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Israel and the Occupied Territories

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The religious freedom situation in the [Occupied Territories](#) is discussed in the annex appended to this report.

Israel has no constitution; however, the law provides for freedom of worship, and the Government generally respects this right.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion; however, problems continued to exist, stemming primarily from the unequal treatment of religious minorities, and from the state's recognition of only Orthodox Jewish religious authorities in personal and some civil status matters concerning Jews.

Relations among religious groups--between Jews and non-Jews, Muslims and Christians, secular and religious Jews, and among the different streams of Judaism--often were strained. Tensions between Israeli Jews and Arabs increased significantly after the start of the second Intifada (or uprising) in 2000 when the police killed twelve Israeli-Arab demonstrators, prompting a three-year public inquiry and investigation. The Orr Commission of Inquiry established to investigate the killings found certain police officers guilty of wrongdoing, and concluded in 2003 that the "government's handling of the Arab sector has been primarily neglectful and discriminatory," that it "did not show sufficient sensitivity to the needs of the Arab population, and did not take enough action to allocate state resources in an equal manner." The Police Investigation Department (PID) decided in September 2005 not to indict any police officers for the killings. The Government then announced that the Deputy State Attorney would review the PID decision, and has allowed Adalah, an Arab-Israeli advocacy group, to examine the investigation files so that the organization could prepare a summary of its findings for the Deputy State Attorney. Tensions remained high due to institutional, legal, and societal discrimination against the country's Arab citizens.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom problems with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

Based on its pre-1967 borders, the country has an area of approximately 7,685 square miles, and its population is approximately 7 million, of which 5.6 million are Jews (including Jewish settlers who live in the Occupied Territories), approximately 1.3 million are Arabs, and approximately 290,000 are members of other minorities. Although the Government defined nearly 80 percent of the population as Jewish, approximately 306,000 of these citizens did not qualify as Jews according to the Orthodox Jewish definition or the definition used by the Government for civil procedures. According to a government survey conducted in 2004 and published in 2005, approximately 8 percent of the Jewish population were Haredim, or ultra-Orthodox, and another 9 percent were Orthodox, while 39 percent described themselves as "traditionally observant" or "traditional," and 44 percent described themselves as "secular" Jews, most of whom observed some Jewish traditions. A growing but still small number of traditional and secular Jews associated themselves with the Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist streams of Judaism, which are not officially recognized for purposes of civil and personal status matters involving their adherents. Although the Government does not officially recognize them, these streams of Judaism received a small amount of Government funding and were recognized by the country's courts.

Numerous religious groups are represented in the country. Slightly less than twenty percent of the population is non-Jewish and the vast majority of them are ethnically Arab. Of this number, Muslims constitute approximately twelve percent, Christians 3.5 percent, Druze 1.5 percent, and adherents of other religious approximately 0.5 percent. The non-Jewish populations were concentrated in the north, in Bedouin communities in the Negev region in the south, and in the narrow band of Arab villages in the central part of the country adjacent to the Occupied Territories. Relatively small communities of evangelical Christians, Messianic Jews (those who consider themselves Jewish but believe that Jesus Christ is the Messiah), and Jehovah's Witnesses also resided throughout the country. In an April 2005, media report, a leader of the Jewish Messianic community estimated that the Messianic Jewish population numbers approximately 10,000 persons. Media sources also indicated that the number of Messianic Jews had grown rapidly over the past decade, with many new adherents coming from the Russian immigrant community.

The Government reported that approximately 60,000 to 70,000 legal foreign workers lived in the country, and estimated that another 50,000 to 70,000 illegal foreign workers resided in the country. Two local non-Governmental organizations (NGOs) advocating for workers' rights placed the number of legal foreign workers closer to 100,000, and estimated that another approximately 100,000 illegal foreign workers lived in the country. Most of the foreign workers were Roman Catholic, Orthodox Christian, Buddhist, or Hindu.

The Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty describes the country as a "Jewish" and "democratic" state. Most members of the non-Jewish minority were generally free to practice their religions but were subject to various forms of discrimination, some of which have religious dimensions.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

There is no constitution; however, the law provides for freedom of worship, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The declaration of independence describes the country as a "Jewish state," but provides for full social and political equality regardless of religious affiliation. While the law explicitly guarantees freedom of religion and the safeguarding of "holy places of all religions," inequities exist. Israeli-Arabs and other non-Jews generally were free to practice their religions; however, discrepancies in treatment existed between Jews and various non-Jewish communities, and between Orthodox Jews and Jews of non-Orthodox affiliations.

The "status quo" agreement reached at the founding of the state, which has been upheld throughout the state's history, guarantees the Government will implement certain policies based on Orthodox Jewish interpretations of religious law. For example, the Government does not recognize Jewish marriages performed in the country unless they are performed by the Orthodox Jewish establishment. The Orthodox Jewish establishment also determines who is buried in Jewish state cemeteries, limiting this right to individuals considered "Jewish" by the Orthodox standards. In addition, the national airline El Al and public buses in every city but Haifa do not operate on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath; however, several private bus companies do. Additionally, streets in most Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods are closed to vehicles on the Sabbath. According to the Law on Work and Rest Hours of 1951, which was upheld by the Supreme Court in April 2005, Jews in most professions are prohibited from working on the Sabbath unless they are granted a special permit by the Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Employment. According to the Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC), however, the Government often chooses not to enforce the law.

In April 2004, the High Court rejected a petition demanding that the Ministry of the Interior enforce the prohibition on the public display of leavened products for sale during the Passover holiday, but it did not rule on the legality of the prohibition. Then, in March 2005, following the interior minister's announcement that he would not enforce the prohibition, then-Prime Minister Sharon reportedly instructed the minister to enforce the prohibition. In recent practice, however, the Government has not enforced this law, according to IRAC. There were no reports of its enforcement during the reporting period. In regions inhabited primarily by non-Jews, bread was displayed and sold openly during Passover.

In 2003, the High Court suspended several municipal prohibitions and curbs on the sale of pork and instructed municipalities to allow sales of pork in neighborhoods where no more than an unspecified, small portion of the residents would object on religious grounds. The result of the decision was to allow each municipality to determine on its own whether to allow the sale of pork.

The law recognizes as "religious communities" those recognized by and carried over from the British Mandate period (1920-1946), during which Great Britain administered present-day Israel and the Occupied Territories. These include: Eastern Orthodox, Latin (Roman Catholic), Gregorian-Armenian, Armenian-Catholic, Syrian (Catholic), Chaldean (Uniate), Greek Catholic Melkite, Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, and Jewish. Since the founding of the country, the Government has recognized three additional religious communities--the Druze (a monotheistic offshoot of Islam) in 1957, the Evangelical Episcopal Church in 1970, and the Baha'i in 1971. The status of several Christian denominations with representation in the country has been defined by a collection of ad hoc arrangements with various Government agencies. The fact that the Muslim population was not defined as a religious community was a vestige of the Ottoman period, where Islam was the dominant religion, and it does not limit Muslims from practicing their faith. The Government allows members of unrecognized religions the freedom to practice their religion. According to the Government, there were no religious groups awaiting recognition during the reporting period.

With some exceptions, each recognized religious community has legal authority over its members in matters of marriage, divorce, and burial. Legislation enacted in 1961 afforded the Muslim courts exclusive jurisdiction to rule in matters of personal status concerning Muslims. For so-called "unrecognized religions," no local religious tribunals exercised jurisdiction over their members in matters of personal status. In addition, unlike recognized religious communities, unrecognized religious communities do not receive government funding for their religious services. The Arrangements Law provides exemption from municipal taxes for any place of worship of a recognized faith. Exemption from tax payments is also granted to churches that have not been officially recognized by law. In several cases, the Government has interpreted that exemption from municipal taxes to apply only to that portion of the property of religious organizations that was actually used for religious worship. Not-for-profit religious schools also receive tax

exemptions. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) had tax-exemption status for its hospital on the Mount of Olives for more than thirty years until the District Court revoked this privilege in 2002. After several rescheduled hearings, the Supreme Court was scheduled to hear LWF's case for tax exemption on May 22, 2006.

Secular courts have primacy over questions of inheritance, but parties, by mutual agreement, may bring such cases to religious courts. Jewish and Druze families may ask for some family status matters, such as alimony and child custody in divorces, to be adjudicated in civil courts as an alternative to religious courts. Christians may ask that child custody and child support cases be adjudicated in civil courts rather than in religious courts. Muslims have the right to bring matters such as alimony and property division associated with divorce cases to civil courts in family-status matters. However, paternity cases remain under the exclusive jurisdiction of Shari'a courts. There is no overarching law or directive that prescribes these varying approaches.

The Supreme Court ruled in April that rabbinic courts may not arbitrate property disputes between a divorced husband and wife. This ruling has, in effect, repudiated the authority of the rabbinic courts to serve as arbitrators in all financial disputes, even if neither party in the dispute objects to the courts playing this role. Although the rabbinic courts have ruled on financial matters since before the establishment of the state, their jurisdiction has never been established in law. In response to the Supreme Court ruling, the rabbinic courts initiated a Knesset bill to secure in law their jurisdiction over financial matters, which they presented in June to the Justice Ministry for its consideration. In March 2004, the Ministry of Religious Affairs was officially dismantled and its 300 employees were reassigned to several other ministries. As a result, the Ministry of the Interior now has jurisdiction over religious matters concerning non-Jewish groups; the Ministry of Tourism is responsible for the protection and upkeep of all holy sites, and the Prime Minister's office has jurisdiction over the nation's 133 religious councils (one Druze and the rest Jewish) that oversee the provision of religious services to their respective communities. Legislation establishing religious councils does not include non-Jewish religious communities other than the Druze. Instead, the Ministry of the Interior directly funds religious services for recognized non-Jewish communities. The state, through the Prime Minister's office, continues to finance approximately 40 percent of the religious councils' budgets, and local authorities fund the remainder. According to government figures, the 2005 state budget included approximately \$31.5 million (Shekels (NIS) 140,000,000) for religious councils.

According to government budget figures, during 2005 the budget for religious services and religious structures for the Jewish population totaled approximately \$260 million (NIS 1.19 billion). Religious minorities, which comprised approximately 20 percent of the population, received approximately \$13 million (NIS 61 million), or 5 percent of total funding. Of these totals, the Government reported that the 2005 budget for Jewish religious services was approximately \$55.5 million (NIS 250,000,000). The 2005 religious services budget for the non-Jewish communities, including the Druze, totaled approximately \$6.5 million (NIS 29,250,000). At least \$209 million (NIS 960 million), comprising approximately 80 percent of the budget for Jewish religious services and education, went toward Orthodox services, Orthodox rabbis' salaries, and Orthodox educational institutions.

