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Israel and the Occupied Territories

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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Israel^[1] has no constitution; however, the law provides for freedom of worship, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion; however, problems continued to exist stemming from the unequal treatment of religious minorities, and from the State's recognition of only Orthodox Jewish religious authorities in personal and some civil status matters concerning Jews.

Relations among religious groups—between Jews and non-Jews, between Muslims and Christians, between secular and religious Jews, and among the different streams of Judaism—often were strained. Tensions between Israeli Jews and Arabs increased significantly after the start of the Intifada in 2000 when Israeli police killed 12 Israeli-Arab demonstrators, prompting a 3-year public inquiry and investigation. The Orr Commission of Inquiry established to investigate the killings, found certain police officers guilty of wrongdoing, and concluded that the "Government's handling of the Arab sector has been primarily neglectful and discriminatory," that it "did not show sufficient sensitivity to the needs of the Arab population, and did not take enough action to allocate state resources in an equal manner." The results of the inquiry were still a matter of official deliberation and public debate at the end of the reporting period. While the Government has taken several steps to address these issues, tensions remained high due to institutional, legal, and societal discrimination against the country's Arab citizens.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

Based on its pre-1967 borders, Israel has an area of approximately 7,685 square miles, and its population is approximately 6.8 million, of which 5.2 million are Jews (including Israeli settlers who live in the occupied territories), 1.3 million are Arabs, and approximately 290,000 are members of other minorities. Although the Government defines nearly 80 percent of the population as Jewish, approximately 300,000 of these citizens do not qualify as Jews according to the Orthodox Jewish definition or the definition used by the Government for civil procedures. According to government figures, approximately 4.5 percent of the Jewish population are Haredim, or ultra-Orthodox, and another 13 percent are Orthodox. The vast majority of Jewish citizens describe themselves as "traditional," or "secular" Jews, and most of them observe some Jewish traditions. A growing but still small number of traditional and secular Jews associate themselves with the Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist streams of Judaism, which are not officially recognized for purposes of civil and personal status matters involving their adherents. Although the Government does not officially recognize them, these streams of Judaism receive a small amount of government funding and are recognized by the country's courts.

Numerous religious groups are represented in the country. Slightly more than 20 percent of the population is non-Jewish and the vast majority of them are ethnically Arab. Of this, approximately 80 percent is Muslim, 10 percent Christian, and 10 percent Druze. The non-Jewish populations are concentrated in the north, in Bedouin communities in the Negev region to the south, and in the narrow band of Arab villages in the central part of the country adjacent to the occupied territories. Relatively small communities of evangelical Christians, Messianic Jews (those who consider themselves Jewish but believe that Jesus Christ is the Messiah), and Jehovah's Witnesses also reside throughout the country. In an April 2005 media report, a leader of the Jewish Messianic community estimated that Messianic Jews in Israel number

approximately 10,000 persons. Media sources also indicate that the number of Messianic Jews in Israel has grown rapidly over the past decade, with many new adherents coming from the Russian immigrant community.

The Government reported that approximately 60,000 to 70,000 legal foreign workers live in Israel, but Kav La Oved (Workers Hotline), an Israeli nongovernmental organization (NGO) advocating for workers' rights, places the number closer to 100,000 and estimates that the inclusion of illegal foreign workers brings the total number of foreign workers to approximately 200,000. Most of the foreign workers are Roman Catholic, Orthodox Christian, Buddhist, or Hindu.

The Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty describes the country as a "Jewish" and "democratic" state. Most members of the non-Jewish minority are generally free to practice their religions but are subject to various forms of discrimination, some of which have religious dimensions.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Israel has no constitution; however, the law provides for freedom of worship, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Declaration of Independence describes the country as a "Jewish state," but also provides for full social and political equality regardless of religious affiliation. While the law explicitly guarantees freedom of religion and the safeguarding of "holy places of all religions," inequities exist. Israeli Arabs and other non-Jews generally are free to practice their religions; however, discrepancies in treatment exist between Jews and various non-Jewish communities, and between Orthodox Jews and Jews of non-Orthodox affiliations.

The "status quo" agreement reached at the founding of the state, and that has been upheld throughout the State's history, guarantees the Government will implement certain policies based on Orthodox Jewish interpretations of religious law. For example, the Government does not recognize Jewish marriages performed in the country unless they are performed by the Orthodox Jewish establishment. The Orthodox Jewish establishment also determines who is buried in Jewish state cemeteries, limiting this right to individuals considered "Jewish" by the Orthodox standards. In addition, the national airline El Al and public buses in most cities do not operate on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath; however, several private bus companies do. Additionally, streets in most Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods are closed to vehicles on the Sabbath. According to the Law on Work and Rest Hours of 1951, which was upheld by the Supreme Court in April 2005, Jews in most professions are prohibited from working on the Sabbath unless they are granted a special permit by the Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Employment.

In April 2004, the High Court rejected a petition demanding that the Ministry of the Interior enforce the prohibition on the public display of leavened products for sale during the Passover holiday, but it did not rule on the legality of the prohibition. Then, in March 2005, following the Interior Minister's announcement that he would not enforce the prohibition, Prime Minister Sharon reportedly instructed the Minister to enforce the prohibition. In recent practice, however, the Government has not enforced this law. There were no reports of its enforcement during the reporting period. In regions inhabited primarily by non-Jews, bread is displayed and sold openly during Passover.

In 2003, the High Court suspended several municipal prohibitions and curbs on the sale of pork and instructed municipalities to allow sales of pork in neighborhoods where no more than an unspecified, small portion of the residents would object on religious grounds. The result of the decision was to allow each municipality to determine on its own whether to allow the sale of pork.

The law recognizes as "religious communities" those recognized by and carried over from the British Mandate. These include: Eastern Orthodox, Latin (Roman Catholic), Gregorian-Armenian, Armenian-Catholic, Syrian (Catholic), Chaldean (Uniate), Greek Catholic Melkite, Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, and Jewish. Since the founding of the country, the Government has recognized three additional religious communities—the Druze in 1957, the Evangelical Episcopal Church in 1970, and the Baha'i in 1971. The status of several Christian denominations with representation in the country has been defined by a collection of ad hoc arrangements with various government agencies. The fact that the Muslim population was not defined as a religious community was a vestige of the Ottoman period, where Islam was the dominant religion, and does not affect the rights of the Muslim community to practice their faith. The

Government allows members of unrecognized religions the freedom to practice their religion. According to the Government, there were no religious denominations awaiting recognition during the reporting period.

With some exceptions, each recognized religious community has legal authority over its members in matters of marriage, divorce, and burial. Legislation enacted in 1961 afforded the Muslim courts exclusive jurisdiction to rule in matters of personal status concerning Muslims. For so-called "unrecognized religions," no local religious tribunals exercised jurisdiction over their members in matters of personal status. In addition, unlike recognized religious communities, unrecognized religious communities do not receive government funding for their religious services. The Arrangements Law provides exemption from municipal taxes for any place of worship of a recognized faith. Exemption from tax payments is also granted to churches that have not been officially recognized by law. In several cases, the Government has interpreted that exemption from municipal taxes to apply only to that portion of the property of religious organizations that was actually used for religious worship. Not-for-profit religious schools also receive tax exemptions. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) had tax-exemption status for its hospital on the Mount of Olives for more than 30 years until the District Court revoked this privilege in 2002. After several rescheduled hearings, the Supreme Court was scheduled to hear LWF's case for tax exemption on December 1, 2005.

Secular courts have primacy over questions of inheritance, but parties, by mutual agreement, may bring such cases to religious courts. Jewish and Druze families may ask for some family status matters, such as alimony and child custody in divorces, to be adjudicated in civil courts as an alternative to religious courts. Christians may ask that child custody and child support cases be adjudicated in civil courts rather than in religious courts. Muslims have the right to bring matters such as alimony and property division associated with divorce cases to civil courts in family-status matters. However, paternity cases remain under the exclusive jurisdiction of the Muslim or Shari'a Court. There is no overarching law or directive that prescribes these varying approaches.

In March 2004, the Ministry of Religious Affairs was officially dismantled and its 300 employees reassigned to several other ministries. As a result, the Ministry of the Interior now has jurisdiction over religious matters concerning non-Jewish groups; the Ministry of Tourism is responsible for the protection and upkeep of all holy sites, and the Prime Minister's office has jurisdiction over the nation's 134 religious councils (one Druze and the rest Jewish) that oversee the provision of religious services to their respective communities. Legislation establishing religious councils does not include non-Jewish religious communities other than the Druze. Instead, the Ministry of the Interior directly funds religious services for recognized non-Jewish communities. The State, through the Prime Minister's office, continues to finance approximately 40 percent of the religious councils' budgets, and local authorities fund the remainder.

According to government budget figures, the Prime Minister's Office transferred approximately \$30 million for religious councils in 2004 and local authorities were supposed to transfer \$47 million (NIS 214, 926, 720) to the religious councils as well. The Government also transferred an additional estimated \$15.5 million (NIS 71 million) in a one-time move to the religious councils pursuant to a court ruling. Together, the religious councils' budget for 2004 was approximately \$92.5 million. The Government reported that the 2005 religious services budget for the non-Jewish communities including the Druze (it did not provide 2004 figures) totaled approximately \$6.5 million.

Arab advocacy groups continue to charge that the State did not allocate adequate or proportional funds for the provision of religious services in Arab towns and villages. A reputable representative of the Arab Christian community criticized the Government in April 2005 for not allocating enough funds for Christian institutions. The Government claimed, however, that funding for religious services in Arab communities has been proportional to the size of the community.

