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2019 REPORT ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: LEBANON

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution states there shall be “absolute freedom of conscience” and guarantees the free exercise of religious rites for all religious groups provided they do not disturb the public order. The constitution also states there shall be a “just and equitable balance” in the apportionment of cabinet and high-level civil service positions among the major religious groups, a provision amended by the Taif Agreement, which ended the country’s civil war and mandated proportional representation between Christians and Muslims in parliament, the cabinet, and other senior government positions. Media reported on June 21 that the Hadath municipality prohibited Christian residents from renting or selling property to Muslims. According to Human Rights Watch, some municipal governments in largely Christian cities have, since 2016, forcibly evicted mostly Muslim Syrian refugees and expelled them from localities. The Internal Security Forces (ISF) summoned a senior member of the Jewish Community Council for interrogation concerning the identities of visitors to synagogues and cemeteries during the summer months. Authorities banned a Brazilian metal band, Sepultura, from entering the country after its members were accused of being “devil worshippers,” according to concert organizers. Organizers also said the band was denied entry due to cultural perceptions that metal music is “satanic” and “anti-religion.” Some members of unregistered religious groups, such as Baha’is and nonrecognized Protestant faiths, continued to list themselves as belonging to recognized religious groups to ensure their marriage and other personal status documents remained legally valid. While then minister of interior Raya al-Hassan and several other political figures vocalized support for optional civil marriage, at least 30 applications for interreligious civil marriage remained pending following the government’s continuation of the halt on their registration in the face of criticism, particularly by religious leaders.

Hizballah, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, continued to exercise control over some territory, particularly the southern suburbs of Beirut and southern areas of the country, both of which are predominantly Shia Muslim.

Organizers of the Byblos International Festival canceled a planned August 9 concert by internationally known indie rock band Mashrou’ Leila, citing the need “to avoid bloodshed.” Political and religious figures, as well as many private citizens, criticized the band for a four-year-old post on Facebook of a controversial image that transposed the face of pop diva Madonna onto an image of the Virgin Mary. The Maronite Eparchy of Byblos accused the group of “offend[ing] religious and human values and insult[ing] Christian beliefs,” while figures ranging from members of parliament (MPs) to private citizens threatened violence. In a December incident, during months of political protests reportedly driven by the country’s economic and political problems, hundreds of Shia protesters demonstrated in Beirut after a video produced by a Sunni individual appeared on social media insulting Shia political and religious figures. A prominent Sunni imam said the posting did not represent the views of the Sunni community. The author of the video later apologized for posting it. The Jewish Community Council reported acts of vandalism, including dumping of trash and rubble, at Jewish cemeteries in Beirut and Sidon. Muslim and Christian community leaders said relationships among individual members of different religious groups continued to be amicable. On July 30, an interreligious spiritual summit convened in Beirut at the House of Druze Communities; senior religious leaders from the Muslim, Christian, and Druze communities attended the event.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officers engaged government officials to encourage tolerance, dialogue, and mutual respect among religious communities and to highlight the importance of combating violent religious extremism. The Ambassador met on March 7 with a group of religious leaders in Tripoli to discuss relations

among the different communities. Embassy public outreach and assistance programs continued to emphasize tolerance for all religious groups, including through interfaith exchange programs.

SECTION I. RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.8 million (midyear 2019 estimate). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other organizations estimate the total population includes 4.5 million citizens and an estimated 1.3 million refugees fleeing the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, the vast majority of whom are Syrian, as well as a Palestinian refugee population present in the country for nearly 70 years.

Statistics Lebanon, an independent firm, estimates 67.6 percent of the citizen population is Muslim (31.9 percent Sunni, 31 percent Shia, and small percentages of Alawites and Ismailis). Statistics Lebanon estimates 32.4 percent of the population is Christian. Maronite Catholics are the largest Christian group, followed by Greek Orthodox. Other Christian groups include Greek Catholics (Melkites), Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, Assyrians, Chaldean Catholics, Copts, Protestants (including Presbyterians, Baptists, and Seventh-Day Adventists), Roman (Latin) Catholics, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ).

