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2013 International Religious Freedom Report - Israel and The Occupied Territories

Executive Summary

A report on the Occupied Territories, including areas subject to the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority (PA), is appended at the end of this report.

The country's laws and policies provide for religious freedom and the government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, there were reports of government actions that affected religious freedom. The Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty protects religious freedom through reference to the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel. The declaration describes the country as a Jewish state with full social and political equality, regardless of religious affiliation, and provides for freedom of religion. Nevertheless, governmental and legal discrimination against non-Jews and non-Orthodox streams of Judaism continued and was debated by public officials and civil society organizations.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There were reports of anti-Semitic acts perpetrated by members of minority religious groups, and of acts of intolerance perpetrated against minority religious groups. "Price tag" attacks (property crimes and violent acts by Jewish settlement supporters primarily targeted at Muslim and Christian religious sites) continued and spread beyond the West Bank to locations well within Israel. The judiciary and prominent societal leaders, however, took positive steps to enforce laws related to freedom of religious practice and gender equality in public spaces, such as the Western Wall. Some individuals and groups were responsible for discriminatory practices against Muslims, Christians, and Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews. Relations among religious and ethnic groups – between Jews and non-Jews, secular and religious communities of the same faith, and among the different streams of Judaism – were strained.

The U.S. government engaged in detailed discussions on religious freedom issues with the government and religious and civil society organizations. Embassy officials raised issues such as strengthening interfaith coordinating councils in support of peace negotiations and countering intolerant or offensive speech and religiously-motivated acts of violence against minority religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 7.7 million (July 2013 estimate that includes settlers living in the Occupied Territories). According to the the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), approximately 75 percent of

the population is Jewish, 17 percent Muslim, 2 percent Christian, and 1.6 percent Druze. The remaining 4 percent consists of relatively small communities of Bahais, Samaritans, Karaites, Jehovah's Witnesses, and those the CBS classifies as "other" – mostly persons who identify themselves as Jewish but do not satisfy the Orthodox Jewish definition of "Jewish" the government uses for civil procedures. The majority of non-Jewish citizens are of Arab origin.

According to the 2011 CBS report, 9 percent of the Jewish population identifies as Haredi (also known as "ultra-Orthodox"), 10 percent as Orthodox, 15 percent as "traditional, religious," 23 percent as "traditional, not so religious," and 43 percent as "nonreligious/secular" Jews, most of whom observe some Jewish traditions. Although not differentiated in official statistics, a 2013 Israel Democracy Institute's (IDI) Guttman Center poll shows that between 500,000 and 600,000 traditional and secular Jews feel a sense of belonging to the Conservative or Reform streams of Judaism. There is also a community of approximately 20,000 Messianic Jews.

Religious communities often are concentrated in geographical areas according to religious beliefs. The country continues to undergo demographic changes due to the higher birth rate of the Haredi and Muslim communities.

According to the CBS, there are approximately 109,000 foreigners permitted to work in the country and an additional 93,000 illegal foreign workers; these numbers do not include an additional 54,000 African migrants/asylum seekers who do not have formal permission to work in the country, according to the CBS. Foreign workers were members of many different religious groups, and included Protestants, Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Although Israel has no constitution, laws and policies generally provide for religious freedom, and the government generally respected this right in practice. The Supreme Court has repeatedly held that the Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty protects freedom to practice religious beliefs, and its rulings incorporate the religious freedom provisions of international human rights agreements into the country's body of law. The Basic Law describes the country as a "Jewish and democratic state" and references the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, which promises freedom of religion and conscience and full social and political equality, regardless of religious affiliation. Government policy continues to support the generally free practice of religion, although governmental and legal discrimination against non-Jews and non-Orthodox streams of Judaism continues.

