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Executive Summary

The constitution requires the state to respect all religious groups and declares equality of rights and duties for all citizens without discrimination or preference. It stipulates, however, that there be a balance of political power among the major religious groups. The parliament and cabinet are comprised of a broad range of the country's 18 officially-recognized religious groups, designed to maintain sectarian balance. Spill-over from the Syrian conflict and increased activity of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the al-Nusra Front (al-Nusra) on Lebanese territory have strained sectarian relations among the country's religious groups. Hizballah's participation in Syria and long record of political violence have enflamed sectarian tensions.

Sectarian violence, including attacks by ISIL, al-Nusra, and other extremist groups, noticeably increased during the year. Extremists in Tripoli, in particular, attacked representatives of several religious groups during Ramadan and committed acts to intimidate Christians. Conflict between Alawites and Sunnis broke out in October. Anti-Semitic rhetoric in the media was common, for example on Hizballah's al-Manar television station. Religious group identity remained a significant element of social interaction and cultural expression. Despite the rise in violence, political and religious leaders were vocal in their opposition to violent extremism and in their support of peaceful coexistence across the sectarian divide. Religious groups said places of worship continued to exist in relative peace and security, and relationships among individual members of different religious groups were generally amicable, with some exceptions.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers discussed religious freedom and the importance of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect with government officials, religious leaders, and members of civil society. The embassy integrated religious freedom concerns into public outreach programs, and sponsored projects designed to increase interreligious dialogue. For example, the embassy sponsored the Adyan Foundation's Alwan ("Colors") program, which brought roundtable discussions and other events on religious tolerance to students, in 30 public and private high schools.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 5.9 million (July 2014 estimate), which includes approximately 4.5 million citizens and approximately 1.4 million refugees fleeing the conflicts in

Syria and Iraq, as well as a legacy Palestinian refugee population. Statistics Lebanon, an independent firm, estimates that 56.2 percent of the citizen population is Muslim (27.9 percent Sunni and 20.6 percent Shia), 35.5 percent Christian (which includes Maronite Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics, and other Christians), 5.3 percent Druze, and small numbers of Jews, Bahais, Ismailis, Alawites, Buddhists, Hindus, and members of The Church of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). The last official census was conducted in 1932, and therefore no accurate official estimate of the country's religious demographics exists.

Many persons fleeing religious mistreatment and discrimination in neighboring states reside in the country, including Kurds, Sunnis, Shia, and Chaldeans from Iraq, as well as Coptic Christians from Egypt and Sudan. According to the secretary-general of the Syriac League, approximately 10,000 Iraqi Christians and 3,000 to 4,000 Coptic Christians reside in the country.

Additionally, approximately 1.15 million registered Syrian refugees and 44,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria reside in the country. The refugees are largely Sunni but include Shia and Christians. Approximately 450,000 Palestinians are registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), of which between 250,000 to 350,000 are believed to be present in the country. Palestinians largely live in refugee camps established during the initial influxes that took place between 1948 and 1971. The Palestinian population is largely Sunni.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution requires the state to respect all religious groups and denominations as well as the personal status and religious interests of persons of every religious group. The constitution declares equality of rights and duties for all citizens without discrimination or preference, but stipulates that there be a balance of political power among the major religious groups. A constitutional provision apportions political offices according to religious affiliation.

The constitution provides that "sectarian groups" be represented in a "just and equitable balance" in the cabinet and high-level civil service positions, which includes the ministry ranks of secretary general and director general. It also provides that these posts be distributed proportionately among the recognized religious groups. The parliament is elected on the basis of "equality between Christians and Muslims." The 1943 "National Pact," which is not an official component of the constitution, stipulates that the president, speaker of parliament, and prime minister be Maronite Christian, Shia Muslim, and Sunni Muslim, respectively. This distribution of political power operates at both the national and local levels of government.

The Taif Agreement, which ratified the end of the country's 15-year civil war in 1989, reaffirms this arrangement while mandating equal Muslim and Christian representation in parliament and reducing the power of the Maronite Christian presidency. In addition, the agreement endorses the constitutional provision of appointing most senior government officials according to religious affiliation. This practice exists in all three branches of government. The Taif Agreement also stipulates a cabinet with seats allocated equally between Muslims and Christians. Citizens who remove their religion from their national registration limit their ability to hold government positions or run for political office.

The penal code stipulates a maximum prison term of one year for anyone convicted of "blaspheming God publicly." This provision is rarely invoked and was not applied during the year.

