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LEBANON 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The constitution declares equality of rights and duties for all citizens without discrimination or preference but establishes a balance of power among the major religious groups. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There was tension among religious groups, attributable in part to competition for political power, and citizens continued to struggle along sectarian lines with the legacy of a 15-year civil war (1975-90). Rising regional tensions, inflamed by the sectarian overtones of the Syrian conflict, were also a source of friction between some religious communities. Places of worship of every religious group continued to exist side by side and relationships among members of different religious groups were generally amicable. Nonetheless, religious group identity was highly significant in most aspects of cultural interaction.

Embassy officials discussed religious freedom and the importance of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect with government officials, religious leaders, and members of civil society. The ambassador and embassy officers met regularly with leaders of religious groups, and integrated religious freedom concerns into public outreach, embassy public diplomacy programs, and U.S. government-funded projects designed to increase inter-religious dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the Beirut-based research firm Statistics Lebanon, the population is approximately 4.3 million. An estimated 27 percent is Sunni Muslim, 27 percent Shia Muslim, 21 percent Maronite Christian, 8 percent Greek Orthodox, 5.6 percent Druze, and 5 percent Greek Catholic, with the remaining 6.5 percent belonging to smaller Christian groups. There are also very small numbers of Jews, Bahais, Buddhists, Hindus, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

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The 18 officially recognized religious groups include four Muslim groups, 12 Christian groups, the Druze, and Judaism. The main branches of Islam practiced are Shia and Sunni. The Alawites and the Ismaili (“Sevener”) Shia order are the smallest Muslim communities. The Maronite community, the largest Christian group, maintains its centuries-long affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church but has its own patriarch, liturgy, and ecclesiastical customs. The second-largest Christian sect is Greek Orthodox. Other Christians are divided among Greek Catholics, Armenian Orthodox (Gregorians), Armenian Catholics, Syriac Orthodox (Jacobites), Syriac Catholics, Assyrians (Nestorians), Chaldeans, Copts, evangelicals (including Baptists and Seventh-day Adventists), and Latins (Roman Catholic). The Druze, who refer to themselves as al-Muwahhideen, or “believers in one God,” are concentrated in the rural, mountainous areas east and south of Beirut.

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

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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

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

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Sunni Muslim, and Shia Muslim, respectively. This distribution of political power operates at both the national and local levels of government.

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

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

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

Although not required by law, religion is generally encoded on national identity cards and noted on "ikhraaj qaid" (official registry) documents. Citizens have the right to remove their religion or change the religion on their identity cards and official registry documents. The government does not require religious affiliation on passports.

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

Formal recognition is a legal requirement for religious groups to conduct most religious activities. A group seeking official recognition must submit a statement of its doctrine and moral principles to the government, which evaluates whether the group's principles are in accord with the government's perception of popular values and the constitution. Alternatively, unrecognized religious groups may apply for recognition through recognized religious groups. In doing so, however, they are not recognized as separate groups, but as part of the group through which they applied. This process has the same requirements as registering through the government. Official recognition conveys certain benefits, such as tax-exempt status and the right to apply the religion's codes to personal status matters.

In most cases the government permits recognized religious groups to administer their own family and personal status laws, such as marriage, divorce, child

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custody, and inheritance. The “Twelver” Shia, Sunni, Christian, and Druze groups have state-appointed, government-subsidized clerical courts to administer family and personal status law.

Unrecognized groups may own property and assemble for worship without government interference; however, they may not perform legally recognized marriage or divorce proceedings, and they have no standing to determine inheritance issues. An individual may change religions if the change is approved by the head of the religious group the person wishes to join.

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

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

The government does not officially recognize some religious groups such as Bahais, Buddhists, Hindus, and unregistered Protestant groups. Members of these groups do not qualify for certain government positions, but they are permitted to perform their religious rites freely. Government records list some members of unregistered religious groups as belonging to recognized religious groups.

The government requires Protestant evangelical churches to register with the Evangelical Synod, a nongovernmental advisory group that represents those churches with the government. It is self-governing and oversees religious matters for Protestant congregations.

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

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Christmas. The government also excuses Armenian public sector employees from work on Saint Vartan Day.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

On September 25, Judge Nadim Zwein reportedly ruled to block Internet access within the country to an amateur anti-Muslim video, after a lawyer filed a complaint. The court determined the video contained several scenes offensive to Muslims. According to media reports, the court asked YouTube, Liveleak, and the Hollywood Reporter Web sites to stop airing the video in the country. Judge Zwein also reportedly ordered the Telecommunications Ministry and Internet providers in the country to cease broadcasting it.

The Ministry of Interior continued to delay validation of the 2008 elections of the Israeli Communal Council. The government did not approve the council's request, repeated over several years, to change its name to the Jewish Community Council.

On October 5, the government banned the Turkish movie "Fetih 1453" from Lebanese theaters because it was reportedly offensive to Orthodox Christians.

The 1989 Taif Agreement called for the eventual elimination of political sectarianism in favor of "expertise and competence" but the government made little progress in that direction. Members of the less represented or "minority" Christian groups, such as Syriac Christians, stated that the government discriminated against them by not appointing a member of their religious group to a ministerial position. While some of their members have served in some high-level civil service positions, such as director general, these groups stated that Maronite and Greek Orthodox individuals filled most positions. These groups further stated that although they estimated their population at 54,000, they were allocated only one representative in parliament.