Under laws inherited from the Ottoman Empire and British Mandate periods, the legal system gives jurisdiction over personal status issues to certain religious communities. Under this system, each officially recognized religious community operates religious courts and has legal authority over its members in matters of marriage, divorce, and burial. Jewish, Druze, Muslim, and Christian families may ask for some personal status cases, including alimony, child custody, and property division, to be adjudicated in civil courts, though societal pressures frequently prevent Muslim women from using this option. Jewish women often prefer the civil courts because they are considered to be fairer to women. However, in cases of divorce, Jewish women are subject to the exclusive jurisdiction of the rabbinical courts if their spouses file the case there first. Paternity cases among Muslim citizens are the exclusive jurisdiction of Islamic law courts. Some couples who marry in the country, including Catholics, cannot obtain a divorce unless they change their religious affiliation to a different religious authority that authorizes divorces.

Members of unrecognized religious groups may practice their beliefs. There is no civil right to marry or divorce in the country for members of unrecognized religious communities, but an authority within one of the recognized religious communities can handle their personal status issues, including marriage, if the authority agrees.

Secular 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 varies from civil law, including in matters relating to the property rights of widows and daughters.

The government implements some policies based on Orthodox Jewish interpretations of religious law. This system limits the personal freedom of individuals who otherwise would not subject themselves to the authority of a religious community, despite a 2013 IDI poll showing a majority of Israeli Jews supported equalizing the legal status of different denominations. For example, the only in-country Jewish marriages the government recognizes are those the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate performs, which excludes citizens without maternal Jewish lineage since such persons are not considered Jewish according to *halacha* (Jewish law). Since the state does not permit civil marriages, interfaith marriages, or marriages performed by non-Orthodox rabbis or unrecognized

religious authorities, many marriages must take place outside the country in order to be legally recognized. This provision restricts the ability of individuals to choose their own religious authorities and prevents several hundred thousand Israeli citizens from marrying within the country. The law allows for civil registration of married couples only if both partners are recognized as being of “no religion,” which applies to a few dozen marriages each year.

To marry in government-recognized ceremonies, Jews must undergo marriage counseling from Orthodox religious authorities. As part of this counseling, all Jews – including the majority who do not define themselves as Orthodox or religious and those who practice Reform or Conservative Judaism – are taught to respect traditional Orthodox family roles. The Knesset (parliament) passed legislation in October that would allow Jews to register their marriage outside the city or town in which they live, allowing individuals to choose the rabbi or marriage registrar where their marriage must be approved.

The Chief Rabbinate determines who is buried in Jewish state cemeteries, limiting this right to individuals considered Jewish by Orthodox standards. A law requiring the government to establish civil cemeteries has not been fully implemented, although there are 44 cemeteries that are authorized to conduct civil burials.

The Chief Rabbinate determines the legal validity of conversions to Judaism within the country under Orthodox rabbinic law. The Chief Rabbinate does not recognize non-Orthodox converts to Judaism as Jews and, as such, Reform and Conservative converts cannot marry or divorce in the country or be buried in Jewish cemeteries; people who converted to Reform or Conservative Judaism abroad do not have any such restrictions in the country.

The government provides funding for Orthodox conversion programs but does not support non-Orthodox programs. The government has not implemented a May 2009 High Court of Justice ruling requiring it to cease discriminating against non-Orthodox conversions. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) sponsors expedited Orthodox Jewish conversion courses for Jewish soldiers who are not recognized as Jewish by the Orthodox rabbinical authorities.

Relatives of Jewish converts cannot receive residency rights, except for the children of female converts born after the mother's conversion is complete.

The State Prosecutor's Office in 2012 adopted a High Court recommendation that the state pay the salaries of non-Orthodox rabbis in rural areas, however, funding for the positions continues to be debated. The Ministry of Culture and Sport agreed to budget the positions, however, Reform movement activists claim the requirements to qualify for funding, such as working full time, exclude most non-Orthodox rabbis, and that Orthodox and non-Orthodox rabbis are not paid equally. On December 5, the High Court enjoined the ministry to ease the funding conditions for activities by Reform and Conservative communities. In May the Ministry of Religious Services (MRS) announced it would stop funding state-appointed neighborhood rabbis directly and instead provide financial support to communities to pay rabbis of their own choice, which would also allow non-Orthodox rabbis to receive state-funded budgets. The parameters for implementing the plan continue to be worked on by MRS.

