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## Lebanon

### International Religious Freedom Report 2003

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there are some restrictions.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Discrimination based on religion is built into the system of government. The Government subsidizes all religions and all religious judges receive monthly salaries from the Government.

Citizens still struggle with the legacy of a 15-year civil war fought along religious lines. There are periodic reports of friction between religious groups; however, it frequently is difficult to distinguish between political and religious differences. There are no legal barriers to proselytizing; however, traditional attitudes and edicts of the clerical establishment discourage such activity.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 4,035 square miles, and its population is approximately 4 million; however, because the matter of religious balance remains such a sensitive political issue, a national census has not been conducted since 1932, before the founding of the modern State. Consequently there is an absence of accurate data on the relative percentages of the population of the major religions and groups. Most observers believe that Muslims, at approximately 70 percent of the population, make up the majority, but do not represent a homogenous group. There also are a variety of other religious groups, primarily Christian denominations, which constitute approximately 23 percent of the population, as well as a small Jewish population. There are also some very small numbers of Baha'is, Buddhists, and Hindus in the country.

There are 18 officially recognized religious groups. Their ecclesiastical and demographic patterns are extremely complex. Divisions and rivalries between groups date back as far as 15 centuries, and still are a factor. The pattern of settlement has changed little since the seventh century, although there has been a steady numerical decline in the number of Christians compared to Muslims. The main branches of Islam are Shi'a and Sunni. Since the Eleventh century, there has been a sizable Druze presence, concentrated in rural, mountainous areas east and south of Beirut. The smallest Muslim minorities are the Alawites and the Ismaili ("Sevener") Shi'a order. The "Twelver" Shi'a, Sunni, and Druze each have state-appointed clerical bodies to administer family and personal status law through their own religious courts, which the Government subsidizes. The Maronites are the largest of the Christian groups. They have had a long and continuous association with the Roman Catholic Church, but have their own patriarch, liturgy, and customs. The second largest Christian group is the Greek Orthodox Church (composed of ethnic Arabs who maintain a Greek-language liturgy). The remainder of the Christians are divided among Greek Catholics, Armenian Orthodox (Gregorians), Armenian Catholics, Syrian Orthodox (Jacobites), Syrian Catholics, Assyrians (Nestorians), Chaldeans, Copts, evangelicals (including Protestant groups such as the Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Friends), and Latins (Roman Catholic).

There are a number of foreign missionaries operating in the country, primarily from Catholic and evangelical Christian churches.

Many persons fleeing alleged religious mistreatment and discrimination in neighboring states reside in the country, including Kurds, Shi'a, and Chaldeans from Iraq and Coptic Christians from Egypt and Sudan.

## Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there are some restrictions. The Constitution provides for the free exercise of all religious rites with the caveat that public order not be disturbed. The Constitution also provides that the personal status and religious interests of the population be respected. The Government permits recognized religions to exercise authority over matters pertaining to personal status such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. There is no state religion; however, politics are based on the principle of religious representation, which has been applied to every conceivable aspect of public life. The unwritten "National Pact" of 1943 stipulates that the President, the Prime Minister, and the Speaker of Parliament be a Maronite Christian, a Sunni Muslim, and a Shi'a Muslim, respectively. The 1989 Taif Accord, which ended the country's 15-year civil war, reaffirmed this arrangement but resulted in increased Muslim representation in Parliament and reduced the power of the Maronite President.

State recognition is a legal requirement for religious groups to conduct certain religious practice. A group that seeks official recognition must submit its dogma and moral principles for government review to ensure that such principles do not contradict popular values and the Constitution. The group must ensure that the number of its adherents is sufficient to maintain its continuity.

Alternatively, religious groups may apply to obtain recognition through existing religious groups. Official recognition conveys certain benefits, such as tax-exempt status and the right to apply the religion's codes to personal status matters. An individual may change religions if the head of the religious group the person wishes to join approves of this change.

In November 2002, the Ministry of Interior notified the "Israelite Communal Council" that the Ministry had been informed about the election of a new board for the Council. This step renewed official government recognition of the Council as the body representing the Jewish community in the country. The Council has been an officially recognized sect in the country since 1926 and has approximately 60 followers. The Government's last official recognition of the Council was in 1985.

Citizens belonging to a faith not recognized by the Government can perform their religious rites freely. However, given the confessional nature of the political system, their political rights are not secured. For example, a Baha'i cannot run for Parliament because there is not a seat allocated for this confession, neither can he/she secure a senior position in the Government as these seats are also allocated on a confessional basis. However, a number of religious faiths are recorded in the country under the existing recognized religions. For example, most Baha'i are registered under the Shi'a sect and thus Baha'i can run for office under a Shi'a seat. Similarly, Mormons are registered under the Greek Orthodox faith. Decisions on granting official recognition of religious groups do not appear to be arbitrary; in recent years, the Government has recognized such groups as the Alawites and the Copts.

