

Document #2031318

USDOS – US Department of State

2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Israel

Executive Summary

This section covers Israel, including Jerusalem. In December 2017, 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) exercises no authority over Jerusalem. In March 2019, the United States recognized Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. A report on the West Bank and Gaza, including areas subject to the jurisdiction of the PA, is appended at the end of this report.

The country's laws and Supreme Court rulings protect the freedoms of conscience, faith, religion, and worship, regardless of an individual's religious affiliation, and the 1992 “Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty” protects additional individual rights. In 2018, the Knesset passed the “Basic Law: Israel – The Nation State of the Jewish People.” According to the government, that “law determines, among other things, that the Land of Israel is the historical homeland of the Jewish people; the State of Israel is the nation state of the Jewish People, in which it realizes its natural, cultural, religious and historical right to self-determination; and exercising the right to national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish People.” The government continued to allow controlled access to religious sites, including the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif (the site containing the foundation of the first and second Jewish temple and the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque). Police closed the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif for several hours on July 27 following clashes with Muslim protesters. Violence occurred between Muslim worshippers and Israeli police on August 11 near the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, on a day marking both the Islamic feast of Eid al-Adha and the Jewish commemoration of Tisha B'Av. According to the International Crisis Group, the first months of the year saw low-level violence erupting over control of the Gate of Mercy building within the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, which evolved into a power struggle among the government, Jordan, and the Jerusalem Waqf (which under the status quo in place since 1967 remains a Jordanian government institution; the 1994 peace agreement between Israel and Jordan recognized Jordan's “special role” in relation to Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem). Violence occurred between Muslims and the police on Jerusalem Day, the June 2 national holiday celebrating the anniversary of the reunification of Jerusalem and Israeli control over the Old City, after hundreds of Jews were allowed into the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, and which coincided with the last 10 days of Ramadan. It was the first time these two holidays overlapped in years and the first time in three decades that non-Muslims entered the site during the final days of Ramadan. Israeli authorities in some instances barred specific individuals from the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site, including Jewish activists believed to have violated the status quo understanding prohibiting non-Islamic prayer, Muslims believed to have verbally harassed or acted violently against non-Muslim visitors to the site, and public figures, including Members of the Knesset (MKs), whose presence authorities said they feared would inflame tensions. The government continued to implement policies based on Orthodox Jewish interpretations of religious law. Local authorities sought to change the status quo regarding prohibitions on public transportation on Shabbat by operating bus lines sponsored by the municipality. Press reporting cited a growing “religionization” (*hadata*) of the society, its politics, and institutions. Some minority religious groups complained about what they said was lack of police interest in investigating attacks on members of their communities. The government maintained its policy of not accepting new applications for official recognition from religious groups, but stated that members of unrecognized religious groups remained free to practice their religion.

On June 8, Jewish youths and seminary students of the Armenian Church each stated that they had been attacked by the other in Jerusalem near the Armenian Church's seminary in Jerusalem. On May 16, religiously observant Jewish teenagers shouting “Death to Arabs” attacked a Muslim teen from East Jerusalem, who was subsequently hospitalized after being knocked unconscious. Christian clergy and pilgrims continued to report instances of ultra-Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem harassing and spitting on them. 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. Approximately 40 individuals, including members of the right-wing organization Lehava, attacked Messianic Jews during a community concert in Jerusalem in June, according to press reports.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported in August a man attacked two of their members, during a door to door activity in Bat Yam and threatened to kill one of them after she called the police. In January Christians launched demonstrations protesting the Haifa Museum of Art's display of an artwork depicting Ronald McDonald as Jesus on the cross, the center of an exhibition about consumerism and religion.

Visiting high-level U.S. government officials, including the Vice President, met with government officials, religious groups, and civil society leaders to stress the importance of tolerance and dialogue and ways to reduce religiously motivated violence. Senior U.S. officials spoke publicly about the importance of maintaining the status quo at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. In meetings with government officials and public speeches, embassy officers stressed the importance of religious freedom and respect for all religious groups. Embassy-supported initiatives focused on interreligious dialogue and community development and advocated for a shared society for Jewish and Arab populations. Embassy officials participated in religious events organized by Jewish, Muslim, Druze, Christian, and Baha'i groups to show U.S. support for religious pluralism.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 8.6 million (midyear 2019 estimate), including residents and citizens. According to the country's 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, Karaite Jews, Seventh-day Adventists, Messianic Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, and members of the Baha'i Faith. The majority of non-Jewish citizens are of Arab origin. This includes approximately 78 percent of the country's 175,000 Christians, according to the CBS, as of December. Non-Arab Christians are mainly those who emigrated from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s as descendants of Jews or alongside Jewish family members, and their descendants.

According to a poll by the local NGO Hiddush published in September, 58 percent of Jewish citizens do not affiliate with any religious stream, 18 percent are “Zionist Orthodox,” 12 percent “ultra-Orthodox” (including 2 percent “Zionist ultra-Orthodox”), 7 percent “Reform,” and 6 percent “Conservative.”

Muslim, Druze, and Christian communities are located throughout the country. For example, in the Galilee region, some communities are homogenous, while others feature a mix of these groups. There are also dozens of Muslim-majority communities in the Negev. In addition to an Alawite community in Ghajar, there are several Druze communities in the Golan Heights.

The CBS estimates 546,100 Jews, 328,600 Muslims, and 15,900 Christians live in Jerusalem, accounting for approximately 99 percent of the city's total population of 901,300, as of 2018.

According to government and NGO data, there are approximately 350,000 foreign workers in the country, including 100,000 documented Palestinian workers; 40,000 undocumented Palestinian workers; 102,000 migrant workers with permits, 75,000 undocumented workers; and 30,000 asylum seekers. Foreign workers and asylum seekers include Protestants, Roman Catholics, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Seventh-Day Adventists, Orthodox Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims. According to the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Catholics among the foreign worker population include 30,000 Filipinos, 8,000 Indians, 2,000 Sri Lankans, 2,500 Colombians, and 1,100 individuals from South American countries.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

Although the country has no constitution, a series of “Basic Laws” enumerate fundamental rights, which are country's constitutional foundation. The 1992 “Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty” describes the country as a “Jewish and democratic state” and references the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, which 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, which applies to citizens and non-Israeli residents.

The 2018 “Basic Law: Israel – The Nation State of the Jewish People” recognizes only the Jewish People as having a national right of self-determination and calls for promotion of “Jewish settlement” in “the Land of Israel. The law recommends – but does not require – that judges use Jewish jurisprudence and heritage as a source of legal principles in cases in which there is no relevant legislation or judicial precedent.

The Chief Rabbinate retains the sole 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 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 converts born after the parent's conversion was complete.

The law recognizes only Judaism, Christianity, Islam, the Druze Faith, and the Baha'i 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 Baha'i 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: by petitioning either the Prime Minister's Office according to the Order in Council or the Ministry of Interior (MOI). 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. Municipalities may levy property taxes on religious properties not used for prayer, such as monasteries, pilgrim hostels, and soup kitchens.

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 annually convenes an interreligious council of all recognized religions, including Judaism, which serves as a discussion forum for recognized religious communities.

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 receive further protection under the antiquities law. The Ministry of Tourism (MOT) is responsible for the protection and upkeep of selected non-Jewish religious sites, while the MRS protects and maintains selected 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.

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 up to three years' imprisonment. Government regulations recognize 16 sites as holy places for Jews, while various other budgetary and governmental authorities recognize an additional 160 places as holy for Jews.

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 criminalizes statements demeaning, degrading, or showing violence toward someone based on race, but provides an exception for statements citing a religious source, unless there is proof of intent to incite racism. The infliction of “injury to religious sentiments” constitutes a criminal offense and is punishable by one year's imprisonment. Such injury includes publishing or saying something that is liable to offend the religious sentiment or faith of others.

The “Nakba Law,” passed in 2011, prohibits institutions that receive government funding from engaging in commemoration of the Nakba, or “catastrophe,” the term used by Palestinians to refer to the displacement of Palestinians during Israel's 1948 War of Independence. Activities forbidden by the law include rejection of the existence of Israel as a “Jewish and democratic state” or commemorating “Israel's Independence Day or the day on which the State was established as a day of mourning.”

The law requires citizens to obtain a permit from the MOI or the prime minister for travel to countries with no diplomatic relations with Israel, including Hajj travel to Saudi Arabia; the government issues these permits in the vast majority of cases. Illegal travel is punishable by a prison sentence or fine if the traveler does not request prior approval.