The law recognizes the following religious communities: Eastern Orthodox, Latin (Roman Catholic), Gregorian-Armenian, Armenian-Catholic, Syrian Catholic, Chaldean (Chaldean Uniate Catholic), Greek Catholic Melkite, Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, Druze, Evangelical Episcopal, and Bahai. Other religious communities, including Muslims and major Protestant Christian denominations, have a presence in the country, but are not recognized by the government as “religious communities.” Five religious communities have applied for official recognition but their applications have been pending for years: Ethiopian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Evangelical Lutheran Church, Evangelical Alliance of Israel, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Law of Return provides the right for any Jew, or any child or grandchild of a Jew, to immigrate to Israel from a foreign country with his or her spouse and children. Prospective immigrants routinely face questioning about their religious beliefs to determine their qualifications for citizenship. While Jews who are atheists or who state their adherence to other religions are conferred immigration benefits, Messianic Jews are routinely excluded, despite the Supreme Court repeatedly upholding their right to citizenship. Descendants of Jews qualify for immigration under the Law of Return regardless of their religious beliefs. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) relies on the guidance of the Jewish Agency, a non-profit, nongovernmental organization (NGO) with strong ties to the government, to determine who qualifies to immigrate as a Jew. Non-Orthodox converts to Judaism are entitled to the civil right of return, citizenship, and registration as Jews in the civil population registry.

The 1967 Protection of Holy Sites Law provides for the protection of holy sites of all religious groups. All holy sites also have protection under the penal law, which makes it a criminal offense to damage any holy site. While arrests are subject to judicial oversight, the government, not the courts, has the authority to decide matters relating to religious rights in holy places, and the Supreme Court has upheld that governmental authority. Historic sites also are protected by the antiquities law. The government provides some resources for the upkeep of holy places of Muslims and all recognized religious communities, but provides significantly greater levels of government resources to Jewish holy places. The government also funds construction of Jewish synagogues and cemeteries.

A government policy since 1967, repeatedly upheld by the Supreme Court and routinely enforced by the police, who cite security concerns, denies non-Muslim worship and prayer at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. While the government ensures limited access to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif to everyone regardless of religious belief, only Muslims are allowed to pray at the site, although their access is occasionally restricted due to security concerns. The Israeli National Police (INP) regulates traffic in and out of the site and removes non-Muslim visitors if they appear to be praying.

The Jerusalem Islamic Waqf (endowments), a Jordanian-funded and administered Islamic trust and charitable organization, manages the site and generally restricts non-Muslims from entering the Dome of the Rock shrine and al-Aqsa Mosque, a practice it started in 2000. The Waqf does not allow non-Muslim religious symbols to be worn on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif.

The Rabbi of the Western Wall, appointed by the prime minister and chief rabbis, sets the guidelines for religious observance at the Western Wall, including the strict separation of women and men. In prior years the Supreme Court repeatedly upheld a policy prohibiting women from praying at the Western Wall while wearing certain prayer shawls and/or phylacteries, or from reading aloud from Torah scrolls because this form of prayer by women violates most Orthodox interpretations of Jewish law and offends "local custom." In April the Jerusalem district court judge upheld a court ruling refuting the policy and made it illegal to arrest or fine women for praying at the Western Wall in this manner. Women are still not permitted to bring a Torah scroll onto the plaza, and have been prevented from accessing the public Torah scrolls at the holy site. The government, however, allows women and egalitarian prayer groups to hold worship services, read the Torah, and wear prayer shawls at an area south of the Mughrabi Gate adjacent to the Western Wall that the Antiquities Authority administers. In August the Ministry of Religious Affairs created an additional temporary structure for mixed-gender prayer services south of the Mughrabi gate in an area nearby, but not abutting, the Wall.

