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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Lebanon

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution states there shall be “absolute freedom of conscience” and provides for the free exercise of religious rites for all religious groups provided they do not disturb the public order. The constitution also states there shall be a “just and equitable balance” in the apportionment of cabinet and high-level civil service positions among the major religious groups, a provision amended by the Taif Agreement, which ended the country’s civil war and mandated proportional representation between Christians and Muslims in parliament, the cabinet, and other senior government positions. The Taif Agreement’s stipulations on equality of representation among members of different confessions do not apply to citizens who do not list a religious affiliation on their national registration, and thus they cannot hold seats designated for specific confessions.

According to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), Internal Security Forces (ISF) arrested comedian Nour Hajjar on August 29 in connection with a complaint that a leading member of the Dar al-Fatwa, Lebanon’s highest Sunni Muslim religious authority, submitted against him. The Dar al-Fatwa claimed that a comedy sketch that Hajjar performed on stage in 2018 was “an insult to Islam, Muslims, and endangers civil peace in the country.”

According to local NGOs, some members of unregistered religious groups, such as Baha’is and members of unrecognized Protestant faiths, continued to list themselves as belonging to recognized religious groups in government records to ensure their marriage and other personal status documents remained legally valid. Many Baha’is said they chose to list themselves as Shia Muslims in order to effectively manage civil matters that Shia institutions officially administered, while members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) said they registered as evangelical Protestants. The government again failed to approve a request from the Jewish community, which includes only 70-100 individuals left living in Lebanon, to change its official name to the Jewish Community Council from the Israelite Communal Council (the group’s officially recognized name).

On August 23, members of the Christian violent extremist group “Soldiers of God” assaulted members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) community attending a drag event at a Beirut bar. The “Soldiers of God” members beat patrons attending the event and prevented them from departing. Police had made no arrests at year’s end. On September 30, Muslim extremists and members of the “Soldiers of God” besieged and assaulted demonstrators at the “Freedoms March” in Beirut, accusing them of “promoting homosexuality.” A similar incident also took place in the southern city of Tyre.

On May 12, individuals vandalized a Christian cemetery in Deir al-Ahmar, damaging its tombs and tearing off crosses from markers.

Hizballah, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization and Specially Designated Global Terrorist Group, continued to exercise influence over some areas, particularly the southern suburbs of Beirut, parts of the Beka’a Valley, and southern areas of the country that are predominantly Shia Muslim, including using religious influence to silence or intimidate critics. In areas under Hizballah’s influence, independent NGOs faced harassment and intimidation, including social, political, and financial pressures. Analysts said Hizballah fears losing its “state-within-a-state privileges” and its ability to maintain arms “beyond the control of the state,” which has stoked sectarian tensions and led to limited sectarian conflict. According to press and NGO accounts, on August 9, a Hizballah truck loaded with weapons overturned in front of a church in the predominantly Christian village of Kahaleh on its way from the Beka’a Valley to Beirut. When

Hizballah members tried to prevent local residents from investigating the accident, a gun battle ensued resulting in two deaths, one a Christian villager and the other a Hizballah member. The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) subsequently took control of the scene. A Washington think tank stated that the incident was the latest example of friction between Hizballah and members of other religious groups in the country, noting that “the incident appears to have united the Christian street against Hizballah” and had exacerbated sectarian tensions.

In May, media outlets reported that a controversy erupted after a group of Christian clergy visited Hizballah’s “Landmark of the Resistance,” a tourist site located near the village of Mleeta in southern Lebanon commemorating Hizballah’s resistance to Israel. Sheikh Mohammad Yazbeck, a cofounder of Hizballah and religious emissary of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, accompanied the Christian clergy, who came to Mleeta from different parts of the country. Member of parliament Nadim Gemayel condemned the visit as “the antithesis of the church’s concepts.”

