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2009 Report on International Religious Freedom - Israel

[Covers the period from July 1, 2008, to June 30, 2009]

The Israeli Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty provides for freedom of worship and the Government generally respected this right in practice. While there is no constitution, government policy continued to support the generally free practice of religion.

While the Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty does not specifically refer to freedom of religion, it does refer to the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, which explicitly provides for the protection of religious freedom. In addition, numerous Supreme Court rulings incorporate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, including their religious freedom provisions, into the country's body of law. The Declaration describes the country as a Jewish state, establishing Judaism as the dominant religion while also promising full social and political equality, regardless of religious affiliation. The Basic Law describes the country as a "Jewish and democratic state." Government policy continued to support the generally free practice of religion, although governmental and legal discrimination against non-Jews and non-Orthodox streams of Judaism continued.

The status of respect for religious freedom by the Government was unchanged during the reporting period. Government allocations of state resources favored Orthodox (including Modern and National Religious streams of Orthodoxy) and ultra-Orthodox (sometimes referred to as "Haredi") Jewish religious groups and institutions, discriminating against non-Jews and non-Orthodox streams of Judaism. Officials at the Ministry of the Interior blocked three Messianic Jews (persons who identify as Jews and follow Jewish traditions but who believe Jesus was the Messiah) seeking to immigrate to the country under the Law of Return and continued to differentiate between Jews and non-Jews on national identification documents.

Some individuals and groups committed abusive and discriminatory practices against Israeli-Arab Muslims, evangelical Christians, and Messianic Jews at the same elevated level cited in the 2008 International Religious Freedom Report. Relations among religious and ethnic groups – between Jews and non-Jews, Muslims and Christians, Arabs and non-Arabs, secular and religious Jews, and among the different streams of Judaism – often were strained during the reporting period. This was due primarily to the continuing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Government's unequal treatment of non-Orthodox Jews, including the Government's recognition of only Orthodox Jewish religious authorities in personal and some civil status matters concerning Jews.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

Based on its pre-1967 borders, the country has an area of 7,685 square miles. The country has a population of 7.4 million (including settlers living in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem), of which 5.6 million are Jews, 1.5 million are Arab Muslims and Christians, and 320,000 are classified as "other" – mostly persons from the former Soviet Union who immigrated under the Law of Return but who did not qualify as Jews according to the Orthodox Jewish definition used by the Government for civil procedures.

According to figures from the Central Bureau of Statistics for 2007, the latest year such information was available, 7 percent of the Jewish population is ultra-Orthodox, 10 percent is Orthodox, 39 percent describe themselves as "traditional religious" or "traditional non-

religious," and 44 percent describe themselves as "non-religious/secular" Jews, most of whom observe some Jewish traditions. It also estimates that 30 percent of the country's Jewish population was born outside the country. A growing but still small number of traditional and secular Jews associate themselves with the Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist streams of Judaism. Although not officially recognized for purposes of civil and personal status matters, groups composed of adherents of these streams of Judaism received a small amount of government funding and were recognized by the courts. There is a small but growing community of approximately 10,000 Messianic Jews.

Slightly more than 20 percent of the population is non-Jewish, the vast majority of whom are ethnic Arabs. Of the total population, Muslims (nearly all Sunnis) constitute 16.5 percent, Christians 2.1 percent; Druze 1.7 percent; other religious groups 0.5 percent, including relatively small communities of, among others, Messianic Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Baha'is.

The Government reported that during 2008 it issued nearly 100,000 permits for foreigners to work in the country, and estimated that another 80,000 to 150,000 illegal foreign workers resided in the country. Foreign workers are members of many different religious groups, including Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic traditions.

Section II. Status of Governmental Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The country has no Constitution. While the Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty does not specifically refer to freedom of religion, it does refer to the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, which explicitly provides for the protection of religious freedom. In addition, numerous Supreme Court rulings incorporate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, including their religious freedom provisions, into the country's body of law. The Declaration describes the country as a Jewish state, establishing Judaism as the dominant religion while also promising full social and political equality, regardless of religious affiliation. The Basic Law describes the country as a "Jewish and democratic state." Government policy continued to support the generally free practice of religion, although governmental and legal discrimination against non-Jews and non-Orthodox streams of Judaism continued.

