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2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Lebanon

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
July 30, 2012

[Covers calendar year from 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2011]

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The constitution declares equality of rights and duties for all citizens without discrimination or preference but establishes a balance of power among the major religious groups. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There was tension among religious groups, attributable in part to competition for political power, and citizens continued to struggle along sectarian lines with the legacy of a 15-year civil war (1975-90). Divisions and rivalries among various groups have existed for many centuries and, while relationships among adherents of different confessions were generally amicable, group identity was highly significant in most aspects of cultural interaction. Despite tensions generated by the competition for political power, places of worship of every confession continued to exist side by side, reflecting the country's centuries-old heritage as a place of refuge for those fleeing religious intolerance.

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom and the importance of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect as part of its overall policy to promote human rights and stability in Lebanon. The ambassador and embassy officers met regularly with leaders of religious communities, and integrated religious freedom concerns into public outreach, embassy public diplomacy programs, and U.S. government-funded projects designed to increase cross-confessional dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The most recent demographic study conducted in 2011 by Statistics Lebanon, a Beirut-based research firm, indicated that 27 percent of the population are Sunni Muslim, 27 percent Shia Muslim, 21 percent Maronite Christian, 8 percent Greek Orthodox, 5 percent Druze, and 4 percent Greek Catholic, with the remaining 7 percent belonging to smaller Christian denominations. There are also very small numbers of Jews, Baha'is, Buddhists, and Hindus, and a very small number of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

The 18 officially recognized religious groups include four Muslim sects, 12 Christian sects, the Druze sect, and Judaism. The main branches of Islam practiced are Shia and Sunni. The Alawites and the Ismaili ("Sevener") Shia order are the smallest Muslim communities. The Maronite community, the largest Christian group, maintains its centuries-long affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church but has its own patriarch, liturgy, and ecclesiastical customs. The second-largest Christian sect is Greek Orthodox. Other Christians are divided among Greek Catholics, Armenian Orthodox (Gregorians), Armenian Catholics, Syrian Orthodox (Jacobites),

Syriac Catholics, Assyrians (Nestorians), Chaldeans, Copts, evangelicals (including Protestant groups such as Baptists and Seventh-day Adventists), and Latins (Roman Catholic). The Druze, who refer to themselves as al-Muwahhideen, or "believers in one God," are concentrated in the rural, mountainous areas east and south of Beirut.

Many persons fleeing religious mistreatment and discrimination in neighboring states have immigrated to the country, including Kurds, Shia, and Chaldeans from Iraq, as well as Coptic Christians from Egypt and Sudan. According to the secretary-general of the Syriac League, approximately 10,000 Iraqi Christians and 3,000 to 4,000 Coptic Christians reside in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution requires the state to respect all religious groups and denominations and declares respect for the personal status and religious interests of persons of every religious sect. The constitution declares equality of rights and duties for all citizens without discrimination or preference but stipulates a balance of power distributed among the major religious groups. A constitutional provision apportions political offices according to religious affiliation.

The constitution provides that Christians and Muslims be represented equally in parliament, the cabinet, and high-level civil service positions, which include the ministry ranks of secretary general and director general. It also provides that these posts be distributed proportionally among the recognized religious groups. The constitutional provision for the distribution of political power and positions according to the principle of religious representation is designed to prevent a single confessional group from gaining a dominant position. The 1943 "National Pact" stipulates that the president, prime minister, and speaker of parliament be Maronite Christian, Sunni Muslim, and Shia Muslim, respectively. This distribution of political power operates at both the national and local levels of government.

The 1989 Taif Agreement, which ended the country's 15-year civil war, reaffirmed this arrangement while mandating equal Muslim and Christian representation in parliament and reducing the power of the Maronite Christian presidency. In addition, the agreement endorsed the constitutional provision of appointing most senior government officials according to religious affiliation. This practice exists in all three branches of government. The Taif Agreement also stipulated a cabinet with power allocated equally between Muslims and Christians.

The penal code stipulates a maximum prison term of one year for anyone convicted of "blaspheming God publicly."

There were no procedures for civil marriage; however, the government recognized civil marriage ceremonies performed outside the country, irrespective of the religious affiliation of each individual.

Religion was generally – but not required to be – encoded on national identity cards and noted on ikhraaj qaid (official registry) documents. Citizens have the right to remove their religion or change their religion on their identity cards and official registry documents. The government does not require citizens' religious affiliations to be indicated on passports. Following the Ministry of Interior's February 2009 circular, citizens were not required to have their religious affiliation encoded on national identity cards or official registry documents.

Government documents refer to Jewish Lebanese citizens as Israelis, although they are not Israeli citizens.

Formal recognition by the government was a legal requirement for religious groups to conduct most religious activities. A group that seeks official recognition must submit a statement of its doctrine and moral principles for government review to determine that such principles do not contradict popular values or the constitution. Alternatively, religious groups may apply for recognition through recognized religious groups. In doing so, however, they would not be recognized as separate sects, but instead they would be recognized as part of the sect through which they applied. This process has the same requirements as registering through the government. Official recognition conveyed certain benefits, such as tax-exempt status and the right to apply the religion's codes to personal status matters.

In most cases the government permitted recognized religious groups to administer their own family and personal status laws, such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. The "Twelver" Shia, Sunni, Christian, and Druze confessions have state-appointed, government-subsidized clerical courts that administer family and personal status law.

