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2013 International Religious Freedom Report - Lebanon

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and in practice the government generally respected religious freedom. The constitution declares equality of [rights and duties](#) for all citizens without discrimination or preference but establishes a [balance of power](#) among the major religious groups.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There was tension and confrontation among [religious groups](#), attributable in part to competition for political power, and citizens continued to struggle along sectarian lines, in part as the legacy of a 15-year civil war (1975-1990). Increasingly, rising regional tensions, inflamed by the sectarian overtones of the Syrian conflict, were also a source of friction and violence between some religious communities. Anti-Semitic rhetoric was common. [Places of worship](#) of every religious group continued to exist side by side and relationships among members of different religious groups were generally amicable, with some exceptions. Nonetheless, religious group identity was highly significant in most aspects of cultural interaction.

Embassy officials discussed religious freedom and the importance of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect with government officials, religious leaders, and members of civil society. The Ambassador and embassy officers integrated religious freedom concerns into public outreach, embassy [public diplomacy](#) programs, and U.S. government-funded projects designed to increase inter-religious dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 4.1 million (July 2013 estimate). An estimated 59.7 percent is Muslim and 39 percent is Christian. There are also very small numbers of Jews, Bahais, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

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

Many persons fleeing religious mistreatment and discrimination in neighboring states are immigrants in the country,

including Kurds, Shia, and Chaldeans from Iraq, as well as Coptic Christians from Egypt and Sudan. According to the secretary-general of the Syriac League, approximately 10,000 Iraqi Christians and 3,000 to 4,000 Coptic Christians reside in the country.

Additionally, Lebanon is [host](#) to [more](#) than 800,000 Syrian refugees. The refugees are largely Sunni but include Shia and Christians.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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

The constitution provides that Christians and Muslims be represented equally in parliament, the cabinet, and high-level civil service positions, which include the ministry ranks of secretary general and [director general](#). It also provides that these posts be distributed proportionally among the recognized religious groups. The constitutional provision for the distribution of political power and positions according to the principle of religious representation is designed to prevent a [single](#) group from gaining a dominant position. The 1943 "National Pact," which is not an official component of the constitution, stipulates that the president, speaker of parliament, and prime minister be Maronite Christian, Shia Muslim, and Sunni Muslim, respectively. This distribution of political power operates at both the national and local levels of government.

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

The penal code stipulates a maximum prison term of one year for anyone convicted of "blaspheming God publicly."

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

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

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

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

There are no formalized procedures for civil marriage. However, the government recognizes civil marriage ceremonies performed outside the country, irrespective of the religious affiliation of each individual. On April 25, the government registered for the first time a civil marriage conducted in Lebanon.

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

The government permits the publication of religious materials of every religious group in different languages. The law, however, allows for censorship under a number of premises, including material that may incite sectarian discord or be deemed a threat to national security.

Religious workers not working under the auspices of a government-registered religious group and found to be working while on tourist visas may be deemed to have violated their visa status and be deported. The government issues religious workers a one-month visa; if they plan to stay longer, they must complete their residency permits during that one month. Religious workers also are obliged to sign a “commitment of responsibility” form before being issued their visa, which commits them to legal prosecution and immediate deportation if they carry out any activity that might prompt community, confessional, or religious instigation and criticism against the Lebanese state or any other country except Israel.

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

Government Practices

There were reports of failure to recognize certain minority religious groups and the lack of representation of minority religious groups in various government positions.

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

The 1989 Taif Agreement called for the eventual elimination of political sectarianism in favor of “expertise and competence” but the government made little progress in that direction. Members of the less represented or “minority” Christian groups, such as Syriac Christians, stated that the government discriminated against them by not appointing a member of their religious group to a ministerial position. While some of their members have served in high-level civil service positions, such as director general, these groups stated that Maronite and Greek Orthodox individuals filled most positions. These groups further stated that although they estimated their population at 54,000, they were allocated only one representative in parliament.

The Christian and Druze leadership councils nominated candidates for their respective senior clerical posts. In contrast, the government’s council of ministers endorsed the nomination of Sunni and Shia muftis and paid their salaries. The government appointed and paid the salaries of Muslim and Druze clerical judges. The government did not pay the salaries of clergy and officials of other religious groups, such as the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic groups.

