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2021 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Lebanon

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Lebanon is a parliamentary republic based on the 1943 National Pact, which apportions governmental authority among a Maronite Christian president, a Shia speaker of the Chamber of Deputies (parliament), and a Sunni prime minister. The law officially recognizes 18 religious sects or confessions. In 2016 parliament elected Michel Aoun to the presidency, ending more than two years of political deadlock. Following the 2017 passage of a new electoral law, the government held parliamentary elections in 2018, after parliament had extended its legal term three times between 2013 and 2017. The elections were peaceful and considered generally free and fair. In October 2020 former prime minister Saad Hariri was designated to form a new cabinet following the resignation of Hassan Diab, becoming the third prime minister-designate since his own resignation in October 2019. Hariri resigned on July 15. Former prime minister Najib Mikati was designated on July 26 to replace him; Mikati formed a cabinet on September 10.

The Internal Security Forces, under the Ministry of Interior, are responsible for law enforcement. The Directorate of General Security, also under the Ministry of Interior, is responsible for border control but also exercises some domestic security responsibilities. The Lebanese Armed Forces, under the Ministry of Defense, are responsible for external security but are authorized to arrest and detain suspects on national security grounds. In recent years the Lebanese Armed Forces also have arrested alleged drug traffickers, managed protests, enforced building codes related to refugee shelters, and intervened to prevent violence between rival political factions. The General Directorate of State Security, reporting to the prime minister through the Higher Defense Council, is responsible for investigating espionage and other national security matters. The Parliamentary Police Force reports to the speaker of parliament and is tasked with protecting parliament premises, as well as the speaker's residence. Both the Internal Security Forces and the Lebanese Armed Forces provide units to the Parliamentary Police Force. Civilian authorities maintained control over the government's armed forces and other security forces, although Palestinian security and militia forces, designated foreign terrorist organization Hizballah, and other extremist elements operated outside the direction or control of government officials. Members of security forces committed some abuses.

The Syrian conflict affected the country economically and socially. Over the past 10 years, the conflict has generated an influx of more than one million Syrian refugees and further strained the country's already weak infrastructure and ability to deliver social services.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: serious political interference with the judiciary; serious restrictions on free expression and media, including violence, threats of violence or unjustified arrests or prosecutions against journalists, censorship, and the existence of laws criminalizing libel; serious restrictions on internet freedom; refoulement of refugees to a country where they would face a threat to their life or freedom; serious high-level and widespread official corruption; existence or use of laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons; and the existence of the worst forms of child labor.

Although the legal structure provides for prosecution and punishment of officials who committed human rights abuses and corruption, enforcement remained a problem, and government officials enjoyed a measure of impunity for human rights abuses, including evading or influencing judicial processes. The country suffered from endemic corruption.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were reports by human rights groups asserting that the government or its agents committed an arbitrary or unlawful killing.

On January 25, large-scale demonstrations erupted for three consecutive nights in Tripoli, leading to violent clashes between protesters and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the Internal Security Forces (ISF). The Lebanese Red Cross, ISF, and media reported that one protester died when he was hit by live fire and that 226 were injured. International NGOs and human rights activists claimed authorities used excessive force, including the use of live ammunition. Killings by security forces are investigated internally and prosecuted through the Military Court. The

military prosecutor charged 35 individuals, including two minors, with terrorism, forming criminal associations, stealing public property, using force against and trying to kill members of the security forces, arson, vandalism, and protesting without permission. All detainees were later released. According to the LAF’s leadership, no organizations or individuals filed formal complaints of torture with the LAF or the judiciary. The LAF conducted an internal investigation into the allegations of abuse and mistreatment of protesters by LAF members, but findings from the investigation have yet to be released.

On February 4, Lokman Slim, a prominent political activist and vocal Hezbollah critic, was found dead in his car in the southern village of Addousieh in an apparent assassination, from multiple bullet wounds. Investigations were ongoing at year’s end.

On August 1, armed clashes erupted between Hezbollah supporters and members of the Arab tribes of the Khaldeh neighborhood during the funeral procession of Hezbollah member Ali Chebli, who was killed the night before in an apparent vendetta shooting. Media reported that five individuals, including three Hezbollah members, were killed. The LAF subsequently intervened and warned that it would open fire on any gunman in the area; the LAF was able to restore order in Khaldeh by August 2.

The state prosecutor requested an investigation to determine whether security force actions were justifiable in the April 2020 death of a protester who died after being hit in the leg by a rubber bullet by a LAF officer during a protest in Tripoli. The investigation was ongoing by a Military Court with no further information available at year’s end. The LAF maintained that the rubber bullet was shot from more than 15 yards away and at an angle acceptable under LAF regulations.