There are no legal barriers to proselytizing.

Official recognition is a legal requirement for religious groups to receive government recognition for baptisms and marriages. A group seeking official recognition must submit a statement of its doctrine and moral principles to the cabinet, which evaluates whether the group's principles are in accord with the government's perception of popular values and the constitution. Alternatively, unrecognized religious groups may apply for recognition through recognized religious groups. In doing so, however, they are not recognized as separate groups, but as part of the group through which they applied. This process has the same requirements as registering through the government. Official recognition conveys other benefits, such as tax-exempt status and the right to apply the religion's codes to personal status matters.

There are 18 officially-recognized religious groups. These include four Muslim groups, 12 Christian groups, the Druze, and Jews. The main branches of Islam practiced are Shia and Sunni. The Alawites and the Ismaili ("Sevener") Shia order are the smallest Muslim communities. The Maronite community, the largest Christian group, maintains its centuries-long affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church but has its own patriarch, liturgy, and ecclesiastical customs. The second-largest Christian group is Greek Orthodox. Other Christians are divided among Greek Catholics, Armenian Orthodox (Gregorians), Armenian Catholics, Syriac Orthodox (Jacobites), Syriac Catholics, Assyrians (Nestorians), Chaldeans, Copts, evangelicals (including Baptists and Seventh-day Adventists), and Latins (Roman Catholic). The Druze, who refer to themselves as *al-Muwahhideen*, or "believers in one God," are concentrated in the rural, mountainous areas east and south of Beirut.

The government does not officially recognize some religious groups, such as Bahais, Buddhists, Hindus, and unregistered Protestant groups. Members of these groups do not qualify for certain government positions, but they are permitted to perform their religious rites freely. Government records list some members of unregistered religious groups as belonging to recognized religious groups.

In nearly all cases, the government permits recognized religious groups to administer their own family and personal status laws in areas such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Shia, Sunni, Christian, and Druze groups have state-appointed, government-subsidized clerical courts to administer family and personal status law.

There are no formalized procedures for civil marriage. The government recognizes civil marriage ceremonies performed outside the country, however, irrespective of the religious affiliation of each partner in the marriage.

Unrecognized religious groups may own property and assemble for worship without government interference. However, they may not perform legally-recognized marriage or divorce proceedings, and they have no standing to determine inheritance issues. An individual may change religions if the change is approved by a local senior official from the religious group the person wishes to join.

The government permits the publication of religious materials of every religious group in different languages. The law, however, allows for censorship under a number of premises, including if material incites sectarian discord or is deemed a threat to national security. The provision is infrequently enforced.

Religious workers present in the country and found to be working while on tourist visas may be deemed to have violated their visa status and be deported. The government issues religious workers a one-month visa; if they plan to stay longer, they must complete their residency permits during that one month. Religious workers also are obliged to sign a "commitment of responsibility" form before being issued their visas, which commits them to legal prosecution and

immediate deportation if they carry out any activity that might prompt community, confessional, or religious instigation and criticism against the Lebanese state or any other country except Israel.

The government requires Protestant evangelical churches to register with the Evangelical Synod, a nongovernmental advisory group that represents those churches with the government. It is self-governing and oversees religious matters for Protestant congregations.

The Christian bishop synods elect their patriarchs, the Sunni and Shia electoral bodies elect their respective senior clerical posts, and the Druze community elects its Sheikh al-Aql. In contrast to the process for the Christians, however, the government council of ministers must endorse the nomination of Sunni and Shia muftis, as well as the Druze Sheikh al-Aql, and pay their salaries. The government also appoints and pays the salaries of Muslim and Druze clerical judges. The government did not pay the salaries of clergy and officials of Christian groups, including the Maronites, Greek Orthodox, and Roman Catholics.

Although not required by law, religion is generally encoded on national identity cards and noted on *ikhraaj qaid* (official registry) documents. Citizens have the right to remove their religion or change the religion on their identity cards and official registry documents. The government does not require religious affiliation on passports.

Government Practices

The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF) increased their presence in Tripoli in the northern part of the country beginning on April 1 in an effort to contain the fighting there between Sunnis and Alawites. On October 23, the LAF arrested Ahmed Salim Mikati, a local terror suspect affiliated with ISIL. Following the arrest, clashes between Sunni extremist groups and the LAF erupted, continuing until October 27, resulting in the death of 11 soldiers and 150 wounded.

There were complaints from minority religious groups about lack of representation in various government positions.