According to Statistics Lebanon, 4.52 percent of the population is Druze, concentrated in the rural, mountainous areas east and south of Beirut. There are also small numbers of Jews, Baha'is, Buddhists, and Hindus. The Jewish Community Council, which represents the country's Jewish community, estimates 70 Jews reside in the country.

UNHCR estimates there are 1.3 million refugees from Syria in the country, mainly Sunni Muslims, but also Shia Muslims, Christians, and Druze. United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) estimates there are between 250,000 and 280,000 Palestinians living in the country as UN-registered refugees in 12 camps and surrounding areas. They are mostly the descendants of refugees who entered the country in the 1940s and 1950s and are mostly Sunni Muslims but also include Christians.

UNHCR states there are approximately 14,000 UNHCR-registered Iraqi refugees in the country. Refugees and foreign migrants from Iraq include mostly Sunni Kurds, Sunni and Shia Muslims, and Chaldeans. There were also Coptic Christians from Egypt and Sudan. According to the secretary-general of the Syriac League, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that advocates for Syriac Christians in the country, approximately 10,000 Iraqi Christians of all denominations and 3,000 to 4,000 Coptic Christians reside in the country. According to the same NGO, the majority of Iraqi Christian refugees are not registered with UNHCR and so are not included in their count.

SECTION II. STATUS OF GOVERNMENT RESPECT FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Legal Framework

The constitution states there shall be "absolute freedom of conscience" and declares the state will respect all religious groups and denominations, as well as the personal status and religious interests of persons of every religious group. The constitution guarantees free exercise of religious rites, provided they do not disturb the public order, and declares the equality of rights and duties for all citizens without discrimination or preference.

By law, an individual is free to convert to a different religion if a local senior official of the religious group the person wishes to join approves the change. The newly joined religious group issues a document confirming the convert's new religion, allowing the convert to register her or his new religion with the Ministry of Interior's (MOI's) Personal Status Directorate. The new religion is included thereafter on government-issued civil registration documents.

Citizens have the right to remove the customary notation of their religion from government-issued civil registration documents or change how it is listed. Changing the documents does not require approval of religious officials.

The penal code stipulates a maximum prison term of one year for anyone convicted of “blaspheming God publicly.” It does not provide a definition of what this entails.

The penal code criminalizes defamation and contempt for religion and stipulates a maximum prison term of three years for either of these offenses.

By law, religious groups may apply to the government for official recognition. To do so, a religious group must submit a statement of its doctrine and moral principles to the cabinet, which evaluates whether the group’s principles are in accord with the government’s perception of popular values and the constitution. Alternatively, a nonrecognized religious group may apply for recognition by seeking affiliation with another recognized religious group. In doing so, the nonrecognized group does not gain recognition as a separate group but becomes an affiliate of the group through which it applies. This process has the same requirements as applying for recognition directly with the government.

There are 18 officially recognized religious groups. According to the government, these include five Muslim groups (Shia, Sunni, Druze, Alawite, and Ismaili), 12 Christian groups (Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Assyrian, Chaldean, Copt, evangelical Protestant, and Roman Catholic), and Jews. Groups the government does not recognize include Baha’is, Buddhists, Hindus, several Protestant groups, and the Church of Jesus Christ.

Official recognition of a religious group allows baptisms and marriages performed by the group to receive government recognition, which also conveys other benefits, such as tax-exempt status and the right to apply the religious group’s codes to personal status matters. By law, the government permits recognized religious groups to administer their own rules on family and personal status issues, including marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Shia, Sunni, recognized Christian, and Druze groups have state-appointed, government-subsidized clerical courts to administer family and personal status law. While the religious courts and religious laws are legally bound to comply with the provisions of the constitution, the Court of Cassation, the highest civil court in the judicial system, has very limited oversight of religious court proceedings and decisions.