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officers engaged government officials to encourage tolerance, dialogue, and mutual respect among religious communities and to highlight the importance of combatting violent extremism. The Ambassador spoke with Christian, Shia, Sunni, and Druze religious leaders throughout the year to discuss the impact of the economic situation on different religious communities. Embassy public outreach and assistance programs continued to emphasize tolerance for all religious groups, including through interfaith programs.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.3 million (midyear 2023). The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other organizations estimate that out of the total population, 1.5 million are Syrian refugees. UNHCR also reported 11,645 registered refugees of other nationalities, including 5,818 Iraqis, as of July 2023. Lebanon has also hosted a Palestinian refugee population for more than 70 years. As of July 2023, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East estimates there are approximately 250,000 Palestinian refugees in the country, including more than 31,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria.

The country has not conducted an official census of its population since 1932. However, Statistics Lebanon, an independent polling and research firm, estimates that 69.3 percent of the citizen population is Muslim (in rounded percentages, 31.2 percent Sunni, 32.2 percent Shia, 5.5 percent Druze, which are counted as Muslim by Statistics Lebanon, and 0.6 percent Alawites and Ismailis combined) and that 30.5 percent of the population is Christian. Maronite Catholics are the largest Christian group (with 52.5 percent of the Christian population), followed by Greek Orthodox (25 percent of the Christian population). Other Christian groups include Greek Catholics (Melkites), Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, Assyrians, Chaldean Catholics, Copts, Protestants (including Presbyterians, Baptists, and Seventh-day Adventists), Roman (Latin) Catholics, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ. There are also small numbers of Jews, Baha’is, Buddhists, and Hindus. The Jewish Community Council, which represents the country’s Jewish community, estimates 70 to 100 Jews reside in the country.

UNHCR reports that Syrian refugees in the country are mainly Sunni Muslims with smaller groups of Shia Muslims, Christians, and Druze. Palestinians live in the country as UN-registered refugees in 12 camps and surrounding areas. They are mostly the descendants of refugees who entered the country in the 1940s and 1950s. Most of those Palestinians are Sunni Muslims, but some are Christians.

UNHCR states that, as of June, there were approximately 6,664 UNHCR-registered Iraqi refugees in the country. Refugees and foreign migrants from Iraq include Sunni Kurds, Sunni and Shia Muslims, and Chaldean Catholics. There are also Coptic Christians from Egypt and Sudan. According to the secretary general of the Syriac League, an NGO that advocates for Syriac

Christians in the country, approximately 3,500 Iraqi Christians of all denominations and 3,000 to 4,000 Coptic Christians reside in the country. According to the Syriac League, most Iraqi Christian refugees are not registered with UNHCR and so are not included in its count. The Syriac League states that the number of Iraqi Christians living in the country has decreased by 85 percent since 2019, largely because of emigration driven by the country's economic crisis.

Persons from all religious groups continued to emigrate from the country during the year, in large part due to the deteriorating economic situation. There is anecdotal evidence that Christians constituted a significant portion of those who left the country, especially following the August 2020 Beirut Port explosion, with some citing fears for their security and potential treatment amid an unpredictable political environment as reasons for their departure.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution states there shall be "absolute freedom of conscience" and declares the state will respect all religious groups and denominations, as well as the personal status and religious interests of persons of every religious group. The constitution guarantees free exercise of religious rites, provided they do not disturb the public order, and declares the equality of rights and duties for all citizens without discrimination or preference.

By law, an individual is free to convert to a different religion if a local senior official of the religious group the person wishes to join approves the change. The religious group issues a document confirming the convert's new religion, allowing the convert to register her or his new religion with the Ministry of Interior's (MOI) Personal Status Directorate. The new religion is included thereafter on government-issued civil registration documents.

Citizens have the right to remove the customary notation of their religion from government-issued civil registration documents or change how it is listed. Changing these documents does not require approval of religious officials and does not change or remove the individual's registration with the Personal Status Directorate.