Since the founding of the country, the Government has recognized three additional religious communities – the Druze in 1957, the evangelical Episcopal Church in 1970, and the Baha'i in 1971. The fact that the Muslim population was not defined as a religious community was a vestige of the Ottoman period when Islam was the dominant religion and it has not limited Muslims from practicing their faith. A collection of ad hoc arrangements with various government agencies defined the status of several Christian denominations with representation in the country. The Government allows members of unrecognized religious groups the freedom to practice their religious beliefs.

The state does not recognize conversions to Judaism performed in the country by non-Orthodox rabbis. The Government provides funds for Orthodox conversion programs but does not provide support for non-Orthodox (i.e. Reform and Conservative) programs. The High Court ruled on May 18, 2009, that the Government must cease discriminating against non-Orthodox conversion institutes. The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) sponsored Orthodox Jewish conversion courses for Jewish soldiers who received non-Orthodox (and therefore unrecognized) conversions and for soldiers not recognized as Jewish by the Orthodox rabbinical authorities. Residency rights were not granted to relatives of converts to Judaism, except for children of female converts who are born after the mother's conversion is complete.

While the law safeguards the "holy places of all religions," the Government provides significantly greater levels of legal protection and government resources to Jewish holy places than to those of other religious groups and to Orthodox Jews over non-Orthodox Jews.

The law considers "religious communities" to be those recognized by, and carried over from, the British Mandate period (1920-48), during which Great Britain administered present-day Israel and the Occupied Territories. These include: Eastern Orthodox, Latin (Roman Catholic), Gregorian-Armenian, Armenian-Catholic, Syrian Catholic, Chaldean (Chaldean Uniate Catholic), Greek Catholic Melkite, Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, and Jewish.

The Government implements some policies based on Orthodox Jewish interpretations of religious law which thereby discriminates against citizens adhering to other religious groups. The priority given to Orthodox Jewish interpretation was a requirement in the "status quo" agreement reached at the founding of the state between the country's founders and the mainstream Orthodox rabbinical councils, which has been upheld throughout the state's history.

For example, the only in-country Jewish marriages the Government recognizes are those performed by the Orthodox Jewish establishment; and the Government does not allow civil

marriages (e.g., secular ceremonies performed by state or municipal authorities) or marriages performed by Conservative, Reform or Reconstructionist rabbis. Exclusive control over marriages – including eligibility for marriage and the performance of marriage rites – resides by law with recognized bodies of the recognized religious denominations. Civil marriages, non-Orthodox marriages of Jews, or interfaith marriages must take place abroad in order to be recognized by the Government. However, the Government stated in 2007 that it allows consular marriages, performed by officials of foreign embassies in the country, for persons who are classified as having no religion or belonging to a religious community not recognized by the state. According to New Family Organization, a non-governmental organization (NGO), more than 5,000 couples marry in civil ceremonies abroad each year, primarily in Cyprus. The Orthodox Jewish establishment also determines who is buried in Jewish state cemeteries, limiting this right to individuals considered Jewish by Orthodox standards.

Members of unrecognized religious groups, particularly evangelical Christians, faced problems in obtaining marriage certifications or burial services that are similar to the problems faced by Jews who were not considered Jewish by the Orthodox establishment. Informal arrangements with other recognized religious groups provide relief in some cases.

Proselytizing is legal in the country and missionaries of all religious groups are allowed to proselytize all citizens. However, a 1977 law prohibits any person from offering material benefits as an inducement to conversion. It is also illegal to convert persons under 18 years of age unless one parent is an adherent of the religious group seeking to convert the minor. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), under a longstanding agreement with the Government, voluntarily refrains from all proselytizing.

With some exceptions, each officially recognized religious community has legal authority over its members in matters of marriage, divorce, and burial. Legislation enacted in 1961 afforded the Shari'a courts exclusive jurisdiction to rule in matters of personal status concerning Muslims. For unrecognized religious groups, no local religious tribunals exercise jurisdiction over their members in matters of personal status. Only recognized religious communities receive government funding for their religious services.

