

# **ISRAEL 2023 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

This section of the report covers Israel within the 1949 Armistice Agreement line as well as the Golan Heights and territories that Israel occupied during the June 1967 war, and where it later extended its domestic law, jurisdiction, and administration. The United States recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in 2017 and Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights in 2019. Language in this report is not meant to convey a position on any final status issues to be negotiated between the parties to the conflict, including the specific boundaries of Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem or the borders between Israel and any future Palestinian state.

## **Executive Summary**

The country's laws and Supreme Court rulings protect the freedoms of conscience, faith, religion, and worship, regardless of an individual's religious affiliation. The country's basic laws form a constitutional framework that describes the country as a "Jewish and democratic state," and determines "the Land of Israel is the historical homeland of the Jewish people; the State of Israel is the nation state of the Jewish People, in which it realizes its natural, cultural, religious and historical right to self-determination; and exercising the right to national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish People." The law recognizes only Judaism, Christianity, Islam, the Baha'i Faith and the Druze religion, and provides for religious courts that regulate personal status matters. It criminalizes actions that damage or desecrate religious sites or restrict access to worshippers.

On October 7, during the Jewish Sabbath and on the eve of the Jewish feast of Simchat Torah, thousands of Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and other armed terrorists breached the security fence between Gaza and Israel and killed an estimated 1,200 Israelis and foreigners. At least 843 of the victims were civilians, and more than 5,400 Israelis and foreigners were

injured. Terrorists attacked military bases, clashed with security forces in the south, and simultaneously infiltrated civilian communities, deliberately targeting noncombatants. During the attack, terrorists committed multiple abuses, including sexual assault and sexual mutilation. The attackers killed or kidnapped approximately 253 Israelis and foreigners.

Human rights organizations raised concerns regarding reports of systemic torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment or punishment of Palestinian detainees in prison facilities, especially after October 7. According to one Israeli nongovernmental organization (NGO), some of these measures might be considered religion-based humiliation, including practices that hindered a detainee's ability to pray and affronts to the modesty of religious detainees. The government stated it used "exceptional measures" during interrogation in some cases but provided no further details. Authorities and NGOs reported violent attacks against Palestinian residents and Arab/Palestinian citizens of Israel and their property, primarily in Jerusalem, by members of violent Jewish extremist organizations that made anti-Christian and anti-Muslim statements and objected to social relationships between Jews and non-Jews. On June 30, the stay on the Supreme Court's order striking down amendments to the security service law that exempted ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students from military service expired. On June 25, the government approved a resolution to pass a new law by March 31, 2024, and to instruct the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) not to conscript eligible ultra-Orthodox men (*haredim*) until then.

The government continued to allow controlled access to religious sites in Jerusalem, including the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount (the site containing the foundation of the First and Second Jewish temples and where the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque are located). Authorities in some cases barred access to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site to individuals on the basis of religion (including Muslims and Jews), gender, age, and security concerns. On April 1, police shot and killed a Palestinian at the site during Ramadan. Israeli Security Forces stated the man assaulted an officer, but Palestinians at the site said the Palestinian was killed after trying to intervene when police and border guards assaulted a Palestinian woman.

On April 2, police detained a Jewish activist suspected of preparing to perform a ritual animal sacrifice at the site for Passover, which coincided with Ramadan. According to multiple media reports, police forcibly entered the al-Aqsa Mosque twice during Ramadan, on April 4 and April 5, injuring approximately 56 Palestinians and arresting more than 350. Officials said they entered the al-Aqsa compound to apprehend hundreds of Palestinians, whom they described as “agitators,” who had barricaded themselves inside the mosque, reportedly armed with fireworks and stones; some individuals in the compound said they wanted to prevent religious Jews from carrying out animal sacrifices at the site during Passover. After Hamas’s October 7 attacks, the Israeli National Police (INP) restricted the entry of Muslim worshipers to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount for Friday prayers in response to Hamas’s calls for mass Palestinian rallies in East Jerusalem.

Waqf officials expressed concerns regarding their lack of control of access to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site and objected to non-Muslims wearing religious symbols or religious clothing and praying or performing religious acts there. During the year, there were multiple instances of Jews performing religious acts at the site, despite the ban on non-Islamic prayer, and police arrested multiple Jewish individuals suspected of planning to conduct ritual animal sacrifices there. Authorities continued to allow use of a temporary platform adjacent to the Western Wall for non-Orthodox “egalitarian” (mixed gender) Jewish prayers. At the main Western Wall Plaza, authorities continued to prohibit mixed-gender Jewish prayer services over the objections of the Jewish Conservative and Reform movements. In July, the Jerusalem Magistrate Court ruled Western Wall security checks should be conducted fairly and impartially and that security guards should not search for Torah scrolls.

Ministry of Religious Services (MRS) regulations concerning cemeteries left the majority of the country’s population unable to exercise its right, as provided by law, to be buried in accordance with secular or non-Orthodox Jewish religious views. According to one NGO, growing “religionization” (*hadata*) of the education system continued. According to media reports, the government allocated approximately 925 million shekels (\$256 million)

in its 2023-24 budget through various ministries for “religionization” activities, including religious Zionist or National Orthodox groups settling in mixed cities and secular areas with the purpose of changing the character of the city or area as well as programs for students, soldiers, and recently discharged soldiers that promoted Jewish culture and identity.

In April, the Supreme Court ruled that adopted non-Jewish children were not required to undergo Orthodox conversion by the Rabbinate and were not required to be adopted only by Orthodox couples. Local authorities continued to circumvent the ban on public transportation on the Jewish Sabbath (Shabbat) by funding privately operated bus lines. The NGO Secular Forum said “religionization” continued in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and that accommodation for religious soldiers affected secular soldiers, particularly women. During the year, two high school seminaries for Sephardic-only ultra-Orthodox school girls opened in Jerusalem after the girls were denied admission to ultra-Orthodox schools due to their ethnicity. In July, the Supreme Court ordered the government and chief rabbis to explain why they would not consider appointing women who meet educational requirements to the Chief Rabbinate Council.

The Chief Rabbinate did not recognize as Jewish some Israeli citizens who self-identified as Jewish, including Reform and Conservative converts to Judaism and others who could not prove Jewish matrilineage to the satisfaction of the Chief Rabbinate. As a result, the government prohibited them from accessing official Jewish marriage, divorce, and burial services. Evangelical Christians and Jehovah’s Witnesses, among others, were not able to obtain official recognition as a religious group. Members of some religious minorities said authorities did not provide the same services and benefits to them as to the country’s majority Jewish population.

During the year, there were incidents of violence that perpetrators justified, at least partially, on religious grounds, including physical attacks and verbal harassment of worshippers and clergy of all faith traditions, and vandalism of religious sites. Racially and religiously motivated attacks by Jewish individuals and groups continued during the year against individuals,

particularly Arab/Palestinian citizens of the country and Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem and their property, including actions with the stated purpose of exacting a “price” for actions taken by the government against the attackers’ interests. Racially and religiously motivated attacks by Muslim individuals and groups continued during the year against Jewish citizens of the country. On May 18, thousands of Jewish nationalists, some chanting anti-Arab and anti-Muslim slogans and vandalizing Palestinian property, marched through Jerusalem and the Old City’s Muslim Quarter under police protection during “Jerusalem Day” celebrations. Several members of the government, including National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir, joined the procession.

Christian heads of churches in Jerusalem continued to raise public concerns that the Christian presence and holy sites in the city were under threat. The statements identified pressure points on Christians that included violence and harassment against clergy and worshipers by violent Jewish extremists; vandalism and desecration of church properties; attempts by settler organizations to obtain strategic property in and around the Christian quarter of the Old City and the Mount of Olives; and restrictions on residency permits for Christian Palestinians under the Citizenship and Entry Law.

Media and NGOs reported tensions between ultra-Orthodox Jews and other citizens continued. There were instances of bus drivers discriminating against women on public transit for religious reasons. Christian clergy and pilgrims also continued to report that they were regularly harassed and spat upon by ultra-Orthodox Jews. Some Jews continued to oppose missionary activity directed at Jews as amounting to religious harassment and reacted with hostility toward Jewish converts to Christianity or individuals who held syncretic beliefs, such as Messianic Jews. In one poll of 800 adult Jews published in September, an NGO reported that 64 percent of respondents identified as either “secular” or “traditional-not-religious” regarding public policies on religion and the state and that 66 percent supported state recognition of choice in marriage, doing away with the Rabbinate’s

monopoly and recognizing civil and non-Orthodox religious marriages equally.

In meetings with government officials, the U.S. Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials stressed the importance of religious pluralism and respect for all religious groups. Numerous high-level U.S. officials made formal stops at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust remembrance site, to remember the six million Jews and millions of others killed by the Nazis, underscore the importance of Holocaust education and countering Holocaust denial and antisemitism, and promote religious tolerance. Senior U.S. officials spoke publicly about the importance of maintaining the historic status quo at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and conveyed this message in meetings with authorities. The embassy used social media to express U.S. support for tolerance and the importance of openness to members of other religious groups. Embassy-supported initiatives also focused on interreligious dialogue and community development and advocated a shared society for the Arab/Palestinian and Jewish populations of the country. The embassy also promoted reducing tensions between religious communities and increasing communication and partnerships by bringing together members of many faiths to advance shared goals and exchange knowledge and experience and through engagement to integrate the Arab/Palestinian minority into the broader national economy.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at nine million (midyear 2023). According to the country's Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) classification system (2023 data), approximately 73.2 percent of the population is Jewish, 18 percent Muslim, 1.9 percent Christian, and 1.6 percent Druze. The remaining 5 percent consists of those the CBS classifies as "other." This category includes individuals who identify as Jewish but do not satisfy the Orthodox Jewish definition of "Jewish" that the government uses for civil procedures and applies to many immigrants from the former Soviet Union. The country also has relatively small communities of Samaritans, Karaite Jews, Messianic Jews, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's

Witnesses, and Baha'is. The majority of non-Jewish citizens are of Arab/Palestinian origin, including approximately 75.3 percent of the country's 188,000 Christians, according to the CBS, comprising 6.9 percent of the total Arab/Palestinian population. Non-Arab/Palestinian Christians are mainly individuals who emigrated from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s.

According to the annual religion and state poll conducted in August by religious freedom and equal rights advocacy NGO Hiddush, 57 percent of Jewish citizens do not affiliate with any stream of Judaism, 21 percent are "Religious-Zionist," 11 percent "ultra-Orthodox," 5 percent "Reform," 4 percent "Conservative," and 2 percent "ultra-Orthodox Zionist."

The Arab/Palestinian Muslim, Druze, and Christian communities are located throughout the country. There are dozens of Muslim-majority communities in the Negev. In addition to an Alawite Muslim community in Ghajar, several Druze communities live in the Golan Heights.

The CBS estimates that as of 2021, 585,000 Jews, 354,300 Muslims, and 12,850 Christians live in Jerusalem.

Approximately 410 Samaritans (practitioners of Samaritanism, which is related to but distinct from Judaism) live in the Holon, near Tel Aviv.

According to government and NGO data, approximately 110,000 documented Palestinians and 39,000 undocumented Palestinians resided in the West Bank or Gaza and worked in Israel prior to October 7. In addition, more than 191,000 foreign nationals live in the country: 118,000 migrant workers with permits; 50,000 non-Palestinian undocumented workers (either migrant workers without a permit or tourists who overstayed their visa); and 23,250 asylum seekers. Foreign workers and asylum seekers include Protestants, Roman Catholics, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Seventh-day Adventists, Orthodox Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims. According to the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Catholics among the foreign worker and asylum

seekers population total 56,570, including 40,000 Filipinos, 10,000 Indians, 3,000 Sri Lankans, 2,500 persons from South America countries, 500 Eritreans, and 150 from other African countries.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

Although the country has no constitution, a series of Basic Laws enumerate fundamental rights, which serve as the country's constitutional foundation. The Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty describes the country as a "Jewish and democratic state" and references the Israeli Declaration of Independence, which protects freedom to practice or not practice religious beliefs, including freedom of conscience, faith, religion, and worship, regardless of an individual's religion. The law incorporates religious freedom provisions of international human rights covenants into the country's body of domestic law, which applies to all citizens and permanent residents of Jerusalem.

The Basic Law: Israel – The Nation State of the Jewish People (Nation State Law) states "the Land of Israel is the historical homeland of the Jewish people; the State of Israel is the nation state of the Jewish People, in which it realizes its natural, cultural, religious and historical right to self-determination; and exercising the right to national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish People." The law calls for promotion of "Jewish settlement" as a national value. The law recommends – but does not require – that judges use Jewish jurisprudence and heritage as a source of legal principles in cases in which there is no relevant legislation or judicial precedent.

The Chief Rabbinate of Israel is the supreme religious authority in the country and the law provides its council with authorities to handle Jewish religious services and rule on matters involving *halacha* (Jewish religious

law). The Council of the Chief Rabbinate consists of Orthodox rabbis chosen by an assembly of rabbis, local government leaders, government ministers, and laypersons appointed by the government.

The Law of Return provides the right for any Jew, including converts to Judaism, or any child or grandchild of a Jew, to immigrate from a foreign country with his or her spouse and children. Under the law, the minor children of a grandchild of a Jew may receive humanitarian status but are not automatically granted citizenship. Non-Jews who are not descendants of Jews do not have this route to immigration. Descendants of Jews qualify for immigration under this law regardless of the religious beliefs under which they were raised as minor children. The law considers those who were eligible for immigration and converted as adults to another religious tradition, including Messianic Judaism, as no longer eligible for benefits under the Law of Return.

Under the Law of Return, the Population and Immigration Authority of the Ministry of Interior (MOI) recognizes Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform conversions in the country for the purpose of immigration, citizenship, and registration. Those who convert through a non-Orthodox denomination, whether inside or outside the country, are not able to obtain religious services such as marriage, divorce, or burial in a Jewish cemetery.

The law recognizes only Judaism, Christianity, Islam, the Baha'i Faith, and the Druze religion. The adopted Ottoman *millet* (court) system recognizes Christian religious communities, including Eastern Orthodox, Latin (Roman Catholic), Gregorian-Armenian, Armenian Catholic, Syrian Catholic, Chaldean (Chaldean Uniate Catholic), Greek Catholic Melkite, Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, and Evangelical Episcopal. By law, the Anglican and Baha'i communities are recognized by the government. The government does not recognize other religious communities, including major Protestant denominations in the country, as distinct religious communities. The two legal pathways to formal recognition include petitioning either the Prime Minister's Office or the MOI. Groups may appeal rejected applications to the Supreme Court.