Under the Law of Return, the Government grants immigration and residence rights to individuals who meet established criteria defining Jewish identity. Included in this definition is a child or grandchild of a Jew, the spouse of a Jew, the spouse of a child of a Jew, and the spouse of a grandchild of a Jew. A separate, more rigorous standard based on Orthodox Jewish criteria is used to determine the right to full citizenship, entitlement to government financial support for immigrants, the legitimacy of conversions to Judaism performed within the country, and Jewish status for purposes of personal and some civil status issues. Residency rights are not granted to relatives of converts to Judaism, except for children of female converts who are born after the mother's conversion is complete. The Law of Return does not apply to non-Jews or to persons of Jewish descent who have converted to another faith. Approximately 36 percent of the country's Jewish population was born outside of the country.

The Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) has charged that the Ministry of the Interior's Population Registry has subjected non-Jewish spouses and non-Jewish adopted children of Jewish immigrants to

unfair and at times arbitrary policies for proving the bona fides of their relationship for residency purposes. Most of these cases involve persons who immigrated under the Law of Return from the former Soviet republics and their non-Jewish spouses and non-Jewish adopted children. In August 2004, the Minister of the Interior acknowledged the problems and took steps to change certain policies. For example, in August 2004, the Minister of Interior announced that he was canceling his ministry's requirement that immigrants from the former Soviet republics deposit a \$7,000 (30,000-shekel) bank guarantee before allowing their non-Jewish spouses to enter the country. The deposit was to be returned once the spouse was granted residency.

In 2003, the Government began issuing new and replacement identification cards that do not carry a "nationality" (e.g., usually religious) designation. Citizens and residents are still required to register with the Ministry of the Interior's Population Registry as one of a set list of nationalities. During the period covered by this report, the Ministry of the Interior issued to individuals arriving in the country immigration forms with an item for travelers to list their religion. Immigration officials were inconsistent in seeking compliance, and the form has since been amended to omit any questions on religious affiliation.

Under the law, ultra-Orthodox Jews are entitled to exemption from military service to pursue religious studies. This exemption allows ultra-Orthodox Jews to postpone military service in 1 year intervals to pursue full-time religious studies at recognized yeshivas, or religious schools. These students must renew their deferments each year by proving that they are full-time students. At the age of 22, the yeshiva students are given 1 year to decide whether to continue to study full time with yearly renewals until they reach the age of 40; to perform community service for one year, and thereafter, 21 days each year until the age of 40; or to serve in the army until they finish their military service requirement. According to the Government, approximately 9 percent of all male candidates for military service are exempted as full-time yeshiva students. In February 2004, due to political pressure from the secular Shinui party and some sectors of society, the Government appointed a parliamentary committee to propose ways to broaden military service to include yeshiva students and to integrate ultra-Orthodox Jews into the workforce. At the end of the reporting period, the committee had not issued its recommendations.

Public Hebrew-speaking secular schools teach mandatory Bible and Jewish history classes. These classes primarily cover Jewish heritage and culture, rather than religious belief. Public schools with predominantly Arab student bodies teach mandatory classes on the Qur'an and the Bible, since both Muslim and Christian Arabs attend these schools. Orthodox Jewish religious schools that are part of the public school system teach mandatory religion classes, as do private ultra-Orthodox schools that receive some state funding.

The Government recognizes the following Jewish holy days as national holidays: Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Simhat Torah, Passover, and Shavuot. Arab municipalities often recognize Christian and Muslim holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Muslim, Christian, and Orthodox Jewish religious authorities have exclusive control over personal status matters, including marriage, divorce, and burial, within their respective communities. The law does not allow civil marriage, and it does not recognize Jewish marriage performed in the country unless performed by recognized Orthodox rabbis. Many Jewish Israelis object to such exclusive control by the Orthodox establishment over Jewish marriages and other personal status issues, and to the absence of provision for civil marriage, for approximately 300,000 immigrants from the former Soviet Union were not recognized as Jewish by Orthodox authorities.

The 1967 Protection of Holy Sites Law applies to holy sites of all religions within Israel, and the Penal Code makes it a criminal offense to damage any holy site. The Government, however, has issued implementing regulations only for Jewish sites. In November 2004, the Arab Israeli advocacy group Adalah petitioned the High Court to compel the Government to issue regulations to protect Muslim sites, charging that the Government's failure to do so had resulted in desecration and the conversion of several sites into commercial establishments. In its petition, Adalah stated that all of the 120 places designated by the Government as holy sites are Jewish. At the end of the reporting period, the case was still pending. The Arab Association for Human Rights (AAHR) issued a comprehensive report in December 2004 documenting what it refers to as the "destruction and abuse of Muslim and Christian holy places in Israel." In its report, AAHR asserted that 250 non-Jewish places of worship had either been destroyed during and after the 1948 war or made inaccessible to the local Arab population. Lands of destroyed Arab villages were given to Jewish farmers, and the surviving mosques in these villages had been used as animal pens or storage depots. In a town south of Haifa, Ein Hod, the mosque was turned into a bar. The Government stated that in March 2004, there was a fire in an abandoned mosque in Beit She'an, resulting in a collapse of the structure. Beyond this incident, there were no reports of damage to holy sites during the reporting

period.

During Jewish holidays and following terrorist attacks, the Government imposed internal and external closures for security purposes that had the effect of restricting access to holy sites in the country for Arab Muslims and Christians, as well as Israeli Arabs and Palestinians who possess Jerusalem identification cards. The construction of the separation barrier also impeded access to holy sites in Jerusalem during the reporting period.

The Government permits religious organizations to apply for state funding to maintain or build religious facilities. Funding has been provided for the maintenance of facilities such as churches, Orthodox synagogues, mosques, and cemeteries. Funding for construction has not been provided for non-Orthodox synagogues. Several civil rights NGOs assert that Orthodox Jewish facilities receive significantly greater proportions of funding than do non-Orthodox Jewish and non-Jewish facilities. Muslim groups complain that the Government has not equitably funded the construction and maintenance of mosques in comparison to the funding of synagogues. AAHR reported that the Government was reluctant to refurbish mosques in areas where there is no longer a Muslim population, and has never in its history budgeted for the building of a new mosque. The Government stated that the AAHR report referred to abandoned sites and not to active sites, and the abandoned sites were not properly maintained. There is no restriction on the construction of new mosques in Israel, but the Government noted that while the state budget does not cover the costs of new construction, it does provide assistance in the maintenance of mosques. The Government cited examples of mosques that received government assistance for their maintenance in 2004, including mosques in Romana, Bartaa, Baana, Daburiya, Bir al Maksur, Bustan Almarge, Maala Iron, Hualad, and Hura, which altogether received approximately \$313,000 (NIS 1,420,000).

Muslim residents of the Be'er Sheva area, including members of Bedouin tribes, have protested the municipality's intention to reopen the city's old mosque as a museum rather than as a mosque for the area's Muslim residents. The High Court rejected a petition from Adalah, representing the area's Muslim community, to enjoin the municipality from renovating the mosque into a museum. The petitioners argued that there were no alternative mosques in the Be'er Sheva area. In January 2005, the High Court issued an interim opinion suggesting that the mosque be used as an Islamic cultural and social center by the Muslim community of Be'er Sheva, but not for prayer. In February 2005, the municipality issued a response rejecting this suggestion, and insisting that the mosque be opened as a museum. According to Adalah, the Attorney General also submitted a response to the High Court supporting the Be'er Sheva Municipality's position that the building not be used as an Islamic Cultural Center. The case was pending at the end of the reporting period.

Building codes for places of worship are enforced selectively based on religion. Several Bedouin living in unrecognized villages were denied building permits for construction of mosques, and in the past, the Government has destroyed mosques built in unrecognized Bedouin communities. In 2003, Government officials demolished a mosque serving approximately 1,500 residents in the unrecognized Bedouin village of Tel al-Maleh that was constructed without a permit. According to the Regional Council for the Arab Unrecognized Villages in the Negev, in 2003 and 2004, the Government issued demolition orders for three mosques in Um al-Hiran, al-Dhiyya, and Tel al-Maleh respectively; all three were unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev and built without the proper permits. The Regional Planning and Building Committee in the Negev stated that it was unaware that the building marked for demolition in al-Dhiyya was a mosque. By the end of the reporting period, the demolition orders still stood. In Um al-Hiran, the Government had issued orders to demolish the mosque and the villagers have been fined approximately \$7,000 (NIS 30,000) for building the structure without a permit. The Tel al-Maleh case was transferred to a lower court for review and the case was pending. In contrast, according to a former Tel Aviv municipal council member, in recent years approximately 100 illegal synagogues have operated in Tel Aviv, some within apartment buildings and others in separate structures.

A 1977 anti-proselytizing law prohibits any person from offering or receiving material benefits as an inducement to conversion. No reports exist of attempts to enforce the law during the reporting period.

Missionaries are allowed to proselytize, although the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) voluntarily refrains from proselytizing under a signed agreement with the Government.

The Knesset has not yet ratified the Fundamental Agreement establishing relations between the Holy See and Israel that was negotiated in the 1990s. In a separate process, representatives of the Government and the Holy See held several negotiating sessions since September 2004 with the aim of reaching an agreement (concordat) on fiscal and legal matters. The negotiations addressed the issues of tax exemption of Roman Catholic institutions and property and the access of the Roman Catholic Church to Israeli courts.

No agreement had been reached by the end of the period covered by this report.