Unrecognized groups may own property and assemble for worship without government interference; however, they are disadvantaged under the law because they may not perform legally recognized marriage or divorce proceedings, and they have no standing to determine

inheritance issues. An individual may change religions if the head of the religious group the person wishes to join approves of the change. Refusal was not reported to occur in practice.

The government permits the publication of religious materials of every religious group in different languages.

Religious workers not working under the auspices of a government-registered religious organization and found to be working while on tourist visas may be deemed to have violated their visa status and may be deported. The government issues religious workers a one-month visa; if they plan to stay longer, they must complete their residency permits during that one month. Religious workers also are obliged to sign a "commitment of responsibility" form before being issued their visa, which commits them to legal prosecution and immediate deportation if they carry out any activity that might prompt community, confessional, or religious instigation and criticism against the Lebanese state or any other country except Israel.

Some religious groups do not enjoy official recognition, such as Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and unregistered Protestant groups. These groups are disadvantaged under the law as their members do not qualify for certain government positions, but they are permitted to perform their religious rites freely. However, a number of members of unregistered religious groups are recorded in government records under recognized religions. Government decisions on granting official recognition to those religious groups that applied were timely and did not appear to be arbitrary.

Protestant evangelical churches are required by the government to register with the Evangelical Synod, a nongovernmental advisory group that represents those churches with the government. It is self-governing and oversees religious matters for Protestant congregations. Representatives of some churches complained that the synod has refused to accept new Protestant groups into its membership since 1975, thereby disadvantaging those groups' adherents.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Armenian Christmas, Eid al-Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice), Saint Maroun Day, Islamic New Year, Ashura, Good Friday, Easter (both Western and Eastern rites), Mawlid al-Nabi (the Prophet Muhammad's birthday), All Saints' Day, Feast of the Assumption, Annunciation, Eid al-Fitr (end of Ramadan), and Christmas. The government also excused Armenian public sector employees from work on Saint Vartan Day.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The 1989 Taif Agreement called for the eventual elimination of political sectarianism in favor of "expertise and competence"; however, little progress has been made in this regard. Representatives from the lesser represented, or "minority" Christian groups, such as Syriac Christians, stated that the government discriminated against them because no one from their religious classification has been appointed a minister. While some of their members have served in some high-level civil service positions, such as director general, these groups stated that most positions were filled by Maronite and Greek Orthodox individuals. These groups further stated that while they estimated their population at 54,000, they were allocated only one representative in parliament.

The leadership councils for Christians and Druze nominated candidates for their respective senior clerical posts; however, the nomination of Sunni and Shia muftis was officially endorsed by the government's council of ministers, and they received monthly salaries from the government. The government appointed and paid the salaries of Muslim and Druze clerical judges. The leaders of other religious groups, such as the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic communities, did not receive salaries from the government.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

On March 27, a bomb exploded outside the Syriac Orthodox church in Zahle, reportedly causing heavy damage but no casualties. No one claimed responsibility for the attack by year's end. While there were periodic reports of tension and occasional confrontations between religious groups during the year, some observers attributed this to political differences, the legacy of the civil war, and heightened political tensions over the violence in Syria. On June 17, clashes between Alawi residents of Jabal Mohsen and a nearby Sunni district of Bab al-Tabbaneh in Tripoli left seven persons dead and more than 10 wounded. This area in Tripoli continued to see occasional clashes between the communities.

In December tensions flared in Saida when Sunni cleric Ahmed al-Assir responded to a perceived insult to the wife of the Prophet Muhammad by Shia cleric Mohammad Yazbek and

called for a sit-in to defend Islam. Press reports suggested that there were also tensions about planned demonstrations for the Shia holiday of Ashura. Local religious leaders hastened to defuse the rhetoric and negotiate an acceptable compromise for the Ashura procession.

During the year, Hizballah directed strong rhetoric against Israel, with which the country remained in a state of war, and its Jewish population.

In a television interview on Al-Dunya TV in July, the bishop of the Syrian Orthodox Church in Lebanon, George Saliba, accused Zionism of controlling global financial markets and international organizations, and blamed Zionists for inciting all global wars and evils. Saliba also blamed Christ's death on the Jews and referred to the old Tsarist forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which propagates a myth of world Jewish domination, as indicating the impact of Zionism on world politics. In October columnist Bushra Gharz Al-Din, writing in the daily *Al-Diyar*, also cited *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* when he claimed that the Arab Spring was instigated by the Jews as part of their conspiracy to take over the world.

During the year, representatives from the Israeli Communal Council reported continued acts of vandalism against a Jewish-owned cemetery in downtown Beirut. There were no arrests or prosecutions by year's end.

There are no legal barriers to proselytizing; however, the clerical establishment strongly discourages such activity.

Religious leaders from the major denominations met regularly to discuss issues of common concern and call for increased mutual respect.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom and the importance of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect as part of its overall policy to promote human rights and stability in Lebanon. The U.S. embassy advanced this goal through contacts at all levels of society, public remarks, embassy public diplomacy programs, and funding projects designed to increase cross-confessional dialogue.

The ambassador and embassy officers met regularly with leaders of religious communities and regularly discussed matters related to religious freedom and mutual respect. In the context of the Arab Spring, in its contacts with religious and political leaders and public outreach programs the embassy emphasized the principle that the universal human rights of all communities and faiths must be protected by their government. The U.S. government supported the principles of the Taif Agreement, and embassy staff regularly discussed the issue of sectarianism with political, religious, and civic leaders.