The Christians and Druze leadership councils nominated candidates for their respective senior clerical posts. In contrast, the government's council of ministers endorsed the nomination of Sunni and Shia muftis and paid their salaries. The government appointed and paid the salaries of Muslim and Druze clerical judges. The government did not pay the salaries of clergy and officials of other religious groups, such as the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic groups.

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Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Hizballah party members directed strong rhetoric against Israel, with which the country remained in a state of war. In a February 16 speech, the Hizballah party secretary general described the “the Zionist scheme” as a threat to the entire region and the cause of “all the agonies of the Palestinian people inside and outside Palestine.” “We must confront and topple it,” he said, “Every resistance fighter in this region, especially in the neighboring countries, is defending the entire nation by resisting the Zionists.”

There are no legal barriers to proselytizing but the clerical establishment strongly discouraged it. On May 7, unknown persons kidnapped a Christian priest at gunpoint in the Bekaa, reportedly because he baptized a Shia woman who fled her home after converting to Christianity. The kidnappers released the priest after several hours. The priest reported that the kidnappers were searching for the woman’s location. Government officials denounced the kidnapping. The Archbishop of Baalbek-Deir al-Ahmar told the press the woman’s father, a Shia cleric, had physically and psychologically tortured her following her conversion to Christianity. Her father told local television that monks and priests “practiced witchcraft and sorcery” on his daughter to bring about her conversion, and accused Christian religious leaders of trying to convert other Shia children in Baalbek. On May 14 the woman was returned to Hizballah Shura Council member Sheikh Mohammad Yazbeck with Archbishop Atallah after her family pledged not to pressure her to convert back to Islam.

There were periodic reports of tension and occasional confrontations among religious groups, exacerbated by political differences, the legacy of the civil war, and the violence in neighboring Syria. The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF) worked together to impose order and end the clashes. In May and October, there were clashes between Sunni and Shia neighborhoods in Beirut; the May violence left two dead and 15 wounded. In October, six people were wounded, following protests over the assassination of ISF Brigadier General Wissam al-Hassan. There was also a series of kidnappings in the north Lebanon region of Akkar in June between Sunni and Alawite villages; local Sunnis accused their Alawite neighbors of complicity in the abduction of one of their residents.

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Conflict between the Alawite residents of Jabal Mohsen and the nearby Sunni district of Bab al-Tabbaneh in north Lebanon continued, with clashes in May, June, August, and December. Press reports put the toll for May clashes at 12 dead and over 100 wounded; 15 killed and over 60 wounded in June; seven killed and more than 100 wounded in August; and four killed and 39 wounded in December. Fighting in August resulted in the destruction of downtown shops and businesses belonging to Alawites in the Sunni neighborhoods of Tripoli. The clashes were primarily political in nature, but both sides made use of religious imagery and slogans; one press report cited photos of those killed being hailed as martyrs and accompanied by the words “our dead are in heaven, yours are in hell.”

Anti-Semitism appeared on the Hizballah mouthpiece *Al-Manar* and was espoused by some journalists, academics, and religious leaders in other non-Lebanese media outlets. Examples of anti-Semitism included honoring a Holocaust denier and blaming Jews for the events of September 11, 2001, and for the production of an amateur anti-Islam video. In February Sheikh Bassam Al-Kayed, head of the Palestinian Islamic Scholars Association in Lebanon, stated: “The Jew is a Satan in human form...They violate all international laws, all human norms, and all Islamic and man-made laws....They violate all values. They are deterred by nothing but force.” On May 7, Lebanese author Jihad Fadhl claimed that Hitler's actions against the Jews in the Holocaust were a response to their “immoral and arrogant” behavior.

There were reports of vandalism of churches around the country. On September 13, in Zalka, Mount Lebanon, the Lebanese Catholic Media Center said that the Holy Cross Armenian Catholic Church was vandalized. No one claimed responsibility.

On September 14, one person was killed and more than 20 were injured, including 12 security personnel, when protestors attempted to storm the Tripoli government building and torched Kentucky Fried Chicken and Hardees restaurants in Tripoli, in protest over an amateur anti-Muslim video. Media reported protestors also shouted slogans against Pope Benedict's visit to Lebanon. The video triggered nation-wide condemnation from both Christian and Muslim religious leaders. Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah convened a week of protests against the video.

On November 11, clashes erupted between supporters of Sunni cleric Ahmed al-Assir and Hizballah (Shia) supporters in the southern city of Sidon, killing three and wounding seven others. The fighting broke out after Shia religious banners were raised in Sidon to mark Ashura, an annual 10-day Shia mourning period.

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom and the importance of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect with government officials, religious leaders, and members of civil society. The embassy advanced this goal through contacts at all levels of society, public remarks, and embassy public diplomacy programs. The embassy also funded projects designed to increase inter-religious dialogue and decrease societal tensions over sectarian issues.

The ambassador and embassy officers met regularly with leaders of religious groups and discussed matters related to religious freedom and mutual respect. In the context of the Arab Spring, in its contacts with religious and political leaders and through public outreach programs, the embassy emphasized the principle that governments must protect the universal human rights of citizens of all communities and faiths. The ambassador and embassy officers also worked with local religious and community leaders to insulate the country from the violence in Syria (including sectarian tensions) and to support transition to a Syrian government that respects the rights of all minorities. The U.S. government supported the principles of the Taif Agreement, and embassy staff regularly discussed the issue of sectarianism with political, religious, and civic leaders.