



2015 Report on International Religious Freedom - Israel

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Executive Summary

The Basic Law describes the country as a Jewish state and has been interpreted by court decisions to protect the freedom of conscience, faith, religion, and worship, regardless of an individual's religious affiliation. The law contains an exception for all laws passed prior to the passage of the Basic Law, thus leaving personal status issues such as marriage, divorce, and conversion under the authority of the relevant recognized religious authority. Following altercations between Jewish activists and young Muslim activists at the site referred to by Jews as the Temple Mount (which is the foundation of the first and second Jewish temples) and by Muslims as the Haram al-Sharif (containing the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque) clashes took place between the Israeli National Police (INP) and Palestinian activists beginning in September which broadened into violence between Palestinians and Israeli security forces in Israel, Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank. The number of fatalities on both sides of the Green Line reached a total of 127 Palestinians and 22 Israelis between October first and the end of December, and an additional 20 Palestinian fatalities in Gaza. The government cited security concerns in imposing restrictions on access to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site by Muslims, particularly during Jewish holidays, which Muslim officials protested. Some Knesset members and government officials called for reversing the policy of banning non-Muslim prayer at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, but Prime Minister Netanyahu publicly repeated his support for the status quo arrangement. The government continued to permit non-Jews, including Muslims and Christians, to pray at the Western Wall, but continued to enforce a prohibition on mixed-gender prayer services. The potential accommodation of the desire for "egalitarian prayer," i.e., permitting men and women to pray as they wished, remained under consideration. The government implemented policies based on Orthodox Jewish interpretations of religious law, reversing, for example, its previous decision to allow a wider spectrum of Orthodox rabbis to perform conversions. The government continued to recognize only Jewish marriages performed in-country when performed under the auspices of the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate. The government declared the Northern Islamic Movement (NIM) to be an "illegal organization," accusing it of undermining the state and inciting violence, and moved to close associated offices and freeze assets; at the end of the year one person had been arrested due to membership in the NIM. The authorities arrested tens of persons in connection with "price tag" attacks against Christian and Muslim religious sites during the year, and detained others or placed them under house arrest. Government officials publicly criticized the attacks, although during the

year only two indictments were filed against two individuals in the arson of the Church of the Multiplication.

Following the violence that began at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in September, a series of attacks by Palestinians targeted Jewish Israelis within the Green Line and claimed the lives of five Israeli citizens, two on-duty Israeli soldiers, and one Eritrean national, including an attack in which a Palestinian national with a work permit in Israel attacked a group praying in an office building in Tel Aviv, killing two Jewish Israeli citizens. There were also attacks against Arab citizens framed as retaliatory or revenge attacks, such as when a 17-year-old Jewish Israeli attacked a group of Arabs in Dimona October 9. Relations between religious and ethnic groups, including between Muslims and Christians, Arabs and non-Arabs, and secular and religious Jews, continued to be strained, although numerous civil society and religious leaders worked to encourage tolerance and calm. On June 18, unknown arsonists burned a large section of the Church of the Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes on the Sea of Galilee in Tabgha and defaced the walls of the building with comments denigrating Christians.

Following the rise in tensions at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif and violent incidents between Israelis and Palestinians in September and October, the U.S. Secretary of State, the U.S. Ambassador, and embassy officers spoke with government officials and Knesset leaders about the importance of maintaining the status quo at the religious site and not escalating tensions through provocative actions or statements. In meetings with government officials, embassy officers stressed the importance of religious pluralism and respect for non-Orthodox streams of Judaism. Visiting high-level U.S. officials, including the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom in November, and the U.S. Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs, Special Representative to Muslim Communities, and Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism in September, met with government officials, religious groups and civil society leaders to stress tolerance and dialogue and ways to reduce religiously motivated violence. Embassy-supported initiatives focused on interreligious dialogue and community development, countering the "price tag" attack phenomenon, and advocating a shared society for Arab and Jewish populations. Embassy officers participated in religious events organized by Jewish, Muslim, Druze, and Christian groups to show U.S. support for religious pluralism, including attendance at a prayer service at the Tabgha Church of the Multiplication shortly after the arson attack against it.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 8 million (July 2015 estimate, which includes Druze (many of whom retain Syrian citizenship), Israelis living in the Golan Heights, and 200,000 Israelis in East Jerusalem. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) classification system, approximately 75 percent of the population is Jewish, 17 percent Muslim, 2 percent Christian, and 1.6 percent Druze. The remaining 4 percent consists of relatively small communities of Bahais, Samaritans, Karaites, Jehovah's Witnesses, and those the CBS classifies as "other" – mostly persons who identify themselves as Jewish but do not satisfy the Orthodox Jewish definition of "Jewish" the government uses for civil procedures, including many immigrants from the former Soviet Union. The majority of non-Jewish citizens are of Arab origin.

According to an April 2014 poll by the Rafi Smith Institute conducted for the media outlet Ynet, more than half of Jewish Israelis define themselves as secular (53 percent), 26 percent define themselves as "traditional, religious," and 21 percent define themselves as "ultra-

Orthodox/religious" or "Haredi." Among those aged 34 and younger, 30 percent define themselves as ultra-Orthodox/religious while only 15 percent of adults more than 50 years old define themselves as such. According to a 2013 Israel Democracy Institute Guttman Center poll, between 500,000 and 600,000 traditional and secular Jews feel a sense of belonging to the Conservative or Reform streams of Judaism. There is also a community of approximately 15,000 Messianic Jews, as reported by the Messianic Jewish community.