Since the Government does not have diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, Muslim citizens must travel through another country, usually Jordan, to obtain travel documents for the Hajj. The average number of Hajj pilgrims traveling from the country each year is approximately 4,500, and the overall number allowed to participate in the Hajj is determined by Saudi Arabian authorities. According to the Government, travel to hostile countries, including travel to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj, may be restricted; however, these restrictions are based on security concerns rather than on any religious or ethnic factors.

During the reporting period, many groups and individuals of numerous religions traveled to the country freely. Members of the Messianic Jewish community, however, charged that during the year, Government officials detained and denied entry to several of their members who were seeking to enter the country. For example, in November 2004, an American citizen, who identified himself as a Messianic Jew, reported to the press that officials at Ben Gurion Airport charged him with the intent to engage in illegal missionary activity, temporarily denied him entry into Israel, threatened to expel him, and held him in a jail near the airport for 24 hours. He was eventually allowed to enter Israel.

According to representatives of Christian institutions, the process of visa issuance for Christian religious workers significantly improved after a period in 2003 when the Government refused to grant residence visas to approximately 130 Catholic clergy assigned to Israel and the occupied territories. The Ministry of the Interior's Christian Department reported that it approved most of the 3,000 applications made by clergy during the reporting period.

The Government discriminates against non-Jewish citizens and residents, the vast majority of whom are Arab Muslims and Christians, in the areas of employment, education, and housing. The Orr Legal Commission of Inquiry, established to investigate the 2000 police killing of 12 Israeli-Arab demonstrators, issued a final report in 2003 noting historical, societal, and governmental discrimination against Arab citizens. The Orr Commission's report also charged the Government with failure to allocate state resources in an equitable manner, and concluded that government neglect resulted in poverty, unemployment, a shortage of land, significant shortcomings in the education system, a substantially defective infrastructure, and other serious problems in the Arab sector.

According to a March 2005 media report, approximately 8,000 non-Jewish soldiers were serving in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). The IDF policy is to allow non-Jewish soldiers to go on home leave for their respective religious holidays. Military duties permitting, Jewish soldiers can leave on holidays. These duties rotate to allow some soldiers to go home for Jewish holidays. The IDF itself conducts commemorative activities appropriate for each respective Jewish holiday.

The IDF does not have any Muslim or Christian chaplains because, according to Government sources, the frequent home leave accorded all soldiers allows Muslim and Christian soldiers easy and regular access to their respective clergy and religious services at home. There have been discussions between the IDF and the National Security Council regarding chaplain appointments for non-Jewish IDF soldiers, but no decision has been made. The Government uses private non-Jewish clergy as chaplains at military burials when a non-Jewish soldier dies in service. In 2003, however, according to the family of an Israeli Christian soldier killed in a terrorist attack, the IDF did not have a military priest available to officiate at their son's burial. The soldier was buried in a non-Jewish section of the military cemetery in a non-religious ceremony without a religious figure to officiate. All Jewish chaplains in the IDF are Orthodox.

The IDF sponsored Orthodox Jewish conversion courses for Jewish soldiers who do not belong to Orthodox Judaism and for non-Jewish soldiers seeking to convert to Judaism. The IDF does not facilitate conversion to other religions.

Military service is compulsory for Jews and Druze. Orthodox Jews can obtain exemptions from service for full-time religious study. Some Arab citizens, mainly Bedouin, are accepted as volunteers. Approximately 90 percent of Israeli Arabs do not serve in the army. Israeli-Arab advocacy groups have charged that housing, educational, and other benefits, as well as employment preferences based on military experience, effectively discriminate in favor of the Jewish population, the majority of whom serve in the military. In December 2004, the Ivri Committee on National Service recommended to the Government that Israeli Arabs be afforded an opportunity to perform alternative nonmilitary service. By the end of the reporting period, the Government had not yet considered these recommendations.

During the year, observers noted that airport immigration officials denied entry on several occasions to non-Jews who arrived with mutilated passports, whereas Jews with damaged travel documents were allowed entry.

The Government has different education standards for Orthodox Jewish and non-Orthodox Jewish schools receiving funding. State-subsidized ultra-Orthodox Jewish religious schools have not been compelled, as have other types of schools, to comply with the law requiring all state-funded schools to teach core curriculum subjects, such as mathematics. The High Court ruled in December 2004 that ultra-Orthodox Jewish religious schools that do not comply with the Education Ministry's core curriculum by the opening of the 2007 school year will not be eligible for any funding from the Ministry. The ruling was a response to a petition filed by the Secondary Schools Teachers' Association against the Ministry of Education charging that while the Ministry cut funding to the public school system, causing hundreds of teachers to lose their jobs, it provided approximately \$40 million to autonomous ultra-Orthodox schools that do not comply with Ministry pedagogical requirements. In response to the court ruling, the Ministry is reportedly establishing criteria for the funding of schools that are not state-run.

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

Quality private religious schools for Israeli Arabs exist; however, parents often must pay tuition for their children to attend such schools due to inadequate government funding. Jewish private religious schools, however, receive significant government funding in addition to philanthropic contributions from within the country and abroad, which effectively lowers the schools' tuition costs.

Government funding to the different religious sectors is disproportionate to the sectors' sizes. Civil rights NGOs have charged that the Government favors Orthodox Jewish institutions in the allocation of state resources for religious activities.

IRAC noted that approximately 97 percent of public funding for Jewish cultural and educational activities goes to Orthodox Jewish organizations, despite IRAC's estimate that non-Orthodox Jewish institutions account for approximately 20 percent of all Jewish cultural activities. In response to a petition filed by IRAC in 2002, the Supreme Court ruled in December 2004 that the Government must create new criteria for state funding of Jewish cultural activities.

In spite of legal provision for public funding to build non-Orthodox synagogues, the Government had not funded the construction of any non-Orthodox synagogues. In 2003, IRAC petitioned the High Court on behalf of a reform congregation in Modi'in to require that Modi'in municipality fund construction of a reform synagogue. The city already funded eight Orthodox synagogues, but none that were conservative or reform. The High Court ruled in 2003 that it was permissible to use state funds for the construction of a Reform synagogue in the city of Modi'in and ordered the municipality to repeat the process for determining which congregations would receive funding and to use criteria that would guarantee and provide equal treatment. Nevertheless, the request for funding stalled in the Modi'in municipality, while the municipality had been using Housing Ministry funding to make allocations to Orthodox synagogues. IRAC again petitioned the High Court to compel the municipality to hold a hearing to consider all available budget requests for synagogue construction in light of the needs of Modi'in residents. IRAC also petitioned the court to freeze all municipal allocations for synagogue construction in Modi'in until such a hearing is held. At the end of the reporting period, the case remained pending with the municipality.

In 1998, the High Court of Justice ruled that discrepancies in budget allocations between religious institutions in the Jewish and non-Jewish sectors constituted "prima facie" evidence of discrimination. In 2000, the plaintiffs from the 1998 High Court case brought a case contending discrimination in the allocation of resources for religious cemeteries. The High Court agreed with the plaintiffs that non-Jewish religious cemeteries were receiving inadequate resources and ordered the Government to increase funding to such cemeteries.

The 1996 Alternative Burial Law established the right of any individual to be buried in a civil ceremony, and

required the establishment of 21 public civil cemeteries throughout the country. However, at the end of the reporting period, 1 public civil cemetery had been established in the country, in Be'er Sheva, and approximately 15 Jewish cemeteries in the country contained a section for civil burials. Several domestic civil rights and immigrant groups asserted that the Government failed to allocate adequate space or sufficient funds for the establishment of civil cemeteries. Civil burials are also offered by certain Kibbutzim, but, according to some NGOs, such burials are expensive. The Government reported that the 2004 capital budget for civil cemeteries was approximately \$760,000. It reported that in 2004, the administrative budget for Jewish cemeteries was approximately \$2 million, and claimed that no capital budget was allocated.

Only approximately 7 percent of land is privately held. Most Israelis who control land, either for residential or business use, including farms, lease their land from the Government on long-term leases. Of the 93 percent of the land not in private hands, the Government directly controls the vast bulk, but approximately 12.5 percent is owned by the state through the quasi-public Jewish National Fund (JNF). The Israel Land Administration, a government agency, manages both the land directly owned by the Government and the JNF land. The JNF's charter prohibits it from leasing land to non-Jews. In addition, the Jewish Agency, an organization that promotes Jewish immigration to the country and develops residential areas on both public and JNF land, as a matter of policy does not lease land to non-Jews. In 2000, the High Court ruled that the State may not allocate land to its citizens on the basis of religion or nationality, even if it allocates the land through a third party such as the Jewish Agency. The Court's decision precludes any restrictions on the leasing or sale of land based on nationality, religion, or any other discriminatory category. With respect to this ruling, official JNF policy has not changed; no other cases arose after the initial 2000 ruling during the period covered by this report.

In October 2004, civil rights groups petitioned the High Court of Justice to block a Government bid announcement involving JNF land that effectively banned Arabs from bidding. The Government then halted marketing of JNF land in the Galilee and other areas of the north, where there are large Arab populations. In December 2004, Adalah petitioned the High Court to require the Government to apply nondiscriminatory procedures for allocating land and to conduct open land sales/leases to Arabs as well as to Jews. In January 2005, the Attorney General ruled that the Government cannot discriminate against Israeli Arabs in the marketing and allocation of lands it manages, including lands that the Israel Land Administration manages for the Jewish National Fund. Adalah criticized the Attorney General, however, for also deciding that the Government should compensate the JNF with land equal in size to any plots of JNF land won by non-Jewish citizens in government tenders.

