularly with leaders of religious communities and regularly discussed matters related to religious freedom and tolerance. The U.S. government supports the principles of the Ta'if Agreement, and embassy staff regularly discussed the issue of sectarianism with political, religious, and civic leaders.