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 government provides separate public schools for Jewish and Arab children, with instruction conducted in Hebrew and Arabic, respectively. 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 regardless of ethnicity or religious observance. Minor children have the right to choose a public secular school instead of a religious school regardless of parental preference. By law, the state provides the equivalent of public school funding to two systems of “recognized but not official” (a form of semi-private) ultra-Orthodox religious schools affiliated with ultra-Orthodox political parties, the United Torah Judaism-affiliated Independent Education System and the Shas-affiliated Fountain of Torah Education System. Churches, however, receive only partial government funding to operate “recognized but not official” schools. Non-Israeli residents in Jerusalem may send their children to one of these church schools or a private school operated by the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf; both include religious instruction. Israeli education authorities use the Palestinian Authority (PA) curriculum in some public schools in Jerusalem. Religious education is part of the PA curriculum for students in grades one through six in these schools, with separate courses on religion for Muslims and Christians. Students in these schools may choose which class to take but may not opt out of religion courses.

The Law of Return provides the right for any Jew, including those who converted to Judaism, 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 receive humanitarian status but are not automatically granted citizenship. Non-Jews who are not descendants of Jews do not have this route to immigration. Under this law, those who completed an Orthodox Jewish 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. Descendants of Jews qualify for immigration under this law regardless of the religious beliefs under which they were raised. The law considers those who were eligible for immigration and as adults converted to another religion, including Messianic Judaism, as no longer eligible for benefits under the Law of Return.

The Law of Citizenship and Entry, renewed annually, prohibits residence status for non-Jewish Iranians, Iraqis, Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians from the West Bank or Gaza, including those who are spouses of Israeli residents or citizens, unless the MOI makes a special determination, usually on humanitarian grounds.

The Chief Rabbinate determines who may be buried in Jewish state cemeteries, limiting this right to individuals considered Jewish by Orthodox Jewish standards. The law provides for the right of any individual to burial in a civil ceremony and requires the government to establish civil cemeteries 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 law mandating women’s equality contains language that explicitly exempts matters of marriage, divorce, and appointments to religious positions.

The only domestic marriages with legal standing and that may be registered are those performed according to the religious statutes of recognized religious communities. Marriages performed outside of the country may be registered with the MOI. Members of nonrecognized groups may process their personal status documents, including marriage licenses, only through the authorities of one of the recognized religious communities if those authorities agree.

The law imposes a two-year prison sentence for persons who conduct, or are married in, a Jewish wedding or divorce outside the Chief Rabbinate’s authority.

Religious courts have exclusive jurisdiction over divorce cases when the 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. 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 interfaith and same-sex couples.

Matters stemming from divorce proceedings, including alimony, child support, child custody, guardianship, and property division, are under the parallel jurisdiction of religious and civil courts. The first court to receive a case acquires exclusive jurisdiction over it.

In accordance with *halacha* (Jewish religious law), 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 such cases, rabbinical courts may impose community-based punishments on the husband, including avoiding financial dealings with a *get*-refuser, excluding him from community activities, and advertising these decisions to the public. The law permits rabbinical courts to hear cases of *get* refusals in which the spouses are not Israeli citizens, if certain other conditions are met (for instance, if the couple lives abroad in a location where there is no rabbinical court).

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 Druze citizens, and male Circassian citizens (Muslims originally from the northwestern Caucasus region who migrated in the late 19th century).

Ultra-Orthodox Jewish men and women may request an exemption from military service. For most ultra-Orthodox Yeshiva students, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Druze religious students, military service is postponed for several years, after which they receive an exemption. A petition on the conscription of ultra-Orthodox men was pending at the Supreme Court as of the year's end. Arab Muslims and Christians, as well as Druze and Circassian women receive a de-facto exemption by not being called for military service. Those exempt from military service may volunteer for it or for civil-national service.

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 to another recognized religion. Religious identification is listed in the National Registry but not on official identity cards.

All citizens who meet the Chief Rabbinate's criteria as "Jewish" under Jewish religious law are recorded as Jewish, whether Orthodox or not (unless they convert to another religion). Approximately 400,000 citizens who identify as Jewish but do not meet the Chief Rabbinate's criteria as "Jewish," as well as members of religious groups that are not recognized, are recorded as "lacking religion." The vast majority are immigrants from the former Soviet Union and their children, who gained citizenship under the Law of Return but are not recognized as Jewish by the Chief Rabbinate because they cannot prove they meet the Orthodox definition of Jewish through matrilineal descent.

For those who do not wish to be identified with a religion, there is no mechanism to change one's registration to "lacking religion."

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. The 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 (up to one month imprisonment) employers who open their businesses and employ Jews on Shabbat, except those who are self-employed. There are exceptions for essential infrastructure and the hospitality, culture, and recreation industries. The law instructs 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. The law prohibits discrimination against workers who refuse to work on their day of rest, based on their religion and regardless of whether they are religiously observant.

The law prohibits discrimination in employment and occupation based on age, race, religion, national origin, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, and disability. The Equal Employment Opportunities Law prohibits an employer from discriminating against employees, contractors, or persons seeking employment.

On January 10, the Knesset approved an amendment to the penal code that includes a motive of racism or hostility based on the victim's religion, ethnic origin, or sexual orientation, or on racism toward or hate for foreign workers as an aggravated circumstance in a murder offense. In the explanatory notes of this amendment, the Knesset noted that murder committed out of racism or hostility justifies severe treatment in the form of mandatory life imprisonment.

The law states public transportation operated and funded by the national government 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 Chief Rabbinate has sole legal authority to issue certificates of *kashrut*, which certify a restaurant or factory's adherence to Jewish dietary laws. Alternatively, restaurants are permitted to display “a true presentation regarding the standards it observes and the manner of supervising their observance” without using the word “kosher.”

The Muslim Mufti of Jerusalem, who has no legal status vis-a-vis Israeli authorities, has issued “fatwas” (religious edicts) prohibiting Palestinian participation in Jerusalem municipal elections, and sales of land by Palestinians to Israelis.

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

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

The government continued to allow controlled access to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. The post-1967 status quo pertaining to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif allows non-Muslim visitors but prohibits non-Islamic worship on the compound. According to the AP, violence occurred between Muslim worshippers and Israeli police on August 11 near the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, on a day marking both the Islamic feast of Eid al-Adha and the Jewish commemoration of Tisha B'Av. According to the AP, the incident occurred after large numbers of Muslims had gathered at the site's gates in response to rumors that police would allow Jewish visitors to enter the site. The protestors threw stones at police, who responded with stun grenades and rubber bullets. After clashes broke out, police allowed access to “several dozen” Jews and provided a police escort. Muslims responded by throwing chairs and other objects at the group, which left shortly thereafter.

According to the International Crisis Group, the first months of the year saw low-level violence erupting over control of the Gate of Mercy building within the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, which evolved into a power struggle among Israel, Jordan, and the Waqf. The Jordanian government Islamic Religious Endowment (Waqf) in Jerusalem maintains the Al-Aqsa Mosque, while the Jordanian Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Holy Places supports maintenance and salary of the Waqf staff in Jerusalem. The Waqf opened the building, which media reported had not been open or used for prayers since 2003, on February 14 when worshippers began using it as a prayer hall. The government issued restraining orders against more than 20 Waqf guards and arrested 19 Muslims, including two minors who confessed to throwing a Molotov cocktail into a police post at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, which resulted in a one-day closing of the site on March 12. According to the government, this closure was done in order to allow the police investigate the incidents and check the scene. Police also closed the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif for several hours on July 27 following clashes with Muslim protesters. Tensions continued at the site, although Muslim worshippers continued to have access to it at the end of the year.

Israeli authorities in some instances barred specific individuals from the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site, including Jewish activists believed to have violated the status quo understanding prohibiting non-Islamic prayer, Muslims believed to have verbally harassed or acted violently against non-Muslim visitors to the site, and public figures, including MKs, whose presence authorities feared would inflame tensions. According to *Makor Rishon* journalist Arnon Segal, 152 persons were arrested between September 10, 2018 and August 25, 2019. The government stated the police banned individuals from accessing the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif only in cases of violation of public order or a disturbance to the freedom of worship. According to the government, 334 individuals were banned from Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif for different time periods. While the government stated it was rare for any individual to be barred entry to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site, human rights and civil society organizations said Israeli authorities banned Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza, Jerusalem residents, as well as Arab and Jewish citizens of Israel. In addition, these organizations said Israeli authorities at times restricted Muslim males under a certain age from entering the site during periods of tension.

Israeli authorities allowed West Bank Muslims to visit the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif during Ramadan and facilitated transportation for tens of thousands of Palestinian worshippers. Israeli authorities allowed men over 40 years old, boys under 16, and women of all ages to enter Jerusalem without permits issued by the Israeli military on the four Fridays of the month. Married men between 30 and 40 were eligible to apply for military permits valid Sunday-Thursday during the month – normally, only men over 50 and women over 45 may transit Israeli checkpoints from the West Bank for worship without military permits.

