

Document #2011170

USDOS – US Department of State

2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Israel

Executive Summary

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This section includes Israel, including Jerusalem. In December 2017, the United States recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. It is the position of the United States that the specific boundaries of Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem are subject to final status negotiations between the parties. The Palestinian Authority (PA) exercises no authority over Jerusalem. In March 2019, the United States recognized Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. A report on the West Bank and Gaza, including areas subject to the jurisdiction of the PA, is appended at the end of this report.

The country's laws and Supreme Court rulings protect the freedoms of conscience, faith, religion, and worship, regardless of an individual's religious affiliation, and the 1992 “Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty” protects additional individual rights. Citing a need to anchor the country's Jewish character in a basic law, on June 19, the Knesset passed the “Basic Law: Israel – The Nation State of the Jewish People.” According to the government, the “law determines, among other things, that the Land of Israel is the historical homeland of the Jewish people; the State of Israel is the nation state of the Jewish People, in which it realizes its natural, cultural, religious and historical right to self-determination; and exercising the right to national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish People.” Druze leaders, other non-Jewish minorities, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) criticized the new law for not mentioning the principle of equality to prevent harm to the rights of minorities. Supporters said it was necessary to balance the 1992 basic law and restate the country's identity as a Jewish and democratic state, noting the Supreme Court had already interpreted the 1992 law as mandating equality. The government continued to control access to religious sites, including the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. Some Members of the Knesset (MKs) and civil society organizations called for reversing the practice of banning non-Muslim prayer at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif (the foundation of the first and second Jewish temples) and the Haram al-Sharif (site containing the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque), based on post-1967 status quo understandings. Police closed the

Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif for several hours on July 27, following clashes with Muslim protesters. The government permitted persons of all faiths to pray individually and quietly at the main Western Wall plaza in separate gender sections, and Jewish men to conduct Orthodox Jewish prayer in groups. The government continued, however, to enforce a prohibition on performance of “a religious ceremony that is not in accordance with the customs of the place, which harms the feelings of the public towards the place,” which authorities interpreted to include mixed gender Jewish prayer services and other ceremonies that did not conform to Orthodox Judaism. The government continued to implement policies based on Orthodox Jewish interpretations of religious law. Following an appeal by the State Attorney’s office, the Supreme Court added 18 months to a four-year sentence for Yinon Reuveni, who vandalized a church in Tabgha in 2015. In June police officers injured an Ethiopian monk while evicting him and other monks from their church in Jerusalem, and in October police arrested a Coptic monk and removed others from the Deir al-Sultan monastery on the roof of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem after they refused to allow the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) to enter and perform restoration work. Some minority religious groups complained of what they said was lack of police interest in investigating attacks on members of their communities. The government maintained its policy of not accepting new applications for official recognition from religious groups, but members of nonrecognized religious groups remained free to practice their religion. Tension continued between the ultra-Orthodox community, police, and other Israelis, particularly related to service in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), resulting in clashes such as those on March 22 between ultra-Orthodox protesters and police. On December 2, the Supreme Court granted the Knesset (parliament) an extension into 2019 to pass legislation regulating ultra-Orthodox military service.

Some Jews continued to oppose missionary activity directed at Jews, saying it amounted to religious harassment, and reacted with hostility toward Jewish converts to Christianity. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported in February an unknown man pepper-sprayed two Jehovah’s Witnesses in Ashdod. According to the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, in October vandals damaged tombs and broke crosses at the cemetery of the Salesian Monastery at Beit Jimal near Beit Shemesh, the third attack on the monastery in three years. Following the attack, the Israeli government offered to pay for repairs.

Visiting high-level U.S. government officials, including the Vice President, met with government officials, religious groups, and civil society leaders to stress the importance of tolerance and dialogue and ways to reduce religiously motivated violence. Senior U.S. officials spoke publicly about the importance of maintaining the status quo at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. In meetings with government officials and public speeches, embassy officers stressed the importance of religious freedom and respect for all religious groups. Embassy-supported initiatives focused on interreligious dialogue and community development and advocated for a shared society for Jewish and Arab populations. Embassy officials participated in religious events organized by Jewish, Muslim, Druze, Christian, and Baha’i groups to show U.S. support for religious pluralism.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 8.4 million (July 2018 estimate), including residents and citizens. According to the country's Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) classification system, approximately 75 percent of the population is Jewish, 18 percent Muslim, 2 percent Christian, and 1.6 percent Druze. The remaining 4 percent consists of those the CBS classifies as “other” – mostly persons, including many immigrants from the former Soviet Union, who identify themselves as Jewish but do not satisfy the Orthodox Jewish definition of “Jewish” the government uses for civil procedures – as well as relatively small communities of Samaritans, Karaites, Ahmadi Muslims, Seventh-day Adventists, Messianic Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, and members of the Baha'i Faith. The majority of non-Jewish citizens are of Arab origin. This includes approximately 78 percent of the country's 175,000 Christians, according to the CBS, as of December. Non-Arab Christians are mainly those who emigrated from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s as descendants of Jews or alongside Jewish family members, and their descendants.

According to a poll by the local NGO Hiddush published in September, 58 percent of Jewish citizens do not affiliate with any religious stream, 17 percent are “Zionist Orthodox,” 12 percent “ultra-Orthodox” (including 2 percent “Zionist ultra-Orthodox”), 7 percent “Reform,” and 6 percent “Conservative.”

Muslim, Druze, and Christian communities are located in the Galilee region, some of which are homogenous; others feature a mix of these groups. There are also dozens of Muslim-majority communities in the Negev. In addition to an Alawite community in Ghajar, there are several Druze communities in the Golan Heights.

The CBS estimates 546,100 Jews, 328,600 Muslims, and 15,900 Christians live in Jerusalem, accounting for approximately 99 percent of the city's total population of 901,300, as of September.

According to government and NGO data, as of October, foreign workers included approximately 113,000 documented foreign workers in the caregiving, agriculture, and construction sectors, including a few thousand in the “skilled worker” category and 39,000 who arrived under bilateral work agreements; 100,000 documented Palestinian workers; 40,000 undocumented Palestinian workers; and 100,000 were undocumented workers, mostly from countries of the former Soviet Union, who remained in the country after overstaying a visa-free entry or a work visa. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, there are approximately 31,000 African migrants and asylum seekers residing in the country, in addition to children born in the country to those migrants. Foreign workers and migrants included Protestants, Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims. According to the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Catholics among the foreign worker population included 30,000 Filipinos, 8,000 Indians, 2,000 Sri Lankans, 2,500 Colombians, and 1,100 workers from South American countries.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

Although the country has no constitution, the unicameral 120-member Knesset enacted a series of “Basic Laws” that enumerate fundamental rights, which it states will become the country’s constitutional foundation. The “Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty” describes the country as a “Jewish and democratic state” and references the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, which protects freedom to practice or not practice religious beliefs, including freedom of conscience, faith, religion, and worship, regardless of an individual’s religion. The law incorporates religious freedom provisions of international human rights covenants into the country’s body of domestic law. Authorities subject non-Israeli residents to the same laws it applies to Israeli citizens. Detention of Palestinians on security grounds falls under military jurisdiction as applied by Israel to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (see “West Bank and Gaza” section), even if detained inside Israel.

On June 19, the Knesset passed a new basic law referred to as the “Nation State Law.” The new law changed the status of Arabic from an official language, a standing it held since Israel adopted then prevailing British Mandate law in 1948, to a language with a “special status.” The law also recognized only the Jewish People as having a national right of self-determination and called for promotion of “Jewish settlement” within Israel.

On April 30, the Knesset passed a law recommending – but not requiring – that judges use Jewish jurisprudence and heritage as a source of legal principles in cases in which there is no relevant legislation or judicial precedents.

The Chief Rabbinate retains the authority to issue certificates of conversion to Judaism within the country under Orthodox interpretations of Jewish law. The Council of the Chief Rabbinate consists of Orthodox rabbis chosen by an assembly of rabbis, local government leaders, government ministers, and laypersons appointed by the government.

The government provides funding for both Orthodox and non-Orthodox conversion programs. Relatives of Jewish converts may not receive residency rights, except for the children of male or female converts born after the parent’s conversion was complete.

The law recognizes Judaism, Christianity, Islam, the Druze Faith, and the Baha’i Faith. Christian religious communities recognized according to the adopted Ottoman *millet* (court) system include: Eastern Orthodox, Latin (Roman Catholic), Gregorian-Armenian, Armenian Catholic, Syrian Catholic, Chaldean (Chaldean Uniate Catholic), Greek Catholic Melkite, Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, and Evangelical Episcopal. The Anglican and Baha’i communities are recognized through a British Mandate-era law adopted by the government. The government does not recognize other religious communities, including major Protestant denominations with a presence in the country, as distinct ethnoreligious communities. There are two legal pathways to formal recognition, according to laws adopted from the British Mandate period: by petitioning either the Prime Minister’s Office according to the Order in Council or the Ministry of Interior (MOI). Groups may appeal rejected applications to the Supreme Court.

Recognized religious communities are exempt from taxation of places of worship and may have separate courts to apply their religion's personal status law. Municipalities may levy property taxes on religious properties not used for prayer, such as monasteries, pilgrim hostels, and soup kitchens.