The government provides resources to both religious and nonreligious schools. The government subsidizes 55 to 75 percent of the operating costs of recognized Haredi schools, which are required to teach a corresponding percentage of the national curriculum.

Government resources available for religious or heritage studies to Arab and non-Orthodox Jewish public schools are significantly less than those available to Orthodox Jewish public schools. Public and private Arab schools offer studies in both Islam and Christianity, but state funding for such studies is proportionately less than the funding for religious education courses in Jewish schools. A Haifa court has upheld the right of a minor to choose a secular education, despite his parents' preference that he attend a religious school.

Public Hebrew-language secular schools teach Jewish history and religious texts. These classes primarily cover Jewish heritage and culture rather than religious belief. Public Arabic-speaking schools with Arab student bodies teach mandatory classes on the Quran and the Bible to both Muslim and Christian Arab students. A few independent mixed Jewish-Arab schools also exist and offer religion classes. The government employs civilian non-Jewish clergy as chaplains at military burials when a non-Jewish soldier dies in service. The MOI provides imams to conduct funerals according to Muslim customs. All Jewish chaplains in the IDF are Orthodox.

Military service is compulsory for Jews, Druze, and the 5,000-member Circassian community (Muslims from the northwestern Caucasus region who migrated in the late 19th century). Arab Christian and Muslim citizens are exempt from compulsory service. Although the majority of Arab citizens choose not to serve in the military, some Christian and Muslim citizens, including many Bedouins, voluntarily enlist. Government policy, formalized and conditioned by the 2002 Tal Law, allows Haredi Jews to refuse to serve for religious reasons. In 2012, the High Court ruled the Tal Law unconstitutional. The policy, however, remains in effect while the Knesset considers alternative legislation that would enforce conscription to the military or national service for the Haredi community. To receive similar national benefits accorded military veterans, Arabs and Haredi Jews can enlist in a national service program run by the Ministry of Security for one or two years, as volunteers in health, education and welfare with NGOs and institutions focused on improving their local communities.

All recognized religious communities are exempt from taxation for places of worship, according to the annually drafted Arrangements Law.

The MOI has jurisdiction over religious matters concerning non-Jewish groups, while the Ministry of Tourism is responsible for the protection and upkeep of non-Jewish holy sites.

The MRS has jurisdiction over the country's 133 Jewish religious councils, which oversee the provision of religious services for Jewish communities. The MOI Department of Non-Jewish Affairs oversees one non-Jewish religious council for the Druze. Legislation establishing religious councils does not include non-Jewish religious communities other than the Druze. The government finances approximately 40 percent of the religious councils' budgets, and local municipalities fund the remainder.

Proselytizing is legal for all religious groups. The law prohibits offering a material benefit as an inducement to conversion. It is also illegal to convert a person under 18 unless one parent is an adherent of the religious group seeking to convert the minor. Despite the legality of proselytism, the government generally discourages proselytizing and encourages the popular perception that it is illegal. The MOI occasionally cites proselytizing

as a reason to deny student, work, and religious visa extensions, as well as to deny permanent residency petitions.

The government operates a special department in the state attorney's office for prosecution of "incitement-related" crimes and a new police unit based in Jerusalem for the investigation of nationalist crimes. Israeli law criminalizes incitement to racism, defined as "persecution, humiliation, vilification, the display of enmity or violence, or the causing of animosity" by reason of color, race, or national-ethnic origin.

While members of recognized religious communities only require approval for visas from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, visas for members of unrecognized religious communities also require MOI approval for stays longer than five years.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, formerly the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

Government Practices

There were reports of arrests and detentions, and the government imposed some restrictions that affected minority religious groups.