The penal code stipulates a maximum prison term of one year for anyone convicted of "blaspheming God publicly." It does not provide a definition of what this entails. A publications law regulates print media and includes provisions that impose potential fines or prison terms for sectarian provocation and prohibit the press from publishing either blasphemous content regarding the country's officially recognized religions or content that may provoke sectarian feuds.

The law governing audiovisual media bans live broadcasts of certain religious events and prohibits the broadcast of programs that seek to harm public morals, ignite sectarian strife, or insult religious beliefs. Websites are censored through court orders filed with the Internal Security Forces' (ISF) Cybercrimes Bureau for further investigation, after which the bureau issues a final order to the Ministry of Telecommunications. Elements of the law permit censorship of religious material considered a threat to national security or offensive to the dignity of the head of state or foreign leaders. The law includes guidelines regarding materials deemed unsuitable for publication in a book, newspaper, or magazine. Any violation of the guidelines may result in the author's imprisonment or a fine. Officials from any of the recognized religious groups may request that the Directorate of General Security (DGS) ban a publication. The government may prosecute offending journalists and publications in the publications court. Authorities occasionally also refer such cases to criminal courts, a process not established in law.

The penal code criminalizes defamation and contempt for religion and stipulates a maximum prison term of three years for either of these offenses.

By law, religious groups may apply to the government for official recognition. To do so, a religious group must submit a statement of its doctrine and moral principles to the cabinet, which evaluates whether the group's principles are in accordance with the government's perception of popular values and the constitution. Alternatively, an unrecognized religious group may apply for recognition by seeking affiliation with another recognized religious group. In doing so, the unrecognized group does not gain recognition as a separate group but becomes an affiliate of the group through which it applies. This process has the same requirements as applying for recognition directly with the government.

There are 18 officially recognized religious groups: five Muslim groups (Shia, Sunni, Druze, Alawite, and Ismaili), 12 Christian groups (Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Assyrian, Chaldean, Copt, evangelical Protestant, and Roman Catholic), and Jews. Religious groups not recognized by the government include Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, several Protestant groups, and the Church of Jesus Christ. Individuals from all of Lebanon's 18 recognized religious communities are involved in Lebanon's political life and government.

Official recognition of a religious group allows baptisms and marriages it performs to receive government recognition and also conveys other benefits such as tax-exempt status and the right to apply the group's codes to personal status matters. By law, the government permits recognized religious groups to administer their own rules on family and personal status issues, including marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. State-appointed, government-subsidized sectarian courts administer family and personal status law for Shia, Sunni, Druze, and recognized Christian groups, according to the respective religious group's beliefs. While the religious courts and religious laws are legally bound to comply with the provisions of the constitution, the Court of Cassation (the highest civil court in the judicial system) has very limited oversight of religious court proceedings and decisions.

There are no formalized procedures for civil marriage or divorce. The government recognizes heterosexual civil marriage ceremonies performed outside the country irrespective of the religious affiliation of each partner in the marriage. While some Christian and Muslim religious authorities will perform interreligious marriages, clerics, priests, or religious courts often require the nonbelonging partner to pledge to raise his or her children in the religion of the partner and/or to relinquish certain rights, such as inheritance or custody claims, in the case of divorce.

Unrecognized religious groups may own property, assemble for worship, and perform religious rites freely. They may not perform legally recognized marriages or divorces, and they have no standing to determine inheritance issues. Due to agreements in the country's confessional system that designate percentages of senior government positions (and in some cases, specific positions) for the recognized religious communities, members of unrecognized groups have no opportunity to occupy certain government positions, including cabinet, parliamentary, secretary-general, and director general positions.

The government requires Protestant churches to register with the Supreme Council of the Evangelical Community in Syria and Lebanon, a self-governing advisory group that oversees religious matters for Protestant congregations and represents those churches to the government.

According to the constitution, recognized religious communities may operate their own schools. However, religious schools must follow the same general rules as public schools, which stipulate that they must not incite sectarian discord or threaten national security. The government permits but does not require religious education in public schools. Both Christian and Muslim local religious representatives sometimes host educational sessions in public schools.

