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ISRAEL AND THE GOLAN HEIGHTS 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

A report on the West Bank and Gaza, including areas subject to the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority (PA), is appended at the end of this report. This section includes Israel, the Golan Heights, and issues primarily related to Israeli residents of Jerusalem. Issues primarily related to Palestinian residents of Jerusalem are covered in the “West Bank and Gaza” section. On December 6, the United States recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. It is the position of the United States that the specific boundaries of Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem are subject to final status negotiations between the parties.

The Basic Law describes the country as a Jewish state and protects the freedom of conscience, faith, religion, and worship, regardless of an individual’s religious affiliation. Some Members of the Knesset (MKs) and government officials called for reversing the policy of banning non-Muslim prayer and the government’s ban on MKs at the Temple Mount (the foundation of the first and second Jewish temples) and the Haram al-Sharif (containing the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque), but Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly repeated his support for both bans. The prime minister, however, allowed MKs, including two Jewish MKs, to enter the compound for one day in August, and one Jewish MK entered on October 25. One Muslim MK visited without permission from Prime Minister Netanyahu on July 27. The government permitted persons of all faiths to pray at the main Western Wall plaza in separate gender sections, but continued to enforce a prohibition on mixed gender Jewish prayer services. On June 25, the government suspended a January 2016 compromise agreement with non-Orthodox Jewish movements regarding “egalitarian prayer,” i.e., Reform and Conservative Jewish services, south of the main Western Wall plaza. The government implemented policies based on Orthodox Jewish interpretations of religious law. For example, the only in-country marriages the government recognized for Jews were those performed by the Chief Rabbinate, which refused to wed persons who did not qualify as Jewish under the Chief Rabbinate’s criteria. Three Muslim citizens shot and killed two Israeli police officers, both of whom were Druze, near the entrance to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif on July 14. The attackers escaped to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, where other Israeli police officers shot and killed them. On June 25, following ultra-Orthodox parties’ objections to elements of a January 2016 agreement with non-Orthodox Jewish groups that offered symbolic recognition to the Conservative and Reform movements, the

cabinet voted to “freeze” the agreement. Media reported on September 19 that Prime Minister Netanyahu expressed support for greater religious pluralism for Jews in Israel, but stated that he “won’t solve” the disparity between laws based on *halacha* (Jewish law) and public practice by the non-Orthodox majority. The government maintained its policy not to accept new applications for official recognition from religious groups, while stating that members of nonrecognized religious groups remained free to practice their religion. Government resources available for religious or heritage studies to Arab and non-Orthodox Jewish public schools remained significantly fewer than those available to Orthodox Jewish public schools.

Caretakers at a Muslim cemetery in Jaffa discovered several smashed gravestones on April 23. The Jerusalem District prosecutor indicted an ultra-Orthodox man on September 4 for painting graffiti and death threats against Reform Jewish leaders on a reform synagogue in Ra’anana in November 2016. Tension continued between the ultra-Orthodox community and other Israelis, including concerns related to service in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), housing, public transportation, and participation in the workforce. The media reported attacks and threats by ultra-Orthodox assailants against soldiers and those encouraging ultra-Orthodox men to enlist in the military, including throwing stones at Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman on August 8, posting signs threatening IDF Human Resources Branch Director Major General Moti Almoz in May and June, and burning effigies of IDF soldiers on May 13. According to missionary organizations, societal attitudes toward missionary activities and conversion to other religions continued to be negative. Some Jews continued to oppose missionary activity directed at Jews, saying it amounted to religious harassment, and reacted with hostility toward Jewish converts to Christianity. Jehovah’s Witnesses described violent attacks, such as a July 20 assault by a woman against a Jehovah’s Witness member in Tel Aviv, hitting her face and legs. According to the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, in September vandals shattered stained-glass windows and committed other acts of vandalism in St. Stephen’s Church at the Beit Jimal Monastery near Beit Shemesh for the third time in four years.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officers spoke with government officials and Knesset leaders about the importance of maintaining the status quo at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif and not escalating tensions through provocative actions or statements. In meetings with government officials and public speeches, the Ambassador and embassy officers stressed the importance of religious pluralism and respect for all religious groups. Visiting high-level U.S. officials, including the President, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, the Special

Representative for International Negotiations, and the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South/Central Asia, met with government officials, religious groups, and civil society leaders to stress tolerance and dialogue and ways to reduce religiously motivated violence. Embassy-supported initiatives focused on interreligious dialogue and community development and advocated for a shared society for Jewish and Arab populations. Embassy officers participated in religious events organized by Jewish, Muslim, Druze, and Christian groups to show U.S. support for religious pluralism.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 8.3 million (July 2017 estimate), which includes residents and citizens living in the Golan Heights, as well as 201,000 Israelis in East Jerusalem (2014 estimate). According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) classification system, approximately 75 percent of the population is Jewish, 18 percent Muslim, 2 percent Christian, and 1.6 percent Druze. The remaining 4 percent consists of those the CBS classifies as “other” – mostly persons, including many immigrants from the former Soviet Union, who identify themselves as Jewish but do not satisfy the Orthodox Jewish definition of “Jewish” the government uses for civil procedures – as well as relatively small communities of Samaritans, Karaites, Ahmadi Muslims, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The majority of non-Jewish citizens are of Arab origin. This includes 134,000 out of 170,000 Christians, according to an April 3 report from the Knesset Research and Information Center. In addition, according to the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, there are approximately 65,000 noncitizen Christian laborers in the country, mostly from Asia. There are also approximately 27,500 Christian “irregular” migrants from Eritrea and approximately 79,000 persons who overstayed tourist visas, mostly Christians from Ukraine and Georgia.

According to a poll by the local NGO Hiddush published in September, 59 percent of Jewish Israelis do not affiliate with any religious stream, 18 percent are “Zionist Orthodox,” 11 percent “ultra-Orthodox” (including 2 percent who chose “Zionist ultra-Orthodox”), 6 percent chose “Reform,” and 5 percent “Conservative.” There is also a community of approximately 20,000 Messianic Jews, as reported by the Messianic Jewish community.

Bedouin Muslim communities are concentrated in the Negev and many majority Druze, Christian, and Muslim communities are located in the Galilee region, some of which are homogenous and others a mix of these groups. There are several

Druze communities in the Golan Heights, as well as an Alawite community in Ghajar.

According to government statistics, as of September 30, there were 86,870 legal foreign workers in the country, 74,212 Palestinian legal workers, and 18,555 undocumented workers (not including Palestinians). The government did not have information on the number of undocumented Palestinian workers. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, there are approximately 38,000 African migrants and asylum seekers residing in the country. Foreign workers and migrants include Protestants, Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

There is no constitution. The Basic Law describes the country as a “Jewish and democratic state” and references the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, which promises freedom of religion and conscience and full social and political equality, regardless of religious affiliation.

According to Supreme Court rulings, the Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty protects freedom to practice or not practice religious beliefs, including freedom of conscience, faith, religion, and worship, regardless of an individual’s religion. The law incorporates religious freedom provisions of international human rights covenants into the country’s body of domestic law.

The Chief Rabbinate retains the authority to issue certificates of conversion to Judaism within the country under Orthodox interpretations of Jewish law. The Council of the Chief Rabbinate consists of Orthodox rabbis chosen by an assembly consisting of rabbis, local government leaders, government ministers, and laypersons appointed by the government.

The government provides funding for both Orthodox and non-Orthodox conversion programs. Relatives of Jewish converts may not receive residency rights, except for the children of male or female converts born after the parent’s conversion is complete. A law which took effect in May authorizes local rabbinates to determine who can use their *mikvahs*, potentially preventing Reform and Conservative Jews from using these facilities for conversions.

The law recognizes Judaism, Christianity, Islam, the Druze, and the Bahai Faith. Christian religious communities recognized according to the adopted Ottoman *millet* (court) system include: Eastern Orthodox, Latin (Roman Catholic), Gregorian-Armenian, Armenian Catholic, Syrian Catholic, Chaldean (Chaldean Uniate Catholic), Greek Catholic Melkite, Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, and Evangelical Episcopal. The Anglican and Bahai communities are recognized through a British Mandate-era law adopted by the government. The government does not recognize other religious communities, including major Protestant denominations with a presence in the country, as distinct ethnoreligious communities. There are two legal pathways to formal recognition, according to laws adopted from the British Mandate period: through a government declaration in response to a petition to the Prime Minister's Office according to the Order in Council, or by petitioning the Ministry of Interior (MOI) for recognition. Groups may appeal rejected applications to the Supreme Court.

Recognized religious communities are exempt from taxation of places of worship and may have separate courts to apply their religion's personal status law. Some nonrecognized religions, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, receive a property tax exemption on their houses of worship, although others, such as Buddhism and Scientology, do not. The government has stated that tax collection from nonrecognized religions is conducted by local authorities in accordance with the law, but has not stated why some nonrecognized religions receive a property tax exemption and others do not. While members of recognized religious communities only require approval for resident visas from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, visas for members of nonrecognized religious communities also require MOI approval for stays longer than five years.

Legislation establishes religious councils for Jewish communities and for the Druze. The Ministry of Religious Services (MRS) has jurisdiction over the country's 133 Jewish religious councils, which oversee the provision of religious services for Jewish communities. The government finances approximately 40 percent of the religious councils' budgets, and local municipalities fund the remainder. The MOI Department of Non-Jewish Affairs has jurisdiction over religious matters concerning non-Jewish groups and oversees the religious council for the Druze. The Department of Non-Jewish Affairs convenes an interreligious council of all recognized religions, including Judaism, which serves as a discussion forum for recognized religious communities.

The law criminalizes willfully and unjustly disturbing any meeting of persons lawfully assembled for religious worship or assaulting someone at such a meeting.

It also criminalizes intentionally destroying, damaging, or desecrating any object held sacred by any group of persons, with punishment of three years' imprisonment.

The law requires individuals to obtain a permit from the minister of interior or the prime minister for travel to "hostile" countries, including Saudi Arabia, which is the destination for those participating in the Hajj. Illegal travel is punishable by a prison sentence or fine if the traveler does not request prior approval.

Proselytizing is legal, although it is illegal to proselytize to a person under 18 years of age without the consent of both parents. The law prohibits offering a material benefit in the course of proselytizing.

The law criminalizes the damage, destruction, or desecration of religious sites (subject to seven years' imprisonment) and actions to "harm the freedom of access" of worshippers to religious sites (subject to five years' imprisonment). Certain religious sites considered antiquities are provided further protection under the antiquities law. The Ministry of Tourism is responsible for the protection and upkeep of non-Jewish religious sites, while the MRS protects and maintains Jewish religious sites. The law also provides for up to five years' imprisonment for actions "likely to violate the feelings of the members of the different religions" with regard to their religious sites. The law grants the government, not the courts, the authority to decide the scope of the right to worship at certain religious sites, and the Supreme Court has upheld this governmental authority.

The government provides separate public schools for Jewish children, conducted in Hebrew, and Arab children, conducted in Arabic. For Jewish children there are separate public schools available for religious and secular families. Individual families may choose a public school system for their children to attend regardless of ethnicity or religious observance. By law, the state provides the equivalent of public school funding to two systems of ultra-Orthodox religious schools, the United Torah Judaism-affiliated Independent Education System and the Shas-affiliated Fountain of Torah Education System.

The law provides the right for any Jew, or any child or grandchild of a Jew, to immigrate to the country from a foreign country with his or her spouse and children. The minor children of a grandchild of a Jew are granted humanitarian status, but are not automatically granted citizenship. Non-Jews have no such route to immigration. Under the Law of Return those who completed an Orthodox conversion inside or outside the country are entitled to immigration, citizenship,

and registration as Jews in the civil population registry. Those who completed conversion to Judaism outside the country, regardless of affiliation, are eligible for these benefits even if they are not recognized as Jewish by the Chief Rabbinate; this would include Reform, Conservative, and other affiliations of Judaism. Immigration rights (including citizenship) under the Law of Return are also extended to those who complete private (non-Rabbinate) Orthodox conversions in Israel. Descendants of Jews qualify for immigration under the Law of Return regardless of the religious beliefs with which they were raised, although the law considers those who as adults convert to other religious groups, including Messianic Judaism, to no longer be eligible for benefits under the Law of Return.