Legal and policy restrictions on religious freedom continued. Government policy supported the generally free practice of religion, although governmental and legal discrimination against non-Jews and adherents to non-Orthodox streams of Judaism continued. The majority of Jewish citizens objected to exclusive Orthodox control over fundamental aspects of their personal lives, and public opinion polls showed a majority of Jewish citizens also supported the formal recognition of other strands of Judaism as valid, such as Reform and Conservative Judaism.

Israeli police controlled access to and the security of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site with police stationed both inside the site and outside each entrance. Entrance to the site was legally permitted regardless of one's religious beliefs, although access was often restricted. Police cited security concerns when restricting Muslim men under 50 from entering the site. On May 8, the Israeli police prevented Muslims from entering for three hours while police escorted 175 Israelis onto the site. That same day, the Israeli police detained the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and the Palestinian Territories for close to eight hours, questioning him about alleged inflammatory rhetoric and incitement before releasing him. Police often removed from the site Jewish individuals who appeared to be praying, in accordance with a government policy dating back to 1967. Several public figures expressed a desire to amend that policy, including Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat. In his Eid al-Adha greeting, Prime Minister Netanyahu reaffirmed that Israel's policy was to maintain the status quo at holy sites in Jerusalem and elsewhere. In November a group of prominent rabbis issued a statement reaffirming the strict religious prohibition on Jewish prayer at the Temple Mount.

Authorities prevented some Jewish groups from entering the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site without a police escort due to security concerns. In October three Jewish men lay on the ground in protest of police restrictions on non-Muslim prayer on the site; in a separate incident, a group of 10 men waved the Israeli flag, prayed, and sang the Israeli national anthem on the site before being detained by the INP. The police also responded to incidents of rock-throwing and rioting by Palestinians in response to periods of increased Jewish presence on the site. The Jerusalem Islamic Waqf, part of the Jordanian Ministry of Waqf, exercised administrative control over the site and prohibited from the site non-Muslim symbols, the Bible and other religious literature, and clothing deemed immodest by Muslim standards, as well as non-Muslim entrance into the Dome of the Rock, al-Aqsa Mosque, al-Marwani Mosque, and the Islamic Museum. Citing safety concerns, on May 28, two INP officers entered the Dome of the Rock to examine restoration work on the ceiling, prompting clashes between the officers and Waqf guards and Muslim worshippers. This was the first time officers had entered the shrine to inspect restoration works carried out by the Waqf under Jordanian sponsorship rather than for security concerns. In December Israeli authorities installed surveillance cameras around the compound, citing security concerns and prompting formal complaints from the Waqf.

Israeli police obstructed access through security checkpoints to the Old City's Church of the Holy Sepulchre during Easter celebrations, which reduced Christians' ability to enter Jerusalem and the Old City to participate in religious services.

Some Muslims stated there was insufficient state funding for Muslim affairs, including for building and restoring mosques and cemeteries, although the state provided municipalities with religious development budgets and religious institutions with operational support funds. Many mosques lacked an appointed imam, a responsibility of the MOI's Muslim Affairs Department. The government allowed non-state employees to be imams in mosques if the community preferred.

The High Court has repeatedly ruled that the segregation of men and women on public streets and sidewalks in the ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighborhood of Mea She'arim in Jerusalem was illegal, and that gender segregation on public buses could not be imposed or ordered but could occur only on a voluntary basis. Authorities

generally enforced the law. In July and August police barred women's prayer group and NGO Women of the Wall from entering the women's section of the Western Wall, citing security concerns.

In May the attorney general backed the recommendations of a Ministry of Justice team established to investigate the exclusion of women by ultra-Orthodox Jews in the public sphere. He advised government ministries to end certain current practices, including gender segregation during funerals, national ceremonies, and public events, and in public health clinics, on buses, and during broadcasts of public radio stations.