The constitution states "sectarian groups" shall be represented in a "just and equitable balance" in the cabinet and high-level civil service positions, which includes the ministry ranks of secretary-

general and director general. It also states these posts shall be distributed proportionately among the major religious groups. This distribution of positions among religious groups is based on the unwritten 1943 National Pact, which used religious affiliation data from the 1932 census (the last conducted in the country). According to the pact, the president shall be a Maronite Christian, the speaker of parliament shall be a Shia Muslim, and the prime minister shall be a Sunni Muslim. This proportional distribution also applies to high-level positions in the civil service, the judiciary, military, and security institutions, and public agencies at both the national and local levels of government. Parliament is elected on equal representation between Christians and Muslims, and cabinet positions must be allocated on the same basis. Druze and Alawites are included in this allocation within Muslim communities. With the exception of Ismaili Islam and Judaism, authorities allocated every government-recognized religious group at least one seat in parliament regardless of the number of its adherents.

The constitution also states there is no legitimacy for any authorities that contradict the “pact of communal existence,” thereby giving force of law to the unwritten 1943 National Pact, although that arrangement is neither officially spelled out in the constitution nor is it a formally binding legal agreement.

The Taif Agreement, which ended the country’s 15-year civil war in 1989, also mandates elections based on the principle of proportional representation between Muslims and Christians in the Lebanese Parliament but reaffirms the Christian and Muslim allocation at 50 percent each. The agreement reduced the constitutional powers of the Maronite Christian presidency and increased those of the Sunni Muslim prime minister while also subjecting the designation of the prime minister to binding consultations with parliament and the designations of all ministers to a parliamentary vote of confidence. The Taif Agreement also endorses the constitutional provision appointing most senior government officials according to religious affiliation, including senior positions within the military and other security forces. Customarily, a Maronite Christian commands the armed forces, while the directors general of the ISF and the DGS are Sunni and Shia Muslims, respectively. Several other top positions in the security services are customarily designated for particular confessions as well. While specific positions are designated by custom rather than law, deviating from custom is rare and the confessions concerned must mutually agree to any change or accommodation. The Taif Agreement’s stipulations on equality of representation among members of different confessions do not apply to citizens who do not list a religious affiliation on their national registration, and thus they cannot hold seats designated for specific confessions.

By law, the synod of each Christian group elects its patriarch, the Sunni and Shia electoral bodies elect their respective senior clerics, and the Druze community elects its Sheikh al-Aql, its most senior religious leader. The cabinet must endorse the nomination of Sunni and Shia muftis, as well as the Sheikh al-Aql, and pay their salaries. The government also appoints and pays the salaries of Muslim and Druze clerical judges. By law, the government does not endorse Christian patriarchs and does not pay the salaries of Christian clergy and officials of Christian groups.

The government issues foreign religious workers a one-month visa; to stay longer, a worker must complete a residency application during the month. Religious workers also must sign a “commitment of responsibility” form before receiving a visa, which subjects the worker to legal prosecution and immediate deportation for any activity involving religious or other criticism directed against the state or any other country, except Israel. If the government finds an individual engaging in religious activity while on a tourist visa, the government may determine a violation of the visa category has occurred and deport the individual.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

According to NGOs, on August 29 the ISF arrested comedian Nour Hajjar in connection with a complaint that a leading member of the Dar al-Fatwa, Lebanon's highest Muslim Sunni religious authority, had submitted against him. The Dar al-Fatwa claimed that a comedy sketch that Hajjar performed on stage in 2018 was "an insult to Islam, Muslims, and endangers civil peace in the country." Upon the orders of Public Prosecutor Ghassan Oueidat, officers took Hajjar, without informing his lawyer, to the division's headquarters at the Justice Ministry in Beirut, where they interrogated him for several hours. Following the interrogation, authorities released Hajjar later that evening, after dozens of protesters gathered outside the ministry calling for his release. According to Amnesty International and legal experts, Article 10 of the Lebanese Code of Criminal Procedures, the statute of limitation for prosecuting such acts is three years and had therefore expired at the time of Hajjar's arrest.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