There are no formalized procedures for civil marriage or divorce. The government recognizes civil marriage ceremonies performed outside the country irrespective of the religious affiliation of each partner in the marriage. While some Christian and Muslim religious authorities will perform interreligious marriages, clerics, priests, or religious courts often require the nonbelonging partner to pledge to raise his or her children in the religion of the partner and/or to relinquish certain rights, such as inheritance or custody claims, in the case of divorce.

Nonrecognized religious groups may own property, assemble for worship, and perform religious rites freely. They may not perform legally recognized marriage or divorce proceedings and they have no standing to determine inheritance issues. Given agreements in the country’s confessional system that designate percentages of senior government positions, and in some cases specific positions, for the recognized religious confessions, members of nonrecognized groups have no opportunity to occupy certain government positions, including cabinet, parliamentary, secretary-general, and director general positions.

The government requires Protestant churches to register with the Evangelical Synod, a self-governing advisory group overseeing religious matters for Protestant congregations and representing those churches to the government.

The law allows censorship of religious publications under a number of conditions, including if the government deems the material incites sectarian discord or threatens national security.

According to the constitution, recognized religious communities may operate their own schools, provided they follow the general rules issued for public schools, which stipulate schools must not incite sectarian discord or threaten national security. The government permits but does not require religious education in public schools. Both Christian and Muslim local religious representatives sometimes host educational sessions in public schools.

The constitution states “sectarian groups” shall be represented in a “just and equitable balance” in the cabinet and high-level civil service positions, which includes the ministry ranks of secretary-general and director general. It also states these posts shall be distributed proportionately among the major religious groups. This distribution of positions among religious groups is based on the unwritten 1943 National Pact, which used religious affiliation data from the 1932 census (the last conducted in the country.) According to the pact, the president shall be a Maronite Christian, the speaker of parliament shall be a Shia Muslim, and the prime minister shall be a Sunni Muslim. This proportional distribution also applies to high-level positions in the civil service, the judiciary, military and security institutions, and public agencies at both the national and local levels of government. Parliament is elected on the basis of “equality between Christians and Muslims,” and cabinet positions must be allocated on the same basis. Druze and sometimes Alawites are included in this allocation with the Muslim communities.

The constitution also states there is no legitimacy for any authorities that contradict the “pact of communal existence,” thereby giving force of law to the unwritten 1943 National Pact, although that agreement is neither an official component of the constitution nor a formally binding agreement.

The Taif Agreement, which ended the country’s 15-year civil war in 1989, also mandates elections based on the principle of proportional representation between Muslims and Christians in parliament, but resetting the Christian and Muslim allocation at 50 percent each. The agreement also amended powers of the Maronite Christian presidency and Sunni Muslim prime minister, reducing constitutional powers of the president and increasing those of the prime minister, while also subjecting the designation of the prime minister to binding consultations with parliament and the designations of all ministers to a parliamentary vote of confidence.

In addition, the Taif Agreement endorses the constitutional provision of appointing most senior government officials according to religious affiliation, including senior positions within the military and other security forces. Customarily, a Christian heads the army, while the directors general of the ISF and the Directorate of General Security (DGS) are Sunni and Shia, respectively. Several other top positions in the security services are customarily designated for particular confessions as well. While specific positions are designated by custom rather than law, deviating from custom is rare and any change or accommodation generally must be mutually agreed by the confessions concerned.

The Taif Agreement mandates a cabinet with seats allocated equally between Christians and Muslims (which includes Druze and sometimes Alawites)

The Taif Agreement’s stipulations on equality of representation among members of different confessions do not apply to citizens who do not list a religious affiliation on their national registration, and thus they cannot hold a seat designated for a specific confession.