According to government figures, the year's budget for religious services for the Jewish population, including funding for religious councils, salaries for religious personnel, funding for the development of cemeteries, and funding for the construction of synagogues and ritual baths, was approximately 418.8 million new Israeli shekels (NIS) (\$120.7 million). Religious minorities, which constituted slightly more than 20 percent of the population, received approximately NIS 79.1 million (\$22.8 million), or 13 percent of total funding, which included NIS 14.1 million (\$4.1 million) for development of religious sites and structures. The Ministry of Education allocated NIS 109.5 million (\$31.6 million) for income support of Rabbinical (yeshiva) students, and NIS 741 million (\$213.6 million) for supporting Rabbinical colleges.

The MOI gave some Christian clergy members entry permits only for the West Bank, precluding their travel inside Israel, or entry permits only for Israel, precluding their travel in the Occupied Territories. The clergy members said this restricted their access to holy sites and members of their religious communities. Other members of the clergy were required to sign a declaration acknowledging that accessing areas under Palestinian control without appropriate authorization from the coordinator of activities in the territories could result in deportation and a ten-year travel ban, but Israeli government officials at the port of entry did not explain how to obtain such a permit. Despite the legality of missionary activities, the MOI cited proselytism as a reason to deny entry into Israel.

According to the government, travel to hostile countries, including travel to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj, required a permit from the minister of interior or prime minister, and illegal travel was punishable by a prison sentence or fine if the traveler did not request prior approval.

In general, Palestinian residents of the West Bank can travel abroad through the Allenby crossing, subject to a security examination. Palestinian religious groups faced some restrictions, such as closures for security reasons and long waits at border crossings, which often impeded travel into the country or travel to other countries for religious purposes.

As in previous years, the MRS failed to fully implement the 1996 Alternative Burial Law, which established the right of any individual to be buried in a civil ceremony.

MOI officials continued to deny citizenship or deny or delay services such as child registration and issuance of social benefits, identity cards, and passports to some citizens based on their religious beliefs, according to the Jerusalem Institute of Justice, an NGO. This included cases of individuals who immigrated under the Law of Return as Jews but were discovered to hold Messianic or Christian beliefs.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported an incident in which soldiers and police told them that proselytizing was illegal and issued a summons to appear at a police station for questioning related to these activities.

The Knesset chairperson's Prize for the Life Quality Fund awarded the Israeli Center for Victims of Cults (ICVC) the Knesset Speaker's Prize for Human Rights for its work to advance rule of law, democratic values, and human rights. According to the government, the fund was established by a private benefactor and is not a national body or organization, even though according to the fund's rules, the Knesset chairperson is the chairperson of the fund's board. NGOs and religious groups objected to the award, stating that the ICVC was an anti-missionary and anti-intermarriage organization that classified Hare Krishnas and Scientologists as "cults." In response to the complaints, the fund held a hearing with the ICVC's management and determined there were no new facts that would lead to changing or withdrawing the award.

According to the INP, 15 persons were arrested in connection to "price tag" attacks between October and the end of the year. Officials quickly and publicly criticized the attacks and police opened investigations and made several arrests. Several prosecutions were ongoing as of the end of the year. The prime minister, government ministers, and other national public figures, as well as the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land (CRIHL) spoke out against these attacks. The CRIHL is an umbrella body of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious institutions that includes the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the PA Ministry of Islamic Waqf, the PA sharia (Islamic law) courts, and the leaders of the major Christian denominations in Jerusalem.

Israeli law criminalizes calling for, praising, supporting, or encouraging acts of violence or terrorism, where the call is likely to lead to violence. The Department for Special Affairs in the State Attorney's Office closed one religious educational institute after it was determined that its educational content was racist, and the funding for another religious educational institute was stopped on the same grounds.

The Ministry of Education initiated a program to employ Arab non-Jewish teachers in Jewish public schools for the 2013-2014 school year.

Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

Terrorist organizations, including Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and members of global Jihadist organizations, continued to carry out attacks against citizens of the country, mostly in the form of indiscriminate missile, rocket, and mortar attacks from the Gaza Strip. Terrorists' statements often contained anti-Semitic rhetoric and appeals to Islamic religious beliefs in conjunction with the attacks, including in Hamas' founding charter where it states that "the Day of Judgment will not come about until Muslims fight the Jews." From January to October, according to the Government of Israel, terrorists committed 811 attacks from the West Bank, 49 from the Gaza Strip, and 288 from in or near Jerusalem, resulting in 29 Israelis injured and four killed.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Following the prime minister's December 2012 delegation of Natan Sharansky, chairman of the Jewish Agency, to study the issue of women's prayer at the Western Wall and suggest ways to accommodate all Jews, Sharansky issued a report recommending changes that would enable prayer for both men and women and female-led prayer in the area of the Western Wall. Cabinet Secretary Avichai Mandelblit chaired a committee on the issue and conducted site visits to alternative locations with Women of the Wall. Although scheduled to publish its findings in late 2013, the committee had not done so by year's end. In April the Jerusalem police began assisting Women of the Wall in entering the women's area of the Western Wall for their monthly service, and this practice continued in the fall. Concurrently, Women of the Wall indicated a willingness to consider moving their prayer services to the Robinson's Arch area south of the Mughrabi gate.

The government increased the number of permits for non-citizen Palestinian Muslims from the West Bank for religious holidays. According to the government, there were 540,897 visits by Palestinians from the West Bank to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif during Ramadan.

The police investigated all known instances of religiously motivated attacks and made arrests when possible. In June the government designated "price tag" vandals as members of "illicit organizations," significantly expanding the investigative and prosecutorial tools available to security services and police. In July the government established a new police unit specializing in nationalist crimes, to include "price tag" attacks and attacks on places of worship. Cases were still under investigation at year's end.

The government launched a nationwide campaign to implement a 2007 MOI decision to eliminate religious affiliation on official identity cards in response to complaints that the majority of identity cards still in circulation identified non-Jews. The new identity cards noted only name and birthday.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Relations between religious and ethnic groups, including between Muslims and Christians, Arabs and non-Arabs, and secular and religious Jews, continued to be tense. There were reports of anti-Semitic acts by members of minority religious groups and of acts of intolerance against minority religious groups. In May the Jerusalem District Attorney filed an indictment against an 18-year-old Jerusalem resident who, along with a group of friends, attacked a young Haredi man during a Nakba Day event. The NGO Search for Common Ground (SFCG) and the CRIHL documented 22 attacks on Jewish holy sites in Israel. For example, in June crosses were spray-painted on the walls and doors of a synagogue in Bat Yam.

"Price tag" attacks continued and spread beyond the West Bank to locations well within Israel. SFCG and the CRIHL documented 10 "price tag" attacks against religious sites within the country, including four against Muslim, five against Christian and one against Jewish holy sites. In August vandals spray-painted "death to the Gentiles," "revenge," and "price tag" and threw a Molotov cocktail attack into a monastery outside of Beit Shemesh. In December vandals sprayed "Muhammad is a pig" and other graffiti on a mosque in Baqa al-Gharbiyya.

Societal attitudes toward missionary activities and conversion were generally negative. Most Jews opposed missionary activity directed at Jews, considering it tantamount to religious harassment, and some were hostile to Jewish converts to Christianity. Messianic Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses were reportedly harassed regularly by Yad L'Achim and Lev L'Achim, Jewish religious organizations opposed to missionary activity and intermarriage. There were no violent attacks against Messianic Jews or Jehovah's Witnesses.

Yad L'Achim offered assistance to Jewish women in "escaping" situations of cohabitation with Arab men, in some cases reportedly facilitating the kidnapping of children away from the women's spouses. The anti-intermarriage organization Lehava established a hotline for citizens to inform on Jewish women who were suspected of having romantic relationships with Arab men and made the names and phone numbers of the men available to facilitate members of the general public contacting them and discouraging intermarriage. Lehava also allegedly collected the identification numbers of the Jewish women.