Bedouin Muslim communities are concentrated in the Negev (south) and many majority Druze, Christian, and Muslim communities are located in the Galilee region (north), some of which are homogenous and some a mix of these religious groups. There are many Druze Syrian and mixed Christian and Druze communities in the occupied Golan Heights, as well as an Alawite community in Ghajar.

According to government statistics, there were approximately 75,000 foreign workers with work permits plus an additional 15,000 illegal foreign workers present in the country. According to the government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), there are 45,000 African migrants and asylum seekers residing in the country, down from 54,000 the previous year. Foreign workers include Protestants, Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

There is no constitution. The Basic Laws describe the country as a "Jewish and democratic state" and reference the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, which promises freedom of religion and conscience and full social and political equality, regardless of religious affiliation.

According to Supreme Court rulings, the Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty protects freedom to 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. The law contains an exception for all laws passed prior to the passage of the Basic Law, thus leaving personal status issues such as marriage, divorce, and conversion under the authority of the relevant recognized religious authority.

Proselytizing is legal for all religious groups. The law prohibits offering a material benefit in the course of proselytizing. It is also illegal to proselytize to a person under 18 years without the consent of both parents.

The Chief Rabbinate retains the authority over all Jewish personal status issues such as marriage and divorce and the issuance of certificates of conversion to Judaism within the country under Orthodox rabbinic law.

In accordance with a 2009 High Court of Justice ruling requiring the government to cease discriminating against non-Orthodox conversion courses, the government provides funding for both Orthodox and non-Orthodox conversion programs. Non-Jewish relatives of Jewish converts generally may not receive citizenship under the Law of Return, although the children of any convert, born after the conversion, will be considered eligible for citizenship whether or not it was

the mother or father who converted. There have been cases in which a non-Jewish spouse received citizenship under the Law of Return.

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 recognizes the religions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, the Druze, and the Bahai. 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 Protestant. Based on this system, which does not differentiate among Protestant denominations, the government does not recognize individual Protestant denominations as distinct religious communities. The Anglican and Bahai communities are recognized through Section II of the King's Order in Council, a British Mandate-era law the government adopted. There are two legal pathways to formal recognition, according to laws adopted from the British Mandate period: through a government declaration in response to a petition to the Prime Minister's Office according to the Order in Council, or by petitioning the Ministry of Interior for recognition. 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, although Protestants do not have a separate legal court system for personal status issues. While members of recognized religious communities only require approval for visas from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, visas for members of nonrecognized religious communities also require Ministry of Interior (MOI) approval for stays longer than five years. Members of nonrecognized religious groups may practice their beliefs.

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 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, which serves as a discussion forum for recognized religious communities. The government finances approximately 40 percent of the religious councils' budgets, and local municipalities fund the remainder. The MOI maintains a program to provide religious training, and trains those Druze and Muslim clerics who are employees of the state on how to work with government ministries. Approximately 50 percent of Muslim imams in the country are state employees and receive their salaries and continuing religious training through the Ministry of Interior. The salaries of the remaining imams are privately funded.

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 a punishment of three years' imprisonment.

The law provides for the protection of sites considered holy places of religious groups by criminalizing 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 are provided

further protection under the antiquities law. The Ministry of Tourism is responsible for the protection and upkeep of non-Jewish religious sites, while the Ministry of Religious Affairs protects and maintains 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, and the Supreme Court has upheld this governmental authority.

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

Public Hebrew-language secular schools teach Jewish history and religious texts. These classes primarily cover Jewish heritage and culture rather than religious belief. Public Arabic-speaking schools with Arab student bodies teach religion classes on the Quran and the Bible to both Muslim and Christian Arab students. A few independent mixed Jewish-Arab schools also exist and offer religion classes. By law, the state provides the equivalent of public school funding to two systems of ultra-Orthodox religious schools, the United Torah Judaism Party-affiliated "Independent Education" system and the Shas Party-affiliated "Fountain of Torah Education" system. Minors have the right to choose a secular education regardless of parental preference.

Laws inherited from the Ottoman Empire and British Mandate periods give jurisdiction over personal status issues to certain religious communities. Religious courts operated by officially recognized religious communities have legal authority over their members in matters of marriage, divorce, and burial. Jewish, Druze, Muslim, and Christian families may ask for personal status cases, including alimony, child custody, guardianship, domestic violence, paternity, and property division, to be adjudicated in religious or civil courts. Exceptions to this provision include cases of divorce where Jewish women are subject to the exclusive jurisdiction of the rabbinical courts if their spouses file the case there first, and paternity cases among Muslim citizens, which are the exclusive jurisdiction of Islamic law courts. Members of religious groups not permitting divorce, such as Catholics, may not obtain a divorce unless they change their religious affiliation to a different religious authority that authorizes divorces. The law allows for civil registration of two people as a married couple only if both partners are recognized as being of "no religion," or if they married outside the country.

