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2020 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Lebanon

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ANNOUNCEMENT: The Department of State will release an addendum to this report in mid 2021 that expands the subsection on Women in Section 6 to include a broader range of issues related to reproductive rights.

Lebanon is a parliamentary republic based on the 1943 National Pact, which apportions governmental authority among a Maronite Christian president, a Shia speaker of the Chamber of Deputies (parliament), and a Sunni prime minister. The law officially recognizes 18 religious sects or confessions. In 2016 parliament elected Michel Aoun to the presidency, ending more than two years of political deadlock. Following the 2017 passage of the new electoral law, the government held parliamentary elections in 2018 after parliament had extended its legal term three times between 2013 and 2017. The elections were peaceful and considered generally free and fair. Following weeks of mass protests, then prime minister Saad Hariri resigned in October 2019, and a new government under Prime Minister Hassan Diab was formed on January 22. After a devastating explosion on August 4 at the Port of Beirut killed more than 200 persons and injured more than 6,500 others, triggering another wave of street protests, Diab resigned August 10. On August 31, Mustapha Adib was designated prime minister, but on September 26, he resigned after failing to form a cabinet. On October 22, former prime minister Saad Hariri was again designated as prime minister to form a new cabinet, but the government formation process continued at year’s end.

The Internal Security Forces, under the Ministry of Interior, are responsible for law enforcement. The Directorate of General Security, also under the Ministry of Interior, is responsible for border control but also exercises some domestic security responsibilities. The Lebanese Armed Forces, under the Ministry of Defense, are responsible for external security but are authorized to arrest and detain suspects on national security grounds. The Lebanese Armed Forces also arrested alleged drug traffickers, managed protests, enforced building codes related to refugee shelters, and intervened to prevent violence between rival political factions. The General Directorate of State Security, reporting to the prime minister through the Higher Defense Council, is responsible for investigating espionage and other national security matters. The Parliamentary Police Force reports to the speaker of parliament and is tasked with protecting parliament premises as well as the speaker’s residence in Ain al-Tineh. Both the Internal Security Forces and the Lebanese Armed Forces provide units to the Parliamentary Police Force. Civilian authorities maintained control over the government’s armed forces and other security forces, although Palestinian security and militia forces, the designated foreign terrorist organization Hizballah, and other extremist elements operated outside the direction or control of government officials. Members of security forces committed some abuses.

The Syrian conflict affected the country economically and socially. Over the past nine years, the conflict has generated an influx of more than one million Syrian refugees and strained the country’s already weak infrastructure and ability to deliver social services.

Significant human rights issues included: allegations of torture by security forces; arbitrary arrest or detention, including excessive periods of pretrial detention by security forces; serious political interference with the judiciary; serious restrictions on free expression, the press, and the internet, including violence, threats of violence or unjustified arrests or prosecutions against journalists, censorship, and the existence of laws criminalizing libel; refoulement of refugees; high-level and widespread official corruption; and criminalization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex status or conduct.

Although the legal structure provides for prosecution and punishment of officials who committed human rights abuses, enforcement remained a problem, and government officials enjoyed a measure of impunity for human rights abuses, including evading or influencing judicial processes. The country suffers from endemic corruption.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were reports of one instance in which human rights groups asserted that the government or its agents committed an arbitrary or unlawful killing. International nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and local media reported that on April 27 the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) used excessive force, including lethal force, against protesters in Tripoli. One protester died after being hit in the leg by a rubber bullet. The LAF issued a statement in which it expressed regret and announced it had opened an investigation. The LAF maintained that the rubber bullet was shot from a distance of more than 15 yards and at an angle acceptable under LAF regulations. The state prosecutor requested an investigation to determine whether security force actions were justifiable and pursued prosecution at the Military Court that continued as of September 8 (see section 1.c., Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment). Killings by security forces are investigated internally and prosecuted through the Military Court.

On August 20, Amal party supporter Hussein Khalil was killed and 10 others were injured in a confrontation between Amal and Hizballah supporters in the southern town of Loubye. On August 19, Amal members angered by Hizballah banners commemorating the Shia holiday of Ashura had harassed a local Hizballah-aligned sheikh, resulting in a larger brawl on August 20 that led both sides to discharge automatic firearms. The LAF subsequently intervened to restore security and demanded that both groups surrender members who had drawn weapons.

On August 18, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) announced its verdict in the 2005 killing of former prime minister Rafik Hariri that also killed 21 others and injured 226. The STL found Hizballah operative Salim Jamil Ayyash guilty on all charges, while Hizballah operatives Hassan Habib Merhi, Hussein Hassan Oneissi, and Assad Hassan Sabra were acquitted. On December 11, the STL sentenced Ayyash to five concurrent terms of life imprisonment, the maximum punishment allowed. If the STL's mandate is renewed in March 2021, its work may continue for several more years to handle sentencing and possible appeals, in addition to proceeding with a trial in the so-called connected cases—the killing of George Hawi and attempted killings of Marwan Hamadeh and Elias Murr.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities during the year.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibits using acts of violence to obtain a confession or information about a crime, but the judiciary rarely investigated or prosecuted allegations of torture. In March 2019 the cabinet appointed the five members of the National Preventive Mechanism (NPM) against Torture, a body within the 10-member National Human Rights Institute (NHRI). The NHRI is mandated to monitor the human rights situation in the country by reviewing laws, decrees, and administrative decisions and by investigating complaints of human rights abuses and issuing periodic reports of its findings. The NPM oversees implementation of the antitorture law. It has the authority to conduct regular unannounced visits to all places of detention, investigate the use of torture, and issue recommendations to improve the treatment of detainees. As of September 8, the NHRI had not begun its assigned functions. Some NGOs alleged that security officials tortured detainees, including incidents of abuse at certain police stations. The government denied the systematic use of torture, although authorities acknowledged violent abuse sometimes occurred during pretrial detention at police stations or military installations where officials interrogated suspects without an attorney present.

The LAF Investigation Branch conducted an internal investigation that began May 6 into the alleged torture of detainees in LAF detention facilities in Sidon and Tripoli following protests in those cities. The investigations were suspended due to the lack of formal allegations from the victims and because the original investigating judge resigned from his position; the cases remained open as of October 19. The LAF imposed the highest penalties allowed by the military code of justice in several cases involving torture, while noting that only a judicial decision could move punishment beyond administrative penalties.

There were no new developments in the May 2019 death of detainee Hassan Diqa, although the case remained under investigation and on the agenda of the parliamentary Human Rights Committee. Diqa's family filed a lawsuit claiming Diqa was subjected to torture in detention, leading to his death. Diqa had been arrested in 2018 on a drug-related charge. As of September 2019, there was no clear evidence that Diqa's death was a result of torture, although evidence emerged that proper procedures in accordance with the antitorture law were not followed.

On October 15, an investigative judge questioned actor Ziad Itani regarding a criminal defamation complaint filed against him by two State Security officials he had accused of torturing him. Itani had stated that State Security tortured him in 2017 after detaining him on false charges of spying for Israel, a charge of which he was eventually exonerated.

Although human rights and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) organizations acknowledged some improvements in detainee treatment during the year, these organizations and former detainees continued to report that Internal Security Forces (ISF) officers mistreated drug users, persons involved in prostitution, and LGBTI individuals in custody, particularly outside of Beirut, including through forced HIV testing, threats of prolonged detention, and threats to expose their identities to family or friends. LGBTI rights NGOs reported anal exams of men suspected of same-sex sexual activity have been banned in Beirut police stations but were carried out in Tripoli and other cities. While physician syndicates in Beirut banned their members from performing such procedures, NGOs stated that local syndicates outside the capital had not all done so.

NGOs reported that impunity was a significant problem in the security forces, including the ISF, LAF, and Parliamentary Police Force (PPF). Impunity was also a problem with respect to the actions of armed nonstate actors such as Hizballah. With regard to the ISF and LAF, this was due in part to a lack of transparency when these forces conducted investigations. Investigations of alleged abuses by security forces were conducted internally by the implicated security force, and security force members could be tried in Military Court for charges unrelated to their official duties (see section 1.e., Trial Procedures). Individuals allegedly belonging to the PPF were captured in photographs and on video shooting live ammunition at protesters on August 8. PPF personnel were recorded in several other instances beating protesters, with no known repercussions. The foreign terrorist organization (FTO) Hizballah continued the practice of extrajudicial arrest and detention, including incommunicado detention (see section 1.e., Trial Procedures).

The LAF worked with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to develop a code of conduct on human rights that was launched in January. The ISF and the Directorate of General Security (DGS) both worked with the OHCHR to revise their respective codes of conduct, introduce accountability elements, and provide for wider dissemination of the codes of conduct among their personnel. The gendarmerie unit of the ISF also instituted a training program that included human rights training with the support of donor countries.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prisons and detention centers were often overcrowded, and prisoners sometimes lacked access to basic sanitation. As was true for most buildings in the country, prison facilities were inadequately equipped for persons with disabilities.

Nongovernmental entities, such as the FTO Hizballah and Palestinian nonstate militias, also reportedly operated unofficial detention facilities.

Physical Conditions: As of September 14, there were approximately 6,670 prisoners and detainees, including pretrial detainees and remanded prisoners, in facilities built to hold 3,500 inmates. Authorities often held pretrial detainees together with convicted prisoners. There were 150 minors and 224 women in Lebanese prisons, according to ISF statistics. The ISF incarcerated women at four dedicated women’s prisons in Baabda, Beirut, Zahle, and Tripoli.

According to a government official, most prisons lacked adequate sanitation, ventilation, and lighting, and authorities did not regulate temperatures consistently. Roumieh prisoners often slept 10 in a room originally built to accommodate two prisoners, and basic medical care suffered from inadequate staffing, poor working conditions, and extreme overcrowding. The ISF reported that seven individuals died in detention facilities during the year. According to the ISF, six died of medical problems, including heart attacks and kidney failure, and one was accidentally electrocuted due to faulty wiring. Some NGOs complained of authorities’ negligence and failure to provide appropriate medical care to prisoners, which may have contributed to some deaths. The ISF reported that none died of police abuse.

Administration: The ISF’s Committee to Monitor against the Use of Torture and Other Inhuman Practices in Prisons and Detention Centers conducted 30 prison visits as of September 14. These monitoring visits were suspended due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. If detention center investigators assigned by the minister of interior found physical abuse, the military investigator assigned a medical team to confirm the abuse, and a judge ruled at the conclusion of the review. As of September 14, there were no complaints reported to the ISF committee. Historically, complaints were generally submitted during or following in-person prison visits by family members. In-person visits were halted in February due to COVID-19 concerns and mitigation efforts, and did not restart during the year. As of October 14, prisoners submitted 12 complaints to the ISF Human Rights Department. The ISF began immediate investigations into the complaints that continued as of October 14. According to the ISF Human Rights Unit, in the course of its own investigations, the ISF took disciplinary action against officers it found responsible for abuse or mistreatment, including dismissals, but it did not publicize this information.

In 2018 authorities arrested an ISF prison officer on charges of sexual abuse of an inmate. The case continued as of October 19, but no additional details were available.

Most investigations were initiated by prisoners’ family members contacting the Ministry of Interior to report complaints, although prison directors could also initiate investigations. Prisoners and detainees have the ability to report abuse directly to the ISF Human Rights Unit. According to a government official, prison directors often protected officers under investigation.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted independent monitoring of prison and detention conditions by local and international human rights groups and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and such monitoring took place. The ICRC regularly visited 16 prisons and detention centers and visited a further 12 on an ad hoc basis.

Improvements: ISF training and corrections staff institutionalized best practices to protect human rights through developing and implementing standard operating procedures and modifying hiring practices and training programs to improve professionalization among new officers. Prisoners gained access to potable water in Roumieh prison following the completion of a 2019 ICRC project of building a new water well and water plant. Prisoners in other prisons gradually achieved access to potable water as the result of an agreement signed by the Rotary Club and the Directorate General of the ISF during the year that resulted in the installation of filters in existing water tanks.