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

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

The law criminalizes the damage, destruction, or desecration of religious sites and actions that "harm the freedom of access" of worshippers to religious sites. Certain religious sites considered antiquities receive further protection under the antiquities law. The Ministry of Tourism is responsible for the protection and upkeep of selected non-Jewish religious sites, while the MRS protects and maintains selected Jewish religious sites. The law also provides for up to five years' imprisonment for actions "likely to violate the feelings of the members of the different religions" regarding their religious sites. The law grants the government the authority to decide the scope of the right to worship at certain religious sites. Government regulations recognize 16 sites as holy places for Jews, while various other budgetary and governmental authorities recognize an additional 160 places as holy for Jews.

The law criminalizes willfully and unjustly disturbing any meeting of persons lawfully assembled for religious worship. It also criminalizes intentionally

destroying, damaging, or desecrating any object held sacred by any group of persons.

The law criminalizes calling for, praising, supporting, or encouraging acts of violence or terrorism where such actions are likely to lead to violence, including calls for violence against religious groups. The law criminalizes statements demeaning, degrading, or showing violence toward someone based on race but provides an exception for statements citing a religious source, unless there is proof of intent to incite racism. The infliction of “injury to religious sentiments” constitutes a criminal offense. Such injury includes publishing or saying something that is liable to offend the religious sentiment or faith of others. The law criminalizes causing a person to be regarded with contempt because of that person’s religion.

The law states that acts of enmity toward a person or a group due to affiliation with, or membership in, a religious group are considered offenses under aggravating circumstances, and penalties are set at double the penalty for the original offense or 10 years’ imprisonment, whichever is lower.

The Jordanian Waqf in Jerusalem administers the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, while the Jordanian Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Holy Places supports maintenance and salary of the Waqf staff in Jerusalem. The Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that Jews have the right to pray on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, but police may restrict this right in the name of public order and safety. The court has reiterated that its precedent on this issue is nonintervention in government decisions, “except in highly unusual cases when the decision constitutes a major distortion of justice or is extremely unreasonable.”

The law authorizes the Minister of Finance to cancel state funding to state-supported institutions that engage in commemoration of the *Nakba*, or “catastrophe,” an Arabic term used to refer to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians during the country’s 1948 War of Independence. The law forbids activities that include rejection of the

existence of Israel as a “Jewish and democratic state” or commemorating “Israel’s Independence Day or the day on which the State was established as a day of mourning.”

The law requires Israeli citizens to obtain a permit from the minister of interior or the Prime Minister for travel to Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Since the 2011 unrest and civil war in Syria, authorities deny Druze residents of the Golan Heights permits to travel to Syria for religious pilgrimage or for higher education. Without prior approval, illegal travel is punishable by a prison sentence or fine. Individuals traveling for the Hajj pilgrimage do not need permits.

It is illegal to proselytize to a person younger than 18 without the consent of both parents. The law prohibits offering a material benefit to potential converts while proselytizing.

The government provides public schools, with instruction conducted in either Hebrew or Arabic. Individual families may choose any public school for their children, regardless of ethnicity or religious observance. Children have the right to choose a public secular school instead of a religious school, regardless of parental preference. The Ministry of Education requires students to receive religious education in schools, including secular and religious schools, whether public or private. Non-Jewish students are required to study the Jewish religion, in addition to their own religion. In addition to secular schools, the state funds Jewish religious public schools. By law, the state provides the equivalent of public-school funding to two systems of “recognized but not official” (a form of semiprivate) ultra-Orthodox religious schools affiliated with ultra-Orthodox political parties, the United Torah Judaism-affiliated Independent Education System and the Shas-affiliated Fountain of Torah Education System.

Churches receive partial government funding to operate “recognized but not official” schools. Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem may send their children to one of these church schools, a private school that follows an internationally approved curriculum, or a private school operated by the

Jerusalem Islamic Waqf (which also includes religious instruction). Some Israeli-funded public schools in Jerusalem as well as some Christian schools use a version of the Palestinian Authority (PA) curriculum modified by the Israeli Ministry of Education. Religious education is mandatory in the PA curriculum for students in grades one through six in these schools, with separate courses on religion for Muslims and Christians. Students in these schools may choose which class to take but may not opt out of religion courses.

The Chief Rabbinate determines who may be buried in Jewish state cemeteries, limiting this right to individuals considered Jewish by Orthodox Jewish standards. The law provides for the right of any individual to burial in a civil ceremony and requires the government to establish civil cemeteries in various areas around the country. The law criminalizes the intentional desecration of, or trespass on, places of burial, which is punishable by three years in prison. The law establishes the legal authority of religious courts operated by officially recognized religious communities over their members in matters of marriage, divorce, and burial. The only domestic marriages with legal standing and that may be registered are those performed according to the religious statutes of recognized religious communities. The law allows for the civil registration of two persons as a married couple outside of the religious court system only if they married outside the country, if the partners are of different religions and their respective religious courts do not object to a civil registration, or if both partners are listed as “lacking religion” in the population registry. Marriages performed outside the country may be registered with the MOI. A law mandating women’s equality contains language that explicitly exempts matters of marriage, divorce, and appointments to religious positions.

Members of some unrecognized groups may process their personal status documents, including marriage licenses, only through the authorities of one of the recognized religious communities, if those authorities agree.

The law imposes a two-year prison sentence, which has never been enforced, for persons who conduct a marriage or are married in a Jewish wedding or divorce in the country outside the Chief Rabbinate's authority.

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

The law allows a Jewish woman or man to initiate divorce proceedings, but both the husband and wife must give consent to make the divorce final. A Muslim man may divorce his wife without her consent and without petitioning the court. A Muslim woman may petition for and receive a divorce through sharia courts without her husband's consent under certain conditions. A marriage contract may provide for other circumstances in which she may obtain a divorce without her husband's consent. Christians may seek official annulments, separations, or divorces through ecclesiastical courts, depending on their denomination.

Matters stemming from divorce proceedings, including alimony, child support, child custody, guardianship, and property division, are under the parallel jurisdiction of religious and civil courts. The first court to receive a case acquires exclusive jurisdiction over it. The Jordanian Waqf administers Islamic courts in Jerusalem for Muslim residents, with the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs in Jordan having appellate authority.

In accordance with halacha, a Jewish woman whose husband refuses to give her a *get* (Jewish legal writ of divorce) may not legally remarry in the country. While a rabbinical court may order a husband to give a *get*, it does not have the power to terminate the marriage if he refuses. In such cases, rabbinical courts may impose community-based punishments on the husband, including avoiding financial dealings with a *get*-refuser, excluding

him from community activities, and advertising these decisions to the public; courts may impose more severe punishments, including travel restrictions and imprisonment, in extreme cases. The law permits rabbinical courts to hear cases of get refusals in which the spouses are not Israeli citizens if certain other conditions are met (for example, if the couple lives abroad in a location where there is no rabbinical court).

Civil courts have primary jurisdiction over questions of inheritance, but parties may file such cases in religious courts by mutual agreement. Decisions by these bodies are subject to Supreme Court review. The rabbinical courts, when exercising their power in civil matters, apply religious law, which differs from civil law, including in matters relating to the property rights of widows and daughters. A child born to a woman still married to another man is considered a *mamzer* (child of an unpermitted relationship) under Jewish law, which restricts the child's future marriage prospects in the observant Jewish community.

Military service is compulsory for Jewish citizens, male Druze citizens, and male Circassian citizens (Muslims originally from the northwestern Caucasus region who migrated in the late 19th century). The IDF does not consider conscientious objection due to religious belief as a basis for exemption from military service.

Religiously observant Jewish women and ultra-Orthodox men may request an exemption from military service. For most ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Druze religious students, military service is postponed for several years, after which they receive an exemption. Arab/Palestinian Muslims and Christians as well as Druze and Circassian women receive a de-facto exemption by not being called for military service. Those exempt from military service may volunteer for it or for the National Service program, a civilian alternative in which volunteers work for two years to promote social welfare in schools, hospitals, or NGOs. Jehovah's Witnesses are not eligible for the National Service program.

By law, excavations within a sacred site require the approval of a ministerial committee, which includes the Ministers of Culture, Justice, and Religious Affairs.

Membership in a recognized religion is recorded in the National Registry and generally passed from parent to child unless a person changes it through a formal conversion to another recognized religion. Religious identification is listed in the National Registry but not on official identity cards.

All Israeli citizens who meet the Chief Rabbinate's criteria as "Jewish" under Jewish religious law are recorded as Jewish, whether Orthodox or not (unless they convert to another religion). Approximately 450,000 citizens who identify as Jewish but do not meet the Chief Rabbinate's criteria as "Jewish" as well as members of unrecognized religious groups are recorded as "lacking religion." The vast majority of individuals in this category are immigrants from the former Soviet Union, their children, and grandchildren, who gained citizenship under the Law of Return as grandchildren or children of Jews but are not recognized as Jewish by the Chief Rabbinate because they cannot prove they meet the Orthodox definition of Jewish through matrilineal descent.

There is no legal requirement regarding personal observance or nonobservance of Shabbat from sunset on Fridays until sunset on Saturdays and on Jewish holidays. The law declares in the context of labor rights that Shabbat and Jewish holidays are national days of rest, while permitting non-Jewish workers alternate days of rest. The law criminalizes (up to one month's imprisonment) employers who open their businesses and employ Jews on Shabbat, except those who are self-employed; the law, however, is rarely enforced. There are exceptions for essential infrastructure and the hospitality, culture, and recreation industries. The law instructs the Minister of Labor and Welfare to consider "Israel's traditions," among other factors, when deciding whether to approve permits to work on Shabbat. The law prohibits discrimination against workers who refuse to work on their day of

rest based on their religion and regardless of whether they are religiously observant.

The law prohibits discrimination in employment and occupation, including against employees, contractors, or persons seeking employment, based on age, race, religion, national origin, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, and disability.

The law states public transportation operated and funded by the national government may not operate on Shabbat, with exceptions for vehicles bringing passengers to hospitals, remote localities, and non-Jewish localities and for vehicles essential to public security or maintaining public transportation services.

The Chief Rabbinate and local religious councils have the legal authority to issue certificates of *kashrut* (i.e., complying with Jewish dietary laws), which certify a restaurant or factory's adherence to Jewish dietary laws. On January 1, a law took effect permitting local religious councils to award kashrut certificates anywhere in the country and not solely to entities in their respective jurisdiction. The law also allows private Orthodox organizations to award kashrut certificates. Businesses may display a declaration regarding the kashrut standards they observe and the organization that supervises those standards but may not use the words "kosher" or "certificate" without a kashrut license from the Rabbinate or the religious councils. The Chief Rabbinate has the authority to indict businesses that violate this law.

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

## **Government Practices**

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

National Public Radio (NPR) reported that on April 1, Israeli police shot and killed Palestinian Mohammed al-Osaibi at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount during Ramadan. Police said al-Osaibi tried to grab an officer's gun at the entrance to the site. International media reported Palestinian worshipers at the site said the police shot the man after he tried to prevent police and border guards from assaulting a Palestinian woman at the site. CNN reported that while initially the police said there was no security camera coverage, after CNN provided evidence that security cameras were pointed at the scene, Israeli authorities reported that "some footage might not be shared with media because it's still closed for investigation." The Associated Press (AP) reported on April 14 that the Israeli state attorney's office said the police acted "lawfully in self-defense" and closed the case.

On December 18, a court in Ramla convicted Sheikh Yousef Elbaz, an Arab/Palestinian citizen of Israel, of "incitement to violence" based on a Facebook post and sermon he delivered at al-Aqsa Mosque in 2022 and sentenced him to eight months in prison, a six months' suspended prison sentence, and a 5,000-shekel (\$1,380) fine or 25 additional days in prison. The court found Elbaz had praised Muslims for "defending al Aqsa with their bodies," calling them "respected jihadists who crushed the nose of the Israeli occupation and in its blood prevented it from dividing al-Aqsa Mosque."

On November 14, the Supreme Court rejected an appeal by settler Ariel Danino against his administrative detention. According to *Haaretz*, Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant signed the order detaining Danino without trial for four months on October 29. Security sources told *Haaretz* that Danino was being detained for his involvement in violence against Palestinians. Israeli media reported that prior to his detention, Danino threatened on social media to kill Palestinians and suggested blowing up al-Aqsa Mosque and

blaming it on rockets from Gaza. *Haaretz* reported Danino lived in the illegal outpost of Kumi Ori, in the West Bank, near the Yitzhar settlement.

The law does not include a specific prohibition on torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment practices; the government stated it used “exceptional measures” during interrogation in some cases but provided no further details. Human rights organizations raised concerns regarding reports of systemic torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment or punishment of Palestinian detainees in prison facilities, especially after October 7. The Public Committee Against Torture in Israel (PCATI), an Israeli NGO, identified what it described as persistent and systemic shortcomings in the government’s investigations of allegations of mistreatment of detainees, especially in the aftermath of October 7. According to human rights NGOs that conducted visits to detention facilities, detainee testimonies, and local press reports, Israeli authorities subjected Palestinian detainees to physical and sexual violence, threats, intimidation, severely restricted access to food and water, exposure to extreme cold without adequate clothing, and regular prolonged periods of isolation. According to PCATI, some of these measures might be considered religion-based humiliation. According to accounts that PCATI had received in recent years, these practices included interference in a detainee’s ability to pray while in detention (such as refusing to tell the time to a detainee, prolonged interrogations with no breaks, and recurring intrusions into a detainee’s cell); provocatively eating and drinking in front of detainees while they were fasting for Ramadan; and multiple affronts to the modesty practices of religious women detainees (such as by activating cameras in their cells, preventing them from privately using the bathroom, or removing their headscarves).

Authorities investigated reports of violent attacks against Palestinians and Arab/Palestinian citizens of Israel and their property, primarily in Jerusalem, by members of Jewish organizations that made anti-Christian and anti-Muslim statements and objected to social relationships between Jews and non-Jews.

On April 2, Israeli police detained a Jewish activist with the Temple Mount Administration whom they suspected of preparing to perform a ritual animal sacrifice for Passover, which coincided with Ramadan. The same day, National Security Minister Ben Gvir publicly called on Jews to visit the Temple Mount holy site for Passover, but to refrain from prohibited ritual sacrifice there.