On April 15, Israeli authorities allowed Temple Mount activists to conduct a ritual slaughter of sheep for Passover in Jerusalem's Old City. On April 18, the police detained at least two suspects who allegedly sought to make a Passover sacrifice at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, as well as two journalists who were with them. According to media reports, the suspects were interrogated on offenses of behavior which might disturb public order, and for animal abuse.

On August 6, a police officer detained an ultra-Orthodox protester and pulled him by his earlock. The police suspended the officer, and authorities continued to investigate the case as of November.

On July 24, the state prosecutor's office announced it would indict, pending a hearing, a senior official in the Chief Rabbinate for bribery and breach of trust regarding the expediting of *kashrut* certificates. A 2017 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.

Press reported that prosecutors dropped a case against two Jewish activists, Yinon Reuveni and another man who was a minor at the time of his arrest, for membership in a terror organization and vandalizing the Benedictine Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem in 2016, due to lack of evidence. A court had previously dismissed as inadmissible the second defendant's confession, ruling that authorities obtained it illegally. The vandalism of the abbey, considered by some Christians the site of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, included graffiti that said “death to Christians” and “Jesus is a monkey.” A spokesman for the church said the decision to acquit the two men was “unacceptable.”

According to the *Times of Israel*, Muslims and police clashed violently on Jerusalem Day, the June 2 national holiday celebrating the anniversary of the reunification of Jerusalem and which coincided with the last 10 days of Ramadan, after police allowed hundreds of Jews onto the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. It was the first time in three decades that non-Muslims were able to enter the site during the final 10 days of Ramadan. The government stated that each year police assess the security situation and decide whether it is necessary to close the site to non-Muslims during this period, “in order to allow for a proper course of prayer for Muslim worshipers during Ramadan.” Prior to the incident, police had announced the compound would be closed to Jews and tourists after the High Court of Justice rejected a petition to overturn the closure. The court subsequently rejected a case that sought to change the route of the “flag march” marking Jerusalem Day, when thousands of Jews participate in the annual parade through Jerusalem's Old City, where the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif is located, including its Muslim quarter. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, Jerusalem Day has been embraced by the “national religious” community. The paper said marchers consisted mostly of young people singing songs of praise and prayer for the unification of the city and the capture of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in the 1967 Six Day War. One Muslim bakery worker said that the march through the Muslim Quarter was a provocation. Another stated that he objected to the staging of the parade during Ramadan, and that the march was disrespectful to Muslims.

According to press and NGO reports, following an appeal of a decision by the Central Elections Committee, the High Court of Justice barred the leader of the Otzma Yehudit party, Michael Ben Ari, from running in Knesset elections because of expressed anti-Arab ideology and incitement. The attorney general had urged the court to ban Ben Ari for his “severe and extreme” racism. The Otzma Yehudit party has described itself as proud disciples of Meir Kahane, the founder of the Kach party, which was banned in 1988 for being racist and antidemocratic. The appeal cited a 2019 statement by Ben Ari, “We have to change the equation regarding anyone who dares to speak against a Jew.... [Such a person] is a dead man. He must not come out alive. No expelling him, no stripping him of his citizenship. He does not live! A firing squad takes him out as the Arabs understand [best].” Ben Ari later said he was talking about Hamas leaders and not all Arabs.

Some religious minority groups complained of lack of police interest in investigating attacks on members of their communities. Data from the NGO Tag Meir and media reports indicated in recent years authorities had indicted few suspects in attacks on religious sites in the country.

According to data from the MRS, of 70,326 individuals who registered for a Jewish marriage in 2018, rabbinical courts instructed 3,996 who self-identified as Jewish to prove their Jewish lineage. Of these, 122 were unsuccessful. On November 6, the *Jerusalem Post* reported on new rabbinic regulations allowing marriage registrars to approve marriage applications of converts based on the list of rabbinical courts approved by the Chief Rabbinate, clarifying the criteria for recognition of conversions.

According to the *Jerusalem Post*, data compiled by the religious freedom NGO Hiddush, which was based on multiple surveys conducted in recent years through the Smith Polling Institute, showed that 70 percent of the country's adult Jewish population supported recognition by the state of freedom of choice in marriage, doing away with the rabbinic monopoly, and equally recognizing civil and non-Orthodox religious marriages. According to the same sources, 53 percent of the public

stated that had they been allowed a choice, they would not have married in an Orthodox ceremony, compared with 35 percent who expressed the same sentiment in 2009, 39 percent in 2013, and 47 percent in 2016.

The Chief Rabbinate continued to require Jewish women to complete bridal counseling sessions prior to marriage. Existing instructions from the Chief Rabbinate require these sessions to address only the wedding ceremony, but in practice the content varied widely and often included marital relations and “family purity” in accordance with *halacha*, according to a report in *Ma’ariv* newspaper. Neither *halacha* nor civil law mandated such counselling sessions, according to the NGO ITIM.

On April 7, a magistrate court convicted an individual who refused to give a *get* to his wife of violating a legal order and sentenced him to 15 months’ imprisonment and seven months’ probation. On August 20, President of the Rabbinical Courts Chief Rabbi David Lau instructed authorities to delay the burial of a *get* refuser’s mother as a means to pressure him. The refuser then agreed to give a *get* to his wife.

Local authorities circumnavigated the ban on public transportation on Shabbat by funding privately operated bus lines. On July 7, the municipal council in Ramat Gan, a suburb of Tel Aviv, approved the operation of two bus lines on Shabbat in central areas of the city as long as they did not enter residential neighborhoods. In November the Tel Aviv city council approved and funded free bus lines on Shabbat for the entire city as well as other major cities in the central area of the country. MK Uri Maklev of the United Torah Party denounced the initiative and called on the transportation minister to stop the service. The orthodox organization Hotam criticized the proposal as “harming Shabbat,” while the secular group Be Free Israel said that the initiative recognized public transportation as a “basic right.” On December 11, the nearby city of Bat Yam decided against offering public transportation on the Sabbath. In a poll released by Hiddush on December 9, 71 percent of Jewish citizens were favor of transportation on weekends, including 94 percent of citizens who described themselves as secular.

Some observant Jews, based on their religious beliefs, may only attend concerts and other entertainment events in venues that allow for the separation of genders. As permitted by attorney general directives until August, cities and municipalities with significant population groups of observant Jews were able to plan and execute events with these guidelines observed. Some women’s rights organizations, including the Israel Women’s Action Network (IWN), expressed concern about gender segregation in any publicly funded or sponsored events, arguing that gender segregation as supported by Orthodox Jews violated antidiscrimination laws and attorney general directives. On August 14, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of an NGO petition objecting to a gender-segregated concert held by the Afula municipality in accordance with the religious practices of a large percentage of its population. The event went forward prior to the Supreme Court ruling as a lower court had initially ruled in favor of the municipality. Minister of Interior Aryeh Deri made an appearance onstage at the concert and criticized the NGO for attempting to impose requirements on all Afula residents irrespective of their beliefs. On August 18, the Office of the Attorney General issued a directive stipulating certain circumstances in which gender-segregated events could be held, pending further examination of the issue. The new guidelines deviated from a previous directive that permitted segregation only in events of a religious nature, under which many observant Jews were not able to participate in municipality events.

In June MK Bezalel Smotrich said the justice system should adhere to religious law, and the country should run itself as “in the days of King David” and “restore the Torah justice system.” Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu responded to Smotrich’s remarks by saying that the country “will not be a *halacha* state.” On August 5, Smotrich, who had then been appointed as minister of transportation, told a conference of rabbis in Jerusalem “We would all like the state to act according to the Torah and *halacha*.” Smotrich also said that he would work to prevent construction, infrastructure, and maintenance work on Shabbat. On August 6, after criticism, Smotrich said that while his comments reflected the “religious will of any observant Jew,” they also made clear that “we all understand we cannot, nor do we want to, force our beliefs on others” and that policy solutions must consider the views of the entire public.

The Chief Rabbinate continued not to recognize as Jewish some citizens who self-identified as Jewish, including Reform and Conservative converts to Judaism and others who could not prove Jewish matrilineage. As a result, the government prohibited those individuals from accessing official Jewish marriage, divorce, and burial services in the country. Some Orthodox and non-Orthodox rabbis, however, officiated at a growing number of these ceremonies outside of the authority of the Chief Rabbinate. Likewise, the government continued not to allow Jewish men with priestly patrilineage (*kohanim*) to marry converts or divorcees, in accordance with *halacha*.

On May 3, *Walla News* reported that in a new book, Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef called reform synagogues idolatrous.

The Supreme Court scheduled a hearing for early 2020 on its 2018 injunction that required the government to explain why it had not held a disciplinary hearing for Chief Rabbi of Safed Shmuel Eliyahu for allegedly making racist and offensive statements against Arabs, Druze, women, and the LGBTI community, following a 2016 petition by the Israel Religious Action Center, Tag Meir, and other NGOs.