The government did not approve the Jewish Community Council's request, repeated over several years, to change its official name from the Israeli Communal Council to the Jewish Community Council.

The 1989 Taif Agreement called for the eventual elimination of political sectarianism in favor of "expertise and competence," but the government made little progress towards that goal. Members of the less well-represented or "minority" Christian groups stated the government discriminated against them by not appointing a member of their religious group to a ministerial position. While some of their members have served in high-level civil service positions, such as director general, these groups stated that Maronite and Greek Orthodox individuals filled most positions. These groups further stated that, although they estimated their numbers at 50,000, they were allocated only one representative out of the 128 seats in parliament.

In an incident widely reported in local media, the International School of Shoueifat (SABIS) issued an amendment to its bylaws banning religious symbols. SABIS, a private, secular school, did not allow students with cross signs drawn on their foreheads to attend school on Ash Monday at the School's Koura campus. Education Minister Elias Bou Saab later called on educational institutions to respect freedom of expression and religious practice. "We call on... public and private schools...to adhere to the content of Articles 9 and 10 of the Lebanese Constitution," Bou Saab's statement said, "by not issuing any regulations, decisions, or teachings that could violate the students' freedom of religion." Bou Saab added that unless the students' practices "violate the general order," they should not be suppressed. SABIS repealed the amendment.

Despite registering a civil marriage for the first time in 2013, the practice was unofficially halted by the Ministry of Interior during the year following the formation of a new cabinet. As of November 19, at least 30 cases were pending registration with the ministry.

Abuses by Rebels, Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

ISIL and al-Nusra attacked the LAF in the border town of Aarsal on August 2, leading to several subsequent skirmishes. During the fighting, 29 government soldiers were captured and four soldiers were later killed.

There were credible reports of Hizballah and other Shia militias limiting access to neighborhoods under their control and harassing Sunnis perceived to be a threat.

Hizballah, a Shia militia, remained the most powerful terrorist organization in the country. Hizballah continued to exercise authority in large parts of the country and conducted extra-legal activities throughout the year. Hizballah's fighting in Syria in support of the Assad regime exacerbated domestic sectarian tensions in Lebanon. In an interview on October 28, former Prime Minister Saad Hariri voiced concern that Hizballah's actions in Syria drew extremist violence to Lebanon, noting "The armed and terrorist groups that are crossing the Lebanese borders and avenging from Hizballah on its own ground - that is in the towns where it is targeting civilians and innocent people and fueling sectarian discord ... "

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of tension and confrontations among religious groups, which observers said were exacerbated by political differences, the legacy of the civil war, and the violence in neighboring Syria. According to Pew Research Forum polling data from 2011 and 2012 released in November 2013, two-thirds of all Muslims, including approximately half of Shia and 80 percent of Sunnis, said sectarian tensions were a very big or moderately big problem.

Although Tripoli's conflict between Alawite residents of Jabal Mohsen and Sunni residents of Bab al-Tabbaneh continued throughout the year, the government implemented a security plan that led to increased peace and stability by the end of the year. Tripoli's delicate sectarian balance was challenged by a marked rise in Sunni extremism and violence targeted at Christians, moderate Sunnis, Shia, and Alawites. Observers stated that Tripoli, the country's second largest city, has suffered from central government neglect since the creation of the modern state of Lebanon. The city's Sunni majority expressed discouragement over the lack of development projects in comparison to Beirut. Sources stated that funding from Salafist leaders appeared to have increased in recent years, resulting in young men being hired as gunmen and fueling sectarian violence.

Tripoli's main library, the historic Saeh Library, founded by Greek Orthodox priest Father Ibrahim Sarrouj, was attacked and burned on January 4. The attacks were reportedly incited by false accusations that Sarrouj had published a study that insulted the Prophet Mohammed. The attackers shot at one of the library staff and set fire to the building in the presence of the ISF, but none of the attackers was apprehended. Approximately 40 percent of the library's books were burned.

Civil society and religious leaders condemned the attack, staging a demonstration involving 600 – 700 participants condemning sectarian violence. Shortly after the attack, ISF leaders, including the commander of the Information Branch of the North, Lt. Col. Mohammad Arab, and the deputy commander of the northern region, Lt. Col. Abdul Nasser Ghimrawi, met to listen to the community's concerns. The mufti of Tripoli, Sheikh Malek al-Shaar, praised Sarrouj and characterized the act as "heinous" and committed by "malicious hands."