According to media reports, Israeli police forcibly entered the al-Aqsa Mosque overnight April 4-5 to remove approximately 300 worshipers who had remained overnight after evening prayers during Ramadan. Police reported dozens of youths had brought fireworks, sticks, and stones with the intent to violate public order at the site and attempted to barricade themselves in the mosque, some saying they wanted to prevent religious Jews from carrying out animal sacrifices at the site. More than 50 Palestinians and two Israeli police officers were injured, and police arrested more than 350 Palestinians. According to Reporters Sans Frontiers and local media, police arrested and assaulted two media workers reporting from the al-Aqsa Mosque, Wehbe Makieh, a freelance camera operator reporting for Al Mayadeen TV, and freelance photojournalist Atta Awisat. Palestinian militants in Gaza and in Lebanon fired rocket salvos towards Israel shortly after the police raid, and in various statements blamed “provocations” at the site for the launches.

On April 5, police entered the al-Aqsa compound again to disperse thousands of worshippers who had gathered in the courtyard for Ramadan prayers. Media outlets reported that footage on social media showed Israeli officers striking individuals with batons, and eyewitnesses reported police smashed doors and windows to enter the mosque and deployed stun grenades and metal-tipped rubber bullets once inside. Police stated its forces entered al-Aqsa after “hundreds of rioters and mosque desecrators barricaded themselves” inside. The Palestinian Red Crescent Society reported at least six Palestinians sustained injuries, two of whom were hospitalized. Police said youth again brought fireworks and rocks to cause disturbances.

On May 18, Reuters reported thousands of Jewish nationalists, some of them chanting “Death to Arabs,” “Mohammed is dead,” “May your village burn,” and other racist and anti-Muslim slogans, paraded through Jerusalem and the Old City’s Muslim quarter under Israeli police protection during “Jerusalem Day” celebrations, commemorating Israel’s capture of East Jerusalem in the 1967 war. Several members of the Israeli government, including National Security Minister Ben Gvir, joined the procession. While there were physical altercations between Jews and Palestinians, media outlets reported less violence than in previous years. Police said they arrested two individuals. Some participants carried flags belonging to Lehava – a far-right Jewish supremacist group. Reuters reported that earlier in the day, hundreds of Jewish pilgrims, including some members of the Knesset (MKs), toured the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount complex.

National Security Minister Ben Gvir visited the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount on May 21, declaring, “We are in charge here. I am happy to go up to the Temple Mount, the most important place for the Jewish people.” He added, “We are in charge in Jerusalem and in all of the Land of Israel.” The PA and Arab governments denounced the visit as a violation of the status quo.

The Religious Freedom Data Center and the group Protecting Holy Land Christians, an ecumenical campaign led by the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Council of Patriarchs, and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, documented 71 attacks against holy sites and clergy in Jerusalem between January and December, including six between October and December. A city official said that as of September 1, police arrested or detained 21 suspects and conducted 16 investigations. On October 4, Israeli police apprehended five suspects on suspicion of spitting on Christian pilgrims in the Old City of Jerusalem. In response, the Jerusalem District Commander ordered the establishment of a special investigation team in to address acts of spitting and hate towards Christians.

According to the NGO Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality (NCF), the estimated 268,000 Bedouin citizens living in the Negev accounted for 34

percent of the area's population, but only 12.5 percent of the residential-zoned land was designated for the Bedouin population. The NCF reported authorities demolished 3,004 Bedouin-citizen structures in 2021. According to the NCF, self-demolitions by Bedouins, undertaken as the result of court orders or other government measures to avoid fines, represented 86 percent of all the demolitions carried out in 2021, which reflected the effect the state's eviction policy on Bedouin Israeli citizens. Other civil society representatives stated the demolitions ignored traditional Bedouin seminomadic lifestyles predating the modern state of Israel.

The government continued to promote measures to encourage increased Jewish-Israeli residence and economic development in the thinly populated Negev Desert. Civil society organizations criticized the plans, stating they could lead to the displacement of 36,000 Bedouins. Authorities made more funding available for government-approved Bedouin cities and towns to relocate Bedouins displaced by economic expansion.

The *Jerusalem Post* reported that on July 24, the Beersheba Magistrate Court ordered that the Bedouin Development and Settlements Authority in the Negev may forcibly resettle 500 residents from the unrecognized Bedouin village of Ras Jrabah and incorporate village land into the nearby city of Dimona. Residents said they owned and resided on the land for generations prior to the 1970 Land Law that registered it as state-owned property, but the court ruled the community could not prove continuous habitation. Following the ruling, the NGO Adalah criticized the decision as a violation of Bedouins' constitutional right of equality and said attempting to resettle the villagers was part of a government strategy of racial segregation "which prioritizes 'Jewish settlement' as a value that all state bodies are mandated to promote."

On November 8, the NCF stated the government had resumed construction of the Jewish community of Hiran on disputed lands of the unrecognized village of Umm al-Hiran. A majority of the Bedouin residents of Umm al-Hiran continued to oppose a 2018 agreement the government reached with some residents that permitted it to demolish the village and relocate to

vacant plots in the Bedouin town of Hura. The NCF also reported the Jewish group Garin Hiran, which was awaiting the establishment of Hiran, was residing in the former Yatir military camp nearby.

On June 30, the stay on the Supreme Court's order striking down amendments to the security service law that exempted ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students from military service expired. On June 25, the government approved a resolution to pass a new law by March 31, 2024, and to instruct the IDF not to conscript eligible ultra-Orthodox men until then. On July 5, the NGO Movement for Quality of Government in Israel submitted a petition to the Supreme Court against the government's nonenforcement of the mandatory draft. On July 24, Knesset members of the ultra-Orthodox United Torah Judaism (UTJ) Party submitted a bill to the Knesset that classified Torah study as a "significant service," equal to military service. On July 25, the Likud Party issued a statement saying it would not put the bill forward for a vote.

Those exempt from compulsory military service continued to have the option of joining the National Service. According to government officials and NGOs, this alternative was more popular among women from Orthodox Jewish backgrounds than other exempted groups.

According to representatives of the ultra-Orthodox Eda Haredit community, some of its members did not receive an exemption from military service because its yeshivas were not recognized by the state and young men studying in those yeshivas did not submit draft exemption applications. As a result, community representatives said police arrested dozens of their members every month.

As in prior years, ultra-Orthodox groups, including Peleg Yerushalmi and Eda Haredit, held protests in Jerusalem against drafting ultra-Orthodox Jews into the military and against the proposed path of a Jerusalem light rail line through an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood.

The IDF continued to have only Orthodox Jewish chaplains. The government employed civilian clergy of different faiths, including Muslim imams, as chaplains at military burials when non-Jewish soldiers died in service.

The Jordanian Waqf in Jerusalem continued to administer the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, while the Jordanian government supported maintenance and Waqf staff salaries in Jerusalem. Israeli police continued to exercise responsibility for security at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, with officers stationed both inside the site and at entrances. Police conducted routine patrols on the outdoor plaza and inside buildings on the site and regulated pedestrian traffic exiting and entering the site.

The government continued to allow controlled access to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and said freedom of worship at the site was a supreme value. The government expressed continued support for the status quo pertaining to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount to allow non-Muslim visitors but prohibit non-Islamic worship on the compound, while stating that the country respected Jordan's "special role" at the site. Police continued to maintain exclusive control of the Mughrabi Gate entrance, through which non-Muslims could enter the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site, and allowed visitors through the gate during set hours.

The Waqf continued to facilitate approved non-Muslim visits to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and restrict non-Muslims who visited the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount from entering the Dome of the Rock and other buildings dedicated for Islamic worship, including the al-Aqsa Mosque.

Waqf officials repeated previous years' concerns regarding their lack of control of access to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, and criticized Israeli authorities for implementing age and gender restrictions on Muslim worshippers attempting to access the site at various times throughout the year. In addition to police banning individual Waqf staff members from the site, the Waqf said that it had a reduced capacity to administer the site because Israeli authorities refused to grant permits to new staff hired to work there, leaving the Waqf seriously understaffed. The Waqf said Israeli

authorities continued to interfere in its administration of the site, including delaying longstanding maintenance and restoration work. Israeli officials and activists stated the Waqf sometimes attempted to conduct repairs without coordinating with Israeli authorities.

Waqf employees remained stationed inside each gate and on the plaza but exercised only limited oversight. The Waqf objected to non-Muslims wearing religious symbols or religious clothing and praying or performing religious acts on the site and to individuals whom Waqf officials perceived to be dressed immodestly or who caused disturbances, but said it lacked authority to remove such persons from the site. Israeli police sometimes acted upon these objections. Waqf officials stated Israeli police did not coordinate with the Waqf on decisions regarding entry and barring of Muslim and non-Muslim visitors to the site.

Human rights and civil society organizations said authorities banned some Palestinian residents in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza and Arab/Palestinian and Jewish citizens of Israel from the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. The organizations repeated concerns expressed by Waqf officials that Israeli authorities at times restricted some Muslims from entering the site based on gender, age, and place of residency. Waqf officials reported multiple times that Israeli police prohibited entry of male Muslim worshipers under the age of 50 during Ramadan. Since 2017, authorities have not issued permits for Gazans to visit the site during Islamic holidays. Muslims who were Israeli citizens, Palestinian residents of Jerusalem, or foreigners already present in Israel did not need permits to visit the site. Palestinian civil society organizations said that police continued to check the identity cards of individuals entering the Old City to visit the site for Friday prayers and would bar from entry those with West Bank identity cards and return them to the West Bank.

On April 12, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that, keeping with past precedent, non-Muslim visitors would not be allowed to visit the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount until the end of Ramadan on April 21. In early April, police suspended non-Muslim access during the final 10 days of

Ramadan, as they had in previous years, and closed the site to non-Muslim visitors during the afternoon of the first 20 days of the month. National Security Minister Ben Gvir publicly criticized the decision, which Netanyahu said the security establishment “unanimously” supported.

On March 30, the Times of Israel reported the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) announced women of all ages, children up to the age of 12, and men over age 55 from the West Bank would be allowed to enter the Haram al-Sharif/ Temple Mount for Friday prayers during Ramadan without permits. COGAT announced it would allow an unspecified number of Palestinian women above age 50 and men above age 55 from Gaza to visit Jerusalem between Sundays and Thursdays during Ramadan. It would also approve visits by West Bank Palestinians to family members in Israel and foreigners to the West Bank, subject to security approval.

Israeli authorities barred specific named individuals from the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site, including Jewish activists believed to have violated the status quo understanding prohibiting non-Islamic prayer, Muslims believed to have verbally harassed or acted violently against non-Muslim visitors to the site or incited others to violence, and public figures whose presence authorities feared would inflame intercommunal tensions. Other banned persons included Waqf guards, administrative and maintenance staff, and imams delivering sermons at the site, as well as prominent activists. Authorities usually banned individuals for a period of months, then allowed them to return. The PA Governorate of Jerusalem reported that Israeli authorities banned 577 individuals from the site during the year, compared with 427 in 2022.

Media outlets reported that after October 7, in response to Hamas’s calls for mass Palestinian rallies in East Jerusalem, the INP restricted the entry of Muslim worshipers to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount for Friday prayers, allowing only Old City resident men above the age of 50, women, and children. Other worshipers performed prayers by roadsides outside the Old City amid a heavy Israeli security presence. According to Waqf officials, on

October 13, authorities limited access to Friday prayers at the site to 5,000 elderly worshippers. The Israeli NGO Ir Amim, writing on December 6, said, “The imposition of entry bans on Muslim worshippers for 60 consecutive days is unprecedented and incomparable to any limitations imposed by Israeli police in past crises.” According to the NGO, access to the site for Jewish visitors and Temple Movement activists remained “unfettered” during the same time period.

Media outlets reported that in July, authorities barred Sheikh Ekrima Sabri, the head of the private Higher Islamic Council in Jerusalem and former imam of al-Aqsa Mosque and former Palestinian Grand Mufti, from traveling abroad for six months. The ban followed a trip by Sabri to Jordan, Algeria, Turkey, and Malaysia. His attorney said the ban was “on the pretext that his travel constitutes a security threat to the occupation state.” Israeli authorities renewed the travel ban in December and summoned Sabri for questioning on incitement charges.

Regional news outlets reported that on February 8, Israeli authorities banned Sheikh Najeh Bakirat, deputy director-general of the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf, from entering the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site for six months; they extended the order for an additional six months on July 2. In July, Israeli authorities deported Bakirat to the West Bank for six months. The deportation order of the Commander of the Home Front stated Bakirat was “active in the Islamic resistance movement (Hamas)” and that “his presence in Jerusalem poses a threat to security.”

Although the Chief Rabbinate and most ultra-Orthodox rabbis continued to ban Jewish visits to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site due to the ongoing *halachic* (Jewish legal) debate about whether it was permissible or forbidden for Jews to enter the Temple Mount, some Orthodox rabbis continued to say entering the site was permissible. According to a *Jerusalem Post* report, a sign placed by the Chief Rabbinate remained at the entrance to the site used by Jews, reading, “According to Torah Law, entering the Temple Mount is strictly forbidden due to the holiness of the site.” According to an Islamic Waqf official, there were 48,223 Jewish

visitors to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount during the year, approximately the same number as in 2022. According to data compiled by Israeli NGOs, 50,098 non-Muslims visited during the year, compared with 51,483 in 2022.

Groups such as the Temple Institute, Beyadenu, and Returning to the Temple Mount continued to call for increased Jewish access and prayer as well as the construction of the third Jewish temple on the site. A group of activists, including the Temple Institute, remained dedicated to rebuilding “the Holy Temple on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem, in accordance with the Biblical commandments.” Mount Moriah is the site of the Dome of the Rock on the Haram al-Sharif compound.

According to local media, some Jewish groups performed religious acts, such as prayers and prostration on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, despite the ban on non-Islamic prayer. Jewish Temple Mount advocacy groups continued to report police generally allowed discreet non-Islamic prayer on the site and that during the year, some Jewish groups performed more overt religious acts there. Video posted to social media on September 4 showed police arresting former member of the Knesset (MK) and activist Yehuda Glick after he broadcast the sound of the shofar (a ram’s horn traditionally sounded during celebrations of Rosh Hashanah) via his mobile phone on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. *124 News* reported that during September celebrations of Rosh Hashanah, Israeli police detained three Israeli Jewish activists at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount after one of them reportedly blew a shofar. The Jordanian Foreign Ministry issued a statement objecting to what it characterized as “extremists” and their “provocative practice,” which it said represented a violation of the status quo.