Arab advocacy groups continued to charge that the state did not allocate adequate or proportional funds for the provision of religious services in Arab towns and villages. A reputable representative of the Arab Christian community criticized the Government in April 2005 for not allocating enough funds for Christian institutions. The Government claimed, however, that funding for religious services in Arab communities has been proportional to the percentage of the total population that these communities comprise. The Government did not provide evidence to support its claim.

Under the Law of Return, the Government grants immigration and residence rights to individuals who meet established criteria defining Jewish identity. Included in this definition is a child or grandchild of a Jew, the spouse of a Jew, the spouse of a child of a Jew, and the spouse of a grandchild of a Jew. A separate, more rigorous standard based on Orthodox Jewish criteria is used to determine the right to full citizenship, entitlement to government financial support for immigrants, the legitimacy of conversions to Judaism performed within the country, and Jewish status for purposes of personal and some civil status problems. Residency rights are not granted to relatives of converts to Judaism, except for children of female converts who are born after the mother's conversion is complete. The Law of Return does not apply to non-Jews or to persons of Jewish descent who have converted to another faith. Approximately 36 percent of the country's Jewish population was born outside of the country.

The Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) charged that the Ministry of the Interior's Population Registry subjected non-Jewish spouses and non-Jewish adopted children of Jewish immigrants to unfair and at times arbitrary policies for proving the bona fides of their relationship for residency purposes. Most of these cases involved persons who immigrated under the Law of Return from the former Soviet republics and their non-Jewish spouses and non-Jewish adopted children. In August 2004, the minister of the interior acknowledged the problems and took steps to change certain policies. For example, in August 2004, the minister of interior announced that he was canceling his ministry's requirement that immigrants from the former Soviet republics deposit a \$7,000 (30,000-shekel) bank guarantee before allowing their non-Jewish spouses to enter the country. The deposit was to be returned once the spouse was granted residency.

In 2003, the Government began issuing new and replacement identification cards that do not carry a "nationality" (i.e., usually religious) designation. Citizens and residents are still required to register with the Ministry of the Interior's Population Registry as one of a set list of nationalities. Immediately prior to this reporting period, the Ministry of the Interior issued to individuals arriving in the country immigration forms with an item for travelers to list their religion.

Immigration officials were inconsistent in seeking compliance, and the form has since been amended to omit any questions on religious affiliation.

Politicians, media outlets, and many ordinary citizens criticized the Government's practice of granting military draft exemptions and living allowances to full-time yeshiva students. Under the Tal Law, ultra-Orthodox Jews are entitled to exemption from military service to pursue religious studies. This exemption allows ultra-Orthodox Jews to postpone military service in one-year increments to pursue full-time religious studies at recognized yeshivas, or religious schools. These students must renew their deferments each year by proving that they are full-time students. At the age of twenty-two, the yeshiva students are given one year to decide whether to continue to study full time with yearly renewals until they reach the age of forty; to perform community service for one year, and thereafter, twenty-one days each year until the age of forty; or to serve in the army until they finish their military service requirement. According to the Government, approximately 9 percent of all male candidates for military service have deferments as full-time yeshiva students, up from 7.3 percent in 2000.

In July 2005, the justice minister wrote to the prime minister to report that the Tal Law had been implemented "unsatisfactorily, to say the least," and insisted that "an immediate change to the situation is needed." In the three years since the law took effect, between 2002 and 2005, only about 1,100 of the 14,000 yeshiva students with draft deferrals had elected to take a "year of decision," and of those students, only about 30 had actually chosen to perform army service. Only 139 out of 45,639 ultra-Orthodox Jews at the military-conscription age have joined the army since 2002. Officials in both the IDF and the Finance Ministry reportedly opposed the Tal Law for various reasons, and failed to implement it. The only two national service programs designed specifically for the ultra-Orthodox include the Nahal Haredi Unit and the Haredi soldier-teacher program. The Government did not take steps to implement the law or to create new military service options for ultra-Orthodox Jews during the reporting period.

Public Hebrew-speaking secular schools teach mandatory Bible and Jewish history classes. These classes primarily cover Jewish heritage and culture, rather than religious belief. Public schools with predominantly Arab student bodies teach mandatory classes on the Qur'an and the Bible, since both Muslim and Christian Arabs attend these schools. Orthodox Jewish religious schools that are part of the public school system teach mandatory religion classes, as do private ultra-Orthodox schools that receive some state funding.

The Government recognizes the following Jewish holy days as national holidays: Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Simhat Torah, Passover, and Shavuot. Arab municipalities often recognize Christian and Muslim holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Muslim, Christian, and Orthodox Jewish religious authorities have exclusive control over personal status matters, including marriage, divorce, and burial, within their respective communities. The law does not allow civil marriage, and it does not recognize Jewish marriage performed in the country unless by recognized Orthodox rabbis. Many Jewish citizens objected to such exclusive control by the Orthodox establishment over Jewish marriages and other personal status problems, and to the absence of provision for civil marriage, because approximately 306,000 immigrants from the former Soviet Union were not recognized as Jewish by Orthodox authorities.

The 1967 Protection of Holy Sites Law applies to holy sites of all religions within the country, and the Penal Code makes it a criminal offense to damage any holy site. The Government, however, issued implementing regulations for only Jewish sites. The Government reported in 2006 that there were several hundred official holy sites in 2005--including ten new mosques that were still under construction during the reporting period--without specifying the number of these sites that the law protects. In 2006, the Government did not issue new implementing regulations to protect non-Jewish holy sites under the law, including the ten new mosques under construction.

In November 2004, the Arab Israeli advocacy group Adalah petitioned the High Court to compel the Government to issue regulations to protect Muslim sites, charging that the Government's failure to do so had resulted in desecration and the conversion of several sites into commercial establishments. In its petition, Adalah stated that all of the 120 places designated by the Government as holy sites are Jewish. At the end of the reporting period, the court had not held an initial hearing on the petition. The Government established a committee to examine the issue, but the committee has met only once, according to Adalah. The Government is expected to submit its full response to the petition prior to the initial hearing, scheduled for October 2006. According to Adalah, the Government did not designate any non-Jewish sites as holy sites in either 2005 or 2006, while it has added fifteen Jewish sites since December 2004. The Government did not provide statistics on holy sites.

In December 2004, the Arab Association for Human Rights (AAHR) issued a comprehensive report documenting what it refers to as the "destruction and abuse of Muslim and Christian holy places in Israel." In its report, AAHR asserted that 250 non-Jewish places of worship had either been destroyed during and after the 1948 war or made inaccessible to the local Arab population. Lands of destroyed Arab villages were given to Jewish farmers, and the surviving mosques in these villages had been used as animal pens or storage depots. In Ein Hod, a town south of Haifa, the mosque was turned into a bar. The Government stated that in March 2004, there was a fire in an abandoned mosque in Beit She'an, resulting in a collapse of the structure. The Government reported that the only incident involving damage to a holy site in 2005 occurred in early March, when a couple protesting a family court decision lit firecrackers

in the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, sparking a riot among church members.

During Jewish holidays and following terrorist attacks, the Government imposed closures to restrict travel in the country and the Occupied Territories for security purposes that had the effect of impeding access to holy sites in the country for Arab Muslims and Christians, as well as Israeli-Arabs and Palestinians who possessed Jerusalem identification cards. The construction of the separation barrier also impeded access to holy sites throughout the country and the Occupied Territories during the reporting period.

The Government permits religious organizations to apply for state funding to maintain or build religious facilities. Funding was provided for the maintenance of facilities such as churches, Orthodox synagogues, mosques, and cemeteries. Funding for construction was not provided for non-Orthodox synagogues. Several civil rights NGOs asserted that Orthodox Jewish facilities receive significantly greater proportions of funding than did non-Orthodox Jewish and non-Jewish facilities. Muslim groups complained that the Government did not equitably fund the construction and maintenance of mosques in comparison to the funding of synagogues.

AAHR reported that the Government was reluctant to refurbish mosques in areas where there was no longer a Muslim population, and has never in its history budgeted for the building of a new mosque. Muslim clerics, judges, and political leaders cited a lack of government funding for, maintenance of, and access to mosques in, among other places, Tiberias, Safed, Beersheva, and Caesaria; the Government kept several of these mosques closed during the year, reportedly for the mosques' protection, and allowed private citizens or municipalities to turn several into galleries, restaurants, and museums. The Government stated that the AAHR report referred to abandoned sites and not to active sites, and the abandoned sites were not properly maintained. There is no restriction on the construction of new mosques, but the Government noted that, while the state budget does not cover the costs of new construction, it does provide assistance in the maintenance of mosques. The Government cited examples of mosques that received government assistance for their maintenance in 2004, including mosques in Romana, Bartaa, Baana, Daburiya, Bir al Maksur, Bustan Almarge, Maala Iron, Hualad, and Hura, which altogether received approximately \$313,000 (NIS 1,420,000). The Government's total development budget for cemeteries was approximately \$6.75 million (NIS 30 million) in 2005. According to government figures, the development budget in 2005 for holy sites and cemeteries for non-Jewish denominations was \$2.22 million (NIS 10 million).

Muslim residents of the Be'er Sheva area, including members of Bedouin tribes, protested the municipality's intention to reopen the city's old mosque as a museum rather than as a mosque for the area's Muslim residents. The High Court rejected a petition from Adalah, representing the area's Muslim community, to enjoin the municipality from renovating the mosque into a museum. The petitioners argued that there were no alternative mosques in the Be'er Sheva area. In January 2005, the High Court issued an interim opinion suggesting that the mosque be used as an Islamic cultural and social center by the Muslim community of Be'er Sheva, but not for prayer. In February 2005, the municipality issued a response rejecting this suggestion, insisting that the mosque be opened as a museum. According to Adalah, the attorney general originally submitted a response to the High Court supporting the Be'er Sheva Municipality's position that the building not be used as an Islamic Cultural Center, but in April 2006 the attorney general announced that the Government preferred to reopen the mosque as a museum for Islamic and eastern culture. The case was pending at the end of the reporting period.