Civil 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 on grounds of due process. 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 male and female citizens who are Jews, except for women who obtain a religious hardship exemption. It is also compulsory for male citizens who are Druze, and male citizens in the 5,000-member Circassian community (Muslims originally from the northwestern Caucasus region who migrated in the late 19th century). Arab Christian and Muslim citizens are exempt from compulsory service.

The law provides the minister of defense some discretion to provide exemptions from compulsory military service for conscientious objectors. A special committee evaluates applications for conscientious objection and may recommend exemptions if it determines an applicant objects to the inherent use of violent force in the military framework and to war in a way that prevents him or her from serving in the military. The committee is also authorized to recommend certain accommodations to conscientious objectors' concerns, including permission not to hold weapons or wear uniforms. The committee chair is authorized to grant exemptions, and committee decisions may be appealed in writing.

To receive benefits similar to those accorded military veterans, Arabs and others exempted from compulsory military service may enlist in a national civil service program run by the Ministry of Science and Technology for one or two years as volunteers in health, education, and welfare with NGOs and institutions focused on improving their local communities.

The law provides the right for any Jew or his or her spouse, or any child or grandchild of a Jew, to immigrate to Israel from a foreign country. The minor children of a grandchild of a Jew are also granted humanitarian status, but are not given automatic citizenship. Non-Orthodox converts to Judaism are entitled to the civil right of return, citizenship, and registration as Jews in the civil population registry. Descendants of Jews qualify for immigration under the Law of Return regardless of the religious beliefs into which they were born, although the law considers those who as adults convert to other religious groups – or adults who converted as children – including Messianic Judaism, to have "opted out" of the protections of the Law of Return.

The law criminalizing incitement to racism, defined as statements demeaning or degrading or showing violence toward someone on the basis of race, provides an exception for statements citing a religious source, unless an intent to incite to racism is proven.

Government Practices

Violent clashes between Israeli security forces and Palestinians in Israel, Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank began in September following altercations between Jewish activists and Muslim activists worshipping at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site. The number of fatalities on both sides of the Green Line reached a total of 127 Palestinians and 22 Israelis between October first and the end of December, and an additional 20 Palestinian fatalities in Gaza. Because religion and ethnicity were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize much of this violence as being solely based on religious identity. The INP clashed on several occasions with groups of young Muslim worshippers at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif compound. The government cited security concerns in imposing temporary restrictions on access to the site by Muslims, particularly during Jewish holidays, which Muslim officials protested. Some Knesset members and government officials called for reversing the policy of banning non-Muslim prayer at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, but Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly repeated his support for the status quo arrangement whereby Muslims worship at the site and non-Muslims visit at appointed times. The government allowed persons of all religions to access the Western Wall, but with the strict separation of women and men. The government implemented policies based on Orthodox Jewish interpretations of religious law; in July it reversed its previous decision to allow a wider spectrum of Orthodox rabbis to perform conversions. The government did not permit civil marriages, interfaith marriages, or marriages performed by non-Orthodox rabbis or nonrecognized religious authorities. The government arrested tens of persons – in one instance, 21 persons in one short period – and

detained others or placed them under house arrest in connection with "price tag" attacks (violence against individuals and property with the stated purpose of exacting a "price" for actions previously taken against the group committing the violence).

Following altercations between Jewish activists and Muslim activists worshipping at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site, there were violent clashes between Israeli security forces and Palestinian citizens in Israel, Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank from October through the end of the year. The number of fatalities on both sides of the Green Line (the demarcation line set in the 1949 Armistice Agreements) reached a total of 127 Palestinians and 22 Israelis between the beginning of October and the end of December, and an additional 20 Palestinian fatalities in Gaza.

On July 26, the INP clashed violently with a group of 20-30 young Muslim worshippers who had stayed overnight at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif compound in contravention of the site's regulations and confronted Jewish visitors to the site the next morning, which was the Jewish fast day of Tisha B'Av. Police made several arrests.

On several other occasions the INP entered the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site in response to Muslim youth protesters, who according to the INP and media reports, threw rocks, fireworks, and what appeared to be Molotov cocktails at the police. In most cases the INP closed the door to the Al-Aqsa Mosque to keep protesters inside and to prevent them from throwing projectiles from inside the mosque. The Jerusalem Islamic Waqf, the Jordanian-funded Islamic trust and charitable organization which continued to administer the site, claimed on at least one occasion INP officers entered the mosque itself – in full combat gear – to disarm protesters.

In October the government placed a travel ban on NIM leader Sheikh Raed Salah, his deputy Kamal Khatib, and senior NIM official Yousef Awawdeh, preventing them from leaving the country through January 2016, after accusing them of inciting violence against Israel. On November 17, the government declared the NIM an "illegal organization," accusing it of undermining the state and inciting violence. Knesset Member Ahmed Tibi and other Arab Israeli politicians stated, however, the decision was motivated more by politics than other considerations. Security services subsequently raided the offices of 13 nonprofit organizations affiliated with the NIM and seized money and property, while bank accounts suspected of being used by these organizations were frozen. As of the end of the year, one person had been arrested specifically due to suspected ties to the NIM.

Following the entrance of ultra-Orthodox Shas and United Torah Judaism parties into the government coalition in May, the cabinet reversed its November 2014 decision to allow a wider spectrum of Orthodox rabbis to perform conversions, leaving 33 rabbis in four centralized conversion courts as the only individuals allowed to perform legal conversions.