Police continued to screen non-Muslims for religious articles when visiting the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Police allowed Jewish males wearing a kippah and *tzitzit* (fringes) and those who wished to enter the site barefoot (in accordance with interpretations of halacha) to enter with a police escort. On July 18, the Palestinian *al-Qastal* news site posted a video on social media of a group of Jewish men, at least one of them wearing a prayer

shawl, reciting aloud what the *Jerusalem Post* subsequently identified as the Priestly Blessing (*Birkat Kohanim*) on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Hamas's head of international relations Basem Naim said, "The continuation of these provocations and violations of our sanctities is liable to ignite a sweeping religious war in the region, affecting everyone and not stopping at borders." Hamas issued a statement saying, "We warn the occupation and its settlers against their continued desecration of al-Aqsa, which will remain purely Islamic, and we will defend it by all available means."

*Haaretz* reported that on April 2, Israeli police arrested Rafael Morris, head of the group Returning to the Temple Mount, on suspicion that he planned to conduct a Passover sacrifice on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount on Passover eve. As it had done in 2022, the group again circulated flyers and posted on social media offering cash prizes to anyone who managed a living sacrifice on the site or who was arrested while trying to do so. The Times of Israel reported on April 5 that police detained several Jewish activists who planned to sacrifice goats and sheep on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount ahead of Passover. According to press reports, Chief Rabbi of the Western Wall and the Holy Places Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz in April banned the bringing of animals to the Temple Mount to prevent Jews from trying to bring Passover sacrifices. Returning to the Temple Mount issued a statement saying that on May 5, Israeli police in Jerusalem detained for questioning five Israeli Jews who intended to sacrifice a lamb on that day.

On October 1, police arrested Yair Hanoach, a member of Returning to the Temple Mount, at a light rail station near Jerusalem's Old City on his way to sacrifice a lamb on the Temple Mount. After Hanoach's arrest, Returning to the Temple Mount released a statement saying, "There is no more room for Muslim rule on the Temple Mount: The time has come to build a Jewish temple and renew the sacrificial rites."

In August, Israeli media and NGOs reported that several ministries, including the Ministries of Agriculture, Jerusalem Affairs, and Heritage, improperly assisted the Temple Institute in 2022 in a plan to import five red heifers from the United States in an unsuccessful plan to perform a ritual sacrifice

associated with rebuilding the Jewish temple on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount.

The government continued to allow MKs and ministers to visit the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site. MKs were required to inform the Knesset guard at least 24 hours prior to the visit to allow for coordination with police. On January 3, Sephardic Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef wrote a letter to National Security Minister Ben Gvir, who visited the site later that day, stating, “As a minister representing the government of Israel you should be acting according to Chief Rabbinate instructions, which have long forbidden visiting the Temple Mount.”

Israeli and Palestinian media, citing accounts from a Temple Mount activist group, reported that on July 27, Ben Gvir joined more than 2,100 Jews who visited the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount during Tisha B’Av – a day of fasting when Jews commemorate the destruction of the temples. According to the Times of Israel, this was Ben Gvir’s third visit to the site as a minister. While there, he said, “This place is the most important place for the people of Israel where we need to return and show our governance.” Negev and the Galilee Development Minister Yitzhak Wasserlauf, a member of Ben Gvir’s Jewish Power party, also joined, later posting on social media his hope for the “redemption” of the Jewish people and “the building of the [Third] temple soon in our days.” Police said they arrested 16 Jewish visitors and two Palestinians because of disturbances at the site. Prior to the visit, Sephardic Chief Rabbi Yosef reportedly accused Ben Gvir of “sinning and causing others to sin” by visiting the Temple Mount.

The issue of the use of the Gate of Mercy (Bab al-Rahma), a building within the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount that the Waqf reopened in 2019 after it had been closed since 2003, remained unresolved. The Israeli government stated it regarded the reopening as a violation of the status quo. An Israeli court in 2022 extended a 2020 court order to close the site, but as of year’s end, the INP had not fully enforced the order. The Waqf said it did not recognize the authority of Israeli courts over the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Throughout the year, Muslim worshippers could generally enter the

site, although Israeli police sometimes conducted security searches there, removed Waqf staff, or temporarily prohibited access to the Gate of Mercy.

According to media, during Yom Kippur in September, a group of Jewish young men climbed on gravestones in the Bab al-Rahmeh Islamic Cemetery, located outside the Old City walls adjacent to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Quds News Network posted a video to social media that showed the group singing, dancing, and jumping from grave to grave. Police appeared to remove the youth from the gravestones but allowed them to remain in the cemetery. The Waqf condemned the act as “desecration” by “Jewish extremists” under police protection, but an INP spokesperson denied the claim, saying police officers were removing them from the scene. Mustafa Abu Zahra, head of the Islamic Cemeteries Committee in Jerusalem, told *al-Arab al-Jadid* that settlers had turned their holiday into an aggression against Muslim graveyards.

On December 27, police arrested an Israeli suspected of desecrating the Bab al-Rahma Cemetery. According to press and social media reports, the man, a West Bank settler, hung a severed donkey’s head among the graves. According to the Waqf, the suspect was “a Jewish extremist.” Police said that at the time of his arrest he was carrying an axe. Police said the man was “unbalanced” and “had broken the law and disrupted public order” by his actions. Authorities also took an accomplice into custody.

Media outlets reported that on December 7, the first night of Hannukah, Jewish “ultranationalists” clashed with police at the start of what had been a planned march through the Muslim Quarter of the Old City. The group Jewish Truth organized the march, saying its purpose was to call for “full Jewish control over the Temple Mount and Jerusalem” and for the authority of the Waqf to be abolished. Police stopped the march of approximately 150 individuals, preventing them from reaching the Western Wall and saying that the marchers had violated the terms of their permit by carrying inflammatory signs, leading provocative chants, and running. Some demonstrators chanted “Eject the Waqf.” One sign read, “A [bulldozer] on the Temple Mount is the true victory.”

Palestinian residents of Jerusalem and Muslim leaders continued to protest archaeological excavations and construction work done at the City of David National Park, in the Silwan neighborhood outside the Old City, and in the Old City near the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Some NGOs monitoring archaeological practices in Jerusalem continued to state the Israel Antiquities Authority emphasized archaeological finds that bolstered Jewish claims, while minimizing historically significant archaeological finds of other religions.

At the main Western Wall Plaza, the place of Jewish worship nearest the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and Judaism's holiest site, authorities continued to prohibit the performance of any "religious ceremony that is not in accordance with the customs of the place, [or] which harms the feelings of the public toward the place." Authorities interpreted this prohibition to include mixed-gender Jewish prayer services, over the objections of the Jewish Conservative and Reform movements. The organization Women of the Wall, whose members were mostly Reform and Conservative Jewish women and whose goal was to secure the official right for women to pray at the Western Wall, stated their monthly presence at the wall for more than 30 years had established them as part of the "customs of the place."

Authorities continued to allow use of a temporary platform south of the Mughrabi Bridge and adjacent to the Western Wall, but not visible from the main Western Wall Plaza, for non-Orthodox "egalitarian" (mixed gender) Jewish prayers. Authorities designated the platform for members of the Conservative and Reform movements of Judaism, including for religious ceremonies such as bar and bat mitzvahs. The upgrade of the egalitarian plaza, per a 2016 agreement between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jewish communities that provided for construction of a permanent plaza for mixed-gender prayer managed by non-Orthodox groups and a merged entry to all prayer spaces adjacent to the Western Wall, remained pending at year's end. On February 28, the Supreme Court held a hearing on petitions demanding implementation of the 2016 agreement, which the government

put on hold in 2017, but did not issue a ruling by the end of the year. The *Jerusalem Post* reported that on February 16, ahead of the hearing, the state's response to the petitions included Prime Minister Netanyahu's position that the renovation of the southern plaza would "continue as quickly as possible," and that the "management of the southern plaza will continue in accordance with the format that has existed in recent years." The Israel Religious Action Center, which represented the petitioners, said successive Israeli governments had not done the bare minimum to implement the agreement since 2020.

The government continued to execute a five-year-plan, begun in 2022, to upgrade infrastructure at the Western Wall and encourage visits, spending portions of the 110 million shekels (\$30.4 million) it allocated for the purpose. The plan did not include the egalitarian plaza.

Authorities continued to prohibit visitors from bringing private Torah scrolls to the main Western Wall Plaza and women from accessing the public Torah scrolls or giving priestly blessings at the site. More than 100 Torah scrolls were housed in the men's section. Authorities, however, permitted women to pray with *tefillin* and prayer shawls pursuant to a 2013 Jerusalem District Court ruling stating it was illegal to arrest or fine them for such actions. On February 9, Prime Minister Netanyahu released a video stating the government would not act upon a proposal by the Shas Party to criminalize women reading from the Torah, praying with tefillin and prayer shawls, or performing other religious acts at the plaza. On July 20, the Jerusalem Magistrate Court ruled Western Wall security checks should be conducted fairly and impartially and that security guards should not search for Torah scrolls. The ruling, however, did not prohibit Western Wall ushers employed by the ultra-Orthodox Western Wall Heritage Foundation, a governmental body that administers the main Western Wall Plaza, from enforcing Western Wall procedures. The *Jerusalem Post* reported that despite the ruling, on August 18, security guards, escorted by ushers, searched Women of the Wall members' bags for Torah scrolls and confiscated one scroll.

Authorities continued to allow Women of the Wall to hold its monthly service in a barricaded portion of the women's area of the main Western Wall Plaza. Ultra-Orthodox protesters repeatedly screamed at, cursed, blew whistles at, spat on, and pushed Women of the Wall members during their monthly services. Representatives of Women of the Wall said police and ushers from the ultra-Orthodox Western Wall Heritage Foundation, which administers the main Western Wall Plaza, were reluctant to intervene when ultra-Orthodox women and men disrupted the women's monthly prayer service. A 2017 petition to the Supreme Court by Women of the Wall asking that ushers and police prevent disruption of their services remained pending at year's end.

Media outlets reported that on February 22, Labor MK Gilad Kariv, a Reform rabbi, used his parliamentary immunity to bring Torah scrolls for use by Women of the Wall, as he has done on several occasions in the past. Kariv referred to the prohibition as illegal. Yitzhak Pindrus, MK of an ultra-Orthodox party, attempted to physically block Kariv from reaching the area. Police intervened when Orthodox protesters spat on, shoved, and verbally abused a Women of the Wall group that included Reform rabbis from the United States as it made its way to the Western Wall.

The *Jerusalem Post* reported that on March 23, two Jewish teenagers set fire to prayer books belonging to the Women of the Wall group. Police arrested the individuals. The *Jerusalem Post* reported that on May 21, security guards seized a Torah scroll that the Women of the Wall group attempted to bring onto the plaza for prayers.

*Haaretz* reported that police imposed attendance restrictions at the Orthodox Holy Fire celebrations in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem's Old City on April 15, Orthodox Easter. Police said the crowd control and attendance restrictions were safety measures prompted by the 2021 stampede disaster at Mount Meron in which 45 persons died. Christian leaders reported the restrictions were unnecessary and that the letter cited by the police purportedly from the churches recommending restrictions was not authorized by the churches. Authorities agreed to

increase attendance to approximately 2,200 Christians inside the church, and more than 1,000 worshippers congregated in the church courtyard. Thousands more gathered in surrounding alleys. Media reported police clashing, sometimes violently, with pilgrims as they attempted to pass through checkpoints erected throughout the Old City without church-issued entry permits, but there were no injuries reported.

According to church officials, Christians in Gaza applied for a total of 981 COGAT permits to visit Jerusalem for Easter celebrations in April, but officials never received an official count of permits issued. Church officials complained that the permits lasted only for a short period of time and most were rescinded shortly after being issued. Church officials also expressed concern that Israeli authorities failed to account for the impact of families separated over the holiday in their issuance of permits.

On January 30, *Haaretz* reported the Israeli government would not appeal a 2022 Jerusalem District Court order halting the registration of the St. Alexander Nevsky Church in Jerusalem's Old City as being owned by the Russian government. The decision shifted responsibility for determining the ownership of the contested religious site back to the Prime Minister's office. In 2022, the Jerusalem District Court ruled the Israeli cabinet, rather than the Justice Ministry's Land Registrar or the court, had sole authority to approve any transfer of ownership of the church. The court was responding to a petition by the Orthodox Palestine Society of the Holy Land, which owned the property until 2020, when the Land Registrar, acting on the request of the Prime Minister's office, registered the ownership to the Russian government.

The plan to expand the Jerusalem Walls National Park in the Old City to parts of the Mount of Olives, where there are Christian holy sites, remained on the Jerusalem Local Planning Committee calendar but the committee postponed discussion to August 2024. According to the plan, promoted by the Israel Nature and Parks Authority and first initiated in 2022, the expansion was designed to restore long-neglected lands and better preserve historical landscapes without harming church properties incorporated into

the national park. Critics said the proposed park expansion would include many holy sites that belonged to various Christian denominations as well as several that were important in Jewish and Muslim traditions. According to the online news site +972 Magazine, the government excluded a nearby Jewish cemetery after Jewish religious authorities opposed its inclusion. The website said that under the plan, existing residents would retain ownership of their land, but lose all autonomous rights over their property. According to the British newspaper the *Guardian*, the Armenian, Catholic, and Greek Orthodox Churches accused the Israel National Parks Authority of promoting a project “whose apparent sole purpose is to confiscate and nationalize one of the holiest sites for Christianity ... under the guise of protecting green spaces.” In December, the EU heads of mission in Jerusalem and Ramallah expressed concern these and other Israeli development “projects in and around Jerusalem’s Old City threaten to alter permanently the character of numerous holy sites and undermine the established religious equilibrium ... Pursuing these plans could have a detrimental impact on the holy sites, the paths of pilgrimage, and the viability of Jerusalem’s communities. It [also] would pose a serious threat to the special status of Jerusalem as well as to the peaceful coexistence of all three monotheistic religions in Jerusalem.”

On July 23, a Jerusalem Municipality committee approved the expropriation of approximately 10,000 square meters (108,000 square feet) for construction of an aerial cable car over the Old City. Israeli NGOs reported that on December 9, the Jerusalem Municipality affixed notices around the predominantly Palestinian neighborhood of Silwan and its vicinity concerning the expropriation of 12 plots of land along the planned cable car route. In 2022, the Supreme Court rejected petitions opposing the government’s plan for the cable car, which would pass above a cemetery belonging to the Karaite Jewish religious movement. According to the Karaite community, the cable car would desecrate the cemetery, thus preventing its further use. The petitioners also included store owners in Jerusalem’s Old City and Palestinian residents of Silwan. The government stated the cable car was meant to solve accessibility problems to holy sites such as the Western Wall, but some NGOs said the project was meant to

promote Jewish tourism sites in East Jerusalem and reinforce Israel's claims of sovereignty over the area.

