

U.S. Department of State
Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999:
Lebanon

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LEBANON

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government respects this right in practice. The state is required to ensure the free exercise of all religious rites with the caveat that public order not be disturbed. The Constitution also provides that the personal status and religious interests of the population be respected. The Government permits recognized religions to exercise authority over matters pertaining to personal status such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. There is no state religion. However, politics are based on the principle of religious representation, which has been applied to every conceivable aspect of public life.

A group that seeks official recognition must submit its dogma and moral principles for government review to ensure that they do not contradict popular values and the Constitution. The group must ensure that the number of its adherents is sufficient to secure its continuity. Alternatively, religious groups may apply to obtain recognition through existing religious groups. Official recognition conveys certain benefits, such as tax-exempt status and the right to apply the religion's codes to personal status matters.

Because the matter of religious balance is such a sensitive political issue, a national census has not been conducted since the founding of the modern Lebanese State. Consequently, there is an absence of accurate data on the relative percentages of the population of the major religions and groups. Most observers believe that Muslims make up the majority, but they do not represent a homogenous group. There also is a variety of other religious groups, primarily from the Christian and Jewish religions.

There are 18 officially recognized religious groups, including 12 officially recognized Christian denominations. Their ecclesiastical and demographic patterns are extremely complex. Divisions and rivalries between groups date back as far as 15 centuries, and are still a factor today. The pattern of settlement has changed little since the 7th century, although there has been a steady numerical decline in the number of Christians compared to Muslims. The Maronites are the largest of the Christian groups. They have had a long and continuous association with the Roman Catholic Church, but have their own patriarch, liturgy, and customs. The second largest group is the Greek Orthodox Church (ethnic Arabs who maintained a Greek-language liturgy). The remainder of the Christians are divided among Greek Catholics, Armenian Orthodox (Gregorians), Armenian Catholics, Syrian Orthodox (Jacobites), Syrian Catholics, Assyrians (Nestorians), Chaldeans, Copts, evangelicals (including Protestant groups such as the Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Friends), and Latins (Roman Catho-

lic). The main branches of Islam are Shi'a and Sunni. Since the 11th century there has been a sizable Druze presence, concentrated in rural, mountainous areas east and south of Beirut. The smallest Islamic minorities are the Alawites, and the Ismaili ("Sevener") Shi'a order. The ("Twelver") Shi'a, Sunni, and Druze each have state-appointed clerical bodies to administer family and personal status law through their own religious courts, which are subsidized by the State. Most Christian groups also administer their own family and personal status law.

Christians and Muslims are represented equally in the Parliament. Seats in the Parliament and Cabinet, and posts in the civil service, are distributed proportionally among the 18 recognized groups. The unwritten "National Pact" of 1943 stipulates that the President, the Prime Minister, and the Speaker of Parliament be a Maronite Christian, a Sunni Muslim, and a Shi'a Muslim, respectively. The Taif Accord, which ended Lebanon's 15-year civil war in 1990, reaffirmed this arrangement but resulted in increased Muslim representation in Parliament and reduced the power of the Maronite President. The Accord called for the ultimate abolition of political sectarianism in favor of "expertise and competence." However, little substantive progress has been made in this regard. A "Committee for Abolishing Confessionalism," called for in the Taif Accord, has not yet been formed.

The Government does not require citizens' religious affiliations to be indicated on their passports; however, the Government requires that religious affiliation be encoded on the new national identity cards.

An individual may change his religion if the head of the religious group he wishes to join approves of this change. There are different personal status codes for each of the 18 officially recognized religious groups. Administered by representatives of the groups, these codes govern many areas of civil law, including marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. Many families have relatives who belong to different religious communities, and intermarriage is not uncommon; however, it may be difficult to arrange in practice between members of some groups because there are no procedures for civil marriage. In March 1998, then-President Elias Hrawi proposed legislation to permit civil marriage as a means of secularizing and facilitating intermarriage. This initiative failed in the face of opposition from the clerical establishment.

Each religious group has its own courts for family law matters, such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance.

State recognition is not a legal requirement for religious practice. For example, although Baha'is, Buddhists, and Hindus are not officially recognized, they are allowed to practice their faith without government interference; however, they legally may not marry, divorce, or inherit in the country.

The Government allows private religious education. There is a vigorous debate on the issue of public religious education, but no final curriculum has been adopted. Publishing of religious materials in different languages is permitted. The country's religious pluralism and climate of religious freedom have attracted many refugees fleeing religious persecution in neighboring states. They include Kurds, Shi'a, and Chaldeans from Iraq and Coptic Christians from Egypt and Sudan.

The Government promotes interfaith understanding by supporting a committee on Islamic-Christian dialog, which is cochaired by a Muslim and a Christian, and includes representatives of the major

religious groups. Leading religious figures who promote Islamic-Christian dialog and ecumenicism are encouraged to visit and are received by government officials at the highest levels.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Discrimination based on religion is built into the system of government. The amended Constitution of 1990 embraces the principle of abolishing religious affiliation as a criterion for filling government positions, but few practical steps have been taken to accomplish this. One notable exception is the Lebanese Armed Forces, which, through universal conscription and an emphasis on professionalism, has significantly reduced the role of confessionalism (or religious sectarianism) in that organization.

Citizens still are struggling with the legacy of a 15-year civil war fought along religious lines. Some of the harshest fighting of the war occurred within religious groups.

There are no legal barriers to proselytizing; however, traditional attitudes and edicts of the clerical establishment discourage such activity.

The Committee of Islamic-Christian Dialog remains the most significant institution for fostering amicable relations between religious communities. It has received the Archbishop of Canterbury and leading representatives of other groups on ecumenical missions to promote understanding between Muslims and Christians. Clerics play a leading role in many ecumenical movements worldwide. For example, the Armenian Orthodox Patriarch, Aram I, is the moderator for the World Council of Churches. The Imam Musa Sadr Foundation has also played a role in fostering the ecumenical message of Musa Sadr, a Shi'a cleric who disappeared in Libya in 1978.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. policy supports the preservation of pluralism and religious freedom, and the U.S. Embassy advances that goal through contacts at all levels of society, public remarks, and U.S. Information Service and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) programming. The issue of political sectarianism remains a delicate one. The United States supports the principles of the Taif Accord and Embassy staff regularly discuss the issue of sectarianism with political, religious, and civic leaders. Embassy staff members meet periodically with the leadership--both national and regional--of officially recognized groups, all of whom have a long tradition of meeting with foreign diplomats and discussing issues of general public interest. The Embassy regularly attends events sponsored by the Committee on Islamic-Christian Dialog. USAID programs in rural areas of the country also require

civic participation, often involving villages of different religious backgrounds, with the aim of promoting cooperation between religions.

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