By law, the synod of each Christian group elects its patriarchs; the Sunni and Shia electoral bodies elect their respective senior clerics; and the Druze community elects its *sheikh al-aql*, its most senior religious leader. The government’s Council of Ministers must endorse the nomination of Sunni and Shia muftis, as well as the *sheikh al-aql*, and pay their salaries. The government also appoints and pays the salaries of Muslim and Druze clerical judges. By law, the government does not endorse Christian patriarchs and does not pay the salaries of Christian clergy and officials of Christian groups.

The government issues foreign religious workers a one-month visa; to stay longer a worker must complete a residency application during the month. Religious workers also must sign a “commitment of responsibility” form before receiving a visa, which subjects the worker to legal prosecution and immediate deportation for any activity involving religious or other criticism directed against the state or any other country, except Israel. If the government finds an individual engaging in religious activity while on a tourist visa, the government may determine a violation of the visa category has occurred and deport the individual.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

On June 21, there were media reports that the Hadath municipality, on the outskirts of Beirut’s southern suburbs, prohibited Christians from renting or selling property to Muslims, and local residents and politicians raised

concerns of discrimination based on religion. Head of the municipality George Aoun defended his decision and said the ban was instituted in 2010, has been enforced since then, and was intended to preserve the composition of each village or town. He added the decision encouraged coexistence. Aoun said that before the civil war, Hadath was purely Christian but that since then, so many Muslims had moved to the community that they made up 60 percent of its residents. Then minister of interior Raya al-Hassan said she considered this ban to be unconstitutional and promoted sectarian division.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) continued to report that, since 2016, some municipal governments in largely Christian cities forcibly evicted mostly Muslim Syrian refugees from their homes and expelled them to other locations in the country. The HRW report stated religious affiliation was among several reasons for the evictions. Most of those interviewed by HRW said their eviction were due, in part, to their religious identity. According to UNHCR, the municipalities identified as being involved in forcibly evicting and expelling Syrian refugees were predominantly Christian. While many of those interviewed by NGOs continued to state that their eviction was due in part to their religious identities, monthly community tension reports prepared jointly by the UN Development Program (UNDP) and UNHCR along with NGO and implementing partners using population survey data from UNDP did not identify religious discrimination as the key driver of tension between refugees and host communities. NGOs and international organizations, including UNDP, UNHCR, and other UN agencies, also reported that perceptions of competition for jobs, resources, and land were the predominant factors driving refugee evictions, along with security concerns and the country's history with Syria.

According to the ISF and the Jewish Community Council, the ISF Information Branch summoned senior Jewish Community Council member Semaria Bihar on September 18 for questioning concerning the number of visitors to Beirut's synagogues and cemeteries over the summer months. Authorities released Bihar the same day but kept his phone overnight.

The government continued to enforce laws against defamation and contempt for religion. For the fourth year in a row, however, there was no judicial action on the lawsuit filed in 2015 by MP Ziad Aswad of the Free Patriotic Movement against "You Stink" activist Assad Thebian, who was accused of "defamation and contempt of religion" for comments he made about Christianity.

On October 31, press reported DGS censored a caricature of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei published in the French weekly *Courrier International*. DGS covered the caricature with a sticker before allowing the publication to enter Lebanon. DGS reviewed all films and plays, and there were complaints by civil society activists that DGS's decision-making process lacked transparency and that the opinions of religious institutions and political groups influenced it.

On April 19, a promoter of rock concerts in the country issued a press release stating authorities banned a Brazilian metal band, Sepultura, from entering the country after members of the band were accused of being "devil worshippers." Organizers, who were only informed of the ban and not allowed to see the government's official ban order circulated within the government, provided a media statement saying the band was denied entry due to cultural perceptions that metal music is "satanic" and "anti-religion."

