

Lebanon (32)



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

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Lebanon

International Religious Freedom Report

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there are some restrictions.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Discrimination based on religion is built into the system of government.

Citizens still are struggling with the legacy of a 15-year civil war fought along religious lines. There are periodic reports of friction between religious groups; however, it frequently is difficult to distinguish between political and religious differences. There are no legal barriers to proselytizing; however, traditional attitudes and edicts of the clerical establishment discourage such activity.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 4,035 square miles, and its population is approximately 3.6 million. Because the matter of religious balance is such a sensitive political issue, a national census has not been conducted since 1932, before the founding of the modern Lebanese State. Consequently there is an absence of accurate data on the relative percentages of the population of the major religions and groups. Most observers believe that Muslims, at approximately 70 percent of the population, make up the majority, but Muslims do not represent a homogenous group. There also are a variety of other religious groups, primarily Christian denominations, which constitute approximately 23 percent of the population, as well as a small Jewish population. There are also some very small numbers of Baha'is, Buddhists, and Hindus in the country. There are some atheists in the country.

There are 18 officially recognized religious groups. Their ecclesiastical and demographic patterns are extremely complex. Divisions and rivalries between groups date back as far as 15 centuries, and still are a factor today. The pattern of settlement has changed little since the Seventh century, although there has been a steady numerical decline in the number of Christians compared to Muslims. The main branches of Islam are Shi'a and Sunni. Since the Eleventh century, there has been a sizable Druze presence, concentrated in rural, mountainous areas east and south of Beirut. The smallest Muslim minorities are the Alawites and the Ismaili ("Sevener") Shi'a order. The "Twelver" Shi'a, Sunni, and Druze each have state-appointed clerical bodies to administer family and personal status law through their own religious courts, which are subsidized by the State. The Maronites are the largest of the Christian groups. They have had a long and continuous association with the Roman Catholic Church, but have their own patriarch, liturgy, and customs. The second largest Christian group is the Greek Orthodox Church (composed of ethnic Arabs who maintain a Greek-language liturgy). The remainder of the Christians are divided among Greek Catholics, Armenian Orthodox (Gregorians), Armenian Catholics, Syrian Orthodox (Jacobites), Syrian Catholics, Assyrians (Nestorians), Chaldeans, Copts, evangelicals (including Protestant groups such as the Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Friends), and Latins (Roman Catholic).

There are a number of foreign missionaries in the country, primarily from Catholic and evangelical Christian churches.

The country's religious pluralism and climate of religious freedom have attracted many persons fleeing alleged religious mistreatment and discrimination in neighboring states. They include Kurds, Shi'a, and Chaldeans from Iraq and Coptic Christians from Egypt and Sudan.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there are some restrictions. The State is required to ensure the free exercise of all religious rites with the caveat that public order not be disturbed. The Constitution also provides that the personal status and religious interests of the population be respected. The Government permits

recognized religions to exercise authority over matters pertaining to personal status such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. There is no state religion; however, politics are based on the principle of religious representation, which has been applied to every conceivable aspect of public life. The unwritten "National Pact" of 1943 stipulates that the President, the Prime Minister, and the Speaker of Parliament be a Maronite Christian, a Sunni Muslim, and a Shi'a Muslim, respectively. The Taif Accord, which ended the country's 15-year civil war in 1989, reaffirmed this arrangement but resulted in increased Muslim representation in Parliament and reduced the power of the Maronite President.

A group that seeks official recognition must submit its dogma and moral principles for government review to ensure that such principles do not contradict popular values and the Constitution. The group must ensure that the number of its adherents is sufficient to maintain its continuity.

Alternatively, religious groups may apply to obtain recognition through existing religious groups. Official recognition conveys certain benefits, such as tax-exempt status and the right to apply the religion's codes to personal status matters. An individual may change religions if the head of the religious group the person wishes to join approves of this change.

The Government allows private religious education. The issue of religious education in public schools no longer is the subject of vigorous debate. Muslim and Christian clergy are working together to prepare unified religious educational materials to be used in public schools.

Publishing of religious materials in different languages is permitted.

A number of both Christian and Muslim religious holidays are considered national holidays. The Christian holidays are Christmas, Good Friday, Easter (for both Western and Eastern rites), St. Maroun Day, All Saints Day, Feast of the Assumption, and New Year. The Muslim holidays are Eid al-Adha, the Muslim New Year, the Prophet Mohammed's birthday, Eid al-Fitr, and Ashura. The Government also excuses from work public sector employees of the Armenian churches on Armenian Christmas and St. Vartan Day.

The Government promotes interfaith understanding by supporting a committee on Islamic-Christian dialog, which is co-chaired by a Muslim and a Christian, and includes representatives of the major religious groups. Leading religious figures who promote Islamic-Christian dialog and ecumenicism are encouraged to visit and are received by government officials at the highest levels.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The 1989 Taif Accord called for the ultimate abolition of political sectarianism in favor of "expertise and competence." However, little substantive progress has been made in this regard. A "Committee for Abolishing Confessionalism," called for in the Taif Accord, has not yet been formed. One notable exception is the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), which, through universal conscription and an emphasis on professionalism, has significantly reduced the role of confessionalism (or religious sectarianism) in that organization. Christians and Muslims are represented equally in the Parliament. Seats in the Parliament and Cabinet, and posts in the civil service, are distributed proportionally among the 18 recognized groups. State recognition is not a legal requirement for religious practice. For example, although Baha'is, Buddhists, and Hindus are not recognized officially, they are allowed to practice their faith without government interference; however, they legally may not marry, divorce, or inherit in the country.