A Muslim woman may petition for and receive a divorce through the Shari'a courts without her husband's consent under certain conditions, and a marriage contract may provide for other cases where she may obtain a divorce without her husband's consent. A Muslim man may divorce his wife without her consent and without petitioning the court.

The Government, through the Chief Rabbinate, discriminates against women in civil status matters related to marriage and divorce. Under the Jewish religious court's interpretation of personal status law, a Jewish woman may not receive a final writ of divorce without her husband's consent. Consequently, thousands of women, so-called *agunot* – "chained women" – are unable to remarry or have legitimate children because their husbands have either disappeared or refused to grant divorces. Rabbinical tribunals had the authority to impose sanctions on husbands who refuse to divorce their wives or on wives who refuse to accept divorce from their husbands, but they could not grant a divorce without the husband's consent, and women could not seek redress in civil courts. Following years of pressure by women's rights advocates, on November 5, 2008, the Knesset closed the financial extortion loophole in the law on divorce by stating that assets can be divided during the Rabbinate's divorce proceedings, rather than after the husband grants a divorce. Some husbands have used the law to extort their wives by demanding a personally favorable distribution of property and financial assets as a condition for agreeing to a divorce.

The 1967 Protection of Holy Sites Law applies to holy sites of all religious groups within the country and in all of Jerusalem, but the Government implements regulations only for Jewish sites. Non-Jewish holy sites do not enjoy legal protection under it because the Government does not recognize them as official holy sites. At the end of 2008, there were 137 designated holy sites, all of which were Jewish. Furthermore, the Government has drafted regulations to identify, protect, and fund only Jewish holy sites. While well-known sites have de facto protection as a result of their international importance, many Muslim and Christian sites are neglected, inaccessible, or threatened by property developers and municipalities. The Christian pilgrimage sites around the Sea of Galilee face periodic threats of encroachment from district planners who want to use parts of their properties for recreation. In the past, only diplomatic interventions have forestalled such efforts. Such sites do, however, enjoy certain protections under the general Penal Law (criminal code), which makes it a criminal offense to damage any holy site. Following a 2007 order by the High Court to explain its unequal implementation of the 1967 Protection of Holy Sites Law, the Government responded in March 2008 that specific regulations were not necessary for the protection of any holy sites. The Government did not explain why it therefore promulgated regulations for Jewish sites but not for non-Jewish sites.

The country's airline El Al and public buses in every city except Haifa did not operate on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath; however, several private bus companies did operate during the reporting period. Additionally, streets in most ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods were closed to vehicles on the Sabbath. According to the Law on Work and Rest Hours of 1951, which was upheld by the Supreme Court in April 2005, Jews in most professions were prohibited from working on the Sabbath unless granted a special permit by the Ministry of Industry, Trade, and

Labor. However, the Government does not usually enforce the law. The state transportation company, Egged, which operates the country's public transportation system, continued to operate sex-segregated busses along city and intra-city routes frequented by ultra-Orthodox Jews. Women who refuse to sit at the back of such busses risk harassment and physical assault by male passengers.

Governmental authorities prohibit mixed gender prayer services at religious sites in deference to the belief of most Orthodox Jews that such services violate the precepts of Judaism. At the Western Wall, the holiest site in Judaism, men and women must use separate areas to visit and pray. Women also are not allowed to conduct prayers at the Western Wall while wearing prayer shawls, which are typically worn by Jewish men, and are not permitted to read from Torah scrolls.

The law permits the Government to subsidize approximately 60 percent of the expenses incurred by ultra-Orthodox Jewish religious schools, despite their regular failure to implement a governmental requirement that all state-funded schools teach core subjects, such as English, mathematics, and science.

The Government funds the construction of Jewish synagogues and cemeteries. According to the Government, while the state budget does not cover the costs of construction for non-Jewish places of worship, it does provide some assistance for their maintenance, although at a disproportionately lower level than for synagogues. In some areas, the Government allows private citizens or municipalities to turn old mosques into galleries, restaurants, and museums.