Legislation establishes religious councils for Jewish communities and for the Druze. The Ministry of Religious Services (MRS) has jurisdiction over the country's 133 Jewish religious councils, which oversee the provision of religious services for Jewish communities. The government finances approximately 40 percent of the religious councils' budgets, and local municipalities fund the remainder. The MOI Department of Non-Jewish Affairs has jurisdiction over religious matters concerning non-Jewish groups and oversees the religious council for the Druze. The Department of Non-Jewish Affairs convenes an interreligious council of all recognized religions, including Judaism, which serves as a discussion forum for recognized religious communities.

The law criminalizes the damage, destruction, or desecration of religious sites (subject to seven years' imprisonment) and actions to "harm the freedom of access" of worshippers to religious sites (subject to five years' imprisonment). Certain religious sites considered antiquities receive further protection under the antiquities law. The Ministry of Tourism (MOT) is responsible for the protection and upkeep of selected non-Jewish religious sites, while the MRS protects and maintains selected Jewish religious sites. The law also provides for up to five years' imprisonment for actions "likely to violate the feelings of the members of the different religions" with regard to their religious sites. The law grants the government, not the courts, the authority to decide the scope of the right to worship at certain religious sites.

The law criminalizes willfully and unjustly disturbing any meeting of persons lawfully assembled for religious worship or assaulting someone at such a meeting. It also criminalizes intentionally destroying, damaging, or desecrating any object held sacred by any group of persons, with punishment of up to three years' imprisonment.

The law criminalizes calling for, praising, supporting, or encouraging acts of violence or terrorism where such actions are likely to lead to violence, including calls for violence against religious groups. The law criminalizes statements demeaning, degrading, or showing violence toward someone based on race, but provides an exception for statements citing a religious source, unless there is proof of intent to incite racism.

The law requires citizens to obtain a permit from the MOI or the Prime Minister for travel to "hostile" countries, including Saudi Arabia, which is the destination for those participating in the Hajj. Illegal travel is punishable by a prison sentence or fine if the traveler does not request prior approval.

It is illegal to proselytize to a person under 18 years of age without the consent of both parents. The law prohibits offering a material benefit in the course of proselytizing.

The government provides separate public schools for Jewish children, conducted in Hebrew, and Arab children, conducted in Arabic. For Jewish children there are separate public schools available for religious and secular families. Individual families may choose a public school system for their children regardless of ethnicity or religious observance. Minors have the right to choose a public secular school instead of a religious school regardless of parental preference. By law, the state provides the equivalent of public school funding to two systems of “recognized but not official” (a form of semi-private) ultra-Orthodox religious schools, the United Torah Judaism-affiliated Independent Education System and the Shas-affiliated Fountain of Torah Education System. Churches, however, receive only partial government funding to operate “recognized but not official” schools. Palestinian residents of Jerusalem may send their children to one of these church schools or a private school operated by the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf; both include religious instruction. Israeli education authorities use the PA curriculum in some public schools in Jerusalem. Religious education is part of the PA curriculum for students in grades one through six in these schools, with separate courses on religion for Muslims and Christians. Students may choose which class to take but may not opt out of religion courses.

The law provides the right for any Jew, including those who converted to Judaism, or any child or grandchild of a Jew, to immigrate to the country from a foreign country with his or her spouse and children. The minor children of a grandchild of a Jew receive humanitarian status, but are not automatically granted citizenship. Non-Jews who are not descendants of Jews do not have this route to immigration. Under the Law of Return, those who completed an Orthodox conversion inside or outside the country are entitled to immigration, citizenship, and registration as Jews in the civil population registry. Those who completed conversion to Judaism outside the country, regardless of affiliation, are eligible for these benefits even if they are not recognized as Jewish by the Chief Rabbinate; this would include Reform, Conservative, and other affiliations of Judaism. Descendants of Jews qualify for immigration under the Law of Return regardless of the religious beliefs under which they were raised. The law considers those who were eligible for immigration and as adults converted to another religion, including Messianic Judaism, as no longer eligible for benefits under the Law of Return.

The 2003 Law of Citizenship and Entry, renewed annually, prohibits residence status for non-Jewish Iranians, Iraqis, Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians from the West Bank or Gaza, including those who are spouses of Israeli residents or citizens, unless the MOI makes a special determination, usually on humanitarian grounds.

The Chief Rabbinate determines who may be buried in Jewish state cemeteries, limiting this right to individuals considered Jewish by Orthodox Jewish standards. The law provides for the right of any individual to burial in a civil ceremony, and requires the government to establish civil cemeteries in various areas around the country. The law criminalizes the intentional desecration of, or trespass on, places of burial, which is punishable by three years’ imprisonment.

Laws inherited from the Ottoman Empire and British Mandate periods establish the legal authority of religious courts operated by officially recognized religious communities over their members in matters of marriage, divorce, and burial. The law

allows for civil registration of two persons as a married couple outside of the religious court system only if they married outside the country, or if the partners are of different religions and their respective religious courts do not object to a civil registration, or if both partners are listed as “lacking religion” in the population registry. A law mandating women’s equality contains language that explicitly exempts matters of marriage, divorce, and appointments to religious positions.

The only domestic marriages with legal standing and that may be registered are those performed according to the religious statutes of recognized religious communities. Members of nonrecognized groups may process their personal status documents, including marriage licenses, through the authorities of one of the recognized religious communities if those authorities agree.

The law imposes a two-year prison sentence for persons who conduct, or are married in, a Jewish wedding or divorce outside the Chief Rabbinate’s authority.

Religious courts have exclusive jurisdiction over divorce cases when the husband and wife are registered with the same recognized religion. Members of religious groups not permitting divorce, such as Catholics, may not obtain a divorce. Paternity cases among Muslim citizens are the exclusive jurisdiction of sharia courts. Civil courts have jurisdiction over personal status cases when religious courts lack jurisdiction, as in cases of interfaith and same-sex couples.

Matters stemming from divorce proceedings, including alimony, child support, child custody, guardianship, and property division, are under parallel jurisdiction of both religious courts and civil courts. The first court to receive a case acquires exclusive jurisdiction over it.

In accordance with *halacha* (Jewish religious law), a Jewish woman whose husband refuses to give her a *get* (Jewish legal writ of divorce) may not legally remarry in the country. While a rabbinical court may order a husband to give a *get*, it does not have the power to terminate the marriage if he refuses. In such cases, rabbinical courts may impose community-based punishments on the husband, including avoiding financial dealings with a *get*-refuser, excluding him from community activities, and advertising these decisions to the public. On June 25, the Knesset passed a law allowing rabbinical courts to hear cases of *get* refusals in which the spouses are not Israeli citizens, if certain other conditions are met (for instance, if the couple live abroad in a location where there is no rabbinical court).

Secular courts have primary jurisdiction over questions of inheritance, but parties may file such cases in religious courts by mutual agreement. Decisions by these bodies are subject to Supreme Court review. The rabbinical courts, when exercising their power in civil matters, apply religious law, which varies from civil law, including in matters relating to the property rights of widows and daughters.

Military service is compulsory for Jewish citizens, male Druze citizens, and male Circassian citizens (Muslims originally from the northwestern Caucasus region who migrated in the late 19th century). Orthodox Jewish women and Arab Christian and Muslim citizens remain exempt from mandatory military service, although they may voluntarily enlist.

Membership in a recognized religion is recorded in the National Registry and generally passed from parents to children, unless a person changes it through a formal conversion to another recognized religion. Approximately 400,000 citizens who identify as Jewish but do not meet the Chief Rabbinate’s criteria as “Jewish” under Jewish religious law, as well as members of religious groups that are not recognized, are recorded as “lacking religion.” The vast majority are immigrants from the former Soviet Union and their children, who gained citizenship under the Law of Return but are not recognized as Jewish by the Chief Rabbinate because they cannot prove they meet the Orthodox definition of Jewish through matrilineal descent. All citizens who meet the Chief Rabbinate’s criteria as “Jewish” are recorded as Jewish, whether Orthodox or not (unless they convert to another religion). Of the approximately 30,000 immigrants who arrived to Israel during the year, 17,700 of them did not qualify as Jewish under the Chief Rabbinate’s criteria, according to a press report citing CBS data.

For those who did not wish to be identified with a religion, there was no mechanism to change one’s registration to “lacking religion.”

Religious identification is listed in the National Registry but not on official identity cards.

There is no legal requirement regarding personal observance or nonobservance of the Jewish Sabbath (Shabbat), from sunset on Fridays until sunset on Saturdays, and on Jewish holidays. The law, however, declares in the context of labor rights that Shabbat and Jewish holidays are national days of rest, while permitting non-Jewish workers alternate days of rest. The law criminalizes those who open their businesses and employ Jews on Shabbat but not workers, except those who are self-employed. There are exceptions for essential infrastructure and the hospitality, culture, and recreation industries. On June 18, the Knesset passed a law prohibiting hiring discrimination against workers who refuse to work on their day of rest, based on their religion and regardless of whether they are religiously observant. The law takes effect on January 1, 2019. An existing law instructs the labor and welfare minister to take into account “Israel’s tradition,” among other factors, when considering whether to approve permits to work on Shabbat.

On January 8, following 2013 and 2017 court rulings permitting municipalities to legislate bylaws allowing commercial activity on Shabbat, the Knesset passed a law granting the minister of interior wider discretion to approve or reject bylaws on this matter.

The law states public transportation may not operate on Shabbat, with exceptions for vehicles bringing passengers to hospitals, remote localities, and non-Jewish localities, and for vehicles essential to public security or maintaining public transportation services. *Halacha* prohibits the use of motorized vehicles on Shabbat, except in emergencies.