Building codes for places of worship are enforced selectively based on religion. Several Bedouin living in unrecognized villages were denied building permits for construction of mosques, and in the past, the Government has destroyed mosques built in unrecognized Bedouin communities. In 2003, government officials demolished a mosque that was constructed without a permit and served approximately 1,500 residents in the unrecognized Bedouin village of Tel al-Maleh. According to the Regional Council for the Arab Unrecognized Villages in the Negev, in 2003 and 2004, the Government issued demolition orders for three mosques in Um al-Hiran, al-Dhiyya, and Tel al-Maleh respectively; all three were unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev and built without the proper permits. The Regional Planning and Building Committee in the Negev stated that it was unaware that the building marked for demolition in al-Dhiyya was a mosque. By the end of the reporting period, the demolition orders continued to stand. The Tel al-Maleh case was transferred to a lower court for review and the case was pending at the end of the rating period. In 2003 in Um al-Hiran, the Government issued orders to demolish the mosque, and villagers were fined approximately \$7,000 (NIS 30,000) for building the structure without a permit. Earlier this year, following a failed appeal by the village, the Magistrate' Court ordered the mosque to be destroyed. It was not known at the end of the period covered by this report whether the mosque was demolished.

Adalah reported that, in March 2005, the state requested a demolition order for a mosque in Husseinia. The case was still pending at the end of the reporting period. According to the Regional Council for the Arab Unrecognized Villages in the Negev, the Government did not destroy any mosques during the reporting period. In contrast, according to a former Tel Aviv municipal council member, in recent years approximately 100 illegal synagogues have operated in Tel Aviv, some within apartment buildings and others in separate structures.

A 1977 anti-proselytizing law prohibits any person from offering or receiving material benefits as an inducement to conversion. No reports existed of attempts to enforce the law during the reporting period.

Missionaries are allowed to proselytize, although the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) voluntarily refrained from proselytizing under a signed agreement with the Government.

By the end of the period covered by this report, the Knesset had not ratified the Fundamental Agreement establishing relations between the Holy See and the Government that was negotiated in the 1990s. In a separate process, representatives of the Government and the Holy See held several negotiating sessions since September 2004 with the aim of reaching an agreement (concordat) on fiscal and legal matters. The negotiations addressed the problems of tax exemption of Roman Catholic institutions and property and the access of the Roman Catholic Church to courts. No agreement had been reached by the end of the period covered by this report.

Since the Government does not have diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, Muslim citizens must travel through another country, usually Jordan, to obtain travel documents for the Hajj. The average number of Hajj pilgrims traveling from the country each year was approximately 4,500, and the overall number allowed to participate in the Hajj was determined by Saudi Arabian authorities. According to the Government, travel to hostile countries, including travel to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj, may be restricted; however, these restrictions are based on security concerns rather than on any religious or ethnic factors.

During the reporting period, many groups and individuals of numerous religions traveled to the country freely. Members of the Messianic Jewish community, however, charged that during the year, government officials detained and denied entry to several of their members who were seeking to enter the country. There were no new instances during the reporting period.

According to representatives of Christian institutions, the process of visa issuance for Christian religious workers significantly improved after a period in 2003 when the Government refused to grant residence visas to approximately 130 Catholic clergy assigned to the country's and the Occupied Territories. The Ministry of the Interior's Christian Department reported that it approved most of the applications made by clergy during the reporting period. The Department did not stipulate how many it received.

The Government discriminated against non-Jewish citizens and residents, the vast majority of whom were Arab Muslims and Christians, in the areas of employment, education, and housing. The Orr Legal Commission of Inquiry, established to investigate the 2000 police killing of twelve Israeli-Arab demonstrators, issued a final report in 2003 noting historical, societal, and governmental discrimination against Arab citizens. The Government has not implemented either the Orr Commission recommendations or those of a follow-up inter-ministerial committee.

According to a March 2005 media report, approximately 8,000 non-Jewish soldiers were serving in the IDF. The IDF policy is to allow non-Jewish soldiers to go on home leave for their respective religious holidays. Military duties permitting, Jewish soldiers can leave on holidays. These duties rotate to allow some soldiers to go home for Jewish holidays. The IDF conducts commemorative activities appropriate for each respective Jewish holiday.

The IDF did not have any Muslim or Christian chaplains because, according to government sources, the frequent home leave accorded all soldiers allowed Muslim and Christian soldiers easy and regular access to their respective clergy and religious services at home. There were discussions between the IDF and the National Security Council regarding chaplain appointments for non-Jewish IDF soldiers, but no decision had been made by the end of the period covered by this report.

The Government used private non-Jewish clergy as chaplains at military burials when a non-Muslim or non-Jewish soldier died in service. The Interior Ministry reported that it provided imams to conduct funerals according to Muslim customs. In 2003, however, according to the family of a Christian soldier killed in a terrorist attack, the IDF did not have a military priest available to officiate at their son's burial. The soldier was buried in a non-Jewish section of the military cemetery in a non-religious ceremony without a religious figure to officiate. All Jewish chaplains in the IDF are Orthodox.

The IDF sponsored Orthodox Jewish conversion courses for Jewish soldiers who do not belong to Orthodox Judaism and for non-Jewish soldiers seeking to convert to Judaism. The IDF does not facilitate conversion to other religions.

Military service is compulsory for Jews and Druze. Orthodox Jews could obtain exemptions from service for full-time religious study. Some Arab citizens, mainly Bedouin, were accepted as volunteers. Approximately 90 percent of Israeli-Arabs do not serve in the army. Israeli-Arab advocacy groups charged that housing, educational, and other benefits, as well as employment preferences based on military experience, effectively discriminate in favor of the Jewish population, the majority of whom serve in the military. In December 2004, the Ivri Committee on National Service recommended to the Government that Israeli-Arabs be afforded an opportunity to perform alternative nonmilitary service. By the end of the reporting period, the Government had not yet considered these recommendations.

In 2003, the Government introduced a core curriculum program that required all state-funded schools to teach core subjects, such as mathematics. However, state-subsidized ultra-Orthodox Jewish religious schools were not compelled, as were other types of schools, to comply with this law. The High Court ruled in December 2004 that ultra-Orthodox Jewish religious schools that did not comply with the Education Ministry's core curriculum by the opening of the 2007 school year would not be eligible for any funding from the ministry. The ruling was a response to a petition filed by the Secondary Schools Teachers' Association against the Ministry of Education charging that while the

ministry cut funding to the public school system, causing hundreds of teachers to lose their jobs, it provided approximately \$40 million to autonomous ultra-Orthodox schools that did not comply with ministry pedagogical requirements. In April 2006, the Education Ministry reported that all of the "recognized but unofficial" education facilities affiliated with ultra-Orthodox parties were now "fully implementing the core curriculum program." It is unclear whether these institutions will continue to implement the core curriculum because Prime Minister Olmert reportedly promised the ultra-religious Shas party in April that his cabinet would pass a new law to "permit all Haredi education institutions to continue to carry out the education and study programs unique to them."

Government resources available for religious/heritage studies to Arab and to non-Orthodox Jewish public schools were proportionately less than those available to Orthodox Jewish public schools. According to IRAC, approximately 96 percent of all state funds for Jewish religious education were allocated exclusively to Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox Jewish schools. Both public and private Arab schools offer studies in both Islam and Christianity, but the state funding for such studies was proportionately less than the funding for religious education courses in Jewish Orthodox schools.

The Government funded secular schools and Orthodox Jewish schools; it did not fully fund religious schools for non-Jews. Schools that seek to adopt a non-Jewish, religious curriculum must operate outside of the regular public schools system. Quality private religious schools for Israeli-Arabs existed; however, parents often must pay tuition for their children to attend such schools since little government funding was available. Jewish private religious schools, however, received significant government funding in addition to philanthropic contributions from within the country and abroad, which effectively lowers the schools' tuition costs.

Government funding to the different religious sectors was disproportionate to the sectors' sizes. Civil rights NGOs charged that the Government favored Orthodox Jewish institutions in the allocation of state resources for religious activities.

IRAC noted that approximately 97 percent of public funding for Jewish cultural and educational activities went to Orthodox Jewish organizations, despite IRAC's estimate that non-Orthodox Jewish institutions accounted for only approximately 20 percent of all Jewish cultural activities. In response to a petition filed by IRAC in 2002, the Supreme Court ruled in December 2004 that the Government must create new criteria for state funding of Jewish cultural activities. Accordingly, the Government issued new criteria for its funding of educational and cultural activities. The educational criteria, however, still discriminated against the secular sector, according to IRAC, which planned to petition the Supreme Court again. IRAC expressed satisfaction with the Government's new criteria for funding cultural activities, though it remained concerned that the criteria could be discriminatory in implementation.

In spite of the legal provision for public funding to build non-Orthodox synagogues, the Government did not fund the construction of any non-Orthodox synagogues. In 2003, IRAC petitioned the High Court on behalf of a Reform congregation in Modi'in to require that Modi'in municipality fund construction of a Reform synagogue. The city already funded eight Orthodox synagogues, but none of the Conservative or Reform synagogues. The High Court ruled in 2003 that it was permissible to use state funds for the construction of a Reform synagogue in the city of Modi'in and ordered the municipality to repeat the process for determining which congregations would receive funding and to use criteria that would guarantee and provide equal treatment. Nevertheless, the request for funding stalled in the Modi'in municipality. IRAC again petitioned the High Court to compel the municipality to hold a hearing to consider all available budget requests for synagogue construction in light of the needs of Modi'in residents. IRAC also petitioned the court to freeze all municipal allocations for synagogue construction in Modi'in until such a hearing was held. In 2005, The Government announced that it would build synagogues for non-Orthodox denominations, but the Government had not allocated any such funding by the end of the reporting period.

In 1998, the High Court of Justice ruled that discrepancies in budget allocations between religious institutions in the Jewish and non-Jewish sectors constituted prima facie evidence of discrimination. In 2000 the plaintiffs from the 1998 High Court case brought a case contending discrimination in the allocation of resources for religious cemeteries. The High Court agreed with the plaintiffs that non-Jewish religious cemeteries were receiving inadequate resources and ordered the Government to increase funding to such cemeteries.

The 1996 Alternative Burial Law established the right of any individual to be buried in a civil ceremony and required the establishment of twenty-one public civil cemeteries throughout the country. However, at the end of the reporting period, only one public civil cemetery existed in the country, in Be'er Sheva, and only approximately fifteen Jewish cemeteries in the country contained a section for civil burials. The City of Jerusalem reportedly planned to establish a cemetery for use by secular citizens free of charge. If completed, this cemetery would be the first public civil cemetery endorsed by a municipal government in the country.