Government resources available for religious/heritage studies to Arab and non-Orthodox Jewish public schools are significantly less than those available to Orthodox Jewish public schools. According to the Israel Religious Action Committee (IRAC), in 2006 approximately 96 percent of all state funds for Jewish religious education were allocated to Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox Jewish schools. Public and private Arab schools offer studies in both Islam and Christianity, but the state funding for such studies is proportionately less than the funding for religious education courses in Jewish schools.

In May 2009, the rabbinical courts presented the Justice Ministry a bill for its review, seeking to secure in law their claim to jurisdiction over financial matters in arbitration of property disputes between a divorced husband and wife. Currently, no religious group possesses such financial authority. The Government stated that its endorsement of the bill was in accordance with its coalition agreement with the Sephardic ultra-Orthodox Shas party. The Supreme Court ruled in April 2006 that Jewish rabbinical courts do not have the authority to arbitrate in any financial dispute. Although the rabbinical courts have ruled on financial matters since before the establishment of the state, their jurisdiction on these matters has never been established in law. The Justice Ministry's review of the draft legislation was ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

The Government observes the following Jewish holy days as national holidays: Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Simhat Torah, Passover, and Shavuot. Arab municipalities often recognize Christian and Muslim holidays. The Government employs civilian non-Jewish clergy as chaplains at military burials when a non-Muslim or non-Jewish soldier dies in service. The Interior Ministry provides imams to conduct funerals according to Muslim customs. All Jewish chaplains in the IDF are Orthodox. The IDF does not have any Muslim or Christian chaplains because, according to government sources, the frequent home leave accorded to all soldiers allows Muslim and Christian soldiers easy and regular access to their respective clergy and religious services at home.

Military service is compulsory only for Jews, Druze, and the 5,000 member Circassian community (Muslims from the northwestern Caucasus region who immigrated to various points in the Ottoman-controlled Middle East in the late nineteenth century). Ultra-Orthodox Jews and Israeli Arabs – both Muslim and Christian – are exempt. The majority of Israeli Arabs opt not to serve in the army; however, some Christian and Muslim Arab citizens, mainly Bedouin, serve as volunteers. As of June 2007, Israeli Arabs and ultra-Orthodox Jews can perform national service for one to two years as volunteers in health, education, or welfare sectors in lieu of military service. This service confers eligibility for similar national benefits accorded military veterans. Israeli-Arab advocacy groups, Knesset members, and local community leaders have charged that housing, educational, and other benefits, as well as employment preferences based on military experience, effectively discriminate in favor of the Jewish population, the majority of which serves in the military.

According to the Government watchdog group Movement for Quality in Government, between 2002 and 2007, 1,520 ultra-Orthodox men chose to enter the workforce through programs mandated by the Tal Law, while 50,000 continued to study in yeshivas. According to IDF figures released in July 2007, approximately 11 percent of all male candidates for military service had deferments as full-time yeshiva students, up from 7.3 percent in 2000.

The Arrangements Law, drafted annually to guide government spending, exempts recognized religious groups from paying municipal taxes for any place of worship. Exemption from tax payments was also granted to some groups that have not been officially recognized by law.

However, the Government has generally interpreted the exemption from municipal taxes to apply only to the portion of the property of religious organizations actually used for worship. Some not-for-profit religious organizations also receive tax exemptions.

Secular courts have primacy over questions of inheritance, but parties, by mutual agreement, may also file such cases in religious courts. Family status matters are normally the purview of religious courts, but Jewish, Druze, and Christian families may ask for some cases, such as alimony and child custody in divorces, to be adjudicated in civil courts. Muslims have the right to bring matters such as alimony and property division associated with divorce to civil courts in family-status cases. However, paternity cases are the exclusive jurisdiction of Shari'a courts.