Overcrowding in detention facilities raised fears of COVID-19 outbreaks within the detention centers, particularly in the notoriously overcrowded Roumieh prison. The ISF ensured immediate, early, and sustained use of masks, gloves, detergents, temperature checks, and limited visits for inmates. The ISF identified buildings at Roumieh prison as quarantine sites for inmates transferred to the prison and for existing inmates in the prison who showed COVID-19 symptoms. On September 17, more than 200 inmates tested positive for COVID-19 in Roumieh prison, prompting social media allegations of “rioting” in the prisons and media coverage of inmate families protesting outside the justice palace. The ISF took immediate action to quarantine and treat COVID-19 patients, including daily testing of inmates and staff to identify and track cases. The ISF also designated one building in Roumieh prison as a quarantine and treatment area for mild cases and transported severe cases to Daher El Bachek Government Hospital’s security wing.

The judiciary approved the use of a modernized but previously unused courtroom at Roumieh prison to expedite the processing of Mount Lebanon criminal cases by reducing the need to transport prisoners to court hearings. Since March authorities allowed those detained for minor, nonviolent offenses to be released after the ISF brought their cases to public prosecutors over the telephone or through video chat. Prosecutors dropped charges against some detainees following virtual reviews, while others were expected to face trial eventually but would not be kept in pretrial detention as was previously the norm. Authorities halted use of the courtroom on September 18 after the first positive COVID-19 cases in the prison.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention and provides for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of arrest or detention in court, and the government generally observed these requirements. The law requires judicial warrants before arrests except in cases of active pursuit. Nonetheless, NGOs and civil society groups alleged some incidents of the government arbitrarily arresting and detaining individuals, particularly protesters, refugees, and migrant workers. Typically, these detentions were for short periods and related to administrative questions associated with the residency or work status of these populations, often lasting between several hours and one or more days.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law generally requires a warrant for arrest and provides the right to a medical examination and referral to a prosecutor within 48 hours of arrest. The law requires that officials promptly inform individuals of the charges against them, and authorities generally adhered to this requirement. If authorities hold a detainee longer than 48 hours without formal charges, the arrest is considered arbitrary, and authorities must release the detainee or request a formal extension. The law provides that a person may be held in police custody for investigation for up to 48 hours, unless the investigation requires additional time, in which case the period of custody may be renewed for another 48 hours.

The law requires authorities to inform detainees of the charges filed against them. A suspect caught in the act of committing a crime must be referred to an examining judge, who decides whether to issue an indictment or order the release of the suspect. By law, bail is available in all cases regardless of the charges, although the amounts required may be prohibitively high.

The law states that from the moment of arrest, a suspect or the subject of a complaint has the right to contact a member of their family, an attorney, their employer, or an advocate of their choosing; has the right to an interpreter if needed; and has the right to undergo a medical examination on the approval of the general prosecutor. It does not, however, explicitly state whether a lawyer may attend preliminary questioning with the judicial police. In practical terms the lawyer may or may not be allowed to attend the preliminary questioning with judicial police. Under the framework of the law, it is possible to hold a suspect at a police station for 48 hours, renewable for another 48 hours upon an approval of the general prosecutor, before allowing the individual to exercise the right to contact an attorney. If the suspect lacks the resources to obtain legal counsel, authorities must provide free legal aid. The law does not require the judicial police to inform an individual who lacks legal counsel that one may be assigned through the regional bar association.

The law does not require authorities to inform individuals they have the right to remain silent. Many law provisions simply state that if the individuals being questioned refuse to make a statement or remain silent, this should be recorded and that the detainees may not be “coerced to speak or to undergo questioning, on pain of nullity of their statements.”

The law excludes from this protection suspects accused of homicide, drug crimes, endangerment of state security, violent crimes, crimes involving terrorism, and those with a previous criminal conviction.

Authorities may prosecute officials responsible for prolonged arrest on charges of depriving personal freedom, but they rarely filed charges.

Authorities failed to observe many provisions of the law, and government security forces as well as armed nonstate actors such as Hizballah continued the practice of extrajudicial arrest and detention, including incommunicado detention. Additionally, the law permits military intelligence personnel to make arrests without warrants in cases involving military personnel or involving civilians suspected of espionage, treason, weapons possession, or terrorism.

Arbitrary Arrest: According to local NGOs, cases of arbitrary detention occurred, but most victims chose not to report violations against them to authorities. NGOs reported most cases involved vulnerable groups such as refugees, drug users, LGBTI individuals, and migrant workers who often feared retribution by authorities while having limited access to legal recourse. Civil society groups reported authorities frequently detained foreign nationals arbitrarily.

On June 23, the Mount Lebanon public prosecutor pressed charges against Shia cleric Sayyed Ali al-Amine, accusing him of stirring sectarian strife and criticizing religious rituals. Media initially reported that al-Amine was charged with meeting Israeli officials during a conference in Bahrain, stirring public sentiment against him, but the news outlets later stated this was reported in error. The case had not progressed as of October 19.

Pretrial Detention: The law states the period of detention for a misdemeanor may not exceed two months. Officials may extend this period by a maximum of two additional months. The initial period of custody may not exceed six months for a felony, but the detention may be renewed. Due to judicial backlogs, pretrial detention periods for felonies sometimes lasted for months or years.

Pretrial detention periods were often lengthy due to delays in due process, in some cases equal to or exceeding the maximum sentence for the alleged crime. As of October, the ISF reported 3,703 prisoners in pretrial detention, or approximately 55 percent of the 6,670 total detainees. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and closure of many courts, judges were instructed by the then minister of justice to conduct investigations and hearings via video calls to expedite the judicial process as well as to prevent the spread of coronavirus among pretrial detainees, lawyers, and judges. This resulted in the release of 1,200 detainees as of May 15 and a sustained significant decrease in the overall number of pretrial detainees. According to a study by the Lebanese Center for Human Rights, before May detainees spent on average one year in pretrial detention prior to sentencing, although those suspected of terrorism, espionage, and violent homicide were often held much longer. According to local NGOs, some Lebanese Sunni militants who were detained after returning from fighting in Syria remained in pretrial detention for more than five years.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

Although the constitution provides for an independent judiciary, authorities subjected the judiciary to political pressure, particularly through negotiations among political factions regarding the appointment of key prosecutors and investigating magistrates. As of September 8, President Aoun had not signed a routine draft decree for judicial reassignments that had been with him since April 16.

Defendants involved in routine civil and criminal proceedings sometimes solicited the assistance of prominent individuals to influence the outcomes of their cases.

Trial Procedures

The constitution and law provide for the right to a fair and public trial.

Defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty and have the right to be promptly informed of the charges against them. Trials are generally public, but judges have the discretion to order a closed court session. Defendants have the right to be present at trial, to consult with an attorney in a timely manner, and to question witnesses against them. Defendants may present witnesses and evidence. Defendants have the right to free interpretation; however, interpreters were rarely available. Defendants have the right not to be compelled to testify or confess guilt; they have the right of appeal.

The Military Court has jurisdiction over cases involving the military, police, and government officials, as well as those involving civilians accused of espionage, treason, weapons possession, and draft evasion. It also may try civilians on security charges or for violations of the military code of justice. While civilian courts may try military personnel, the Military Court often hears these cases, including for charges unrelated to official military duty. Human rights activists raised concerns that such proceedings created the potential for impunity.

Governance and justice in the Palestinian camps varied greatly, with most camps under the control of joint Palestinian security forces representing multiple factions. Palestinian groups in refugee camps operated an autonomous system of justice mostly nontransparent to outsiders and beyond the control of the state. For example local popular committees in the camps attempted to resolve disputes through informal mediation methods but occasionally transferred those accused of more serious offenses (for example, murder and terrorism) to state authorities for trial.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

There is an independent judiciary in civil matters, but plaintiffs seldom submitted civil lawsuits seeking damages for government human rights abuses. During the year there were no examples of a civil court awarding a person compensation for such abuses. There is no regional mechanism to appeal adverse domestic human rights decisions.

The country has registered reservations regarding individual complaints on all international human rights treaties, and appeals to international human rights bodies or special procedures such as the Committee Against Torture are accessible only after exhausting all domestic remedies. In May 2019 a coalition of NGOs sent a submission to the special rapporteur on freedom of speech concerning the Ministry of Telecommunications’ blocking of Grindr, to which the government did not reply during the year.

Property Restitution

During the year while municipalities and security services continued to evict Syrian refugees from informal settlements on private land, in most cases evictions were ordered by the Lebanese landlord, most often due to nonpayment of rent, for reappropriating the land or property, or in connection with intercommunity tensions. While evictions generally cited violations of building codes, environmental codes, or both, collective and individual evictions proceeded without any opportunity for legal challenge. On June 8, the Litani River Authority (LRA) instructed 42 Syrian refugees living in an informal settlement in Nabatieh, South Lebanon, to relocate farther away from the river. The following day the LRA returned with an ISF escort and demolished the shelters without providing advance notice or allowing the families to collect their belongings before demolition began.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The law prohibits such actions, but there were reports that authorities interfered with the privacy of persons regarded as enemies of the government. There were reports that security services monitored private email and other digital correspondence. The law allows the interception of telephone calls with prior authorization from the prime minister at the request of the minister of interior or minister of defense.

Militias and non-Lebanese forces operating outside the area of central government authority frequently violated citizens’ privacy rights. Various nonstate actors, such as the FTO Hizballah, used informer networks, telephone monitoring, and electronic monitoring to obtain information regarding their perceived adversaries.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for the Press

The constitution provides for freedom of expression, including for the press, and stipulates that restrictions may be imposed only under exceptional circumstances. The government generally respected this right, but a coalition of 60 NGOs cited in July what they characterized as an upward trend in restrictions on freedom of expression, especially on social media, particularly regarding political and social topics.

Freedom of Speech: Individuals were generally free to criticize the government and discuss matters of public interest; however, several legal restrictions limit this right. The law prohibits discussing the dignity of the president or insulting him or the president of a foreign country. The military code of justice prohibits insulting the security forces, and the Military Court prosecuted civilians under this statute.

On January 7, the ISF Cybercrimes Bureau questioned journalist and activist Nidal Ayoub in relation to posters she carried during protests with slogans such as, “God is great but the revolution is greater.” Ayoub was previously the subject of a smear campaign in December 2019 during which she was accused of working for Israel and a U.S. intelligence agency; she faced numerous threats and insults after her address was released on social media. In response Ayoub filed a defamation lawsuit against the alleged instigator of the smear campaign, who has yet to be called for questioning. The alleged instigator responded by filing a countersuit accusing Ayoub of having attacked the president, the sovereignty of the state, and religion. As of December 16, courts had not taken up the lawsuits.

In June public prosecutor Ghassan Oueidat ordered that critics of the president be criminally prosecuted. The NGO ALEF (Association Libanaise pour l’Education et la Formation) reported that legal rights advocates objected to implementation of the order and that as a result no one was actually criminally prosecuted for mocking or insulting the president.

Freedom of Press and Media, Including Online Media: A 1962 law regulates print media. The law holds journalists responsible for erroneous or false news; threats or blackmail; insult, defamation, and contempt; causing prejudice to the president’s dignity; insulting the president or the president of a foreign country; instigation to commit a crime through a publication; and sectarian provocation. The law further contains detailed rules governing the activities of printing houses, press media, libraries, publishing houses, and distribution companies. This law provides rules and conditions for becoming a journalist and for obtaining licenses for new publications.

There was uncertainty regarding which legal framework is applicable to online news sites in the country. No specific law regulates online speech. The law, however, contains a number of speech offenses, such as defamation of public officials, public entities, and individuals. Authorities are accordingly able to prosecute individuals, journalists, and bloggers for what they express online under various authorities including cybercrime statutes. Authorities heard these cases in both civil and military courts; they generally carried sentences of between one and three years in prison as well as a fine.