The Chief Rabbinate has sole legal authority to issue certificates of *kashrut*, which certify a restaurant's adherence to Jewish dietary laws. Alternatively, restaurants are permitted to display “a true presentation regarding the standards it observes and the manner of supervising their observance” without using the word *kashrut*.

The Mufti of Jerusalem issued “fatwas” (religious edicts) prohibiting Palestinian participation in Jerusalem municipal elections, and sales of land by Palestinians to the Israelis.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights with a reservation stating that matters of personal status are governed by the religious law of the parties concerned, and the country reserves the right to apply that religious law when inconsistent with its obligations under the Covenant.

Government Practices

On July 27, Muslim protestors threw rocks and fireworks at Israeli police officers near the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. According to the government, violent acts and danger to Israeli security forces forced police to “use appropriate means to scatter the riots” and keep the peace and the public safety. Police closed the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif for several hours. These clashes led to the arrest of more than 20 individuals and injuries to four police officers, according to media reports.

Following an investigation for more than one year, State Attorney Shai Nitzan announced on May 1 he was closing, without charges, the government's investigation into a January 2017 incident in which a police officer and a Muslim citizen died during a police action to demolish homes in the unrecognized Bedouin village of Umm al-Hiran. Nitzan wrote he decided not to bring criminal charges against police officers after concluding police shot Abu al-Qian because they feared for their lives; however, he recommended disciplinary action against some officers due to “professional mistakes,” according to media reports. In votes on May 9 and June 13, the Knesset rejected a proposal by MK Taleb Abu Arar, one of three Bedouins in the Knesset, to establish a Knesset inquiry into the events and all subsequent investigations leading up to Nitzan's decision. The Arab legal rights organization Adalah stated the decision was evidence of “whitewashing” and that the government treated Arab citizens' lives as unequal to those of Jewish citizens.

On August 16, following an appeal by the State Attorney's office, the Supreme Court added 18 months to a four-year sentence for Yinon Reuveni, who burned and vandalized a large section of the Church of the Multiplication in Tabgha in 2015.

On April 4 in Jerusalem, two police officers reportedly hit an ultra-Orthodox man with a mental disability on the head after he briefly stopped in the road and waved his hands while walking with a group of ultra-Orthodox protesters toward a demonstration, according to the NGO Public Committee Against Torture in Israel.

On November 22, the Jerusalem District Court acquitted Jerusalem police officer Gil Zaken of charges he choked and hit in the head an ultra-Orthodox demonstrator in 2016.

Christian clergy in Jerusalem said police officers treated them with unnecessary force on two occasions. First, in June an Ethiopian monk sustained injuries from police officers when they were evicting him and other monks from their church. According to media reports, police had suspected the monks of trespassing because they did not provide identification cards. Second, on October 24, police physically removed several Coptic monks from outside a chapel in the Deir al-Sultan monastery on the roof of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, arresting one of them when the monks refused to allow the IAA to enter and perform restoration work. The government stated the injured monk's refusal to obey police instructions left police with no choice but to remove him, using necessary and appropriate physical force. Ownership of the monastery remained the subject of an ongoing dispute between the Coptic and Ethiopian churches.

On August 13, police arrested a senior official in the Chief Rabbinate for allegedly accepting a bribe to expedite issuance of *kashrut* certificates. A 2017 report from the state comptroller called for comprehensive reform of the *kashrut* regulation system and criticized the MRS, Chief Rabbinate, and local religious councils for structural failures that enabled fraud, waste, poor supervision, and nepotism.

On July 6, a court ordered the head of the banned Northern Islamic Movement, Sheikh Raed Salah, released to house arrest. In 2017, police had arrested him on suspicion of incitement and supporting the activities of an illegal organization.

Some religious minority groups complained of lack of police interest in investigating attacks on members of their communities. Data from the NGO Tag Meir and media reports indicated in recent years authorities had indicted few suspects in attacks on religious sites in the country.

On July 19, police in Haifa briefly detained and questioned Conservative Rabbi Dov Hayun on suspicion he conducted Jewish marriage ceremonies outside of the Chief Rabbinate's authority. The attorney general subsequently instructed police to stop investigating the rabbi before they had determined “whether his actions raise suspicion of a criminal offense.” As of year's end, police had not taken any further action against the rabbi.

According to data from the MRS, out of 70,326 individuals who registered for a Jewish marriage in 2018, rabbinical courts instructed 3,996 who self-identified as Jewish to prove their Jewish lineage. Of these, 122 were unsuccessful.

Prior to marriage, the Chief Rabbinate required Jewish women to complete bridal counseling sessions. Existing instructions from the Chief Rabbinate required these sessions address only the wedding ceremony, but in practice the content varied widely and often included marital relations and “family purity” in accordance with *halacha*, according to a report in *Ma’ariv* newspaper. Neither *halacha* nor civil law mandated such counselling sessions, according to the NGO ITIM.

On May 3, the rabbinical courts, which are government institutions, reported they had issued nine arrest warrants against men who refused to give a *get* and succeeded in securing 216 *gets* from intransigent husbands in 2017. In a speech to new rabbinical court judges on October 15, Sephardi Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef urged them to “have the courage to render judgment” in cases of *get* refusal, stating, “Do whatever is necessary to make sure a divorce is granted.”

Ultra-Orthodox parties continued to block legislative changes to the status quo regarding issues of *halacha* and state, which opponents said perpetuated practices that infringed on religious freedom. For example, on November 21, the Knesset defeated a bill to allow limited public transportation on Shabbat for municipalities that so chose. Bus cooperatives, however, continued to operate lines on Shabbat in several cities.

The Chief Rabbinate continued not to recognize as Jewish some citizens who self-identified as Jewish, including Reform and Conservative converts to Judaism and others who could not prove Jewish matrilineage. As a result, the government prohibited those individuals from accessing official Jewish marriage, divorce, and burial services in the country. Some Orthodox and non-Orthodox rabbis, however, officiated at a growing number of these ceremonies outside of the Chief Rabbinate. Likewise, the government continued not to allow Jewish men with priestly patrilineage (*kohanim*) to marry converts or divorcees, in accordance with *halacha*.

On October 29, the Supreme Court ordered Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked to explain, within 60 days, why the government had not held a disciplinary hearing for Chief Rabbi of Safed Shmuel Eliyahu, a government employee. This order followed a 2016 petition to the Supreme Court by the Israel Religious Action Center, Tag Meir, and other NGOs to initiate disciplinary hearings against Eliyahu, alleging he made a series of racist and offensive statements against Arabs, Druze, women, and the LGBTI community. The government did not hold a disciplinary hearing for Eliyahu by the end of the year, and the case was ongoing.

The government continued to control access to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. The post-1967 status quo pertaining to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif allows non-Muslim visitors but prohibits non-Islamic worship on the compound, despite the fact that no law or published policy prohibits non-Islamic prayer there. The Jordanian Government Islamic Religious Endowment (Waqf) in Jerusalem maintained the Al-Aqsa Mosque, while the Jordanian Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Holy Places supported maintenance and salary of the Waqf staff in Jerusalem. The 1994 peace agreement between Israel and Jordan recognized Jordan’s “special role” in relation to Muslim holy

sites in Jerusalem. Supporters of the status quo stated that, while not perfect, the post-1967 arrangement allowed the holy sites to be open to visitors from all faiths for the first time in Jerusalem’s millennia-old history.

Israeli police continued to be responsible for security, with police officers stationed both inside the site and outside each entrance. Israeli police conducted routine patrols on the outdoor plaza and inside buildings on the site and regulated pedestrian traffic exiting and entering the site. Israeli police continued to maintain exclusive control of the Mughrabi Gate entrance, the entrance through which non-Muslims may enter the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, and allowed visitors through the gate during set visiting hours; however, police sometimes restricted this access due to security concerns. Israeli police maintained checkpoints outside other gates to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, preventing non-Muslims from entering these other areas, but they did not coordinate with Waqf guards inside. Some Jewish groups performed religious acts such as prayers and prostration on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif despite the ban on non-Muslim prayer. NGOs, media, and Jewish Temple Mount advocacy groups continued to report that changes in relations between police and the Temple Mount advocacy movement created a more permissive environment for non-Muslim religious acts on the site. In response, the government reiterated that non-Muslim prayer was not allowed on the grounds of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif.

Israeli authorities in some instances barred specific individuals from the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site, including Jewish activists believed to have violated the status quo understanding prohibiting non-Muslim prayer, Muslims believed to have verbally harassed or acted violently against non-Muslim visitors to the site, and public figures, including MKs, whose presence authorities feared would inflame tensions. The government stated that police have no specific policy regarding barring individuals from entering, but police respond both to intelligence information they receive in advance as well as events that unfolding on the ground, without distinguishing between Muslim and non-Muslim visitors. The government added it was rare for any individual to be barred entry to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site. Police continued to screen non-Muslims for religious articles. Police allowed Jewish male visitors who were visibly wearing a *kippah* (head covering) and *tzitzit* (fringes), and those who wished to enter the site barefoot (in accordance with interpretations of *halacha*) to enter the site with police escort.

The Waqf continued to restrict non-Muslims who visited the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif from entering the Dome of the Rock and other buildings dedicated for Islamic worship, including the Al-Qibli/Al-Aqsa Mosque. It also lodged objections with Israeli police concerning non-Muslim visitors wearing religious symbols or religious clothing. Israeli police sometimes acted upon these objections.