A group of Modern Orthodox rabbis established a private conversion court primarily for children of Russian immigrants whose mothers were not Jewish and therefore whose Judaism was not recognized by the state or the Rabbinic Courts. The Chief Rabbinate continued not to recognize these Modern Orthodox converts to Judaism as Jews.

The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) continued to sponsor Orthodox Jewish conversion courses for Jewish soldiers who were not recognized as Jewish by the Orthodox rabbinical authorities.

The applications for official recognition of five religious communities – the Ethiopian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Evangelical Lutheran Churches, Evangelical Alliance of Israel, and Jehovah's Witnesses – remained pending with the government, as some of them had been for over five years.

Many mosques continued to lack an MOI-appointed imam; the government continued to permit nonstate employees to be imams in mosques if the community preferred.

Pursuant to a 2013 High Court ruling, the government paid the salaries of 12 non-Orthodox rabbis serving local councils (as opposed to cities). In addition, the Ministry of Housing assisted in providing funding for buildings of non-Orthodox Jewish religious institutions, according to the Israel Religious Action Center.

The government continued to control access to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, preventing non-Muslim worship and prayer at the site, and limiting access for visits by non-Muslim groups to specific times.

The INP continued to be responsible for security at the entrances of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, with police stationed both inside the site and outside each entrance. The INP conducted routine patrols on the outdoor plaza and regulated traffic in and out of the site. Waqf employees remained stationed inside each gate and on the plaza. They reportedly could object to the presence of particular persons, such as individuals dressed immodestly or causing disturbances, but they lacked the authority to remove persons from the site.

The government cited security concerns in imposing temporary blanket age restrictions on access by Muslims to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif at various times during the year, particularly during the Jewish holidays in September and October. These restrictions barred entry of male Muslims under the age of 50 to the site during the four-to-five hour non-Muslim visiting period at the site Sunday through Thursday. The government also restricted access for Muslim women, especially following altercations between women affiliated with the Murabitat organization of the Islamic Movement and Jewish visitors. According to media reports, the government provided Muslims from Gaza occasional access to the site, including permitting entry to 500 Muslim Gazans during Eid al-Adha on September 23, and allowing between 100 and 200 Muslim Gazans travel to visit the site on Fridays beginning in Ramadan.

Muslim officials, including representatives of the Waqf and representatives of the Joint List, an alliance of all the country's Arab-majority political parties, continued to object to the government's access restrictions on Muslim worshippers at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif and repeated previous years' complaints over what they said were police violations of the status quo agreements regarding control of access to the site.

The Waqf continued to restrict non-Muslims from entering the Dome of the Rock shrine and the Al-Aqsa Mosque and prohibited individuals from wearing non-Muslim religious symbols on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif.

The INP continued to screen non-Muslims for religious paraphernalia, and generally prohibited them from praying publicly on the site. The police continued to have exclusive control of the Mughrabi Gate entrance – the only entrance through which non-Muslims could enter the site – and

generally allowed visitors through the gate during set visiting hours, although the INP sometimes restricted this access due to security concerns.

Israeli authorities in some instances barred specific individuals from the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site, including Jewish activists believed to have violated rules against non-Muslim prayer, Muslims believed to have acted violently against non-Muslim visitors to the site, and public figures including members of Knesset whose presence authorities feared would inflame tensions.

The government halted construction and excavations in the immediate vicinity of the Mughrabi Gate of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif following concerns from the Islamic Waqf and Jordanian government the activities could lead to further destabilizing religious tension at the site.

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, a view the ultra-Orthodox community supported. Increasing numbers of the "national religious" community, a self-identified religious Zionist group, took an opposing view and found meaning in setting foot on the site. Some government coalition Knesset members called for reversing the policy of banning non-Muslim prayer at the site. On July 26, the fast day of Tisha B'Av, and on September 17, the Jewish New Year, Minister of Agriculture Uri Ariel visited the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, drawing criticism from others in his coalition. Members of Knesset Miri Regev and Oren Hazan made statements supporting Jewish prayer at the site, as did Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely. NGOs, such as the Temple Institute and Temple Mount Faithful, continued to call on the government to implement a time-sharing plan at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif to set aside certain hours for Jewish worship, similar to the practice at the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron.

Press reports on a lower court ruling in March on the possibility of Jewish prayer at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site were followed by news and social media speculation such prayer would be permitted, but the police stated they would continue to abide by the previous ruling of the Supreme Court permitting the government to restrict such worship to maintain the public order.

Prime Minister Netanyahu reiterated his support for the status quo arrangement at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, saying the policy remained: "It is Muslims who pray on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif and non-Muslims who visit." He reaffirmed the government's respect for the role of Jordan and the Jordanian king in administering the site, stated his government had no intention of dividing the site, and welcomed increased INP-Waqf coordination, including the installation of cameras to monitor the site, which would be coordinated with Jordan at the professional level.

In October the prime minister announced a ban on visits to the site by all members of Knesset, including Muslims. Joint List members of Knesset (MKs), most of them Arab Muslims or Arab Christians, condemned their inclusion in the ban. Jewish MKs including Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development Uri Ariel, called the ban "unnatural" and "unfair."