Jewish rabbinical courts may not arbitrate property disputes between a divorced husband and wife. Although they had done so since before the establishment of the state, the Supreme Court ruled in April 2006 that they have no jurisdiction over financial matters. The Justice Ministry's review of government endorsed draft legislation submitted by the rabbinical courts was ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

The Ministry of the Interior has jurisdiction over religious matters concerning non-Jewish groups, while the Ministry of Tourism is responsible for the protection and upkeep of non-Jewish holy sites. The Ministry of Religious Affairs has jurisdiction over the country's 133 Jewish religious councils, which oversee the provision of religious services for Jewish communities. A single non-Jewish religious council exists for the Druze and is overseen by the Interior Ministry's Department of Non-Jewish Affairs. Legislation establishing religious councils does not include non-Jewish religious communities other than the Druze. Instead, the Ministry of the Interior provides a limited amount of direct funds for religious services for recognized non-Jewish communities. The Government continues to finance approximately 40 percent of the religious councils' budgets and local authorities funded the remainder.

Public Hebrew-speaking secular schools teach Jewish history and Jewish religious texts. These classes primarily cover Jewish heritage and culture, rather than religious belief. Public Arabic-speaking schools with Arab student bodies teach mandatory classes on the Qur'an and the Bible, since both Muslim and Christian Arabs attend these schools. Orthodox Jewish religious schools that are part of the public school system teach mandatory religion classes, as do private ultra-Orthodox schools that receive significant state funding. The few private mixed Jewish-Arab schools that exist have proven to be successful for both Arabs and Jews.

Under the Law of Return, the Government grants immigration and residence rights to individuals who meet established criteria defining Jewish identity. Included in this definition is a child or grandchild of a Jew, the spouse of a Jew, the spouse of a child of a Jew, and the spouse of a grandchild of a Jew. The Government uses a separate, more rigorous standard based on Orthodox Jewish criteria to determine the right to full citizenship, entitlement to government financial support for immigrants, the legitimacy of conversions to Judaism performed within the country, and Jewish status for purposes of personal and some civil status issues.

Although identification cards do not carry a religion or nationality designation, the Interior Ministry distinguishes between Jews and non-Jews on identification cards by printing the birth date of Jews in Hebrew letters according to the Jewish calendar while listing that of others according to the Gregorian calendar.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy continued to support the generally free practice of religion, although government discrimination against non-Jews and non-Orthodox streams of Judaism continued.

For example, the Government continued to discriminate against non-Orthodox Jewish citizens through some policies based on Orthodox Jewish interpretations of religious law. Many Jewish citizens objected to exclusive Orthodox control over fundamental aspects of their personal lives. Approximately 310,000 citizens who immigrated under the Law of Return but are not considered Jewish by the Orthodox Rabbinate cannot be married, divorced, or buried in Jewish cemeteries within the country. A 1996 law requiring the Government to establish civil cemeteries remained inadequately implemented.

Restrictions on access to non-Jewish religious sites, as well as limits on funding and protection of those sites, also contributed to religious tensions. While officially legal, some missionaries continued to face harassment and discrimination from some local government officials.

During Jewish holidays, following terrorist attacks, and in response to other potential threats, the Government imposed closures to restrict travel for the stated purpose of providing security. These closures impeded access to holy sites in Israel, the West Bank, and Jerusalem.

During the reporting period, members of many religious groups traveled to the country freely. However, according to representatives of Christian institutions, visa issuance rates for some of their religious workers remained low. Continuing a policy enacted in October 2007, the Interior

Ministry refused to grant multiple-entry visas for members of the clergy and other religious workers seeking to travel to and between their parishes in Israel and the Occupied Territories. Clergy who wished to return to or visit their parishes and congregations were required to apply for new, single-entry visas at Israeli consulates abroad, a process that could take months. Following an unsuccessful appeal by the Vatican in advance of Pope Benedict XVI's May 2009 visit to the country, the Interior Ministry stated that multiple-entry visas for clergy and other religious workers constituted a security threat and would not be issued.

Since the Government did not have diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, Muslim citizens traveled through another country, usually Jordan, to obtain travel documents for performing the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). The average annual number of Hajj pilgrims traveling from the country in recent years was approximately 4,500. Saudi Arabian authorities determined the overall number allowed to participate in the Hajj. According to the Government, travel to hostile countries, including travel to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj, may be restricted; however, these restrictions were based on security concerns rather than on any religious or ethnic factors.