Several domestic civil rights and immigrant groups asserted that the Government failed to allocate adequate space or sufficient funds for the establishment of civil cemeteries. Civil burials were also offered by certain Kibbutzim, but, according to some NGOs, such burials were expensive. The Government reported that the 2004 capital budget for civil cemeteries was approximately \$760,000. It reported that in 2004, the administrative budget for Jewish cemeteries was approximately \$2 million, and claimed that no capital budget was allocated. In 2005, the budget for Jewish burials was approximately (NIS 17 million), while the budget for civilian burials was (NIS 11.5 million).

Only approximately 7 percent of land was privately held, according to Adalah. Most citizens who controlled land, either for residential or business use, including farms, leased their land from the Government on long-term leases. Of the 93 percent of the land not in private hands, the Government directly controlled the vast bulk, but approximately 12.5 percent was owned by the state through the quasi-public Jewish National Fund (JNF). The Israel Land Administration, a government agency, manages both the land directly owned by the Government and the JNF land. The JNF's charter prohibited it from leasing land to non-Jews. In addition, the Jewish Agency, an organization that promotes Jewish immigration to the country and develops residential areas on both public and JNF land, as a matter of policy does not lease land to non-Jews. In 2000, the High Court ruled that the state may not allocate land to its citizens on the basis of religion or nationality, even if it allocates the land through a third party such as the Jewish Agency. The Court's decision precludes any restrictions on the leasing or sale of land based on nationality, religion, or any other discriminatory category. JNF complied with the ruling by publishing announcements about land sales in publications available to both Jews and non-Jews, but it remained unclear whether or not non-Jewish citizens would actually be able to purchase the advertised properties.

In October 2004, civil rights groups petitioned the High Court of Justice to block a government bid announcement involving JNF land that effectively banned Arabs from bidding. The Government then halted marketing of JNF land in the Galilee and other areas of the north, where there are large Arab populations. In December 2004, Adalah petitioned the High Court to require the Government to apply nondiscriminatory procedures for allocating land and to conduct open land sales or leases to Arabs as well as to Jews. In January 2005, the attorney general ruled that the Government would not discriminate against Israeli-Arabs in the marketing and allocation of lands it manages, including lands that the Israel Land Administration manages for the Jewish National Fund. Adalah criticized the attorney general, however, for also deciding that the Government should compensate the JNF with land equal in size to any plots of JNF land won by non-Jewish citizens in government tenders.

Exclusive control over marriages resides by law with recognized bodies of the recognized religious denominations. Accordingly, anyone wishing to marry in a secular ceremony, Jews wishing to marry in non-Orthodox religious ceremonies, Jews not officially recognized as Jewish by the Orthodox Jewish establishment but wishing to marry in Jewish ceremonies, and Jews wishing to marry someone of another faith must all do so abroad. The Ministry of the Interior recognizes such marriages. During the reporting period, approximately 250,000 citizens could not marry because they lacked religious affiliation. According to Central Bureau of Statistics, between 2000 and 2004, 32,009 citizens married outside of the country. Almost half of this number--14,214--comprised couples in which both the husband and the wife were Jewish. A smaller proportion of this number--1,764--lacked religious affiliation in the country. Between 2000 and 2003, five percent of Jewish couples that qualified to be married by the Chief Rabbinate decided to marry abroad instead. Others decided instead to hold weddings unrecognized by the Government, including Reform and Conservative weddings and those conducted by Kibbutz authorities.

In March 2004, the Knesset (parliament) rejected two bills that would have allowed for civil marriage. In July 2004, the chairman of a Knesset committee established to formulate a civil marriage option announced that the committee would not complete its work or issue recommendations due to what was characterized as political interference with the committee's work. In April 2005, the High Court instructed the Government to inform the Court within three months of the government's position on whether to recognize so-called "consular marriages," those conducted by officials of foreign embassies in the country. Government recognition of consular marriages would enable couples with no religious affiliation, or those of a religion not recognized by the Government, to wed in such civil ceremonies. Consular weddings have not been performed since 1995, when the Foreign Ministry issued a memorandum to foreign embassies instructing them to cease performing consular marriages. According to press reports, the High Court was expected to consider two petitions demanding that the Interior Ministry recognize consular marriages in 2006.

In December 2004, the Government reached an agreement with the Chief Rabbinate to limit required prenuptial instruction to those Jewish religious laws that were directly connected to the marriage ceremony and not require Jewish couples to receive instruction on Orthodox Jewish laws of ritual purity.

The state does not recognize conversions to Judaism performed in the country by non-Orthodox rabbis. In March 2005, the High Court ruled that, for the purpose of conferring citizenship rights, the Government must recognize those non-Orthodox conversions of non-citizen legal residents that were begun in the country but formalized abroad by acknowledged Jewish religious authorities, even if not of the Orthodox strain. In a separate May 2004 ruling, the court determined that non-Jews who move to the country and then convert in the country through an Orthodox conversion were eligible to become immigrants and citizens pursuant to the Law of Return. Previously, non-Jews were entitled to immigrate to the country and obtain full citizenship only if these conversions were conducted entirely abroad and under Orthodox standards. The High Court did not, however, rule on whether the Government must recognize non-Orthodox conversions formalized in the country.

Separately, in May 2006 the Chief Rabbinate announced that it decided two years ago to not automatically recognize conversions performed by Orthodox rabbis abroad, citing the need for consistency of standards in the conversion process.

The Shinui Party, which ran in the 2002 national elections on a platform of ending the exclusive power of the Orthodox establishment over such problems as marriage and citizenship, left then-Prime Minister Sharon's governing coalition in December 2004 in protest over the allocation of approximately \$70 million in the 2005 budget for ultra-Orthodox

religious institutions. Then-Prime Minister Sharon allocated the funds as part of a coalition agreement with the ultra-Orthodox United Torah Judaism party to secure that party's support for the Gaza disengagement plan.

Under the Jewish religious courts' interpretation of personal status law, a Jewish woman may not receive a final writ of divorce without her husband's consent. Consequently, thousands of women, so-called "agunot," are unable to remarry or have legitimate children because their husbands have either disappeared or refused to grant divorces.

Rabbinical tribunals have the authority to impose sanctions on husbands who refuse to divorce their wives or on wives who refuse to accept divorce from their husbands. In May 2004, a rabbinical court decided for the first time to jail a woman who refused to accept a divorce from her husband. Rabbinical courts also could exercise jurisdiction over, and issue sanctions against, non-Israeli Jews present in the country. The rabbinical courts administration asked U.S. authorities in mid-February 2006 to extradite husbands who fled to the United States to avoid granting their wives a religious divorce decree.

Some Islamic law courts have held that Muslim women could not request a divorce but could be forced to consent if a divorce was granted to the husband. One Arab Muslim woman who won a divorce from her abusive husband in a Muslim court subsequently filed a civil suit against the husband with the Magistrates Court in the north. The court set a precedent in March 2005 by awarding the woman approximately \$10,000 in compensation for damage to her status and chances of re-marrying. Divorced Arab women were stigmatized in their communities and experienced difficulties remarrying.

Members of unrecognized religious groups, particularly evangelical Christians, sometimes faced problems in obtaining marriage certifications or burial services that were similar to the problems faced by Jews who were not considered Jewish by the Orthodox establishment. Informal arrangements with other recognized religious groups provided relief in some cases.

Most Orthodox Jews believed that mixed gender prayer services violate the precepts of Judaism. As a result, such services were prohibited at the Western Wall, the holiest site in Judaism, and men and women must use separate areas to visit the Western Wall. Women also were not allowed to conduct any prayers at the Western Wall wearing prayer shawls, which were typically worn by men, and cannot read from Torah scrolls. In 2003, the Women of the Wall, a group of more than 100 Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform women, lost their fourteen-year legal battle to hold formal women's prayer services at the Western Wall. The High Court ruled that the group could not hold prayer services at the Western Wall and instead would be permitted to hold them at nearby Robinson's Arch, part of an archeological site. The court ordered the Government to prepare an area at Robinson's Arch where women could read aloud from the Bible and conduct group prayers, and the Government inaugurated a plaza in this area for women's services in August 2004. The mayor of Jerusalem, Uir Lupolianski, requested permission to expand the women's section and make its size equal to that of the men's section, by changing the route of the "Mugraby Path" leading to the Temple Mount.

Another religious group, the Masorti movement, regularly held prayer services at Robinson's Arch according to its own customs, which include men and women praying together, women reading from the Torah, and women wearing a tallit or tefillin. However, they could pray only between seven and eight in the morning without paying. If the members of the Masorti movement wanted to pray after this time, they had to pay the approximately \$6 fee charged to visit the archeological site. In April 2006, the Masorti movement petitioned the High Court regarding the fee.

Non-Orthodox Jews faced greater difficulties than Orthodox Jews in adopting children. In December 2004, in response to a petition from IRAC, the High Court ordered the Government to justify the practice under which the Adoption Service of the social affairs ministry that placed non-Jewish children only in Orthodox Jewish homes. The Government did not respond by the end of the reporting period. Existing law requires that the adopted child must be of the same religion as the adopting parents. However, Representatives of IRAC reported that when no family of the same religion was willing to adopt the child, adoption officials consistently placed the child with an Orthodox family. In such cases, the child's conversion to Judaism had to be completed before the adoption was finalized. The Government defended its practice by arguing that the placement of non-Jewish children in Orthodox homes eliminated any subsequent legal uncertainty about the Jewish status of the children. At the end of the reporting period, the case was still pending.

The Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center began construction in 2004 of a \$150 million Center for Human Dignity and Museum of Tolerance in Jerusalem. The Wiesenthal Center began building on the site of a municipal parking lot, which local officials had built in the 1960s over part of a centuries-old Muslim cemetery. Supporters of the Wiesenthal Center cited an 1894 ruling by the Shari'a court at the time, which stated that because the cemetery was abandoned, it was no longer sacred. During the reporting period, builders unearthed hundreds of skeletons and skeletal remains. After several Muslim organizations petitioned the High Court to stop construction, the court ordered the sides to arbitration and issued an injunction stopping construction work. The museum was reportedly considering a plan to relocate the Muslim graves.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

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

Persecution by Terrorist Organizations

During the reporting period, terrorist organizations, including Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, carried out several attacks. While terrorists launched these attacks largely as political statements, they sometimes accompanied the attacks with anti-Semitic rhetoric.

Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom

The Government appointed Oscar Abu-Razek, a Muslim Israeli-Arab, as director general of the Ministry of Interior, the first Arab to serve in such a senior position in a government ministry. In addition, for the first time since the establishment of the state, an Arab was appointed in 2004 as a permanent justice of the High Court.

According to government data, the number of non-Jewish directors on the boards of state-owned companies increased from 5.5 percent in 2002 to 8 percent in 2005. Former Prime Minister Sharon stated publicly that increasing the number of non-Jewish board directors and the number of non-Jewish civil service employees is a government priority.

Members of the Knesset and the Chief Rabbinate attended a seminar in January 2005, hosted by the American Jewish Committee, to increase understanding of the various branches of Christianity. To enhance interfaith relations, seminar participants also visited the heads of various Christian subgroups, including the Latin and Armenian patriarchs and a representative of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate.

In June 2006, The 35th World Zionist Congress passed a resolution obligating the Jewish Agency to include Israeli-Arab communities in its development plans for the country. The agency has never been active before in the Arab and Druze communities. The resolution's proponents succeeded through a rare collaborative effort between Reform and Orthodox groups, who combined to overcome the opposition of delegates from some political parties, including Kadima, Herut and Yisrael Beiteinu.

The Government established a new department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to fight anti-Semitism and commemorate the Holocaust.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Relations among different religious groups--between Jews and non-Jews, between Christians and Muslims, between Christians of different traditions, and among the different streams of Judaism--often were strained. Tensions between Jews and non-Jews were the result of historical grievances as well as cultural and religious differences, and they were compounded by governmental and societal discrimination against Israeli-Arabs, both Muslim and Christian. These tensions were heightened by the Arab-Israeli conflict, and manifested in terrorist attacks targeting citizens, IDF operations in the Occupied Territories, incidents of Jewish militants targeting Israeli-Arabs, and incidents of Israeli-Arab involvement in terrorist activity.

On July 7, 2005, the Messianic congregation in Arad published a letter in Iton HaTzvi that reported harassment by members of the local ultra-Orthodox community. The High Court heard on September 12, 2005, a petition by ultra-Orthodox Jews seeking both the right to demonstrate at the house of a family of Messianic Jews and reversal of a police decision prohibiting such a demonstration. The court had not issued a ruling by the end of the reporting period. According to Messianic Jews resident in Arad, since April 2004 members of the Gur Hassidim movement have demonstrated regularly in front of the homes of Christians and Messianic Jews in Arad to protest alleged proselytizing by these groups.

An observer reported that a group of approximately 200 ultra-Orthodox Jews violently disrupted the religious service of a Messianic congregation in Be'er Sheva on December 24, 2005. According to the account, the group pushed and slapped the congregation's pastor and damaged property. Police dispersed the mob. On December 26, 2005, the observer filed a report with the Be'er Sheva police.

Members of the Messianic Jewish community in Arad reported suffering verbal harassment and physical violence at the hands of ultra-Orthodox Jews. During the reporting period, authorities and public officials did not respond effectively to protect this community.

According to a 2006 poll conducted by the Israel Democracy Institute, some 62 percent of the citizens believed that the Government should encourage Arab citizens to emigrate. Only 14 percent of respondents thought relations between Jews and Arabs were good in the country. An ultra-Orthodox weekly, *Sh'a Tova*, carried a comic strip in March 2005 for children with a negative depiction of Arabs, including the statement, "Yes, a good Arab is a dead

Arab." In 2005, fans of a Jerusalem soccer team shouted racist slogans against Israeli-Arab soccer players during a match. In 2004, several Jews were indicted in one incident for shouting such slogans.

Two individuals wrapped a pig's head with a keffiyeh with the word "Mohammad" written on it and threw it into the courtyard of the Hassan Bek mosque in Jaffa on August 19, 2005. Police later arrested and charged the individuals with religious insult, but released them in September after a judge ruled that there was no risk that the individuals would repeat the act.

In March, the state prosecutor initiated a formal investigation of Rabbi David Batzri and his son, Rabbi Yitzhak Batzri, for suspected incitement to racism. The rabbis organized a conference in January to rally opposition to the proposed expansion of a bilingual school in Jerusalem that includes both Arab and Jewish students. Rabbi David Batzri stated at the conference, "The people of Israel are pure and Arabs are a nation of asses. The question must be asked, why didn't God give them four legs, because they are asses?" His son, Rabbi Yitzhak Batzri, added, "People say we are racist, but they are the evil ones, the cruel ones, the scum of snakes. This is war."

During the reporting period, incidents occurred in Jerusalem in which ultra-Orthodox Jewish youths assaulted Arabs and spray-painted anti-Arab graffiti.

During the run-up to the parliamentary elections in March, the Herut party used campaign posters depicting an Arab woman wrapped in a traditional veil with the caption "this demographic will poison us." In April Attorney General Menachem Mazuz ordered a criminal investigation into the incident.

The phrases "Death to Arabs" and "Death to Gentiles" were spray-painted in March 2005 on ten graves in a Christian cemetery in Jerusalem's Gilo neighborhood. Police continued to investigate the matter, but had not made any arrests by the end of the reporting period. Adalah and AADR reported that the police have still not made any arrests. Similarly, in May 2006, Israeli youths celebrating the holiday of Lag Ba'Omer, a day traditionally marked by the lighting of bonfires, allegedly attempted to set fire to an abandoned mosque in the northern city of Acre. The individuals claimed they were simply preparing to light a bonfire, but police found indications of attempted arson.

Former Prime Minister Sharon's controversial withdrawal of all citizens from the Gaza Strip and four settlements in the northern West Bank caused tensions in society between supporters and opponents of the withdrawal, the latter often being members of religious Zionist groups. Prior to disengagement, a rabbi issued a religious edict permitting settlers to physically harm Bedouin and Druze soldiers who participated in the evacuation of settlements pursuant to Sharon's plan. In response to the edict, a Bedouin Sheikh urged Bedouin soldiers to respond forcefully, including with live fire, to any settler attacks against them during the evacuation.

Death threats in various forms, including graffiti, were made against government officials who supported the disengagement plan, including against Prime Minister Sharon. During a March 2005 sermon, Shas party spiritual leader Rabbi Ovadia Yosef suggested that God would see that Sharon dies for implementing disengagement. The national office of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) issued a public statement condemning Yosef's sermon for its inflammatory language and his subsequent apology as inadequate. As part of his opposition to the disengagement plan, right-wing activist Noam Federman passed out flyers inciting violence and terror and made statements on his weekly radio show such as, "Let's get rid of the Arabs. They have twenty-two other countries. Let's take them there." In March 2006, the Jerusalem prosecutor's office indicted Federman on twenty-five charges related to these actions.

In May 2006, Vandals spray painted approximately twenty swastikas on the ark, Torah scroll and walls of the great synagogue in the city of Petah Tikva. Neo-Nazi graffiti was also sprayed on monuments honoring, and actual gravesites of, several well-known historical figures, including the grave of the country's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion. In May 2005, swastikas and graffiti comparing Prime Minister Sharon to Adolf Hitler were sprayed on the road leading into the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. A reputable Jewish organization attributed these acts to extremist opponents of Prime Minister Sharon's disengagement plan. In April 2005, police discovered two fake bombs in Jerusalem and arrested two far-right Jewish religious activists for planting those bombs and others in their efforts to distract government attention from the disengagement plan.

In February 2005, Druze rioters damaged a Melkite Catholic church and damaged or burned dozens of Christian-owned businesses, homes, and cars in the northern village of Mughar after a Druze falsely claimed that Christian youths had placed pornographic pictures of Druze girls on the Internet. Eight persons were reported injured, and many Christians fled the city and refused to allow their children to return to school for weeks in the aftermath of the violence. Druze religious leaders were quick to denounce the riots, and representatives of the Christian community criticized the Government for not responding more quickly to the violence. In June 2005, the Government announced the allocation of \$2 million (NIS 10 million) in state funds to compensate residents for property damage incurred during the riots.

Numerous NGOs in the country were dedicated to promoting Jewish-Arab coexistence and interfaith understanding. Their programs included events to increase productive contact between religious groups and to promote Jewish-Arab dialogue and cooperation. These groups and their events have had varying degrees of success. Interfaith dialogue often was linked to the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians and between the country and its Arab neighbors. Among efforts in this area were those of participants in the Alexandria Interfaith Peace Process, initiated at

a 2002 interfaith conference in Cairo. Canon Andrew White, the Archbishop of Canterbury's special representative to the Alexandria Process, convened meetings in December 2004 and in January 2005 in Jerusalem with Israeli and Palestinian religious leaders to discuss advancing the Alexandria Process. The group discussed ways to advance an agenda of peace among religious leaders in their respective communities. In January 2005, as part of the Alexandria Process, Israeli rabbis and Israeli and Palestinian imams joined a group of more than 100 imams and rabbis from all over the world in a Brussels conference aimed at enhancing interfaith understanding and combating violence.

Animosity between secular and religious Jews continued during the period covered by this report. Non-Orthodox Jews have complained of discrimination and intolerance by members of ultra-Orthodox Jewish groups. Persons who consider themselves Jewish but who are not considered Jewish under Orthodox law particularly complained of discrimination. As in past years, ultra-Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem threw rocks at passing motorists driving on the Sabbath.

A variety of NGOs existed that sought to build understanding and create dialogue between religious groups and between religious and secular Jewish communities. Several examples were the Geshar Foundation (Hebrew for "bridge"); Meitarim, which operates a pluralistic Jewish-oriented school system; and the Interreligious Coordinating Council in the country, which promoted interfaith dialogue among Jewish, Muslim, and Christian institutions.

Throughout society, attitudes toward missionary activities and conversion generally were negative. Many Jews were opposed to missionary activity directed at Jews, and some were hostile toward Jewish converts to Christianity. Media sources reported that the Messianic Jewish community accused Yad L'achim, a Jewish religious organization opposed to missionary activity, of harassing its members. Christian and Muslim Israeli-Arab religious leaders complain that missionary activity that leads to conversions frequently disrupts family coherence in their communities.