Many families have relatives who belong to different religious communities, and intermarriage is not uncommon; however, intermarriage may be difficult to arrange in practice between members of some groups because there are no procedures for civil marriage. However, civil ceremonies performed outside the country are recognized by the State.

The Government does not require citizens' religious affiliations to be indicated on their passports; however, the Government requires that religious affiliation be encoded on national identity cards.

Religious groups administer their own family and personal status laws (see Section II). Many of these laws discriminate against women. For example, Sunni inheritance law provides a son twice the inheritance of a daughter. Although Muslim men may divorce easily, Muslim women may do so only with the concurrence of their husbands.

Article 473 of the Penal Code stipulates that one who "blasphemes God publicly" may face imprisonment for up to a year. In 1999 a leading singer and songwriter was accused of insulting Islam by incorporating lines from a poem based on verses from the Koran into a song; however, he was acquitted of the charges in December 1999. No one was prosecuted under this law during the period covered by this report.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There was a credible report that Syrian intelligence officials in Lebanon arrested three Syrian Druze men who had converted to Christianity in March 2001 on suspicion of membership in Jehovah's Witnesses. They initially were held in Lebanon and then reportedly were transferred to prison in Syria and held for 2 months. They were released after signing papers stating that they would cease attending their church.

and cease contact with their pastor.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Citizens still are struggling with the legacy of a 15-year civil war fought along religious lines. Some of the harshest fighting of the war occurred within religious groups.

There are no legal barriers to proselytizing; however, traditional attitudes and edicts of the clerical establishment strongly discourage such activity. There were reports that members of the Christian community in Kesirwan with the knowledge of local clergy occasionally harassed verbally church leaders and persons who attend an unrecognized Protestant evangelical church.

The Committee of Islamic-Christian Dialog remains the most significant institution for fostering amicable relations between religious communities.

In October 2001, there was an arson attempt at the St. George Orthodox Church in the overwhelmingly Muslim city of Tripoli. The incident did not result in any injuries or damage to the facility. On October 17, a small explosive package was detonated at the Mar Elias Church in Sidon, another predominantly Muslim city. The explosion caused minor damage to the church door, but no injuries. Two days later, on October 19, a mosque in the Christian town of Batroun sustained damage in a fire. The incident is believed to have been an arson attack. Political and religious leaders of all religious denominations universally criticized all of the attacks.

On October 3, 1999, one person was killed when a bomb exploded in a Maronite church in an eastern Beirut suburb. There were no arrests made in this case during the period covered by this report.

Throughout the fall of 1999, approximately six random bombings were carried out against Orthodox churches and shops that sold liquor; the bombings took place in the northern city of Tripoli and in surrounding areas. The Government suspected that radical Sunni extremists carried out the bombings in retaliation for Russian military operations in Chechnya. Police officials detained and allegedly tortured a number of Sunni youths for suspected involvement in these bombings; however, the youths were released due to a lack of evidence.

In December 1999, Sunni extremists killed four LAF soldiers in an ambush in the northern region of Dinniyeh after the soldiers attempted to arrest two Sunni Muslims allegedly involved in a series of church bombings. On December 31, 1999, the LAF retaliated by launching a massive military operation against Sunni extremists in the north. Five civilians, 7 LAF soldiers, and 15 extremists were killed in the operation. The trial of the suspects who were involved in the case was ongoing at the end of the period covered by this report. In May 2002, some of the suspects went on a hunger strike for a few days to protest trial delays and seek improvements in their detention conditions.

Clerics play a leading role in many ecumenical movements worldwide. For example, the Armenian Orthodox Patriarch, Aram I, is the moderator for the World Council of Churches. The Imam Musa Sadr Foundation also has played a role in fostering the ecumenical message of Musa Sadr, a Shi'a cleric who disappeared in Libya in 1978.

UNESCO funded a \$10,000 project for the publication of a book on Christian-Islamic understanding in the country. The book was authored by 16 Muslim and Christian scholars and is scheduled to be available on the local market in August 2002.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. policy supports the preservation of pluralism and religious freedom, and the U.S. Embassy advances that goal through contacts at all levels of society, public remarks, embassy public affairs programs, and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) programming. The issue of political sectarianism remains a delicate one. The United States supports the principles of the Taif Accord and embassy staff regularly discuss the issue of sectarianism with political, religious, and civic leaders. Embassy staff members meet periodically with the leadership--both national and regional--of officially recognized groups, all of whom have a long tradition of meeting with foreign diplomats and discussing issues of general public interest. In late 2001, during Ramadan, the Ambassador hosted a series of iftars (evening meals breaking the daily fast). At one iftar, the Ambassador hosted members of the Muslim-Christian Dialogue Committee and others concerned with the issue of religious freedom. The Embassy regularly attends events sponsored by the Committee on Islamic-Christian Dialog. USAID programs in rural areas of the country also require civic participation, often involving villages of different religious backgrounds, with the aim of promoting cooperation between religions.

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