Waqf officials repeated previous years’ complaints over their lack of control of access to the site. Waqf officials stated Israeli police did not coordinate with the Waqf on decisions regarding entry and barring of Muslim and non-Muslim visitors to the site. Waqf employees remained stationed inside each gate and on the plaza, but Waqf officials said they were able to exercise only a limited oversight role. The Waqf reportedly objected to non-Muslims praying or performing religious acts on the site and

to individuals who dressed immodestly or caused disturbances, but they lacked authority to remove such persons from the site. The government stated that most of the time, police and the Waqf worked in full coordination, including regular joint sessions regarding routine activities.

On August 20, the Supreme Court ordered the government to respond within 60 days to a petition by the NGO Moked Israeli Center for the Advancement of Democracy and Protection of Human Rights, which objected to a sign near the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif discouraging non-Muslim visitors from entering the site. The court later granted government requests to extend the deadline for a response into 2019.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu again reiterated his support for the post-1967 status quo understandings at holy sites in Jerusalem, including in a statement following his meeting with King Abdullah II of Jordan on June 18. Many Jewish leaders, including the government-appointed Rabbi of the Western Wall, continued to say Jewish law prohibited Jews from entering the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif for reasons of ritual purity. Some MKs, however, including members of the governing coalition, called for reversing the policy of banning non-Muslim prayer at the site to provide equal religious freedom for all visitors. Some government coalition Knesset members continued to call on the Israeli government to implement time-based division at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif to set aside certain days or hours for Jewish access and/or worship, similar to the arrangement used at the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. MK Yehuda Glick and other members of the Temple Mount movement continued to advocate for reversing the status quo prohibition on non-Muslim prayer at the site, describing it as a restriction on religious freedom.

In accordance with previously instituted practices, Israeli police announced a temporary closure of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif to non-Muslim visitors during the last 10 days of Ramadan; however, the police permitted non-Muslim visits to the site during the first two days of this period. The government stated that each year police assess the security situation and decide whether it is necessary to close the site to non-Muslims during this period, “in order to allow for a proper course of prayer for Muslim worshipers during Ramadan.” In July Prime Minister Netanyahu rescinded his 2015 blanket prohibition of MKs and ministers visiting the site and allowed these officials to visit once a month, after obtaining approval of the Chairman of the Knesset and according to police security assessments.

The Waqf expressed its continued concern over calls by some Jewish activists to build a third Jewish temple on the site, as well as increased numbers of visits by Jews whom the Waqf described as Jewish “Temple Mount activists.” The Waqf also objected to increased attempts by activists to pray on the site or conduct other religious activity on the site in violation of the status quo. Waqf officials also stated Israeli police restricted the Waqf’s administration of the site by prohibiting building and infrastructure repairs. For example, police prevented the Waqf from carrying out repairs without advance approval and oversight from the IAA and refused to permit the entry of most maintenance equipment onto the site, according to the Waqf. The government stated maintenance of the site was supervised by police and coordinated in advance, adding that larger scale renovations required approval and supervision by the IAA and of a

ministerial committee to ensure the site is properly preserved and no archeological findings are destroyed or covered by the renovators. In August Israeli authorities briefly detained four Waqf employees attempting to carry out repairs, but they subsequently permitted the repairs.

Waqf officials reported Israeli police on occasion detained Waqf employees (typically guards) or expelled them from the site and from the vicinity of visiting non-Muslim groups. The government stated that on some occasions, Waqf employees with suspected connections to terrorist organizations, such as Hamas and Shabab al-Aqsa, instigated “provocations,” which police handled either by issuing a directive limiting the proximity of the Waqf employees to visiting Jewish groups, or in extreme cases, removing them from the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif.

The Temple Mount Sifting Project and other group and individuals criticized the Waqf for the “destruction of the heritage of Jews as well as Christians and Muslims” for moving soil, stones, and artifacts from dirt mounds in the courtyard the Waqf had previously dug up during controversial excavations. According to a media report, the mixed pile of dirt had limited archaeological value because it was already out of its original archeological strata; however, artifacts in the dirt could be of historical value.

On March 26, for the first time, authorities allowed Temple Mount activists to conduct a ritual slaughter of sheep for Passover in the Davidson Center Archaeological Park, below the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif.

At the main Western Wall plaza, the place of worship nearest Judaism’s holiest site, the government continued to permit persons of all faiths to pray individually and quietly and Jewish men to conduct Orthodox Jewish prayer in groups, with separation of women and men. The government, however, continued to prohibit at the main plaza the performance of “a religious ceremony that is not in accordance with the customs of the place, which harms the feelings of the public towards the place.” Authorities interpreted this prohibition to include mixed-gender Jewish prayer services and other ceremonies not conforming to Orthodox Judaism.

Members of the Jewish Conservative and Reform movements continued to criticize gender segregation and rules governing how women may pray at the Western Wall. Authorities continued to prohibit visitors from bringing private Torah scrolls to the main Western Wall plaza and women from accessing the public Torah scrolls or giving priestly blessings at the site. Authorities, however, permitted women to pray with *tefillin* and prayer shawls pursuant to a 2013 Jerusalem District Court ruling stating it was illegal to arrest or fine them for such actions.

Police continued to allow the group Women of the Wall to enter the women’s area of the main Western Wall plaza for its monthly service. In June, following a request from the police and the government-sponsored Western Wall Heritage Foundation, the Attorney General’s Office ruled the Women of the Wall must hold their monthly service in a barricaded area in the women’s section, which police set up on a side of the women’s section not touching the Western Wall. Representatives of Women of the Wall complained of a lack of effort by police or ushers from the Western Wall Heritage

Foundation, which administers the Western Wall site, to intervene when ultra-Orthodox women and men disrupted their monthly prayer service with screaming, whistling, and pushing. In response, the government stated that large numbers of Israeli police, ushers, and security personnel maintained order on occasions when Women of the Wall prayed there. Women of the Wall filed a petition to the Supreme Court in March 2017 to require ushers and police to prevent disruption to their services. The case was ongoing as of the end of the year.

Authorities continued to allow use of a temporary platform south of the Mughrabi ramp and adjacent to the Western Wall, but not visible from the main Western Wall plaza, for non-Orthodox egalitarian (mixed gender) Jewish prayers. Authorities designated the platform for members of the Conservative and Reform movements of Judaism, including for religious ceremonies such as bar and bat mitzvahs. In response to an ongoing Supreme Court case from 2013 on the issue of prayer access at the Western Wall, the government stated in January it intended to upgrade the egalitarian prayer space. In June 2017, the government “froze” a 2016 agreement with non-Orthodox Jewish groups that offered symbolic recognition to the Conservative and Reform Judaism movements in addition to upgrading the egalitarian prayer space. The non-Orthodox Jewish movements stated that upgrading the prayer space alone would not fulfill the agreement. In August a special government committee approved expansion of the platform through a fast-track planning process. The court case was ongoing as of the end of the year.

On May 13, the government allocated 200 million shekels (\$53.35 million) to the MOT for the planning and establishment of a cable car from the First Station cultural complex in Jerusalem to the Dung Gate of the Old City. The plan included building a roof over a Karaite cemetery under the path of the cable car to resolve Orthodox Jewish concerns about use of the cable car by Jewish men with priestly patrilineage (*kohanim*), for whom it is halachically forbidden to contract ritual impurity by “sheltering” over a corpse. The Karaite community objected to the plan, saying building a roof over the cemetery would render it ritually impure according to Karaite beliefs, preventing further use of the cemetery.

The security barrier dividing most of the West Bank from Israel also divided some Palestinian communities in Jerusalem, affecting access to places of worship. The Israeli government previously stated the barrier was highly effective in preventing attacks in Israel.

Several groups, including religious minorities and human rights NGOs, criticized the July passage of the new Nation State Law. The law called for promoting “Jewish settlement,” which non-Jewish organizations and leaders said they feared would lead to increased discrimination in housing and land issues. Druze leaders decried the law for relegating what they termed a loyal minority that serves in the military to second-class-citizen status. Opponents, including the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, also criticized the law for failing to mention the principle of equality in order to prevent harm to the rights of non-Jewish minorities. Supporters stated it was necessary to anchor the country’s Jewish character in a basic law to balance the 1992 Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty, which anchored the country’s democratic character with protection of individual rights,

noting the Supreme Court had already interpreted the 1992 law as mandating equality. According to press reports, on August 4, a demonstration in Tel Aviv comprised of approximately 90,000 members of the Druze community and Jewish supporters protested the law. A week later, press reported that 30,000 Arab citizen protestors and their Jewish supporters also took part in a protest against the law in Tel Aviv. Political leaders conceded the need to address the criticisms of the Druze community. As of the end of the year, multiple lawsuits challenging the Nation State Law were pending with the Supreme Court.

On May 5, the government announced it had begun recruiting women as legal advisors in rabbinical courts, following a petition to the Supreme Court by ITIM and Bar Ilan University's Rackman Center for the Advancement of the Status of Women. In 2017, the Rabbinical Courts Administration named a female deputy director-general for the first time. Because only men may become rabbis under Orthodox interpretations of Jewish law, there were no female judges in rabbinical courts, although some women have acted as rabbinic pleaders (equivalent to lawyers) since 1995.

The MOI continued to rely on the sole discretion and approval of the Jewish Agency, a parastatal organization, to determine who qualified to immigrate as a Jew or descendant of a Jew. The government continued to deny applications from individuals whom the government said became ineligible when they converted to another religion, including those holding Messianic or Christian beliefs.