The Israeli government and settler organizations in Jerusalem made efforts to increase property ownership by Israeli Jews in Jerusalem. Civil society organizations and PA representatives stated the efforts sought to emphasize Jewish history in Palestinian neighborhoods. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and NGOs such as Bimkom and Ir Amim said the goal of Jerusalem municipal and Israeli national policies was to decrease the number of Palestinian residents of Jerusalem; these groups cited the Israeli government's goal of "maintaining a solid Jewish majority in the city," as stated in the Jerusalem Municipality's master plan.

During the year, media outlets reported on a continuing dispute between the Armenian Orthodox Patriarchate and an Australian-Jewish developer over a large section of the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City that was purported to have been illegally sold to the developer by a since-defrocked Armenian Orthodox priest. In May, the PA and Jordanian governments suspended their recognition of the Patriarch in protest over the alleged deal. Several times in October and November, clashes between workers affiliated with the developer and Armenian Orthodox protesters resulted in Israeli police intervention to prevent violence. On December 28, the Patriarchate sued in the Jerusalem District Court to cancel the deal.

In May and June, according to online news site +972 Magazine, the government approved 340 million shekels (\$93.9 million) to "salvage preserve, develop, and prevent antiquity theft in Judea, Samaria, and the Jordan Valley" and to develop "settler-controlled" archaeological sites in East Jerusalem. The news site characterized this as part of an ongoing effort by religious settlers to anchor archeology in biblical literalism and use it as a central justification for the settlements, which the site said was a narrative used to erase Palestinian claims to the land and to displace the Palestinian population.

There were no Islamic seminaries in the country, and students of Islam traveled elsewhere, primarily to Jordan or the West Bank, to study. The government stated there were “Islamic colleges” in Umm al-Fahm, Baqa’a al-Gharbia, and Kfar Baraa. Muslim leaders continued to state that none of those institutes was an Islamic seminary.

Some former mosques and Islamic cemeteries remained sealed and inaccessible, including to Muslims. These sites belonged to the defunct pre-state Waqf (distinct from the present Jordanian-administered Waqf in Jerusalem) until it was confiscated by the state after the 1948 War of Independence. Other former mosques continued to be used for secular purposes.

The MRS listed 21 dedicated cemeteries in Israel and West Bank settlements for the burial of persons the government defined as “lacking religion” and 33 cemeteries for civil burial, but only three were available for use by the public regardless of residence and one had been full for several years. The state permitted other cemeteries located in agricultural localities to bury only “residents of the area.” This, according to Hiddush, left the majority of the country’s population unable to exercise its right, as mandated by law, to be buried in accordance with secular or non-Orthodox Jewish religious views. The two MRS-administered cemeteries in West Bank settlements were available only for the burial of Israeli citizens.

According to Hiddush, Orthodox Jewish NGOs and religious councils held the majority of MRS licenses for civil burial, and some of the organizations conducted a “less religious burial” rather than a secular one, did not allow burial in a coffin, and stated on their websites that their services were only for non-Jews.

According to the Secular Forum, the IDF failed to notify to some families of fallen IDF soldiers that they could choose a civil burial ceremony.

Some unrecognized religious groups, including Jehovah’s Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists, received a property tax exemption on their houses

of worship, while others, such as Buddhists and the Church of Scientology, did not. The Baha'i Gardens in Haifa were tax exempt but the Baha'i Gardens in Acre were not, as the Acre municipality did not recognize that location as a holy site. In April, the Baha'i World Center closed the Acre site to the public after the municipality ordered the Baha'is to pay seven million shekels (\$1.9 million) in taxes.

The government maintained its policy of not accepting applications for official recognition from unrecognized religious groups, including evangelical Christian churches and Jehovah's Witnesses. The government stated some leaders of unrecognized religious groups were invited to and participated in official events and ceremonies, along with the leaders of recognized religions.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, present in Jerusalem since 1887, remained officially unrecognized by Israel, although the government "acknowledged" the church. The church lacked tax-exempt status on its properties or its own ecclesiastical courts to adjudicate divorce, inheritance, or custody issues, but the state recognized marriages performed by church clergy. Church leaders reported the group requested recognition from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Interior during the year but that, as of year's end, the government took no action.

On January 17, the Supreme court dismissed a 2021 petition by the Watchtower Association demanding the government allow marriage registration for Jehovah's Witnesses, in response to the government's 2022 rejection of the group's request for recognition as an official religion in the country.

On January 24, the Lod Administrative Court ruled that the regional council of Givat Brenner and local council of Moshav Beit Elazari must build a *mikveh* (ritual bath) in the locality, following a 2021 petition by 220 residents, comprising 25 percent of Moshav's population. While the council stated that residents could find a reasonable alternative close by and that Moshav wanted to maintain its secular character, the court ruled the

rejection of the request violated residents' right to freedom of religion and worship.

On June 28, the Knesset passed a preliminary reading of a bill revising the election process for city rabbis. Analysts said the bill would subordinate city rabbis to the Chief Rabbinate, significantly increase the power of the MRS and the Chief Rabbinate in the committee that elects rabbis, and increase the number of appointed rabbis to include also neighborhood rabbis. According to commentators, the bill, advanced by the ultra-Orthodox Shas Party, would reduce city rabbis' autonomy, hinder the ability of local communities to elect rabbis that fit their way of life, and lead to the appointment of an unnecessarily large number of rabbis at great public expense. The bill remained pending in the Knesset at year's end.

On September 22, the Supreme Court reaffirmed the Tel Aviv municipality's stipulation that the NGO Rosh Yehudi could hold an outdoor Yom Kippur eve prayer gathering in downtown Tel Aviv only provided it did not separate men and women. Despite the ruling, on September 25, Rosh Yehudi attempted to segregate participants by gender, leading to an altercation with Tel Aviv residents who objected to the barriers. Rosh Yehudi's declared goals include the spreading of Judaism in the public space, supporting religious Zionist or National Orthodox groups settling in mixed cities and secular areas with the purpose of changing the character of the city or areas, and inducing secular individuals to become more religious. Prime Minister Netanyahu posted a statement on social media condemning "left-wing protesters [who] acted out against Jews during their prayers," and Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi David Lau said, "The most special day of the year turned, due to the frenzied incitement of religion haters, into a sad day."

On October 6, on the eve of the holiday of Simchat Torah, President Isaac Herzog urged Israelis to set aside their differences for the Jewish holiday, amid heightened societal tensions regarding gender-segregated prayer in central Tel Aviv. In a statement released before the holiday, Herzog said the celebrations marking the conclusion of the previous year's Torah readings

and the start of the cycle anew were the “inheritance” of all Jews – whether secular or religious.

On October 16, police arrested prominent singer and neuroscientist Dalal Abu Amneh after she posted on Facebook a verse from the Quran “*wala ghaliba illa Allah*” (“there is no victory but God”) accompanied by a Palestinian flag. On October 18, Dalal posted on Instagram that she had been held in police custody for two days in solitary confinement and accused authorities of trying to strip her of her humanity and voice. Authorities released Dalal without charges, and activists said the arrest sent a chilling message to the entire Arab community in Israel, particularly because she was arrested when she went to a police station to ask for protection. Despite her being released without charges, demonstrations led by the Afula mayor continued outside her home, and authorities repeatedly cut off her water supply for several hours at a time.

Seventh-day Adventists and others who worshipped on Saturday stated they faced difficulty traveling to their houses of worship in cities, including Jerusalem, in which public transportation was unavailable on Shabbat.

According to Brigham Young University’s Jerusalem Center, the government maintained an agreement with the Church of Jesus Christ that no member of the Church would engage in proselytizing “directly or indirectly” within Israel and the West Bank and Gaza as a condition for it to lease land for its campus on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. Some other unrecognized Christian communities reported the MOI Department of Non-Jewish Affairs discouraged them from proselytizing or holding large public gatherings outside their houses of worship.

The MOI appointed and funded approximately half of the Druze and Muslim clerics in the country and continued to train Druze and Muslim clerical employees of the state on how to work with government ministries. Muslim leaders again said the MOI routinely monitored and summoned for “talks” those whom ministry officials suspected of opposing government policies. The government said it did not monitor clerics, but government employees

of all faiths were “expected not to incite against the state in their official capacities.” The government stated the remaining Druze and Muslim clerics were not state employees due to either the preference of the local community or a lack of MOI budgetary resources. Muslim leaders stated sharia court judges, who were Ministry of Justice employees, were their preferred religious representatives.

Religious organizations providing education, health care, and other humanitarian relief and social services to Palestinians in and around East Jerusalem continued to state that the physical barrier begun by Israel during the Second Intifada in 2003 impeded their work, particularly south of Jerusalem in West Bank Christian communities around Bethlehem. Clergy members stated the barrier and additional checkpoints restricted their movements between Jerusalem and West Bank churches and monasteries as well as the movement of congregants between their homes and places of worship. Christian leaders continued to state the barrier hindered Bethlehem-area Christians from reaching the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The Israeli government previously stated it constructed the barrier as an act of self-defense and that it was highly effective in preventing terrorist attacks in Israel.

Public Hebrew-language state schools taught Jewish history, culture, and some basic religious texts. Many ultra-Orthodox religious schools in the recognized-but-not-official category continued not to offer a basic humanities, mathematics, and science curriculum. The government, however, included a basic curriculum for public ultra-Orthodox schools. Public Arabic-speaking schools continued to teach religion classes on the Quran and the Bible to both Muslim and Christian Arab/Palestinian students. A few independent, mixed Jewish-Arab/Palestinian schools also offered religion classes. For example, the curriculum at the nonprofit school Hand-in-Hand: Center for Jewish-Arab Education, which received a third of its funding from the government, emphasized commonalities in the holy writings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. A small number of schools that received public funding taught a bilingual Hebrew-Arabic curriculum with a focus on Jewish-Arab/Palestinian coexistence.

Separate public and semipublic school systems varied widely in educational quality around the country, according to NGOs and international organizations. Freedom House reported in its annual report that school quality and resources were generally lower in mostly non-Jewish communities. During the year, Arab/Palestinians, including Christians, Muslims, and Druze, as well as ultra-Orthodox Jewish students, passed the matriculation examination at lower rates than their non-ultra-Orthodox Jewish counterparts. The government continued educational and scholarship programs to benefit Arab/Palestinian students. In 2023, there were 61,550 Arab/Palestinian students in higher education programs, 19 percent of all students in the country, which was slightly less than the Arab/Palestinian percentage of the population (21 percent, including residents of East Jerusalem), according to the Council for Higher Education. In the last decade, there was an increase of approximately 137 percent in the number of Arab/Palestinian students, 123 percent in bachelor's programs, 230 percent in master's programs, and 152 percent in doctoral programs.

Textbooks used in East Jerusalem schools continued to fall under the jurisdiction of the Jerusalem Education Administration, a joint body of the municipality and the Israeli Ministry of Education. A curriculum committee continued to review and edit textbooks issued by the PA to remove content considered to be antisemitic or to incite violence against Israel, and the Israeli education ministry required schools to use edited textbooks. Palestinians and PA officials complained the Israel-approved curriculum whitewashed or removed references to Palestinian identity or national aspirations, including removal of Palestinian flags, pictures of Palestinian leaders, or texts about the Palestinian "right of return." Some municipality officials stated their plans to phase out the edited version of the PA curriculum and to compel schools to use either the Israeli curriculum or an internationally approved one.

There were reportedly insufficient classrooms to accommodate Palestinian schoolchildren in Jerusalem. Based on population data from the CBS, the

NGO Ir Amim published data ahead of the 2022-23 school year showing a shortage of 3,517 classrooms for Palestinian children living in East Jerusalem. Ir Amim also reported that following a freedom of information request, the Jerusalem Municipality reported it did not know where 40,963 Palestinian children in Jerusalem were enrolled in school. According to Ir Amim, this figure constituted 29 percent of East Jerusalem children of compulsory school age.

The Mossawa Center, an NGO promoting the rights of Arab citizens, reported that following October 7, approximately 130 Arab students and lecturers from 33 higher education institutions were summoned by their respective college or university to disciplinary hearings and suspended or expelled through what it said were expedited and improper procedures. According to a survey of Arab university students in Israel conducted by the Union of Arab Students released on December 28, 61 percent of respondents said they had seriously considered or were considering terminating their studies because of concerns for their personal safety.

According to an April 23 *Haaretz* report, the government decided to increase the amount it allocated per Arab/Palestinian high school student over the next five years, from 28,000 to 30,000 shekels (\$7,700 to \$8,300); Jewish students received 33,000 shekels (\$9,100). The gap was wider, according to the report, in towns with lower socioeconomic status, where the state invested 42,000 shekels (\$11,600) per Jewish student while Arab students received 29,000 shekels (\$8,000) per year.

According to Secular Forum, growing “religionization” (*hadata*) of the education system continued, including in textbooks and through programs in schools taught by Orthodox Jewish NGOs. According to media reports, through different ministries, the government allocated approximately 925 million shekels (\$256 million) in the 2023-24 budget for “religionization” purposes for activities including support for religious Zionist or National Orthodox groups settling in mixed cities and secular areas with the purpose of changing the character of the city or area as well as programs for schools,

students, soldiers, and recently discharged soldiers that promoted Jewish culture and identity.

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

During the year, two high school seminaries for Sephardic-only ultra-Orthodox school girls opened in Jerusalem after these girls were persistently denied admission by ultra-Orthodox schools due to their ethnicity, despite a 2009 court ruling prohibiting ethnic segregation of Sephardic and Ashkenazi schoolgirls. On February 19, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel and a Haifa University legal clinic called on the Ministry of Education to dismantle the segregated classes, stating they constituted illegal discrimination.

Several groups, including religious minorities such as the Druze community and human rights NGOs, continued to criticize the Nation State Law, which specifies Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people.

The government maintained a policy to ensure non-Jewish minorities were well represented in the civil service, but Arab citizens remained underrepresented compared with their percentage of the overall population. Arab/Palestinians comprised 14.7 percent of public sector employees (61.3 percent of whom were at entry-level employees), according to the Civil Service Commission, and approximately 1.4 percent of

employees in the 70 government-owned companies, despite comprising 21 percent of the country's population.