The law governing audiovisual media bans live broadcasts of unauthorized political gatherings and certain religious events, as well as any broadcast of “any matter of commentary seeking to affect directly or indirectly the well-being of the nation’s economy and finances, material that is propagandistic and promotional, or promotes a relationship with Israel.” Media outlets must receive a license from the Council of Ministers to broadcast any type of political

news or programs. The law prohibits broadcasting programs that harm the state or its relations with foreign countries or have an effect on the well-being of such states. The law also prohibits the broadcast of programs that seek to harm public morals, ignite sectarian strife, or insult religious beliefs.

Violence and Harassment: Journalists continued to face intimidation and harassment. Political friction and tension led some outlets to fear entering certain “politically affiliated” areas to report without removing brandings and logos identifying the outlets. For example, MTV journalists sometimes reportedly removed their outlet’s logo when entering Hizballah-affiliated areas, and MTV routinely decided not to report from these areas because of concern about how they would be treated. Outlets that sought to report in areas under the control of Hizballah were required to obtain special permission from Hizballah’s media arm. Several media teams following the October 28-29 round of demarcation negotiations in Naqoura reported that Hizballah operatives harassed them, prevented them from filming, including by breaking equipment, and demanded that they leave. The caretaker minister of information and the head of the Editor’s Syndicate denounced the incidents, while an LAF spokesperson noted that some media teams had moved away from the designated demarcation negotiation media location into territory controlled by Hizballah. Journalist Mariam Seif Eddine, who lives in a Hizballah-controlled southern Beirut suburb and criticized Hizballah in her reporting, told the ISF that she and her family were threatened and assaulted by Hizballah members in early December.

Journalists covering protests were on several occasions attacked or harassed by rioters and security forces. ISF soldiers injured at least four media members on January 15 while covering protests outside the ISF’s el-Helou barracks in Beirut, where protesters were calling for the release of detainees who had been arrested the previous day. The ISF director general apologized and promised an investigation into the attacks. Journalist Mohammad Zbeeb was attacked by three assailants during a news conference on February 21. The assailants were allegedly supporters of a minister about whom Zbeeb had reported on critically after a February 13 attack against Zbeeb, which occurred in a private parking structure. One of the minister’s bodyguards admitted to planning and carrying out the February 13 attack. Several local and international media workers were injured on June 6, 11, and 12 while covering protests, and on July 15, the minister of interior called for security forces to step up their protection of journalists.

Authorities continued to prosecute online, print, and television journalists for violations of the country’s publications law. Prosecutors sometimes referred these cases to criminal courts based on both private complaints and their own discretion, but more often they referred such cases to the Publications Court. Publications Court cases typically remained open for a year or more and typically ended with fines or dismissal. Judge Ghada Aoun on March 19 pursued the prosecution of economist Hassan Moukalled and OTV journalist Josephine Dib for slander and defamation against Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt and Member of Parliament Wael Abou Faour, and transferred the case to the Publications Court, according to a report by the Samir Kassir Foundation.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: Authorities selectively applied elements of the law that permit censorship of pornographic material, political opinion, and religious material considered a threat to national security or offensive to the dignity of the head of state or foreign leaders. The Directorate of General Security (DGS) may also review and censor any foreign newspapers, magazines, and books to determine admissibility into the country, but these reviews were mostly for explicit, pornographic content. The law prohibits the press from publishing blasphemous content regarding the country’s officially recognized religious groups or content that may provoke sectarian feuds. Some journalists reported that political violence and extralegal intimidation led to self-censorship.

The law includes guidelines regarding materials deemed unsuitable for publication in a book, newspaper, or magazine. Any violation of the guidelines may result in the author’s imprisonment or a fine. Authors could publish books without prior permission from the DGS, but if the book contains material that violates the law, including material considered a threat to national security, the DGS may legally confiscate the book and put the author on trial. Publishing without prior approval a book that contained unauthorized material could put the author at risk of a prison sentence, fine, and confiscation of the published materials.

Authorities from any of the recognized religious groups could request that the DGS ban a book. The government may prosecute offending journalists and publications in the publications court. According to NGOs, as of September 8, each of the 30 book-banning cases the government registered in the publications court in 2017—mainly from libel suits filed by politicians, political parties, and private citizens—remained in the process of being resolved. Authorities occasionally also referred such cases to criminal courts, a process not established in law.

Libel/Slander Laws: In most cases criminal courts heard libel and other defamation complaints, which may carry sentences of one to three years in prison but typically resulted in fines or a promise to remove offending material from the internet. NGOs and activists reported increased prosecutions under such laws, and political figures or their representatives filed several complaints against critics throughout the year. The human rights NGO ALEF reported that in several dozen cases during the year, criminal defamation suits were filed against journalists, bloggers, political activists, and private citizens, including for posting their opinions in WhatsApp groups or on Facebook. While these cases rarely, if ever, resulted in prolonged detentions or jail sentences, interrogations by police and lengthy, expensive trials created a chilling effect on political speech.

NGOs stated that more than 100 individuals who participated in protests were detained by security forces because of statements they made at demonstrations or on social media. On June 18, security forces detained activist Michel Chamoun for allegedly criticizing President Michel Aoun and posting a video online describing Aoun’s tenure as president as a “humiliation.” Protesters in Jounieh clashed with security forces following Chamoun’s arrest, blocking the city’s main road and setting fire to debris. Chamoun was released the same day. Following his release Chamoun

claimed to have been compelled by security forces to sign a pledge not to insult Aoun again if he wished to avoid prosecution. Chamoun had previously been arrested in April for criticizing Maronite patriarch Boutros Rai, but he was released after the patriarch declined to press charges.

Also on June 18, DGS personnel detained activist brother and sister Bandar el-Khatib and Kinda el-Khatib in Halba, Akkar. The pair allegedly criticized Hizballah and President Michel Aoun in social media posts. While Bandar was released on June 20, Kinda was referred to the Military Court and remained in custody as of the end of the year. Kinda is known as a Future Movement supporter, and the Future Movement’s ‘Blue Force’ Twitter account launched the hashtag #FreedomforKindaKhatib in solidarity with her. Social media campaigns were launched by those who called for her release and those who accused her of being an Israeli agent and of opposing Hizballah. On June 22, prosecutors charged her with spying for Israel and entering the West Bank and Gaza. On September 3, the investigating Military Court prosecutor issued an indictment against her, accusing her of communicating with agents of “the Zionist enemy” and providing security information about the country for the benefit of foreign countries, and referred her to the Military Court for trial. In the details of the indictment, it was noted that Kinda confirmed she had corresponded with an Israeli journalist, which she reported to the ISF’s Public Relations Division. The indictment also claimed Kinda met with a Kuwaiti intelligence officer and provided him with security information. On December 13, Kinda was sentenced to three years in prison for “collaborating” with and traveling to Israel.

Private citizens may file criminal complaints, which the law requires an investigating judge to consider, and many defamation cases were initiated via the allegations of private citizens. Politicians at times responded to allegations of wrongdoing leveled at them by filing criminal complaints alleging defamation. On August 24, Speaker Berri filed an antidefamation lawsuit against three journalists for their coverage of the August 8 demonstrations. The military justice code also prohibits defamation of the army.

The ISF Cybercrimes Bureau reported that, as of August 14, it received referrals of 371 defamation cases for investigation. The bureau reportedly investigated 671 defamation cases during the year. In March the NGO Human Rights Watch reported that security agencies called in at least 29 individuals for interrogation concerning free speech charges, including insult and defamation, between October 2019 and March. In 2019 Human Rights Watch reported a 325 percent increase in the number defamation cases investigated by authorities and noted prison sentences against at least three individuals in defamation cases between 2015 and 2019.

Nongovernmental Impact: Political and religious figures sometimes sought to rally public outcry aimed at inhibiting freedom of expression and the press, including through coercion and threats of violence. Amal and Hizballah leaders cited “foreign interference” as a justification for limiting media publications in areas that they controlled.

Internet Freedom

The law does not restrict access to the internet. The government maintains a monopoly over the internet backbone, as well as over the fixed and mobile telephone industry in general, and therefore it exercises tight control over internet service providers (ISPs). Private ISPs obtain a permit by decree from the Ministry of Telecommunications.

The government reportedly restricted access to some websites to block online gambling, pornography, religiously provocative material, extremist forums, and Israeli websites, but there were no verified reports the government systematically attempted to collect personally identifiable information via the internet. Generally, websites are censored through court orders filed with the ISF’s Cybercrimes Bureau for further investigation, which issues a final order to the Ministry of Telecommunications. Website owners are not notified that their websites have been blocked, but they must appeal the blocking within 48 hours in order to have the decision overturned. NGOs reported that the Ministry of Telecommunications continued to block websites without warning. In April the Office of the Prosecutor General ordered the Ministry of Telecommunications to block 28 exchange rate applications which, it claimed, were spreading false information about the unofficial exchange rate between the U.S. dollar and the Lebanese lira. On June 2, the website Blogger, a platform that allows users to create their own blogs, was blocked. The ministry provided no explanation for the blocking.

Restrictions on freedom of speech concerning government officials applied to social media communications, which authorities typically considered a form of publication rather than private correspondence. Human rights groups reported that political parties and their supporters intimidated individuals online and in person in response to online posts deemed critical of political leaders or religious figures. The ISF’s Cybercrime Bureau and other state security agencies also summoned journalists, bloggers, and activists to question them about social media and blog posts, especially when they criticized political figures or religious sects. On February 24, the Mount Lebanon public prosecutor ordered the arrest of journalist Charbel Khoury after Khoury was questioned by the ISF’s Cybercrimes Bureau over tweets that criticized the Free Patriotic Movement party chief’s economic advisor. Khoury refused to delete his tweet or sign any pledges to do so during interrogation. Khoury was released. NGOs noted the number of known summonses might not be accurate since many individuals chose not to discuss or report their cases.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions specific to academic freedom, but libel and slander laws apply.

The majority of private universities enjoyed freedom of expression, and students were free to hold student elections and organize cultural, social, and political activities.

Physical disputes over Hizballah banners commemorating the Shia holiday of Ashura and banners celebrating Salim Ayyash, who was convicted in absentia with the Special Tribunal for Lebanon verdict, broke out in Nabaa and Khalde in mid-August during the buildup to the Shia holiday of Ashura. In Khalde violence broke out for a second time on August 27 between local Sunnis and supporters of Amal and Hizballah over the hanging of Ashura banners. Several injuries were reported, as well as the deaths of a Sunni teenager and Syrian man.

The DGS Censorship Bureau did not ban any films during the year due to the lack of film releases in the country then. In 2019 the DGS Censorship Bureau requested the banning of two films, *Hard Paint* (2018) and *Damascus Cover* (2017), on the premise that they promoted homosexuality and the Israeli intelligence service, respectively. As of October 19, the Ministry of Interior had not issued final judgment on the DGS request. The DGS reviewed all films and plays, and there were complaints among the public that the DGS decision-making process lacked transparency and was influenced by the opinions of religious institutions and political groups.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The constitution provides for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, and the government generally respected these freedoms.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The constitution provides for the freedom of peaceful assembly with some conditions established by law. Organizers are required to obtain a permit from the Interior Ministry three days prior to any demonstration.

Security forces occasionally intervened to disperse demonstrations, usually when protesters caused property damage or clashes broke out between opposing protesters. Security forces generally allowed demonstrators to protest peacefully during the widespread mass protests that began in October 2019 and during which the ISF and LAF predominantly demonstrated restraint and professionalism in interactions with protesters. The ISF occasionally used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse protesters who authorities alleged were engaging in violence or vandalism, and the LAF in some instances used nonlethal force to disperse protesters who resisted LAF efforts to clear key thoroughfares. The NGOs Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, however, reported security forces used excessive force against protesters on some occasions.

