



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

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Lebanon**International Religious Freedom Report 2004**

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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. There is no state religion; however, discrimination based on religion is built into the system of government. The Government appoints and pays the salaries of Muslim and Druze judges as the judicial system is historically part of the State apparatus. Because of the religious nature of the political system, officially unrecognized groups such as Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and unregistered Protestant Christian groups can be disadvantaged under the law.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there are periodic reports of friction between religious groups, which may be attributed to political or religious differences, and citizens still struggle with the legacy of a 15-year civil war fought along religious lines.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 4,035 square miles, and its population is approximately 4 million; however, because the matter of religious balance remains such a sensitive political issue, a national census has not been conducted since 1932, before the founding of the modern 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 they 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 18 officially recognized religious groups. Their ecclesiastical and demographic patterns are extremely complex. Divisions and rivalries between groups date back many centuries and still are a factor. There has been a steady decline in the number of Christians compared to Muslims. The main branches of Islam are Shi'a and Sunni. Since the 11th 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 the Government subsidizes. The Maronites are the largest Christian group. 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). Other Christians are divided among Greek Catholics, Armenian Orthodox (Gregorians), Armenian Catholics, Syrian Orthodox (Jacobites), Syrian Catholics, Assyrians (Nestorians), Chaldeans, Copts, Latins (Roman Catholic), and evangelicals (including Protestant groups such as the Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Friends).

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

Many persons fleeing alleged religious mistreatment and discrimination in neighboring states reside in the country, including 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 Constitution provides for 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 nearly all aspects 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 1989 Taif Accord, which ended the country's 15-year civil war, reaffirmed this arrangement, but it resulted in increased Muslim representation in Parliament and reduced the power of the Maronite President.

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

State recognition is a legal requirement for religious groups to conduct certain religious practices. 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.

In February, the Government denied a residency permit to the head of the Pentecostal Church and granted him seven days to depart the country. The Government informed him he must register as a religious worker in order to re-apply for a residency permit. He claimed he could not fulfill this requirement because the head of the Evangelical Church refused to register him. The Evangelical Council has not registered a new church since 1975.

In 2002, the Ministry of Interior notified the "Israelite Communal Council" that the Ministry had been informed about the election of a new board for the council. This step renewed official government recognition of the council as the body representing the Jewish community in the country. The council has been an officially recognized sect in the country since 1926 and has approximately 60 followers. The Government's previous official recognition of the council was in 1985.

Citizens belonging to a faith not recognized by the Government can perform their religious rites freely; however, given the confessional nature of the political system, their political rights are not secured. For example, a Baha'i cannot run for Parliament nor can a Baha'i secure a senior position in the Government because there are no seats allocated for this confession. However, a number of religious faiths are recorded in the country under the existing recognized religions. For example, most Baha'i are registered under the Shi'a sect and thus Baha'i can run for office under a Shi'a seat. Similarly, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) are registered under the Greek Orthodox faith. Decisions on granting official recognition of religious

groups do not appear to be arbitrary; in recent years, the Government has recognized such groups as the Alawites and the Copts.

The Government allows private religious education. In 2002 Muslim and Christian clergy completed a set of unified religious education material to be used in public schools. However, the materials have not yet been included in school curriculums.

The Government permits publishing of religious materials in different languages.

The Government promotes interfaith understanding by supporting a committee on Islamic-Christian dialogue, 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 dialogue and ecumenism are encouraged to visit and are received by government officials at the highest levels. 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. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization 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 has been available on the local market since 2002.

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. Christians and Muslims are represented equally in the Parliament, the Cabinet, and first category civil service positions. First category civil service positions include the ranks of Secretary General and Director General. 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 in that organization. Seats in the Parliament and Cabinet, and posts in the civil service, are distributed proportionally among the 18 recognized groups.

Officially unrecognized groups such as Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and some evangelical denominations may own property and assemble for worship without government interference; however, they are disadvantaged under the law because legally they may not marry, divorce, or inherit in the country. Protestant evangelical churches are required to register with the Evangelical Synod, which represents those churches to the Government. Representatives of some churches have complained that the Synod has refused to accept new members since 1975, thereby crippling their clergy's ability to minister to communities in accordance with their beliefs.

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, the Government recognizes civil ceremonies performed outside the country.

There are no legal barriers to proselytizing; however, traditional attitudes and edicts of the clerical establishment strongly discourage such activity. The clerical establishments are appointed by the religious authorities to which they are affiliated. The nomination of the Sunni and Shi'a Muftis is officially endorsed by the Council of Ministers, and they receive monthly salaries from the Government.

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 I). 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.