In October Joint List MKs also staged protests in the Old City and at the entrance to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif over INP-imposed age restrictions on all Muslims.

The government continued to permit people of all faiths to make individual prayers at the Western Wall, the place of worship nearest the holiest site in Judaism. The rabbi of the Western Wall continued to set the guidelines for religious observance mandating the strict separation of women and men, which the government continued to enforce. The authorities continued not to permit women to bring a Torah scroll onto the plaza, and prevented women from accessing the public Torah scrolls at the site. The authorities did permit 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. The police continued to assist Women of the Wall, an NGO and prayer group, to enter the women's area of the Western Wall for its monthly service.

The authorities continued to allow use of a platform south of the Mughrabi ramp (an area called Robinson's Arch) and adjacent to but not touching the Western Wall for religious rituals. The authorities designated the platform, which was built by the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs, for members of the Conservative and Reform movements of Judaism as well as Women of the Wall. Non-Orthodox mixed gender groups also continued to use it for religious ceremonies such as bar and bat mitzvahs. This accommodation of the desire for "egalitarian" Jewish prayer (permitting men and women to pray as they wished and together) remained a subject of debate in the Jewish community throughout the year. Ultra-orthodox Jewish leaders continued to oppose mixed-gender prayer spaces at the wall, and activist groups such as Women of the Wall stated the platform accommodation as currently constructed was insufficient to meet their demands to conduct Jewish prayer services – including the use of Torah scrolls – at the traditional Western Wall site.

Cabinet Secretary Avichai Mandelblit continued to chair a committee on egalitarian prayer at the Western Wall. The government and religious groups continued to meet through the end of the year to discuss plans to construct an egalitarian prayer space at the Robinson's Arch area of the wall – discussions that began in 2013 between the government and Jewish groups dissatisfied with restrictions placed on prayer. A legal battle over whether administration of this new area could be awarded to Elad (the City of David Foundation), an association dedicated to asserting Jewish presence in the Silwan area abutting the Old City, continued, with the Jerusalem municipality advocating for awarding the area's administration to Elad, and the government opposing. Reform and Conservative groups had opposed the granting of administrative powers over the site to Elad. An appeal to the Supreme Court was pending at year's end.

The government continued to prohibit Israeli citizens in unofficial capacities from traveling to parts of the West Bank under the civil and security control of the Palestinian Authority (Area A). Jewish leaders said this restriction prevented Jewish Israelis from routinely visiting several Jewish religious sites, although the IDF occasionally provided security escorts for groups to visit some Jewish religious sites.

Although the law included Saudi Arabia as a "hostile" country, religious authorities, including the head of the country's sharia court, stated they were not aware of any requirement for a government-issued permit to travel to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj.

A Beit Shemesh court in January ruled in favor of four local Modern Orthodox women who complained the municipality had not complied with a previous ruling to eliminate signs in public places requesting members of the public dress modestly, awarding them damages of 60,000 Israeli new shekels (NIS) (\$15,280).

Authorities continued to enforce rulings by the High Court declaring the segregation of men and women on public streets and sidewalks in the ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighborhood of Mea She'arim in Jerusalem to be illegal. The authorities also enforced the High Court's ruling against the imposition of gender segregation on buses. Communities could voluntarily self-segregate on public transportation, but could not impose this on others; the Supreme Court required that bus companies post signs informing passengers they were free by law to sit in any available seat.

The MRS continued to implement partially a 1996 law, which established the right of any individual to be buried in a civil ceremony. There were 44 cemeteries containing plots for people without religious status, according to the MFA. The MRS listed 21 Jewish cemeteries with plots for civil burial and 19 dedicated cemeteries for persons the government defined as being "of no religion."

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 Muslim customs.

According to government figures and Hiddush, a religious freedom NGO, the year's authorized budget for religious services for the Jewish population, including funding for religious councils, salaries for religious personnel, funding for the development of cemeteries, and funding for the construction of synagogues and ritual baths, was approximately NIS 511 million (\$131.1 million). Religious minorities, which constituted slightly more than 20 percent of the population, received approximately NIS 65 million (\$16.7 million), which included NIS 3.6 million (\$923,000) for development of religious sites and structures. In December the government added additional funds, some of which was rollover from previous years, for both Jewish communities and religious minorities, increasing the totals to NIS 828 million (\$212.4 million) for religious services for Jewish communities; and NIS 121 million (\$31 million) for religious minorities, of which NIS 51.8 million (\$13.3 million) was dedicated to development of religious sites and structures. Allocation of a special budget for the restoration of Arab religious sites, including a special budget for maintaining Muslim cemeteries, was pending at year's end. Some Muslims stated there was insufficient state funding for Muslim affairs, including for building and restoring mosques and cemeteries, although the state provided municipalities with religious development budgets and religious institutions with operational support funds.

Some former mosques, which belonged to the Muslim Waqf until confiscated by the state following the 1948 War of Independence in accordance with the Absentee Property Law, continued to be used as municipal buildings and entertainment facilities. Muslim community leaders reported Beer Sheva's Muslim population of approximately 10,000 had no mosque in which to pray, and the government would neither allow them to use the Ottoman-era mosque, which was converted to a museum of Islamic culture following a 2011 Supreme Court ruling, nor authorize the construction of another mosque.