According to local NGOs, some members of unregistered religious groups, such as Baha'is and members of nonrecognized Protestant faiths, continued to list themselves as belonging to recognized religious groups in government records to ensure their marriage and other personal status documents remained legally valid. Many Baha'is said they chose to list themselves as Shia Muslims in order to effectively manage civil matters officially administered by Shia institutions, while members of the Church of Jesus Christ said they registered as evangelical Protestant.

The government again failed to take action to approve a request from the Jewish community to change its official name to the Jewish Community Council from the Israeli Communal Council (the group's officially recognized name). Additionally, the Jewish community faced difficulty importing material for religious rites; customs agents were reportedly wary of allowing imports of any origin containing Hebrew script given a national ban on trade of Israeli goods.

Non-Maronite Christian groups reiterated criticisms made following May 2018 parliamentary elections that the government had made little progress toward the Taif Agreement's goal of eliminating political sectarianism in favor of "expertise and competence." Members of these groups, which include Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholics,

and Chaldeans, among others, said the fact that the government allotted them only one of the 64 Christian seats in parliament, constituted government discrimination. The Syriac League continued to call for more representation for non-Maronite and non-Greek Orthodox Christians in cabinet positions, parliament, and high-level civil service positions, typically held by members of the larger Christian religious groups. During protests that sprang up across the country beginning on October 17, some of the protesters, religious figures and politicians began calling for an electoral law that was not based on religious affiliation.

Similarly, some women's rights advocates among protesters highlighted the absence of a civil code governing issues of personal status and objected to the country's reliance on gender-discriminatory family codes adjudicated solely by religious courts.

Members of all confessions may serve in the military, intelligence, and security services. While most confessions had members serving in these capacities, some groups did not do so, usually because of their small number of adherents in the country. Members of the largest recognized confessions dominated the ranks of senior positions.

During Ramadan, the prime minister designated an official delegation, including a medical team that accompanied pilgrims going on Hajj to assist them in administrative and medical matters.

During the July 16-18 Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington, then foreign Minister Gebran Bassil praised the country's confessional system as a stronghold of religious freedom, saying "no minority feels unsafe or threatened by the majority, and no confession fears violation of rights." He said his presence at the ministerial was a "manifestation of his deepest conviction and the attachment of his country to religious freedom, to protect minorities, and to preserve diversity in the Middle East."

Speaking on the issue of civil marriage, then minister of interior Raya al-Hassan stated during a February 15 television interview that she "will try to open the door to a serious and deep dialogue on this issue with all religious and other authorities ... until civil marriage is recognized." Al-Hassan's remarks elicited support from some political figures including Walid Jumblatt, the leader of the predominantly Druze Progressive Socialist Party. Her remarks drew strong opposition from religious figures. According to NGO representatives, civil society figures cautiously engaged both Christian and Muslim leaders throughout the year to assuage fears that civil marriage would pose a threat to religious leaders' ability to administer their own confessional affairs. During the year, the MOI took no action on the 30 or more cases of civil marriage that awaited registration with the ministry since 2013.

On December 15, Beirut Governor Ziad Chehib, with the permission of the Beirut Municipality and Department of Antiquities, ordered the removal of a sculpture in downtown Beirut because of the statue's resemblance to the Star of David, the symbol of Judaism. Created by a British artist and installed in 2018, the sculpture was formed of three large metal squares interlocked to form a cube shape, and from above appeared as the Star of David. The gallery that organized the installation said the piece had nothing to do with Israel, but it was nonetheless removed to "avoid any clashes."

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Hizballah, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, continued to exercise control over some territory, particularly the southern suburbs of Beirut and southern areas of the country, both of which are predominantly Shia Muslim. There, it provided a number of basic services, such as health care, education, food aid, infrastructure repair, and internal security. There continued to be reports of Hizballah controlling access to the neighborhoods and localities under its control, including in Beirut's southern suburbs and areas of the Bekaa Valley and South Lebanon.