According to local NGOs, some members of unregistered religious groups, such as Baha'is and members of unrecognized Protestant faiths, continued to list themselves as belonging to recognized religious groups in government records to ensure their marriage and other personal status documents remained legally valid. Many Baha'is said they chose to list themselves as Shia Muslims in order to effectively manage civil matters that Shia institutions officially administered, while members of the Church of Jesus Christ said they registered as evangelical Protestants.

The government again failed to approve a request from the Jewish community to change its official name to the Jewish Community Council from the Israelite Communal Council (the group's officially recognized name). Jewish community representatives reported that the MOI continued to delay the verification of the results of the Jewish Community Council's election of members, which occurs every six years, most recently in 2020. Regulations governing such councils require the MOI to verify council election results. The council, which represents the interests of the country's Jewish citizens, repeatedly submitted requests to change its government-appointed name to reduce social stigma, but to no avail. The council blamed its official name in part for the difficulties it experienced with renewals every six years. In late 2021, the Minister of Interior said the MOI would investigate allegations that several council members forged the signatures of nonresident Lebanese Jews to illegally acquire property. As of year's end, the MOI had not referred the case to the judiciary.

The Jewish community faced difficulties importing material for religious rites; as customs agents were reportedly wary of allowing imports of any origin containing Hebrew script due to a national ban on trade of Israeli goods, the Jewish Community Council decided to stop importing any religious material. During the year, the Jewish Community Council faced difficulty in renewing the mandate of its members, a legal requirement for groups that wish to continue to be recognized by the government. This was due to government officials' unwillingness to put their signatures on any document with the group's name on it, since doing so could be misinterpreted as tacit support for Israel.

The government remained in a caretaker status because parliament was unable to elect a president after former president Michel Aoun's six-year term expired in October 2022. The caretaker cabinet consisted of 24 ministers: five Maronite, five Shia, five Sunni, three Greek Orthodox, two Druze, two Greek Catholic, one representing Christian minorities, and one Armenian Orthodox.

Members of all confessions may serve in the military, intelligence, and security services. While most confessions had members serving in these capacities, some religious groups did not, usually because of their small number of adherents in the country. Members of the largest recognized confessions dominated the ranks of senior positions.

During the year, religious leaders spoke out on various political issues. On January 3, Grand Mufti of the Sunni community Abdel Latif Derian called for "finalizing the presidential election as soon as possible," warning that "the country and citizens can no longer bear this vacuum that is

destroying all of the state's pillars." He further warned that a "presidential vacuum is a rejected and dangerous thing, and it threatens Muslims and Christians in their country, [which is] built on the basis of the culture of citizenship and coexistence." On February 12, Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros al-Rai said that politicians were abusing their "power and influence" in delaying the election of a new president. Al-Rai convened a prayer meeting of all Christian leaders on April 5 in an attempt to rally action to elect a president. 53 parliamentarians attended, but 10 others opted either not to attend, or to attend virtually.

Christian and Muslim leaders continued to fear that allowing civil marriages would threaten their ability to administer their own confessional affairs. According to the online news site Al-Monitor, "Secular and feminist movements have highlighted the importance of civil marriage as the door to a personal status law."

Persons seeking a nonreligious marriage ceremony typically travelled to countries that allow civil marriages, such as Cyprus.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

On March 23, caretaker Prime Minister Mikati, after meeting with Speaker Berri, made a last-minute decision to delay the start of daylight savings time/summer hours from March 26 to April 21. The government announcement gave no reason for the change, but local media reported that Berri asked for the change to allow Muslims to break earlier from their Ramadan fasts. Christian politicians and institutions objected to the move. On March 27, Mikati reversed the daylight savings time postponement in response to criticism that he had unilaterally approved the delay without first consulting with the cabinet. Later that day, Mikati announced that the cabinet had voted to begin daylight savings on the evening of March 29-30.