Exclusive control over marriages resides by law with recognized bodies of the recognized religious denominations. Accordingly, anyone wishing to marry in a secular ceremony, Jews wishing to marry in non-Orthodox religious ceremonies, Jews not officially recognized as Jewish by the Orthodox Jewish establishment but wishing to marry in Jewish ceremonies, and Jews wishing to marry someone of another faith must all do so abroad. The Ministry of the Interior recognizes such marriages. According to Central Bureau of Statistics figures released in March 2005, 7,089 Israelis married abroad in 2002, compared to 3,639 in 1997. Others hold weddings unrecognized by the Government, including Reform and Conservative weddings and those conducted by Kibbutz authorities.

In March 2004, the Knesset (Parliament) rejected two bills that would have allowed for civil marriage in Israel. In July 2004, the chairman of a Knesset committee established to formulate a civil marriage option announced that the committee would not complete its work or issue recommendations due to what he characterized as political interference with the committee's work. In April 2005, the High Court instructed the Government to inform it within 3 months of the Government's position on whether to recognize so-called "consular marriages," those conducted by officials of foreign embassies in the country. Government recognition of consular marriages would enable couples in Israel with no religious affiliation, or those of a religion not recognized by the Government, to wed in such civil ceremonies.

In December 2004, the Government reached an agreement with the Chief Rabbinate to limit required prenuptial instruction to those Jewish religious laws that are directly connected to the marriage ceremony and not require Jewish couples to receive instruction on Orthodox Jewish laws of ritual purity.

The State does not recognize conversions to Judaism performed in the country by non-Orthodox rabbis. In March 2005, the High Court ruled that, for the purpose of conferring citizenship rights, the Government must recognize those non-Orthodox conversions of noncitizen legal residents that were begun in Israel but formalized abroad by acknowledged Jewish religious authorities, even if not of the Orthodox strain. In a separate May 2004 ruling, the court determined that non-Jews who move to the country and then convert in the country through an Orthodox conversion are eligible to become immigrants and citizens pursuant to the Law of Return. Previously, non-Jews were entitled to immigrate to the country and obtain full citizenship only if these conversions were conducted entirely abroad and under Orthodox standards. The High Court

did not, however, rule on whether the Government must recognize non-Orthodox conversions formalized in Israel.

The Shinui Party, which ran in the 2002 national elections on a platform of ending the exclusive power of the Orthodox establishment over such issues as marriage and citizenship, left Prime Minister Sharon's governing coalition in December 2004 in protest over the allocation of approximately \$70 million in the 2005 budget for ultra-Orthodox religious institutions. Prime Minister Sharon allocated the funds as part of a coalition agreement with the ultra-Orthodox United Torah Judaism party to secure that party's support for the Gaza disengagement plan.

Under the Jewish religious courts' interpretation of personal status law, a Jewish woman may not receive a final writ of divorce without her husband's consent. Consequently, thousands of women, so-called "agunot," are unable to remarry or have legitimate children because their husbands have either disappeared or refused to grant divorces.

Rabbinical tribunals have the authority to impose sanctions on husbands who refuse to divorce their wives or on wives who refuse to accept divorce from their husbands. One Jewish U.S. citizen served more than 2 years in jail rather than grant his wife a writ of divorce. He was released approximately 1 year ago. In May 2004, a rabbinical court decided for the first time to jail a woman who refused to accept a divorce from her husband. Rabbinical courts also may exercise jurisdiction over, and issue sanctions against, non-Israeli Jews present in the country.

Some Islamic law courts have held that Muslim women may not request a divorce but that women may be forced to consent if a divorce is granted to the husband. One Arab Muslim woman who won a divorce from her abusive husband in a Muslim court subsequently filed a civil suit against the husband with the Magistrates Court in northern Israel. The court set a precedent in March by awarding the woman approximately \$10,000 in compensation for damage to her status and chances of re-marrying. Divorced Arab women are stigmatized in their communities and experience difficulties remarrying.

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

Most Orthodox Jews believe that mixed gender prayer services violate the precepts of Judaism. As a result, such services are prohibited at the Western Wall, the holiest site in Judaism, and men and women must use separate areas to visit the Western Wall. Women also are not allowed to conduct any prayers at the Western Wall wearing prayer shawls, which are typically worn by men, and cannot read from Torah scrolls. In 2003, the Women of the Wall, a group of more than 100 Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform women, lost their 14-year legal battle to hold formal women's prayer services at the Western Wall. The High Court ruled that the group could not hold prayer services at the Western Wall and instead would be permitted to hold them at nearby Robinson's Arch, part of an archeological site. The court ordered the Government to prepare an area at Robinson's Arch where women could read aloud from the Bible and conduct group prayers, and the Government inaugurated a plaza in this area for women's services in August 2004. According to IRAC, however, women who want to pray there must either provide the Government with 2 days' notice or pay the regular fee applicable for visiting the archeological site.

In 2003, IRAC petitioned the Supreme Court to overturn the government practice whereby the Adoption Service of the Ministry of Social Affairs places non-Jewish Israeli children only in Orthodox Jewish homes. Existing law requires that the adopted child must be of the same religion as the adopting parents. However, Representatives of IRAC reported that when no family of the same religion is willing to adopt the child, adoption officials consistently place the child with an Orthodox family. In such cases, the child's conversion to Judaism must be completed before the adoption is finalized. The Government defended its practice by arguing that the placement of non-Jewish children in Orthodox homes eliminates any subsequent legal uncertainty about the Jewish status of the children. At the end of the reporting period, the case was still pending.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

Palestinian terrorist organizations, including Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, committed acts of terror against Israelis during the period covered by this report. These attacks included an August 2004 twin suicide bombing of buses in Be'er Sheva, killing 16 persons and injuring more than 100. Hamas claimed responsibility. In November 2004, a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv killed 3 Israelis and wounded 30. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) claimed responsibility. Rocket attacks in June and September 2004 killed a total of four residents of Sderot. At least one group claiming responsibility for attacks, Hamas, includes anti-Semitic material on its website.

Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom

The Government appointed Oscar Abu-Razek, a Muslim Israeli Arab, as director general of the Ministry of Interior, the first Arab to serve in such a senior position in a government ministry. In addition, for the first time since the establishment of the State, an Arab was appointed as a permanent justice of the High Court.

According to government data, the number of non-Jewish directors on the boards of state-owned companies increased from 5.5 percent in 2002 to 8 percent in 2005. Prime Minister Sharon has stated publicly that increasing the number of non-Jewish board directors and the number of non-Jewish civil service employees are government priorities.

Members of the Knesset and the Chief Rabbinate attended a seminar in January 2005, hosted by the American Jewish Committee, to increase understanding of the various branches of Christianity. To enhance interfaith relations, seminar participants also visited the heads of various Christian denominations in Israel, including the Latin and Armenian patriarchs and a representative of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate.

A Knesset subcommittee was established in December 2004 to track the needs of the Israeli-Arab sector and recommend changes in the 2005 budget to benefit that sector. Mohammed Barakeh, a Knesset member from the Israeli-Arab party "Hadash," was appointed to head the subcommittee.

The Government established a new department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to fight anti-Semitism and commemorate the Holocaust.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Relations among different religious groups--between Jews and non-Jews, between Christians and Muslims, between Christians of different traditions, and among the different streams of Judaism--often are strained. Tensions between Jews and non-Jews are the result of historical grievances as well as cultural and religious differences, and they were compounded by governmental and societal discrimination against Israeli Arabs, both Muslim and Christian. These tensions were heightened by the Arab-Israeli conflict, and manifested in terrorist attacks targeting Israelis, IDF operations in the occupied territories, incidents of Jewish militants targeting Israeli Arabs, and incidents of Israeli Arab involvement in terrorist activity.

According to a March 2005 poll conducted by the Dahaf Institute, a majority of Israeli Jews believe that the state should encourage Israeli Arabs to emigrate. Similar surveys have also revealed a continuing increase in distrust between Israeli Jews and Arabs. An ultra-Orthodox weekly, Sh'a Tova, reportedly carried a comic strip for children with negative depiction of Arabs, including the statement, "Yes, a good Arab is a dead Arab." During the reporting period, Israeli Jewish fans of a Jerusalem soccer team shouted racist slogans against Israeli Arab soccer players during a match. In 2004, several Israeli Jews were indicted in one incident for shouting such slogans.

During the reporting period, incidents occurred in Jerusalem in which ultra-Orthodox Jewish youths assaulted Arabs and spray-painted anti-Arab graffiti.

In October 2004, a yeshiva student spat at the Armenian archbishop of Jerusalem while he was engaged in a religious procession through the Old City. The student was arrested and ordered to remain away from the Old City for 75 days. He also made a formal apology. The Holy See and the country's Chief Rabbinate issued a joint condemnation of the assault at the end of a meeting of Catholic and Jewish officials near Rome shortly after the incident.

The phrases "Death to Arabs" and "Death to Gentiles" were spray-painted in March on 10 graves in a Christian cemetery in Jerusalem's Gilo neighborhood. Police continued to investigate but had not made any arrests by the end of the reporting period.

According to a reputable Jewish organization in Israel, recent years have seen an increase in anti-Semitic graffiti in outlying immigrant towns. The organization attributes these acts to "disaffected" immigrant youth rather than to individuals motivated by anti-Semitic beliefs.