A petition by six Orthodox women halacha students and NGOs to permit women to take the Chief Rabbinate's halacha examinations used to ordain rabbis remained pending in the Supreme Court at the year's end.

On July 5, the Supreme Court issued an order demanding that the government, Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Lau, and Sephardic Chief Rabbi Yosef explain why they would not consider appointing women who meet the educational requirements to the Chief Rabbinate Council, which is responsible for electing the two Chief Rabbis. The court order was in response to a 2022 petition by the Rackman Center, which advocates for women's rights. The petition remained pending at the year's end. Only 10 percent of the 150-member council were women, according to the Rackman Center.

The IDF stated it respected all soldiers regardless of religion, race, gender, or sexual orientation, while keeping a respectful space for all soldiers and preserving their rights. According to the Secular Forum, however, some IDF accommodations for religious soldiers negatively affected secular soldiers, particularly women. For example, in August, IDF leadership ordered women soldiers not to sing in their basic training kitchen, in order to accommodate religious male soldiers. On January 15, in response to a 2021 petition, the IDF told the Supreme Court it would maintain the prohibition on bringing leavened food products into military bases during Passover.

Members of some religious minorities said the government did not provide the same services and benefits to them as to the country's majority Jewish population and in many jurisdictions made it difficult for members of minority groups to obtain permits needed for new construction.

Adalah continued to report the government discriminated against the Bedouin residents of the Negev in several ways, including charging those in unrecognized villages the highest water prices in the country; refusing to

classify camels as “farm animals”; preventing Bedouin herders from using the grazing land in the region; not addressing overcrowded and unsanitary conditions in local schools; and displacing residents to allow for the expansion of primarily Jewish towns and the relocation or expansion of government military facilities.

On February 22, the Knesset approved a bill in a preliminary reading seeking to allow state-run rabbinical courts to conduct arbitration proceedings on nonreligious matters with the consent of both sides, significantly expanding their authorities on par with civil arbitration. In July, the MRS proposed legislation that would grant rabbinical courts authority to decide alimony. Civil rights NGOs stated both bills, if they became law, would severely undermine the civil court system, hinder women’s rights in the all-male rabbinical courts, and unfairly disadvantage the weaker party in a dispute.

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

The Chief Rabbinate and MOI continued not to recognize non-Orthodox converts to Judaism as Jews, although they remained eligible for immigration under the Law of Return. A group of Orthodox rabbis continued to operate a private conversion court for children of families whom the state or rabbinical courts did not recognize as Jews.

On April 30, the Supreme Court ruled that non-Jewish children adopted in the country were not required to undergo Orthodox conversion by the Rabbinate and were not required to be adopted only by Orthodox couples, settling a 20-year controversy concerning what had been mandatory requirements. The ruling was in response to an NGO petition which argued that in-country adoption policies discriminated against non-Orthodox couples. The Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs, which had previously

maintained the requirement was necessary so that such children would be recognized as Jewish by the state, informed the court prior to the ruling that it would examine adoptions on a case-by-case basis in the future.

In December 2022, Minister of Religious Services Michael Malchieli halted implementation of a new policy, due to take effect in January 2023, that would have allowed private Orthodox organizations to award kashrut certificates, thereby removing the Chief Rabbinate's monopoly on this function. The private Orthodox rabbinical organization Tzohar submitted a petition to the Supreme Court on September 19, arguing the Minister did not have the authority to halt the new policy. The petition was pending as of year's end.

On March 7, the Supreme Court rejected appeals by the Population and Immigration Authority (PIBA) to two verdicts from 2022 that ruled PIBA must register civil marriages performed online in Utah. The court ruling allowed couples, including LGBTQI+ couples, to wed in civil marriage ceremonies without leaving the country. Following the March ruling, PIBA registered the marriages of hundreds of Utah online marriage couples previously put on hold by a 2020 MOI order refusing to recognize them. Hiddush reported that following the ruling, 150-175 Israeli couples married online in Utah monthly. According to a Hiddush poll taken in August, only 36 percent of Israelis were aware of the option for an online civil Utah marriage, but among those who were aware, 65 percent supported the option, 31 opposed it, and 12 percent had no opinion. Ten percent of Israelis stated an online Utah marriage was their preferred method to marry.

A Rackman Center petition to the Supreme Court from 2021 demanding the establishment of criteria under which women could officiate state-sanctioned wedding ceremonies remained pending at year's end.

Local authorities continued to circumvent the ban on public transportation on Shabbat by funding privately operated bus lines. In July, the local council of Mevaseret Zion and the municipality of Nes-Ziona joined the initiative. In

August, Minister of Transportation Miri Regev overturned a 2022 government decision that would have established separate metropolitan authorities empowered to make decisions regarding public transportation, including operating on Shabbat.

Reversing its prior decision, Minister of Transportation Regev announced the government would uphold the status quo and that the light rail in the Tel Aviv metropolitan area would not operate on Shabbat. Critics of the decision said Tel Aviv was primarily a secular city and that “religious coercion” was behind the decision. They said the decision not to run trains on Friday evenings and Saturdays would result in greater traffic and prevent residents from traveling on Shabbat or force them to pay for taxis.

Responding on August 10 to a petition by the Tel Aviv Green Seculars Party pending before the Supreme Court, the state said the current schedule was consistent with government policy and based on the “balance formula” regarding the operation of public transportation on rest days. In August and September, protests took place along the light rails on Fridays, just before the lines shut down for Shabbat.

From October 7 to November 17, the Transportation Ministry operated trains and later buses on Shabbat without announcing the service to the public. Media reported that the ministry ceased the practice because it feared the continued operation of public transportation on Shabbat would bring it into conflict with ultra-Orthodox coalition parties. On November 27, the Supreme Court rejected a petition by the Movement for Quality of Government in Israel demanding the ministry resume operation of public transportation on Shabbat during the period of emergency, arguing there was no cause for the court to intervene.

On March 28, the Knesset passed a law allowing hospital managers to restrict leavened food products on hospital premises during Passover after considering other alternatives and patients’ and workers’ needs. According to the law, these restrictions must be published, and hospital managers may authorize employees to inform those entering hospitals about the regulations. The law passed despite a 2020 Supreme Court ruling allowing

individuals to bring leavened food products into hospitals. The law did not permit security guards to search patients' or visitors' bags for such items, an action taken by hospitals prior to the Supreme Court ruling. MK Moshe Gafni of the ultra-Orthodox UTJ party said the law was unnecessary because it did not provide for relevant enforcement, and Knesset opposition leader Yair Lapid from the Yesh Atid Party criticized the legislation, saying it would cause pushback against what many considered religious coercion. Prior to the law's enactment, Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara said that the then-proposed legislation "raises considerable constitutional difficulties" and "violated fundamental rights to individual autonomy and freedom from religion."

On January 23, Culture and Sports Minister Miki Zohar stated his office would stop a project called "Israeli Shabbat," under which the state subsidized the opening of museum and heritage sites on Saturdays for the benefit of secular residents. Several hours later, following criticism from secular politicians, Prime Minister Netanyahu announced the project would continue. Despite the promise, the program stopped due to lack of funding on January 31. In February, the government transferred responsibility for implementing the project to the Heritage Ministry but had not renewed funding as of year's end.

On May 7, the government approved the establishment of a "Kosher electricity" facility in Bnei Brak to address concerns of ultra-Orthodox Jews about using electricity produced on Shabbat. Construction of the electricity storage facility had not begun as of year's end. Critics said religious and secular consumers alike would bear the cost of building and operating the facility, and chairman Avigdor Liberman of the opposition Yisrael Beytenu Party said, "This is another insane step in the direction of a state based on halacha."

Christian leaders continued to report little difficulty obtaining visas for clergy to serve in Israel or East Jerusalem, except for Christian clergy from Armenia or Arab countries, some of whom reported long delays for, and periodic denials of, their visa applications. The government stated Christian clergy

from Arab countries were subject to the same entry laws and similar security procedures as clergy from other parts of the world and that any visa delays or denials were due to security reviews. The government also said there were some “unavoidable delays” in cases of applicants from countries that did not have diplomatic relations with Israel. Church officials noted clergy visas did not allow the bearer access to basic social benefits, such as disability insurance or national health insurance, even for those who had served in the country for more than 30 years.

According to the NGO HaMoked, approximately 12,000 Palestinians living in Israel, including in Jerusalem, held temporary stay permits because of the country’s citizenship and entry law, which the Knesset in March reenacted through March 2024, with no legal guarantee they could continue living with their families. There were also cases of Palestinian spouses of Palestinian residents living in East Jerusalem without legal status. Some Palestinian residents moved to East Jerusalem neighborhoods outside the security barrier to live with their nonresident spouse and children while maintaining Jerusalem residency. According to Christian religious leaders, this situation remained an especially acute problem for Christians because of their small population and consequent tendency of Christian citizens or residents of Israel to marry Christians from the West Bank or elsewhere (i.e., who held neither citizenship nor residency). Christian religious leaders expressed concern that this was a significant element in the continuing decline of the Christian population, including in Jerusalem, thereby compromising the long-term viability of Christian communities.

According to NGOs, community members, and media commentators, additional factors contributed to Christian emigration, including political instability, the limited ability of Christian communities in the Jerusalem area to expand due to building restrictions, difficulties some Christian clergy experienced obtaining Israeli visas and residency permits, loss of confidence in the peace process, and economic hardships created by the construction of the security barrier and the imposition of travel restrictions. The government stated such difficulties stemmed from the “complex political

and security reality” and not from any restrictions on the Christian community itself.

On February 22, PIBA reversed its 2022 decision not to allow the Jehovah’s Witness partner of an Israeli citizen, who was also a Jehovah’s Witness, to begin the process of attaining citizenship. According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, in the initial denial letter, the PIBA had cited “an indication that the couple belongs to a messianic association that works to spread Christianity.”

While the law does not authorize the government’s Israel Land Authority (ILA), which administered the 93 percent of the country’s public lands, to lease land to foreigners, in practice, foreigners were allowed to lease if they could show they would qualify as Jewish under the Law of Return. Approximately 13 percent of all public land remained owned by the quasi-governmental Jewish National Fund (JNF), whose statutes strictly prohibit sale or lease of land to non-Jews. The application of ILA restrictions continued to limit the ability of Muslim and Christian residents of Jerusalem who were not citizens to purchase property built on state land, including in parts of Jerusalem. In recent years, an increasing number of Arab/Palestinian citizens in Jerusalem acquired property built on ILA-owned land. Arab/Palestinian citizens could participate in bids on JNF land, but sources stated the ILA granted the JNF another parcel of land whenever an Arab/Palestinian citizen of the country won a bid. Despite a 2018 Supreme Court ruling that the ILA Executive Council must include an Arab/Palestinian citizen, Druze, or Circassian member to prevent discrimination against non-Jews, there were no members from these groups on the council at year’s end. The Bedouin Authority and the Israel Land Authority stated they gave priority to Bedouin veteran soldiers in the purchase of plots of land to encourage recruitment into the army.

On September 30, Sephardic Chief Rabbi Yosef said in a sermon, “A person who eats nonkosher food, his brain becomes stupid, he can’t understand things, doesn’t get it. As soon as he starts keeping kosher, you can start to

influence him.” Knesset opposition leader Lapid responded by saying that Yosef was “not the chief rabbi of Israel, but a rabbi of a loud minority.”

In April, Yosef expressed support for a rabbi in the town of Or Yehuda who proceeded with a health conference that excluded women doctors from speaking to an audience of rabbis. Yosef asked, “What are we? Reform Jews? They [critics] want anti-religious coercion. They are copying everything from the Reform Jews.”

Both Palestinian and Israeli officials evoked ethnoreligious language to deny the historical self-identity of the other community in the region or to emphasize an exclusive claim to the land. During a speech on May 15 at the United Nations marking the anniversary of the Nakba, PA President Mahmoud Abbas denied Jewish ties to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, saying “Israel has been digging [underneath the al-Aqsa Mosque] for 30 years in an attempt to find anything that would prove its [past] existence there, but they did not find anything... They lie and lie, like Goebbels [said]: ‘Lie and lie, until people believe it.’” The *Jerusalem Post* reported that in his speech, Abbas emphasized that “the ownership of al-Buraq [Western] Wall and the Haram al-Sharif [Temple Mount] belongs exclusively and only to the Islamic Waqf alone.”

On March 20, PA Presidency spokesperson Nabil Abu Rudeineh said in a televised interview with PA-official Palestine TV, “The Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the al-Aqsa Mosque are among the foundational pillars of history, and they are Palestinian holy places, and not Jewish holy places. There is no historical proof – despite all the excavations – that they [the Jews] had any kind of presence in this land.”

In June, local media reported MK Amit Halevi proposed dividing the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, with Muslims controlling the southern portion and Jews controlling the central and northern portions of the site. Halevi said, “We will take the northern end and pray there. The entire mountain is sacred to us, and the Dome of the Rock is the place on which the Temple stood. This should be our guideline.” Palestinian political and religious

leaders roundly denounced the statements as dangerous, extremist, and unacceptable. In several statements during the year, Palestinian officials described Israeli government and Temple Mount activists' actions as attempting to physically or temporally divide the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount in violation of the status quo.

In April, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa told the AP that the Christian community in the Holy Land had come under increasing attack, with the government emboldening Jewish violent extremists who harassed clergy and vandalized property on an unprecedented level. Pizzaballa said those responsible "feel they are protected ... that the cultural and political atmosphere now can justify, or tolerate, actions against Christians."

Media outlets reported that on May 28, dozens of "religious Jews" led by Jerusalem Deputy Mayor Arie King and Rabbi Zvi Thau, spiritual leader of Noam Party, described in the press as far-right, protested and chanted "missionaries go home" as hundreds of evangelical Christians from around the world arrived at the Davidson Center near the Western Wall for an organized prayer event called "Pentecost 2023 – A Global Day of Prayer for Jerusalem and the Nations." In response to this and other incidents, on June 6, Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem Shlomo Amar issued a statement against the harassment of Christians in Jerusalem, stating, "We were sorry to hear from non-Jewish clerics that a number of young Jews and some who pretend to be G-d-fearing, persecute them with curses, blasphemies and more, as they walk the streets of the city ... such behavior is strictly forbidden."