Israeli police continued to be responsible for security of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, with police officers stationed both inside the site and outside each entrance. Israeli police conducted routine patrols on the outdoor plaza and inside buildings on the site and regulated pedestrian traffic exiting and entering the site. Israeli police continued to maintain exclusive control of the Mughrabi Gate entrance through which non-Muslims may enter the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, and allowed visitors through the gate during set hours; however, police sometimes restricted this access, citing “security concerns.” Local media, the Waqf, and Jewish Temple Mount groups reported that Israeli police maintained checkpoints outside other gates to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, preventing non-Muslims from entering these other areas without coordinating with Waqf guards inside. Some Jewish groups performed religious acts such as prayers and prostration on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif despite the ban on non-Islamic prayer. NGOs, media, and Jewish Temple Mount advocacy groups continued to report that changes in relations between police and the Temple Mount advocacy movement created a more permissive environment for non-Muslim religious acts on the site. In response, the government reiterated that non-Islamic prayer was not allowed on the grounds of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. Police continued to screen non-Muslims for religious articles. Police allowed Jewish male visitors who were visibly wearing a *kippah* (head covering) and *tzitzit* (fringes), and those who wished to enter the site barefoot (in accordance with interpretations of *halacha*) to enter the site with police escort.

The Waqf continued to restrict non-Muslims who visited the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif from entering the Dome of the Rock and other buildings dedicated for Islamic worship, including the Al-Aqsa Mosque. It also lodged objections with Israeli police concerning non-Muslim visitors wearing religious symbols or religious clothing. Israeli police sometimes acted upon these objections.

Waqf officials repeated previous years’ complaints over their lack of control of access to the site. The Waqf reportedly objected to non-Muslims praying or performing religious acts on the site and to individuals who dressed immodestly or caused disturbances, but they lacked authority to remove such persons from the site. Waqf officials stated Israeli police did not coordinate with the Waqf on decisions regarding entry and barring of Muslim and non-Muslim visitors to the site. Waqf employees remained stationed inside each gate and on the plaza, but Waqf officials said they were able to exercise only a limited oversight role. The government stated that most of the time, police and the Waqf worked in full coordination, including regular joint sessions regarding routine activities.

In August 2018, the Supreme Court ordered the government to respond within 60 days to a petition by the NGO Moked Israeli Center for the Advancement of Democracy and Protection of Human Rights, which objected to a sign near the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif discouraging non-Muslim visitors from entering the site. The case was ongoing as of the years’ end.

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 for reasons of ritual purity. Some MKs, however, called for reversing the policy of banning non-Islamic prayer at the site to provide equal religious freedom for all visitors. Some Knesset members continued to call on the government to implement time-based division at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif by setting 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 in the West Bank.

The government continued to allow MKs and ministers to visit the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site once a month, after obtaining approval of the Chairman of the Knesset and after reviewing police security assessments. This was in accordance with a 2018 decision by Prime Minister Netanyahu, which rescinded his 2015 blanket prohibition of MKs and ministers visiting the site. MKs also must inform the Knesset guard at least 24 hours prior to the visit to allow for coordination with the visit with the police.

At the main Western Wall plaza, the place of worship nearest the Temple Mount, Judaism’s holiest site, the government continued to enforce a regulation prohibiting the performance of “a religious ceremony that is not in accordance with the customs of the place, which harms the feelings of the public towards the place.” Authorities interpreted this prohibition to include mixed-gender Jewish prayer services and other ceremonies not conforming to Orthodox Judaism.

Members of the Jewish Conservative and Reform movements continued to criticize gender segregation and rules governing how women may pray at the Western Wall. Authorities continued to prohibit visitors from bringing private Torah scrolls to the main Western Wall plaza and women from

accessing the public Torah scrolls or giving priestly blessings at the site. Authorities, however, 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.

Authorities allowed the group Women of the Wall to hold its monthly service in the women’s area of the main Western Wall plaza but in a barricaded area. In March and October, Jerusalem Rabbi Shlomo Amar called on people to arrive at the Western Wall to oppose Women of the Wall during their monthly prayer service, referring to their activities as an effort to “hurt the sanctity of the place.” Representatives of 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. In response, the government stated that large numbers of Israeli police, ushers, and security personnel maintained order on occasions when Women of the Wall prayed there. Women of the Wall filed a petition to the Supreme Court in March 2017 to require ushers and police to prevent disruption to their services. The case was ongoing as of the end of the year.

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 “egalitarian” (mixed gender) 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 response to an ongoing Supreme Court case from 2013 on the issue of prayer access at the Western Wall, the government stated in January it intended to upgrade the egalitarian prayer space. In June 2017, the government “froze” a 2016 agreement with non-Orthodox Jewish groups that offered symbolic recognition to the Conservative and Reform Judaism movements in addition to upgrading the egalitarian prayer space. In August 2018 a special government committee approved expansion of the platform. According to the government, the renovation of the platform has not been accomplished due to regulatory procedures. The non-Orthodox Jewish movements stated that upgrading the prayer space alone would not fulfill the agreement with the government. The court case was ongoing as of the end of the year.

On June 3, the National Infrastructure Committee approved, in an expedited process, a plan for the establishment of a cable car from the First Station cultural complex in Jerusalem to the Dung Gate of the Old City. On November 4, the Housing Cabinet approved the plan. The cable car route would pass over a Karaite cemetery, something opposed by the Karaite community and which, according to the Karaite belief would desecrate the cemetery, preventing its further use. While the original plan included a physical roof over the cemetery, which contradicted Karaite customs, the approved plan does not include a roof. The government stated the cable car was meant to solve accessibility problems to holy sites such as the Western Wall, although some NGOs said the project was meant to promote Jewish touristic sites in East Jerusalem. The plan was pending final approval from the government at year’s end.

The security barrier dividing most of the West Bank from Israel also divided some communities within Jerusalem, affecting access to places of worship. The Israeli government previously stated the barrier was highly effective in preventing attacks in Israel.

Several groups, including religious minorities and human rights NGOs, continued to criticize the 2018 Nation State Law. During the April and September general election campaigns, members of the Druze community, as well as others, demonstrated in front of the residences of party candidates and demanded a promise to amend the law by adding an equality clause, or to rescind it. Several politicians, including Blue and White Party leader Benny Gantz, voiced support. As of the end of the year, multiple lawsuits challenging the Nation State Law were pending with the Supreme Court. In the campaign for the April election, PM Netanyahu wrote on Instagram, “Israel is not a state of all its citizens ... it is the nation-state of the Jewish people only.” In November the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights released observations stating that it was “deeply concerned about the possible discriminatory effect” of the Nation State Basic Law on non-Jews.

Press reporting cited growing “religionization” (*hadata*) of the society, its politics, and institutions. According to the August 23 issue of the *New Yorker*, “manifestations of *hadata* appear throughout civic life,” but “nowhere have those changes been more pronounced or more influential than in the public school system.” According to the article, “much of the curriculum these days is being taught through the narrow prism of religious orthodoxy.” A November report in *Haaretz* noted, “According to the Education Ministry, Jewish-Israeli culture is taught in a pluralistic and sometimes critical fashion. But countless examples prove otherwise.”

On April 16, six orthodox female *halacha* students and NGOs petitioned the Supreme Court, demanding that women be allowed to register for the Halachic exams of the State of Israel. This petition followed a rejection of their registration by the Chief Rabbinate, which the petitioners stated they viewed as wrongful discrimination. In May 2018, the government began recruiting women as legal advisors in rabbinical courts, following a petition to the Supreme Court by ITIM and Bar Ilan University’s Rackman Center for the Advancement of the Status of Women.

The MOI continued to rely on the sole discretion and approval 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, including those holding Messianic or Christian beliefs, whom the government said became ineligible when they converted to another religion.

A group of Orthodox rabbis continued to operate a private conversion court for children of families whom the state or rabbinical courts did not recognize as Jews. The Chief Rabbinate continued not to recognize non-Orthodox converts to Judaism as Jews, although they remained eligible for immigration under the Law of Return if they converted outside the country.

A series of Supreme Court cases on conversion rights, including a petition demanding immigration rights to those who completed Reform or Conservative conversions inside the country, continued through year's end.

According to ITIM, some individuals from the former Soviet-Union were asked by the rabbinate to take DNA tests in order to prove their Judaism. While the Supreme rabbinical court overturned two such requests, in a response to a Supreme Court petition, the government stated on September 16 that it supported consensual DNA tests as a last resort. The case was ongoing at year's end.

According to a June report in *Haaretz*, a “large majority” of Jews in the country would strip the Chief Rabbinate of its authority to determine who qualified as Jewish in the country, according to a survey published July 2 by the Jerusalem-based Israel Democracy Institute.