According to the law, persons are classified as “lacking religion” if they do not belong to one of the recognized religions as recorded in the National Registry. This includes approximately 322,000 immigrants and their children, primarily from the former Soviet Union, who gained Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return but are not recognized as Jewish by the Chief Rabbinate, which applies the Orthodox definition of matrilineal descent.

The Chief Rabbinate determines who may be buried in Jewish state cemeteries, limiting this right to individuals considered Jewish by Orthodox standards. The law provides for the right of any individual to be buried in a civil ceremony, and requires that civil cemeteries be established in various areas around the country. The law criminalizes the intentional desecration of, or trespass on, places of burial, which is punishable by three years’ imprisonment.

Laws inherited from the Ottoman Empire and British Mandate periods establish the legal authority of religious courts operated by officially recognized religious communities over their members in matters of marriage, divorce, and burial. The law allows for civil registration of two persons as a married couple outside of the religious court system only if they married outside the country, or if the partners are of different religions and their respective religious courts do not object to a civil registration, or if both partners are listed as “lacking religion” in the population registry. A 1951 law on women’s equality explicitly excludes issues of marriage and divorce and appointments to religious positions.

The law imposes a two-year prison sentence on those who conduct a Jewish wedding but fail to officially register it, i.e., conduct a Jewish wedding outside the Rabbinate’s authority.

Religious courts have exclusive jurisdiction over divorce cases in which a husband and wife are registered with the same recognized religion. Members of religious groups not permitting divorce, such as Catholics, may not obtain a divorce unless they convert to a different religion that authorizes divorce. Paternity cases among Muslim citizens are the exclusive jurisdiction of sharia courts. Civil courts have jurisdiction over personal status cases when religious courts lack jurisdiction, as in cases of mixed-religion and same-sex couples.

Matters stemming from divorce proceedings, including alimony, child support, child custody, guardianship, and property division, are under parallel jurisdiction of both religious courts and civil courts, and the first court to receive a case acquires exclusive jurisdiction over it. A 2014 law requires spouses to meet with the Family Assistance Unit, a dispute-resolution body promoting settlement outside of courts, before filing such lawsuits in either court system.

In accordance with *halacha*, a Jewish woman whose husband refuses to give her a *get* (Jewish-legal writ of divorce) may not legally remarry in the country. While a rabbinical court may order a husband to give a *get*, it does not have the power to terminate the marriage if he refuses. In February the Supreme Court upheld the authority of rabbinical courts to impose community-based punishments, such as avoiding financial dealings with a *get*-refuser, excluding him from community activities, and advertising these decisions to the public. The Supreme Court, however, rejected a prohibition on giving a *get*-refusing man a Jewish burial, since his death would already have terminated the marriage.

Secular courts have primary jurisdiction over questions of inheritance, but parties may file such cases in religious courts by mutual agreement. Decisions by these bodies are subject to Supreme Court review. The rabbinical courts, when exercising their power in civil matters, apply religious law, which varies from civil law, including in matters relating to the property rights of widows and daughters.

Military service is compulsory for Jewish citizens, male citizens who are Druze, and male citizens in the Circassian community (Muslims originally from the northwestern Caucasus region who migrated in the late 19th century). On September 12, the Supreme Court struck down the existing arrangement to exempt ultra-Orthodox men from military service, and it set a deadline of one year to pass new legislation to reduce inequality in the burden of military service between ultra-Orthodox and other Jews. Orthodox Jewish women and Arab Christian and Muslim citizens remain exempt from mandatory military service, although some voluntarily enlist.

Membership in a recognized religion is recorded in the National Registry and generally passed from parents to children, unless a person changes it through a formal conversion. Those who identify as Jewish but do not meet the Chief Rabbinate's criteria as "Jewish" under Jewish religious law, as well as members of religious groups that are not recognized, are recorded as "lacking religion." All citizens who meet the Chief Rabbinate's criteria as "Jewish" are recorded as Jewish, whether Orthodox or not (unless they convert to something else).

The law criminalizes calling for, praising, supporting, or encouraging acts of violence or terrorism where such actions are likely to lead to violence, including calls for violence against religious groups.

The law criminalizing statements demeaning or degrading or showing violence toward someone on the basis of race provides an exception for statements citing a religious source, unless intent to incite racism is proven.

There is no legal requirement regarding personal observance or nonobservance of the Jewish Sabbath (Shabbat), from sunset on Fridays until sunset on Saturdays, and on Jewish holidays. A 1951 law, however, declares in the context of labor rights that Shabbat and Jewish holidays are national days of rest, while permitting non-Jewish workers alternate days of rest. The law criminalizes those who open their businesses and employ Jews on Shabbat, but not the workers, except those who are self-employed. There are exceptions, however, for essential infrastructure and the hospitality, culture, and recreation industries. Following a series of political crises relating to train infrastructure work on Shabbat, the Knesset passed a law on December 25 instructing the labor and welfare minister to take into account "Israel's tradition," among other factors, when considering whether to approve permits to work on Shabbat. Municipalities and regional councils may pass bylaws relating to commercial activity on Shabbat, with the consent of the minister of interior. *Halacha* prohibits the use of motorized vehicles on Shabbat. A 1991 law states that public transportation may not operate on Shabbat, with exceptions for vehicles bringing passengers to hospitals, remote localities, and non-Jewish localities, and for vehicles essential to public security or maintaining public transportation services.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights with a reservation stating that matters of personal status are governed by the religious law of the parties concerned, and the country reserves the right to apply that religious law when inconsistent with its obligations under the Covenant.

Government Practices

Summary paragraph: Three Muslim citizens shot and killed two Israeli police officers, both of whom were Druze, near the entrance to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif on July 14, and then escaped to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif where other Israeli police officers shot and killed them. On August 15, Israeli police arrested the head of the banned Northern Islamic Movement, Sheikh Raed Salah, on suspicion of incitement and supporting the activities of an illegal organization. On June 25, following ultra-Orthodox parties' objections to elements of a January 2016 agreement with non-Orthodox Jewish groups that offered symbolic recognition to the Conservative and Reform movements, the cabinet voted to "freeze" the agreement. Media reported that on September 19, Prime Minister Netanyahu expressed support for greater religious pluralism for Jews in Israel, but stated that he "won't solve" the disparity between *halacha*-based laws and public practice by the non-Orthodox majority which largely eschews them. Those who self-identify but are not recognized by the Chief Rabbinate as Jewish, including Reform and Conservative converts to Judaism and others without Jewish matrilineage, remained prohibited from accessing official Jewish marriage, divorce, and burial services in the country, although some Orthodox and non-Orthodox rabbis officiated at these ceremonies outside of the Rabbinate (i.e., they did not register it officially). The government maintained its policy not to accept applications for official recognition by evangelical Christian churches and Jehovah's Witnesses, while stating that members of nonrecognized religious groups remained free to practice their religion. Government resources available for religious or heritage studies to Arab and non-Orthodox Jewish public schools remained significantly fewer than those available to Orthodox Jewish public schools.

Three Muslim citizens shot and killed two Israeli police officers, both of whom were Druze, near the entrance to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif on July 14. The attackers escaped to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, where other Israeli police officers shot and killed them. On September 17, authorities arrested two Arab citizens, including a 16-year-old, on suspicion of planning another terrorist attack at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif.

On August 15, Israeli police arrested the head of the banned Northern Islamic Movement, Sheikh Raed Salah, on suspicion of incitement and supporting the activities of an illegal organization. A statement from the police characterized several speeches Salah made as inflammatory, reportedly including a speech at the

funeral of the three terrorists who killed two policemen at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif on July 14. In that speech, Salah quoted a verse from the Quran regarding “those who have been killed in the cause of Allah.”

MK Ahmad Tibi compared Salah’s statements with those of rabbis such as Chief Rabbi of Safed Shmuel Eliyahu, which Tibi said “incite to murder and incite to killing Arabs,” with no response from the police. A petition to the Supreme Court by the Israel Religious Action Center to initiate disciplinary hearings against Eliyahu was pending as of September 26. On June 14, authorities indicted Rabbi Yosef Elitzur for incitement to violence, based on two articles he published in 2013.

Some religious minority groups complained of police apathy when investigating attacks against them. Data from the NGO Tag Meir and media reports indicated authorities had indicted few suspects despite 35 attacks on religious sites in the country since 2010.

At the end of the year there were multiple versions of a draft basic law to define the country as a Jewish state. Proponents said such a law was needed because the Basic Law on Human Dignity had led courts to give preference to individual human rights and freedoms over policies that perpetuated Israel as a Jewish state. The version backed by Prime Minister Netanyahu would define Israel as the “nation-state of the Jewish people,” and as a “Jewish and democratic state,” according to press reports. Civil society organizations and some political leaders expressed concern that such a law could lead to discrimination against non-Jewish minorities.

Busloads of Muslim worshippers routinely traveled from different parts of the country to Jerusalem for prayers at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, but the government refused some buses entry to the site on July 21, in the midst of the crisis that began with the July 14 terrorist attack.

Israeli authorities in some instances barred specific individuals from the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site, including Jewish activists believed to have violated rules against non-Muslim prayer, Muslims believed to have acted violently against non-Muslim visitors to the site, and public figures, including members of the Knesset, whose presence authorities feared would inflame tensions.

Many Jewish leaders, including the government-appointed Rabbi of the Western Wall, continued to say Jewish law prohibited Jews from entering the Temple

Mount/Haram al-Sharif, a view the ultra-Orthodox community supported. Increasing numbers of the self-identified “national religious” Zionist community stated they found meaning in setting foot on the site. Some government coalition MKs, such as Yehuda Glick, called for reversing the policy of banning non-Islamic prayer at the site in order to provide equal religious freedom for all who find the site holy. MK Bezalel Smotrich called for “implementing Jewish sovereignty” there. Glick and some Jewish NGOs, such as the Temple Institute and Temple Mount Faithful, continued to call on the government to implement a time-sharing plan at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif to set aside certain hours for Jewish worship, similar to the practice at the Tomb of the Patriarchs/Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron. Muslim authorities continued to oppose this idea. Some Jewish and non-Jewish MKs condemned the government’s ban on all MKs from ascending the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. Prime Minister Netanyahu allowed MKs to enter the compound for one day in August, and two Jewish MKs did so. One Jewish MK also entered on October 25. On April 2, the Supreme Court rejected a request by Temple Mount activists to sacrifice sheep near the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif for Passover.

Prime Minister Netanyahu reiterated his support for the status quo arrangement at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, for example, in remarks to reporters on July 16.

The government continued to permit persons of all faiths to pray at the main Western Wall plaza, the place of worship nearest the holiest site in Judaism, but with separation of women and men, and with the women’s section being less than half the size of the men’s section. On June 25, following ultra-Orthodox parties’ objections to elements of a January 2016 agreement with non-Orthodox Jewish groups that offered symbolic recognition to the Conservative and Reform Judaism movements, the cabinet voted to “freeze” the agreement. At the same time, Prime Minister Netanyahu ordered the government to expedite construction to upgrade the temporary egalitarian prayer space, a platform for Reform and Conservative Jewish services south of the main Western Wall plaza, but the non-Orthodox movements stated that upgrading the prayer space alone would not fulfill the agreement. In response to a Supreme Court case on the issue, the government stated in September it would not raise the agreement for another government decision, and the court had no grounds to impose an agreement. The case was pending at the end of the year, with the next hearing scheduled for January 2018.