On June 23, the *Jerusalem Post* reported that during a Jerusalem city council meeting, an argument erupted after a member of a secular political party called for the council to condemn recent attacks by "far-right Jews" against Christians in the Old City of Jerusalem. According to the report, one councilman responded that he was still waiting for the Pope to condemn the Holocaust, and Jerusalem Deputy Mayor King said, "We support tourism but not missionaries."

The High Court of Justice on September 29 ordered the Minister of Justice and the Attorney General to explain their failure to discipline Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem Amar for violating civil service laws after he made derogatory comments about LGBTQI+ persons, Reform Jews, and the Women of the Wall.

Following reports of multiple attacks on Palestinians by Israelis after the October 7 Hamas attack, Sephardic Chief Rabbi Yosef, Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Lau, and 11 other prominent rabbis called on Jews to refrain from assaulting Arab laborers, saying such acts “contradict the Torah.”

In December, Chief Rabbi Yosef sent a letter to IDF Chief Rabbi Colonel Eyal Karim, speaking out against images and videos of Israeli soldiers desecrating mosques and religious sites during the conflict in Gaza and the West Bank. Yosef said that “especially when it comes to religious matters ... it must be explained to soldiers that the religious feelings of members of other religions should not be harmed.”

On December 29, at a New Year’s reception for spiritual and lay leaders of Christian churches and communities, President Herzog said Hamas’ October 7 attacks were incompatible with “the Gospels, with the writing of the Gospels, with the teaching of Jesus Christ, or the teachings of course of the Jewish faith, and also with moderate Islam. Our problem – all of us – is with extreme fundamentalist Islam, which does not accommodate you or us.”

Before the October 12 formation of a broadly-based “unity government” following the Hamas attack of October 7, conservative and ultra-conservative parties, including ultra-Orthodox and Religious Zionist parties, made up half of the 64-member governing coalition in the 120-seat Knesset. Twelve Knesset members were from ethnic or religious minorities (eight Muslims, one Druze, two Ethiopian-Israelis, and one Christian) following the 2022 elections. In 2022, Arab/Palestinian citizen of Israel Khaled Kabub became the first permanently appointed Muslim justice of the 15-member Supreme Court.

On July 4, the Knesset approved a law postponing elections for Chief Rabbis from August 2023 to April 2024. The official reason for the postponement was not to interfere with local elections but press reports stated the real reason behind the move was to accommodate Shas party leader Aryeh Deri's desire to resolve internal party disagreements regarding the election of a new Sephardic Chief Rabbi. Deri's brother and Chief Rabbi Yosef's son were the leading candidates for the position.

## **Actions of Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors**

On October 7, during the Jewish Sabbath and on the eve of the Jewish feast of Simchat Torah, thousands of Hamas, PIJ, and other armed terrorists breached the security fence between Gaza and Israel by land and air via paragliders and killed an estimated 1,200 persons. At least 843 of the victims were civilians, and more than 5,400 Israelis and foreigners were injured in the terrorist attacks. The attack began with Hamas firing more than 3,000 rockets toward Israel from Gaza. Terrorists attacked military bases, clashed with security forces in the south, and simultaneously infiltrated civilian communities, deliberately targeting noncombatants. During the attack, terrorists committed multiple abuses, including sexual assault and sexual mutilation. The attackers killed or kidnapped approximately 253 Israelis and foreigners. Among the victims were an autistic girl, age 12, killed at Kibbutz Nir Oz and a girl, age 16, with muscular dystrophy and cerebral palsy, according to press reports. The victims included at least 30 children, women, and elderly persons and at least 19 soldiers.

Prior to the October 7 attack, U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations Hamas and PIJ as well as other militant and terrorist groups continued to be active in Gaza. Hamas remained in de facto political control of Gaza during the year. An October 9 *New York Times* report stated, "Since its founding, Hamas has declared that Israel has no right to exist, that there are no Israeli civilians and that every Israeli citizen is a soldier of the state, and thus a legitimate target." A Tufts University professor and expert on international

humanitarian law told the *Times*, “There is no question [that the Hamas assault] involved multiple war crimes and crimes against humanity, some of which are ongoing. Those are not close calls.”

Video taken on October 7 showed armed men from Gaza shooting Israeli civilians at close range who were in cars trying to escape, hiding in bomb shelters, and lying directly on the ground while injured. The attacks, which included the burning of homes, led to severe damage and the destruction of communities bordering Gaza. Some human rights organizations and the government described the October 7 attacks as war crimes and crimes against humanity. The government called the attacks the deadliest by a terrorist organization in the history of the state. The government officially declared war on Hamas on October 8.

During the October 7 attacks, Hamas, PIJ, and other terrorist groups carried out acts of abuse, rape, mutilation, and other conflict-related sexual violence. Based on evidence published by Israeli authorities, civil society organizations, survivor testimonies, and videos posted by Hamas, on October 7, Hamas terrorists committed sexual assaults against women, girls, and men, including rape and gang rape, in private homes, at the music festival, on the side of the road, and in a military base. Eyewitnesses testified they saw rapes, mutilation, and sexual assaults taking place, some followed by killing. Medical and search and rescue professionals described evidence of sexual violence. The Lahav 433 Police Unit and the Civil Commission on October 7th Crimes by Hamas against Women and Children continued to collect evidence and testimonies regarding sexual violence at year’s end. A December 12 report published by the Hostages and Missing Families Forum indicated hostages who were released from Gaza reported some women and men suffered sexual assaults by Hamas while in captivity.

On October 7, Hamas, PIJ, and other armed terrorists systematically destroyed Israeli homes, schools, bomb shelters, and other civilian property of Israeli communities near the Gaza border. A total of 2,692 terror attacks occurred during the year, including rockets and mortars, of which 326 occurred in October, according to Shin Bet. Many of these rocket launches

hit or endangered civilian communities. To protect these communities, on October 7, the IDF began to evacuate residents of localities neighboring the Gaza border. According to the Ministry of Defense data, 253,000 residents were displaced due to Hamas's attack on October 7, the Israel-Hamas conflict, and the conflict along the northern border with Hizballah.

In October, the U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization Hizballah in Lebanon initiated cross-border fire against Israel in support of Hamas following the October 7 attacks from Gaza and the ensuing hostilities, which continued through the end of the year. In the context of this conflict, several Palestinian terror organizations inside Lebanon also fired munitions into Israel. On November 5, Hizballah antitank missiles killed two Israeli civilians, one in Yiftah kibbutz and another in Kiryat Shmona. On November 23, Hizballah antitank missile and mortar attacks killed an employee of the Israeli Electric Corporation and injured 21 others, including six other employees and seven soldiers.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

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

Religiously motivated attacks by Jewish individuals and groups continued to take place during the year against individuals, particularly Arab/Palestinian citizens of the country and Palestinians of the West Bank and their property, including actions with the stated purpose of exacting a "price" for actions taken by the government against the attackers' interests. Attacks targeted both Christians and Muslims. Religiously motivated attacks by Arab Muslim individuals and groups continued to take place during the year against Jewish citizens, including, but not limited to, the October 7 attacks. Shin Bet reported that on January 27, a Palestinian gunman shot and killed seven Jewish Israelis in the Jerusalem's Neve Yaakov neighborhood. On January

28, a 13-year-old Palestinian shot and severely wounded two Jewish Israelis near the City of David site in Jerusalem's Silwan neighborhood. On March 13, a Palestinian youth from Jerusalem stabbed a Jewish Israeli man in the Old City.

The government classified any association using the phrase "price tag" as an illegal association. The government further classified a price-tag attack as a security (as opposed to criminal) offense but often failed to hold individuals responsible for such actions. According to police, the most common offenses were attacks on vehicles, defacement of real estate, harm to Muslim and Christian holy sites, assault, and damage to agricultural lands. The NGO Tag Meir continued to organize visits to areas where these attacks occurred and sponsored activities promoting tolerance in response to the attacks. On April 6, unknown individuals set fire to cars and spray-painted "administrative price tag" in the Israeli-Arab city of Kfar Qasim. The message referred to Jewish Israelis who were then held in administrative detention for alleged involvement in settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank. Police opened an investigation into the incident.

Political and religious groups in the West Bank and Gaza continued to call on members to "defend" al-Aqsa Mosque and holy sites in Jerusalem.

On May 13, an unknown individual set fire to a tent belonging to the Ohel HaHasidim Synagogue in Lod. On May 15, police arrested a suspect.

According to press reports, in June, an ultra-Orthodox Jewish group began to pray at the Catholic Stela Maris Monastery on Haifa's Mount Carmel. The Jewish group stated the prophet Elisha was buried at the site, which the monastery denied. After two ultra-Orthodox men were filmed praying in the monastery, police arrested a Christian for assaulting another ultra-Orthodox man who came to pray. Christians organized vigils at the monastery, protesting the ultra-Orthodox efforts to enter the facility. After violent clashes in late July, police blocked the road to the site and the Christian community installed an iron fence around the monastery to deter further intrusions. On August 9, President Herzog visited the Stela Maris

Monastery and met with the abbot and leaders of Christian denominations. He called for respecting all religions and said the attacks against Christians “in their places of prayer, in their cemeteries, on the streets” was “extreme and unacceptable in any shape or form.” Following Herzog’s visit, the rabbi of the ultra-Orthodox community involved in the incidents called on his followers to refrain from visiting the monastery. According to the press, in September, Chief Rabbi Lau sent a letter to the monastery’s abbot expressing “strong condemnation” of acts of violence against worshippers and places of worship.

According to media reports, members of the Jewish organizations Lehava and La Familia used violence and incited violence against Palestinians and Arab/Palestinian citizens of the country. On March 26, La Familia members attacked individuals they believed to be Palestinians and antijudicial amendment protesters in Jerusalem, according to *Haaretz*.

In January, unknown persons vandalized the community center of the Maronite Christian community in Ma’a lot-Tarshiba, with Christian images defaced and equipment broken.

Media outlets reported that on March 19, police arrested an Israeli man after he attacked priests at the Tomb of the Virgin Mary in Jerusalem with an iron bar during rites marking Lent. The Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the Holy Synod, and the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre condemned the attack in a statement that said, “Terrorist attacks by radical Israeli groups targeting churches, cemeteries, and Christian properties, in addition to physical and verbal abuse of Christian clergy, have become almost a daily occurrence that evidently increases in intensity during Christian holidays.”

The Times of Israel reported that on January 5, police arrested two teenagers suspected of desecrating approximately 30 graves in Jerusalem’s Anglican Mount Zion Cemetery on January 2. Security footage on social media showing two individuals wearing kippahs and tzitzit vandalizing at least 28 graves, knocking over crosses, breaking tombstones, and throwing debris on graves. Media reported the suspects were eventually released to

house arrest. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the attack. Police issued a statement saying Jerusalem District Police Commander Doron Turgeman met with the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, Theophilos III, to update him on the investigation.

On July 21, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate issued a statement after a video circulated on social media platforms showing individuals whom the Patriarch identified as “Israeli radicals” lying on a couch inside property belonging to the Church at Mount Zion in Jerusalem and refusing to leave. The Patriarchate said a large number of Orthodox sites were “at risk from attacks by radicals who write slogans offensive to Christianity, Christ, and Christians, and throw paint on their walls as part of the disgraceful acts, attacks, and behavior they practice against Christian sanctities and property in general, and Orthodox property in general, and the Orthodox in particular.”

Eviction lawsuits filed by the settler organization Ateret Cohanim against Palestinian-protected tenants that manage the New Imperial Hotel and Petra Hotel near the Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem’s Old City remained pending as of year’s end. In 2022, the Supreme Court rejected the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate’s appeal against Ateret Cohanim regarding ownership of the hotels and a third property in the Christian Quarter, exhausting all recourse and efforts for the Greek Orthodox Church to fight a 2004 sale of the leases.

Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to face aggressive treatment from some individuals during their public proselytizing activities. On April 18, an individual pepper-sprayed two Jehovah’s Witnesses during a door-to-door activity despite them telling the attacker that they were leaving. The two submitted a police complaint.

The *Times of Israel* reported that on July 19, an employee from the ultra-Orthodox Western Wall Heritage Foundation asked Roman Catholic Abbot Nikodemus Schnabel of the Dormition Abbey to hide his cross while accompanying Germany’s Minister of Education to the Western Wall because it was “really big and it’s inappropriate for this place.” Schnabel

refused and the employee allowed him access to the site. The Western Wall Heritage Foundation issued a statement apologizing “for the distress that was caused,” but defended the employee’s actions.

There were continued reports of ultra-Orthodox Jews in public areas harassing individuals who did not conform to Orthodox Jewish traditions, such as by driving on Shabbat or wearing clothing that the ultra-Orthodox perceived as immodest. The harassment included verbal abuse, spitting, throwing stones, and kicking cars driving on Shabbat. In some ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods, private organizations posted “modesty signs” demanding women dress modestly to avoid distracting devout men. Such signs remained displayed in the city of Beit Shemesh despite a longstanding court order to remove them. Vandals in cities with large ultra-Orthodox populations regularly defaced publicly displayed photographs of women. For example, on November 12, ultra-Orthodox men spray painted over the faces of women on posters showing the faces and names of Hamas hostages that were hung in Bnei Brak. Police arrested one suspect. Religious Services Minister Malchieli stated in response that “the act of defacing these images in Bnei Brak is profoundly serious and is not reflective of the ultra-Orthodox public’s values.” According to media reports, due to failed enforcement against vandalism, some companies preferred to self-censor and not show women in their advertisements.

Although the Supreme Court ruled in 2011 that segregating women on buses was illegal, media outlets reported there were multiple cases of bus drivers discriminating against women based on religion. For example, in Tel Aviv, a driver berated a woman for wearing a tank top, and in Ashdod, a bus driver told a woman she could not board a bus because it was meant only for ultra-Orthodox men. In another case, on August 13, a public bus driver ordered teenage girls wearing tank tops and jeans to separate from their male friends, sit in the back of the bus, and cover themselves with blankets, saying, “This is a line for haredim. You live in a Jewish state and you should respect the people living here.”

According to missionary organizations, societal attitudes toward missionary activities and conversion to other religions continued to be negative. Some Jews continued to oppose missionary activity directed at Jews, saying it amounted to religious harassment, and reacted with hostility toward Jewish converts to Christianity and individuals who held syncretic beliefs, such as Messianic Jews. The *Times of Israel* reported that on June 22, Jewish activists from the organizations Lehava, which opposes interfaith relationships, and Yad l'Achim, which tries to counter Christian proselytization in Israel, attempted to disrupt a gathering of Messianic Jews at the Clal Center in Jerusalem. Police dispersed the protesters and arrested one individual for attacking police.