In a September 7 cabinet meeting, caretaker Prime Minister Mikati said that over a thousand Syrian refugees each week were fleeing to Lebanon. Mikati said the refugee flows "could create harsh imbalances." Mikati said what is worrying about the influx in refugees is that most of them are young men and women and "that threatens our entity's independence and could create harsh imbalances that could affect Lebanon's demographic balance." According to the AP, "the demographic in question may be religious affiliation, as the vast majority of Syrians are Sunni Muslims."

Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

On August 18, the General Directorate for Religious Advocacy, a subordinate organization of the Higher Islamic Shia Council, declared 15 of its own clerics unqualified to deliver religious guidance within the Shia Muslim community. The general directorate issued the directive based on what it cited as deviations in the 15 clerics' beliefs and behaviors, attributing the discrepancies to their "insufficient religious knowledge." Sheikh Yasser Aoudeh, one of the supposedly disqualified clerics who is also a staunch critic of both Hizballah and the Amal Movement, told the AP that he did not recognize the authority of the Higher Islamic Shia Council and rejected "corruption by politicians who are protected by religious authorities." Aoudeh said both Hizballah and the Amal Movement "strictly prohibit any criticism." The Higher Islamic Shia Council subsequently issued a statement on August 20 stating that the General Directorate for Religious Advocacy's directive did not reflect the Council's point of view and that Acting President of the Higher Islamic Shia Council Sheikh Ali al-Khatib had not been informed in advance.

On August 9, Minister of Culture Mohammed Mortada formally requested that the MOI ban the film *Barbie* from cinemas, arguing that it contradicted the values of "faith and morality" by diminishing the importance of the family unit. The DGS reviewed the film and authorized its public release in Lebanese theaters on September 1.

ACTIONS BY FOREIGN FORCES AND NONSTATE ACTORS

Hizballah, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization and Specially Designated Global Terrorist Group, continued to exercise influence over some areas, particularly the southern suburbs of Beirut, the Beka'a Valley, and southern areas of the country, all of which are predominantly Shia. In those areas, Hizballah provided several basic services, such as gas, diesel, health care, education, food aid, infrastructure repair, and internal security. There continued to be reports of Hizballah controlling access to the neighborhoods and localities under its influence, including in Beirut's southern suburbs and areas of the Beka'a Valley and South Lebanon. Hizballah has used this influence, including religious influence, to silence and intimidate critics.

In areas under Hizballah's influence, independent NGOs faced harassment and intimidation, including social, political, and financial pressures. In October, Hizballah members harassed Murr TV (MTV) reporter Joyce Akiki as she attempted to report from an area near Lebanon's southern border with Israel, saying that she and MTV "represented Zionists." Armed members of nonstate armed groups, including Hizballah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other Palestinian militias, impeded access to certain neighborhoods, camps, and other areas where they operated outside the reach and authority of the government. Starting in October, Hizballah, Palestinian militants, and the Israeli Defense Forces engaged in sporadic, and often tense, exchanges of fire along the Blue Line (the line of demarcation separating Lebanon from Israel and the Golan Heights).

From July 29 through December, sporadic heavy fighting between rival armed groups in the Ain el-Helweh Palestinian refugee camp killed at least 30 persons. According to the press, Fatah, the main faction under the PLO umbrella, which is associated with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, clashed with the Islamist groups Jund al-Sham and Shebab al-Muslim after a senior Fatah commander was killed.