A March 2005 dispute over the sale of property in Jerusalem's Old City owned by the Greek Orthodox Church to Jewish investors led a Holy Synod meeting in Istanbul to depose the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Irineos I, in May 2005. While Greece, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority recognized the ousting of Irineos and the appointment of Theophilus III as his successor, the Government did not. In November 2005, Theophilus appealed this issue to the High Court and at the same time a ministerial committee was established to deal with the situation. The committee did not resolve the issue and the court recommended waiting for the establishment of the next Government and a new ministerial committee before resolving the matter.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom problems with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. embassy consistently raised problems of religious freedom with the Foreign Ministry, the police, the prime minister's office, and other government agencies.

Embassy representatives, including the ambassador, routinely meet with religious officials. These contacts include meetings with Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Druze leaders at a variety of levels. In April 2005, the embassy invited two Knesset members from the secular Shinui party and two from the ultra-Orthodox Shas party to participate together in an International Visitors Program on the U.S. legislative, judicial, and executive branches of Government. The program received positive media coverage for enhancing understanding and ties between these two rival parties.

Embassy officials maintain a dialogue with NGOs that follow human and civil rights problems, including religious freedom. Embassy representatives also attended and spoke at meetings of such organizations, including the Arab Association for Human Rights, the Mossawa Advocacy Center for Arab Citizens in Israel, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, the Israel Religious Action Center, and Adalah.

THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES (INCLUDING AREAS SUBJECT TO THE JURISDICTION OF THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY)

The Palestinian Authority (PA) does not have a ratified constitution; however, the Palestinian Basic Law provides for freedom of religion, and the PA generally respected this right in practice. The Basic Law names Islam as the official religion but also calls for "respect and sanctity" for other religious groups.

There was no change in the status of the PA's respect for religious freedom during the reporting period. Hamas candidates won 74 of 132 seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council during elections on January 25, 2006. A new PA government led by Hamas Prime Minister Isma'il Haniyyah was sworn-in by PA President Mahmud Abbas on March 28. President Abbas took steps to eliminate religious incitement, although incidents of such incitement still occurred. In previous years, there were credible reports that PA security forces and judicial officials colluded with criminal elements to extort property illegally from Christian landowners in the Bethlehem area. While there were no reports of Christians being targeted for extortion or abuse during the period covered by this report, the PA did not take action to investigate past injustices allegedly perpetrated by PA officials.

Israel exercises varying degrees of legal control in the Occupied Territories. Israel has no constitution; however, it also

has a Basic Law that provides for freedom of worship. The Israeli government generally respects this right in practice in the Occupied Territories.

There was no change in the status of the Israeli government's respect for religious freedom in the Occupied Territories during the reporting period. Israel's strict closure policies frequently restricted the ability of Palestinians to reach places of worship and practice their religions. The construction of a separation barrier by the government of Israel, particularly in and around East Jerusalem, also severely limited access to mosques, churches, and other holy sites, and seriously impeded the work of religious organizations that provide education, healthcare, and other humanitarian relief and social services to Palestinians. Such impediments were not exclusive to religious believers or to religious organizations, and at times the Israeli government made efforts to lessen the impact on religious communities. The Israeli government confiscated land (usually offering limited compensation, which churches do not accept) belonging to several religious institutions to build its separation barrier between East Jerusalem and the West Bank. However, according to the Israeli government, it sought to build the barrier on public lands where possible, and when private land was used, provided opportunities for compensation.

Christians and Muslims generally enjoy good relations, although tensions exist. Strong societal attitudes are a barrier to conversions from Islam. Relations between Jews and non-Jews, as well as among the different branches of Judaism, are strained. Societal tensions between Jews and non-Jews exist and such tensions remained high during the reporting period; however continuing violence also contributes to societal tensions and was apparent during Israel's disengagement from Gaza and portions of the West Bank in 2005. The violence that has occurred since the outbreak of the second Intifada (uprising) in October 2000 has significantly curtailed religious practice in many areas of the Occupied Territories. This violence included severe damage to places of worship and religious shrines in the Occupied Territories.

Prior to the establishment of the Hamas-led government on March 28, 2006, the U.S. government discussed religious freedom problems with the PA and the Israeli government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The Gaza Strip covers an area of 143 square miles, and its population is approximately 1.3 million persons. The West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem) covers an area of 2,238 square miles, and its population is approximately 2.4 million persons, not including approximately 250,000 Israeli settlers. East Jerusalem covers an area of twenty-seven square miles, and its population is approximately 400,000 persons, not including approximately 180,000 Israeli settlers.

Approximately 98 percent of Palestinian residents of the Occupied Territories were Sunni Muslims. According to the sum of estimates provided by individual Christian denominations (which appear significantly overstated), the total number of Christians was approximately 200,000. Other estimates placed the Christian community between 40,000 to 90,000 persons. A majority of Christians were Greek Orthodox; the remainder consisted of Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic Protestant, Syrian Orthodox, Armenian, Coptic, Maronite, and Ethiopian Orthodox denominations. Christians were concentrated primarily in the areas of Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Bethlehem. According to municipal officials in Bethlehem, since 2002 approximately 2,800 Christians from the Bethlehem area had left the West Bank for other countries. According to Christian leaders, most left for economic and security reasons. Low birth rates among Palestinian Christians had also contributed to its shrinking minority status. There was also a community of approximately 400 Samaritans located on Mount Gerazim near Nablus in the West Bank.

Adherents of several denominations of evangelical Christians, as well as members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, operated in the West Bank. Foreign missionaries operate in the Occupied Territories, including a small number of evangelical Christian pastors who reportedly sought to convert Muslims to Christianity. While they maintained a generally low profile, the PA was aware of their activities and generally did not restrict them.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The PA does not have a constitution; however, the Basic Law provides for religious freedom, and the PA generally respected this right in practice. The Basic Law states that "Islam is the official religion in Palestine," and that "respect and sanctity of all other heavenly religious groups (i.e., Judaism and Christianity) shall be maintained." In 2002 the Basic Law was approved by the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) and signed by then-President Yasir Arafat. The Basic Law states that the principles of Shari'a (Islamic law) are "the main source of legislation."

Churches in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza operate under one of three general categories: churches recognized by the status quo agreements reached under Ottoman rule in the late nineteenth century, Protestant and evangelical churches established between the late nineteenth century and 1967, which, although they exist and operate, are not recognized officially by the PA, and a small number of churches that became active within the last decade, and whose legal status is more tenuous.

The first group of churches is governed by nineteenth century status quo agreements reached with Ottoman authorities, which the PA respects, and that specifically established the presence and rights of the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Assyrian, Syrian Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Coptic, and Ethiopian Orthodox churches. These churches are "recognized" by the Israeli Government. The Episcopal and Lutheran churches were added later to this list. The PA, immediately upon its establishment, recognized these churches and their rights. Like Shari'a courts under Islam, these religious groups are permitted to have ecclesiastical courts whose rulings are considered legally binding on personal status and some land problems. Civil courts do not adjudicate on such matters.

Churches in the second category, which includes the Assembly of God, Nazarene Church, and some Baptist churches, have unwritten understandings with the PA based on the principles of the status quo agreements. They are permitted to operate freely and are able to perform certain personal status legal functions, such as issuing marriage certificates.

The third group of churches consists of a small number of proselytizing churches, including Jehovah's Witnesses and some evangelical Christian groups. These groups have encountered opposition in their efforts to obtain recognition, both from Muslims who oppose their proselytizing, and from Christians who fear that the new arrivals may disrupt the status quo. However, these churches generally operate unhindered by the PA.

In practice, the PA requires Palestinians to declare religious affiliation on identification papers. All legal matters relating to personal status must be handled in either Islamic or Christian ecclesiastical courts if such courts exist for the individual's denomination. All legally recognized individual sects are empowered to adjudicate personal status matters, and in practice most do so. Neither the PA nor the Israeli government currently has a civil marriage law. Legally, members of one religious group mutually may agree to submit a personal status dispute to a different Christian denomination to adjudicate, but in practice this does not occur. Churches that are not officially recognized by the PA or the Israeli government must obtain special permission to perform marriages or adjudicate personal status issues; however, in practice non-recognized churches advise their members to marry (or divorce) abroad.

Since Islam is the official religion of the PA, Islamic institutions and places of worship receive preferential treatment. The PA has a Ministry of Waqf and Religious Affairs, which pays for the construction and maintenance of mosques and the salaries of many Palestinian imams. The government of Jordan maintains responsibility for waqf institutions in Jerusalem. The Ministry also provides limited financial support to some Christian clergymen and Christian charitable organizations. The PA does not provide financial support to any Jewish institutions or holy sites in the West Bank; these areas are generally under Israeli control.

The PA requires that religion be taught in PA schools, with separate courses for Muslim and Christian students. A compulsory curriculum requires the study of Christianity for Christian students and Islam for Muslim students in grades one through six. The PA Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE) revised its primary and secondary school textbooks. A USG-funded review of Palestinian textbooks concluded that the textbooks did not cross the line into incitement but continued to show elements of imbalance, bias, and inaccuracy.

Critics noted the new textbooks often ignored historical Jewish connections to Israel and Jerusalem.

The PA does not officially sponsor interfaith dialogue; however, it sends representatives to meetings on improving inter-religious relations and attempts to foster goodwill among Muslim and Christian religious leaders. The PA makes an effort to maintain good relations with the Christian community; however, the PA has not taken sufficient action to remedy past harassment and intimidation of Christian residents of Bethlehem by the city's Muslim majority. The PA judiciary failed to adjudicate numerous cases of seizures of Christian-owned land in the Bethlehem area by criminal gangs. There were credible reports that PA security forces and judicial officials colluded with gang members to extort property illegally from Christians. In previous years, PA officials appear to have been complicit in property extortion of Palestinian Christian residents. Several attacks against Christians in Bethlehem went unaddressed by the PA, but authorities investigated attacks against Muslims in the same area.

PA President Abbas has informal advisors on Christian affairs. Six seats in the 132-member PLC are reserved for Christians; there are no seats reserved for members of any other faith. The PA observes several religious holidays, including Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, Zikra al-Hijra al-Nabawiya, Christmas, and the Birth of the Prophet. Christians also may observe the Easter holiday.