On August 23, Moustapha Nourredine, the owner of a restaurant in the village of Bourj Qalaway in the southern region of Bint Jbeil, canceled a planned performance by the Ktir Salbeh Show, a traveling comedy troupe. Media blamed cancellation on external pressure from Hizballah, exerted because of the sexual content of the group's jokes and the attire of the female actresses. Nourredine also cited "sharia restrictions" and his request that female actress Dolly Helou not perform as the reasons for the cancellation, and he said the show was canceled due to poor ticket sales.

SECTION III. STATUS OF SOCIETAL RESPECT FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

On July 30, organizers of the Byblos International Festival canceled a planned August 9 concert by internationally recognized indie rock band Mashrou' Leila, citing the need "to avoid bloodshed." Mashrou' Leila publicly supported LGBTQ rights and regularly sang about subjects such as sectarianism and corruption. Political and religious figures, as well as many private citizens, strongly criticized the band for a four-year-old post on Facebook of a controversial image that transposed the face of pop diva Madonna onto an image of the Virgin Mary. The Maronite Eparchy of Byblos accused the group of "offend[ing] religious and human values and insult[ing] Christian beliefs," while figures ranging from MPs to private citizens threatened violence. Following a six-hour interrogation by security officials, band members met with religious authorities in an attempt to resolve the issue, and the band removed the contested image from social media. Local and international human rights activists, as well as many members of the public, characterized criticisms of the band as an assault on freedom of speech and artistic creativity, calling on the public to play the group's music in protest.

In December, during months of protests driven by the country's economic and political problems, hundreds of Shia protesters in one incident demonstrated in Beirut, throwing rocks and fireworks at police and soldiers, after a video appeared on social media insulting Shia political and religious figures, including the speaker of the parliament and the leader of Hizballah. Police used tear gas and water cannons to disperse the crowd. The video showed a Sunni individual from the northern city of Tripoli, Samer al-Saydawi, cursing Shia, their leaders, and their religious figures. A prominent Sunni imam criticized the posting and said it did not represent the views of the Sunni community. Saydawi, who lived abroad at year's end, later released a second video, apologizing for his previous message.

On May 16, the country's top political and religious leaders, as well as foreign dignitaries and representatives, attended the state funeral of Maronite Patriarch Cardinal Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir. Sunni Grand Mufti Abdel Latif Deryan described Sfeir as "a role model for moderation, openness, wisdom, dialogue, love, and coexistence between Muslims and Christians."

On January 15, Rabbi Alex Goldberg met with Tripoli Mufti Malek Chaar. Mufti Chaar issued a statement afterwards saying the meeting resulted from an appointment request made by the Association of Dialogue for Reconciliation and Life. Mufti Chaar received a foreign delegation from 12 countries comprising 27 persons from different religions.

Following issuance of a permit to the Jewish Community Council to restore the Sidon cemetery in 2018 after acts of vandalism, the council did not begin any restoration during the year. The council's 2011 lawsuit against individuals who constructed buildings in the Jewish cemetery in Tripoli continued, pending additional court-ordered analysis of the site, and was unresolved by year's end. Once again, the Jewish Community Council reported acts of vandalism, including dumping of trash and rubble, at Jewish cemeteries in Beirut and Sidon. Despite the council submitting a formal complaint to the municipality of Beirut, no substantial progress was made regarding preventing construction debris and other garbage from being dumped in the Beirut Jewish cemetery.

Religious leaders stated relationships among individual members of different religious groups remained amicable, demonstrated by continued participation by Christian and Muslim religious leaders in interfaith dialogues. On July 30, an interreligious spiritual summit sponsored by Sheikh al-Aql Naim Hassan convened in Beirut at the House of Druze Communities. Senior religious leaders from the Muslim, Christian, and Druze communities attended. The religious leaders gathered at the summit in an attempt to restore calm following an increase in intra-Druze tensions. Summit participants issued a joint communique stating national unity represented an indispensable guarantee to build a better future for the country, and coexistence among the different components of the population must be preserved from any threat connected to the resurgence of sectarian impulses and conflicts.