In November 2003, the Cabinet endorsed a draft law allowing the country to adhere to the Islamic Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, which makes the Islamic culture the core of the educational curriculum at all levels in schools and universities. Following strong condemnation and opposition from a spectrum of Christian figures, including the head of the Maronite Church, the Shi'ite Speaker of Parliament argued that the bill in its spirit violated the Constitution. The Government subsequently withdrew the bill.

Article 473 of the Penal Code stipulates that one who "blasphemes God publicly" may face imprisonment for up to a year. There were no prosecutions reported under this law during the period covered by this report.

Students and teachers functioning on tourist visas are deemed to have violated their visa status and consequently are deported. The same sanction applies to religious workers not working under the auspices of a Lebanon-registered organization.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there are periodic reports of friction between religious groups, which may be attributed to political or religious differences, and citizens still struggle with the legacy of a 15-year civil war fought along religious lines. Religious and political leaderships generally have maintained amicable relations in spite of their various political differences, and their differences have not resulted in conflict or violence. Most of the issues at stake concern political or development issues and each party/confession seeks to mobilize as much popular support as possible to obtain its goals.

Unlike in the previous reporting period, there were no incidents of violence against religious persons and buildings.

In May 2003, a bomb exploded outside the home of a Western Christian missionary in Tripoli killing one person.

In 2002, a bomb blast destroyed a mosque and shrine in the town of Anjar, home to a large Armenian community, but injured no one. Authorities continue to investigate the attack on the shrine, which is estimated to date back 800 years and was a popular pilgrimage site for Sunni Muslims. Local Muslim clerics severely criticized the attack, which occurred as Muslims prepared for the Eid al-Fitr feast marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan.

In 2002, an American citizen missionary affiliated with the Christian and Missionary Evangelical Alliance was killed in Sidon. It is believed that Sunni extremists, possibly operating from the nearby Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp, were responsible. In April, the investigating judge recommended filing the case as inactive, since the investigation had produced no results. The judge, however, issued a permanent search warrant to assist in determining the identity of the perpetrators.

In 2002, Ahmad Mansur, an employee at the teachers' fund office, shot and killed eight of his colleagues. Mansur claimed that he committed the crime for confessional reasons. Seven of the eight victims were Christians. Mansur was arrested and, in April 2003, the judicial tribunal

(Supreme Court) sentenced him to death. The sentence was carried out on January 17.

In 1999, Sunni extremists killed four LAF soldiers in an ambush in the northern region of Dinniye after the soldiers attempted to arrest two Sunni Muslims allegedly involved in a series of church bombings. The LAF retaliated by launching a massive military operation against Sunni extremists in the north. A total of five civilians, seven LAF soldiers, and 15 extremists were killed in the operation. In 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. The trial was ongoing at the end of the period covered by this report.

The Arab-Israeli conflict and Israel's long-occupation of South Lebanon nurtured a strong intolerance for Israelis, and Lebanese media sometimes refers to the State of Israel as "the Jewish State." Hizballah, through its media outlets, regularly directs strong rhetoric against Israel and its Jewish population and characterizes events in the region as part of a "Zionist conspiracy."

During the period covered by this report, Hizballah's Al-Manar television aired a Syrian-made anti-Semitic mini-drama that it advertised as portraying the history of the Zionist movement. The station aired the series "Al-Shatat" ("The Diaspora") in daily segments during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan when television audiences peak.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. 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. Embassy officers meet periodically with leaders of religious communities to discuss issues related to religious freedom and tolerance. The Embassy also complained to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Information about the airing of anti-Semitic programs by Al-Manar television. Furthermore, the Ambassador raised with the head of the Surete Generale, the agency responsible for all immigration issues, the visa status of several Christian missionaries who had been advised to depart the country and regularize their visa status. The Surete Generale confirmed this action was based solely on better enforcing visa regulations, which it has been doing since the events of September 11, 2001. The issue of political sectarianism remains a delicate one. The United States supports the principles of the Taif Accord and Embassy staff regularly discusses the issue of sectarianism with political, religious, and civic leaders.

During Ramadan, the Embassy, along with the United Arab Emirates and Canadian Embassies, co-hosted an Iftar (evening meal breaking the daily fast) attended by over 70 persons of various confessional denominations. The Embassy also sent a member of the Islamic-Christian Dialogue Committee on an international visitor program to participate in an interfaith program in the United States. Embassy staff regularly attends events sponsored by the Committee on Islamic-Christian Dialogue. USAID programs in rural areas of the country require civic participation that often involves villages of different religious backgrounds with the aim of promoting cooperation between religions.

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