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 Immigration and
 Refugee Board of Canada

 Commission de l'immigration
 et du statut de réfugié du Canada

Lebanon: Treatment of Christians and availability of state protection for Christians; whether Hezbollah targets Christians in particular (2007 - 2008)

The conflict between Israel and Lebanon in July and August 2006 exacerbated tensions between Hezbollah and the elected government of Fouad Siniora and, consequently, worsened relations among religious groups (US 14 Sept. 2007, Sec. 3). In fact, the conflict created serious divisions between Lebanese Christians (Global Insight 13 Feb. 2007; *Courrier international* 22 Aug. 2007; *Le Figaro* 6 Aug. 2007a) who support Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces party, one of Hezbollah's chief rivals, and those who support Michel Aoun, who has forged ties with Hezbollah (AFP 21 Sept. 2006; ICG 25 July 2006, 15). In addition, religious groups cannot agree on a presidential candidate, who must be a Maronite Christian (*Guardian* 13 Dec. 2007; *Le Figaro* 6 Aug. 2007a; *ibid.* 6 Aug. 2007b), and the position has been vacant since 23 November 2007 (*Guardian* 13 Dec. 2007). According to *Courrier international*, all 13 parliamentary sessions to elect the Lebanese president have been postponed (22 Jan. 2008).

Although this political climate has led to clashes among religious groups – notably a bombing on 13 February 2007 in a Christian neighbourhood in northern Beirut that killed three people whose religion and ethnic origin were not reported – the United States (US) Department of State attributed the attacks to political differences and to the "legacy" of the civil war (US 14 Sept. 2007, Sec. 3.). An 11 January 2008 article in *Sud Ouest* also reported that the current divisions in Lebanon are no longer religious in nature.

In December 2007, following the period covered by the US Department of State report, the political crisis worsened when a bomb attack in a Christian suburb of Beirut killed a high-ranking general (*Guardian* 13 Dec. 2007). According to *The Guardian*, the attack can be attributed to differences of opinion over the choice for the next president (*ibid.*). Information on who claimed responsibility for this attack could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

The attack echoes a September 2007 car bombing, which also took place in a Christian neighbourhood (*Courrier international* 20 Sept. 2007). According to an article in the daily *An Nahar* and reprinted in *Courrier international*, that attack happened [translation] "four hours after the Maronite Church denounced the 'Hezbollah emirate' inside Lebanon" (*ibid.*). Further information on the attack or information indicating who claimed responsibility for the attack could not be found the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Protection offered by the Lebanese armed forces

The Lebanese army, which has officers from every community and whose soldiers are mostly Shia Muslim and Christian, is considered to be the only force able to keep the country together

(*Guardian* 13 Dec. 2007) and one of only a few truly national institutions (*L'Express* 28 Nov. 2007). However, *Le Monde diplomatique* reports that Christian soldiers have vandalized some mosques (1 Feb. 2008). The Lebanese armed forces were targeted for the first time in December 2007 (*Guardian* 13 Dec. 2007). Later, in February 2008, the daily *Orient-Le Jour* published a news release from the leaders of the Lebanese army citing attacks targeting army positions (4 Feb. 2008). Those attacks followed riots at the end of January 2008, during which demonstrators insulted soldiers in the region of Mar Makhaeil, site of the first clashes in the 1975 civil war (*Libération* 29 Jan. 2008). Those soldiers had been deployed primarily to the Shia neighbourhoods of Chiyah and Mar Mikhaeil (*La Croix* 29 Jan. 2008) to prevent the violence from spilling over into neighbouring Christian and Sunni Muslim neighbourhoods (The Canadian Press 27 Jan. 2008). According to *Libération*, the region of Mar Mikhaeil, is [translation] "extremely sensitive" (29 Jan. 2008), since it is adjacent to the neighbourhood of Ain el-Remmaneh, whose population is mostly made up of Christians (*La Croix* 29 Jan. 2008; *Libération* 29 Jan. 2008), many of whom support the Lebanese Forces party (ibid.), and since the Shia Muslims who support the opposition also live next to the Mar Mikhaeil region (ibid.). According to the French religious daily *La Croix*, the Christians feared that the riots, begun in protest to the electricity being cut off (*Libération* 29 Jan. 2008; The Canadian Press 27 Jan. 2008), would spread to the predominantly Christian neighbourhoods (*La Croix* 29 Jan. 2008). Sources do not agree on the number of victims in these attacks; figures range between 7 and 10 (*Libération* 29 Jan. 2008; *La Croix* 29 Jan. 2008; The Canadian Press 27 Jan. 2008).

Hezbollah

According to the International Crisis Group (ICG), much of Lebanon's Christian community supports the Hezbollah party (10 Oct. 2007, 1). Information on Hezbollah's treatment of Christians who do not support them could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

However, party leaders state that the role of the party's military wing is to defend Lebanon against Israeli attacks, not to fight the Lebanese people (*The Christian Science Monitor* 7 Nov. 2007).

Moreover, a former high-ranking officer in the Lebanese army stated in November 2007 that the Progressive Socialist Party and the Lebanese Forces [a Christian party represented in Parliament and opposed to Hezbollah (*Le Monde* 20 Dec. 2006; ICG 21 Dec. 2006) and a former militia] were preparing themselves so that they could ensure the neutrality of the Christians and Druze in the Mount Lebanon district in the event of violence between Shias and Sunnis (*The Christian Science Monitor* 7 Nov. 2007). According to the former officer, efforts have been made to ensure that "Christians and Druze stay out of the fighting" (ibid.). However, this information could not be corroborated among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within time constraints.

How the threat is perceived by political stakeholders

The Free Patriotic Movement, a Christian political party, reports that Lebanese Christians are marginalized (Free Patriotic Movement 3 Dec. 2007). According to the statements of a Maronite priest that were broadcast on the Al-Jazeera network and published by the *Daily Star*, the power struggle between Shia and Sunni Muslims is the reason for the political crisis in Lebanon, and the Christians are caught in the middle (*Daily Star* 3 Jan. 2008).

According to the Free Patriotic Movement, one of the biggest dangers for Lebanese Christians is the presence of large numbers of Palestinians in Lebanon (Free Patriotic Movement 3 Dec. 2007). Moreover, Maronite cardinal Nasrallah Sfeir stated that the chief threat to the Christian community is the departure of its members (*Le Figaro* 6 Aug. 2007c). According to Cardinal Nasrallah Sfeir, the increase in Islamism is not the chief threat to Christians, since Lebanese Islam is tolerant and traditionally has close ties to eastern Christianity (ibid.).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Oral sources: Attempts to reach the following sources were unsuccessful: the Canada Research Chair on Islam, Pluralism and Globalization (CRC-IPG) at the Université de Montréal, the Réseau Moyen-Orient of the Université de Montréal.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International (AI), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), European Country of Origin Information Network (ecoi.net), Freedom House, Groupe de recherche islamo-chrétien (GRIC), Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Independent*, International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS), Lebanese Foundation for Peace, Middle East Council of Churches, Middle East Forum, Middle East Policy Council, ReliefWeb.

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