In early July Islamists attacked with grenades the few restaurants and cafés in Tripoli that remained open and served food and beverages during the fasting hours of Ramadan. Four suspects were arrested. Before Ramadan, Tripoli Mayor Nader Ghazzal requested restaurants and cafés to close during the fasting hours of Ramadan, but following the attacks noted that his request neither had the force of law nor was mandatory.

The press reported in August that several Islamists toured jewelry stores in Tripoli and demanded owners stop selling jewelry with Christian icons and remove existing pieces from their displays, threatening those who continued to do so.

Unknown perpetrators painted graffiti threats against Christians on the churches of Mar Elias in Minnieh, Tripoli, and Mar Elias in Mina, Tripoli on September 1. The messages read, "The Islamic state will break the cross" and "We came to slaughter you, you worshippers of the cross." These incidents were reportedly (and widely perceived as being) in retaliation for the burning of the ISIL and al-Nusra flags by youth in Sassine Square, in Achrafieh, Beirut on August 30.

Anti-Semitic rhetoric was common. On February 10, the Middle East Media Research Institute's website reported that Hizballah's al-Manar TV claimed that Jews created the fictional superhero Superman as part of a plan to control the United States and advance Jewish goals globally. During the segment, a narrator said, "Hollywood is a Jewish invention that changed the way Americans view America, and created dreams, rather than reality. They managed to make the Americans live the dream, divorced from reality. Undoubtedly, the goal was to take over the greatest superpower in the world, to control all aspects of its daily life, and to harness it in the service of Jewish goals worldwide. Whenever someone challenges this, Superman is ready to deal with him."

In an exchange ignited by the execution of four soldiers (including one Sunni and two Shia) at the hands of ISIL following their kidnapping in early August, a Maronite priest, Salim Makhoul, ridiculed Islamists' beards, saying, "They are no more useful than a brush to clean the boots of the lowliest Lebanese soldier." A Sunni sheikh from Tripoli, Abdel-Kader Abdo, retorted, "All the beards of bishops and priests are not worth a Muslim's boot." The exchange resulted in reprimands to both from their superiors.

Following instances of violence perpetrated by ISIL and al-Nusra, leaders of Sunni, Shia, and many Christian groups condemned the extremism and violence perpetrated in the name of religion. On August 10, the Sunni electoral body, consisting of political and religious figures, elected Sheikh Abdel al-Latif-Deryan as the country's new grand mufti. In an unprecedented show of cross-sectarian unity, religious and political leaders from all of Lebanon's major religious groups attended Deryan's inauguration ceremony on September 26. During his inauguration, Deryan stressed peaceful coexistence and condemned violence in the name of religion.

Places of worship of every religious group continued to exist in relative peace and security, and relationships among individual members of different religious groups were generally amicable, with some exceptions. Religious leaders from the major denominations met regularly to discuss issues of common concern and call for increased mutual respect. For example, the country's National Committee for Muslim-Christian Dialogue, headed by Secretary-General Dr. Mohammad Sammak, regularly brought together religious leaders to address problems in their communities and attempted to quell conflict between religious groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officers discussed religious freedom with government officials and the importance of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect. These discussions focused on ending sectarian violence and advancing Lebanon's political process. Embassy officers met with religious leaders and members of civil society to encourage sectarian dialogue and counter violent

extremism. For example, the embassy sponsored the Adyan Foundation's (a local NGO) Alwan program. Alwan operated in 30 public and private high schools throughout the country. The embassy organized events, roundtables, and community projects to foster understanding between students of different religious backgrounds. The embassy sponsored four programs aimed at cross-confessional dialogue. Many of the embassy's other projects and programs include improving sectarian communications as a component of their larger goals.

The Ambassador and embassy staff in public outreach efforts emphasized the need for religious freedom and respect for diversity, including in the Ambassador's meeting with the new grand mufti, during which he highlighted the grand mufti's efforts to bridge sectarian divisions and praised his moderate record, a statement widely reported in the domestic media. The Ambassador also visited Sunni Mufti Sheikh Malek al-Shaar in embattled Tripoli in recognition of the mufti's efforts to promote moderation and cross-confessional cooperation.

The Ambassador also met with the clerical leadership of all of the country's religious communities – Sunni, Shia, Druze, and its many Christian groups – to promote a similar message. Through contacts with religious and political leaders and through public outreach programs, embassy officials emphasized the principle that governments must protect the universal human rights of citizens of all communities and faiths. The Ambassador and embassy officers also worked with local religious and community leaders to support their efforts to insulate the country from sectarian tensions spilling over from the violence in Syria.

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