According to government figures, the 2008 budget for religious services and religious institutions for the Jewish population was approximately 1.6 billion shekels (\$457 million). Religious minorities, which constituted slightly more than 20 percent of the population, received approximately 65 million shekels (\$18.6 million), or just less than 4 percent of total funding.

The Supreme Court ruled on March 9, 2009 that implementing regulations to protect Islamic holy sites are unnecessary. In its ruling, the court registered the Government's commitment to provide annual funding of \$526,000 (2 million shekels), and dismissed – on the strength of the Government's commitment – the 2004 petition of the Arab-Israeli legal advocacy group Adalah that implementing regulations were required. Adalah had charged that all of the locations designated as holy sites were Jewish and that the Government's failure to draft implementing regulations to protect non-Jewish sites had resulted in the desecration and their conversion to other uses of individual Muslim sites. In August 2007 the Supreme Court had directed the Government to explain its failure to protect Islamic holy sites and provide funds for their maintenance.

Responding to petitions against the May 2008 High Rabbinical Court's annulment of the conversions of all 40,000 people who converted under the auspices of the state-sanctioned Orthodox conversion courts since 1999, the High Court on May 19, 2009 ordered the High Rabbinical Court to explain its decision within 90 days. The High Rabbinical Court, which disputes the secular High Court's jurisdiction over the issue, had not answered by the end of the reporting period. The May 2008 ruling alleged lax standards under the High Rabbinical Court's previous director, Rabbi Haim Druckman. In February 2008 a ministerial committee on conversions had established a new Conversion Authority – headed by Sephardic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar – to appoint and oversee the work of state-sanctioned Orthodox religious judges who evaluate the bona fides of would-be converts to Judaism. Amar also heads the High Rabbinical Court. Critics charged that the appointment of Amar to be in charge of the Conversion Authority effectively erased years of progress toward broadening the official definition of Jewishness and solidified the Orthodox establishment's hold on matters of Jewish identity.

In order to marry in government-recognized ceremonies, Jews had to undergo marriage counseling administered by the Orthodox religious authorities. As part of this counseling, all Jews – including the secular majority and those who practice reform or conservative Judaism – were instructed to respect traditional Orthodox family roles. A brochure used in the counseling during the reporting period compared women to clay and urged the husband to "shape and mold her as he pleases." The husband is also instructed not to become "spineless" or tolerate disrespectful behavior from his wife: "If she is disrespectful you must not give in; you can become angry and stop talking to her until she realizes she is wrong." The husband is also admonished to compliment his wife regularly, "even if it is a lie," because "a woman who has not been complimented is like a fish out of water."

As in previous reporting periods, the Religious Affairs Ministry failed to implement the 1996 Alternative Burial Law that established the right of any individual to be buried in a civil ceremony, and did not utilize any of the money allocated in the 2008 state budget for the development of civil/secular burial plots. There were only two public cemeteries available to the approximately 310,000 citizens, mostly immigrants from the former Soviet Union, who immigrated under the Law of Return but are not considered Jewish according to the Orthodox Jewish authorities. In January 2008 the Jerusalem municipality approved plans to establish a new city cemetery for use by secular citizens free of charge.

In December 2008 the Government and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) concluded negotiations that followed the LWF's appeal to the Supreme Court of the District Court's 2002 revocation of its tax-exempt status. The agreement stipulated that the Government would eliminate all back-taxes claimed by the tax authority in return for LWF, a not-for-profit religious organization, agreeing to commence payment of employment taxes starting January 1, 2009. LWF's hospital on the Mount of Olives had enjoyed tax exempt status for almost 40

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 who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

returned to the United States.

Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

During the reporting period, terrorist organizations, including Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, carried out regular attacks against Israeli citizens, mostly in the form of indiscriminate rocket and mortar attacks from the Gaza Strip. On at least one occasion, a rocket from Gaza killed an Israeli Muslim. Terrorists often issued statements that contained anti-Semitic rhetoric in conjunction with the attacks.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On May 18, 2009, the High Court ruled that the Government must stop discriminating against non-Orthodox conversion institutes in regard to state funding. The decision came in response to a 2005 petition by IRAC.