In August 2020 the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) announced its verdict in the 2005 killing of former prime minister Rafik Hariri, which also killed 21 others and injured 226. The STL found Hezbollah operative Salim Jamil Ayyash guilty on all charges, while Hezbollah operatives Hassan Habib Merhi, Hussein Hassan Oneissi, and Assad Hassan Sabra were acquitted. In December 2020 the STL sentenced Ayyash to five concurrent terms of life imprisonment, the maximum punishment allowed. The STL’s mandate was renewed in March for a further period of two years or until the exhaustion of available funds. Its work may continue for several more years to handle record keeping, sentencing, and possible appeals.

b. Disappearance

There were no known reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities during the year.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibits using acts of violence to obtain a confession or information about a crime, but the judiciary rarely investigated or prosecuted allegations of torture. In 2019 the cabinet appointed the five members of the National Preventive Mechanism (NPM) against Torture, a body within the 10-member National Human Rights Institute (NHRI). The NHRI is mandated to monitor the human rights situation in the country by reviewing laws, decrees, and administrative decisions and by investigating complaints of human rights abuses and issuing periodic reports of its findings. The NPM oversees implementation of the antitorture law. It has the authority to conduct regular unannounced visits to all places of detention, investigate the use of torture, and issue recommendations to improve the treatment of detainees. As of December the NHRI had not begun its assigned functions. Some NGOs alleged that security officials tortured detainees, including incidents of abuse at certain police stations. The government denied the systematic use of torture, although authorities acknowledged violent abuse sometimes occurred during pretrial detention at police stations or military installations where officials interrogated suspects without an attorney present.

The LAF Investigation Branch began an internal investigation in May 2020 into the alleged torture of detainees in LAF detention facilities in Sidon and Tripoli following protests in those cities. The investigation was suspended due to a lack of formal allegations from the victims and because the original investigating judge resigned from his position. Cases remained open for both facilities as of December.

The LAF imposed the highest penalties allowed by the military code of justice in several cases involving torture, while noting that only a judicial decision could move punishment beyond administrative penalties.

Although human rights and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) organizations acknowledged some improvements in detainee treatment during the year, these organizations and former detainees also reported that ISF officers mistreated drug users, persons involved in commercial sex, and LGBTQI+ individuals in custody, particularly outside of Beirut, including through forced HIV testing, threats of prolonged detention, and threats to expose their identities to family or friends. LGBTQI+ rights NGOs reported forced anal exams of men suspected of same-sex sexual activity have been banned in Beirut police stations but were carried out in Tripoli and other cities. While physician syndicates in Beirut banned their members from performing such procedures, NGOs stated that local syndicates outside the capital had not all done so.

NGOs reported impunity was a significant problem in the security forces, including the ISF, LAF, and Parliamentary Police Force (PPF). Impunity was also a problem with respect to the actions of armed nonstate actors, such as Hezbollah. ISF and LAF impunity was due in part to a lack of transparency when these forces conducted investigations. Investigations of alleged abuses by security forces were conducted internally by the implicated security force, and security force members could be tried in Military Court for charges unrelated to their official duties (see section 1.e., Trial Procedures). Individuals allegedly belonging to the PPF were captured in photographs

and on video shooting live ammunition at protesters during the August 2020 protests. PPF personnel were recorded in several other instances beating protesters, with no known repercussions. The foreign terrorist organization (FTO) Hizballah continued the practice of extrajudicial arrest and detention, including incommunicado detention (see section 1.e., Trial Procedures).

The LAF, ISF, and the Directorate of General Security (DGS) have new codes of conduct that they developed and implemented in 2020 with the help of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to promote respect and protection of human rights and introduce accountability elements. The ISF gendarmerie unit also instituted a training program that included human rights training with the support of donor countries.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prisons and detention centers were often overcrowded, and prisoners sometimes lacked access to basic sanitation. As was true for most buildings in the country, prison facilities were inadequately equipped for persons with disabilities.

Nongovernmental entities such as FTO Hizballah and Palestinian nonstate militias also reportedly operated unofficial detention facilities.

Physical Conditions: As of September 10, there were approximately 7,401 prisoners and detainees, including pretrial detainees and remanded prisoners, in facilities built to hold 3,500 inmates. Authorities often held pretrial detainees together with convicted prisoners. There were 110 minors and 207 women held in prisons, according to ISF statistics. The ISF incarcerated women at three dedicated women’s prisons in Baabda, Beirut, and Tripoli.

According to a government official, most prisons lacked adequate sanitation, ventilation, and lighting, and authorities did not regulate temperatures consistently. In Roumieh prison groups of prisoners often slept in rooms originally built for many fewer persons, and basic medical care suffered from inadequate staffing, poor working conditions, and extreme overcrowding. The ISF reported that 19 individuals died in detention facilities during the year. According to the ISF, 18 prisoners died of medical problems, including heart attacks, cancer, and COVID-19, and one committed suicide. Some NGOs complained of authorities’ negligence and failure to provide appropriate medical care to prisoners, which may have contributed to some deaths. The ISF reported that none died of police abuse.