According to press and NGO accounts, on August 9, a Hizballah truck loaded with weapons overturned in front of a church in the predominantly Christian village of Kahaleh on its way from the Beka'a Valley to Beirut. When Hizballah members tried to prevent local residents from investigating the accident, a gun battle ensued resulting in two deaths, one a Christian villager and the other a Hizballah member. The LAF subsequently took control of the scene. On August 18, a military court summoned four villagers and four Hizballah members to give testimony about the incident. According to press reports, Christian parties in the country rejected the summoning of the villagers by the LAF investigation. Analysis posted by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy stated that the incident was the latest example of friction between Hizballah and members of other religious groups in the country and stated: "Accumulating frustration with such behavior has led to increased hostility against Hizballah on the street and in social media spaces, and for many Lebanese, the Kahaleh incident seems to have cracked the wall of fear surrounding Hizballah. More Christian civilians and community leaders are now calling for an armed response and self-defense measures."

In late July, according to the *Jerusalem Post*, Hizballah mobilized its fighters as a "show of strength" for the commemoration of the holy day of Ashura. Pro-Hizballah media covered Hizballah's activities, which one satellite channel said were intended to protect participants in Shia observances. The *Post* said that the goal of Hizballah was "to blend [Shia] religious events with the group's militia and terrorist activities, to portray Hizballah as both 'safeguarding' these religious events and hijacking them for its own purposes."

Investigations continued into the 2021 killing of Lokman Slim, a prominent political activist and vocal critic of Hizballah. No findings had been made public by year's end.

Although the law empowered the cabinet to license all political parties, Hizballah's "political wing" operated without a license.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On February 25, a week after masked men blocked his car and abducted him, authorities found the body of Sheikh Ahmed al-Rifai, a Sunni cleric in northern Lebanon who was known as a vocal critic of Hizballah and its allies, and who had posted frequently on social media. Al-Rifai was affiliated with the Dar al-Fatwa, a government institution that issues legal and religious rulings specific to the Sunni community, administers religious schools, and oversees mosques. Grand Mufti Derian called the incident a horrific and painful crime and said that such violence contradicts human values and religion rejects it. Local officials said that people from his hometown, including family members, killed al-Rifai.

On May 21, three men assaulted Mohammad Chamseddine, a staff member with the social research firm Information International, after he had a heated discussion with a cleric in Sidon about the importance of personal freedom. The incident began when the cleric objected to a swimsuit that a Christian woman wore as she was sunbathing with her husband at a Sidon beach. The cleric, along with two other assailants, shouted that they not only disapproved of personal freedoms, but wanted Lebanon to establish a religious police force reminiscent of that which is in place in Saudi Arabia and Iran. Chamseddine filed a criminal complaint but does not expect any action. He noted that the municipality did not have the right to impose restrictions on a public beach, noting that the Ministry of Public Works and Transport exercised jurisdiction there. Sectarian issues have also arisen on beaches in the Christian north, where residents disparage women who wear full-length black dresses while swimming.

Religiously affiliated violent groups also used religious justifications for violence against other marginalized communities, especially the LGBTQI+ community. On August 23, members of the Christian violent extremist group “Soldiers of God” assaulted members of the LGBTQI+ community attending a drag event at a Beirut bar. The “Soldiers of God” members beat the patrons attending the event and prevented them from departing. Police had not arrested anyone involved in the attack at year’s end. On September 30, Muslim extremists and members of the “Soldiers of God” besieged and assaulted demonstrators at the “Freedoms March” in Beirut accusing them of “promoting homosexuality.” Several protesters and journalists were wounded and ISF reportedly evacuated besieged individuals in armored vehicles. A similar incident also took place in the southern city of Tyre.

According to a September 1 Associated Press report, local religious and political leaders “painted the LGBTQ+ community as part of Western attacks on Islamic values.” Among other incidents, the report stated that the Sunni-affiliated Islamic Cultural Center submitted a request to the public prosecutor’s office to shut down Helem, the first LGBTQ+ rights group in the Arab world. The prosecutor’s office referred the case to the MOI, which did not act on the complaint.