In January 2009 the Education Ministry approved the accreditation of the country's first fully independent Arab university, Mar Elias College. The university is operated by the Melkite (Eastern rite) Catholic Church and provides a higher education curriculum oriented toward coexistence for a diverse faculty and student body of Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

On November 10, 2008, the Supreme Court ruled that the refusal of the state transportation company, Egged, and its advertising company Canaan, to allow a political party to post campaign advertisements featuring images of women on its busses in Jerusalem was discriminatory and ordered Egged and Canaan to accept the two candidates' advertisements. The women, both candidates in the November 2008 Jerusalem municipal elections, were told that their pictures might offend ultra-Orthodox residents who frequent intra-city routes for which Egged operates sex-segregated busses.

In September 2008 the police reissued a 1999 directive to police precincts throughout the country reminding them of their duty to fully investigate crimes against minority religious communities.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Jewish-Arab tensions remained at approximately the same level as in recent years. However, tensions between some Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities and evangelical Christians and Messianic Jewish communities grew significantly during 2007 and 2008, and maintained their elevated levels through the end of the reporting period.

Relations among other religious and ethnic groups, including Muslims and Christians, Arabs and non-Arabs, and secular and religious Jews, also continued to be strained. Such religious and ethnic tensions are the result of historical grievances as well as cultural and religious differences, and they have been compounded by the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which has included terrorist attacks targeting Jewish civilians, IDF operations in the Occupied Territories, incidents of Jewish militants targeting Israeli-Arabs, and incidents of Israeli-Arab involvement in terrorist activity.

Animosity between secular and religious Jews continued during the reporting period. In particular, members of Orthodox Jewish groups treated non-Orthodox Jews with manifestations of discrimination and intolerance. As in past years, ultra-Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem and other ultra-Orthodox enclaves threw rocks at passing motorists driving on the Sabbath and periodically harassed or assaulted women whose appearance they considered immodest, including by throwing acid on them.

Society's attitudes toward missionary activities and conversion generally were negative. Most Jews were opposed to missionary activity directed at Jews, and some were hostile to Jewish converts to Christianity. While proselytism is officially legal, missionaries continued to face harassment and discrimination by some Jewish activists and organizations. The Messianic Jewish and Jehovah's Witnesses communities, among others, accused groups such as Yad L'Achim and Lev L'Achim, and Jewish religious organizations opposed to missionary activity, of harassing and occasionally assaulting their members. According to Yad L'Achim's annual report for 2008, quoted in the newspaper *Yom L'Yom*, the organization "saved 174 souls from the clutches of the [Messianic and evangelical] mission" during the year. The organization's semi-clandestine Counter-Missionary Department, headed by Rabbi Alex Artovski, also claimed to have dozens of informants and infiltrators in the Government and in Christian or Messianic Jewish congregations, enabling the organization to force the closure of 18 religious meeting places and expel 12 "top-ranking" missionaries from the country during 2008. According to JIJ attorneys and representatives of affected religious communities, Yad L'Achim succeeded in such activities by pressuring landlords, employers and Interior Ministry officials to assist its campaign against groups it deemed "dangerous cults."

Despite harassment, the number of Messianic Jews and evangelical Christians has grown in recent years through both immigration and conversion. During the reporting period, however, increased press reporting and complaints from religious freedom activists indicated a corresponding increase in Yad L'achim and associated activism, and a growing wider backlash

against the presence of evangelical Christian or Messianic Jewish congregations and missionaries living in Jewish communities. Exacerbating these tensions was the widespread but false belief that proselytizing is illegal in the country.

Members of Jehovah's Witnesses reported an increase in assaults and other crimes against their membership in 2008 and noted the difficulties their members faced convincing the police to investigate or apprehend the perpetrators. Between September 2007 and September 2008, members of Jehovah's Witnesses filed 46 criminal complaints against anti-missionary activists, most of them members of Yad L'Achim. The crimes ranged from harassment to assault. Police stated that they responded to 15 of 35 calls for assistance during the same time period, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses legal department. The JIJ noted a similar trend regarding crimes committed against members of the congregations it represents.