There continued to be tension between the Haredi community and the majority of Israelis, including concerns related to housing, service in the IDF, and participation in the workforce. As part of an overall austerity budget, the government reduced its subsidies to families per child, seriously affecting the income of Haredi families, many of whom previously relied on government subsidies for families with five or more children. Polling of Jewish citizens by the NGO Hiddush indicated that tension between Haredi and secular Israelis was the most acute conflict among Jews within Israeli society, more important than the left-right divide, the economic divide, and the Ashkenazi and Sephardic divide.

There were some improvements on societal acceptance of women in the public sphere in religiously conservative communities. The Knesset passed legislation in May to increase the representation of women on the committee that appoints rabbinical judges. For the first time, Haredi women ran for office in the local council of Elad in the October municipal elections. Also for the first time a woman was appointed as one of two supervisors of Acre's religious council. The Working Group for Equality in Personal Status Issues successfully campaigned to have a woman appointed to advise the council that selects sharia court judges.

Expressions of animosity between secular and religious Jews continued. As in past years, there were instances of Haredi Jews throwing rocks at passing motorists driving on the Sabbath in predominantly Haredi neighborhoods, and harassing or assaulting women whose appearance they considered immodest. In several instances, Haredi Jews attacked Haredi soldiers for choosing to serve in the military. There continued to be numerous reports of Haredi men spitting at non-Haredi Jews and persons of different faiths.

Women who refused to sit at the back of buses on routes frequented by Haredi Jews risked harassment from male passengers, despite a ruling by the Supreme Court in January 2011 that gender segregation on public buses could occur only on a voluntary basis. In July Haredi protesters in Beit Shemesh smashed the windows of a bus and threw stones at two other buses after a driver stopped his bus and called the police when a Haredi couple asked a female passenger to move to the back of the bus. The INP carried out arrests of individuals suspected of breaking the law in connection with this incident.

Interfaith dialogue often was linked to ongoing peace efforts between Israelis and Palestinians and between the country and its Arab neighbors. A number of NGOs sought to build understanding and create dialogue among religious groups and between religious and secular Jewish communities. These organizations included Neve Shalom-Wahat al-Salam; Hagar, an Arab-Jewish school; Hiddush; the Israeli Religious Action Center of the Reform Movement; and the Interreligious Coordinating Council, which promoted interfaith dialogue among Jewish, Muslim, and Christian institutions.

The CRIHL standing committees met quarterly and the organization continued to implement its Universal Code on Holy Sites in partnership with Search for Common Ground, which included research and documentation of attacks on holy sites and joint interreligious responses to holy site attacks.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy officials engaged in detailed discussions on religious freedom and the importance of combating intolerant speech directed against religious groups with the government, as well as with religious and civil society organizations. The Ambassador hosted and attended many events with Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Druze, and Bahai religious leaders, including on many of their holidays, to underline the importance of religious freedom to the U.S. government. U.S. embassy officers consistently raised concerns about religious freedom with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, the police, the Chief Rabbinate, other government agencies, members of the Knesset, and municipal leaders. In public addresses to the political leadership and groups of religious leaders, the Ambassador stressed the importance of interreligious dialogue – as well as communication between different groups within the same religion – as a bulwark against religiously-motivated violence and provocation.

Embassy officials maintained a dialogue with NGOs that focused on human and civil rights, including religious freedom, and promoted interfaith initiatives. Embassy representatives also attended and spoke at meetings of such organizations and encouraged religious leaders to advance regional peace and calm local tensions. The CRIHL hosted the Ambassador and Consul General in Jerusalem at its annual meeting to further interfaith understanding and promote religious freedom. The embassy offered programs that exposed religiously diverse groups of Israelis to U.S. models of religious diversity, civil society, and the art of negotiation, and supported Jewish-Arab educational programs that brought groups of students of different faiths together such as through Hagar, the Arab-Jewish school in Beer Sheva.

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