District courts declared two Jewish men as “lacking religion” due to their requests in January and March to change to this status and demanded that the MOI change their status in the civil population registry.

Petitions of four municipalities against Interior Minister Deri's rejection of their bylaws that would have legalized commerce on Shabbat were pending at the Supreme Court. An additional petition was dismissed without prejudice on July 23.

The MRS listed 21 dedicated cemeteries in Israel and the West Bank for persons the government defined as “lacking religion,” but only two were available for use to the broader general public regardless of residence. The one MRS-administered cemetery in the West Bank was available only for the burial of Israeli citizens. Additionally, 13 MRS-administered cemeteries in 10 agricultural localities were authorized to conduct civil burial (i.e., not affiliated to a religion) for these localities and nearby residents. Some persons, however, who sought a civil burial for a relative reported several civil cemeteries near Tel Aviv were unusable because they were full or restricted to local residents. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that the distant location of such cemeteries made it difficult to arrange and attend burials. In 2018, the MRS published a call for proposals to develop or expand cemeteries for civil burials, following a 2016 report by the state comptroller that criticized the MRS for not implementing the civil burial law and thereby preventing the right of citizens to civil burial. On July 18, Hiddush petitioned the Supreme Court demanding the state to allow civil burial in agricultural localities. On July 4, following another Hiddush petition, the IDF announced it would change its orders to allow for non-Orthodox military burial ceremonies.

The government again did not propose new draft legislation to respond to the 2017 Supreme Court decision striking down the exemption of ultra-Orthodox men from military service and setting a deadline of one year to pass new legislation to reduce inequality in the burden of military service between ultra-Orthodox and other Jews. The government requested additional time to pass a new draft law and received a postponement until January 2020. Some ultra-Orthodox communities stated that mandatory conscription was a violation of the right to conscientious objection on the basis of their religious beliefs; however, the Ministry of Defense rejected this argument. 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. According to government officials and NGOs, this alternative was more popular among women from “national religious” Jewish Orthodox backgrounds than other exempt groups.

Members of the ultra-Orthodox “*Eda Haredit*” community did not receive an exemption from military service based on its members' conscientious objection on religious grounds. Because its yeshivas were not recognized by the state, they did not receive the same postponement and exemption from military service as other yeshiva students. As a result, dozens of them were arrested every month, according to representatives of the community.

In December, the IDF stated that it had made a counting mistake in recent years in the number of ultra-Orthodox in the military. According to media reports, numbers were doubled and even tripled to meet the objectives set by the law. The IDF stated data was not skewed intentionally and the Chief of Staff appointed a committee to inquire regarding the gaps in the figures.

According to the website of Brigham Young University's Jerusalem Center, the government maintained an agreement with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that no member of the Church “will engage in proselytizing of any kind” within Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. Some other nonrecognized Christian communities reported the MOI Department of Non-Jewish Affairs discouraged them from proselytizing or holding large public gatherings outside their houses of worship.

The government maintained its policy of not accepting applications for official recognition from nonrecognized religious groups, including evangelical Christian churches and Jehovah's Witnesses. The government stated no religious community had attempted to apply for recognition during the year. The government stated some leaders of nonrecognized religions were invited and participated along with the leaders of recognized religions at official events or ceremonies.

On June 13, a judicial panel reviewed an appeal by the Jehovah's Witnesses to the Supreme Court that requested official recognition as a religious community. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, despite repeated requests, the government had not taken action on their 2017 application. The panel did not make a decision by year's end.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, on January 16, a judicial panel reviewed an appeal to the Supreme Court in connection with the Jehovah's Witnesses' efforts to obtain recognition of the Watchtower Association of Israel as a “public institution” under the Land Taxation Law. The Jehovah's Witnesses made their original application in 2012 and although the tax authority approved the application, the Finance Committee of the Knesset, which has the authority to grant such exemptions, placed the application on hold. In response to a 2017 lawsuit by the Jehovah's Witnesses, the committee stated it was within its rights to deny tax exemptions to “missionary associations.” The Jehovah's Witnesses then appealed to the Supreme Court. The judicial panel gave the tax authority additional time for further review and investigation and ordered it to present a final position on whether or not the Watchtower Association met the requirements for an exemption. After a hearing on May 22, the tax authority informed the Supreme Court on November 7 that it approved the application for tax exemption. At year's end, the Knesset Finance Committee had not reviewed that decision.

Public Hebrew-language state schools taught Jewish history, culture, and some basic religious texts. Many ultra-Orthodox religious schools in the “recognized but not official” category continued not to offer the basic humanities, math, and science curriculum. The government, however, included the basic curriculum in public ultra-Orthodox schools. Public 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 commonalities in the holy writings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

According to the NGO *Noar Kahalacha*, dozens of Jewish schoolgirls were still unable to attend ultra-Orthodox schools due to discrimination based on their Mizrahi ethnicity (those with ancestry from North Africa or the Middle East), despite a 2009 court ruling prohibiting ethnic segregation between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi schoolgirls. A 2017 report from the state comptroller criticized the Ministry of Education (MOE) for failing to respond effectively to discrimination in educational institutions, including discrimination against girls in ultra-Orthodox schools. The government stated the MOE did not tolerate any form of discrimination, and schools that refused to accept students for discriminatory reasons were summoned to hearings, sometimes leading to delays and denial of their budgets until the schools resolved the discrimination.

The government funded approximately 34 percent of the budget of Christian school systems in the “recognized but not official” category, in which schools have autonomy over hiring teachers, admitting students, and the use of school property, according to church officials. The government repeated its offer made in previous years to fully fund Christian schools if they became part of the public school system, but churches rejected this option, stating that, unlike in Orthodox schools, they would lose autonomy over those decisions. Church leaders criticized the disparity in government funding between their school system and those affiliated with the ultra-Orthodox political parties United Torah Judaism and Shas, which were also categorized as “recognized but not official” but received full government funding.

Seventh-day Adventists stated they faced difficulty traveling to their houses of worship in cities in which public transportation was unavailable on Shabbat, including Jerusalem. Some nonrecognized religious groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists, received a property tax exemption on their houses of worship, although others, such as Buddhists and the Church of Scientology, did not. The government has stated local authorities conducted tax collection from nonrecognized religious groups in accordance with the law. The government stated it was unaware of any recent case in which a religious house of worship was not granted a property tax exemption, although representatives of religious groups stated that tax collection by local authorities remained a concern.

Christian leaders reported little difficulty obtaining visas for clergy to serve in the country, except for Christian clergy from Arab countries, some of whom reported long delays and periodic denials of their visa applications. The government stated Christian clergy from Arab countries were subject to the same entry laws and similar security procedures as clergy from other parts of the world and that any visa delays or denials were due to security reviews. The government also said there were some “unavoidable delays” in cases of applicants from countries that did not have diplomatic relations with Israel. Church officials 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 had 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 acknowledging their right to conscientious objection. Because members of the community were not exempt from military service, they could not participate in the national civil service program as alternative service.

The MOI continued to train Druze and Muslim clerical employees of the state on how to work with government ministries. The MOI appointed and funded approximately half of the Druze and Muslim clerics in the country. Muslim leaders criticized the MOI for appointing non-Muslims to head the Muslim Affairs Department at the ministry, mostly Druze former military officials. Muslim leaders again said the MOI routinely monitored and summoned for “talks” those whom the ministry suspected of opposing government policies. According to the government, the government did not monitor clerics, but government employees of all faiths were “expected not to incite against the state in their official capacities.” The government stated the remaining Druze and Muslim clerics were not state employees due to either the preference of the local community or lack of MOI budget. Muslim leaders stated sharia court judges, who were Ministry of Justice employees, were their preferred religious representatives.

No Islamic seminaries remained in the country, and students of Islam traveled elsewhere, primarily Jordan or the West Bank, to study. The government stated there were “Islamic colleges” in Umm al-Fahm, Baqa’a al-Gharbia, and Kfar Baraa. Muslim leaders rejected this assertion, stating the institutes in Umm al-Fahm and Kfar Baraa, operated by an NGO that teaches some Islamic studies, were not recognized as educational institutions by the Israeli Council for Higher Education. The Muslim leaders also said Al-Qasemi College in Baqa’a al-Gharbia was a teachers’ college that included a program for teaching Islam in schools. The leaders stated that none of those institutes was an Islamic seminary.

The government continued to promote measures to encourage increased Israeli residence and economic development in the thinly populated Negev Desert in the south of the country, including development plans for military industries, railways, the expansion of Road 6, and a phosphate mine. Civil society organizations criticized the government for these plans, stating they could lead to the displacement of 36,000 Bedouins. The government made more funding available for government-approved Bedouin cities and towns to relocate Bedouins displaced by the economic expansion.