At year's end, approximately 70 percent of students attended private schools, which despite many having ties to confessional groups, often were open to children of other religious groups as well.

Local pluralism and religious freedom NGO Adyan Foundation initiated a project funded by the government of Denmark, titled “Women, Religions and Human Rights in Lebanon.” The project’s stated long-term objective was to end discrimination against women through reforms that would amend the country’s laws by altering or ending the role played by religious communities and their courts over personal status issues.

A November report published by Arab Barometer, an international research consortium, showed personal piety in the country declined dramatically in the past decade: only 24 percent of the population described themselves as religious compared with 44 percent in 2010. In addition, those attending religious services weekly dropped by 21 percentage points from 2007 to 2018; the country’s population also experienced a 28 percentage point drop in those reading or listening to religious texts. Despite these reported changes, intolerance toward members of other religions rose: 20 percent of those polled stated they would not like neighbors of a different religious group, an increase of 16 percentage points since 2010. Support for religion in the public sphere increased, with Shia and Druze being somewhat more likely than Christians to favor incorporating religion into politics; however, 71 percent said religious leaders should not influence voters, a 20-point decline since 2010.

SECTION IV. U.S. GOVERNMENT POLICY AND ENGAGEMENT

The Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to engage government officials on the need to encourage tolerance, dialogue, and mutual respect among religious groups.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers frequently met with individual politicians representing different religious groups to discuss their views, including on relations with other religious groups, and to promote religious tolerance.

The Ambassador met on multiple occasions with the leadership of the Sunni, Shia, Druze, and Christian communities to promote interfaith dialogue and urge them to take steps to counter violent extremism. Embassy officers often met with civil society representatives to convey similar messages.

The Ambassador met on March 7 with a group of religious leaders in Tripoli, including the Mufti of Tripoli Sheikh Dr. Malek Chaar, Greek Orthodox Bishop of Tripoli Afram Keryakos, and Maronite Bishop of Tripoli Georges Abou Jaoude, to discuss relationships among the different communities. The group praised U.S. assistance in the region and highlighted the positive impact that their close working relationship had on relationships among the different religious communities in Tripoli.

In March embassy officials met with Chaldean Bishop Michel Kassarji to explore opportunities for enhanced engagement and to identify steps to improve the eparchy’s communication and cooperation in provision of assistance from international agencies, including UNHCR. This was a continuation of 2018 meetings among Iraqi Christian refugees, Chaldean Church officials, and UNHCR, which stemmed from complaints of religious-based discrimination in the provision of services to refugees that were assessed by the U.S. Agency for International Development as unfounded. In May following embassy outreach to minority refugee communities, the World Food Program (WFP) added a significant number of beneficiaries to its U.S.-funded food program. More than 2,300 Iraqi and other non-Syrian refugee households comprising approximately 8,900 refugees (primarily religious minorities) began receiving \$27 per month through a card that could be used to purchase food at WFP-approved grocery stores.

The embassy continued for the ninth consecutive year to fund and manage a scholarship program at the American University of Beirut and the Lebanese American University that brings together religiously and geographically diverse students to increase their understanding of religious diversity. Each scholarship includes full tuition, up to one year of intensive English courses, housing or transportation expenses, a monthly stipend, books, medical insurance, and a laptop. Nearly 140 religiously diverse students from 70 high schools, including 20 percent from UNRWA schools, participated during the year. Students from a variety of religious backgrounds also collaborated to develop and lead community service projects serving geographically and religiously diverse communities across the country as part of a project that directly served more than 4,000 high school students since 2007.

For the ninth consecutive year, the embassy selected five students between the ages of 18 and 25 to participate in a five-week visitor exchange program at Temple University, where they learned about religious pluralism in the United States, visited places of worship, and participated in related cultural activities.