Authorities continued to prohibit anyone from bringing private Torah scrolls to the main Western Wall plaza and to prohibit women from accessing the public Torah

scrolls or giving priestly blessings at the site. The authorities permitted women to pray with *tefillin* and prayer shawls pursuant to a 2013 Jerusalem District Court ruling stating it was illegal to arrest or fine them for such actions. The police continued to allow the group Women of the Wall to enter the women's area of the main Western Wall plaza for its monthly service, but the media reported that security guards conducted intrusive body searches on some women while searching for Torah scrolls under their clothes on August 23, despite a January 11 injunction by the Supreme Court prohibiting such searches.

Authorities continued to allow use of a temporary platform south of the Mughrabi ramp and adjacent to the Western Wall, but not visible from the main Western Wall plaza, for non-Orthodox Jewish prayers. Authorities designated the platform for members of the Conservative and Reform movements of Judaism, including for religious ceremonies such as bar and bat mitzvahs.

In September ultra-Orthodox MK Yisrael Eichler described the non-Orthodox movements who were party to the Western Wall agreement as “enemies of the Jewish religion,” while Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem Shlomo Amar described them as “accursed evil people” and compared them to Holocaust-deniers, according to press reports. Prime Minister Netanyahu condemned Amar's remarks. Also in September media reported that opposition MK Haneen Zoabi stated the country's “fascist laws” make it “suitable to compare, logical to compare, Israel ... with Germany in the [19]30s.”

Ultra-Orthodox parties continued to be against legal changes to the status quo regarding issues of *halacha* and state, which opponents said raised religious freedom concerns. For example, the only in-country marriages the government recognized for Jews were those performed by the Chief Rabbinate, which continued to refuse to perform marriages involving citizens without maternal Jewish lineage, because the Chief Rabbinate did not consider them Jewish according to *halacha*. Likewise, men with ancestry in the Jewish priesthood (*cohanim*) were not allowed to marry converts or divorcees, in accordance with *halacha*. On September 19, media reported Prime Minister Netanyahu expressed support for greater religious pluralism for Jews in Israel, but stated that he “won't solve” the disparity between *halacha*-based laws and public practice by the non-Orthodox majority which largely eschews them. Analysts in media and civil society ascribed Netanyahu's position to the reality of his political coalition with ultra-Orthodox parties.

According to the think tank Israel Democracy Institute, hundreds of thousands of Israeli Jews worked illegally on Shabbat, but the government made little effort to enforce the ban on Jews' employment on Shabbat, while credit card companies reported 25 to 30 percent of all consumer activity occurred on Shabbat. Four consecutive ministers of interior refused to act on a bylaw allowing 164 grocery stores and kiosks to operate on Shabbat passed by the Tel Aviv-Jaffa Municipality in 2014. The Supreme Court ruled on April 19, and again on October 26, that the protracted nondecision of the ministers of interior was unlawful, and the bylaw could take effect. On September 11, non-Orthodox Jewish groups withdrew a petition to the Supreme Court that had argued the Shabbat ban on public transportation adversely impacted those of low socioeconomic status, after the judges noted their petition was lacking an aggrieved public transportation operator. The petitioners stated they would establish such an operator and apply for a license from the Transportation Ministry to operate on Shabbat, then return to the Supreme Court if the government denied its application. The NGO Hiddush reported in September that 73 percent of Jewish Israelis supported full or partial public transportation on Shabbat, up from 58 percent in 2010.

Following three years of hearings on a petition by women's rights organizations to appoint a female director-general to the rabbinical courts, the Supreme Court ruled August 15 that since the position was inherently administrative, not religious, it must be open to anyone licensed as a rabbinic pleader, including women. In June the Rabbinical Courts Administration named a female deputy director-general for the first time. Since only men can become rabbis under Orthodox interpretations of Jewish law, there were no female judges in rabbinical courts, although some women have acted as rabbinic pleaders (equivalent to lawyers) since 1995.

A June hearing in the Knesset Committee for Distributive Justice discussed the inaccessibility of Jewish mikvah ritual baths to disabled women.

The MOI continued to rely on the guidance of the Jewish Agency, a parastatal organization, to determine who qualified to immigrate as a Jew or descendant of a Jew. The government continued to deny applications from individuals whom the government said became ineligible when they converted to another religion, including those holding Messianic or Christian beliefs.

Those who self-identify but are not recognized by the Chief Rabbinate as Jewish, including Reform and Conservative converts to Judaism and others without Jewish matrilineage, were prohibited from accessing official Jewish marriage, divorce, and burial services in the country, although some Orthodox and non-Orthodox

rabbis did officiate at these ceremonies outside of the Rabbinate. *Ha'aretz* reported on September 18 that the Chief Rabbinate had changed the registration status of 900 persons from Jewish to non-Jewish or “pending clarification” in 2015 and 2016, after the highest rabbinical court approved the Chief Rabbinate’s power to revoke Israelis’ Jewish status in December 2016. The NGO ITIM petitioned the Supreme Court against this practice, and the case was ongoing at year’s end.

A group of Orthodox rabbis continued to operate a private conversion court for children of families whose Judaism was not recognized by the state or the rabbinical courts. A ruling by the Supreme Court in 2016 expanded immigration rights under the Law of Return to those who completed private (non-Rabbinate) Orthodox conversions in the country. The Chief Rabbinate continued not to recognize non-Orthodox converts to Judaism as Jews, although they continued to be accepted for the purpose of immigration under the Law of Return. A Supreme Court case to grant immigration rights to those who completed Reform or Conservative conversions was pending at year’s end.

In June the Association for Civil Rights in Israel filed a petition in the Supreme Court against what it said was the IDF’s practice of pressuring soldiers who were not recognized as Jewish by the Chief Rabbinate to convert to Judaism through an expedited Orthodox Jewish conversion course. In its September 17 response to the court, the government stated it changed its procedures to allow soldiers to sign a waiver upon arrival at the course affirming they did not wish to participate. The court scheduled the next hearing for July 2018.

The MRS listed 23 Jewish cemeteries with plots for civil burial, managed by the National Insurance Institute, and 21 dedicated cemeteries for persons the government defined as “lacking religion.” Additionally, 13 cemeteries in 10 agricultural localities were authorized to conduct civil burial for these localities and nearby residents. Some persons, however, who sought a civil burial reported several civil cemeteries near Tel Aviv were unusable because they were full or restricted to local residents.

Pursuant to a 2013 Supreme Court ruling on easing the funding conditions for activities by the Reform and Conservative Jewish communities, the government continued to pay the salaries of 12 non-Orthodox rabbis serving regional councils. The Ministry of Housing continued to provide funding to build non-Orthodox Jewish religious institutions, which it designated “seminaries,” according to the Israel Religious Action Center.

In August the government cable and satellite broadcasting regulator fined Channel 20, the “Heritage Channel,” 100,800 shekels (\$29,000) for excluding the Reform and Conservative Jewish movements from its programming, since its license describes the outlet as a platform for all streams of Judaism. Channel 20 appealed the decision to the Supreme Court, and the case was ongoing at year’s end.

Those exempt from compulsory military service continued to have the option to join the National Service, a civilian alternative in which volunteers work for two years to promote social welfare in schools, hospitals, or NGOs. On August 3, the education ministry supervisor of Jewish religious public high schools testified to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that educators in those schools discouraged girls from enlisting based on a religious ruling from the Chief Rabbinate.

The government maintained its policy not to accept applications for official recognition by evangelical Christian churches and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The government stated members of nonrecognized religions remained free to practice their religion, and that some leaders of these religions were invited and participated along with the leaders of recognized religions at official events or ceremonies.

The only domestic marriages which had legal standing and could be registered were marriages performed according to the religious statutes of recognized religious communities. Members of other nonrecognized groups could attempt to process their personal status documents, including marriage licenses, through the authorities of one of the recognized religious communities if those authorities agreed. The government allowed civil registration of marriages held outside the country. The Interior Ministry continued to register same-sex marriages conducted abroad.

Some church leaders stated a law preventing a spouse from the West Bank or Gaza from obtaining resident status was especially challenging for Christian Israelis because their small population made it difficult to find a spouse within the community in Israel.

The government operated a special police unit of 60 officers for the investigation of “ideologically-based offenses” in Israel and the West Bank, including “price tag” attacks (violence by Jewish individuals and groups against non-Jewish individuals and property with the stated purpose of exacting a “price” for actions the government had taken that the Jewish group opposed, actions by the

government against members of the group committing the violence, or violent attacks by other Palestinians).

President Reuven Rivlin attended an interfaith ceremony to mark the completion of the restoration of the Church of the Multiplication in Tabgha on February 12. In 2015 arsonists burned a large section of the church and scrawled on the building's stone walls sections of the Jewish prayer book that in this context denigrated Christians. In July a court convicted one person of charges including arson and defacing real estate with a hostile motive, and acquitted a second suspect. In January the government paid 1.5 million shekels (\$432,000) for the restoration of the church.

The government provided separate public schools for Jewish children, conducted in Hebrew, and Arab children, conducted in Arabic. Government resources available for religious or heritage studies to Arab and non-Orthodox Jewish public schools remained significantly less than those available to Orthodox Jewish public schools.

For Jewish children there continued to be separate public schools for religious and secular families. Individual families were able to choose a public school system regardless of ethnicity or religious observance. Public Hebrew-language state schools taught Jewish history, culture, and some basic religious texts. By law, the state provided the equivalent of public school funding to two systems of ultra-Orthodox religious schools, the United Torah Judaism-affiliated Independent Education System and the Shas-affiliated Fountain of Torah Education System. Public and private Arabic-speaking schools continued to teach religion classes on the Quran and the Bible to both Muslim and Christian Arab students. A few independent mixed Jewish-Arab schools also offered religion classes. For example, the curriculum at the nonprofit school Hand-in-Hand: Center for Jewish-Arab Education, which received a third of its funding from the government, emphasized commonality and similar storylines in the holy writings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Minors had the right to choose a public secular school instead of a religious school regardless of parental preference.

Many ultra-Orthodox religious schools continued not to offer a basic humanities, math, and science curriculum, and in 2015 a group of formerly ultra-Orthodox students who graduated from these schools sued the state for allowing them to graduate without the requisite knowledge to participate in the economy. They said they were denied basic education and left lagging far behind secular Israelis in topics such as science, math, history, English, and geography. After the

government responded to the court that the bearers of the responsibility are parents and educational institutions, and the statute of limitations should apply, a Jerusalem District Court judge dismissed the case.

A May report from the State Comptroller criticized the education ministry for failing to respond effectively to discrimination in educational institutions, including discrimination against girls in ultra-Orthodox schools. In September 2016 the media reported municipal authorities denied at least 50 school girls entry into ultra-Orthodox schools to which they had been assigned because of their lack of “spiritual suitability” stemming from their Sephardic heritage. The government stated approximately 25 girls were denied entry. Reportedly, the Ministry of Education effectively used its control of the budget to persuade schools to change their policy towards some of these students, but in January the newspaper *Yediot Ahronot* reported 14 cases remained unresolved. In May the education ministry issued new regulations banning demand for a particular “spiritual authority” at home as an admissions criterion.

Christian church representatives stated that government budget cuts to private Christian schools categorized as “recognized but not official” schools could cause their schools to begin closing in five to 10 years. The government offered to fully fund the Christian schools if they became part of the public school system, but the churches rejected this option, stating they would lose control over hiring teachers, admitting students, and using school property. Following a strike in 2015, the government pledged to transfer an additional 50 million shekels (\$14.4 million) to the schools, of which church leaders received one-quarter in 2016 and the remainder in 2017. Church leaders stated this transfer helped reduce their debts from 2015, but did not resolve their annual deficits nor the financial disparity with the ultra-Orthodox schools, which were also categorized as “recognized but not official” but which received full government funding.