On June 10, 2009 the Be'er Sheva District Court handed down sentences to two defendants charged with assaulting the pastor of a Messianic congregation in Be'er Sheva and damaging property. Members of the congregation filed charges against the assailants after a witness to the assault filed a report with the Be'er Shiva police in December 2005. Earlier that month, a witness reported that a group of approximately 200 Orthodox Jews had violently disrupted the religious service of that congregation in Be'er Sheva. According to the account, the group pushed and slapped the congregation's pastor and damaged property.

On May 15, 2009, ultra-Orthodox residents of the Tel Aviv suburb of Rehovot attacked and beat a group of Messianic Jews who were handing out New Testament pamphlets on the street. According to press reports, secular passers-by joined in the beating before police intervened to stop them.

On December 21, 2008, unknown vandals painted swastikas and Russian graffiti on doors and in classrooms of the Lev Simcha yeshiva in Ashdod. Police refused to reveal the contents of the graffiti, citing shock at its graphic nature. A police investigation was ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

On December 20, 2008, unknown vandals painted anti-Muslim and anti-Arab graffiti – including slogans such as "Mohammed is a pig"; "death to Arabs"; and "Kahane was right," a reference to the founder of the outlawed Jewish terrorist organization Kach – on the doors and walls of the Al-Bahar mosque in Jaffa. A police investigation was ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

On October 8, 2008, violence erupted between Israeli Jews and Arabs in the city of Acre (Akko) at the beginning of the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur after an Arab resident drove into a predominantly Jewish neighborhood. Driving on Yom Kippur is prohibited with the exception of emergency vehicles. Rioting ensued for several days, as Jewish and Arab extremists incited their communities against one another. While the inflammatory rhetoric was mutual, the majority of those inciting violence were Jewish, according to the Northern District police commander. According to press reports, both communities suffered significant property damage, and several Arab families were displaced from their homes in or near Jewish neighborhoods. Police continued to pursue and arrest the chief instigators after the violence subsided. On October 20, 2008, police arrested six young Jewish men in Tel Aviv for allegedly firebombing two Arab homes in an attempt to spread the anti-Arab incitement to Jaffa and other mixed neighborhoods around Tel Aviv.

On August 13, 2008, unknown arsonists attacked the Beit Yaakov Synagogue in the Tel Aviv suburb of Bnei Brak, destroying the synagogue's Torah scrolls.

On November 10, 2008, two defendants were sentenced to two months imprisonment, suspended for three years, plus 150 hours of community service for their part in a 2006 incident where approximately 100 ultra-Orthodox Jews assaulted approximately 50 Christian tourists in a Jerusalem neighborhood, injuring three.

Numerous NGOs in the country remained dedicated to promoting Jewish-Arab coexistence and interfaith harmony. Their programs included events to increase productive contact between religious groups and to promote Jewish-Arab dialogue and cooperation. For example, the "House of Hope" in the Galilee town of Shfaram near Haifa, founded by Elias Jabbour, engaged Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities in dialogue. Also, Father Elias Chacour, a Greek Catholic priest in the village of Ibellin in western Galilee, founded a secondary school with Christian and Muslim students and several Jewish faculty members. These groups and their events had varying degrees of success. Interfaith dialogue often was linked to ongoing peace efforts between Israelis and Palestinians and between the country and its Arab neighbors. A number of NGOs sought to build understanding and create dialogue among religious groups and between religious and secular Jewish communities. These organizations include the Geshar Foundation (Hebrew for "bridge"); Meitarim, which operated a pluralistic Jewish-oriented school system; the Interreligious Coordinating Council, which promoted interfaith dialogue among Jewish, Muslim, and Christian institutions; and the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, comprising the chief religious authorities of the area's Jewish, Muslim, and Christian establishments.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy consistently raised concerns of religious freedom with the Foreign Ministry, the police, the Prime Minister's office, and other government agencies.

Embassy officials maintained a dialogue with NGOs that follow human and civil rights matters, including religious freedom, and promote interfaith initiatives. Embassy representatives also attended and spoke at meetings of such organizations.