On January 15, hundreds of protesters gathered outside the el-Helou police station to object to the detention by authorities the previous night of more than 50 demonstrators. Violent confrontation broke out after protesters threw rocks, firecrackers, and bottles. According to witness accounts and footage reviewed by Human Rights Watch, at approximately 9 p.m. ISF units charged the gathered protesters, deploying large amounts of tear gas and using batons against protesters. An estimated 120 protesters were arrested but released the next day. In the incident 40 ISF members were injured, as well as four journalists and an unknown number of protesters. The ISF completed internal investigations into the incident but did not make the results of these investigations available to the public. The ISF also sought judicial investigations into the matter, but protesters who raised allegations against the ISF in media declined to take their allegations to the judiciary, preventing public investigations. On January 18 and 19, violent clashes erupted between ISF riot police and protesters, resulting in approximately 400 injured persons between protesters and ISF personnel. Security forces used rubber bullets, tear gas, and water cannons to disperse or deter protesters as well as intimidating and, in some cases, beating those attempting to film abuses. The media freedom organization Samir Kassir Foundation reported that security agents forced playwright and activist Hashem Adnan to delete a video he took of them destroying protester tents in downtown Beirut on March 28.

In the wake of the massive explosion at the Port of Beirut on August 4, which many Lebanese blamed on systemic government corruption and negligence, tens of thousands of protesters gathered in downtown Beirut on August 8 to demand the resignation of the second government in less than a year, ousting of the political elite, and accountability for the port disaster. Protesters clashed with security forces on August 8, including the PPF, LAF, and ISF. During the night protesters broke into, temporarily occupied, and vandalized the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Energy and Water, Ministry of Economy and Trade, Ministry of Environment, Association of Banks of Lebanon, and Le Grey Hotel, which was set on fire. The LAF used rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse some protesters engaged in vandalism and to discourage protesters from throwing stones, Molotov cocktails, and smoke bombs. The ISF used batons and tear gas to disperse demonstrators. One plain clothes individual identified by the ISF as belonging to the PPF and surrounded by security forces members but not wearing a uniform, shot live ammunition at protesters from within parliament premises. NGOs also reported live ammunition was shot from within the compound belonging to the PPF. Videos on social media appeared to show an LAF soldier firing live ammunition into the air before being stopped by his commanding officer. The LAF opened an investigation into the incident and reported the soldier was removed from active duty and permanently reassigned to an administrative position, and the soldier's company commander was relieved of his command. Authorities used pellet shot (birdshot) against protesters, resulting in injuries to the head, eyes, and torsos of several demonstrators and some aid workers, although it remained unclear who was responsible.

The Lebanese Red Cross and the Islamic Emergency Relief Corps reported 728 injured (including both protesters and security forces), of whom 153 were transported to hospitals. The LAF reported 105 injuries, including two in critical condition. The ISF issued a statement that one ISF soldier was killed after falling down an elevator shaft in a building occupied by protesters, and 128 other ISF personnel were injured in the clashes. The ISF also stated that 20 individuals were detained during the protest. A lawyer with the NGO Legal Agenda said that 18 of the 20 individuals were released after 24 hours and two remained detained on charges unrelated to the protests.

After clashes between pro-President Aoun and anti-Aoun demonstrators grew violent outside the Presidential Palace in Baabda on September 12, LAF soldiers attempted to defuse tensions by forming a human cordon between the two sides. Multiple videos emerged on social media appearing to show individual uniformed soldiers using live fire in close proximity to protesters. In three videos soldiers fired live rounds into the air as a crowd control measure. The LAF released a statement noting that soldiers were “forced to shoot into the air” to disperse crowds after demonstrators pelted the LAF with rocks. Security forces investigated the incident and found no misconduct. Human Rights Watch condemned the use of live ammunition, called on the LAF to revise rules on the escalation of force at protests, and demanded an investigation of the incidents.

Altercations between protesters and supporters of the FTO Hizballah occurred sporadically during the protests, and security forces attempted to separate the conflicting groups with varying levels of success. On August 8, Hizballah and Amal supporters burned the symbolic gallows that protesters had erected to hang effigies of political leaders, including Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Amal leader Nabih Berri. On August 31, black-clad individuals, allegedly Amal and Hizballah supporters, riding motorcycles destroyed tents and personal property belonging to protesters in downtown Beirut.

Amnesty International reported that in October 2019 the LAF used live ammunition fired in the air to disperse protesters blocking a main road in the northern area of Beddawi, which resulted in the alleged wounding of two protesters. During the same incident, five officers were injured. As of December 16, a military court was investigating the incident. In 2019 an LAF bodyguard opened fire from inside a military vehicle attempting to pass through protesters blocking a road in Khalde, killing one protester. The LAF arrested the shooter and an investigation into the incident continued as of December 16.

Freedom of Association

The constitution provides for freedom of association, with some conditions established by law, and the government generally respected the law.

No prior authorization is required to form an association, but organizers must notify the Ministry of Interior for it to obtain legal recognition, and the ministry must verify that the organization respects “public order, public morals, and state security.” In some cases the ministry sent an NGO’s notification papers to the security forces to initiate inquiries about an organization’s founding members. Organizations must invite ministry representatives to any general assembly where members vote on bylaws, amendments, or seats on the board of directors. The ministry must then validate the vote or election. Failure to do so can result in the dissolution of the organization by a decree issued by the Council of Ministers.

The cabinet must license all political parties.

In areas under Hizballah’s sway, independent NGOs faced harassment and intimidation, including social, political, and financial pressures. Hizballah reportedly paid youth who worked in “unacceptable” NGOs to leave the groups.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement

The law provides for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation. The government generally respected these rights for citizens but placed extensive limitations on the rights of refugee populations and asylum seekers, most of whom were from the West Bank and Gaza, Syria, and Iraq (see section 2.f., Protection of Refugees).

In-country Movement: Armed nonstate actors hindered or prevented movement in areas they controlled. Armed Hizballah members controlled access to some areas under Hizballah’s control, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine prevented access to a border area under its control, according to the security services. Within families, men sometimes exercised considerable control over female relatives, restricting their activities outside the home or their contact with friends and relatives.

Citizenship: Citizenship is derived exclusively from the father. A citizen mother married to a noncitizen father may not transmit Lebanese citizenship to her children (see section 2.g., Stateless Persons).

e. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons

Fighting in 2007 destroyed the Nahr el-Bared Palestinian refugee camp, displacing approximately 30,000 residents, of whom an estimated 27,000 were registered Palestinian refugees. Many of the displaced resided in areas adjacent to the camp or in other areas of the country where United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) services were available. A comprehensive, multiyear plan to rebuild the Nahr el-Bared Camp in eight stages began in 2008; the project continued at year’s end and was approximately 75 percent completed. Remaining reconstruction was not fully funded, with a 76.5 billion Lebanese lira (\$51 million according to the official exchange rate) shortfall remaining. Of the 27,000 Palestinians originally displaced following the camp’s destruction, UNRWA expected that approximately 21,000 would return. As of June, 3,370 families (13,887 residents) of the displaced families had returned to newly reconstructed apartments in the camp, and the temporary settlements that provided housing for them near Nahr el-Bared Camp were decommissioned.

f. Protection of Refugees

As of July there were nearly 880,414 Syrian refugees in the country registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Since the government instructed UNHCR to stop registering Syrian refugees in early 2015, this total did not include Syrian refugees who arrived after that time. There were no formal refugee camps in the country for Syrians. Most Syrian refugees resided in urban areas, many in unfinished, substandard, or nonresidential buildings. Approximately 20 percent lived in informal tented settlements, often adjacent to agricultural land, according to UNHCR. According to a UN study, refugees often took loans to cover basic needs such as rent, food, and health care, leaving nearly 90 percent in debt and food insecure.

In 2015 the government banned the entry of all Syrian refugees other than undefined “humanitarian exceptions.” During the year the Ministry of Social Affairs did not acknowledge or submit any humanitarian admission cases, according to UNHCR.

Nearly 12,200 UNHCR-registered Iraqi refugees resided in the country, including 193 additional Iraqis who entered as of July 31 to escape violence. As of July 31, UNHCR also registered 2,282 refugees and asylum seekers from Sudan and 2,179 refugees and asylum seekers from other countries.

Abuse of Migrants, Refugees, and Stateless Persons: In April 2019 the Higher Defense Council (HDC), a body the president chairs that includes cabinet ministers and security service heads, issued guidance to the security services to increase enforcement of building codes. This resulted in the destruction of thousands of refugee shelters. While demolition of hard structures did not continue during the year, environmental concerns remained one of the key reasons given for collective evictions in the first half of the year, affecting more than 470 individuals.

Multiple NGOs and UN agencies shared reports of sexual harassment and exploitation of refugees by employers and landlords, including paying workers below the minimum wage, working excessive hours, debt bondage, and pressuring families into early marriage of their daughters to relieve economic hardship. There were multiple reports of foreign migrant domestic workers (mainly from East Africa and Southeast Asia) tied to their employers through legal sponsorship, known as the *kafala* system, who faced physical, mental, and sexual abuse, unsafe working conditions, and nonpayment of wages. According to NGOs that assisted migrant workers in reporting these abuses to authorities, security forces and judges did not always adequately investigate these crimes, and victims sometimes refused to file complaints or retracted testimony due to threats and fear of reprisals or deportation.

On November 23, a Syrian man in Bcharre allegedly shot and killed a local citizen before surrendering to security forces. The killing provoked an outcry from the local community, including physical violence, destruction of homes, threats, and verbal abuse directed at Syrians. Several Syrian refugees were injured, some severely. The ministries of Interior and Social Affairs were alerted, and the LAF intervened. The municipality hosted a town hall meeting and issued a circular calling on the security agencies to search the homes of Syrians living in Bcharre to find weapons and verify identities. Starting November 23, village residents—some armed with sticks, knives, and other weapons—drove out hundreds of Syrian families from Bcharre, leaving many unable to take their belongings, while others saw their homes damaged or destroyed. The UNHCR Office in Tripoli received more than 270 families, assessed their situations, and provided emergency cash assistance, medical and psychosocial support, and advice on alternative shelter, where possible. UNHCR advocated with authorities to promote calm and refrain from taking, encouraging, or condoning any actions of retaliation against Syrian refugees, stressing that collective retribution against a whole community for the actions of one individual was unacceptable.

Refoulement: The government reaffirmed its commitment to the principle of nonrefoulement with respect to Syrians. Some political party representatives, however, employed antirefugee rhetoric, stating that assistance to Syrian refugees in particular placed an additional burden on the state already facing an economic crisis. The DGS coordinated with Syrian government officials to facilitate the voluntary return of approximately 21,000 refugees from April 2018 until August. UNHCR did not organize these group returns but was present at departure points and found no evidence that returns were involuntary or coerced in the cases of those refugees whom they interviewed. Human rights groups, including Amnesty International, questioned government claims that refugee returns were entirely voluntary, calling the environment “coercive” and citing credible risk of persecution or other human rights abuses upon return to areas controlled by the Syrian regime.

The government on July 14 approved a new refugee returns policy, which outlined its desire for Syrian refugees to return to Syria. The policy committed the government to eliminating obstacles that impede returns and to facilitating exit procedures, including waiving fees that departing refugees would otherwise have to pay as a condition of their exit. Despite reaffirming the government’s commitment to the principle of nonrefoulement, the policy downplayed the protection risks and lack of basic services returnees would face in Syria. It also called on the government to carry out a census of all refugees in Lebanon, with fines and potential detention for those who fail to self-report, as well as the creation of an electronic database containing refugee biodata to be managed by the Ministry of Social Affairs, both of which raised significant protection concerns, according to UNHCR. Although significant financial and human resource hurdles prevented the government from implementing the new policy during the year, its approval after years of deliberation stoked refugee fears of refoulement.