On July 31, the education ministry published a report showing its per-student annual budget for Jewish religious high schools in 2016-17 was 33,016 shekels (\$9,500), 22 percent higher than for Jewish secular high schools and 54 percent higher than Arab high schools, whose students were predominantly Muslim. The amount for Druze high schools was comparable to Jewish secular schools. The report also found the ministry’s per-student budget in Jewish religious elementary schools was 19 percent higher than secular elementary schools and 4 percent higher than Arab elementary schools.

The Custody of the Holy Land, a priory of the Franciscan order, reported local municipalities, such as Tel Aviv and Haifa, continued to charge property tax on monastery property, such as friars' residences, parish halls, and other buildings that are part of the monasteries and do not conduct business activity. Church officials said they paid part of these disputed taxes during the year and the remainder was under negotiation. The government stated only properties mainly used for worship and having no business activities were exempt from property tax under the law, while religious organizations were obligated to pay taxes on other property and assets.

Christian leaders reported little difficulty obtaining visas for clergy to serve in the country. Church officials, however, noted the clergy visa did not allow the bearer access to basic social benefits such as disability insurance or national health insurance, even for those who have served in the country for more than 30 years.

The government continued to approve annual "delays" of conscription to military service for individual Jehovah's Witnesses upon presentation of documentation of their continued affiliation with their religious community, although without acknowledgment of their right to conscientious objection. Since members of the community were not exempt from military service, they could not participate in the national civil service program as an alternative service.

A Supreme Court petition by the organization Yesh Gvul called to change the criteria for exemptions from military service based on conscientious objection to be equivalent to the criteria for exemptions based on religious beliefs. The government's preliminary response stated the two exemptions are based on different sections of the law for different circumstances, and requested dismissal for lack of cause. The court scheduled the next hearing for June 2018.

Since September 2014, the government has allowed Christians and individuals who spoke Aramaic to register with their national or ethnic group listed as Aramean instead of Arab. A report published on April 3, by the Knesset Research and Information Center, found only 16 persons had changed their registration to Aramean as of February.

The MOI trained Druze and Muslim clerical employees of the state on how to work with government ministries. Approximately half of the Druze and Muslim clerics in Israel were appointed and funded by the MOI. Muslim leaders alleged the MOI routinely monitored and summoned for "talks" those whom the ministry suspected of opposing government policies. The other Israeli Druze and Muslim

clerics were nonstate employees due to either the preference of the local community or lack of MOI budget, according to the government. Muslim leaders stated sharia court judges, who were Ministry of Justice employees, were their preferred religious leaders. There remained no Islamic seminaries in the country, and students of Islam traveled to other countries, primarily Jordan or the West Bank, to study.

According to the NGO Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality (NCF), in recent years the government approved plans for the establishment of 15 new towns and settlements in the Negev region, the vast majority intended for the Jewish population. Authorities approved plans for settlements named Hiran, Daya, and Neve Gurion to replace existing Bedouin villages. Authorities planned Daya to replace the unrecognized village al-Qatamat, and Neve Gurion was to replace some houses in the recognized village of Bir Haddaj.

During a police action on January 18 to demolish homes in the unrecognized Bedouin village of Umm al-Hiran, in preparation to replace it with a Jewish settlement called Hiran, police shot local resident Yaqub Musa Abu al-Qian, and Abu al-Qian's car subsequently struck and killed one police officer. Abu al-Qian died of his wounds shortly thereafter. Village leaders expressed openness to almost any option that would allow them to remain in place, including living side-by-side with Jewish neighbors in an expanded community. The NGO Adalah wrote a letter to the National Planning and Building Council on August 7, objecting to bylaws drafted by the Hiran cooperative association that would allow only Orthodox Jews to live in Hiran, stating the government intended to replace the Muslim residents of Umm al-Hiran. A group of 35 Jewish families sponsored by the OR Movement, which advocates internal settlements, remained in the forest outside Umm al-Hiran, living in mobile homes donated by the Jewish National Fund, while waiting to obtain the land. The group included an estimated 175 children.

Some former mosques and cemeteries, belonging to the defunct prestate Waqf (different from the Jordanian-administered Waqf of the Haram al-Sharif) until confiscated by the state after the 1948 War of Independence, remained sealed and inaccessible, even to Muslims. Other former mosques continued to be used for secular purposes. Muslim community leaders reported no difficulties obtaining municipal approval for construction of mosques in Muslim-majority localities. They noted, however, that Be'er Sheva's Muslim population of approximately 10,000 continued to travel to nearby Bedouin towns to pray, since they could not use an Ottoman-era Be'er Sheva mosque the government converted to a museum.

of Islamic culture following a 2011 Supreme Court ruling, and the government would not authorize the construction of another mosque.

The IDF continued to have only Orthodox Jewish chaplains; the government employed civilian non-Jewish clergy as chaplains at military burials when a non-Jewish soldier died in service. The MOI continued to provide imams to conduct military funerals according to Islamic customs. In June the IDF issued new regulations allowing secular military funerals.

In some ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods, “modesty signs” posted by private organizations demanded women obscure themselves from public view so as not to distract devout men, which NGOs stated they perceived as an infringement on women’s equality and human dignity. The local municipality of Beit Shemesh failed to comply with court orders from January 2015 and January 2016 to take down the signs, leading the Jerusalem District Court on June 7 to rule the municipality would face a fine of 10,000 shekels (\$2,900) for each day the signs remained up after July 6. The municipality appealed the decision to the Supreme Court, which scheduled a hearing on the case for March 2018.

The Jerusalem Magistrate’s Court ruled June 21 that requests by airline staff to female passengers to change seats when an ultra-Orthodox man objected to sitting next to a woman were discriminatory. According to the Israel Religious Action Center, asking a passenger to change seats because of her gender would be no different from asking someone to move because of their race or religion. The court awarded 6,500 shekels (\$1,900) to an octogenarian plaintiff who brought a case against El Al after she changed seats at the request of a flight attendant in 2015.

A Supreme Court ruling on September 12 reaffirmed the Chief Rabbinate had sole legal authority to issue certificates of *kashrut*, which certify a restaurant’s adherence to Jewish dietary laws. It broadened, however, the allowance for alternative non-Rabbinate certification, such as that of the independent Orthodox organization *Hashgacha Pratit*, stating restaurants without a *kashrut* certificate were allowed to present “a true presentation regarding the standards it observes and the manner of supervising their observance.” The media reported on September 27 that the Chief Rabbinate levied a 2,000 shekel (\$580) fine on a Jerusalem restaurant for displaying a new certificate by *Hashgacha Pratit*, which the organization stated conformed to the September 12 Supreme Court ruling. A May report from the State Comptroller called for comprehensive reform of the *kashrut* regulation system and criticized the MRS, Chief Rabbinate, and local

religious councils for structural failures that enabled fraud, waste, poor supervision, and nepotism.

In March the NGO Adalah withdrew a petition from the Supreme Court that objected to a law banning meat imports without a *kashrut* certificate from the Chief Rabbinate after the judges indicated they did not perceive the law treating secular Jews and non-Jews differently.

Sources stated that some non-kosher restaurants that opened on the Sabbath paid fines that varied according to local laws.

Religious identification was listed in the National Registry, but not on official identity cards.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity were often closely linked, it was often difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

According to missionary organizations, societal attitudes toward missionary activities and conversion to other religions continued to be negative. Some Jews continued to oppose missionary activity directed at Jews, saying it amounted to religious harassment, and reacted with hostility toward Jewish converts to Christianity, such as Messianic Jews. Jehovah's Witnesses described violent attacks, such as a July 20 assault by a woman on a Jehovah's Witness in Tel Aviv, hitting her face and legs. On June 29, Jehovah's Witnesses received a letter from the state prosecutor's office stating it refused to reopen an investigation into an attack on a June 2016 Bible lecture in Rishon Lezion, after police had closed the case without charge in August 2016. At the time, according to Jehovah's Witnesses, police had said they could not identify the attackers, whom they had failed to arrest at the time of the incident, despite video evidence. Jehovah's Witnesses reported some municipalities refused to rent public halls to them, such as in Holon on June 21.

Ultra-Orthodox Jews at the Western Wall continued to harass verbally visitors and Jewish worshippers who did not conform to Jewish Orthodox traditions, such as modest dress or gender segregation at the Western Wall Plaza. Members of the Jewish Conservative and Reform movements continued to criticize gender segregation and rules governing how women pray at the Western Wall. Representatives of the egalitarian prayer group Women of the Wall complained of

a lack of effort by police or ushers from the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, which administers the Western Wall site, to intervene when ultra-Orthodox women and men disrupted their monthly prayer service with screaming, whistling, and pushing. On February 27, the Liba Center, an Orthodox Jewish organization working closely with the Chief Rabbinate, bused in more than 1,000 schoolgirls to oppose the monthly prayer service, according to media reports. Women of the Wall filed a petition to the Supreme Court in March to require ushers and police to prevent disruption to their services. The court scheduled a hearing for January 14, 2018.

Tension continued between the ultra-Orthodox community and other Israelis, including concerns related to service in the IDF, housing, public transportation, and participation in the workforce. The media reported attacks and threats by ultra-Orthodox assailants against soldiers and those encouraging ultra-Orthodox men to enlist in the military, including throwing stones at Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman on August 8, posting signs threatening IDF Human Resources Branch Director Major General Moti Almoz in May and June, and burning effigies of IDF soldiers on May 13. In November the Ramle Magistrates Court ordered ultra-Orthodox activists to pay an ultra-Orthodox IDF officer 650,000 shekels (\$187,000) compensation for defamation, according to media reports. Clashes and protests between secular and ultra-Orthodox residents occurred in the southern city of Arad in September, reportedly originating from conflicts over budgeting and the use of public buildings.

There continued to be reports of ultra-Orthodox men spitting at those wearing Christian clerical clothing, according to church leaders. Muslim activists reported hijab-wearing women experienced harassment by non-Muslims on public buses in Tel Aviv-Jaffa.

Drivers who operated motor vehicles in or near ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods on the Jewish Sabbath (Friday night to Saturday night) in Jerusalem reported incidents of harassment, such as slurs or spitting, by ultra-Orthodox Jewish residents in those neighborhoods.

Although the Chief Rabbinate and rabbis of many denominations continued to discourage Jewish visits to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site, some Orthodox rabbis continued to say entering the site was permissible. Groups such as the Temple Mount Faithful and the Temple Institute continued to call for increased Jewish access and prayer there, as well as the construction of a third Jewish temple on the site.

The Northern Islamic Movement, which the government declared illegal in November 2015, continued to speak of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif as “under attack” due to what it regarded as a large number of Jewish visitors and the government’s temporary installation of security measures after a July 14 terrorist attack at the site.

Ultra-Orthodox opposition to LGBTI pride parades outside of Tel Aviv sometimes led to threats and attacks. On June 22, police arrested an ultra-Orthodox man with a knife near the Be’er Sheva pride parade.

Activists who testified at a February Knesset hearing on LGBTI youths reported that some minors who expressed their sexual preferences in religious communities faced expulsion from their homes and stigmatization from rabbis as suffering from mental illness, leading some to attempt suicide.

Jewish groups that oppose conversion of Jews to other religions, such as Yad L’Achim, urged Jewish women not to date non-Jewish men, for example with posts on social media encouraging women romantically involved with men from “a minority” to call the group’s 24-hour hotline. It continued to offer assistance to Jewish women and their children to “escape” cohabitation with Arab men, sometimes by “launching military-like rescues from hostile Arab villages,” according to Yad L’Achim’s website.

Lehava, described by the press as a radical right-wing Jewish group opposing romantic relationships between Jews and non-Jews, faced criminal charges for violence against Arab men whom they said they perceived to be consorting with Jewish women. Following a petition to the Supreme Court by the Israel Religious Action Center, authorities notified Lehava leader Ben-Tzion Gopstein on November 13 that he could be indicted on charges of incitement to violence, racism, terrorism, and obstruction of justice, pending a hearing.