The Supreme Court in May overturned a decision by the Ra'anana municipality that would have prevented Jehovah's Witnesses from holding a religious gathering in a municipally-controlled building.

In a separate case, a Netanya court in October rejected an appeal of its 2014 ruling stating a public school was justified in refusing to rent an event hall to Jehovah's Witnesses because their "conduct" conflicted with the character of the school.

In Petakh Tikva, the Histadrut (national labor union) reversed its year-long practice of renting a public hall to the Jehovah's Witness community, citing "forbidden missionary work" in its decision to stop renting to them. The issue was pending in court at year's end.

While the government provided the funds legally required to cover the operating costs of the two school systems affiliated with the ultra-Orthodox political parties Shas and United Torah Judaism, the government provided lesser amounts to support other private schools classified as "recognized but not official," including Christian and other ultra-Orthodox school systems. After successive years of budget cuts for the "recognized but not official" category, which the government said was an effort to encourage schools to become public, some ultra-Orthodox schools in this category chose to challenge this funding level in court; as of the end of the year this case remained pending. The Secretariat of Christian Schools organized a month-long strike at the outset of the 2015-2016 school year and successfully negotiated a one-year return to prior levels of funding for schools in its system. The government and the secretariat appointed a committee to work on a long-term funding solution for these semi-private schools. At year's end, secretariat officials said they had not yet received any of the funds promised.

Government resources available for religious or heritage studies to Arab and non-Orthodox Jewish public schools remained significantly less than those available to Orthodox Jewish public schools. Public and private Arab schools continued to offer studies in both Islam and Christianity, but state funding for such studies remained proportionately lower than the funding for religious education courses in Jewish schools.

Many ultra-Orthodox religious schools continued not to offer a basic humanities, math, and science curriculum, and a group of formerly ultra-Orthodox students who graduated from these schools sued the state in December for allowing them to graduate without the requisite knowledge to participate in the economy, claiming they were denied basic education and left lagging far behind secular Israelis in topics such as science, math, history, English, and geography. The case was pending at year's end.

The government continued to implement policies based on Orthodox Jewish interpretations of religious law. For example, the only in-country Jewish marriages the government recognized were those authorized by the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate, which refused to perform marriages involving citizens without maternal Jewish lineage, whom the Chief Rabbinate did not consider Jewish according to *halacha* (Jewish law). The Rabbinate required individuals who did qualify to marry to follow a procedure which included sessions with a rabbi and classes for the bride to learn about her duties and responsibilities under *halacha* (Jewish law). The Orthodox Chief Rabbinate also had jurisdiction over the procedures for divorces.

Reform and Conservative converts to Judaism also could not marry or divorce in the country or be buried in Jewish cemeteries pursuant to the Chief Rabbinate's lack of recognition of non-Orthodox converts as Jews.

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the government's legal accommodation of non-Jewish communities with regard to marriage, divorce, and personal status issues followed the practice of the Ottoman government and the British Mandate, with some modifications.

The MRS authorized the civil registration of the marriages performed by some nonrecognized religious communities, such as the Evangelical Christian and Karaite communities, whereas in general the only domestic marriages which had legal standing and could be registered were marriages performed according to the religious statutes of recognized religious communities. Members of other nonrecognized groups could attempt to process their personal status documents, including marriage licenses, through the authorities of one of the recognized religious communities if those authorities agreed. The government allowed civil registration of marriages held outside the country.

According to NGOs working with women of all religious backgrounds, although women could choose between civil and religious courts to adjudicate personal status matters other than marriage or divorce, societal pressures at times prevented Muslim women from adjudicating personal status issues in civil courts. Media reports indicated the numbers of Muslim women turning to civil courts were on the rise, however. Jewish women often preferred the civil courts because they considered those courts fairer to women.

Although the government continued to exempt Arab, Christian, and Muslim citizens from compulsory military service, the government continued sending letters to Christian citizens encouraging them to volunteer for military service.

The government continued to exempt individual Jehovah's Witnesses from military service on an annual basis upon presentation of documentation of their continued affiliation with that religious community, although without acknowledgment of their right to conscientious objection.

The government continued to implement a 2007 MOI decision to eliminate "national identification" on official identity cards. Both "national identification" and "religious identification" were now listed only in the central population registry. Birth certificates for children of mixed marriages or nonrecognized marriages continued to omit the names of non-Jewish fathers. A petition to require the government to issue birth certificates listing both parents' names, even if one was not Jewish, remained pending before the High Court of Justice.

The government continued to allow Christians and individuals who spoke Aramaic to register with their national or ethnic group listed as Aramean instead of Arab. Church leaders said the measure was aimed at dividing the Arab minority. Approximately 200 families reportedly made use of the option to register as Aramean.

The MOI continued to rely on the guidance of the Jewish Agency, an entity that represents world Jewish communities with strong ties to the government, to determine who qualified to immigrate as a Jew. Prospective immigrants faced questioning about their religious beliefs to determine their qualifications for citizenship. According to the Jerusalem Institute of Justice, an NGO, MOI officials continued to deny citizenship to individuals based on their lack of Jewish status according to Israeli law as upheld by Supreme Court rulings, even if they stated their religious identity as Jewish since they identified as Messianic Jews. On the same basis, members of such groups would be denied or delayed services such as family unification. This included cases of individuals who

immigrated under the Law of Return as Jews but were discovered to hold Messianic or Christian beliefs.