A group of Orthodox rabbis continued to operate a private conversion court for children of families whom the state or rabbinical courts did not recognize as Jews. In August, for the first time, the Jerusalem District Court recognized a non-Rabbinate Orthodox conversion through the NGO Giyur k'Halacha. The Chief Rabbinate continued not to recognize non-Orthodox converts to Judaism as Jews, although they remained eligible for immigration under the Law of Return if they converted outside the country.

A Supreme Court case to grant immigration rights to those who completed Reform or Conservative conversions inside the country continued through year's end.

On June 3, a committee headed by former Justice Minister Moshe Nissim made recommendations for proposed legislation on a new conversion law. Prime Minister Netanyahu appointed the committee in 2017 in response to the 2005 Supreme Court petition by the Conservative and Reform Jewish movements for recognition of non-Orthodox conversions inside the country. The recommendations did not receive political support from any of the Jewish Knesset factions, and the government did not act on them by the end of the year. At a Supreme Court hearing on December 17, the government requested a six-month extension for the presentation of its plan. By year's end, the court had not rendered a decision on the extension request.

On January 15, the Knesset Committee for Immigration, Absorption, and Diaspora Affairs discussed incidents in which the Population and Immigration Authority incorrectly registered as Christian immigrants from the former Soviet Union who self-identified as Jewish. *Ha'aretz* reported in September 2017 that the Chief Rabbinate had

changed the registration status of 900 persons from Jewish to non-Jewish or “pending clarification” in 2015 and 2016. ITIM petitioned the Supreme Court against these changes and the case continued at year’s end.

In October an individual petitioned the District Court in Haifa to change his registration from Jewish to “lacking religion.” The court scheduled a hearing for January 2019.

Several municipalities filed legal challenges in the Supreme Court against the January 8 law granting the minister of interior wider discretion to approve or reject bylaws allowing commercial activity on Shabbat. These challenges followed Interior Minister Aryeh Deri’s rejection from June to August of five municipalities’ bylaws that would have legalized commerce on Shabbat, according to media reports. Sources stated some non-kosher restaurants that opened on Shabbat paid fines that varied according to local laws.

On July 19, Minister of Culture and Sport Miri Regev signed a regulation conditioning government funding of Israeli sports associations, except soccer associations, on their accommodation of Shabbat-observant athletes.

The MRS listed 21 dedicated cemeteries in Israel and the West Bank for persons the government defined as “lacking religion,” but only two were available for use to the broader general public regardless of residence. The one MRS-administered cemetery in the West Bank was available only for the burial of Israel citizens. Additionally, 13 MRS-administered cemeteries in 10 agricultural localities were authorized to conduct civil burial (i.e., not affiliated to a religion) for these localities and nearby residents. Some persons, however, who sought a civil burial for a relative reported several civil cemeteries near Tel Aviv were unusable because they were full or restricted to local residents. On May 29, the MRS published a call for proposals to develop or expand cemeteries for civil burials, following a 2016 report by the state comptroller that criticized the MRS for not implementing the civil burial law and thereby preventing the right of citizens to civil burial.

On February 19, the government passed a motion to recognize more Ethiopian Jewish religious leaders (*keisim*) and integrate them into Jewish religious councils. According to recommendations published November 7 by a special government committee, *keisim* would be allowed to conduct some community religious functions but not marriages and funerals, unless they underwent the rabbinical ordination process and applied individually to the Chief Rabbinate. On October 7, the cabinet approved a plan to facilitate immigration of approximately 1,000 parents from Ethiopia’s Falash Mura community whose children were already in Israel.

In 2017, the government cable and satellite-broadcasting regulator fined Channel 20, the “Heritage Channel,” 100,800 shekels (\$26,900) for excluding the Reform and Conservative Jewish movements from its programming, because its license described the outlet as a platform for all streams of Judaism. Channel 20 appealed the decision to the Supreme Court. On May 9, the court ruled an administrative court would adjudicate the appeal. The case was ongoing in the Court for Administrative Affairs in Jerusalem as of the end of the year.

In June, following a Supreme Court challenge by the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, the government announced attendance at a presentation to introduce an expedited Orthodox Jewish conversion course would no longer be mandatory for IDF soldiers who self-identified as Jewish but were not recognized by the Rabbinate as Jewish. The government stated the IDF would instead send invitations to IDF soldiers for the presentation; those who do not wish to participate could be excused.

In September 2017, the Supreme Court struck down the existing arrangement to exempt ultra-Orthodox men from military service, and it set a deadline of one year to pass new legislation to reduce inequality in the burden of military service between ultra-Orthodox and other Jews. Some ultra-Orthodox communities stated that mandatory conscription was a violation of the right to conscientious objection on the basis of their religious beliefs. On October 14, the Ministry of Defense sent a letter to the Eda Haredit community rejecting this argument. Following a request from the government for more time to pass a new draft law, on December 2, the Supreme Court agreed to postpone the deadline to 2019.

Those exempt from compulsory military service continued to have the option to join the National Service, a civilian alternative in which volunteers work for two years to promote social welfare in schools, hospitals, or NGOs. According to government officials and NGOs, this alternative was more popular among women from “national religious” Jewish Orthodox backgrounds than other exempt groups.

The government continued to operate a special police unit for the investigation of “ideology-based offenses” in Israel and the West Bank, including “price tag” attacks, which refer to violence by Jewish individuals and groups against non-Jewish individuals and property with the stated purpose of exacting a “price” for actions taken by the government against the attackers’ interests. The government continued to classify any association using the phrase “price tag” as an illegal association and a price tag attack as a security (as opposed to criminal) offense. On March 29, the Lod District Court convicted one person of “membership in a terrorist organization” for a 2015 price tag attack, according to media reports.

The government maintained an agreement with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that no member of the Church “will engage in proselytizing of any kind” within Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, according to the website of Brigham Young University’s Jerusalem Center. Some other nonrecognized Christian communities reported the MOI Department of Non-Jewish Affairs discouraged them from proselytizing or holding large public gatherings outside their houses of worship.

In April the Watchtower Association of Israel (Jehovah’s Witnesses) sued the government in the Supreme Court to process its application for a tax exemption from capital gains transactions, which it submitted in 2012. In 2016, the tax authority had approved its application and forwarded it to the Knesset Finance Committee, according to Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Supreme Court scheduled a hearing for January 16, 2019.

Public Hebrew-language state schools taught Jewish history, culture, and some basic religious texts. Many ultra-Orthodox religious schools in the “recognized but not official” category continued not to offer the basic humanities, math, and science curriculum. However, the government included the basic curriculum in public ultra-Orthodox schools. This category included 43 schools with 5,652 students in the 2017-2018 school year, an increase of 20 percent from the previous year, according to media reports. Public Arabic-speaking schools continued to teach religion classes on the Quran and the Bible to both Muslim and Christian Arab students. A few independent mixed Jewish-Arab schools also offered religion classes. For example, the curriculum at the nonprofit school Hand-in-Hand: Center for Jewish-Arab Education, which received a third of its funding from the government, emphasized commonalities in the holy writings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

According to the NGO Noar Kahalacha, dozens of Jewish school girls were unable to attend ultra-Orthodox schools due to discrimination based on their Mizrahi ethnicity (those with ancestry from North Africa or the Middle East), despite a 2009 court ruling prohibiting ethnic segregation between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi schoolgirls. A 2017 report from the state comptroller criticized the Ministry of Education (MOE) for failing to respond effectively to discrimination in educational institutions, including discrimination against girls in ultra-Orthodox schools. The government stated the MOE did not tolerate any form of discrimination, and schools that refused to accept students for discriminatory reasons were summoned to hearings, sometimes leading to delays and denial of their budgets until the schools resolved the discrimination.

The government funded approximately 34 percent of the budget of Christian school systems in the “recognized but not official” category, in which schools have autonomy over hiring teachers, admitting students, and the use of school property, according to church officials. The government repeated its offer made in previous years to fund fully Christian schools if they became part of the public school system, but the churches rejected this option, stating they would lose autonomy over those decisions. Church leaders criticized the disparity in government funding between their school system and those affiliated with the ultra-Orthodox political parties United Torah Judaism and Shas, which were also categorized as “recognized but not official” but received full government funding.

The government maintained its policy of not accepting applications for official recognition from nonrecognized religious groups, including evangelical Christian churches and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The government stated no religious community had attempted to apply for recognition during the year. In April the Jehovah’s Witnesses submitted an appeal to the Supreme Court requesting official recognition as a religious community. A hearing was scheduled for January 2019. The government stated some leaders of nonrecognized religions were invited and participated along with the leaders of recognized religions at official events or ceremonies.

Seventh-day Adventists stated they faced difficulty traveling to their houses of worship in cities in which public transportation was unavailable on Shabbat, including Jerusalem. Some nonrecognized religious groups, including Jehovah’s Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists, received a property tax exemption on their houses of worship,

although others, such as Buddhists and the Church of Scientology, did not. The government has stated local authorities conducted tax collection from nonrecognized religions in accordance with the law. The government stated it was unaware of any recent case in which a religious house of worship in Israel was not granted a property tax exemption.