Israel exercises varying degrees of legal control in the Occupied Territories. The international community considers Israel's authority in the Occupied Territories to be subject to the 1907 Hague Regulations and the 1949 Geneva Convention relating to the Protection of Civilians in Time of War. The Israeli government considers the Hague Regulations applicable and maintains that it largely observed the Geneva Convention's humanitarian provisions. The Israeli government applies Israeli law to East Jerusalem, which it annexed after 1967; however, the U.S. government considers Jerusalem a permanent status issue to be resolved in negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

The Israeli government gives preferential treatment to Jewish residents of the Occupied Territories, including East Jerusalem, when granting permits for home building and civic services. For example, Palestinian residents of Jerusalem pay the same taxes as Jewish residents, but Palestinian residents receive significantly fewer municipal

services than Jewish residents. Many of the national and municipal policies enacted in Jerusalem are designed to limit or diminish the non-Jewish population of Jerusalem. These are official policies that every Jerusalem municipal government has acknowledged and followed since 1967, and that Israeli ministers have at times openly admitted. According to Palestinian and Israeli human rights organizations, the Israeli government uses a combination of zoning restrictions on building for Palestinians, confiscation of Palestinian lands, and demolition of Palestinian homes to "contain" non-Jewish neighborhoods, while simultaneously permitting Jewish settlement in predominantly Palestinian areas in East Jerusalem.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Haram al-Sharif (Noble Sanctuary), contains the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque, among the most holy sites in Islam. Jews refer to the same place as the Temple Mount and consider it the location of the ancient Jewish temple. The location has been, with all of East Jerusalem, under Israeli security control since 1967, when Israel captured the city (East Jerusalem was formally annexed in 1980, and thus Israel applies its laws to East Jerusalem). The Haram al-Sharif is administered, however, by the Islamic waqf, a PA-affiliated but Jordanian-funded and administered Muslim religious trust for East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. The Israeli police control the compound's entrances, and limit access to the compound. The waqf can object to entrance of particular persons, such as non-Muslim religious radicals, or to prohibited activities, such as prayer by non-Muslims or disrespectful clothing or behavior, but lacks authority to remove anyone from the site, and thus must rely on Israeli police to enforce site regulations. In practice, waqf officials claimed that police often allowed religious radicals (such as Jews seeking to rebuild the ancient Temple on the site and to remove the mosques) and immodestly dressed persons to enter and often were not responsive to enforcing the site's rules.

While non-Muslims (except guests of the waqf) were not allowed to enter the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount from September 28, 2000 (the date of former Likud party head Ariel Sharon's visit which sparked unrest) until August 2003, non-Muslims could visit the site during designated visiting hours. The Israeli government, as a matter of stated policy, has prevented non-Muslims from worshipping at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount since 1967. Israeli police consistently did not permit public prayer on public safety grounds and publicly indicated that this policy has not changed in light of the renewed visits of non-Muslims to the compound or the court ruling on the issue. Waqf officials contend that the Israeli police, in contravention of their stated policy and the religious status quo, have allowed members of radical Jewish groups to enter and to worship at the site. Spokesmen for these groups have claimed successful attempts to pray inside the compound in interviews with the Israeli media. The Waqf interprets police actions as part of an Israeli policy to incrementally reduce Waqf authority over the site and to give non-Muslims rights of worship in parts of the compound.

Since October 2000, the Israeli government, citing security concerns, prevented most Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza from reaching the Haram al-Sharif by prohibiting their entry into Jerusalem. Restrictions were often placed on entry into the Haram al-Sharif even for Palestinian residents of Jerusalem, such as a frequently implemented restriction on males under the age of forty-five.

There were also disputes between the Muslim administrators of the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and Israeli authorities regarding Israeli restrictions on waqf attempts to carry out repairs and physical improvements on the compound and its mosques. In 2005 Palestinian workers under direction of Jordanian engineers worked on restoring tiles on the Dome of the Rock and Ottoman-era stones on the southern and eastern walls of the compound. Israeli authorities prevented the waqf from conducting several improvement projects or removing debris from the site, alleging that the waqf was attempting to alter the nature of the site or to discard antiquities of Jewish origin.

Personal status law for Palestinians is based on religious law. For Muslim Palestinians, personal status law is derived from Shari'a, and various ecclesiastical courts rule on personal status issues for Christians. A 1995 PA presidential decree stipulated that all laws in effect before the advent of the PA would continue in force until the PA enacted new laws or amended the old ones. Therefore, in the West Bank, which was formerly under Jordanian rule, the Shari'a-based Jordanian Status Law of 1976 governs women's status. Under the law, which includes inheritance and marriage laws, women inherit less than male members of the family. The marriage law allows men to take more than one wife, although few do so. Prior to marriage, a woman and man may stipulate terms in the marriage contract that govern financial and child custody matters in the event of divorce. Reportedly, few women use this section of the law. Personal status law in Gaza is based on Shari'a-centered law as interpreted in Egypt; however, similar versions of the attendant restrictions on women described above apply as well.

Due to violence and security concerns, the Israeli government has imposed a broad range of strict closures and curfews throughout the Occupied Territories since October 2000. These restrictions largely continued during the reporting period and resulted in significantly impeded freedom of access to places of worship in the West Bank for Muslims and Christians.

In 2002, the Israeli government, citing security concerns, began constructing a barrier to separate most of the West Bank from Israel, East Jerusalem, and Israeli settlement blocks. Construction of the barrier has involved confiscation of property owned by Palestinians, displacement of Christian, Muslim, and Israeli residents, and tightening of restrictions on movement for non-Jewish communities. The Israeli government asserts that it has mechanisms to compensate landowners for all takings, but there were several reports of land being taken along the barrier's route

without compensation under the Absentee Property Statute or military orders.

Construction of the separation barrier continued in and around East Jerusalem during the reporting period, seriously restricting access by West Bank Muslims and Christians to holy sites in Jerusalem and in the West Bank. The barrier also negatively affected access to schools, healthcare providers, and other humanitarian services, although in some cases, the Government made efforts to lessen the impact on religious institutions.

The separation barrier made it difficult for Bethlehem-area Christians to reach the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, and it made visits to Christian sites in Bethany and in Bethlehem difficult for Palestinian Christians who live on the Israeli side of the barrier, further fragmenting and dividing this small minority community. Foreign pilgrims sometimes experienced difficulty in obtaining access to Christian holy sites in the West Bank because of the barrier and Israeli restrictions on movement in the West Bank. The barrier and its checkpoints also impeded the movement of clergy between Jerusalem and West Bank churches and monasteries, as well as the movement of congregations between their homes and places of worship. On November 15, 2005, Israel opened a new crossing terminal from Jerusalem into Bethlehem for tourists and non-tourists. After initial complaints of long lines, the Israeli government instituted new screening procedures and agreed to ease access into Bethlehem during the Christmas holiday, with restrictions eased from December 24 to January 19. For example, the PA reported 30,000 visitors to the Church of the Nativity for various Christmas celebrations on December 24-25 2005, the largest turnout since 2000.

Hundreds of Armenian pilgrims attending the Holy Fire Celebration on April 22, 2006 were prevented by the Israeli Police from entering the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the Old City of Jerusalem despite the fact that all had the necessary permits to enter.

In February 2003, the Israeli government issued confiscation orders for land in Bethlehem to build a barrier and military positions around Rachel's Tomb (a shrine holy to Jews, Christians, and Muslims). This barrier would leave the shrine on the "Israeli" side of the separation barrier. By the end of 2004, the Israeli government walled off and fortified the Rachel's Tomb area, and often restricted access to the site, only allowing Jewish visitors regular, unimpeded access and requiring prior coordination by other worshippers. In previous years, Jewish tourists visiting the shrine occasionally were harassed by Palestinians, but Israel's closure of the area and associated land expropriations impeded Muslim and Christian access to the site. Israeli settlers obtained ownership of some of the land and properties around the tomb through a disputed land deal.

In 2003, the Government of Israel confiscated land from the Baron Deir monastery in Bethlehem, which belongs to the Armenian Patriarchate, for construction of an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) patrol road in the area. Negotiations between the Patriarchate and the Israeli government reduced the amount of land confiscated.

The Armenian Patriarchate reported that the IDF caused significant damage to the property during incursions into Bethlehem in 2002. The parties reached an undisclosed agreement on compensation for this damage.

Since 2003, the Israeli government confiscated land (with some compensation generally offered but refused) belonging to three Catholic institutions in Bethany for construction of the separation barrier: the Camboni Sisters Convent, the Passionist Monastery, and the Sisters of Charity Convent and school. Construction of the barrier in this area, which was largely completed during the reporting period, involved confiscation of a significant portion of each church property. In the village of Bethany on the Mount of Olives, the Israeli government built an eight-meter high concrete separation barrier that crosses into the property of several Christian institutions. The barrier in Bethany blocks the annual Orthodox Palm Sunday procession from Lazarus' Tomb in Bethany to the Old City of Jerusalem, but Israel has constructed a crossing terminal to allow foreign pilgrims and Christians living on the West Bank side of the barrier to participate in the procession.

Israeli closure policies, imposed according to the Israeli government due to security concerns, prevented tens of thousands of Palestinians from reaching places of worship in Jerusalem and the West Bank, including during religious holidays such as Ramadan, Christmas, and Easter. There have been several violent clashes in the past between Israeli police and Muslim worshippers on the Haram al-Sharif, which waqf officials allege have been due to the large police contingent kept on the site. On a few occasions, Muslim worshippers have thrown stones at police and police have fired tear gas and stun grenades at worshippers. Muslim worshippers also have held demonstrations at the site to protest reported Jewish extremist plans to damage the mosques or create a Jewish worship area at the site. Israeli security officials and police have generally been proactive and effective in dealing with such threats. There were no incidents of rocks thrown near the Western Wall during the period covered by this report.

The Israeli government's closure policy prevented several Palestinian religious leaders, both Muslim and Christian, from reaching their congregations. In previous years, several clergymen reported that they were subject to harassment at checkpoints; however, during the reporting period there were no reports of serious harassment of clergy.

During the reporting period, Palestinian violence against Israeli settlers prevented some Israelis from reaching Jewish holy sites in the Occupied Territories, such as Joseph's Tomb near Nablus. Since early 2001, following the outbreak of the Intifada, the Israeli government has prohibited Israeli citizens in unofficial capacities from traveling to the parts of the West Bank under the civil and security control of the PA. This restriction prevented Israeli Arabs from visiting

Muslim and Christian holy sites in the West Bank, and it prevented Jewish Israelis from visiting other sites, including an ancient synagogue in Jericho. Visits to the Jericho synagogue ceased after disagreements erupted between Israel and the PA over security arrangements.