The government operated a special department in the state attorney's office for prosecution of "incitement-related" crimes and a police unit based in Jerusalem for the investigation of such crimes in Israel and the West Bank, including "price tag" attacks.

The government arrested tens of persons in connection with "price tag" attacks and detained others or placed them under house arrest in connection with attacks on Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious sites and civilian sites associated with the Arab population. Although the government declared the price tag movement an illegal association in 2014, it filed formal charges against only a few individuals accused of such attacks. NGOs, religious institutions, and the press stated arrests for "price tag" attacks rarely led to successful prosecutions, mostly for lack of sufficient evidence. During the year, only two indictments were filed against two defendants in price tag attacks against holy sites.

In late July the government announced it had identified five persons, including one minor, as responsible for the June 18 arson attack on the Benedictine Church of the Multiplication in Tabgha in which the perpetrators burned a large section of the church and defaced the walls of the building with comments denigrating Christians. The government filed indictments against two of the individuals, while taking "administrative steps" against the other three. After initially declining to pay for repairs to the church, saying the damage was not covered by the laws governing compensation for acts of terror, the government agreed to pay for restoration of the church.

In July the Jerusalem District Court sentenced brothers Shlomo and Nahman Twito, two members of the Lehava organization, which eschews any interaction between Jews and non-Jews, to two years and two and a half years, respectively, in prison, for setting fire to two first grade classrooms and scrawling graffiti with racist messages, including "Death to Arabs," at the Arabic-Hebrew bilingual Max Rayne Hand in Hand school in West Jerusalem in 2014. Judicial review of the sentence was pending at year's end.

Police investigated Lehava leader Bentzi Gopstein for stating in an August panel discussion with religious students in Jerusalem that he condoned attacks on non-Jewish religious sites, including the June 18 burning of the Church of the Multiplication in Tabgha. In October the Custody of the Holy Land, the Vatican's representative body in Israel, requested the Attorney General indict Gopstein on charges of incitement to racism. There was no indictment as of the end of the year.

The Chief Rabbinate in March, reportedly faced with the threat of legal action by Hiddush, issued new regulations on kosher certifications for hotels and hostels, overriding former prohibitions at private events held in hotels against photography, movie screenings, playing music on Saturdays and Jewish religious festivals, and displays of Christian symbols around Christmas and New Year, as well as cancelling the requirement that only non-Jewish receptionists work on Saturdays.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Actions by Foreign Forces and Non-State Actors

Militant and terrorist groups, including Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, issued anti-Semitic statements in conjunction with 22 rocket attacks and 11 other attacks launched at Israel from the Gaza Strip. Hezbollah fired an anti-tank projectile that killed two soldiers on January 28 in the Har Dov area of northern Israel. There were also incidents involving the shooting of civilians.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Beginning in September there were attacks reportedly by Palestinians targeting Jews which resulted in the deaths of five Israelis and one Eritrean on the Israeli side of the Green Line. There were also attacks by Jews framed as retaliation or revenge against Arabs, including at least one incident involving an attack on a Jew in a case of mistaken identity. On November 19, for example, a Palestinian attacked a crowd of civilians, including a group observing Jewish afternoon prayers in an office building in Tel Aviv, killing two Jewish Israeli citizens. On October 9, a Jewish citizen stabbed two Palestinians and two Israeli Arab citizens in the city of Dimona in what he said was an act of retaliation for attacks by Palestinians on Israelis in East Jerusalem in late September and early October. Because religion and ethnicity were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

Jehovah's Witnesses were subject to multiple incidents of societal violence. For example, on March 18, a tourist couple who were Jehovah's Witnesses going door-to-door to talk to residents of the southern city of Eilat was attacked by local residents and required medical attention for minor injuries. On May 2, according to the leadership of the Jehovah's Witnesses community, demonstrators in Ra'anana violently attacked and harassed Jehovah's Witnesses gathering for a religious assembly, assaulting them, spitting at them, and spilling water on them.

In September before the confluence of the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur and the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha, civil society organizations, including Mosaica and the Abraham Fund Initiative, convened meetings of Jewish and Muslim religious leaders to call for religious tolerance and respect for each other's traditions during the holiday period. Observers credited these efforts with ensuring uneventful passage of the holidays despite incidents both before and after the September 23-24 holiday overlap.

According to NGOs, societal attitudes toward missionary activities and conversion to other religions continued to be negative. Many Jews continued to oppose missionary activity directed at Jews, saying it amounted to religious harassment and reacted with hostility toward Jewish converts to Christianity. Religious groups including the Messianic Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses continued to proselytize and invited members of the public to participate in peaceful religious observances in public spaces such as parks and public walkways, according to observers.

Although many ultra-Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform rabbis continued to discourage Jewish visits to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site, other Modern Orthodox rabbis continued to say entering the site was permissible. Visits by Jews to the site continued to increase and 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. The northern branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel continued to speak of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif as "under attack." The group reportedly paid groups of men (Murabitun) and women (Murabitat) to enter the compound as worshippers and "defend" the Al-Aqsa Mosque from those they perceived as attempting to take control away from Muslims.