The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF) increased their presence in Tripoli in northern Lebanon in an effort to contain the fighting there between Sunnis and Alawites. On December 2, caretaker Prime Minister Mikati announced that the LAF would take responsibility for ensuring security in Tripoli.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On April 25, the first civil marriage was conducted and registered in the country. The couple wed as a secular couple by having a reference to their religious group legally struck from their family registers under an article dating from the 1936 French mandate. The move was controversial, with President Sleiman expressing his support via social media, while caretaker Prime Minister Mikati and Grand Mufti Qabbani rejected it. The couple’s first child was born in October and they were able to not declare a religious group on the child’s birth certificate, which is unprecedented.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. According to Pew Research Forum polling data from 2011 and 2012 released in November of this year, two-thirds of all Muslims, including about half of Shias and 80 percent of Sunnis, say sectarian tensions are a very big or moderately big problem.

Anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli rhetoric was common. In March the Lebanese daily *Al-Sharq* published an article by Lebanese writer Sana Kojok repeating the anti-Semitic blood libel which claims that during Passover, Jews eat matzah made with the blood of non-Jews. Hizballah party members directed strong rhetoric against Israel, with which the country remained in a state of war. In an August 2 speech marking Jerusalem Day, the Hizballah party secretary general called for the “elimination” of Israel, stating, “The Zionist entity must be dismantled and removed, its tyrannical acts halted, its criminal elements, including its mass murderers, who are beyond count, must be prosecuted.” He added that “the entity must be eliminated. Only then will there be peace in this world.”

There are no legal barriers to proselytizing.

There were reports of tension and confrontations among religious groups, exacerbated by political differences, the legacy of the civil war, and the violence in neighboring Syria. The LAF and Internal Security Forces (ISF) worked together to impose order and end the clashes. Since June, there have been attacks and clashes between Sunnis and Shias. The June clashes in the southern town of Sidon between supporters of Sunni Salafist Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir and Hizballah affiliated individuals resulted in one person killed and four others injured. In July and August car bombs rocked two areas in the Hizballah dominated Shia stronghold in Beirut's southern suburbs (53 were injured in July and 27 killed and 338 injured in August). Radical Sunni groups claimed responsibility for the attacks. On August 23, two bombs exploded in front of al-Taqwa and al-Salam mosques in a predominantly Sunni area of Tripoli, killing 47 and injuring 600 people. Firefights erupted in September when the Shiyah family (Sunnis) shot at a Hizballah checkpoint in Baalback, leaving two Hizballah members dead and five others injured.

Conflict between the Alawite residents of Jabal Mohsen and the nearby Sunni district of Bab al-Tabbaneh in Tripoli continued, with clashes throughout the year. In October nighttime firebomb attacks destroyed Christian- and Alawite-owned businesses in the Zahrieh neighborhood of Tripoli. In November a Lebanese Sunni Muslim cleric whose group was allied to Syria's government was killed in Tripoli. The cleric, Saad al-Din Ghiyyeh, was shot in his car by masked gunmen on a motorcycle. Soldiers were deployed to the area to prevent further violence in the city.

Religious leaders from the major denominations met regularly to discuss issues of common concern and call for increased mutual respect. For example, Lebanon's National Committee for Muslim-Christian Dialogue, headed by Secretary-General Dr. Mohammad Sammak, regularly brought together religious leaders to address problems in their communities and attempt to quell conflict between sects.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Ambassador and embassy officials discussed religious freedom and the importance of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect with government officials, religious leaders, and members of civil society. The embassy advanced this goal through contacts at all levels of society, public remarks, and embassy public diplomacy programs. These included two sports programs to foster conflict resolution among youth from different religious backgrounds and an arts program promoting religious tolerance through interaction of youth from different religious backgrounds.

The Ambassador and embassy staff emphasized the need for religious freedom and respect for diversity in public outreach efforts, for example, by hosting an iftar that brought together a cross-sectarian number of religious leaders to underscore the importance of religious diversity. In the context of the Arab Spring, through its contacts with religious and political leaders and through public outreach programs, the embassy emphasized the principle that governments must protect the universal human rights of citizens of all communities and faiths. The Ambassador and embassy officers also worked with local religious and community leaders to insulate the country from sectarian tensions spilling over from the violence in Syria. In conflict-ridden Tripoli, for example, USAID implemented programs focused on cross-sectarian reconciliation and economic development projects at the grass roots level.