In February the Jerusalem municipality began to enforce collection of taxes on church properties used for nonworship activities, such as friars' residences and parish halls, issuing retroactive fines and placing liens on bank accounts belonging to several churches. Then-Mayor of Jerusalem Nir Barkat said the city was owed 650 million shekels (\$173.4 million) in uncollected taxes on church assets. On February 25, leaders of 14 Christian churches in Jerusalem, including the Greek Orthodox, Latin (Roman Catholic), and Armenian Orthodox Churches, issued a joint letter condemning the decision, after the Jerusalem municipality announced it would start collecting back taxes on church-owned property and freeze financial accounts used by churches for their day-to-day operations. Church leaders also expressed concern over the introduction of a draft Knesset bill that would allow the government to expropriate lands sold by a church to private investors, with compensation to the investors for the price they paid for the land. In their joint statement, the church leaders accused the government of a “systematic and unprecedented attack against Christians in the Holy Land.” The bill's sponsor stated the purpose of the bill was to protect thousands of residents living in buildings built on church lands that private developers purchased from a church. Those residents reportedly feared massive price hikes or eviction when their leases expired.

In protest against the tax collection and the property expropriation bill, church leaders closed the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem on February 25, the first such closure since 1990. They reopened the church on February 28 after Prime Minister Netanyahu announced the government would freeze the tax collection and suspend consideration of the property expropriation bill and establish a working group led by Minister for Regional Cooperation Tzachi Hanegbi to examine the two issues. In a statement following Minister Hanegbi's meeting with the working group on October 23, the MFA stated the government “has no intention to confiscate church lands or to cause any economic damage to the churches.” When church leaders learned the bill would come before the Knesset on November 11, they pressured the government, which again froze debate on the bill. Church leaders again expressed outrage when the bill was scheduled to be read in the Knesset on December 24, Christmas Eve. The bill did not progress further before the Knesset voted to dissolve itself on December 26.

Christian leaders reported little difficulty obtaining visas for clergy to serve in the country, except for Christian clergy from Arab countries, some of whom reported long delays and periodic denials of their visa applications. The government stated Christian clergy from Arab countries were subject to the same entry laws and similar security procedures as clergy from other parts of the world. The government also said there were some “unavoidable delays” in cases of applicants from states that did not have diplomatic relations with Israel. Church officials noted the clergy visa did not allow the bearer access to basic social benefits such as disability insurance or national health insurance, even for those who have served in the country for more than 30 years.

The government continued to approve annual “delays” of conscription to military service for individual Jehovah’s Witnesses upon presentation of documentation of their continued affiliation with their religious community, although without acknowledging their right to conscientious objection. Because members of the community were not exempt from military service, they could not participate in the national civil service program as alternative service.

On June 28, the Supreme Court rejected a petition from the organization Yesh Gvul demanding the government give equal weight to military exemption requests based on conscientious objection as for those based on religious beliefs. The court ruled the two kinds of exemptions were based on different parts of the Security Service Law; exemption for Orthodox Jewish women based on their religious beliefs was a right, while exemption of conscientious objectors was at the discretion of the defense minister.

The MOI continued to train Druze and Muslim clerical employees of the state on how to work with government ministries. The MOI appointed and funded approximately half of the Druze and Muslim clerics in the country. Muslim leaders again said the MOI routinely monitored and summoned for “talks” those whom the ministry suspected of opposing government policies. According to the government, the government did not monitor clerics, but government employees of all faiths were “expected not to incite against the state in their official capacities.” The government stated the remaining Druze and Muslim clerics were nonstate employees due to either the preference of the local community or lack of MOI budget. Muslim leaders stated sharia court judges, who were Ministry of Justice employees, were their preferred religious representatives. No Islamic seminaries remained in the country, and students of Islam traveled elsewhere, primarily Jordan or the West Bank, to study. The government stated there were “Islamic colleges” in Umm al-Fahm, Baqa’a al-Gharbia, and Kfar Baraa. Muslim leaders rejected this assertion, stating the institutes in Umm al-Fahm and Kfar Baraa, operated by an NGO that teaches some Islamic studies, were not recognized as educational institutions by the Israeli Council for Higher Education. The Muslim leaders also said Al-Qasemi College in Baqa’a al-Gharbia was a teachers’ college that includes a program for teaching Islam in schools. The leaders stated that none of those institutes was an Islamic seminary.

According to the NGO Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality (NCF), 115 of the 126 Jewish communities in the Negev maintained admission committees to screen new residents, effectively excluding non-Jewish residents. Following objections by multiple NGOs, authorities canceled plans for new Jewish communities called Daya, Eshel HaNasi, and Neve Gurion to replace existing Bedouin villages. In August the National Planning and Building Council recommended that the government proceed with the establishment of a town called Ir Ovot, which was to include a zone for approximately 50 Bedouin Israelis to remain in their current locations.

On April 11, Bedouin residents of Umm al-Hiran signed an agreement with the Ministry of Agriculture Authority for the Development and Settlement of Bedouin in the Negev to self-demolish their structures and relocate to vacant plots in the Bedouin town of Hura. This decision followed years of legal battles and negotiations, in preparation for

replacing Umm al-Hiran with a Jewish community called Hiran. Jewish families sponsored by the OR Movement (an organization dedicated to expanding the Jewish population of the Negev region), who planned to move to Hiran, remained in the forest outside Umm al-Hiran, living in mobile homes donated by the Jewish National Fund, while waiting for the village land to become available.

Some former mosques and cemeteries remained sealed and inaccessible, including to Muslims. These sites belonging to the defunct prestate Waqf (not to be confused with the Jordanian-administered Waqf of the Haram al-Sharif) until confiscated by the state after the 1948 War of Independence. Other former mosques continued to be used for secular purposes. On December 5, following a decades-long legal battle between the Jaffa Muslim community and a real estate developer, the government approved a request from the Tel Aviv Municipality to recognize Tasou cemetery in Jaffa as a Muslim cemetery. This decision included authority for the Muslim community to manage the cemetery but did not transfer its ownership. The Islamic Council in Jaffa welcomed the decision, publicly calling it “a just decision that’s been waiting for more than 70 years.” In November MK Ayman Odeh raised 160,000 shekels (\$42,700) to help the Haifa Muslim community repurchase a section of the Independence Mosque in Haifa that government-appointed trustees had previously sold.

Muslim community leaders reported no difficulties obtaining municipal approval for construction of mosques in Muslim-majority localities, but they sometimes faced difficulty in Jewish-majority localities. For example, Be’er Sheva’s Muslim population of approximately 10,000 continued to travel to nearby Bedouin towns to pray because they could not use an Ottoman-era Be’er Sheva mosque the government previously converted to a museum of Islamic culture and the government would not authorize the construction of another mosque.

On July 30, the Ministry of Transportation ordered the expropriation of land previously allocated to a Karaite synagogue in Ramle for the purpose of building a highway interchange. The Karaites said the loss of land and the new interchange would disrupt their religious and communal activity. On December 11, the Supreme Court dismissed their appeal on procedural grounds, stating the case should be submitted to a lower court. The government subsequently reported the government and community reached an agreement that would minimize the amount of land expropriated and optimize use of the land for the synagogue’s needs.

The IDF continued to have only Orthodox Jewish chaplains; the government employed civilian non-Jewish clergy as chaplains at military burials when a non-Jewish soldier died in service. The MOI continued to provide imams to conduct military funerals according to Islamic customs. In 2017, the IDF issued new regulations allowing secular military funerals.

In some ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods, private organizations posted “modesty signs” demanding women obscure themselves from public view to avoid distracting devout men. The local municipality of Beit Shemesh failed to comply with court orders from 2015 and 2016 to remove the signs, leading the Jerusalem District Court to rule in 2017 that the municipality would face a fine of 10,000 shekels (\$2,700) per day if the signs

remained posted. In December 2017, the municipality took down six of the eight signs, but did not then remove the remaining two due to a protest. Local residents put up new signs to replace those the municipality removed. On February 18, the Supreme Court ordered the municipality to install security cameras and take action against individuals posting the signs. As of September police had not made any arrests. The municipality had not installed cameras as of November, according to media reports. The court case continued through December.

In some ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods, vandals repeatedly tore down or defaced billboards showing pictures of women, including commercial advertisements, public awareness campaigns, and political advertisements. In July police arrested six ultra-Orthodox men for vandalizing campaign signs of a female candidate for mayor of Jerusalem, according to media reports.

In response to NGO Secular Forum’s petition against a ban on bringing leavened bread and similar foods into public hospitals during Passover, the government told the Supreme Court in July that it would expand the role of hospital security guards on Passover to include checking visitors’ belongings for such foods. The case was ongoing at year’s end.

The government continued to enforce the 2003 Law of Citizenship and Entry prohibiting non-Jewish Iranians, Iraqis, Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians from the West Bank or Gaza, including those who are spouses of Israeli residents or citizens, from obtaining resident status unless the MOI made a special determination, usually on humanitarian grounds. The government stated it has extended the law annually due to government reports that Palestinian family reunification allowed entry to a disproportionate number of persons who were later involved in acts of terrorism. The NGO HaMoked said that statistics from government documents obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests contradicted these terrorism allegations, and the denial of residency to Palestinians from the West Bank or Gaza for the purposes of family reunification led to cases of family separation.