An HDC decision enacted in April 2019 required the deportation of anyone arrested and found to have entered the country illegally thereafter. Deportations ceased in mid-March, when the border with Syria was closed amid COVID-19, and resumed again in September. As of September 2019, the DGS reported it had deported 2,731 individuals under this order, and deportations continued until the end of March when they were suspended following

the implementation of border closures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Humanitarian organizations considered the government’s deportation policy—particularly the HDC decision—to be creating a high risk of refoulement in view of the lack of a formal review process to assess credible fear of persecution or torture. Human rights groups and the international community all raised concerns about the risk of turning over refugees to Syrian authorities. There were several anecdotal reports by international observers of Syrian refugees who were subsequently abused in detention, including one death in custody in July, after being turned over to Syrian authorities by Lebanese officials. Government officials maintained that the policy only applied to illegal migrants, not refugees, although it did not appear there was sufficient due process to make such a determination. UNHCR and international donors urged the government to provide for a judicial or independent administrative review before carrying out deportations. The government maintained that while the law requires a court hearing on all deportation cases, it did not have the bandwidth to process the existing caseload.

Non-Syrian asylum seekers arrested due to irregular entry or residency faced administrative detention without being sentenced by a court. The DGS held these individuals in a migrant retention facility where officials processed their immigration files before making administrative deportation decisions. In the past most cases resulted in deportation of the detainee, except for instances where UNHCR secured their resettlement to a third country. Deportations of non-Syrian refugees/asylum seekers were not observed by UNHCR during the year.

In September, Human Rights Watch reported that more than 200 migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers attempting to flee by boat to Cyprus were intercepted by Cypriot and Lebanese security forces and forced to return to Lebanon. In October, UNHCR and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon’s Maritime Task Force hosted a roundtable with the DGS and LAF to sensitize them to international protection standards, including how to treat returnees requesting asylum after being intercepted at sea or otherwise received.

Access to Asylum: The law does not provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status. Nonetheless, the country hosted an estimated 1.5 million refugees, the vast majority of them Syrian. In an effort to address the low number of refugees obtaining and renewing legal residency, the government has waived residency fees since 2017 for refugees who registered with UNHCR prior to 2015. This ruling excluded unregistered refugees or those who had renewed on the basis of Lebanese sponsorship. DGS implementation of the waiver continued to be inconsistent, and there was minimal improvement in the percentage of refugees with legal status. According to UNHCR, 28 percent of the refugee population held legal residency as of July.

Due to the slow pace of implementation of residency determinations, the majority of Syrian refugees were unable to renew their legal documents, which significantly affected their freedom of movement due to the possibility of arrests at checkpoints, particularly for adult men. While authorities released most detainees within a few days, some of the refugees said authorities required them to pay fines before releasing them or confiscated their identification documents (IDs). Syrian refugees faced barriers to obtaining Syrian IDs that were required to renew their residency permits in Lebanon because of the hostility of the Syrian government to the refugee population and because Syrian embassies and consulates charged exorbitant fees. Obtaining and maintaining legal residency was also a challenge for refugees of other nationalities, particularly Iraqis, due to high renewal fees and sponsorship requirements. There is no official limitation of movement for Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS) in the country; however, PRS without legal status faced limitations on their freedom of movement, mainly due to the threat of arrest at checkpoints.

Since 2014 authorities granted entry visas at the border only to PRS with either a verified embassy appointment in the country or a flight ticket and visa to a third country. Additionally, limited numbers of PRS secured visas to the country by obtaining prior approval from the DGS, which required a sponsor in the country and could not be processed at border posts. In 2019 UNRWA estimated that 12 percent of PRS in the country had arrived after 2016.

In 2017 the DGS issued a circular allowing the free, unlimited renewal of PRS residency for six months, with no fees for delayed submission. This circular has been consistently used since its issuance and applies to PRS who entered the country legally or who regularized their status before September 2016. The circular also granted temporary residency documents to PRS who turned 15 years old in the country, allowing them to use available documents, such as an individual civil status card, instead of passports or national identity cards. Previously, children were required to have an ID or valid travel document to be able to renew their residency. If they did not have one of these two documents, their legal status was revoked, and they became at risk of arrest and detention if they were stopped at any checkpoint. The circular, issued for residency renewal and not regularization, did not apply to PRS who entered the country through unofficial border crossings. Authorities issued a departure order to PRS who entered the country through official border crossings but who overstayed their temporary transit visas or failed to renew their visas.

Since 2017 the government waived the condition of valid residency for birth and marriage registration for the PRS, expanding the application of a previous circular issued in 2017 applicable to Syrians. Since 2018, the Ministry of Interior waived the costly court proceedings to obtain birth registration of PRS and Syrian refugee children older than one year who were born in Lebanon between 2011 and 2018. The proof of marriage requirement remained in effect during the year, and a valid residency permit was needed to obtain a marriage certificate.

Freedom of Movement: Authorities imposed curfews in a number of municipalities across the country, allegedly to improve security of all communities. Some international observers raised concerns that these measures might be discriminatory and excessive, since authorities typically enforced them for Syrian refugees, who mostly lack legal residency status and could face greater consequences if detained for a curfew violation. In March, Human Rights

Watch reported that at least eight municipalities, citing COVID-19 concerns, implemented curfews that restricted the movement of Syrian refugees to certain times. Human Rights Watch claimed that the municipalities introduced these measures before the government called for a nationwide curfew. In the Kfarhabou municipality in March, authorities implemented restrictions to combat the spread of COVID-19, including a curfew on Syrian refugees between 3 p.m. and 7 a.m. In Darbaashtar municipality, also in March, Human Rights Watch declared Syrians were barred from leaving their homes or receiving visitors without exceptions.

The only restrictions on other Lebanese residents were general restrictions on movement except for emergencies, according to these reports. Some municipalities and neighborhoods hosting Syrian refugee populations continued to impose movement restrictions through curfews (outside of COVID-19 related curfews), evictions, and threats of evictions. UN agencies reported that local municipal officials frequently used the threat of evictions to exert control over refugees or to appease host communities competing with refugees for jobs and other resources.

During the year the government continued to limit refugees’ ability to reside in the country. Measures included forced compliance with building codes in refugee shelters, which resulted in evictions from private property, arrests for residency-related offenses, and refugee-specific limitations on movement ostensibly to contain the pandemic. In March as a precautionary measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19, law enforcement agents were instructed to refrain from carrying out arrests based on residency-related charges.

Police checkpoints and curfews imposed by municipalities restricted refugees’ movement. Cases of ID confiscation and fines for breaking curfews continued, and a few violent incidents against refugees occurred. UNHCR staff reported restrictions on movement increasingly forced families to send children and young women, whom authorities are less likely to stop yet who are more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, to perform family errands.

Employment: Authorities continued requiring Syrian refugees who wished to obtain residency permits to pledge to abide by the country’s laws, under which Syrians may work only in agriculture, construction, and cleaning. Employment restrictions that began in 2019 remained in effect, although enforcement was not as strict during the year.

The law allows a special account to provide end-of-service indemnities or severance pay to Palestinian refugees who retire or resign. These benefits were available only to Palestinians working in the legal labor market. Palestinians did not benefit from national sickness and maternity funds or the family allowances fund. UNRWA continued to bear the cost of basic medical, maternity, or family health-care expenses (excluding worker’s compensation).

Palestinian refugees received partial access to the benefits of the National Social Security Fund. A 2010 law expanding employment rights and removing some restrictions on Palestinian refugees was not fully implemented, and Palestinians remained barred from working in most skilled professions, including medicine, law and engineering that require membership in a professional association. Informal restrictions on work in other industries left many refugees dependent upon UNRWA for education, healthcare and social services. According to UN agencies, government officials, and Palestinian advocacy groups, Palestinian refugees consistently reported discrimination in hiring due to excessive bureaucracy and societal stigma. Lack of written contracts, lack of employment benefits, and insecure job tenure contributed to unstable working conditions.

Access to Basic Services: The government did not consider local integration of any refugees a viable solution.

The law considers UNRWA-registered Palestinian refugees to be foreigners. UNRWA provides health, education, social services, and emergency assistance to registered Palestinian refugees residing in the country. The amount of land allocated to the 12 official Palestinian refugee camps in the country has changed only marginally since 1948, despite a fourfold increase in the population. Consequently, most Palestinian refugees lived in overpopulated camps, some of which suffered heavy damage in past conflicts (see also section 2.e., Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons). By agreement with the government, Palestinian security committees provided security for refugees in the camps.

The government did not permit UNRWA to install individual electricity meters in apartments, preferring that UNRWA pay a single bill rather than collecting from thousands of households, which limited access to electricity for residents.

Palestinian refugees typically could not access public health and education services or own land. By law Palestinians are excluded from purchasing or inheriting property. Palestinians who owned and registered property prior to the 2001 law’s entry into force could bequeath it to their heirs.

Palestinian refugees residing in the country could not obtain citizenship and were not considered citizens of any other country. Palestinian refugee women married to citizens were able to obtain citizenship after one year of marriage. By law the father transmits citizenship to children. Palestinian refugees, including children, had limited social and civil rights and no access to government-provided health, education, or other social services. Children of Palestinian refugees faced discrimination in birth registration, and many had to leave school at an early age to earn an income.

Palestinian refugees who fled Syria for the country since 2011 received limited basic support from UNRWA, including food aid, cash assistance, and winter assistance, such as cash to purchase fuel for heating. Authorities permitted children of PRS to enroll in UNRWA schools and access UNRWA health clinics.

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education facilitated the enrollment of more than 200,000 non-Lebanese students, predominantly Syrian refugees, in public schools (basic education from kindergarten to grade nine) in the 2019-20 academic year. UNHCR estimated there were almost 512,000 registered Syrians of school age (three to 14 years old) in the country. Donor funding to UN agencies covered school-related expenses, such as school fees, books, and uniforms. Syrian refugees had access to many nonprofit and private health centers and local clinics for primary care services, and UN agencies and NGOs funded the majority of associated costs with international donor support. Syrian refugees had access to a limited number of UNHCR-contracted hospitals for lifesaving and obstetric care. In July, Human Rights Watch alleged there was a dearth of protection facilities such as safe shelters in the country for male and transgender women survivors of sexual and gender-based violence fleeing Syria.

Iraqi refugees had access to both the public and private education systems. Iraqi refugees also had access to the primary healthcare system. UNHCR, through NGOs, provided secondary health care with donor support.

g. Stateless Persons

Citizenship is derived exclusively from the father, resulting in statelessness for children of a citizen mother and a noncitizen father when registration under the father's nationality is not possible. This legal discrimination particularly affected Lebanese, Palestinians, and increasingly Syrians from households headed by women. Moreover, undocumented Syrian refugees were unable to register their marriages and births of their children due to their lack of official status. Additionally, some children born to citizen fathers did not have their births registered due to administrative obstacles or a lack of understanding of the regulations. There were no official statistics on the size of the stateless population.

Approximately 3,000-5,000 Palestinians were not registered with UNRWA or the government. These Palestinians began to arrive in the country during the 1960s and do not hold any formal valid identification documentation. The government does not recognize their legal status in the country. Without documentation and legal status, nonregistered Palestinians faced restrictions on movement, risked arrest or detention, and encountered obstacles completing civil registration procedures.

Undocumented Palestinians, not registered in other countries where UNRWA operates, such as Syria or Jordan, were not necessarily eligible for the full range of services provided by UNRWA. In most cases UNRWA nonetheless provided primary health care, education, and vocational training services to undocumented Palestinians. The majority of these were men, many of them married to UNRWA-registered refugees or Lebanese citizen women, who could not transmit refugee status or citizenship to their husbands or children.