On September 2, MTV (Murr TV) aired a video announcing the launch of a campaign by the channel to decriminalize homosexuality in the country. On a September 4 program posted on Spot Shot Online (Lebanon), Sunni religious leader Hassan Moraib, the Deputy Inspector-General of the Dar Al-Fatwa in Lebanon, issued a fatwa against the channel. He said that MTV had sold its soul to Satan, that Islamic law prohibits watching the channel, and that the channel is a worse “plague” than the coronavirus.

On May 28, media outlets reported that a controversy erupted after a group of Christian clergy visited Hizballah’s “Landmark of the Resistance,” a tourist site located near the village of Mleeta in southern Lebanon commemorating Hizballah’s resistance to Israel. Sheikh Mohammad Yazbeck, a cofounder of Hizballah and religious emissary of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, accompanied the Christian clergy, who came to Mleeta from different parts of Lebanon. Member of parliament Nadim Gemayel condemned the visit as “the antithesis of the church’s concepts.”

Critics posted online that the visit was “shameful” and that it was perplexing why church officials would visit the site. Another critic said the clergy should have removed their crosses if they wanted to go to Mleeta. According to one account, the clerics came from various areas in Lebanon, including the Bekaa Valley, Zahle, Jezzine, and Sidon. MP Nadim Gemayel condemned the visit of

the clergy to the Mleeta museum according to Lebanon's MTV, and he tweeted in Arabic, "The visit of some bishops to the Iranian Militia Museum is the antithesis of the Church's concepts and evidence of the slander of those who have nothing to do with the church's historical struggle."

On May 12, individuals vandalized a Christian cemetery in Deir al-Ahmar, damaging its tombs and tearing off crosses from markers.

The Jewish Community Council's 2011 lawsuit against individuals who constructed buildings on the property of a Jewish cemetery in Tripoli continued, pending additional analysis of the site that a court initially ordered in 2017. The lawsuit remained unresolved at year's end.

At year's end, approximately 70 percent of students, not including those from the refugee population, attended private schools, the majority of which were tied to religious organizations and included schools that the government subsidized. These schools generally continued to accommodate students from other religious and minority groups.

On July 18, the National Working Group on Freedom of Religion and Belief published the first locally produced report on freedom of religion and belief in Lebanon, a collaborative project titled, "National Report on Freedom of Religion and Belief," and focused on the intersection of religion and politics in the country. The report found "The institutionalization of religion within the sectarian system consecrated a mentality that links the Lebanese identity to sectarian rather than national belonging. This has perpetuated a fear of the 'other' and an existential competition at the expense of state-building and identity formation." The report also stated, "the root causes of violent extremism are fundamentally related, on the one hand, to the weakness of the state and, on the other, to its sectarian system." The report urges reform of the country's educational system and personal status laws, as well as continued dialogue among the country's religious groups.

The Beirut-based Adyan Foundation hosted the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) summit on April 26-27 in Lebanon to promote freedom of religion or belief and broader human rights as the basis for reforms in Lebanon. Separately, Adyan continued work on an initiative that affirms the role of religion in promoting social cohesion and peaceful coexistence at the local level.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to engage government officials on the need to encourage tolerance, dialogue, and mutual respect among religious groups. The Ambassador met on multiple occasions throughout the year with the leadership of the Sunni, Shia, Druze, and Christian communities to promote interfaith dialogue and urge them to take steps to counter violent extremism related to religious belief. During these meetings, the Ambassador discussed the welfare of religious communities and protecting religious freedom. Embassy officers often met with civil society representatives to convey similar messages.

During the year, the embassy continued to raise with the MOI the delays that the Jewish Community Council faced on the confirmation of its registration. The embassy amplified messages of religious tolerance through its social media accounts.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers frequently met with individual politicians representing different religious groups to discuss their views, including on relations with other religious groups and to promote religious tolerance.

During the year, the embassy selected five undergraduate college students to study in the United States through an exchange program intended to expose participants to religious pluralism in the

United States, including visits to diverse houses of worship and attendance at a variety of related cultural activities.