According to HaMoked, there were approximately 10,000 Palestinians living in Israel, including Jerusalem, on temporary stay permits because of the citizenship and entry law, with no legal guarantee they could continue living with their families. There were also cases of Palestinian residents’ Palestinian spouses living in East Jerusalem without legal status. Some Palestinian residents moved to Jerusalem neighborhoods outside the security barrier to live with their nonresident spouse and children while maintaining Jerusalem residency. According to Christian religious leaders, this situation remained an especially acute problem for Christians because of their small population and consequent tendency to marry foreign Christians (Christians who hold neither citizenship nor residency). Christian religious leaders expressed concern this was a significant element in the continuing decline of the Christian population, including in Jerusalem, which negatively impacted the long-term viability of their communities. Other factors included political instability; the inability to obtain residency permits for spouses due to the 2003 Law of Citizenship and Entry; limited ability of Christian communities in the Jerusalem area to expand due to building restrictions; difficulties Christian clergy experienced in obtaining Israeli visas and residency permits; loss of

confidence in the peace process; and economic hardships created by the establishment of the security barrier and the imposition of travel restrictions. The government stated such difficulties stemmed from the “complex political and security reality” and not from any restriction on the Christian community.

While the law does not authorize the Israel Land Authority (ILA), which administers the 93 percent of the country in the public domain, to lease land to foreigners, in practice, foreigners have been allowed to lease if they could show they would qualify as Jewish under the Law of Return. The application of ILA restrictions historically limited the ability of Muslim and Christian residents of Jerusalem who are not citizens to purchase property built on state land, including in parts of Jerusalem. In recent years, however, an increasing number of Palestinian residents of Jerusalem have acquired property built on ILA-owned land.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses reported that during the year the government positively addressed two longstanding visa cases involving foreigners married to citizens.

NGOs reported incidents in which authorities violated the freedom not to practice religion, particularly in the secular public education system and the military. For example, the Secular Forum criticized the MOE’s “Jewish Israeli culture curriculum” for students in first to ninth grade, referring to it as “religious indoctrination to young children.” The Secular Forum also opposed religious programs in those schools by private religious organizations, such as presentations about Passover in March by the Chabad ultra-Orthodox Jewish movement. The government denied students were subjected to religious indoctrination or coercion, stating the secular public school curriculum included lessons “on the culture of the Jewish people,” including elements of the Jewish faith and traditions, such as the Jewish calendar and holidays.

In some instances, the IDF did not permit soldiers to cook or heat water for a shower on Shabbat, according to media reports. The government stated soldiers were expected to respect Shabbat and *kashrut* in IDF base kitchens “in order to accommodate religious and kosher-observant soldiers.” The government said it was not aware of limitations on heating water for showers on bases.

Women’s rights organizations cited a growing trend of gender segregation reflecting increased incorporation of Jewish religious observance in government institutions, including in the IDF, as accommodation to increase the enlistment of participants who follow strict interpretations of Jewish law prohibiting mixing of the sexes. For example, IDF commanders sometimes asked female soldiers serving in leadership or instructor positions to allow a male colleague to assume their duties when religious soldiers who objected to interacting with females were present, according to the Israel Women’s Network. In response to this claim and similar allegations in media reports, IDF Chief of Personnel Director Major General Almoz said such practices “are in violation of Army orders and policy, do unnecessary harm to large groups serving in the Army, and are inconsistent with IDF commanders’ responsibility.” According to many observers, the trend in recent years has been toward greater inclusion of women in the IDF, including in combat roles and senior leadership positions.

NGOs monitoring archaeological practices in Jerusalem continued to state the IAA emphasized archaeological finds that bolstered Jewish claims while minimizing historically significant archaeological finds of other religions. In 2017, the Supreme Court upheld the MRS’ declaration that the Western Wall tunnels were an exclusively Jewish holy site, but ruled that the MRS and the Western Wall Heritage Foundation must ensure those sections of the tunnels significant to Muslims and Christians – including excavations of a Christian chapel, an Islamic school, and Islamic Mamluk-era buildings – were properly managed to protect the antiquities and to ensure access for members of other religions. The government stated the IAA conducted impartial evaluations of all unearthed archeological finds and by law the IAA must document, preserve, and publish all findings from excavations. It added that IAA researchers “have greatly intensified their research of ‘non-Jewish’ periods in the history of the land of Israel, [including] the Prehistoric, Early Bronze, Byzantine, Muslim, Mamluk, and Ottoman periods.”

The interreligious council convened on May 8 and discussed the integration of Bedouin Muslims into the Israeli economy and higher education, according to the government.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religious and national identities were often closely linked, it was often difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

According to missionary organizations, societal attitudes toward missionary activities and conversion to other religions continued to be negative. Some Jews continued to oppose missionary activity directed at Jews, saying it amounted to religious harassment, and reacted with hostility toward Jewish converts to Christianity, such as Messianic Jews. For example, security camera footage showed ultra-Orthodox men vandalizing the Beit Hallel Messianic Jewish house of worship in Ashdod in September, and members of the Ashdod Messianic Jewish community complained of stalking, verbal abuse, and harassment from anti-missionary organizations.

Jehovah’s Witnesses stated that on February 17, a man pepper-sprayed two Jehovah’s Witnesses who had knocked on the door of his home in Ashdod. Police closed the case on the grounds the suspect was unknown, even though the victims provided police with the address of the house where the attack occurred. Jehovah’s Witnesses said a television reporter conducted an “ambush interview” on June 14 in front of a Jehovah’s Witnesses literature display in Tel Aviv, selecting a member of Yad L’Achim, a Jewish group that opposes conversion of Jews to other religions, to comment about the Jehovah’s Witnesses. According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Yad L’Achim activist made numerous discriminatory and derogatory statements about them.

Lehava, described by press as a radical right-wing Jewish group opposing romantic relationships between Jews and non-Jews, continued to assault Arab men whom they perceived to be consorting with Jewish women, according to the Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC). Following a 2017 IRAC petition to the High Court demanding Lehava leader Ben-Tzion Gopstein be indicted on a series of offenses, the Jerusalem District Attorney held a pre-indictment hearing for Gopstein on March 8 on charges of

incitement to violence, racism, terrorism, and obstruction of justice. On March 14, IRAC withdrew its petition after the government stated to the court that it would decide whether to indict Gopstein. In August IRAC wrote a letter to the state attorney requesting a decision regarding an indictment. Prosecutors had not filed an indictment as of the end of the year.

In April authorities indicted seven Jewish Israelis on charges of terrorism targeting Arab (Muslim or Christian) citizens of Israel in a series of attacks, including a stabbing, in Be’er Sheva that began in 2016, according to media reports. According to the indictment, on several occasions the defendants assaulted men whom they believed were Arab to deter them from dating Jewish women. In a plea bargain, the Be’er Sheva District Court issued a five and a half year sentence to Raz Amitzur, the “main spirit of a group that perpetrated these attacks with a racist motive,” according to prosecutors. The court sentenced four other members of the group to community service, according to media reports.

There continued to be reports of ultra-Orthodox Jews in public areas of ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods harassing, with verbal abuse, spitting, or throwing stones, individuals who did not conform to Jewish Orthodox traditions, such as by not wearing modest dress or driving on Shabbat. For example, on July 15, a widely publicized video showed a group of ultra-Orthodox men in Beit Shemesh chasing and yelling at a girl for dressing in a way they perceived as immodest. There continued to be reports of ultra-Orthodox men spitting at individuals wearing Christian clerical clothing, according to church leaders. In Jerusalem, these incidents often occurred in the Old City and near the shared holy site of the Cenacle (devotional site of the Last Supper)/David’s Tomb outside the southeastern wall of the Old City.

Muslim activists reported hijab-wearing women sometimes experienced harassment by non-Muslims on public buses in Tel Aviv-Jaffa.

Tension continued between the ultra-Orthodox community and other citizens, including concerns related to service in the IDF, housing, public transportation, and participation in the workforce. On March 22, in a demonstration by the ultra-Orthodox Hapeleg Hayerushalmi group against the arrest of a military deserter, clashes broke out between demonstrators and police. According to media reports, demonstrators threw stones and other objects at police, used tear gas against police officers, and vandalized cars. Police dispersed protesters with “skunk water” (a foul-smelling, nonlethal liquid used by the government for crowd control) and arrested more than 30 protesters. In a separate incident on April 4, police used stun grenades against ultra-Orthodox protestors who threw objects at cars, according to media reports.

In June Yad L’Achim posted videos of their activists harassing alleged proselytizers. The organization also claimed to have “rescued” individuals from Messianic Jewish congregations and continued to offer assistance to Jewish women and their children to “escape” cohabitation with Arab men, sometimes by “launching military-like rescues from hostile Arab villages,” according to Yad L’Achim’s website. Media reported in October, in the context of municipal elections, that the Ramle branch of the Jewish Home party posted billboards warning against marriages between Jews and Muslims.

The national Jewish Home party reportedly disavowed the billboards. The October wedding of Muslim news anchor Lucy Aharish and Jewish actor Tzahi Halevi drew rebukes from Jewish politicians who opposed marriage between Jews and non-Jews.

Unknown suspects vandalized a Conservative synagogue in Netanya in three incidents in May. According to media reports, an unidentified individual spray-painted Nazi symbols on the Mikdash Moshe Synagogue in Petakh Tikva on August 13, and vandals placed a pig's head at the entrance to the Sukkat Shaul Synagogue in Ramat Hasharon on November 9.

The most common “price tag” offenses, according to police, were attacks on vehicles, defacement of real estate, damage to Muslim and Christian holy sites, assault, and damage to agricultural lands. For example, according to the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, in October vandals damaged tombs and broke crosses at the cemetery of the Salesian Monastery at Beit Jimal near Beit Shemesh, the third attack on the monastery in three years. An October 18 statement from the Latin Patriarchate criticized Israeli authorities for failing to apprehend the culprits in any of the preceding cases. The same day, the MFA condemned the desecration of the cemetery. The MOI offered to pay for the repair of the damaged cemetery markers and headstones.