Advancement of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's controversial plan to withdraw all citizens from the Gaza Strip and four settlements in the northern West Bank caused tensions in Israeli society between supporters and opponents of the plan, the latter often being members of religious Zionist groups. During the year, a rabbi issued a religious edict permitting settlers to physically harm Bedouin and Druze soldiers who participate in the evacuation of settlements pursuant to Sharon's plan. In response to the edict, a Bedouin Sheikh urged Bedouin soldiers to respond forcefully, including with live fire, to any settler attacks against them during the evacuation.

Death threats in various forms, including graffiti, have been made against government officials who support the disengagement plan, including against Prime Minister Sharon. During a March 2005 sermon, Shas party spiritual leader Rabbi Ovadia Yosef suggested that God would see that Sharon dies for implementing disengagement. The national office of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) issued a public statement condemning Yosef's sermon for its inflammatory language and his subsequent apology as inadequate. Neo-Nazi graffiti was sprayed on monuments honoring, and actual gravesites of, several well-known Israeli historical figures, including the grave of the country's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion. In May 2005, swastikas and graffiti comparing Prime Minister Sharon to Adolf Hitler were sprayed on the road leading into the Yad Vashem Holocaust museum in Jerusalem. A reputable Jewish organization attributed these acts to extremist opponents of Prime Minister Sharon's disengagement plan. In April 2005, police discovered two fake bombs in Jerusalem and arrested two far-right religious activists with planting those bombs and others, in their efforts to distract government attention from the disengagement plan.

In February 2005, Druze rioters damaged a Melkite Catholic church and damaged or burned dozens of Christian businesses, homes, and cars in the northern village of Mughar after a Druze falsely claimed that Christian youths had placed pornographic pictures of Druze girls on the Internet. Eight persons were reported injured, and many Christians fled the city and refused to allow their children to return to school for weeks in the aftermath of the violence. Druze religious leaders were quick to denounce the riots, and representatives of the Christian community criticized the Government for not responding more quickly to the violence. In June 2005, the Government announced the allocation of \$2 million (NIS 10 million) in state funds to compensate residents for damaged property incurred during the riots.

Numerous NGOs in the country are dedicated to promoting Jewish-Arab coexistence and interfaith understanding. Their programs include events to increase productive contact between religious groups and to promote Jewish-Arab dialogue and cooperation. These groups and their events have had varying degrees of success. Interfaith dialogue often is linked to the peace process between the country and its Arab neighbors. Among efforts in this area are those of participants in the Alexandria Interfaith Peace Process, initiated at a 2002 interfaith conference in Cairo. Canon Andrew White, the Archbishop of Canterbury's special representative to the Alexandria Process, convened meetings in December 2004 and in January 2005 in Jerusalem with Israeli and Palestinian religious leaders to discuss advancing the Alexandria Process. The group discussed ways to advance an agenda of peace among religious leaders in their respective communities. In January, as part of the Alexandria Process, Israeli rabbis and Israeli and Palestinian imams joined a group of more than 100 imams and rabbis from all over the world in a Brussels conference aimed at enhancing interfaith understanding and combating violence.

Animosity between secular and religious Jews continued during the period covered by this report. Non-

Orthodox Jews have complained of discrimination and intolerance by members of ultra-Orthodox Jewish groups. Persons who consider themselves Jewish but who are not considered Jewish under Orthodox law particularly complained of discrimination. As in past years, ultra-Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem threw rocks at passing motorists driving on the Sabbath.

A variety of NGOs exists that seek to build understanding and create dialogue between religious groups and between religious and secular Jewish communities. Several examples are the Gesher Foundation (Hebrew for "bridge"); Meitarim, which operates a pluralistic Jewish-oriented school system; and the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, which promotes interfaith dialogue among Jewish, Muslim, and Christian institutions.

Throughout society, attitudes toward missionary activities and conversion generally are negative. Many Jews are opposed to missionary activity directed at Jews, and some are hostile toward Jewish converts to Christianity. Media sources reported that the Messianic Jewish community accused Yad L'achim, a Jewish religious organization opposed to missionary activity, of harassing its members. Christian and Muslim Israeli-Arab religious leaders complain that missionary activity that leads to conversions frequently disrupts family coherence in their communities.

A March 2005 dispute over the sale of property in Jerusalem's Old City owned by the Greek Orthodox Church to Jewish investors ended with senior Orthodox leaders calling for the removal of the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Irineos I. At the end of the reporting period, Patriarch Irineos had not resigned, but many Greek Christians in the country reject his authority.

Politicians, media outlets, and many ordinary citizens criticized the Government's practice of granting military draft exemptions and living allowances to full-time yeshiva students. In February 2004, due to political and societal pressures, the Government appointed a parliamentary committee to investigate ways to broaden military service to include yeshiva students. At the end of the reporting period, the committee had not issued its recommendations.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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

Embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, routinely meet with religious officials. These contacts include meetings with Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Druze leaders at a variety of levels. In April 2005, the Embassy invited two Knesset members from the secular Shinui party and two from the ultra-Orthodox Shas party to participate together in an International Visitors Program on the U.S. legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government. The program received positive media coverage for enhancing understanding and ties between these two rival parties.

In October 2004, a representative from the Office of International Religious Freedom visited Israel and met with Government officials, Jewish religious leaders, civil rights NGO representatives, Israeli-Arab human rights advocates, and Christian clergy and religious workers—particularly those negatively impacted by construction of the separation barrier.

In November 2004, the Embassy hosted, as it has in recent years, an Iftar to commemorate the Muslim holiday of Ramadan, inviting more than 80 Israeli Muslim representatives from the political, economic, legal, religious, and business communities, as well as representatives of interfaith organizations. The dinner promoted understanding and cooperation between Jews, Muslims, and Christians, and enhanced U.S. understanding of issues affecting these religious communities.

The Embassy provided grants to local organizations promoting interfaith dialogue and coexistence and to organizations examining the role of religion in resolving conflict. For example, a grant facilitated the Alexandria Process, an interfaith dialogue between Christian, Muslim and Jewish spiritual leaders on furthering tolerance and nonviolence in their respective communities. Part of the grant funds publications and curriculum development for religious tolerance and coexistence in the Israeli school system.

The Embassy provided a grant to support a program for a dozen Palestinian youths and 20 Israeli-Jewish and Israeli-Arab youths to hold an October dialogue/retreat on "Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Youth Leadership."

Embassy officials maintain a dialogue with NGOs that follow human and civil rights issues, including religious freedom. Embassy representatives also attended and spoke at meetings of such organizations, including the Arab Association for Human Rights, the Mossawa Advocacy Center for Arab Citizens in Israel, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, the Israel Religious Action Center, and Adalah.

THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES (INCLUDING AREAS SUBJECT TO THE JURISDICTION OF THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY)

Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights, and East Jerusalem during the 1967 War. Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) now administer the West Bank and Gaza Strip to varying extents. The PA does not have a constitution; however, the Basic Law provides for freedom of religion, and the PA generally respects this right in practice. The Basic Law names Islam as the official religion but also calls for "respect and sanctity" for other religions.

There was no change in the status of the PA's respect for religious freedom during the reporting period. President Mahmud Abbas took steps to eliminate religious incitement, although incidents of such incitement still occurred. In previous years, there were credible reports that PA security forces and judicial officials colluded with criminal elements to extort property illegally from Christian landowners in the Bethlehem area. While there have not been recent reports of Christians being targeted for extortion or abuse, the PA has not taken action to investigate past injustices allegedly perpetrated by PA officials.

Israel exercises varying degrees of legal control in the occupied territories. Israel has no constitution; however, Israeli law provides for freedom of worship, and the Israeli Government generally respects this right in practice in the occupied territories.

There was no change in the status of the Israeli Government's respect for religious freedom in the occupied territories during the reporting period. Israel's strict closure policies frequently restricted the ability of Palestinians to reach places of worship and practice their religions. The construction of a separation barrier by the Government of Israel, particularly in and around East Jerusalem, also severely limited access to mosques, churches, and other holy sites, and seriously impeded the work of religious organizations that provide education, healthcare, and other humanitarian relief and social services to Palestinians. Such impediments were not exclusive to religious believers or to religious organizations, and at times the Israeli Government made efforts to lessen the impact on religious communities. The Israeli Government confiscated land (usually offering limited compensation, which churches do not accept) belonging to several religious institutions to build its separation barrier between East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

There generally are amicable relations between Christians and Muslims, although tensions exist. Strong societal attitudes are a barrier to conversions from Islam. Relations between Jews and non-Jews, as well as among the different branches of Judaism, sometimes are strained. Societal tensions between Jews and non-Jews exist primarily as a result of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; such tensions remained high during the reporting period. The violence that has occurred since the outbreak of the Intifada in October 2000 has significantly curtailed religious practice in many areas of the occupied territories. This violence included severe damage to places of worship and religious shrines in the occupied territories.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The occupied territories are composed of the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. The Gaza Strip covers an area of 143 square miles, and its population is approximately 1.3 million persons, not including approximately 7,800 Israeli settlers. The West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem) covers an area of 2,238 square miles, and its population is approximately 2.4 million persons, not including approximately 220,000 Israeli settlers. East Jerusalem covers an area of 27 square miles, and its population is approximately 400,000 persons, including approximately 180,000 Israeli settlers. The

Golan Heights covers an area of approximately 810 square miles, and its total population is approximately 20,000.