The government also took measures aimed at strengthening the nine Bedouin municipalities in the Negev by improving the municipalities’ management to better utilize the three billion shekels (\$870 million) provided through the Ministry of Agriculture’s (MOA) Socioeconomic Development Plan for Negev Bedouin 2017-2021 to improve infrastructure, education, public services, and employment in government-approved Negev Bedouin cities and towns. The government held joint planning forums to address violence, women’s employment, strategic planning, and education in Bedouin municipalities, with the stated intention of improving communication between the Bedouin municipalities and the government. According to the NGO Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality, 115 of 126 communities in the Negev maintained admission committees to screen new residents, which the NGO stated effectively excluded non-Jewish residents. Following objections by multiple NGOs, authorities canceled plans for new communities called Daya, Eshel HaNasi, and Neve Gurion that would have replaced existing Bedouin villages.

As of year’s end, Bedouin residents in the unrecognized village of Umm al-Hiran had not fulfilled the agreement they reached in 2018 with the Ministry of Agriculture Authority for the Development and Settlement of Bedouin in the Negev to self-demolish their structures and relocate to vacant plots in the Bedouin town of Hura. This agreement followed years of legal battles and negotiations, in preparation for replacing Umm al-Hiran with a community called Hiran. Families sponsored by the OR Movement (an organization dedicated to expanding the Israeli population of the Negev and Galilee regions) to move to Hiran remained in the forest outside Umm al-Hiran, living in mobile homes donated by the Jewish National Fund, while waiting for the village land to become available.

Some former mosques and Islamic cemeteries remained sealed and inaccessible, including to Muslims. These sites belonged to a defunct prestate Waqf (distinct from the Jerusalem Jordanian-administered Waqf of the Haram al-Sharif) until confiscated by the state after the 1948 War of Independence. Other former mosques continued to be used for secular purposes. In December

2018, following a decades-long legal battle between the Jaffa Muslim community and a real estate developer, the government approved a request from the Tel Aviv Municipality to recognize Tasou Cemetery in Jaffa as an Islamic cemetery. This decision included authority for the Muslim community to manage the cemetery but did not transfer its ownership. The Islamic Council in Jaffa welcomed the decision, publicly calling it “a just decision that’s been waiting for more than 70 years.”

Muslim community leaders reported no difficulties obtaining municipal approval for construction of mosques in Muslim-majority localities, but they sometimes faced difficulty in Jewish-majority localities.

On June 6, the Karaite community submitted a second petition to the Supreme Court, which remained pending at year’s end, to block the expropriation of land, previously allocated to a Karaite synagogue in Ramla, for the construction of a highway interchange. The Karaites stated that the loss of land and the new interchange would disrupt their religious and communal activity. In 2018, the Ministry of Transportation ordered the expropriation of the land, and the Karaites subsequently appealed to the Supreme Court. Later in 2018, the Supreme Court dismissed the Karaites’ appeal on procedural grounds, stating the case should be submitted to a lower court. The government subsequently reported it had reached an agreement with the Karaite community that would minimize the amount of land expropriated and optimize use of the land for the synagogue’s needs. The Karaites, however, denied an agreement had been reached and submitted the second petition to the Supreme Court.

The IDF continued to have only Orthodox Jewish chaplains; the government employed civilian clergy of different faiths as chaplains at military burials when a non-Jewish soldier died in service. The MOI continued to provide imams to conduct military funerals for Muslim soldiers according to Islamic customs.

In some ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods, private organizations posted “modesty signs” demanding women obscure themselves from public view to avoid distracting devout men. The local municipality of Beit Shemesh failed to comply with court orders from 2015 and 2016 to remove the signs, and the Jerusalem District Court ruled in 2017 that the municipality would face a fine of 10,000 shekels (\$2,700) per day if the signs remained posted. Following the municipality’s refusal to remove the signs, the Supreme Court ruled in November 2018 that authorities must comply with the order by December 31, 2018 or start paying fines. The Supreme Court later extended the deadline until August 30. According to the government, the municipality did not fully implement the ruling by the end of the year, and some signs that were taken down were replaced by new ones. Vandals repeatedly tore down or defaced billboards showing pictures of women, including commercial advertisements, public awareness campaigns, and political advertisements.

NGOs Adalah and the Secular Forum organized petitions against a ban on bringing non-kosher-for-Passover foods (known as hametz) into public hospitals during Passover. On March 5, the Supreme Court issued an injunction demanding that the government explain why it could not implement “proportional solutions” to the problem, such as the use of disposable plates and utensils at the hospital. In response, on July 15, the government maintained its support for establishing “hametz zones” on hospital premises but outside of hospital buildings and explained that solutions such as the use of disposable utensils were technically problematic. In October, the Chief Rabbinate told the Supreme Court it opposed the use of disposable utensils as well as the establishing “hametz zones.” It stated that bringing hametz into hospitals during Passover would violate religious freedom and the right to life, as it would lead some individuals to avoid going to the hospital during Passover.

According to the NGO HaMoked, there were approximately 10,000 Palestinians living in Israel, including Jerusalem, on temporary stay permits because of the citizenship and entry law, with no legal guarantee they could continue living with their families. There were also cases of Palestinian spouses of non-Israeli residents living in East Jerusalem without legal status. Some non-Israeli residents moved to Jerusalem neighborhoods outside the security barrier to live with their nonresident spouse and children while maintaining Jerusalem residency. According to Christian religious leaders, this situation remained an especially acute problem for Christians because of their small population and consequent tendency to marry Christians from the West Bank or elsewhere (Christians who hold neither citizenship nor residency). A Christian religious leader expressed concern this was a significant element in the continuing decline of the Christian population, including in Jerusalem, which negatively impacted the long-term viability of their communities.

In a May 20 statement, leaders of the Catholic churches in Jerusalem said the failure of international diplomacy and the peace process led many residents to feel “their lives have become more and more unbearable,” causing some to emigrate, with “many more consider leaving ... [while] some are resorting to violence.” According to NGOs, community members, and media commentators, other factors contributing to Christian emigration included political instability; the inability to obtain residency permits for spouses due to the 2003 Law of Citizenship and Entry; limited ability of Christian communities in the Jerusalem area to expand due to building restrictions; difficulties Christian clergy experienced in obtaining Israeli visas and residency permits; loss of confidence in

the peace process; and economic hardships created by the establishment of the security barrier and the imposition of travel restrictions. The government stated such difficulties stemmed from the “complex political and security reality” and not from any restrictions on the Christian community.

While the law does not authorize the Israel Land Authority (ILA), which administers the 93 percent of the country in the public domain, to lease land to foreigners, in practice, foreigners have been allowed to lease if they could show they would qualify as Jewish under the Law of Return. This public land includes approximately 12.5 percent owned by the Jewish National Fund (JNF), whose statutes prohibit sale or lease of land to non-Jews. The application of ILA restrictions historically limited the ability of Muslim and Christian residents of Jerusalem who are not citizens to purchase property built on state land, including in parts of Jerusalem. In recent years, however, an increasing number of non-Israeli citizens in Jerusalem have acquired property built on ILA-owned land. Arab citizens are allowed to participate in bids for JNF land, but sources stated that the ILA will grant the JNF another parcel of land whenever an Arab citizen of Israel wins a bid.

On June 11, the Supreme Court upheld a lower court 2017 decision in favor of Ateret Cohanim, a Jewish pro-settlement organization, which signed a 99-year lease through three companies in 2004 for three properties owned by the Greek Orthodox Church in Jerusalem’s Old City. The Church had argued that its official who signed the lease was not authorized to do so. In a July 11 protest of the court’s ruling, Christian leaders prayed outside the disputed buildings and, according to the *Times of Israel*, the Greek Orthodox patriarch said that “extremist groups [were] trying to weaken the unity and identity of the Christian neighborhood.” In August the Greek Orthodox Church filed a new lawsuit seeking to overturn the Supreme Court decision, stating it had new evidence of corruption and fraud involving the sale. After filing the case, the patriarchate said that changing Jerusalem’s status quo “threatens the continuous hundreds-of-years old mosaic and balance that shores [up] the good relations between Jerusalemites of different faiths.” In November, after representatives of the three companies used by Ateret Cohanim failed to respond to the Church’s lawsuit, the Jerusalem District Court ordered the case reopened.

Some NGOs reported incidents in which they said authorities violated the freedom not to practice religion, particularly in the secular public education system and the military. For example, the Secular Forum continued to criticize the MOE’s “Jewish Israeli culture curriculum” for students in the first to ninth grades, referring to it as “religious indoctrination to young children.” The Secular Forum also opposed religious programs in those schools by private religious organizations, such as presentations about Passover in March by the Chabad ultra-Orthodox Jewish movement. The government denied students were subjected to religious indoctrination or coercion, stating the secular public school curriculum included lessons “on the culture of the Jewish people,” including elements of the Jewish faith and traditions, such as the Jewish calendar and holidays. According to *Haaretz*, in May the minister of education canceled a regulation that required schools to inform parents of activities of religious NGOs in schools and the option to allow children to opt out of participation.