According to sources who conducted Jewish weddings outside of the Rabbinate’s authority (i.e., did not register it), the vague wording of the law that deals with those who conduct such weddings and the government’s nonenforcement of the law, enabled non-Rabbinate Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jewish weddings to occur openly, usually as an act of protest against the Rabbinate’s authority. Most Jewish Israelis, including those who are secular, continued to use Rabbinate-approved Orthodox rabbis to conduct their weddings. The only mechanism for Jews to gain state recognition of a non-Orthodox wedding remained to wed outside

the country and then register the marriage with the MOI. Approximately 11 percent of marriages registered with the MOI in 2015, the most recent year available, occurred abroad, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics.

The Reform Movement, Conservative Movement, and the secular Jewish organization Be Free Israel started an “Equal Wedding” radio campaign in summer 2016, followed by billboards and street signs in April to raise awareness among Jews of options to wed outside the Chief Rabbinate, although the weddings would not receive government recognition. The campaign, which points the public toward the three non-Orthodox Jewish movements (Conservative, Reform, and secular) for wedding alternatives, led to anger in ultra-Orthodox communities and an objection from the Chief Rabbinate to the government regulator of commercial broadcasts. Vandals tore down some of the campaign’s billboards in Jerusalem.

Thousands of Jewish women were trapped in various stages of informal or formal *get* refusal, especially in the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox communities, according to Bar Ilan University’s Rackman Center for the Advancement of the Status of Women. In June, following issuance of new guidelines from the state attorney in November 2016, rabbinical courts in Jerusalem and Haifa approved requests to open criminal proceedings with the State Prosecutor’s Office against two *get*-refusers for the first time. This change would enable extradition requests of husbands living overseas, who account for over 80 percent of the rabbinical courts’ open cases, according to media reports. According to the government, the new guidelines change *get*-refusal from a private, civil matter to an issue of public concern, which would help to eliminate *get*-refusal from society. The two criminal investigations continued as of November.

The Rackman Center stated that in some instances a woman’s husband made granting a *get* contingent on his wife conceding to extortionate demands, such as those relating to property ownership or child custody. A child born to a woman still married to another man would be considered a *mamzer* (child of an unpermitted relationship) under Jewish law, which would restrict the child’s future marriage prospects in the Jewish community. The rabbinical courts reported on June 19 that they succeeded in obtaining 211 *gets* in 2016, and media reported the courts had approximately 150 open cases.

Following the July 14 killing of two Druze Israeli policemen by three Muslim Israeli assailants, unknown suspects fired shots and threw stun grenades at mosques in the mixed Druze-Muslim-Christian city of Maghar, hometown of one of the July 14 victims, in separate incidents on July 16 and 17. Muslim and Druze

religious leaders took actions to lower tensions, such as a visit by Muslim leaders to the mourning Druze families, but expressions of resentment and fear between the two groups persisted in the wake of the crisis, especially on social media. In August media reported a Muslim imam in the village of Kafr Qara led a successful public campaign to block the selection of a Druze headmaster to a Muslim high school because of the man's religion.

Caretakers at a Muslim cemetery in Jaffa discovered several smashed gravestones on April 23. Also in April, media reported unidentified criminals inscribed satanic symbols with black and silver paint on the wall of a Russian Orthodox church in Haifa. According to the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, on September 20, vandals shattered stained-glass windows and committed other acts of vandalism in St. Stephen's Church at the Beit Gemal Monastery near Beit Shemesh. The Jerusalem District prosecutor indicted an ultra-Orthodox man on September 4 for painting graffiti and death threats against Reform Jewish leaders on a reform synagogue in Ra'anana in November 2016.

More than 1,000 Christian Israelis visited Christian holy sites in Lebanon on organized tours during the year, following mediation by Christian clergy with the Israeli and Lebanese governments, according to press reports.

A variety of NGOs continued to try to build understanding and create dialogue among religious groups and between religious and secular Jewish communities, including Neve Shalom-Wahat al-Salam, the Abraham Fund Initiative, Givat Haviva, the Hagar and Hand-in-Hand bilingual schools, Hiddush, the Israeli Religious Action Center of the Reform Movement, Mosaica, and Interfaith Encounters.

The NGO Tag Meir continued to organize visits to areas where "price tag" attacks occurred and sponsored activities to promote tolerance in response to the attacks. One such attack occurred on May 9, in the Arab village of Na'ura, where anonymous vandals slashed the tires of nine vehicles and wrote anti-Muslim graffiti on a nearby wall, according to press reports.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

During a visit in May, the President met with the prime minister and other government officials. Discussions included combating religious-based violence, overcoming religious division, and building a future of trust, harmony, tolerance,

and respect for members of all faiths. He visited religious sites and the Yad Vashem memorial for Holocaust victims in Jerusalem.

Following heightened tensions at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in the wake of the July 14 terrorist attack at the site, the Ambassador and embassy officers spoke with government officials and Knesset leaders about the importance of maintaining the agreed-upon status quo at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif and not escalating tensions through provocative actions or statements. In meetings with government officials, visiting high-level U.S. government officials and embassy officers also stressed the importance of religious pluralism and respect for all religious groups, such as in the Ambassador's June 27 speech at an event sponsored by B'nai B'rith.

In July the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South/Central Asia visited Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Nazareth for discussions with government officials and religious minority groups, including Muslims, Christians, Druze, and Bahais, as well as Jewish Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform representatives. They discussed a wide range of concerns related to religious minority groups, equal treatment, and instances of religiously motivated violence.

Embassy-supported initiatives focused on interreligious dialogue and community development, and advocated a shared society for Arab and Jewish populations, including conferences at which embassy officers spoke out in support of the right of persons of all faiths to practice their religion peacefully, while also respecting the beliefs and customs of their neighbors.

Embassy officers participated in religious events organized by Jewish, Muslim, Druze, Christian, and Bahai communities and used embassy social media platforms to express U.S. support for tolerance and the importance of openness to members of other religious groups.

Embassy-hosted events included an interfaith Ramadan iftar, an interfaith Rosh Hashanah reception, and an interfaith Thanksgiving dinner. The embassy also promoted the reduction of tensions between religious communities and an increase in interreligious communication and partnership within society by bringing together representatives of many faith communities to advance shared goals and exchange knowledge and experience. Embassy programs supported mixed Jewish-Arab educational and community initiatives to reduce societal tensions and violence, including a project by the Citizens Accord Forum that brought together

ultra-Orthodox and Arab citizens to create a shared civic agenda and implement activities related to social issues of common concern in their communities, in addition to a project supporting dialogue between religious Jewish and Arab women.

The embassy provided grants to organizations advocating religious tolerance among different groups, such as a project by the Leo Baeck Education Center for an interfaith celebration of Christmas and Hanukkah, which was held December 20 in a mixed Jewish-Arab neighborhood of Haifa. More than 250 Arab and Jewish children and their parents experienced different ways to celebrate religious traditions as a cohesive community.

The embassy supported a project by the NGO Tsofen to mitigate interreligious and intercommunal tensions between the country's Arab and Jewish citizens through economic integration of the two communities and the creation of sustainable cycles of intergroup collaboration. The project's activities promote the participation of Arab citizens in Israel's high-technology industry, diversifying work environments, and facilitating intergroup collaboration. In addition, the embassy supported a project to bring together Jewish, Muslim, and Christian female artists in Haifa, Jerusalem, and Lod to foster economic empowerment and encourage interfaith dialogue.

**WEST BANK AND GAZA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM REPORT****Executive Summary**

This section includes the West Bank, Gaza, and issues primarily related to Palestinian residents of Jerusalem. Issues primarily related to Israeli residents of Jerusalem are covered in the “Israel and the Golan Heights” section. On December 6, the United States recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. It is the position of the United States that the specific boundaries of Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem are subject to final status negotiations between the parties.

The Palestinian Authority (PA) exercised varying degrees of authority in the West Bank and no authority over Jerusalem. Although PA laws apply in the Gaza Strip, the PA did not have authority there and Hamas continued to exercise de facto control of security and other matters. The PA Basic Law, which serves as an interim constitution, establishes Islam as the official religion and states the principles of sharia shall be the main source of legislation, but provides for freedom of belief, worship, and the performance of religious rites unless they violate public order or morality. It also proscribes discrimination based on religion, calls for respect of “all other divine religions,” and stipulates all citizens are equal before the law. Violence between Palestinians and Israelis in Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank continued. In July three Israeli Arab attackers shot and killed two Israeli National Police (INP) officers and injured a third at an entrance to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount compound in Jerusalem. Citing security concerns, the INP temporarily closed the compound, and cancelled Muslim Friday prayers for the first time since 1969. PA President Mahmoud Abbas’ spokesman issued a public statement saying Abbas had condemned the attack and all acts of violence during a conversation with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The government of Israel unilaterally introduced new security measures for entering the compound, citing the need to improve security. The Jerusalem Islamic Waqf (the Government of Jordan Islamic trust and charitable entity that administers the site) rejected the measures as a violation of the status quo. Palestinians held sit-ins and protests, and clashes occurred between Palestinians and the Israeli Security Forces. The Chief Rabbinate continued to rule that Jewish visits to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount were religiously prohibited for reasons of ritual purity; however, visits by Jewish Temple Mount activists to the site facilitated by Israeli authorities increased to record levels during the year. The Israeli government, in accordance with the status quo, prohibited non-Muslim worship at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, although the Israeli police became

more permissive of silent Jewish prayer and other religious rituals performed on the site, according to Temple Mount movement groups and Israeli media. The Israeli government continued to impose intermittent restrictions on Palestinian access to religious sites, including the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, citing security concerns. Continued travel restrictions impeded the movements of Muslims and Christians between the West Bank and Jerusalem. Proselytizing religious groups not recognized by the PA experienced difficulties in gaining acceptance of personal status documents they issued. Some official PA media channels as well as social media accounts affiliated with the ruling Fatah political movement featured content praising or condoning acts of violence, at times referring to assailants as “martyrs.” Some anti-Semitic content also appeared in Fatah and PA-controlled media. PA President Abbas maintained a commitment to pursue Palestinian national aspirations through nonviolent means in multiple public statements. Palestinian leaders, however, including President Abbas, did not consistently condemn individual terrorist attacks or speak out publicly against members of their institutions who advocated for violence. Hamas, a U.S. designated terrorist organization with de facto control of Gaza, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and other extremist groups disseminated anti-Semitic materials, and incited violence via traditional and social media channels, as well as during rallies and other events. Hamas also continued to enforce restrictions on Gaza’s population based on its interpretation of Islam and sharia. Senior Israeli and Palestinian leaders condemned various forms of ideologically-motivated offenses, including violent acts by Jewish individuals and groups against Palestinians as well as property crimes. The Israeli government arrested or detained alleged suspects in such attacks, and indicted a prominent West Bank settlement rabbi for incitement to violence against Palestinians. Local human rights groups and media, however, reported authorities rarely convicted alleged offenders. The Israeli government criticized the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) July designation of the old city of Hebron, which encompasses the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs, as an endangered World Heritage site, stating UNESCO’s approval of a Palestinian motion to recognize the old city as a heritage site was a deliberate attempt to diminish Jewish and Israeli connections to the area.