Approximately 98 percent of Palestinian residents of the occupied territories are Sunni Muslims. According to a 1997 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics estimate, approximately 39,560 Palestinian Christians live in the occupied territories. However, according to the sum of estimates provided by individual Christian denominations (which seem significantly overstated), the total number of Christians is approximately 200,000. A majority of Christians are Greek Orthodox (approximately 120,000), and there also are a significant number of Roman Catholics and Greek Catholics (approximately 50,000 together), Protestants, Syrian Orthodox, Armenians, Copts, Maronites, and Ethiopian Orthodox. In general Christians are concentrated in the areas of Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Bethlehem. According to municipal officials in Bethlehem, since 2002 approximately 2800 Christians from the Bethlehem area have left the occupied territories for other countries. According to Christian leaders, most of the Christians left their homes not due to religious discrimination, but for economic and security reasons associated with the violence of the Second Intifada, the restrictions resulting from Israeli closure policies and the construction of the Israeli separation barrier, and the negative impact of both on the local economy. There is also a community of approximately 400 Samaritans (an ancient offshoot of Judaism) located on Mount Gerazim near Nablus in the West Bank.

Adherents of several denominations of evangelical Christians as well as members of Jehovah's Witnesses operate in the West Bank. Foreign missionaries operate in the occupied territories, including a small number of evangelical Christian pastors who seek to convert Muslims to Christianity. While they maintain a generally low profile, the PA is aware of their activities and generally does not restrict them.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Palestinian Authority does not have a constitution; however, the Basic Law provides for religious freedom, and the PA generally respects this right in practice. The Basic Law states that "Islam is the official religion in Palestine," and that "respect and sanctity of all other heavenly religions (i.e., Judaism and Christianity) shall be maintained." In 2002 the Basic Law was approved by the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) and signed by then-PA Chairman Yasir Arafat. The March 2003 draft constitution states that "Islam is the official religion of the State," and "Christianity and all other monotheistic religions shall be equally revered and respected." It is unclear whether the injunction to "respect" other religions will translate into an effective legal protection of religious freedom. The Basic Law states that the principles of Shari'a (Islamic law) are "the main source of legislation," while the draft constitution states that Shari'a is "a major source of legislation."

Churches in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza operate under one of three general categories: churches recognized by the status quo agreements reached under Ottoman rule in the late 19th century, Protestant and evangelical churches established between the late 19th century and 1967, which, although they exist and operate, are not recognized officially by the PA, and a small number of churches that became active within the last decade, and whose legal status is more tenuous.

The first group of churches is governed by 19th century status quo agreements reached with Ottoman authorities, which the PA respects, and which specifically established the presence and rights of the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Assyrian, Syrian Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Coptic, and Ethiopian Orthodox churches. The Episcopal and Lutheran churches were added later to this list. The PA immediately upon its establishment recognized these churches and their rights. Like Shari'a courts under Islam, these religious groups are permitted to have ecclesiastical courts whose rulings are considered legally binding on personal status issues and some land issues. Civil courts do not adjudicate on such matters.

According to the PA, no other churches have applied for official recognition; however, churches in the second category, which includes the Assembly of God, Nazarene Church, and some Baptist churches, have unwritten understandings with the PA based on the principles of the status quo agreements. They are permitted to operate freely and are able to perform certain personal status legal functions, such as issuing marriage certificates.

The third group of churches consists of a small number of proselytizing churches, including Jehovah's Witnesses and some evangelical Christian groups. These groups have encountered opposition in their efforts to obtain recognition, both from Muslims who oppose their proselytizing, and from Christians who fear that the new arrivals may disrupt the status quo. However, these churches generally operate unhindered by the PA.

In practice the PA requires Palestinians to declare religious affiliation on identification papers. All personal status legal matters must be handled in either Islamic or Christian ecclesiastical courts if such courts exist for the individual's denomination. All legally recognized individual sects are empowered to adjudicate personal status matters, and in practice most do so. Neither the PA nor the Government of Israel currently has a civil marriage law. Legally, members of one religious group mutually may agree to submit a personal status dispute to a different Christian denomination to adjudicate, but in practice this does not occur. Churches that are not officially recognized by the PA or the Government of Israel must obtain special permission to perform marriages or adjudicate personal status issues; however, in practice non-recognized churches advise their members to marry (or divorce) abroad.

Since Islam is the official religion of the PA, Islamic institutions and places of worship receive preferential treatment. The PA has a Ministry of Waqf and Religious Affairs, which pays for the construction and maintenance of mosques and the salaries of many Palestinian imams. The Ministry also provides limited financial support to some Christian clergymen and Christian charitable organizations. The PA does not provide financial support to any Jewish institutions or holy sites in the occupied territories.

The PA requires that religion be taught in PA schools, with separate courses for Muslim and Christian students. A compulsory curriculum requires the study of Christianity for Christian students and Islam for Muslim students in grades one through six. While the PA has taken several steps to eliminate incitement in textbooks and teaching, Israeli NGO analysts at Palestinian Media Watch report that textbooks still delegitimize Israel's historical connection to the land, and that many teachers still use inflammatory anti-Israel rhetoric in the classroom.

The PA does not officially sponsor interfaith dialogue; however, it sends representatives to meetings on improving interreligious relations and attempts to foster goodwill among Muslim and Christian religious leaders. The PA makes an effort to maintain good relations with the Christian community; however, the PA has not taken sufficient action to remedy past harassment and intimidation of Christian residents of Bethlehem by the city's Muslim majority. In previous years, PA officials appear to have been complicit in property extortion of Palestinian Christian residents. PA President Abbas has informal advisors on Christian affairs. Six seats in the 88-member Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) are reserved for Christians and one seat is reserved for Samaritans; there are no seats reserved for members of any other faith. The PA observes several religious holidays, including Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, Zikra al-Hijra al-Nabawiya, Christmas, and the Birth of the Prophet. Christians also may observe the Easter holiday.

Israel has no constitution; however, Israeli law provides for freedom of worship, and the Israeli Government generally respects this right in practice in the occupied territories. Israel exercises varying degrees of legal control in the occupied territories. The international community considers Israel's authority in the occupied territories to be subject to the 1907 Hague Regulations and the 1949 Geneva Convention relating to the Protection of Civilians in Time of War. The Israeli Government considers the Hague Regulations applicable and maintains that it largely observed the Geneva Convention's humanitarian provisions. The Israeli Government applies Israeli law to East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, areas that it annexed after 1967.

The Israeli Government gives preferential treatment to Jewish residents of the occupied territories, including East Jerusalem, when granting permits for home building and civic services. For example, Palestinian residents of Jerusalem pay the same taxes as Jewish residents, but Palestinian residents receive significantly fewer municipal services than Jewish residents. Many of the national and municipal policies enacted in Jerusalem are designed to limit or diminish the non-Jewish population of Jerusalem. These are official policies that every Jerusalem municipal government has acknowledged and followed since 1967, and that Israeli ministers including current Israeli Interior Minister Ophir Pines-Paz have at times openly admitted. According to Palestinian and Israeli human rights organizations, the Israeli Government uses a combination of zoning restrictions on building for Palestinians, confiscation of Palestinian lands, and demolition of Palestinian homes to "contain" non-Jewish neighborhoods.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Haram al-Sharif ("Noble Sanctuary," known to Jews as the Temple Mount), containing the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque, has been, with all of East Jerusalem, under Israeli security control since

1967, when Israel captured the city (East Jerusalem was formally annexed in 1980, and thus Israel applies its laws to East Jerusalem). The Haram al-Sharif is administered, however, by the Islamic Waqf, the PA-affiliated but Jordanian-funded Muslim religious trust for East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The Israeli police control the compound's entrances, and have the ability to limit access to the compound. The Waqf can object to entrance of particular persons, such as non-Muslim religious radicals, or to prohibited activities, such as prayer by non-Muslims or disrespectful clothing or behavior, but lacks authority to remove anyone from the site, and thus must rely on Israeli police to enforce site regulations. In practice, Waqf officials say that police often allow religious radicals (such as Jews seeking to rebuild the Temple on the site and to remove the mosques) and immodestly dressed persons to enter and often are not responsive to enforcing the site's rules.

While non-Muslims (except guests of the Waqf) were not allowed to enter the Haram al-Sharif from September 28, 2000 (the date of then-candidate for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's riot-inducing ascent to the Haram) until August 2003, non-Muslims can now visit the site during designated visiting hours. The Israeli Government, as a matter of stated policy, has prevented non-Muslims from worshipping at the Haram al-Sharif since 1967. Israeli police consistently have declined to allow obvious prayer on public safety grounds and publicly have indicated that this policy has not changed in light of the renewed visits of non-Muslims to the compound or the court ruling on the issue. Waqf officials contend that the Israeli police, in contravention of their stated policy and the religious status quo, have allowed members of radical Jewish groups to enter and to worship at the site. Spokesmen for these groups have confirmed successful attempts to pray inside the compound in interviews with the Israeli media. The Waqf interprets police actions as part of an Israeli policy to incrementally reduce Waqf authority over the site and to give non-Muslims rights of worship in parts of the compound.

Since October 2000, the Government of Israel, citing security concerns, has prevented most Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza from reaching the Haram al-Sharif, the third holiest shrine in Islam, by prohibiting their entry into Jerusalem. Restrictions are often placed on entry into the Haram al-Sharif even for Palestinian residents of Jerusalem, such as a frequently-implemented restriction on males under the age of 45.