In November the Secular Forum and Hiddush filed a freedom of information petition to a district court in order to obtain information regarding the repeated cancelation of visits of families in some IDF bases on Shabbat, according to the Secular Forum, in order not to discriminate against religiously observant soldiers. The IDF responded to the petition, admitting that some bases were not holding visits on Shabbat, and established a committee to offer recommendations. The recommendations were pending as of the year’s end. In some instances, IDF soldiers were punished for keeping non-kosher foods in their rooms.

Women’s rights organizations cited a growing trend of gender segregation reflecting increased incorporation of Jewish religious observance in government institutions, including in the IDF, as accommodation to increase the enlistment of participants who follow strict interpretations of Jewish law prohibiting mixing of the sexes. On April 14, following a wave of protests by national religious rabbis, the IDF stopped allowing women to serve in combat positions in the armored corps despite a successful pilot program, citing economic and logistical reasons. Many observers, however, stated that the trend in recent years has been toward greater inclusion of women in the IDF, including in combat roles and senior leadership positions.

Following a petition by Tebeka, a human rights group focusing on issues involving the Ethiopian Jewish community, the Chief Rabbinate Council adopted recommendations on October 31 according to which it would be prohibited to verify a person’s Judaism based on their origin or skin color. Tebeka petitioned the Supreme Court to object to a demand by the Kiryat Gat rabbinate to verify the Judaism of Ethiopian workers of a catering company in order for the business to receive a certificate for the most stringent level of kosher supervision.

Certain NGOs monitoring archaeological practices in Jerusalem continued to state the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) emphasized archaeological finds that bolstered Jewish claims while minimizing historically significant archaeological finds of other religions. Archeologists from the NGO Emek Shave disputed the government’s representation of the “pilgrim’s road,” a tunnel dug by the IAA and inaugurated in Silwan on June 30, as being historically part of the pilgrimage route to the

Jewish Second Temple; Emek Shemek said the excavation method did not establish with certainty the date and purpose of the road. NGOs such as the Ir David Foundation and the Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies supported the government’s position.

According to the AP, the government was trying to end the custom of polygamy among Bedouins in the Negev and, for the first time, prosecuted suspected polygamists. Many Bedouins stated they saw this new policy as a means to curb their population growth and criminalize community members. Emi Palmor, the former director general of the Ministry of Justice, stated she was determined to enforce the law but was trying to do so with input from the community, and said she spent two years researching the issue and discussing solutions with Bedouin activists. Although the country outlawed polygamy decades ago, approximately 20 to 30 percent of Bedouin men practiced polygamy, according to government figures, with the rate as high as 60 percent in some villages. On September 20, the Beer Sheva District Court convicted Amin Abu Sakik from the Bedouin town of Rahat of polygamy and sentenced him to seven months in prison. The decision superseded a lighter sentence issued by the Beer Sheva Magistrate’s Court of community service, one-year suspended sentence, and a fine. Abu Sakik was the first person to be convicted of polygamy since enforcement of the law was renewed in 2017.

At the beginning of the year, the 120-member Knesset had 16 members from religious minorities (12 Muslims, three Druze, and one Christian). At year’s end, following two elections, the Knesset had 14 members from religious minorities (nine Muslims, three Druze, and two Christians). As of June, the 23-member cabinet included one Druze minister; there were no Muslim or Christian cabinet members. At year’s end, there were no Druze, Muslim, or Christian members of the cabinet.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

According to an article in the *Jewish Press*, a U.S. weekly newspaper, on June 8, 60 seminary students from the Armenian Church punched and kicked two Jewish youths in Jerusalem. Both victims required medical treatment, and one was hospitalized. Subsequently, the Armenian Patriarchate said the newspaper’s article about the incident was “a pure lie and malicious slander.” In its statement, the patriarchate stated that a group of 20 seminarians and the seminary’s dean were attacked by three Jews and their dog, which, after its muzzle was removed, was ordered to attack the dean. According to the patriarchate, the three Jews also attacked the group, while the seminarians shielded the priest from the dog. One seminarian’s hand was broken in the attack. Both sides filed complaints at the local police station.

According to *Haaretz*, on May 16, five or six religiously observant Jews shouting “Death to Arabs” attacked a Palestinian teen from East Jerusalem. The attackers hit the youth, identified as Ibrahim Sawilam, knocking him unconscious and requiring that he be taken to the hospital. Although his family filed a complaint with the police, who said they would open an investigation, *Haaretz* reported that they had not followed up with either Sawilam or any of his friends who were with him at the time of the attack.

Christian clergy and pilgrims continued to report instances of ultra-Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem harassing or spitting on them. 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. For example, approximately 40 individuals, including members of the right-wing organization Lehava, attacked Messianic Jews during a community concert in Jerusalem in June, cursing, screaming, using pepper spray, and tossing live frogs at them, according to *Haaretz*. Several eyewitnesses said the police did not respond appropriately in defense of the concertgoers and organizers. The police detained two persons for questioning and later released them without charges. In a written response, the Israel National Police said it denounces all violence and closed the case for lack of evidence.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported in August that a man in Bat Yam attacked two of their members during door-to-door activity and threatened to kill one of them after she called the police. The police closed the investigation four days after it was opened, and Jehovah’s Witnesses appealed the decision on September 23. The case remained pending at year’s end.

Lehava members continued to criticize or assault Arab men who were in relationships with Jewish women and to harass “mixed” couples. In May Lehava Director Ben-Tzion Gopstein sent a letter to MK Gideon Saar of the Likud Party demanding he put a stop to a relationship between Saar’s daughter and her Arab partner. Another organization, Yad L’Achim, continued to stop instances of cohabitation between Jewish women and Arab men by sometimes “launching military-like rescues from ‘hostile’ Arab villages,” according to its website. Following a 2017 petition from the Israel Religious Action Center, which represents the Reform Movement, to the High Court demanding Ben-

Tzion Gopstein be indicted on a series of offenses, the Jerusalem district attorney held a pre-indictment hearing in 2018 and indicted him on November 26, 2019 for incitement to terrorism, violence and racism. In August the Central Elections Committee disqualified Gopstein's Knesset candidacy due to incitement to racism.

There continued to be reports of ultra-Orthodox Jews in public areas of their neighborhoods harassing individuals who did not conform to Jewish Orthodox traditions, such as by driving on Shabbat or not wearing modest dress. The harassment included verbal abuse, spitting, and throwing stones.

On January 30, unknown individuals removed the cross from a church in the Golan Heights, abandoned since 1967. According to Kan News, the police received a complaint alleging a hate crime.

According to media reports, on November 15, unknown individuals spray painted a swastika on a Magen David Adom (MDA) ambulance whose staff were treating a patient in Tel Aviv. The MDA team filed a police complaint.

Muslim activists reported hijab-wearing women experiencing harassment by non-Muslims. According to a September report in *Haaretz*, a dental clinic in Netanya would not hire a dentist because she wore a hijab. In a conversation with the dentist, which the applicant recorded, the clinic director conceded that the Muslim woman had made a positive impression on the clinic's staff members but said patients would not want her to treat them because of her hijab. In a subsequent lawsuit, the Tel Aviv Regional Labor Court awarded the dentist 40,000 shekels (\$11,000) in compensation, finding that employer's refusal to hire her constituted illegal discrimination.

On June 4 a group of Muslim students at David Yellin College of Education, a teachers' college in Jerusalem, wrote "Ramadan Kareem" ("Blessed Ramadan") on a communal student chalkboard. This same chalkboard was being used for commemorative notes recognizing Israel's Day of Remembrance. Other members of the community who filmed the incident said the Muslim students had "desecrated the memory" of fallen Israeli soldiers. The college punished the students for "inappropriate conduct," and banned two students, Reem Jouabra and Maram Abu Sneineh, from entering the college campus until August and revoked academic honors and grades awarded to them. The college also ordered the students to complete community service and to apologize to the community and the college president. Following an appeal by the NGO Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, the college rescinded most of the penalties imposed on the two students.

Tension continued between the ultra-Orthodox community and other citizens, including concerns related to service in the IDF, housing, public transportation, and participation in the workforce. On January 26, unknown individuals burned Torah scrolls and spray-painted graffiti on a Conservative synagogue in Netanya, following several vandalism cases at the same synagogue in 2018. On January 29, unknown individuals vandalized an Orthodox synagogue in Jerusalem, cut the ark in which Torah scrolls are kept, destroyed Torah scrolls, and broke into the safe. On June 11, unknown individuals broke into the safe of an Orthodox synagogue in Bnei-Brak and stole Torah scrolls.