Lehava continued to publicly criticize – and its members physically assaulted or harassed – Arab/Palestinian men who were in relationships with Jewish women and “mixed” couples. Lehava and Yad l'Achim continued to disrupt instances of cohabitation between Jewish women and Arab/Palestinian men. According to the Yad l'Achim website, the organization views itself as a “Jewish rescue corps” that recovers Jewish women from “hostile” Arab/Palestinian villages.

Tension continued between the ultra-Orthodox community and other citizens, including concerns related to service in the IDF, housing, public transportation, and participation in the workforce.

Adalah reported that as of October 23, it was representing 74 Arab/Palestinian university and college students in proceedings stemming from the students’ posts online following the October 7 attacks. According to Adalah, the institutions said the students’ posts violated university disciplinary regulations by either “supporting terrorism” or “sympathizing with terror organizations.” Adalah said, “The vast majority of these posts merely expressed solidarity with the Palestinian people in Gaza and/or quoted verses from the Holy Quran and religious prayers, actions well within the realm of freedom of expression.” On October 12, Minister of Education Yoav Kish sent a memorandum to presidents and heads of academic

institutions them encouraging them to suspend or in some cases expel students who incited or expressed support for terrorism.

NGOs reported some LGBTQI+ minors who revealed their sexual orientation in religious communities faced expulsion from their homes and stigmatization by rabbis. NGOs noted reports of mental illness among the LGBTQI+ minors because of this treatment, leading some to attempt suicide. NGOs reported conversion therapy took place mainly within Jewish and Muslim religious communities, although a 2022 Health Ministry directive banned medical professionals from offering or administering such treatment. Other NGOs noted that an increasing number of rabbis, educators, and community leaders in Orthodox Jewish communities were adopting a more inclusive approach to LGBTQI+ minors.

Several Jewish religious NGOs, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, conducted private, unrecognized religious services such as marriages and conversions, and issued unrecognized kashrut certificates to provide an alternative to the Chief Rabbinate for Jews who could not or did not want to use the Rabbinate's services. According to NGOs, some Jewish couples married unofficially in the country outside of the Rabbinate's authority in unofficial Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and secular ceremonies that the MOI did not register. According to the CBS, in 2021 (the most recent data available), 7,091 couples registered with PIBA marriages conducted abroad.

NGOs, including Mavoi Satum and ITIM, promoted the use of prenuptial agreements to prevent cases of *aginut* (the status of a woman whose husband is unwilling or unable to grant her a get). Such agreements placed financial obligations on a refusing spouse until the termination of the marriage.

According to media outlets, multiple incidents took place during the year involving ultra-Orthodox individuals protesting the sale of "non-kosher" mobile phones at stores within their communities. "Kosher" phones were configured only for calls and text messages, with no Internet access or apps, and were affiliated only with one provider. Media outlets reported kosher

mobile phones also allowed rabbis to monitor and control the flow of information into their communities. In January, police clashed with approximately 400 ultra-Orthodox protesters in the Geula neighborhood in Jerusalem, some of whom attempted to damage a mobile phone store, and some who pepper-sprayed and threw eggs at police. Police arrested one individual. A similar incident involving more than 300 ultra-Orthodox demonstrators took place on March 16 and another on March 26.

Throughout the year, representatives of the Christian community reported what they stated was an increasing atmosphere of harassment from ultra-Orthodox Jews, apathy from authorities, and a fear of further deterioration. Christian clergy and pilgrims continued to report instances of Jewish Israelis in Jerusalem harassing or spitting on them. According to reports in the *Jerusalem Post* and *Haaretz*, on October 3, Israeli settler Elisha Yered, suspected of obstruction of justice in the August killing of Palestinian teen Qosai Mi'tan, wrote on X (formerly Twitter) that spitting at Christians was “an ancient Jewish custom.” According to the *Post*, the comment came amid several incidents of Jews spitting on or near Christian worshippers in Jerusalem’s Old City, which were filmed on October 1 and 2.

Church leaders in the Old City of Jerusalem reported Israeli police did not intervene when their processions faced verbal harassment from Israelis and that they observed minimal consequences resulting from any police arrests on incidents of verbal or physical assault, complaining authorities often released suspects without charges. In August, the *Jerusalem Post* reported that “so far in 2023, there have been dozens of attacks by extremist Jews on Christians or Christian sites, ranging from merely unpleasant to vandalism and assault.” Church officials and Christian leaders blamed a minority of violent Jewish extremists for the attacks, saying that the government had fostered a culture of impunity for attacks on non-Jews. A representative of the Franciscans, which administer sites in Jerusalem for the Catholic church, said, “The police try to paint each attack as something isolated, and try to paint the attackers as mentally unstable ... In doing so, the police remove themselves from all responsibility.”

Churches for Middle East Peace, a coalition of 30 U.S. religious communities and organizations, said that lack of protections for Christian practice or Christians themselves was forcing the remaining minority to consider fleeing the land. On July 9 at a state memorial ceremony for Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern political Zionism, President Herzog condemned growing attacks against Christians in Israel, particularly in Jerusalem, calling them “a true disgrace.” Herzog said, “I utterly condemn violence ... directed by a small and extreme group, towards the holy places of the Christian faith and against Christian clergy in Israel... This includes spitting, and the desecration of graves and churches,” a phenomenon that he noted had been on the rise “in the last weeks and months especially.”

In June, Israeli academics and activists organized a public conference on attacks against Christians in Jerusalem titled “Why Do (Some) Jews Spit on Gentiles.” *Haaretz* reported that aides to Jerusalem Mayor Moshe Leon threatened to fire the Tower of David Museum director if the conference took place at the museum, and organizers later relocated it to an Armenian Patriarchate hall. The aides denied that anyone issued such threats. Conference organizers invited Foreign Ministry and municipal officials to participate but they refused, according to *Haaretz*. Jerusalem’s Chief Sephardic Rabbi Amar issued a letter denouncing the conference as “arranged by those seeking to eradicate religion ... and trying to confuse and convert innocent Jews.” Jerusalem Deputy Mayor King called the conference “antisemitic.”

On October 3, the *Times of Israel* reported Orthodox Jews were filmed spitting on Christian pilgrims carrying a cross out of the Church of the Flagellation in Jerusalem during the Jewish holiday of Sukkot. Police arrested five individuals suspected of spitting on the pilgrims, but National Security Minister Ben Gvir, who oversees the INP, said he did not think spitting was a criminal case and suggested it did not justify arrest. Prime Minister Netanyahu posted on social media, “Israel is totally committed to safeguard the sacred right of worship and pilgrimage to the holy sites of all faiths... Derogatory conduct towards worshipers is sacrilege and is simply unacceptable.” Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Lau said “such phenomena are

unwarranted and certainly should not be attributed to Jewish law.” Religion Minister Malkieli also condemned the incident, saying “this is not the way of the Torah, and there is no rabbi that supports or gives legitimacy to this reprehensible behavior.”

Chief Rabbi of Safed Shmuel Eliyahu, a prominent figure in Israel’s religious nationalist movement, said in a February 10 newsletter that the earthquake that struck Turkey and Syria earlier in the week, killing tens of thousands, was “divine justice,” comparing the earthquake to the drowning of the Egyptian forces in the Red Sea in the biblical story of Exodus.

Despite labor law mandating that workers are entitled to take a weekly day off for worship, some foreign domestic workers in Jerusalem stated that some employers did not allow them to do so.

According to a survey conducted by the Center for Democratic Values and Institutions, in collaboration with the Israel Democracy Institute, more than half (56 percent) of the Arab/Palestinian citizens of Israel agreed with a statement by MK and United Arab List party leader Mansour Abbas that the October 7 Hamas attack did not reflect Arab society and Islamic values.

A variety of NGOs continued to try to build understanding and create dialogue among religious groups and between religious and secular Jewish communities. The NGOs included Neve Shalom-Wahat al-Salam, the Abraham Fund Initiative, Givat Haviva, Hagar, Hand-in-Hand integrated Jewish-Arab/Palestinian bilingual schools, Hiddush, IRAC, Mosaica, Tag Meir, and the Interfaith Encounter Association.

In its annual *Israel Religion and State Index* survey of 800 adult Jews conducted in August and published in September, Hiddush reported 64 percent of respondents identified as either “secular” (46 percent) or “traditional-not-religious” (18 percent) with regard to how they viewed public policies on religion and the state. Of the individuals surveyed, 86 percent supported freedom of religion and conscience and 60 percent supported the separation of religion and state, while 59 percent supported

equal status for the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform traditions. Fifty-six percent stated immigrants should be recognized as Jewish if they identify as such (compared with 35 percent in 2022), and 33 percent stated immigrants should be recognized as Jewish if they underwent either an Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform conversion. Of those surveyed, 22 percent accepted the position of the ultra-Orthodox parties that yeshiva students should be exempted from military or civic service.

According to the Hiddush poll, 66 percent of respondents supported state recognition of choice in marriage, doing away with the Rabbinat's monopoly, and recognizing civil and non-Orthodox religious marriages equally. In addition, 47 percent stated that, had they been allowed a choice, they would not have married in an Orthodox ceremony. The poll found 72 percent of respondents did not observe Shabbat according to religious law, and 71 percent supported running public transportation on Shabbat.

According to the *Jerusalem Post*, a poll released by the CBS on July 12 found that 56 percent of Israeli residents aged 20 and above believed the influence of religion had strengthened in various areas in recent years. Additionally, approximately 73 percent believed religion had a strong impact on life in the country. The percentage holding this view among Jews, 77 percent, was higher than that of Arabs, 52 percent. In response to the question of whether there should be a separation between religion and the state in Israel, among Jews, the answers were as follows: 30 percent "strongly agreed," 19 percent "agreed," 15 percent "somewhat disagreed," and 30 percent "disagreed entirely" with the statement.

## **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

On October 9, the United States, joined by several European countries, issued a statement condemning Hamas for the October 7 terror attack.

In October 18 remarks during a visit to Israel, President Biden said, "October 7th ... a sacred Jewish holiday, became the deadliest day for the Jewish people since the Holocaust. It has brought to the surface painful memories

and scars left by millennia of antisemitism and the genocide of the Jewish people. The world watched then, it knew, and the world did nothing. We will not stand by and do nothing again. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever.”

In remarks to the American people on October 20, the President said, “The terrorist group Hamas unleashed pure, unadulterated evil in the world. But sadly, the Jewish people know, perhaps better than anyone, that there is no limit to the depravity of people when they want to inflict pain on others.” He continued, “We must, without equivocation, denounce antisemitism. We must also, without equivocation, denounce Islamophobia.”

On November 24, following the release of some Hamas hostages, the President stated that the United States would continue to work with regional partners towards “a future where all children in the region – every child – Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Israeli, Palestinian, Arab – grow up knowing only peace.”

In meetings with government officials, the Ambassador and other embassy officials stressed the importance of religious pluralism and respect for all religious groups. Numerous high-level officials made formal stops at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust remembrance site, to remember the six million Jews killed by the Nazis, underscore the importance of fighting Holocaust denial, keep a public spotlight on antisemitism, and highlight religious tolerance. The U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism visited the country in June and December and met with several high-level government officials, including the President, Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and Speaker of the Knesset, to discuss combating rising global antisemitism.

Senior U.S. officials spoke publicly and with Israeli and Waqf officials about the importance of maintaining the status quo at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and conveyed this message in meetings with government officials. In January, the Ambassador gave an interview to the Arabic-language *al-Hurra* news outlet on the issue. Embassy statements reiterated U.S. government statements about the need to de-escalate tensions around the Haram al-

Sharif/Temple Mount, especially when Jewish and Muslim holidays coincided, which occurred during the year with Passover and Ramadan.

In February, following the arrest of two teenagers for vandalizing the Mount Zion Cemetery, the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism posted to social media, “Desecration of any and all holy sites is unacceptable, and the sanctity of burial must be respected. Families have the right to peacefully lay to rest loved ones. We must work together to call out all forms of hate whenever and wherever they occur.”

On April 16, following his meeting with Rabbi of the Wall Shmuel Rabinowitz, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom posted to social media, “I reiterated U.S. support for implementation of the 2016 Western Wall agreement to expand the egalitarian space at the Wall.”

In May, the Ambassador hosted an iftar during Ramadan attended by a range of embassy partners as well as prominent members of the Arab and Jewish communities. The Ambassador delivered remarks in which he stressed the United States’ commitment to tolerance, religious freedom, and promoting diversity and inclusion.

Throughout the year, embassy officials used social media to express U.S. support for tolerance and the importance of openness to members of other religious groups. Embassy officials advocated the right of persons from all faiths to practice their religion peacefully while also respecting the beliefs and customs of their neighbors. The embassy also issued public statements condemning attacks on places of worship. In August, the embassy marked the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief by highlighting a Department of State exchange program focused on countering Holocaust denial and combating antisemitism and anti-Muslim sentiment on social media.

Embassy-supported initiatives focused on interreligious dialogue and community development and advocated a shared society for

Arab/Palestinian and Jewish populations. The embassy also promoted the reduction of tensions between religious communities and an increase in interreligious communication and partnerships by bringing together representatives of many faith communities to advance shared goals and exchange knowledge and experience. Embassy programs continued to support mixed Jewish-Arab/Palestinian educational and community initiatives to reduce societal tensions and violence through sports, the arts, environmental projects, and entrepreneurship. The embassy supported such initiatives as the Negev Cultural Lab, which provided capacity-building tools for Jewish and Arab cultural institutions promoting shared existence in Israel's south, and Defenders of the Desert, a project to promote shared society through environmental activities for an audience of 100 junior high school students, 50 Jewish and 50 Bedouin.

The embassy worked to mitigate interreligious and intercommunal tensions between the country's non-Jewish and Jewish citizens through the greater integration of the Arab/Palestinian minority into the broader national economy, especially the high-tech sector. This was accomplished both through funding and through high-profile visits by the Ambassador to embassy-supported organizations in this area, which were amplified on the embassy's social media platforms.

Throughout the year, the embassy highlighted events, programs, religious holidays and observances, and news related to interfaith dialogue and religious freedom across embassy social media platforms. For example, in November, a senior embassy official hosted an interfaith Thanksgiving dinner with representatives from the Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and Druze communities to celebrate diversity, partnership, and mutual respect. During the event, the embassy highlighted the U.S. commitment to ongoing dialogue, interreligious and intercultural communication, and partnering with diverse communities in the country and the region.