There are also disputes between the Muslim administrators of the Haram al-Sharif and Israeli authorities regarding Israeli restrictions on Waqf attempts to carry out repairs and physical improvements on the compound and its mosques. Palestinian workers under direction of Jordanian engineers are currently working on restoring tiles on the Dome of the Rock and Ottoman-era stones on the southern and eastern walls of the compound. Israeli authorities have prevented the Waqf from conducting several improvement projects or removing debris from the site, alleging that the Waqf is attempting to alter the nature of the site or to discard antiquities of Jewish origin.

Personal status law for Palestinians is based on religious law. For Muslim Palestinians, personal status law is derived from Shari'a, and various ecclesiastical courts rule on personal status issues for Christians. A 1995 PA presidential decree stipulated that all laws in effect before the advent of the PA would continue in force until the PA enacted new laws or amended the old ones. Therefore, in the West Bank, which was formerly under Jordanian rule, the Shari'a-based Jordanian Status Law of 1976 governs women's status issues. Under the law, which includes inheritance and marriage laws, women inherit less than male members of the family. The marriage law allows men to take more than one wife, although few do so. Prior to marriage, a woman and man may stipulate terms in the marriage contract that govern financial and child custody matters in the event of divorce. Reportedly, few women utilize this section of the law. Personal status law in Gaza is based on Shari'a-centered law as interpreted in Egypt; however, similar versions of the attendant restrictions on women described above also apply as well.

Due to the increased violence and security concerns related to the Intifada, the Israeli Government has imposed a broad range of strict closures and curfews in the occupied territories since October 2000. These restrictions largely continued during the reporting period and resulted in significantly impeded freedom of access to places of worship for Muslims and Christians.

In 2002, the Government of Israel, citing security concerns, began constructing a barrier in the occupied territories to separate most of the West Bank from Israel, East Jerusalem, and Israeli settlement blocks. Construction of the barrier has involved confiscation of property owned by non-Jews, displacement of Christian and Muslim residents, and tightening of restrictions on freedom of access to places of worship for non-Jewish communities. The Government of Israel asserts that it has mechanisms to compensate landowners for all takings, but the Consulate General has received several reports of land being taken along the barrier's route without compensation under the Absentee Property Statute or military orders.

Construction of the separation barrier continued in and around East Jerusalem during the reporting period, restricting access by Arab Muslims and Christians, including Israeli Arabs as well as Palestinians who possess Jerusalem ID cards, to holy sites in Jerusalem and in the West Bank. The barrier also negatively affected access to schools, healthcare providers, and other humanitarian services, although in some cases, the Government made efforts to lessen the impact on religious institutions.

The separation barrier has made it difficult for Bethlehem-area Christians to reach the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, and it makes visits to Christian sites in Bethany and in Bethlehem difficult for Palestinian Christians who live on the Israeli side of the barrier, further fragmenting and dividing this small minority community. Foreign pilgrims sometimes also experience difficulty in obtaining access to Christian holy sites in the West Bank. The barrier and its checkpoints also impede the movement of clergy between Jerusalem and West Bank churches and monasteries, as well as the movement of congregations between their homes and places of worship.

In February 2003, the Government of Israel issued confiscation orders for land in Bethlehem to build a barrier and military positions around Rachel's Tomb (a shrine holy to Jews, Christians, and Muslims). This barrier would leave the shrine on the "Israeli" side of the separation barrier. By the end of 2004, the Government of Israel had walled off and fortified the Rachel's Tomb area, and often restricted access to the site, only allowing Jewish visitors regular, unimpeded access and requiring prior coordination by other worshippers. In previous years, Jewish tourists visiting the shrine occasionally had been harassed by Palestinians, but Israel's closure of the area and associated land expropriations impede Muslim/Christian access to the site. Israeli settlers have obtained ownership of some of the land and properties around the tomb through a disputed land deal.

In 2003, the Government of Israel confiscated land from the Baron Deir monastery in Bethlehem, which belongs to the Armenian Patriarchate, for construction of an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) patrol road in the area. Negotiations between the Patriarchate and the Government of Israel reduced the amount of land confiscated.

The Armenian Patriarchate also reports that the IDF caused significant damage to the property during IDF incursions into Bethlehem in 2002. The parties have not reached agreement on compensation for this damage.

Since 2003, the Israeli Government has confiscated land (with some compensation generally offered but refused) belonging to three Catholic institutions in Bethany for construction of the separation barrier: the Camboni Sisters Convent, the Passionist Monastery, and the Sisters of Charity Convent and school. Construction of the barrier in this area, which was largely completed during the reporting period, involved confiscation of a significant portion of each church property. In the village of Bethpage on the Mount of Olives, the Israeli Government built an 8-meter-high concrete separation barrier that crosses into the property of several Christian institutions. The barrier in Bethpage blocks the annual Orthodox Palm Sunday procession from Lazarus' Tomb in Bethany to the Old City of Jerusalem, but Israel has constructed a special gate to allow foreign pilgrims and Christians living on the Israeli side of the barrier to participate in the procession.

Israeli closure policies, imposed according to the Israeli Government due to security concerns, prevented tens of thousands of Palestinians from reaching places of worship in Jerusalem and the West Bank, including during religious holidays such as Ramadan, Christmas, and Easter. There have been several violent clashes between Israeli police and Muslim worshippers on the Haram al-Sharif, which Waqf officials allege have been due to the large police contingent kept on the site. On a few occasions, Muslim worshippers have thrown stones at police and police have fired tear gas and stun grenades at worshippers. Muslim worshippers also have held demonstrations at the site to protest reported Jewish extremist plans to damage the mosques or create a Jewish worship area at the site. Israeli security officials and police have generally been proactive and effective in dealing with such threats. In previous reporting periods there were some incidents of Muslims throwing rocks toward Jewish worshippers on the Western Wall plaza, but there have not been any recent incidents of rocks thrown near the Western Wall.

The Israeli Government's closure policy prevented several Palestinian religious leaders, both Muslim and Christian, from reaching their congregations. In previous years, several clergymen reported that they were subject to harassment at checkpoints; however, during the reporting period there were no reports of serious harassment of clergy.

During the reporting period, Palestinian violence against Israeli settlers prevented some Israelis from reaching Jewish holy sites in the occupied territories, such as Joseph's Tomb near Nablus and the Tomb of

the Patriarchs in Hebron. Since early 2001, following the outbreak of the Intifada, the Israeli Government has prohibited Israeli citizens in unofficial capacities from traveling to the parts of the West Bank under the civil and security control of the PA. This restriction prevented Israeli Arabs from visiting Muslim and Christian holy sites in the West Bank, and it prevented Jewish Israelis from visiting other sites, including an ancient synagogue in Jericho. There are now joint PA-Israeli plans, however, to resume Jewish visits to the Jericho synagogue.

Settler violence against Palestinians prevented some Palestinians from reaching holy sites in the occupied territories. Settlers in Hebron have in past years forcibly prevented Muslim muezzins from reaching the al-Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs to sound the call to prayer, and have harassed Muslim worshippers in Hebron. Settler harassment of Palestinian Muslims in Hebron was a regular occurrence in this reporting period. The Government of Israel did not effectively respond to settler-initiated blocking of religious sites.

While there are no specific restrictions placed on Palestinians making the Hajj, all Palestinians faced closures and long waits at Israeli border crossings, which often impeded travel for religious purposes. Palestinians generally are not allowed to use Ben-Gurion airport to travel to Egypt or Jordan, and there are no direct air links from Israel to Saudi Arabia (Israel and Saudi Arabia do not have diplomatic relations). If residents of the occupied territories obtain a Saudi Hajj visa, they must travel by ground to Amman (for West Bankers) or Egypt (for Gazans) and then by ground, sea, or air to Jeddah.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

During the reporting period, some Christian groups report that the Government of Israel failed to grant new visas to or renew existing visas for 38 Christian clergy ministering in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. While religious leaders say that there is still a problem with clergy visas, there has been significant improvement in this area in the past year. Catholic and Orthodox priests and nuns and other religious workers often from Syria and Lebanon faced long delays, and sometimes denied applications, entirely without explanation; however, the Israeli Government claimed that delays were due to security processing for visas and extensions.

In July 2003, during construction of the separation barrier in the West Bank town of Abu Dis, Israeli authorities damaged the ruins of a sixth-century Byzantine monastery. Officials of the Israel Antiquities Authority publicly accused the Defense Ministry of ignoring repeated warnings about the archaeological value of the site, and they charged that excavations for the barrier had damaged one-third of the Byzantine remains. At the end of the reporting period, neither the Defense Ministry nor the Antiquities Authority had repaired the site.

On June 13 2003, the day that Muslims celebrated the Birth of the Prophet Muhammed, IDF personnel closed the al-Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron in violation of the Hebron Protocol, which states that the mosque should be available to Muslim worshipers on Muslim holidays. On June 24, 2003 (and in subsequent orders still in effect in 2005), Israeli officers issued a new order preventing the muezzin at the al-Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron from sounding the call to prayer when Jews were praying in their portion of the shrine.

The Government of Israel generally has not compensated churches for damage incurred during past military operations. Sites damaged in 2002 for which no compensation was paid include St. Mary's Convent, the chapel at Bethlehem University, the Lutheran Church and orphanage in Beit Jala, the Latin Convent in Beit Sahour, the Bethlehem Bible College, a Syrian Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Pilgrim's House, and the Omar Ibn al-Khattab Mosque. Both the ninth century al-Khader Mosque in Nablus, reputed to be the oldest mosque in the occupied territories, and the church of Mar Mitri, the oldest Christian church in Nablus, were destroyed. There were no reports of major damage to religious sites in the occupied territories during this reporting period. At the end of this reporting period, there had been no compensation paid for destroyed holy sites.