The ultra-Orthodox organization Yad L'Achim reportedly continued to pressure Jewish women not to date Palestinian men and offered Jewish women what it termed "escape" assistance from cohabitation with Arab men, i.e. facilitating the covert departure of women and their children from the homes they shared with their Arab spouses. Lehava continued to operate a hotline for citizens to inform on Jewish women who were suspected of having romantic relationships with Arab men and reportedly made public the names and phone numbers of the men involved to facilitate efforts to discourage intermarriage.

According to the *Religion and State Index* published by Hiddush, 64 percent of Israelis surveyed during the year supported recognizing all types of marriage, including civil, Reform, and Conservative, and 64 percent also expressed support for recognition of marriage or civil unions for same-sex couples. A majority expressed dissatisfaction over the Chief Rabbinate's monopoly on *kashrut* (Jewish dietary law) certifications and opposed making these certifications conditional upon businesses' observance of the Sabbath. Eighty-six percent of Israelis surveyed supported the general principle of freedom of religion and conscience, an increase over previous years.

Religious freedom and democracy monitoring organizations reported continued tension between the ultra-Orthodox community and the majority of Israelis, including concerns related to housing, service in the IDF, and participation in the workforce. There continued to be reports of Haredi men spitting at non-Haredi Jews and persons of other faiths. Seventy-six percent of ultra-Orthodox Jews said spitting at Christians should be considered a crime, although only 28 percent felt it should be a high-priority crime, according to the 2015 Hiddush *Religion and State Index*.

Lehava leader Bentzi Gopstein, a reportedly influential figure for extremist settler youth, in December published an opinion article on an ultra-Orthodox website calling the "Christian Church" a "deadly centuries-old enemy," whose adherents were "blood-sucking vampires" and should be expelled from the country.

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 bilingual schools, Hiddush, the Israel Religious Action Center of the Reform Movement, Mosaica, and Interfaith Encounters. The NGO Rabbis for Human Rights hosted the Interreligious Coordinating Council to promote dialogue among Jewish, Muslim, and Christian institutions.

According to the NGO Hiddush and the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land (CRIHL), on February 26, unknown arsonists attacked a Greek Orthodox seminary in Jerusalem and scrawled anti-Christian graffiti on the walls. The prime minister, minister of religious services, and others as well as the CRIHL spoke out against "price tag" attacks following this incident. On October 5, unknown assailants attacked the Hasan Bek Mosque in Tel Aviv-Jaffa.

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.

The CRIHL, which includes the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA) Ministry of Islamic Waqf (endowments), the PA sharia courts, and the leaders of the major Christian denominations in Jerusalem, continued to implement its Universal Code on Holy Sites in

partnership with the international NGO Search for Common Ground, documenting attacks on religious sites and promoting joint interreligious responses to such attacks.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Following the rise in tensions at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif and violent incidents between Israelis and Palestinians in September and October, the U.S. Secretary of State, the Ambassador, and embassy officers spoke with government officials and Knesset leaders about the importance of maintaining the agreed-upon status quo at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif and not escalating tensions through provocative actions or statements. In meetings with government officials, visiting U.S. government officials and embassy officers also stressed the importance of religious pluralism and respect for all streams of Judaism.

In a November visit to Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and the West Bank, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with government officials and Knesset members to discuss "price tag" attacks and other instances of religiously motivated violence. He also met with leaders of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian religious communities and civil society organization leaders to discuss issues ranging from the desecration of Jewish graves at the Mount of Olives to the challenges faced by the Muslim and evangelical communities.

The U.S. Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs, Special Representative to Muslim Communities, and Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism met with government officials during a September visit to Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and the West Bank to discuss the equal treatment of religious communities, combating acts of extremism, and strategies for calming tensions at religious sites. The three officials also met with civil society organizations involved in interreligious engagement and visited three sites previously targeted by vandals, including the Tabgha Church of the Multiplication, a mosque in Fureidis, and the Max Rayne Hand-in-Hand school, an institution dedicated to the education of Muslim and Jewish students together, which also had experienced an arson attack in 2014.

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 officers spoke out in support of the right of persons of all faiths to practice their religion peacefully, while also respecting the beliefs and customs of their neighbors.

Embassy officers participated in religious events organized by Jewish, Muslim, Druze, and Christian communities and used embassy social media channels to express U.S. support for tolerance and openness to other religions. One such event was a prayer service at the Tabgha Church of the Multiplication attended by an embassy officer shortly after the arson attack against it.

Embassy-hosted events, including an iftar during Ramadan and an interfaith Thanksgiving dinner, promoted the reduction of tensions between religious communities and an increase in interreligious communication and partnership within society. Embassy programs supported mixed Jewish-Arab educational and communal initiatives to reduce societal violence, including a training workshop on the subject of racism for 30 teachers from Jewish schools in Jerusalem and its surroundings. The embassy funded the NGO Mosaica to produce videos and lesson plans for teachers on the coinciding observances of Yom Kippur and Eid al-Adha.

The embassy provided grants to organizations advocating religious tolerance among different ethnic groups, such as the NGO Sikkuy, which arranged a series of cultural tours to Arab majority towns in the Galilee and Wadi Ara during Ramadan for the purpose of introducing 2,000 Jews to Arab culture and religious practices during the Islamic holiday season.