The Directorate of Political and Refugee Affairs is responsible for late registration of children of Palestinian refugees. According to the law, birth registration of children older than one year previously required a court procedure, proof of marriage, an investigation by the DGS, and a DNA test. The Ministry of Interior facilitated the required documentation for birth registration of the PRS and Syrian children more than one year old and born in the country since 2011. In such cases authorities no longer require the court procedure and DNA tests to register these children; however, proof of marriage is still mandatory. This decree does not apply to the registration of Palestinian refugee children older than one year.

Approximately 1,500 of an estimated 100,000 Kurds living in the country lacked citizenship, despite decades of family presence in the country. Most were descendants of migrants and refugees who left Turkey and Syria during World War I, but authorities continued to deny them citizenship to preserve the country's sectarian balance. The government issued a naturalization decree in 1994, but high costs and administrative obstacles prevented many individuals from acquiring official status. Some individuals who had previously received official status had their citizenship revoked in 2011 under a presidential decree. Others held an "ID under consideration" document without a date or place of birth.

Stateless persons lacked official identity documents that would permit them to travel abroad and could face difficulties traveling internally, including detention for not carrying identity documents. They had limited access to the regular employment market and no access to many professions. Additionally, they could not access public schools or public health-care facilities, register marriages or births, or own or inherit property.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

Although the law provides citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections conducted by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage, lack of government control over parts of the country, defects in the electoral process, previous prolonged extensions of parliament's mandate, and corruption in public office restricted this ability.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: Michel Aoun was elected president in 2016, ending two and one-half years of political stalemate. Following the passage of a new electoral law, parliamentary elections were held in 2018 for the first time in nine years. Observers concluded that the elections were generally free and fair. Eight members of parliament resigned following the August 4 Beirut port explosion. According to the constitution, parliamentary by-elections must be held within 60 days to fill vacant seats. Elections have been delayed until at least January 1, 2021, according to a ministerial decree issued September 10 that cited the state of emergency, damage to polling places in Beirut, lack of supplies, lack of funds, and overstretched security forces.

Political Parties and Political Participation: All major political parties and numerous smaller ones were almost exclusively based on confessional affiliation, and parliamentary seats were allotted on a sectarian basis.

Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: No law limits participation of women or members of minority groups in the political process, and they did participate. There were, however, significant cultural barriers to women’s participation in politics. Prior to 2004 no woman held a cabinet position, and there have been 13 female ministers subsequently, including sitting ministers. Six women served in the 20-member cabinet formed in January, one of whom became the country’s first female deputy prime minister and minister of defense. Six of the 128 members of parliament were women, and one of them resigned her seat in August. Several female members of parliament were close relatives of prominent male politicians, whereas female leadership of political parties was limited. Three parties introduced voluntary quotas for women. Since 2017 women have been able to run in municipal elections in their native towns instead of the municipality of their spouse.

Members of minority groups participated in politics. Regardless of the number of its adherents, authorities allocated every government-recognized religious group, except Ismaili Islam and Judaism, at least one seat in parliament. Voters elected three parliamentarians representing minorities (one Syriac Orthodox Christian and two Alawites) in the 2018 elections. None of the minority parliamentarians were women.

Since refugees are not citizens, they have no political rights in the country.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The country suffers from endemic corruption. Although the law provides criminal penalties for official corruption, the government did not implement the law effectively, and officials reportedly engaged in corrupt practices with impunity on a wide scale. Government and security officials, customs agents, and members of the judiciary were subject to laws against bribery and extortion, but the lack of strong enforcement limited the law’s effectiveness.

On May 28, parliament approved a law lifting the secrecy of bank accounts of sitting and former ministers, parliamentarians, and civil servants. The law gives power to the Special Investigation Commission of the Central Bank and the National Anticorruption Commission to investigate such cases.

On July 21, the government agreed to hire accounting firms to conduct forensic and financial audits of the Central Bank’s accounts. The government signed the contracts on September 1, but the auditor withdrew in November over a political impasse related to obtaining financial records.

The Central Inspection Board (CIB), an oversight body within the Office of the Prime Minister, is responsible for monitoring administrative departments, including procurement and financial actions, and remained mostly independent of political interference. The CIB may inspect employees of the national and municipal governments, and has the authority to seek their removal or refer cases for prosecution. The CIB’s authority does not extend to cabinet ministers or to municipal officials. The Social Security Fund and the Council for Development and Reconstruction, public entities that managed large funding flows, were outside the CIB’s jurisdiction.

In the wake of the massive explosion at the Port of Beirut on August 4, which many Lebanese blamed on systemic government corruption and negligence, tens of thousands of protesters gathered in downtown Beirut on August 8 to demand the resignation of the second government in less than a year, ousting of the political elite, and accountability for the port disaster. The judge leading the inquiry into the explosion paused the investigation under political pressure after he pursued indicting several members of the political elite.

Corruption: The government lacked strong control over corruption. There was limited parliamentary or auditing oversight of revenue collection and expenditures. On April 21, parliament endorsed the anticorruption law and approved the establishment of the Anticorruption Commission. On May 12, the government approved the *Anticorruption National Strategy* drafted by the Ministry of Administrative Reform and the UN Development Program. During the mass protests that began in October 2019 and continued to varying degrees during the year, demonstrators accused the government and public sector of widespread endemic corruption, lack of transparency, and limited accountability, all of which generated popular outrage. Within the first month of protests in 2019, there was an uptick in the number of corruption-related investigations and prosecution actions, but no verdicts were reached in any cases involving high-ranking officials during the year.

The most common types of corruption generally included political patronage; judicial failures, especially in investigations of official wrongdoing; and bribery at multiple levels within the national and municipal governments. A number of cases were referred to the judiciary, including a case involving off-speculation fuel oil purchased by the national electricity utility. Ministers and directors general were questioned, and more than 20 individuals were indicted in that case. On May 14, Financial Prosecutor Ali Ibrahim ordered the arrest of Mazen Hamdan, the Central Bank’s director of monetary operations, for manipulating the Lebanese lira’s exchange rate with the U.S. dollar. Hamdan was released on bail, and investigations continued as of September 8. The head of the Money Changers Syndicate, Mahmoud Mrad, and others were arrested following investigation into money changers selling currency in violation of regulatory standards. They were released, and no formal charges were filed as of December 16.

Two judges were dismissed from the judiciary during the year following internal investigations into corruption allegations.

Financial Disclosure: The law requires the president of the republic, the president of the Chamber of Deputies, and the president of the Council of Ministers as well as ministers, members of parliament, and judges to disclose their financial assets in a sealed envelope deposited at the Constitutional Council. The government does not make the information available to the public. Officials must do the same when they leave office. Heads of municipalities disclose their financial assets in a sealed envelope deposited at the Ministry of Interior, and civil servants deposit their sealed envelopes at the Civil Servants Council, which are also not available to the public. If a case is brought to the State Council for noncompliance, the State Council may take judiciary administrative action to remove the offender from office.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

A number of domestic and international human rights groups operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were sometimes responsive to these groups' views, but there was limited accountability for human rights abuses.

There was no information on reports from previous years of international and local human rights groups being targeted by security services for harassment.

Government Human Rights Bodies: Parliament's Committee on Human Rights struggled to make legal changes to guide ministries in protecting human rights. As of September 8, neither the 10-member National Human Rights Institute nor the 5-member National Preventive Mechanism against Torture located within it had a budget or commenced its work (see section 1.c., Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment).

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalizes rape and the use of threats or violence to claim a “marital right to intercourse,” although it does not explicitly outlaw spousal rape. While the government effectively enforced the law, its interpretation by religious courts in cases brought before them, and not to civil courts, precluded full implementation of civil law in all provinces, such as in the case of an abused wife compelled to return to her husband under personal status law, despite battery being outlawed. The minimum prison sentence for a person convicted of rape is five years, or seven years for raping a minor. The law no longer frees rapists from prosecution or nullifies their convictions if they married their victims.

The law criminalizes domestic violence, calls for provision of shelters, gives women the ability to file a restraining order against the abuser, and assigns special units within the ISF to receive domestic violence complaints. NGOs alleged that the definition of domestic violence was narrow and as a result did not provide adequate protection from all forms of abuse, such as spousal rape. Although the law provides for a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison for battery, religious courts could cite personal status law to require a battered wife to return to a home shared with her abuser. Some police, especially in rural areas, treated domestic violence as a social, rather than criminal, matter.

NGOs and activists criticized the domestic violence law, claiming that it does not sufficiently protect victims or punish abusers, who they alleged often received disproportionately light sentences.

Police and judicial officials worked to improve their management of domestic violence cases, but they noted that social and religious pressures—especially in more conservative communities—led to underreporting of cases. Some victims, often under pressure from relatives, sought arbitration through religious courts or between families rather than through the justice system. There were reports and cases of foreign domestic workers, usually women, suffering from mistreatment, abuse, and in some instances rape or conditions akin to slavery.

According to women's rights NGO Kafa, victims reported that police responses to complaints submitted by battered or abused women improved during the reporting period. During the year ISF and judicial officials received training on best practices for handling cases involving female detainees, including victims of domestic violence and sexual exploitation. NGOs that provided services to such victims reported increased access to potential victims in ISF and DGS custody. The ISF continued its practice of alerting its human rights unit to all cases involving victims of domestic violence and other vulnerable groups, so officers could track the cases and provide appropriate support to victims.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the ISF encouraged reporting of domestic violence including raising awareness on social media of their hotline for abuse survivors. The ISF reported that the number of calls to the hotline doubled between March 2019 and March. The NGO ABAAD was quoted in media saying that the government needed to increase services and availability of shelters to keep up with demand.

The Women's Affairs Division in the Ministry of Social Affairs and several NGOs continued projects to address sexual or gender-based violence, such as providing counseling and shelter for victims.

Other Harmful Traditional Practices: In February dozens of women gathered in front of the Higher Islamic Shia Council to protest the law giving full child custody to the father automatically upon divorce. The organizers, Protecting Lebanese Women and the National Campaign to Raise the Age of Custody, called for raising the age of

custody (age of emancipation) recognized by Shia courts. The protest was in reaction to a viral video of a woman, Lina Jaber, sneaking into the funeral service of her late daughter, who had been killed by stray bullets. Lina Jaber had lost custody of both her children when she filed for divorce, and her husband had forbidden her to attend the funeral.

On March 8, hundreds of protesters marched to demand raising the minimum age of marriage to 18, despite the event being officially cancelled to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Marriage is governed by 18 different sect-based personal status laws, and all sects allow girls to be married before age 18.

Sexual Harassment: The law prohibits sexual harassment, but authorities did not enforce the law effectively, and it remained a widespread problem that was among the October 2019 protesters’ most vocal complaints. The Director General of the ISF announced May 6 that during the first months of government-mandated COVID-19 shutdown, complaints of sexual harassment and sexual extortion doubled compared with the same time period before the pandemic.

Coercion in Population Control: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Discrimination: Women suffered discrimination under the law and in practice, including under the penal and personal status codes. The constitution does not explicitly prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex. In matters of marriage, child custody, inheritance, and divorce, personal status laws provide unequal treatment across the various confessional court systems but generally discriminate against women. All 18 recognized religious groups have their own personal status courts responsible for handling these matters, and laws vary depending on the religious group. For example, Sunni religious courts apply an inheritance law that provides a daughter one-half the inheritance of a son. Religious law on child custody matters favors the father in most instances, regardless of religion. Sharia courts weigh the testimony of one man as equal to that of two women. Nationality law also discriminates against women, who may not confer citizenship to their spouses and children, although widows may confer citizenship to their minor children born of a citizen father. By law women may own property, but they often ceded control of it to male relatives due to cultural norms and family pressure. The law does not distinguish between women and men in employment and provides for equal pay for men and women, although workplace gender discrimination, including wage discrimination, exists.