There were no reports of major damage to Christian churches during this reporting period. In previous years, there were credible reports that the Israeli military caused significant damage to church property. In January 2003, the IDF fired a missile that penetrated the roof of St. Philip's Episcopal Church in the Gaza Strip and exploded inside. The explosion created a 1.5-meter crater near the altar and shattered all the stained glass windows and chandeliers. Church officials filed a claim with the IDF for compensation, but never received a response. At the end of the reporting period, the Church was not repaired and remained unusable. The IDF acknowledged the incident, claiming it was an accident that occurred while fighting militants. The IDF generally does not compensate religious groups for damage that allegedly occurred

during combat operations.

In previous years, the PA failed to halt several cases of seizures of Christian-owned land in the Bethlehem area by criminal gangs. In many cases, criminal gangs reportedly used forged land documents to assert ownership of lands belonging to Christians. Police failed to investigate most of these cases. In two cases, police arrested and then released the suspects on bail and allowed them to continue occupying the land in question. Local religious and political leaders confirmed that no such attempts to seize Muslim-owned land took place.

There were credible reports in previous years that PA security forces and judicial officials colluded with members of these gangs to seize land from Christians. In one reported case, a PA judge openly told a Palestinian Christian landowner that he and his partners in the PA intelligence services required a substantial bribe to allow the landowner to remain on his property. PA officials repeatedly promised Christian leaders that they would take action in these cases, but by the end of the reporting period, no action had been taken.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the occupied territories.

Forced Religious Conversions

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

During the reporting period, the Palestinian terrorist groups Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad carried out several terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians. In January 2004, 11 persons were killed and over 50 injured in a suicide bombing aboard a bus in Jerusalem. Hamas claimed responsibility for the attack. While these attacks were usually carried out in the name of Palestinian nationalism, some of the rhetoric used by terrorist organizations such as Hamas also included expressions of anti-Semitism.

A small number of Jewish settlers affiliated with the extremist group Kach were arrested for assaulting Palestinians and destroying Palestinian property; however, most incidents of violence or property destruction reportedly committed by settlers against Palestinians did not result in arrests or convictions.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

There generally are amicable relations between Christians and Muslims, although tensions exist. Relations between Jews and non-Jews, as well as among the different branches of Judaism, often are strained. Tensions between Jews and non-Jews exist primarily as a result of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as well as Israel's control of access to sites holy to Christians and Muslims. Some non-Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem have complained of discrimination and intolerance on the part of some Orthodox Jews.

Societal attitudes continued to be a barrier to conversions, especially for Muslims converting to Christianity. In previous years, there were reports that some Christian converts from Islam who publicized their religious beliefs were harassed or ostracized by their families or villages.

Muslim-Christian tension has been minimal during this reporting period, and the few instances of Muslim-Christian violence seem related to social or inter-family conflicts rather than religious disputes. Both Muslim and Christian Palestinians have accused Israeli officials of attempting to foster animosity among Palestinians by exaggerating reports of Muslim-Christian tensions.

Interfaith romance is a sensitive issue. Most Christian and Muslim families in the occupied territories encourage their children--especially their daughters--to marry within their respective faiths. Couples who challenge this societal norm have encountered considerable societal and familial opposition. For example, there were reports of some Christian women receiving death threats from Christian family members and community leaders for marrying Muslim men during the reporting period.

In October 2004, a yeshiva student spat at the Armenian archbishop of Jerusalem while he was engaged in a religious procession through the Old City. The student was arrested and ordered to remain away from the Old City for 75 days. He also made a formal apology. The Holy See and the country's Chief Rabbinate issued a joint condemnation of the assault at the end of a meeting of Catholic and Jewish officials near Rome shortly after the incident. There have been several other spitting incidents in this reporting period, usually involving Armenian clergy due to their proximity to several Jewish Quarter yeshivas. The Mayor of Jerusalem, the Chief Rabbinate and the heads of several yeshivas have strongly criticized such behavior and punished those involved. The Armenian Patriarchate is satisfied with measures that the GOI, Municipality and yeshivas have taken after these incidents, but believes that more education on tolerance and respect for other religions would be helpful.

A March 2005 dispute over the transfer of property in Jerusalem's Old City owned by the Greek Orthodox Church to Jewish investors ended with senior Orthodox leaders calling for the removal of the Greek Patriarch of Jerusalem, Irineos I. The sale enraged Palestinians, who see the deals as a betrayal of Palestinian parishioners by the mostly-Greek clergy, and fear that such purchases will affect the Palestinian claims on Jerusalem as the capitol of a future Palestinian state. At the end of the period covered by this report, Patriarch Irineos had been ousted from his position by the Orthodox synod of bishops, but had not resigned, claiming that proceedings against him were illegal. Jordan and the Palestinian Authority have rescinded official recognition of Irineos, but at the reporting period's end Israel still recognized him as Patriarch and kept a contingent of Israeli police inside the Greek Orthodox Monastery to protect him.

In general more-established Christian denominations have not welcomed less-established evangelical churches. During the reporting period, settlers from the Hebron area and the southern West Bank severely beat and threatened several international activists, including three from the Christian Peacemaker Teams that escort Palestinian children to school and that protect Palestinian families from settler abuse. While it is unclear whether the attackers' motives stemmed from religious extremism as opposed to ultra-nationalism, the activists feel that local Israeli police did not actively pursue the suspects and oppose the Christian Peacemaker Teams' presence in Palestinian villages.

The strong correlation between religion, ethnicity, and politics in the occupied territories at times imbues the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with a religious dimension. The rhetoric of some Jewish and Muslim religious leaders has been harsher since the outbreak of the Intifada in October 2000.

In previous years, Muslims on the Haram al-Sharif threw stones at Jewish worshippers on the Western Wall plaza, leading to major police confrontations; however, there have not been any recent incidents of stone-throwing at the plaza.

The rhetoric of some Jewish and Muslim religious leaders was harsh and at times constituted an incitement to violence or hatred. For example, the PA-controlled television station broadcast statements by Palestinian political and spiritual leaders that resembled traditional expressions of anti-Semitism, such as Lebanese-produced programming that appeared related to the anti-Semitic forgery "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion." Some prominent Israeli officials also made public anti-Muslim statements. Former Israeli Deputy Defense Minister Ze'ev Boim asked in 2003, "What can explain bloody terrorism? What is the essence of Islam in general and the Palestinians in particular? Is it insufficient cultural development or genetic defects?"

Israeli activists reported numerous examples in which PA television shows invoked messages that activists considered anti-Semitic or that attempted to de-legitimize Jewish history in general. Israeli settler radio stations often depicted Arabs as subhuman and called for Palestinians to be expelled from the West Bank. Right-wing, pro-settler organizations such as Women in Green, and various Hebron-area publications, have published several cartoons that demonize Palestinians. Also, the sermons of some Muslim imams occasionally included anti-Semitic messages, such as a May 13 sermon delivered by Shaykh Ibrahim Mudayris that ran on PA television, in which he compared Jews (in the context of land conflicts) to "a virus, like AIDS."

There were instances of Jewish-nationalist extremists harassing Muslims. On several occasions, a group of Jewish-nationalist extremists known as the "Temple Mount Faithful" again attempted to force their way inside the wall enclosing the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. In addition, the same group periodically attempted to lay a cornerstone for the building of a new Jewish temple that would replace the Islamic Dome of the Rock shrine, an act that Muslims considered an affront.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Consulate General in Jerusalem discusses religious freedom issues with the Palestinians, and the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv discusses religious freedom issues with the Government of Israel as part of its overall policy to promote human rights in the occupied territories. The Consulate General also maintains contacts with representatives of the Jerusalem Waqf--an Islamic trust and charitable organization that owns and manages large amounts of real estate, including the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount in Jerusalem--as well as with the various Christian churches and Jewish communities in Jerusalem. Consulate General officers regularly urged PA officials and religious leaders to end incitement in the Palestinian media and in public statements.

The U.S. Government helped mitigate the delay in granting visas to religious clerics in the occupied territories. The U.S. Consulate General in Jerusalem regularly works with the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv to convey points of concern regarding visa issuance, and U.S. officials regularly meet with religious representatives to ensure that their legitimate grievances are reported and addressed.

The Consulate General investigates allegations of abuses of religious freedom. During the reporting period, the Consulate investigated a range of charges, including allegations of damage to places of worship, allegations of incitement, and allegations concerning access to holy sites. Consulate General officers met with representatives of the Bethlehem Christian community and traveled to the area to investigate charges of mistreatment of Christians by the PA. The Consulate General raised the issue of seizure of Christian-owned land in discussions with PA officials.

Since 2002 the U.S. Government has funded the Israel-Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI) to conduct an evaluation of new Palestinian elementary and high school textbooks, and to develop materials and conduct teacher training to foster tolerance and remove anti-Semitic and prejudicial content from Palestinian classrooms.

In October 2004, a representative from the Office of International Religious Freedom visited Jerusalem and met with Government officials, NGO representatives, Muslim waqf officials, and Christian clergy and religious workers, particularly those negatively impacted by construction of the separation barrier.

In several cases, the Israeli Government agreed to consider changes to the route of the barrier in Jerusalem near several Christian institutions and installed pedestrian gates in the barrier to facilitate the passage of priests and other religious workers. Three of these route changes were formalized by the end of the reporting period.

[1] The religious freedom situation in the Occupied Territories is discussed in the annex appended to this report.

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