The most common "price tag" offenses, according to police, included attacks on vehicles, defacement of real estate, damage to Muslim and Christian holy sites, assault, and damage to agricultural lands. For example, on July 27, vandals sprayed graffiti on a truck and walls in Kfar Qasim referring to marriages between Jews and Arabs that said: "the daughter of Israel to the people of Israel," and "enough with the intermarriage." On December 12, unknown individuals sprayed Stars of David and sayings including "Muhammad is a pig" and damaged a car in the village of Manshiya Zabda in northern Israel.

The NGO Tag Meir continued to organize visits to areas where "price tag" attacks occurred and to sponsor activities promoting tolerance in response to the attacks.

Although the Chief Rabbinate and rabbis of many denominations continued to discourage Jewish visits to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site due to concerns relating to Jewish religious beliefs regarding the ongoing *halakhic* debate about whether it is permissible or forbidden for Jews to enter the Temple Mount, some Orthodox rabbis continued to say entering the site was permissible. Increasing numbers of the self-identified "national religious" Zionist community stated they found meaning in setting foot on the site. 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. In some cases, Israeli police acted to prevent individuals from praying and removed them; in other cases reported on social media and by NGOs, police appeared not to notice the activity. According to local media, some Jewish groups escorted by Israeli police performed religious acts such as prayers and prostration. According to the Jerusalem Waqf and Temple Mount activist groups, visits by activists associated with the Temple Mount movement increased during the year to record levels, including a single-day record of 1,451 visits on "Jerusalem Day" in May. According to Temple Mount activist groups and the Waqf, during the weeklong Jewish

holiday of Sukkot, activists conducted 3,009 visits, a 25 percent increase over 2017. According to Yareah, an organization that promotes Jewish visits to the Temple Mount, 30,416 Jews visited the site during the year, the first time the number of Jewish visitors exceeded 30,000 since Israel's founding.

Individuals affiliated with the Northern Islamic Movement, which the government declared illegal in 2015, continued to speak of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif as being “under attack” by Israeli authorities and an increasing number of Jewish visitors. 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.

In January Christians launched demonstrations protesting the Haifa Museum of Art's display of an artwork depicting Ronald McDonald as Jesus on the cross, the center of an exhibition about consumerism and religion. On January 11, hundreds protested the exhibit and police arrested one man on suspicion of assault and searched for two other persons who had thrown firebombs at the museum. Police said that three police officers were hurt as dozens of demonstrators tried to forcibly enter the museum. On January 17, Haifa Mayor Einat Kalisch-Rotem said the sculpture would be taken out of the exhibition following consultations with church leaders, noting that it was due to return to the Finnish museum from which it was borrowed at the end of January. The Association for Civil Rights condemned the move, stating that the decision was “a capitulation to violence and a severe violation of artistic freedom of expression.”

NGOs reported that some LGBTI minors who revealed their sexual orientation in religious communities faced expulsion from their homes and stigmatization from rabbis. NGOs noted reports of mental illness among the LGBTI minor community, leading some to attempt suicide. Other NGOs noted an increasing number of rabbis, educators, and community leaders in Orthodox Jewish communities were adopting a more inclusive approach to LGBTI minors.

Some religious figures and politicians spoke against LGBTI individuals. On July 18, Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem and former Chief Rabbi of Israel Shlomo Amar called on religious LGBTI individuals to throw away their *kippahs* and Shabbat observance, saying they were sinning against the Jewish people with their bodies.

Several religious NGOs, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, sought to break the rabbinate's monopoly over issues that included *kashrut* certificates for burial, marriage, and divorce. In its first year, the unofficial *kashrut* certification of Tzohar, a network of Zionist Orthodox rabbis, gained 150 businesses.

According to the NGO Panim, more than 2,610 weddings took place outside of the Rabbinate's authority in 2018, compared with 2,400 in 2017. These included unofficial orthodox, conservative, reform and secular ceremonies. The Chuppot initiative, an effort by some Orthodox Jews to challenge the Rabbinate's exclusive supervision of Jewish religious ceremonies and practices, held 216 unofficial Orthodox weddings during 2019. The only mechanism for Jews to gain state recognition of a non-Rabbinate Orthodox wedding remained to wed outside the country and then register the marriage with the MOI.

According to the Rackman Center, thousands of Jewish women were “trapped” in various stages of informal or formal *get* refusals, especially in the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox communities. 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. One in three Jewish women who divorced faced such demands, according to the Center for Women's Justice. A child born to a woman still married to another man is considered a *mamzer* (child of an unpermitted relationship) under Jewish law, which restricts the child's future marriage prospects in the Jewish community. In February, Mavoi Satum, an organization that deals with issues of divorce in Israel, tried to set a precedent through an appeal to the High Rabbinical Court, which demanded that the court not close cases until a *get* is issued. The court did not take up the issue.

A rabbinical court in September ruled that a woman who engaged in an extramarital relationship was entitled to only 20 percent of joint property, accumulated from the date of her infidelity. On June 6, the president of the Supreme Court ordered an additional hearing for April 2020 on a 2018 Supreme Rabbinical Court ruling which found that a woman who engaged in an extramarital relationship had no rights to her and her husband's home.

In an October decision, a rabbinical court moved the custody of children from their mother to their father because the mother stopped observing Judaism, although the father had been previously convicted in violent offenses, according to *Haaretz*. *Haaretz* reported that state social services were against the move but could not intervene because the divorce case was taking place in a rabbinical court. As a part of the custody agreement, the mother had to sign an agreement tying custody to a religious lifestyle, in order to obtain a *get*.

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 integrated Jewish-Arab bilingual schools, Hiddush, Israeli Religious Action Center, Mosaica, and Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA). For example, IEA held 384 interfaith encounters throughout the year. The number of children studying at integrated Yad BeYad Jewish-Arab schools in the school year beginning in September was 1,800, up from 1,700 in the previous year.

The Tomb of the Kings, a 2,000-year-old archaeological site in Jerusalem owned by the government of France, reopened to the public two days a week in October for the first time since 2010. Ultra-Orthodox Jews were seeking unrestricted worship at the ancient Jewish tomb and challenged French ownership of the site.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In meetings with government officials, embassy officials stressed the importance of religious pluralism and respect for all religious groups. The Ambassador spoke at the Christian Media Summit hosted by the government to promote religious freedom in the region, and the Charge d’Affaires hosted an interfaith reception for representatives of the country’s diverse religious groups. Additionally, the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism represented the U.S. government at President Reuven Rivlin’s emergency conference on combating anti-Semitism.

Senior U.S. officials spoke publicly about the importance of maintaining the status quo at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. The embassy continued to support workshops at the American Center in Jerusalem that addressed topics including religion in public schools, democracy and religious freedom, and prevention of societal attacks on religious minorities.

Embassy-supported initiatives focused on interreligious dialogue and community development and advocated a shared society for Arab and Jewish populations. Embassy officials advocated for the right of persons from all faiths to practice their religion peacefully, while also respecting the beliefs and customs of their neighbors.

Throughout the year, embassy officials participated in religious events organized by Jewish, Muslim, Druze, Christian, and Baha’i 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.

In March the Ambassador visited the Beit Jimal Monastery to condemn the vandalism of the monastery’s cemetery. The embassy produced a video that included the Ambassador’s remarks and amplified the video on Twitter and Facebook.

In July the embassy held a roundtable discussion on religious freedom issues hosted by the Israel Democracy Institute and livestreamed by the *Jerusalem Post*, with the participation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and NGOs.

Embassy-hosted events included an interfaith 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 partnerships 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 through sports, the arts, environmental projects, and entrepreneurship. Initiatives included a continuing project by the Citizens Accord Forum that brought together ultra-Orthodox, Muslim, and Christian citizens to create a shared civic agenda and language to deal with common issues and concerns in their communities. Another project supported joint training sessions for Muslim and Jewish teachers of religion.

The embassy worked to mitigate interreligious and intercommunal tensions between the country’s non-Jewish and Jewish citizens through the greater integration of the Arab minority into the broader national economy – especially the high-tech sector. An ongoing grant supported efforts by Arab, ultra-Orthodox, and Ethiopian Jewish NGOs to break down social and religious barriers and better integrate their communities into the technical workforce.

The embassy awarded a grant to the Mosaica religious peace initiative to establish a mechanism for crisis prevention and management in Jerusalem, with particular focus on Islamic and Jewish holy sites in the Old City.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on religious
freedom (covering 2019)



Country:

Israel

Source:[USDOS – US Department of State](#)**Original link:**<https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/israel/>**Document type:**

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

10 June 2020

Document ID:

2031318

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