On March 9, President Aoun publicly expressed support for a unified personal status law under the civil code to replace the existing sect-based personal status laws. Since 2018 divorced women have been allowed to include the names of their children on their civil records.

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship is derived exclusively from the father, which may result in statelessness for children of a citizen mother and noncitizen father who may not transmit his own citizenship (see section 2.g., Stateless Persons). If a child’s birth is not registered within the first year, the process for legitimizing the birth is long and costly, often deterring families from registration. Syrian refugees no longer need legal residency to register the birth of their children. Authorities also waived several requirements for late birth registration by Syrian refugees. Birth registration remained inaccessible to some, because the government required proof of legal residence and legal marriage, documentation which was often unavailable to refugees.

Education: Education for citizens is free and compulsory through the primary phase. Noncitizen and stateless children, including those born of noncitizen fathers and citizen mothers and refugees, lacked this right. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education directed that non-Lebanese students could not outnumber Lebanese in any given classroom during the regular school shift, which sometimes limited enrollment. Syrian refugee children were not legally entitled to enroll in public schools at regular hours, although they could attend schools’ second shifts.

Educational institutions reported that, due to the economic crisis and lack of funding, a number of schools may be forced to close by the end of the year. The American University of Beirut laid off 25 percent of its workforce in June due to the economic crisis. The International Rescue Committee reported September 28 that at least one in four children in Beirut were at risk of missing a year of their education after 163 schools were damaged in the August 4 Beirut port explosion.

Child Abuse: The country lacked a comprehensive child protection law, although legal provisions furnished some protection to children who were victims of violence.

As of August 7, the child protection NGO Himaya reported assisting with more than 1,145 cases of psychological, physical, and sexual abuse as well as exploitation and neglect. The Ministry of Social Affairs has a hotline to report cases of child abuse. In a typical example, representatives of a local shelter for abused women and children described the case of a father who sexually and physically abused a child in the shelter’s care. According to the organization, the father escaped punishment through religious courts, as many families chose to handle such cases through these courts rather than the national justice system.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: There is no legal minimum age for marriage, and the government does not perform civil marriage. Most religious leaders opposed civil marriage, despite the fact that the country recognizes heterosexual civil marriages conducted outside the country. Each sect has its own religious courts governing matters of personal status, such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. The minimum age of marriage varies

from ages 14 to 18, depending on the sect. UN agencies, NGOs, and government officials noted high rates of early marriage among the Syrian refugee population, in some cases four times the rate of child marriage as before the conflict began. They partially attributed this circumstance to social and economic pressure on families with limited resources.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibits and punishes commercial sexual exploitation, child pornography, and child sex trafficking. The minimum age for consensual sex is 18 for both men and women, and statutory rape penalties include hard labor for a minimum of five years and a minimum of seven years’ imprisonment if the victim is younger than 15 years old. The government generally enforced the law.

Displaced Children: Some refugee children lived and worked on the street. In view of the poor economic environment, limited freedom of movement, and little opportunity for livelihoods for adults, many Syrian refugee families often relied on children to earn money for the family, including by begging or selling small items in the streets. Refugee children were at greater risk than Lebanese children for exploitation, gender-based violence, and child labor, since they had greater freedom of movement compared to their parents, who often lacked residency permits. Some refugee children and the children of foreign domestic workers also faced obstacles to equal treatment under the law. NGOs reported discrimination against them, including bullying linked to race, skin color, religion, and nationality, although some could attend public school.

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education facilitated enrollment of almost 200,000 non-Lebanese children in the 2019-20 academic year. More than one-half of refugee children ages three to 18 were out of school, according to UNHCR. The government and some NGOs offered a number of informal education programs to eligible students.

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State’s *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

Anti-Semitism

At year’s end there were an estimated 70 Jews living in the country and 5,500 registered Jewish voters who lived abroad but had the right to vote in parliamentary elections.

The Jewish Community Council reported that a construction site adjacent to the Jewish cemetery in Beirut regularly dumped trash and rubble into the cemetery in the beginning of the year, but the dumping stopped during the year.

The Ministry of Interior delayed the verification of the results of the Israeli Communal Council’s election of members that occurs every six years (see section 2.b., Freedom of Association). The council has repeatedly submitted requests to change its government-appointed name to reduce stigma, with no success. The council blames its official name in part for the difficulties experienced with renewals every six years.

A June report from the Anti-Defamation League found anti-Semitic educational material and incitement to anti-Semitism at educational institutions run by the education branch of Hizballah.

Rooms, shops, and a gas station were built on the land of the Jewish cemetery in Tripoli, and a lawsuit was filed in 2011. While the suit remained pending, authorities had taken no action on it by year’s end.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Persons with Disabilities

By law persons with disabilities have the right to employment, education, health services, accessibility, and the right to vote; however, there was no evidence the government effectively enforced the law. Although prohibited by law, discrimination against persons with disabilities continued.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and the National Council of Disabled are responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. According to the president of the Arab Organization of Disabled People, little progress has occurred in the 20 years since parliament passed the law on disabilities.

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education stipulated that for new school building construction, “schools should include all necessary facilities in order to receive the physically challenged.” Nonetheless, the public school system was ill-equipped to accommodate students with disabilities.

Depending on the type and nature of the disability, children with a disability may attend mainstream school. Due to a lack of awareness or knowledge, school staff often did not identify a specific disability in children and could not adequately advise parents. In such cases children often repeated classes or dropped out of school. According to NGOs, children with disabilities lacked access to education, as both public and private schools often improperly refused to admit them or charged additional fees, citing a lack of appropriate facilities or staff.

The law mandates access to buildings for persons with disabilities, but the government failed to amend building codes to implement these provisions. The law does not mandate access to information or accommodations for communication for persons with disabilities.

Members of National/Racial/Ethnic Minority Groups

Lebanese of African descent attributed discrimination to the color of their skin and claimed harassment by police, who periodically demanded to see their papers. Foreign Arab, African, and Asian students, professionals, and tourists reported being denied access to bars, clubs, restaurants, and private beaches at the direction and discretion of venue owners or managers.

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The law prohibits sexual relations “contradicting the laws of nature” and effectively criminalizes consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults. The law was occasionally enforced in civilian and military courts, and it carries a penalty of up to one year in prison. In 2019 a military prosecutor in Beirut acquitted four military personnel accused of “sodomy.” The judge cleared the group of charges of committing sexual acts “contrary to nature” and declined to issue warrants for their arrest, commenting that the law does not specify what kind of relationship can be considered “contrary to nature.” The ruling was the first of its kind by a military prosecutor. In February the Government Commissioner to the Military Court issued a decision not to prosecute four LAF soldiers who were separately accused of having same-sex sexual relations. Some government and judicial officials, along with NGOs and legal experts, questioned whether the law actually criminalizes same-sex sexual conduct.

No provisions of law provide antidiscrimination protections to LGBTI persons based on their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics. NGOs continued to report employment discrimination faced by transgender women due to the inconsistency between official documentation and gender self-presentation.

NGOs stated that official and societal discrimination against LGBTI persons persisted. Observers received reports from LGBTI refugees of physical abuse by local gangs, which the victims did not report to the ISF. Observers referred victims to UNHCR-sponsored protective services.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, NGOs noted that the government-enforced lockdown from March 18 posed increased risks to the LGBTI community, which depended on community centers, tight social networks, and NGOs for emotional and financial support.

The DGS continued to maintain a travel ban on foreign attendees of the Networking, Exchange, Development, Wellness, and Achievement (NEDWA) sexual health conference, which was organized by the LGBTI rights NGO Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality (AFE) and was relocated outside of the country starting in 2019 due to security concerns following DGS and other agencies’ threats to expose attendees from LGBTI-hostile countries to their governments.

The government did not collect information on official or private discrimination in employment, occupation, housing, statelessness, or lack of access to education or health care based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Individuals who faced problems were reluctant to report incidents due to fear of additional discrimination or reprisal. There were no government efforts to address potential discrimination.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

HIV/AIDS is stigmatized due to sensitivities about extramarital relations and LGBTI identities. NGOs reported that resources to direct patients to clinics where they can receive tests without stigma or discrimination were limited. Marsa, a sexual health center, reported six cases of discrimination against HIV-positive individuals within their workplaces, and two cases of foreign persons living with HIV who faced difficulty in receiving treatment and accessing medical care. In addition to stigma and discrimination, many persons with HIV/AIDS were unable to pay for routine tests that the Ministry of Public Health does not cover, including the blood test that must be completed and submitted to the Ministry of Public Health before any treatment may begin. The law requires the government to provide treatment to all HIV-positive citizens and Palestinian and Syrian refugees living in the country. Nonetheless, treatment was only available at one hospital in Beirut, making it difficult for patients outside of Beirut to receive treatment easily.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides for the right of private-sector workers to form and join trade unions, bargain collectively, and strike but places restrictions on these rights. The Ministry of Labor must approve the formation of unions, and it controlled the conduct of all trade union elections, including election dates, procedures, and ratification of results. The law permits the administrative dissolution of trade unions and bars trade unions from political activity. Unions have the right to strike after providing advance notice to and receiving approval from the Ministry of Interior. Organizers of a strike (at least three of whom must be identified by name) must notify the ministry of the number of participants in advance and the intended location of the strike, and 5 percent of a union’s members must take responsibility for maintaining order during the strike.

There are significant restrictions on the right to strike. The law excludes public-sector employees, domestic workers, and agricultural workers. Therefore, they have neither the right to strike nor to join and establish unions. The law prohibits public-sector employees from any kind of union activity, including striking, organizing collective petitions, or joining professional organizations.

The law protects the right of workers to bargain collectively, but a minimum of 60 percent of workers must agree on the goals beforehand. Two-thirds of union members at a general assembly must ratify collective bargaining agreements. The Association of Banks in Lebanon renewed the collective sectoral agreement with the Federation of Lebanese Bank Employees Unions in December 2019 after nearly three months of mediation between the two parties led by the minister of labor. The Association of Banks in Lebanon had initially refused to renew the agreement.

The law prohibits antiunion discrimination. By law when employers misuse or abuse their right to terminate a union member’s contract, including for union activity, the worker is entitled to compensation and legal indemnity and may institute proceedings before a conciliation board. The board adjudicates the case, after which an employer may be compelled to reinstate the worker, although this protection is available only to the elected members of a union’s board. Anecdotal evidence showed widespread antiunion discrimination in both the public and private sectors, although this issue did not receive significant media coverage. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), the most flagrant abuses occurred in banking, private schools, retail businesses, daily and occasional workers, and the civil service.

By law foreigners with legal resident status may join trade unions. According to the ILO, however, most unions do not encourage or accept the participation of foreign workers. The law permits migrant workers to join existing unions (regardless of nationality and reciprocity agreements) but denies them the right to form their own unions. They do not enjoy full membership since they may neither vote in trade union elections nor run for union office. Certain sectors of migrant workers, such as migrant domestic workers, challenged the binding laws supported by some unions by forming their own autonomous structures that acted as unions, although the Ministry of Labor has not approved them.

Palestinian refugees generally may organize their own unions. Because of restrictions on their right to work, few refugees participated actively in trade unions. While some unions required citizenship, others were open to foreign nationals whose home countries had reciprocity agreements with Lebanon.

The government’s enforcement of applicable law was weak, including with regard to prohibitions on antiunion discrimination.

Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining were not always respected. The government and other political actors interfered with the functioning of worker organizations, particularly the main federation, the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (CGTL). The CGTL is the only national confederation recognized by the government, although several unions boycotted and unofficially or officially broke from the CGTL and no longer recognized it as an independent and nonpartisan representative of workers. Since 2012 the Union Coordination Committee (UCC), a grouping of public and private teachers as well as civil servants, played a major role in pushing the government to pass a promised revised salary scale, largely overshadowing the CGTL. While the UCC is not formally recognized by any government body, it acts as an umbrella organization and guides several recognized leagues of workers in demonstrating and in negotiating demands. During the 2019 national budget debate, both the CGTL and UCC failed to take leadership of worker protest actions successfully or to express coherently the demands and aspirations of working persons. In January 2019 the CGTL was further weakened when union president Antoine Bechara was interrogated by the ISF Anticybercrime Bureau over a complaint filed by then minister of economy Raed Khoury. In May 2019 Bechara was arrested and pressured to resign after a video was leaked showing him insulting and making offensive comments against the late Maronite patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir, but he was re-elected on July 14. The National Federation of Workers and Employees in Lebanon emerged as another alternative to represent the independent trade union movement.

The economic and financial collapse, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ensuing political unrest exacerbated challenges in the labor sector, including an increased rate of unemployment, increased dismissal of employees, partial salary payments, deteriorating working conditions, and an increased number of businesses shutting down. The Ministry of Labor formed a crisis committee to look into the unlawful termination of contracts, but it did not include foreign domestic workers in its review. Multiple international organizations reported in September that domestic workers were adversely affected by the port explosion since many were suddenly laid off or rendered homeless along with their employers.

Antiunion discrimination and other instances of employer interference in union functions occurred. Some employers fired workers in the process of forming a union before the union could be formally established and published in the official gazette.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor and criminalizes all forms of labor trafficking.

Children, foreign workers employed as domestic workers, and other foreign workers sometimes worked under forced labor conditions. The law criminalizes trafficking and provides protection for domestic workers against forced labor, but domestic work is excluded from legal protection and is therefore vulnerable to exploitation. In

violation of the law, employment agencies and employers routinely withheld foreign workers’ passports, especially in the cases of domestic workers, sometimes for years. According to NGOs assisting migrant workers, in some instances employers withheld salaries for the duration of the contract, which was usually two years.

Many employers left their domestic migrant workers in the streets and at their respective embassies because they were unable to pay their salaries due to the economic crisis and the devaluation of the Lebanese lira. For example, hundreds of Ethiopian migrant workers were left in the streets in front of the Ethiopian embassy by their employers.

Also see the Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

Child labor occurred, including in its worst forms. While up-to-date statistics on child labor were unavailable, anecdotal evidence and the accounts of NGOs suggested the number of child workers may have risen during the year and that more children worked in the informal sector. UNHCR noted that commercial sexual exploitation of refugee children continued to occur.

The minimum age for employment is 14, and the law prescribes the occupations that are legal for juveniles, defined as children between ages 14 and 18. The law requires juveniles to undergo a medical exam by a doctor certified by the Ministry of Public Health to assure they are physically fit for the types of work employers ask them to perform. The law prohibits employment of juveniles for more than seven hours per day or between 7 p.m. and 7 a.m., and it requires one hour of rest for work lasting more than four hours. The law prohibits specific types of labor for juveniles, including informal “street labor.” It also lists types of labor that, by their nature or the circumstances in which they are carried out, are likely to harm the health, safety, or morals of children younger than 16, as well as types of labor that are allowed for children older than 16, provided they are offered full protection and adequate training.

Overall, the government did not enforce child labor law effectively. Advocacy groups did not consider penalties for those who violate laws on the worst forms of child labor to be commensurate with those for other analogous serious crimes, such as kidnapping.

Child labor, including among refugee children, was predominantly concentrated in the informal sector, including in small family enterprises, mechanical workshops, carpentry, construction, manufacturing, industrial sites, welding, agriculture, and fisheries. UN agencies and NGOs reported that Syrian refugee children were vulnerable to child labor and exploitation. According to the ILO, child labor rates have at least doubled since the Syrian refugee influx. The ILO reported that instances of child labor strongly correlated with a Syrian refugee presence. The ILO equally highlighted that the majority of Syrian children involved in the worst forms of child labor—especially forced labor—worked primarily in agriculture in the Bekaa and Akkar regions and on the streets of major urban areas (Beirut and Tripoli). Anecdotal evidence also indicated child labor was prevalent within Palestinian refugee camps.

The Ministry of Labor is responsible for enforcing child labor requirements through its Child Labor Unit. Additionally, the law charges the Ministry of Justice, ISF, and Higher Council for Childhood (HCC) with enforcing laws related to child trafficking, including commercial sexual exploitation of children and the use of children in illicit activities. The HCC is also responsible for referring children held in protective custody to appropriate NGOs to find safe living arrangements.

A Ministry of Labor unit responsible for inspections of all potential labor violations also investigates child labor matters when a specific complaint is reported or found in the course of its other inspections.

The Ministry of Labor’s Child Labor Unit acts as the government’s focal point for child labor matters, and it oversees and implements the ministry’s national strategy to tackle child labor. The National Steering Committee on Child Labor is the main interministerial body coordinating on child labor across the government.

In October 2019 the Ministry of Social Affairs developed a National Action Plan to End Street Begging by Children, but implementation was slow due to the October 2019 revolution and government resignation.

Also see the Department of Labor’s *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings>.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

The law provides for equality among all citizens and prohibits employment discrimination based on race, gender, disability, language, or social status. The law prohibits women from working in certain industries, such as mining, factories, agriculture, energy, and transportation, although the law was not enforced in multiple sectors, including factories and agriculture. The law does not specifically provide for protection against employment discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, HIV status, or other communicable diseases. Although the government generally respected these provisions, they were not enforced in some areas, and aspects of the law and traditional beliefs discriminated against women. Discrimination in employment and occupation occurred with respect to women, persons with disabilities, foreign domestic workers, and LGBTI and HIV-positive persons (see section 6).

The law does not distinguish between women and men in employment, and it provides for equal pay for men and women, with exceptions that exclude women from a variety of industrial and construction jobs as well as jobs listed in Annex 1. According to the UN Population Fund, the law does not explicitly prohibit sexual harassment in the workplace, although it gives an employee the right to resign without prior notice in the event that the employer or representative commits an indecent offense towards the employee or a family member. There are, however, no legal consequences for the perpetrator.

The law defines a “disability” as a physical, sight, hearing, or mental disability. It stipulates that persons with disabilities fill at least 3 percent of all government and private-sector positions, provided such persons fulfill the qualifications for the position. There was no evidence the government enforced the law. Employers are legally exempt from penalties if they provide evidence no otherwise qualified person with disabilities applied for employment within three months of advertisement.

Migrant workers and domestic workers faced employment hurdles that amounted to discrimination. In July, Syrian workers, usually employed as manual laborers and construction workers, continued to suffer discrimination. Many municipalities enforced a curfew on Syrians’ movements in their neighborhoods in an effort to control security.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The legal minimum wage was last raised in 2012. In July then minister of labor Lamia Yammine requested an increase in the minimum wage to balance purchasing power and inflation, but no further action was taken. There was no official minimum wage for domestic workers. Observers concluded that the minimum wage was lower than unofficial estimates of the poverty income level. Official contracts stipulated monthly wages for domestic workers, depending on the nationality of the worker. A unified standard contract, which was registered with the DGS for workers to obtain residency, granted migrant domestic workers some labor protections. The standard contract covered uniform terms and conditions of employment, but not wages for domestic workers, depending on the nationality of the worker. The law prescribes a standard 48-hour workweek with a weekly rest period that must not be less than 36 consecutive hours. The law stipulates 48 hours of work as the maximum per week in most corporations except agricultural enterprises. The law permits a 12-hour day under certain conditions, including a stipulation that overtime pay is 50 percent higher than pay for normal hours. The law does not set limits on compulsory overtime. The law includes specific occupational health and safety regulations and requires employers to take adequate precautions for employee safety.

Domestic workers are not covered by law or other legal provisions related to acceptable conditions of work. Such provisions also do not apply to those involved in work within the context of a family, day laborers, temporary workers in the public sector, or workers in the agricultural sector. On September 11, the caretaker minister of labor signed a new standard labor contract for all domestic workers, foreign and Lebanese, that would apply to all contracts signed after November 1.

The Ministry of Labor is responsible for enforcing regulations related to acceptable conditions of work, but it did so inconsistently. The ministry’s enforcement team handled all inspections of potential labor violations, but it suffered from a lack of staff, resources, legal tools, and political support for its work. Interference with inspectors affected the quality of inspections, and issuance of fines for violators was common. The law stipulates that workers may remove themselves from situations that endanger their health or safety without jeopardy to their employment, although government officials did not protect employees who exercised this right.

Workers in the industrial sector worked an average of 35 hours per week, while workers in other sectors worked an average of 32 hours per week. These averages, however, were derived from figures that included part-time work, including for employees who desired full-time work. Some private-sector employers failed to provide employees with family and transportation allowances as stipulated under the law and did not register them with the National Social Security Fund (NSSF).

Some companies did not respect legal provisions governing occupational health and safety in specific sectors, such as the construction industry. Workers may report violations to the CGTL, Ministry of Labor, NSSF, or through their respective unions. In most cases they preferred to remain silent due to fear of dismissal.

Violations of wage, overtime, and occupational health and safety standards were most common in the construction industry and among migrant workers, particularly with foreign domestic workers.

Foreign migrant workers arrived in the country through local and source-country recruitment agencies. Although the law requires recruitment agencies to have a license from the Ministry of Labor, the government did not adequately monitor their activities. A sponsorship system tied foreign workers’ legal residency to a specific employer, making it difficult for foreign workers to change employers. If employment were terminated, a worker would lose residency. This circumstance made many foreign migrant workers reluctant to file complaints to avoid losing their legal status.

Some employers mistreated, abused, and raped foreign domestic workers, who were mostly of Asian and African origin. Domestic workers often worked long hours and in many cases did not receive vacations or holidays. Victims of abuse may file civil suits or seek other legal action, often with the assistance of NGOs, but most victims, counseled by their embassies or consulates, settled for an administrative solution that usually included monetary compensation and repatriation. Again during the year, victims explained that, when they escaped from employers

who were withholding wages, an NGO helped them file charges against their employers. Authorities commonly reached administrative settlements with employers to pay back wages or finance return to employees’ home countries but generally did not seek criminal prosecution of employers.

During a May interview with an NGO, Ethiopian domestic workers reported that their employers had stopped paying them and refused to provide them with tickets to return home as stipulated in the unified contract that is designed to protect domestic worker rights. This left many of them stranded, sleeping on the pavement outside the Ethiopian Consulate, without food, money, passports, or medical care amid the global pandemic.

In June the Director General of Nigeria’s National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons named Lebanon among Gulf countries in which Nigerian citizens were trapped in domestic servitude. The official stated her agency had received more than 50 distress calls and collected evidence regarding cruel working conditions, unpaid salaries, 18-hour workdays, and hazardous duties. Some of the women were reportedly sold as slaves to third-party buyers.

Authorities typically did not prosecute perpetrators of abuse against foreign domestic workers for a number of reasons, including the victims’ refusal to press charges and lack of evidence. Authorities settled an unknown number of cases of nonpayment of wages through negotiation. According to source-country embassies and consulates, many workers did not report violations of their labor contracts until after they returned to their home countries, since they preferred not to stay in the country for a lengthy judicial process.

While licensed businesses and factories strove to meet international standards for working conditions with respect to occupational safety and health, conditions in informal factories and businesses were poorly regulated and often did not meet these standards. The Ministry of Industry is responsible for enforcing regulations to improve safety in the workplace. The regulations require industries to have three types of insurance (fire, third party, and workers’ policies) and to implement proper safety measures. The ministry has the authority to revoke a company’s license if its inspectors find a company noncompliant, but there was no evidence this occurred.

The law requires businesses to adhere to safety standards, but authorities poorly enforced the law, and it did not explicitly permit workers to remove themselves from dangerous conditions without jeopardy to their continued employment. By law workers may ask to change their job or be removed from an unsafe job without being affected. The government only weakly implemented the law due to lack of governance, the weak role of the trade union movement, corruption, and lack of trade union rights.

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