There were incidents of ideologically motivated violence. Sources stated that assailants were motivated by a variety of factors. In some cases, perpetrators justified violence on religious grounds. For example, on multiple occasions, Palestinian youths threw rocks at Jewish visitors to Joseph’s Tomb in Nablus. On July 21, a Palestinian assailant stabbed and killed three Israelis and critically injured a fourth in the Halamish settlement northwest of Ramallah; on social media the assailant attributed his attack to Israel’s security measures on the Haram al-

Sharif/Temple Mount. Various Israeli and Palestinian groups opposed to interacting with other religions continued to protest against interfaith social and romantic relationships and other forms of cooperation. Incidents of ideologically-motivated crimes against Palestinians occurred, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

President Trump, during a May visit to Bethlehem, publicly called for “a more peaceful, safe, and far more tolerant world.” Officials from the U.S. Consulate General in Jerusalem met with Palestinian officials to express concern about religiously intolerant content and glorification of violence in traditional and social media, and to request the removal of this content. Consulate general officials also met with Palestinian religious leaders to discuss religious tolerance and a broad range of issues affecting Christian and Muslim communities. Consulate general officials expressed concern about UNESCO resolutions backed by the PA that minimized or ignored the Jewish historical and religious connection to Hebron and the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs. Visiting senior U.S. government officials, including the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South/Central Asia, met with political, religious, and civil society leaders to promote tolerance and cooperation against religious prejudice. Consulate general officers met with representatives of religious groups to monitor their concerns about access to religious sites, respect for clergy, and attacks on religious sites and houses of worship. Consulate general officers also met with local Christian leaders to discuss their concerns about steady Christian emigration from Jerusalem and the West Bank. Consulate general officers also discussed the Beit Jala Christian community’s concerns about impeded access to their agricultural lands and local monastery due to the construction of the Israeli security barrier in the Cremisan Valley. Officials from the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf and other Islamic religious figures met with consulate general officials to raise concerns about Israeli restrictions on Muslim access to and other matters pertaining to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the Palestinian population at 2.7 million in the West Bank and 1.8 million in the Gaza Strip (July 2017 estimates). According to U.S. estimates, the Palestinian residents of these territories are predominantly Sunni Muslims. The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) estimates 536,600 Jewish Israelis live in Jerusalem – including areas in East Jerusalem which Israel captured in the 1967 War and unilaterally annexed in 1980 – accounting for

approximately 61 percent of the city's total population of 882,652. According to CBS, an estimated 332,600 Palestinians reside in Jerusalem, of whom approximately 12,000 are Palestinian Christians, and approximately another 2,000 residents who are non-Palestinian Christians. The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics reported an estimated 400,000 Jewish Israelis reside in Israeli settlements in the West Bank. According to various estimates, approximately 50,000 Christians reside in the West Bank and Jerusalem, and according to media reports, there are approximately a thousand Christians residing in Gaza. According to local Christian leaders, Palestinian Christian emigration has continued at rapid rates. A majority of Christians are Greek Orthodox; the remainder includes Roman Catholics, Greek Catholics (Melkites), Syrian Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholics, Copts, Maronites, Ethiopian Orthodox, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and other Protestant denominations. Christians are concentrated primarily in East Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Nablus; smaller communities exist elsewhere. Approximately 360 Samaritans (practitioners of Samaritanism, which is related to but distinct from Judaism) as well as a small number of evangelical Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses reside in Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The inhabitants of the different portions of the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip are subject to the jurisdiction of different authorities. Israelis and Palestinians living in Jerusalem are subject to Israeli civil and criminal law. Israelis living in West Bank settlements are nominally subject to military law but Israeli authorities apply Israeli civil and criminal law to them in practice. Palestinians living in the portion of the West Bank designated as Area C in the Oslo II Accord fall under Israel's military legal system for criminal and security issues as well as civil issues, while Palestinians who live in Area B fall under PA civil law and Israeli military law for criminal and security issues. Although per the Oslo II Accord, only PA civil and security law applies to Palestinians living in Area A of the West Bank, Israel applies Israeli military law whenever its military enters Area A. The Gaza Strip officially comes under the jurisdiction of an interim PA government, although Hamas exercises de facto authority over it.

An interim Basic Law applies in the areas under PA jurisdiction. The Basic Law states Islam is the official religion, but calls for respect of "all other divine religions." It provides for freedom of belief, worship, and the performance of

religious rites unless they violate public order or morality. The Basic Law also proscribes discrimination based on religion and stipulates all citizens are equal before the law. The Basic Law states the principles of sharia shall be the main sources of legislation.

There is no specified process by which religious organizations gain official recognition; each religious group must negotiate its own bilateral relationship with the PA. Nineteenth century status quo arrangements reached with the Ottoman authorities, which are observed by the PA, recognize the presence and rights of the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Assyrian, Coptic, Ethiopian Orthodox, Greek Catholic, and Syrian Orthodox Churches. Later agreements with the PA recognized the rights of the Episcopal (Anglican) and Evangelical Lutheran Churches. Legally recognized religious groups are empowered to adjudicate personal status matters, such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. They may establish ecclesiastical courts to issue legally binding rulings on personal status and some property matters for members of their religious communities.

Churches not officially recognized, but with unwritten understandings with the PA based on the basic principles of the status quo agreements, including the Assemblies of God, the Nazarene Church, and some evangelical Christian churches, may operate freely. Some may perform some official functions such as issuing marriage licenses. Churches not recognized by the PA generally must obtain special one-time permission from the PA to perform marriages or adjudicate personal status matters if these groups want the actions to be recognized by and registered with the PA. These churches may not proselytize. There are a small number of such churches which became active within the last decade and whose legal status remains uncertain.

By law, Islamic institutions and places of worship receive financial support from the government.

Religious education is part of the curriculum for students in grades one through six in public schools the PA operates. There are separate courses on religion for Muslims and Christians. Students may choose which class to take but may not opt out of religious courses. Recognized churches operate private schools in the West Bank which include religious instruction. Private Islamic schools also operate in the West Bank. Churches also operate “recognized but unofficial” (a form of semiprivate) schools in East Jerusalem, and the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf operates private schools in East Jerusalem; both include religious instruction.

Islamic or Christian religious courts handle legal matters relating to personal status, including inheritance, marriage, dowry, divorce, and child support. For Muslims, sharia determines personal status law, while various ecclesiastical courts rule on personal status matters for Christians. Legally, members of one religious group may submit a personal status dispute to a different religious group for adjudication if the disputants agree it is appropriate to do so.

Palestinian law provides that in the 132-member Palestinian Legislative Council (that has not met since 2007) six seats be allocated to Christian candidates, who also have the right to contest other seats. There are no seats reserved for members of any other religious group. A presidential decree requires that Christians head nine municipal councils in the West Bank (including Ramallah, Bethlehem, Birzeit, and Beit Jala) and establishes a Christian quota for 10 West Bank municipal councils.

PA land laws prohibit Palestinians from selling Palestinian-owned lands to “any man or judicial body corporation of Israeli citizenship, living in Israel or acting on its behalf.” Under Israeli law, the Israel Land Administration (ILA), which manages 93 percent of Israel's land, may not lease land to foreign nationals.

Government Practices

Summary Paragraph: Violence between Palestinians and Israeli security forces continued. Since religion and ethnicity or nationality are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize much of this violence as being solely based on religious identity. On July 14, three Muslim Israeli Arab attackers shot and killed two Druze INP officers and injured a third at an entrance to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount compound, prompting Israeli police to close the compound and cancel Muslim Friday prayers. Following the compound's reopening, the INP erected new security measures at entrances used by Muslim worshippers. The Jerusalem Islamic Waqf rejected the measures, characterizing them as a violation of the status quo understanding between Israeli and Jordanian authorities. Following protests in Jerusalem and the West Bank, the INP removed the equipment. In accordance with status quo arrangements with the Waqf, the Israeli government continued to prohibit non-Muslim prayer and other religious practices at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, but Israeli police became more permissive of silent Jewish prayer and other religious rituals performed on the site, according to the Waqf and multiple NGO observers. Citing security concerns, the Israeli government also imposed access restrictions on Muslim worshippers in what the

Waqf said was a breach of the status quo, including temporary blanket age restrictions on several days during the year. Visits by Jewish Temple Mount activists increased again during the year to record levels, and especially during Jewish and Israeli national holidays. Some Israeli NGOs and Members of Knesset (MKs) said the status quo arrangement restricted Jews' freedom of worship. The Israeli government continued to permit both Muslims and Christians to pray at the Western Wall, although Israeli police frequently limited access to Palestinians to the Western Wall Plaza for what they stated were security reasons. Various Israeli and PA political and religious leaders continued to condemn ideologically-motivated violence. Israeli police and the IDF reported investigating known instances of religiously motivated attacks and making arrests where possible, although NGOs, religious institutions, and media continued to state that those arrests rarely led to successful prosecutions. The Israeli government criticized the designation by UNESCO in July of the old city of Hebron, including the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs, as an endangered World Heritage site in Palestinian territory. The Israelis stated that UNESCO's approval of a Palestinian motion to recognize Hebron as a heritage site was a deliberate attempt to diminish Jewish and Israeli connections to the area.

On July 14, three Israeli Arab attackers shot and killed two INP officers and injured a third at the Bab al-Hutta entrance to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount compound. Citing security concerns, Israeli police closed the compound and cancelled Muslim Friday prayers for the first time since 1969, when an Australian visitor set fire to the pulpit inside Al-Aqsa Mosque. The INP reopened the Haram Al-Sharif/Temple Mount on July 16 to residents of the Old City but erected new security screening equipment, including metal detectors, at entrances to the site used by Muslim worshippers. The Waqf rejected these measures, characterizing them as a violation of the status quo. Muslim worshippers refused to enter the site pending full reversal of all newly imposed security measures. Protests included "days of rage," sit-ins, and prayers. Clashes between Israeli security forces and Palestinian protestors were reported in East Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank through July 27. Tensions subsided July 27, and Muslims returned to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount when the INP removed the last of the newly installed equipment.

The Israeli government continued to control access to Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. The INP continued to be responsible for security, with police officers stationed both inside the site and outside each entrance. Israeli police conducted routine patrols on the outdoor plaza and regulated pedestrian traffic in and out of the site. Fatah and other Palestinian political factions organized protests (often

using the term “days of rage”) throughout the year and called on Palestinians to defend the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount.

The Chief Rabbinate continued to rule that Jewish visits to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount were prohibited on religious grounds for reasons of ritual purity. Visits by Jewish Temple Mount activists facilitated by Israeli authorities to the site, however, increased again during the year to record levels. The Waqf expressed concern over these activists’ increased attempts to pray on the site in violation of the status quo, as well as over continuing calls by some activists to destroy the Al-Aqsa Mosque and replace it with the Third Jewish Temple. According to the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf, activists associated with the Temple Mount movement conducted 25,628 visits to the site during the year, compared to approximately 14,800 in 2016. Visits reached a single-day record of 1,079 on Tisha b’Av (August 1), a day which commemorates multiple tragedies in Jewish history, including the destruction of the Jewish temples. The increase in visits on Tisha b’Av prompted criticism from Israel’s Sephardi chief rabbi, who reiterated that walking on the site is forbidden by Jewish law. According to Temple Mount movement groups and the Waqf, during the week-long Jewish holiday of Sukkot, activists conducted 2,266 visits, a 40 percent increase over the comparable period in 2016. The INP permitted multiple groups to visit the site concurrently, expanding the permitted size of each groups to more than 70 persons, according to the Waqf, Temple Mount activist groups, and media reports. In accordance with previously instituted practices, Israeli police announced a temporary closure of the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount to non-Muslim visitors during the last 10 days of Ramadan; however, on several occasions the INP permitted non-Muslim visits to the site during that period.

The status quo understandings pertaining to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount prohibit non-Muslim worship on the compound, which some Israeli NGOs and MKs said restricted Jews’ freedom of worship. Some Jewish groups escorted by Israeli police, however, performed religious acts such as prayers, weddings, and prostration. The incidence of such acts at the site represented an increase from previous years, according to local NGOs, media, and Jewish Temple Mount movement groups, who also reported that changes in relations between the police and the Temple Mount movement created a more permissive environment for silent prayer. In some cases, Israeli police acted to prevent individuals from praying and removed them, but in other cases, some of which were documented on social media in photos and videos, police appeared not to notice the acts of prayer. Some Jewish Temple Mount activists toured the site in bare feet, consistent with their interpretation of Jewish tradition at the times of the two Jewish temples, to

which the Waqf raised objections. Israeli authorities sometimes barred individual Jewish Temple Mount activists who had repeatedly violated rules against non-Muslim prayer on the site, including Temple Mount movement leaders.