The Government allows private religious education. In 2002 Muslim and Christian clergy finalized a set of unified religious education material to be used in public schools. However, the materials have not yet been included in school curricula.

The Government permits publishing of religious materials in different languages.

The Government promotes interfaith understanding by supporting a committee on Islamic-Christian dialog, which is co-chaired by a Muslim and a Christian, and includes representatives of the major religious groups. Leading religious figures who promote Islamic-Christian dialog and ecumenism are encouraged to visit and are received by government officials at the highest levels. Clerics play a leading role in many ecumenical movements worldwide. For example, the Armenian Orthodox Patriarch, Aram I, is the moderator for the World Council of Churches. The Imam Musa Sadr Foundation also has played a role in fostering the ecumenical message of Musa Sadr, a Shi'a cleric who disappeared in Libya in 1978. UNESCO funded a \$10,000 project for the publication of a book on Christian-Islamic understanding in the country. The book was authored by 16 Muslim and Christian scholars and has been available on the local market since August 2002.

The following religious holidays are considered national holidays: Christmas, Good Friday, Easter (for both Western and Eastern rites), St. Maroun Day, All Saints Day, Feast of the Assumption, New Year, Eid al-Adha, the Muslim New Year, the Prophet Mohammed's birthday, Eid al-Fitr, and Ashura. During the period covered by this report, the Government also announced Armenian Christmas as an official holiday and excuses from work public sector employees of the Armenian churches on St. Vartan Day.

### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

The 1989 Taif Accord called for the ultimate abolition of political sectarianism in favor of "expertise and competence." However, little substantive progress has been made in this regard. Christians and Muslims are represented equally in the Parliament, the Cabinet, and first category civil service positions. First category civil service positions include the ranks of Secretary General and Director General. One notable exception is the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), which, through universal conscription and an emphasis on professionalism, has significantly reduced the role of confessionalism in that organization. Seats in the Parliament and Cabinet, and posts in the civil service, are distributed proportionally among the 18 recognized groups.

Officially unrecognized groups such as Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and some evangelical denominations may own property and assemble for worship without government interference; however, they legally may not marry, divorce, or inherit in the country. Protestant evangelical churches are required to register with the Evangelical Synod, which represents those churches to the Government. Representatives of some churches have complained that the Synod has refused to accept new members since 1975, thereby crippling their clergy's ability to administer to communities in accordance with their beliefs.

Many families have relatives who belong to different religious communities, and intermarriage is not uncommon; however, intermarriage may be difficult to arrange in practice between members of some groups because there are no procedures for civil marriage. However, the Government recognizes civil ceremonies performed outside the country.

There are no legal barriers to proselytizing; however, traditional attitudes and edicts of the clerical establishment strongly discourage such activity. There were reports that members of the Maronite Christian community in Kesirwan, with the knowledge of local clergy, occasionally harassed verbally church leaders and persons who attend an officially unrecognized Protestant evangelical church.

The Government does not require citizens' religious affiliations to be indicated on their passports; however, the Government requires that religious affiliation be encoded on national identity cards.

Religious groups administer their own family and personal status laws (see Section II). Many of these laws discriminate against women. For example, Sunni inheritance law provides a son twice the inheritance of a daughter. Although Muslim men may divorce easily, Muslim women may do so only with the concurrence of their husbands.

Article 473 of the Penal Code stipulates that one who "blasphemes God publicly" may face imprisonment for up to 1 year. There were no prosecutions reported under this law during the period covered by this report.

#### *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.

#### **Section III. Societal Attitudes**

Despite the years of conflict and civil strife, tolerance and consensus among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. The Sunni and Shiite religious and political leaderships generally have maintained amicable relations in spite of the various political differences and their differences have not resulted in conflict or violence. Most of the issues at stake concern political or development issues and each party/confession seeks to mobilize as much popular support as possible to obtain its goals. The same applies to other religious communities in the country.

There were some incidents during the period covered by this report of violence against religious persons and buildings. In May a bomb exploded outside the home of a Western Christian missionary in Tripoli, North Lebanon killing one person.

In December 2002, a bomb blast destroyed a mosque and shrine in the east near the border with Syria but injured no one. A 110 pound explosive charge was planted on the mosque grounds in the town of Anjar, home to a large Armenian community. Local residents say a Muslim charitable endowment that owns the mosque grounds had been involved in long-running disputes with local people over land ownership in the area. Authorities are investigating the attack on the shrine, which is estimated to date back 800 years and was a popular pilgrimage site for Sunni Muslims. Local Muslim clerics severely criticized the attack, which occurred as Muslims prepared for the 'Eid al-Fitr feast marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan.

Also in December 2002, a Sunni army conscript shot a Christian conscript. The security forces chased the culprit and killed him in an exchange of gunfire. Security forces arrested one Sunni cleric and charged him