On April 25, vandals burned two cars and spray-painted anti-Arab graffiti in the village of Iksal in the northern part of the country in a suspected “price tag” attack. Police had not arrested any suspects as of October. On October 26, vandals punctured tires and spray-painted “revenge” and “price tag” in Hebrew on 20 cars in Yafia, near Nazareth, according to media reports. The NGO Tag Meir continued to organize visits to areas where “price tag” attacks occurred and sponsored activities to promote tolerance in response to the attacks.

Although the Chief Rabbinate and rabbis of many denominations continued to discourage Jewish visits to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site due to concerns relating to Jewish religious beliefs, some Orthodox rabbis continued to say entering the site was permissible. Increasing numbers of the self-identified “national religious” Zionist community stated they found meaning in setting foot on the site. Groups such as the Temple Mount Faithful and the Temple Institute continued to call for increased Jewish access and prayer there, as well as the construction of a third Jewish temple on the site. In some cases, Israeli police acted to prevent individuals from praying and removed them, but in other cases reported on social media and by NGOs, police appeared not to notice the acts. Some Jewish groups escorted by Israeli police performed religious acts such as prayers, wedding rituals, and prostration. According to the Jerusalem Waqf and Temple Mount activist groups, visits by activists associated with the Temple Mount movement increased during the year to record levels, including a single day record of 1,451 visits on “Jerusalem Day” in May, a national holiday commemorating Israel's establishment of control over all Jerusalem in the 1967 war. According to Temple Mount activist groups and the Waqf, during the weeklong Jewish holiday of Sukkot, activists conducted 3,009 visits, a 25 percent increase over 2017.

Individuals affiliated with the Northern Islamic Movement, which the government declared illegal in 2015, continued to speak of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif as being “under attack” by Israeli authorities and an increasing number of Jewish visitors. Some small Jewish groups continued to call for the destruction of the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque to enable the building of a third Jewish temple.

In October, following press reports Jews had purchased property in Jerusalem’s Muslim Quarter owned by Adeeb Joudeh al-Husseini, the representative of a Muslim family historically entrusted with safeguarding the key to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, members of the Palestinian community called on al-Husseini to relinquish the keys to the church. According to *Ha’aretz*, in November every cemetery in East Jerusalem refused to bury a victim of a car accident because his name was associated with the sale of a house to Jews.

NGOs reported that some LGBTI minors who revealed their sexual orientation in religious communities faced expulsion from their homes and stigmatization from rabbis as suffering from mental illness, leading some to attempt suicide. Other NGOs noted increasing numbers of rabbis, educators, and community leaders in Orthodox Jewish communities were adopting a more inclusive approach to LGBTI minors.

On February 6, Tzohar, a network of Zionist Orthodox rabbis, announced it was opening a nongovernmental certification authority for businesses adhering to Jewish dietary laws. Tzohar’s decision followed a September 2017 Supreme Court ruling allowing a business to display “a true presentation regarding the standards it observes and the manner of supervising their observance,” but without using the word “*kashrut*,” which the court affirmed only the Chief Rabbinate had authority to determine.

In June media reported the Barkan kosher winery had removed workers of Ethiopian descent from their positions in the production of wine after the NGO Badatz Eda Haredit expressed doubt that Ethiopian-Israelis were Jewish. Sephardic Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef criticized the winery and the Badatz Eda Haredit, and stated categorically that Jews of Ethiopian descent were Jewish. Barkan Winery subsequently issued a statement that their products with a Badatz Eda Haredit *kashrut* certificate would be destroyed, according to Kan Radio.

According to sources who conducted Jewish weddings outside the Rabbinate’s authority (i.e., did not register them), the vague wording of the law dealing with those who conducted such weddings and the government’s nonenforcement of the law enabled non-Rabbinate Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jewish weddings to occur openly, often as an act of protest against the Rabbinate’s authority. According to the NGO Panim, more than 2,400 Jewish weddings took place outside of the Rabbinate’s authority in 2017, an increase of 8 percent from 2016. Most Jewish citizens, including those who were secular, continued to use Rabbinate-approved Orthodox rabbis to conduct their weddings. The only mechanism for Jews to gain state recognition of a non-Orthodox wedding or a non-Rabbinate Orthodox wedding, however, remained to wed outside the country and then register the marriage with the MOI. Approximately 15 percent of marriages registered with the MOI in 2016, the most recent year available, occurred

abroad, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics. According to data from the MRS, most of these weddings involved Israelis who had emigrated from the former Soviet Union.

In July, after police detained and questioned a Conservative rabbi in Haifa for conducting weddings outside of the Rabbinate, dozens of officiants and couples who had married outside of the Rabbinate turned themselves in at police stations in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and others “confessed” their crime on social media. Police declined to arrest any of the individuals involved.

According to the Rackman Center, thousands of Jewish women were “trapped” in various stages of informal or formal *get* refusal, especially in the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox communities. In two cases of *get* refusal, the NGOs Center for Women’s Justice and Mavoi Satum helped women receive marriage nullification decrees from nongovernmental Orthodox rabbinical courts in June and July.

The Rackman Center stated that in some instances a woman’s husband made granting a *get* contingent on his wife conceding to extortionate demands, such as those relating to property ownership or child custody. One in three Jewish women who divorced faced such demands, according to the Center for Women’s Justice. A child born to a woman still married to another man is considered a *mamzer* (child of an unpermitted relationship) under Jewish law, which restricts the child’s future marriage prospects in the Jewish community.

In June the Israel Women’s Network asked the Tel Aviv Municipality and the deputy attorney general not to allow an ultra-Orthodox group to hold a gender-segregated event in Tel Aviv. The municipality canceled the event, and then accepted a Tel Aviv District Court suggestion to allow the event with partial gender segregation on June 24. According to a media report citing government data, the Office for Development of the Periphery, Negev, and Galilee funded more than 80 gender-segregated events during the year to accommodate strict interpretations of *halacha*.

A variety of NGOs continued to try to build understanding and create dialogue among religious groups and between religious and secular Jewish communities, including Neve Shalom-Wahat al-Salam, the Abraham Fund Initiative, Givat Haviva, the Hagar and Hand-in-Hand integrated Jewish-Arab bilingual schools, Hiddush, Israeli Religious Action Center, Mosaica, and Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA). For example, IEA held 245 interfaith encounters in Israel (including Jerusalem), of which 120 included Palestinians residents of the West Bank. The number of children studying at integrated Jewish-Arab schools in the school year beginning in September was 1,700, up from 1,100 five years earlier, according to media reports.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

During a visit in January, the U.S. Vice President met with the prime minister, the president, and other government officials. Discussions included combating religious-based violence and building a future of trust, harmony, tolerance, and respect for members of all faiths. The Vice President visited religious sites and the Yad Vashem memorial for Holocaust victims in Jerusalem.

Senior U.S. officials spoke publicly about the importance of maintaining the status quo at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. In meetings with government officials and at public events, embassy officials also stressed the importance of religious pluralism and respect for all religious groups, including in two embassy-hosted live discussions of religious freedom on social media in November. The online discussions addressed topics including religion in public schools, democracy and religious freedom, and prevention of societal attacks on religious minorities.

Embassy-supported initiatives focused on interreligious dialogue and community development and advocated a shared society for Arab and Jewish populations, including conferences at which embassy officials advocated for the right of persons from all faiths to practice their religion peacefully, while also respecting the beliefs and customs of their neighbors.

Throughout the year, embassy officials participated in religious events organized by Jewish, Muslim, Druze, Christian, and Baha'i communities and used embassy social media platforms to express U.S. support for tolerance and the importance of openness to members of other religious groups.

Embassy-hosted events included an interfaith Ramadan iftar, an interfaith Rosh Hashanah reception, and an interfaith Thanksgiving dinner. The embassy also promoted the reduction of tensions between religious communities and an increase in interreligious communication and partnerships by bringing together representatives of many faith communities to advance shared goals and exchange knowledge and experience. Embassy programs supported mixed Jewish-Arab educational and community initiatives to reduce societal tensions and violence, including a project by the Citizens Accord Forum that brought together ultra-Orthodox, Muslim, and Christian citizens to create a shared civic agenda and implement activities related to social issues of common concern in their communities. Another project supported dialogue between religious Jewish, Muslim, and Christian women.

The embassy worked to mitigate interreligious and intercommunal tensions between the country's non-Jewish and Jewish citizens through the greater integration of the Arab minority into the broader national economy. For example, the Ambassador and Minister of Social Equality Gila Gamliel hosted an investment conference promoting Arab high-tech startups with Israeli Jewish and international investors in Nazareth on December 11.

The embassy supported a project to bring together Jewish, Muslim, and Christian female artists in Haifa, Jerusalem, and Lod to foster economic empowerment and encourage interfaith dialogue.

The embassy and consulate jointly provided a grant to the Abu Tor Good Neighbors project to advance cooperation and mutually beneficial community services for Jews and Arabs living in the mixed Jerusalem residential neighborhood of Abu Tor, where Jews and Arabs live on opposite sides of a road without much interaction.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2018)



Country:

Israel

Source:

USDOS – US Department of State [\(/en/source/11558.html\)](/en/source/11558.html)

Original link:

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/israel/> (<https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/israel/>)

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

21 June 2019

Document ID:

2011170

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