Some government coalition Knesset members continued to call on the Israeli government to implement time-based division at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount to set aside certain days or hours for Jewish access and/or worship, similar to the arrangement used at the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. The Knesset Lobby for Strengthening the Jewish Connection to the Temple Mount, headed by MK Yehuda Glick and Chairman of the Jewish Home faction MK Shuli Moalem-Refaeli, organized a conference in December to urge the Chief Rabbinate to remove its religious ruling that Jewish visits to Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount were prohibited. MK Yehuda Glick and other members of the Temple Mount movement continued to advocate to reverse the status quo prohibition on non-Muslim prayer at the site, describing it as a restriction on religious freedom.

Israeli police continued to screen non-Muslims for religious paraphernalia. Israeli police continued to have exclusive control of the Mughrabi Gate entrance – the only entrance through which non-Muslims could enter the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount – and allowed visitors through the gate during set visiting hours, although police sometimes restricted this access due to what they stated were security concerns. Israeli police maintained checkpoints outside other gates to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, preventing non-Muslims from entering these other areas, but did not coordinate with Waqf guards inside.

The Waqf continued to restrict non-Muslims who visited the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount from entering the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. It also lodged objections with Israeli police concerning non-Muslim visitors wearing religious symbols or religious clothing, such as Jewish prayer shawls. The INP sometimes acted upon these objections and/or enforced the restrictions of its own accord.

Waqf officials repeated previous years' complaints over what they said were violations by Israeli police of the status quo arrangements regarding control of access to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and Waqf's administrative authorities on the site. Waqf officials stated Israeli police did not coordinate with the Waqf on decisions to allow non-Muslim visitors onto the site or to restrict access to broad categories of Muslim worshippers or to individual Palestinians whom police suspected could disrupt the non-Muslim visits. Waqf employees remained stationed inside each gate and on the plaza but Waqf officials said they were able

to exercise only a reduced oversight role. They reportedly could object to the presence of particular persons, such as individuals dressed immodestly or causing disturbances, but lacked the authority to remove such persons from the site. Waqf officials also stated Israeli police challenged the Waqf's authority by restricting its administration of the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, particularly by prohibiting building and infrastructure repairs. For example, Israeli police prevented the Waqf from carrying out routine repairs without advance approval and oversight from the Israeli Antiquities Authority, and refused to permit the entry of most maintenance equipment onto the site, according to the Waqf. Waqf officials stated these restrictions impacted its ability to repair leaking water pipes and address electrical problems inside the Dome of the Rock and other buildings; in addition, these restrictions prevented the Waqf from pursuing approximately 20 major renovation projects. Waqf officials also reported Israeli police on occasion detained Waqf employees (typically guards) or expelled them from the site and from the vicinity of visiting Jewish activist groups.

According to media reports and the Waqf, Israeli authorities in some instances barred specific individuals from the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site, including Jewish activists whom the INP had previously removed from the site for violating rules concerning non-Muslim prayer, Muslims believed to have acted violently against non-Muslim visitors to the site, and public figures whom authorities feared would inflame tensions. During the year, Prime Minister Netanyahu continued to instruct police to bar sitting government ministers and MKs from visiting the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. For the first time since 2015, however, he ordered police to permit MK visits for one day on August 29, and subsequently permitted MK Yehuda Glick to visit the site on October 25, according to the Waqf. Israeli police continued to enforce "black lists" barring at least 50 Muslim men and women they accused of verbally harassing Jewish visitors to the site. Israeli police said some of these banned Muslims had objected to what they perceived as attempts by Jewish Temple Mount activists to break the status quo injunction against non-Muslim prayer on the site.

The Israeli government and the PA sometimes prevented Jewish Israelis from visiting Jewish religious sites in PA-controlled territory in the West Bank for security reasons. Palestinians threw stones and clashed with IDF escorts during visits of Jewish groups to Joseph's Tomb in Nablus (located in Area A) on several days during the year. The IDF used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse Palestinian protesters, to secure the site, and/or to evacuate Jewish worshippers.

According to Christian religious, political, and civil society leaders, a combination of factors continued to provide the impetus for increased Christian emigration from Jerusalem and the West Bank, including political instability; the limited ability of Christian communities in the Jerusalem area to expand due to building restrictions maintained by the municipality in Jerusalem or Israeli authorities in Area C; the difficulties Christian clergy experienced in obtaining Israeli visas and residency permits; Israeli government family reunification restrictions; loss of confidence in the peace process; and economic hardships created by the establishment of the security barrier and the imposition of travel restrictions.

Jerusalem-based Christian religious leaders expressed concern about the continuing decline of Christian population in Jerusalem, and in particular, about the departure of young Palestinian Christian families, which impacted the long-term viability of Jerusalem parishes. These Christian leaders noted that, of the approximately 14,000 Christians residing in Jerusalem, many were already married. As such, the pool of eligible marriage partners remained limited, compelling Palestinian Christians to search for spouses in the nearby Christian communities of Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and others, located in the West Bank. In 2003, however, the Knesset passed a law freezing, in most cases, the family unification process for Jerusalem permanent residents. Over the past 15 years, this order has effectively denied Palestinians from East Jerusalem, who are permanent residents of Israel, the possibility of living in East Jerusalem with spouses from the West Bank or Gaza, and denied their children born in Gaza or the West Bank permanent residency status in Jerusalem. Christian leaders stated that this measure has forced many East Jerusalem Christians and Muslims to relocate to Jerusalem neighborhoods outside Israel's security barrier, the West Bank, or emigrate. Palestinians not leaving East Jerusalem due to this policy or for other reasons risked losing their permanent residency and the attendant social welfare benefits.

While under Israeli law the ILA could not lease land to foreigners, in practice, foreigners have been allowed to lease if they could show that they would qualify as Jewish under the Law of Return. The application of ILA restrictions historically limited the ability of Palestinian Muslim and Christian residents of Jerusalem who are not citizens of Israel to purchase property built on state land, including in parts of East Jerusalem. In recent years, however, an increasing number of Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem have been able to acquire property built on ILA-owned land.

Religious organizations providing education, health care, and other humanitarian relief and social services to Palestinians in and around East Jerusalem continued to

state that the security barrier, particularly south of Jerusalem in the West Bank, impeded their work. Clergy members stated the barrier and additional checkpoints restricted their movements between Jerusalem and West Bank churches and monasteries, as well as the movement of congregants between their homes and places of worship. Christian leaders continued to state the barrier hindered Bethlehem-area Christians from reaching the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. They also said it made visits to Christian sites in Bethlehem difficult for Palestinian Christians who lived on the west side of the barrier. Foreign pilgrims and religious aid workers also reported difficulty or delays accessing Christian religious sites in the West Bank because of the barrier. The Israeli government previously stated it constructed the barrier as an act of self-defense, and that it has been highly effective in preventing attacks in Israel.

Bethlehem-based Christian leaders stated construction of the security barrier also impacted the Christian community residing in the area by inhibiting economic growth and limiting employment-related movement. In addition, Bethlehem residents asserted that political instability affected tourism, Bethlehem's key economic sector. During the year, Bethlehem had the highest unemployment rate among West Bank cities, which sources stated was a factor compelling many young Christians to emigrate.

On September 25, representatives of Palestinian Christian churches raised concerns before the Human Rights Council in Geneva over the impact of the security barrier on the Christian community of Beit Jala, according to media reports. The security barrier runs through the Cremisan Valley on land owned by 58 Christian Palestinian families, close to a monastery and its sister convent and school. The construction of the barrier has restricted farmers' access to their lands.

Nonrecognized churches, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and some evangelical Christian groups, face a continued ban on proselytization but stated they were able to conduct most other functions unhindered by the PA. The PA, however, continued to refuse to recognize personal status legal documents issued by some of these nonrecognized groups, which the groups said made it difficult for them to register newborn children under their fathers' names or as children of married couples. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses representatives reported the PA issued birth certificates for their members but would not issue marriage licenses, resulting in children born to these couples listed as having been born out of wedlock, which complicated inheritance claims. Many nonrecognized churches advised members with dual citizenship to marry or divorce abroad in order to register the action officially in the second location.

The PA continued to implement its policy of providing imams with themes they were required to use in weekly Friday sermons in West Bank mosques and prohibited them from broadcasting Quranic recitations from minarets prior to the call to prayer.

The PA Ministry of Waqf (Islamic religious endowments) and Religious Affairs continued to pay for construction of new mosques, maintenance of approximately 1,800 existing mosques, and salaries of most Palestinian imams in the West Bank. The ministry also continued to provide limited financial support to some Christian clergy and Christian charitable organizations.

Although the PA removed the religious affiliation category from Palestinian identity cards in 2014, older identity cards continued to circulate, listing the holder as either Muslim or Christian.

The Israeli government continued to permit both Muslims and Christians to pray at the Western Wall, the place of worship nearest the holiest site in Judaism, although Israeli police frequently limited access to Palestinians to the Western Wall Plaza for what they stated were security reasons.

The Israeli government continued to prohibit Israeli citizens in unofficial capacities from traveling to the parts of the West Bank under the civil and security control of the PA (Area A). While these restrictions in general prevented Jewish Israelis from visiting several Jewish religious sites, the IDF provided special security escorts for Jews to visit religious sites in Area A, particularly Joseph's Tomb in Nablus – a site of religious significance to Jews, Christians, and Muslims which is located near Balata refugee camp. Some Jewish religious leaders said this policy prevented Jewish Israelis from freely visiting several Jewish religious sites in the West Bank, including Joseph's Tomb, because they were denied the opportunity to visit the site on unscheduled occasions or in larger numbers than may be permitted through IDF coordination. IDF officials said requirements to coordinate Jewish visits to Joseph's Tomb were needed to ensure Jewish Israelis' safety. On June 25, Israeli security forces arrested 20 Israelis for attempting to enter Joseph's Tomb illegally, without prior coordination with Israeli authorities. The suspects were released on bail. On October 11, clashes erupted when the ISF escorted a group of approximately 1,000 worshippers to Joseph's Tomb.

According to local Palestinian political leaders and local press, Israeli authorities continued to prevent most Palestinians from accessing Rachel's Tomb, a

Bethlehem shrine of religious significance to Jews, Christians, and Muslims under Israeli jurisdiction in Area C, but continued to allow relatively unimpeded access to Jewish visitors. Israeli police closed the site to all visitors on Saturdays, for the Jewish Sabbath (Shabbat).

The IDF continued to limit access to the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, another site of significance to Jews, Christians, and Muslims as the tomb of Abraham. Muslim leaders continued to oppose publicly, in statements to local media, the IDF's control of access, citing Oslo-era agreements which gave Israel and the PA shared responsibility for the site. The IDF again restricted Muslim access on 10 days corresponding to Jewish holidays and Jewish access on 10 days corresponding to Islamic holidays. The IDF restricted Muslims to one entry point with IDF security screening. The IDF granted Jews access to several entry points without security screening. The IDF also periodically closed roads approaching the site, and since 2001 has permanently closed Shuhada Street to Palestinian pedestrians, citing security concerns. Both Muslims and Jews were able to pray at the site simultaneously but in separate spaces. Israeli authorities continued to implement frequent bans on the Muslim call to prayer from the Ibrahimi Mosque, saying it disturbed Jewish settlers in the surrounding areas or posed a security concern. The Israeli government criticized the designation by UNESCO in July of the old city of Hebron, including the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs, as an endangered World Heritage site in Palestinian territory. The Israelis stated that UNESCO's approval of a Palestinian motion to recognize Hebron as a heritage site was a deliberate attempt to diminish Jewish and Israeli connections to the site.