Settler violence against Palestinians prevented some Palestinians from reaching holy sites in the Occupied Territories. Settlers in Hebron have in previous reporting periods forcibly prevented Muslim muezzins from reaching the al-Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs to sound the call to prayer, and have harassed Muslim worshippers in Hebron. Settler harassment of Palestinians in Hebron was a regular occurrence in this reporting period. The Israeli government did not effectively respond to settler-initiated blocking of religious sites.

While there were no specific restrictions placed on Palestinians making the Hajj, all Palestinians faced closures and long waits at Israeli border crossings, which often impeded travel for religious purposes. Palestinians generally were not allowed to use Ben-Gurion Airport. If residents of the Occupied Territories obtained a Saudi Hajj visa, they must travel by ground to Amman (for West Bankers) or Egypt (for Gazans) and then by ground, sea, or air to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Palestinians from Gaza who participated in the Hajj departed through the Palestinian-controlled Rafah crossing into Egypt.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Throughout the year Israeli authorities still required that Christian clergy leave the West Bank or Jerusalem every ninety days to renew their tourist visas, disrupting their work and causing financial difficulties to their sponsoring religious organizations. Catholic and Orthodox priests and nuns and other religious workers often from Syria and Lebanon faced long delays, and sometimes denied applications, entirely without explanation; however, the Israeli government claimed that delays were due to security processing for visas and extensions. The shortage of foreign clergy impeded the functioning of Christian congregations.

In January 2006 the IDF re-opened the Mosque to Muslim worship for the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. Israeli officers selectively enforced orders preventing the muezzin at the al-Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron from sounding the call to prayer when Jews were praying in their portion of the shrine.

There were no reports of major damage to Christian churches during this reporting period. In previous reporting periods, there were credible reports that the Israeli military caused significant damage to church property.

In previous reporting periods, the PA failed to halt several cases of seizures of Christian-owned land in the Bethlehem area by criminal gangs. In many cases, criminal gangs reportedly used forged land documents to assert ownership of lands belonging to Christians. Police failed to investigate most of these cases. In two cases, police arrested and then released the suspects on bail and allowed them to continue occupying the land in question. Local religious and political leaders confirmed that no such attempts to seize Muslim-owned land took place.

In the midst of growing chaos and lawlessness in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, there were credible reports in previous years that PA security forces and judicial officials colluded with members of these gangs to seize land from Christians. In one reported case, a PA judge openly told a Palestinian Christian landowner that he and his partners in the PA intelligence services required a substantial bribe to allow the landowner to remain on his property. PA officials repeatedly promised Christian leaders that they would take action in these cases, but by the end of the reporting period, no action had been taken.

Officials from the Qalqilya branch of the YMCA relocated following a firebombing of its office by local Muslims in April 2006. Local Muslim leaders have written to the Hamas-led municipal council demanding that the branch office close.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the Occupied Territories.

Forced Religious Conversions

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

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There generally were amicable relations between Christians and Muslims, although tensions exist. Relations between Jews and non-Jews often were strained. Tensions between Jews and non-Jews exist primarily as a result of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as well as Israel's control of access to sites holy to Christians and Muslims. Relations among different branches of Judaism were also strained. Some non-Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem have complained of discrimination and intolerance on the part of some Orthodox Jews.

Societal attitudes continued to be a barrier to conversions, especially for Muslims converting to Christianity. In

previous reporting periods, there were reports that some Christian converts from Islam who publicized their religious beliefs were harassed or ostracized by their families or villages.

Muslim-Christian tension has been minimal during this reporting period, and the few instances of Muslim-Christian violence appear related to social or inter-family conflicts rather than religious disputes. Both Muslim and Christian Palestinians have accused Israeli officials of attempting to foster animosity among Palestinians by exaggerating reports of Muslim-Christian tensions.

Jewish settlers, either acting alone or in groups, engaged in assaulting Palestinians and destroying Palestinian property; however, most instances of violence or property destruction reportedly committed against Palestinians did not result in arrests or convictions.

Interfaith romance was a sensitive issue. Most Christian and Muslim families in the Occupied Territories encouraged their children-especially their daughters-to marry within their respective religious groups. Couples who challenged this societal norm encountered considerable societal and familial opposition. For example, there were reports of some Christian women receiving death threats from Christian family members and community leaders for marrying Muslim men during the reporting period.

In September 2005, Muslims rioted through the predominantly West Bank Christian village of Taybah, torching homes, vandalizing private vehicles, and assaulting residents. The violence followed a reported romance between a Muslim woman and a Christian man from Taybah. In October 2004, a yeshiva student spat at the Armenian archbishop of Jerusalem while he was engaged in a religious procession through the Old City. The student was arrested and ordered to remain away from the Old City for seventy-five days. He also made a formal apology. The Holy See and the country's chief rabbinate issued a joint condemnation of the assault at the end of a meeting of Catholic and Jewish officials near Rome shortly after the incident. There were several other spitting incidents, usually involving Armenian clergy due to their proximity to several Jewish quarter yeshivas. The mayor of Jerusalem, the chief rabbinate, and the heads of several yeshivas have strongly criticized such behavior and punished those involved. The Armenian patriarchate was satisfied with measures that the Israeli government, Jerusalem municipality and yeshivas have taken after these incidents, but believes that more education on tolerance and respect for other religious groups would be helpful.

A March 2005 dispute over the transfer of property in Jerusalem's Old City owned by the Greek Orthodox Church to Jewish investors ended with senior Orthodox leaders calling for the removal of the Greek Patriarch of Jerusalem, Irineos I. The sale enraged Palestinians, who saw the deals as a betrayal of Palestinian parishioners by the mostly-Greek clergy and feared that such purchases would affect Palestinian claims on East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state. Patriarch Irineos I was ousted from his position by the Orthodox synod of bishops, but did not resign, claiming that proceedings against him were illegal. Jordan and the PA have rescinded official recognition of Irineos I, but at the end of the period covered by this report Israel still recognized him as patriarch and kept a contingent of Israeli police inside the Greek Orthodox Monastery to protect him.

In general, established Christian subgroups did not welcome less-established evangelical churches. Settlers from the Hebron area and the southern West Bank severely beat and threatened several international activists, including individuals from the Christian Peacemaker Teams that escort Palestinian children to school and protect Palestinian families from settler abuse. While it is unclear whether the attackers' motives stemmed from religious extremism as opposed to ultra-nationalism, the activists felt that local Israeli police did not actively pursue the suspects and oppose the Christian Peacemaker Teams' presence in Palestinian villages.

The strong correlation between religion, ethnicity, and politics in the Occupied Territories at times imbues the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with a religious dimension. The rhetoric of some Jewish and Muslim religious leaders has been harsher since the outbreak of the Intifada in October 2000.

In previous years, Muslims at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount threw stones at Jewish worshippers on the Western Wall plaza, leading to major police confrontations; however, there were no incidents of stone-throwing at the plaza during the period covered by this report.

Palestinian media frequently published and broadcast material criticizing the Israeli occupation, including dismissing Jewish connections to Jerusalem. In September 2005 Sheikh Taysir al-Tamimi, the chief justice and president of the Higher Shari'a Council, called the Israeli government's claim of a Jewish connection to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount a "baseless lie" and provocation to Muslims everywhere. Al-Tamimi also warned against the "Judaization" of Jerusalem. Rhetoric by Palestinian terrorist groups included expressions of anti-Semitism. Some Muslim religious leaders preached sermons on the official PA television station that included expressions of anti-Semitism. However, on October 28, Israeli media quoted PLO Chief Negotiator Sa'eb Erekat's statement that the Iranian president's declaration that Israel should be wiped off the map was "unacceptable."

Israeli activists reported numerous examples in which PA television shows invoked messages that activists considered anti-Semitic or that attempted to de-legitimize Jewish history in general. Israeli settler radio stations often depicted Arabs as subhuman and called for Palestinians to be expelled from the West Bank. Right-wing, pro-settler

organizations such as *Women in Green*, and various Hebron-area publications, have published several cartoons that demonize Palestinians. Also, the sermons of some Muslim imams occasionally included anti-Semitic messages, such as a May 13, 2005, sermon delivered by Shaykh Ibrahim Mudayris that ran on PA television, in which he compared Jews (in the context of land conflicts) to "a virus, like AIDS." In May 2005 media quoted PA Minister of Information Nabil Sh'ath as calling for Mudayris' suspension from the PA religious affairs ministry and Muslim waqf, which employed Mudayris, and banned him from delivering Friday sermons. At the end of the reporting period, Mudayris was no longer delivering Friday sermons.

There were instances of Jewish-nationalist extremists harassing Muslims. On several occasions, a group of Jewish-nationalist extremists known as the *Temple Mount Faithful* attempted to force their way inside the wall enclosing the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. In addition, the same group periodically attempted to lay a cornerstone for the building of a new Jewish temple that would replace the Islamic Dome of the Rock shrine, an act that Muslims considered an affront.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Prior to the establishment of the Hamas-led PA government, U.S. officials maintained dialogue with PA officials on religious issues, in particular on incitement in the Palestinian media. In light of the new PA government led by Hamas which has not agreed to the Quartet principles that it disavow violence, recognize Israel, and accept previous agreements and obligations, U.S. officials have no contact with PA officials under the authority of the prime minister or any other minister in the Hamas-led cabinet, including working-level officials in these ministries. Contact is allowed with PA President Abbas and officials in the Office of the PA president and other officials in agencies directly under the authority of the PA president. The consulate general continues to maintain contacts with representatives of the Jerusalem waqf—an Islamic trust and charitable organization that owns and manages large amounts of real estate, including the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount in Jerusalem—as well as with the various Christian churches and Jewish communities in Jerusalem.

U.S. officials regularly meet with religious representatives to ensure that their legitimate grievances are reported and addressed.

During the reporting period, the consulate investigated a range of charges, including allegations of damage to places of worship, incitement, and allegations concerning access to holy sites. Consulate general officers met with representatives of the Bethlehem Christian community and traveled to the area to investigate charges of mistreatment of Christians by the PA. The consulate general raised the issue of seizure of Christian-owned land in discussions with PA officials.

In October 2004, a representative from the Office of International Religious Freedom visited Jerusalem and met with government officials, NGO representatives, Muslim Waqf officials, and Christian clergy and religious workers, particularly those negatively impacted by construction of the separation barrier.

In several cases, the Israeli government agreed to consider changes to the route of the barrier in Jerusalem near several Christian institutions and installed pedestrian gates in the barrier to facilitate the passage of priests and other religious workers.

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