Religiously intolerant and anti-Semitic material continued to appear in official PA media. In July PA TV reportedly broadcast a video clip characterizing Jewish Israelis as "evil" and "satans," and glorified armed resistance. Following the December 6 United States government declaration on Jerusalem, an official PA television program featured a poem that contained anti-Semitic language. Another video program broadcast on PA TV in December featured children stating that Jewish people poisoned the late Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat.

Civil society organizations alleged problematic content in Palestinian textbooks, including inappropriately militaristic and adversarial examples directed against Israel as well as the absence of Judaism alongside Christianity and Islam when discussing religion.

Israeli police and the IDF reported investigating known instances of religiously motivated attacks and making arrests where possible. In June the GOI indicted Rabbi Yosef Elitzur, a rabbi in a West Bank settlement, for incitement to violence against Palestinians. Elitzur is also coauthor of the controversial book, “The King’s Torah,” which attempts to justify in religious terms the killing of non-Jews in certain circumstances. In December an Israeli court sentenced Yitzhar settlement resident Eliraz Fein to five months’ community service for social media posts calling for violent acts against Palestinians and Israeli soldiers. The court gave Fein a 10-month suspended prison sentence and a 2,000 shekel (\$575) fine for comments she made in an email forum in which Yitzhar residents mulled the legality under Jewish law of attacking, and even killing, IDF soldiers “under certain circumstances.” In general, however, NGOs, religious institutions, and media continued to state that arrests in religiously motivated crimes against Palestinians rarely led to indictments and convictions. Israeli NGO Yesh Din also reported Palestinian victims generally feared reprisals by perpetrators or their associates. Both of these factors increased Palestinian victims’ reluctance to file official complaints, according to Yesh Din. In response to these reports, the Israeli government stated the special unit it established in 2013 in the West Bank to combat nationalistic crimes continued to face evidentiary challenges. Those challenges included long delays before Palestinians filed complaints, submission of complaints by NGOs rather than plaintiffs, lack of cooperation by witnesses, and challenges in coordinating with the PA. The Israeli government reported this unit opened 142 cases and filed 66 new indictments in 2017.

NGOs monitoring archaeological practices in Jerusalem and the West Bank continued to state the Israel Antiquities Authority, an Israeli government entity, exploited archaeological finds to bolster Jewish claims, while overlooking other historically significant archaeological finds of other religions or the needs of Palestinian residents at these sites. In March the Israeli High Court of Justice ruled against a petition filed by Emek Shaveh, a Jerusalem-based Israeli archaeological NGO, seeking to nullify the Israel Ministry of Religious Services’ declaration of the Western Wall tunnels as an exclusively Jewish holy site, since excavations also unearthed a Christian chapel, an Islamic school, and Islamic Mamluk-era buildings. The court rejected the petition, but ruled that the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Western Wall Heritage Foundation must ensure that those sections of the tunnels significant to Muslims and Christians were properly managed to protect the antiquities and to ensure access and enable worship for members of other religions. Under Israeli Antiquities Law, excavations within a sacred site require the approval of a ministerial committee, which includes the Minister of Culture, the Minister of Justice, and the Minister of Religious Affairs. Based on

this provision, Emek Shaveh submitted another petition to the High Court of Justice in June requesting a halt to Western Wall tunnels excavations pending the necessary approvals by the ministerial committee. The Western Wall Heritage Foundation continued to promote ongoing archaeological excavations in the vicinity of the Western Wall Plaza, including tunnels underneath the Old City's Muslim Quarter, which the Waqf stated were altering the religious landscape of the area around the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount.

The Israeli government retained its previous regulations regarding visa issuance for foreigners to work in Jerusalem and the West Bank, which Christian institutions said impeded their work by preventing many foreign clergy from entering and working. The Israeli government continued to limit Arab Christian clergy serving in the West Bank or Jerusalem to single entry visas, which local parish leaders in the West Bank said complicated needed travel to other areas under their pastoral authority outside the West Bank or Jerusalem, such as Jordan. Clergy, nuns, and other religious workers from Arab countries said they continued to face long delays before they received visas, and reported periodic denials of their visa applications. The Israeli government stated visa delays or denials were due to security processing. Officials from multiple churches expressed concerns that non-Arab visa applicants and visa renewal applicants also faced long delays.

According to some church officials, Israel continued to prohibit some Arab Christian clergy from entering Gaza, including bishops and other senior clergy seeking to visit congregations or ministries under their pastoral authority. Israel facilitated visits by clergy, including bishops from non-Arab countries, to Gaza on multiple occasions, including delegations from Europe, North America, and South Africa.

Three PA ministries (Finance, Economy and Tourism) were headed by Christians at year's end.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and other militant and terrorist groups were active in Gaza. Hamas remained in de facto political control.

Hamas, PIJ, and other extremist groups disseminated anti-Semitic materials and incited to violence via traditional and social media channels, as well as during rallies and other events. In January thousands of Hamas activists and supporters participated in a protest organized at the Jabalya refugee camp in Gaza to rally

against Israel and praise the terrorist ramming attack in Jerusalem that killed four IDF soldiers. Speaking at the rally, a Hamas official voiced support “for every jihadi who carries out an attack that puts an end to the acts of the Zionist enemy.”

Hamas also continued to enforce restrictions on Gaza’s population based on its interpretation of Islam and sharia.

Christian groups reported Hamas generally tolerated the small Christian presence in Gaza and did not force Christians to abide by Islamic law. According to media accounts, Hamas continued neither to investigate nor prosecute Gaza-based cases of religious discrimination, including reported anti-Christian bias in private sector hiring and in police investigations of anti-Christian harassment.

Some Muslim students continued to attend schools run by Christian institutions or NGOs in Gaza.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were incidents of deadly violence that perpetrators said was justified at least partly on religious grounds. Because religion and ethnicity or nationality were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize much of this violence as being solely based on religious identity. Actions included killings, physical and verbal attacks on worshipers and clergy, and vandalism of religious sites. There was also harassment by members of one religious group of another, social pressure to stay within one’s religious group, and anti-Semitic media items.

In June three armed Palestinian assailants arrived at the Old City’s Damascus Gate; one of the assailants fatally stabbed Hadas Malka, a border police officer. On July 21, a Palestinian stabbed and killed three Israeli citizens – a father, son, and daughter – in the West Bank settlement of Halamish. Some of these attackers cited specific religious motivations on social media before perpetrating the attacks. For example, prior to carrying out the attack in Halamish, the assailant commented on Facebook that he would take actions to “defend” the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Israeli authorities arrested the assailant, and demolished his house on August 16.

Palestinians threw stones and Molotov cocktails and committed other acts of violence against Jewish visitors to Joseph’s Tomb in Nablus. On August 29, the IDF shot and wounded two Palestinians while the soldiers were providing protection to a group of Jewish worshipers visiting the Joseph’s Tomb holy site,

Palestinian media reported. The IDF confirmed that during the incident, soldiers “identified an armed suspect and opened fire on him.”

According to multiple media reports, Jewish groups harassed and attacked Muslim and Christian Palestinians. The Jewish Israeli antiassimilation organization Lehava continued to protest social and romantic relationships between Jews and Palestinians, made anti-Christian and anti-Muslim statements, and reportedly assaulted Palestinians in West Jerusalem. The Israeli police remanded Lehava leader Bentzi Gopstein to house arrest October 22, following allegations he made threats against Arabs in romantic relationships with Jewish women. The Jerusalem Magistrate’s Court sentenced Gopstein to five days house arrest. Of the 14 other members of the group arrested at the same time for making similar threats, the court extended the house arrest of two by two days, and released the remaining 12, Hebrew-language media reported. According to local human rights groups and media, Israeli authorities rarely prosecuted Jewish attacks against Muslims and Christians successfully, failing to open investigations or closing cases for lack of evidence.

Local Christian clergy said some Jewish Israelis in Jerusalem continued to subject them to nonphysical abuse, including insults and spitting. These incidents often occurred in the Old City and near the shared holy site of the Cenacle (devotional site of the Last Supper)/David’s Tomb near the Old City.

According to Jehovah’s Witnesses and evangelical Christians, established Christian groups opposed their efforts to obtain official recognition from the PA because of their proselytizing.

Jewish proponents of accessing and performing religious rituals at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site, such as Return to the Mount, the Temple Mount Faithful, and the Temple Institute, continued to call for increased Jewish access and prayer at the site, while almost all ultra-Orthodox rabbis and some National Religious Orthodox rabbis continued to discourage Jewish visits. Some small Jewish groups continued to call for the destruction of the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque to enable the building of a third Jewish temple. Political and religious groups in the West Bank and Gaza continued to call on members to “defend” the Al-Aqsa mosque.

According to Palestinian sources, most Christian and Muslim families in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip pressured their children, especially their daughters, to marry within their respective religious groups. Couples who

challenged this societal norm, particularly Palestinian Christians or Muslims who sought to marry Jews, encountered considerable societal and family opposition. Families sometimes disowned Muslim and Christian women who married outside their faith.

Independent Palestinian media outlets continued to broadcast anti-Semitic programming. Multiple social and traditional media sites glorified attacks against Jewish Israelis, referring to the assailants as “martyrs.”

According to local press and social media, some Israeli settlers in the West Bank continued to justify their attacks on Palestinian property, such as the uprooting of Palestinian olive trees or “price tag” attacks (property crimes and violent acts by extremist Jewish individuals and groups against Palestinians), as necessary for the defense of Judaism.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

During his May visit to Bethlehem, the U.S. President publicly called for “a more peaceful, safe, and far more tolerant world.” Officials from the U.S. Consulate General in Jerusalem met with Palestinian officials to discuss religious tolerance. These discussions included continued requests to remove religiously intolerant material or language glorifying violence from traditional and social media. During meetings with Palestinian religious authorities, consulate general officials also discussed religious tolerance as well as other issues such as the Muslim religious leaders’ perceptions of detrimental changes to the status quo of religious sites, including concerns about Israeli restrictions on Muslim access to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Consulate general officials also expressed concerns about UNESCO resolutions sponsored by the PA that minimized or ignored the Jewish religious and historical connection to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and Western Wall as well as to Hebron and the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs. Consulate general officers raised with local authorities the views and concerns expressed by both majority and minority religious groups. In meetings with PA officials, consulate general officers objected to instances of intolerant and anti-Semitic material in PA and Fatah party media and social media as well as inappropriate material in Palestinian textbooks.

During a visit in October, the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South/Central Asia met with politicians and local religious and civil society leaders to discuss religious tolerance, anti-Semitism, interfaith relations, and the need for cooperation against religious prejudice. He also met with a broad

range of Christian religious, social, and political leaders to discuss key factors driving Palestinian Christian emigration. In addition, the Special Advisor met with local Palestinians to hear their concerns that construction of Israel's security barrier in the Cremisan Valley impeded access to the Catholic convent and school and agricultural lands near Beit Jala and Bethlehem, as well as with representatives of churches not recognized by the Palestinian Authorities.

The Consul General and consulate general officers met regularly with representatives of a large range of religious groups from Jerusalem, the West Bank, and when possible, the Gaza Strip. This included meetings with the Waqf and Muslim leaders in Jerusalem and throughout the West Bank; meetings with Orthodox, ultra-Orthodox, and Reform rabbis, as well as representatives of various Jewish institutions; regular contacts with leaders of the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land (an interfaith group promoting communication and respect among religious communities), and the Greek Orthodox, Latin (Roman Catholic), and Armenian Orthodox patriarchates; and meetings with the Holy See's Custodian of the Holy Land, leaders of the Anglican and Lutheran Churches, and leaders of evangelical Christian groups. These meetings included discussions of the groups' concerns about religious tolerance, access to religious sites, respect for clergy, and attacks on religious sites and houses of worship. Consulate general officers spoke to local Christians concerned about impeded access to their agricultural lands and local monastery due to the construction of the Israeli separation barrier in the Cremisan Valley, and to Waqf officials concerned about Israeli police restrictions on Muslim access to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and on Waqf renovation projects there.