Administration: The ISF’s Committee to Monitor against the Use of Torture and Other Inhuman Practices in Prisons and Detention Centers conducted 30 prison visits as of September 2020. These monitoring visits were suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. If detention center investigators assigned by the minister of interior found physical abuse, the military investigator assigned a medical team to confirm the abuse, and a judge ruled at the conclusion of the review. As of September 2020 there were no complaints reported to the ISF committee. Historically, complaints were generally submitted during or following in-person prison visits by family members. In-person visits were halted in February 2020 due to COVID-19 mitigation efforts and did not restart during the year. As of October 2020, prisoners submitted 12 complaints to the ISF Human Rights Department. According to the ISF Human Rights Department, the ISF took disciplinary action against officers it found responsible for abuse or mistreatment, including dismissals, but it did not publicize this information. The ISF reported that five ISF officers were punished for not informing suspects of their rights upon detention per article 47 of the Code of Criminal Procedures.

Most investigations were initiated by prisoners’ family members contacting the Ministry of Interior to report complaints, although prison directors could also initiate investigations. Prisoners and detainees can report abuse directly to the ISF Human Rights Department. According to a government official, prison directors often protected officers under investigation.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted independent monitoring of prison and detention conditions by local and international human rights groups and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and such monitoring took place. The ICRC regularly visited 16 prisons and detention centers and visited a further 12 on an ad hoc basis.

Improvements: ISF training and corrections staff institutionalized best practices to protect human rights through developing and implementing standard operating procedures and modifying hiring practices and training programs to improve professionalization among new officers. During the year an NGO renovated the Nabatieh prison in South Lebanon, and ICRC worked to improve the electrical network in Roumieh prison. The World Health Organization (WHO) equipped a special room for medical examinations in Roumieh prison. In addition, the United Nations provided and equipped a prefabricated trailer to conduct trials via Zoom. The government undertook the renovation of several detention centers across the country. Prisoners gained access to potable water in Roumieh prison following the completion of a 2019 ICRC construction project. Prisoners in other prisons gradually achieved access to potable water as the result of an agreement signed by the Rotary Club and the Directorate General of the ISF in 2020, which resulted in the installation of filters in existing water tanks.

Overcrowding in detention facilities raised fears of COVID-19 outbreaks within the detention centers, particularly in the notoriously overcrowded Roumieh prison. The ISF ensured early and sustained use of masks, gloves, detergents, and temperature checks and limited visits for inmates. The ISF identified buildings at Roumieh prison as quarantine sites for inmates transferred to the prison and for existing inmates in the prison who showed COVID-19 symptoms. In September 2020 more than 200 inmates tested positive for COVID-19 in Roumieh prison, prompting social media

allegations of “rioting” in the prisons and media coverage of inmate families protesting outside the justice palace. The ISF quarantined and treated COVID-19 patients, including daily testing of inmates and staff to identify and track cases.

The judiciary approved the use of a modernized but previously unused courtroom at Roumieh prison to expedite the processing of Mount Lebanon criminal cases by reducing the need to transport prisoners to court hearings. Since March authorities allowed those detained for minor, nonviolent offenses to be released after the ISF brought their cases to public prosecutors over the telephone or through video chat. Prosecutors dropped charges against some detainees following virtual reviews, while others were expected to face trial eventually but would not be kept in pretrial detention.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention and provides for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of arrest or detention in court, and the government generally observed these requirements. The law requires judicial warrants before arrests except in cases of active pursuit. Nonetheless, NGOs and civil society groups alleged some incidents of the government arbitrarily arresting and detaining individuals, particularly protesters, refugees, and migrant workers. Typically, these detentions were for short periods and related to administrative questions associated with the residency or work status of these populations, often lasting between several hours and one or more days.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law generally requires a warrant for arrest and provides the right to a medical examination and referral to a prosecutor within 48 hours of arrest. The law requires that officials promptly inform individuals of the charges against them, and authorities generally adhered to this requirement. If authorities hold a detainee longer than 48 hours without formal charges, the arrest is considered arbitrary, and authorities must release the detainee or request a formal extension. The law provides that a person may be held in police custody for investigation for up to 48 hours, unless the investigation requires additional time, in which case the period of custody may be renewed for another 48 hours.

The law requires authorities to inform detainees of the charges filed against them. A suspect caught in the act of committing a crime must be referred to an examining judge, who decides whether to issue an indictment or order the release of the suspect. By law, bail is available in all cases regardless of the charges, although the amounts required may be prohibitively high.

The law states that from the moment of arrest, a suspect or the subject of a complaint has the right to contact a member of their family, an attorney, their employer, or an advocate of their choosing; has the right to an interpreter if needed; and has the right to undergo a medical examination on the approval of the general prosecutor. It does not, however, explicitly state whether a lawyer may attend preliminary questioning with the judicial police. In practical terms the lawyer may or may not be allowed to attend the preliminary questioning with judicial police. Under the framework of the law, it is possible to hold a suspect at a police station for 48 hours, renewable for another 48 hours upon an approval of the general prosecutor, before allowing the individual to exercise the right to contact an attorney. If the suspect lacks the resources to obtain legal counsel, authorities must provide free legal aid. The law does not require the judicial police to inform an individual who lacks legal counsel that one may be assigned through the regional bar association.

The law does not require authorities to inform individuals they have the right to remain silent. Many law provisions simply state that if the individuals being questioned refuse to make a statement or remain silent, this should be recorded and that the detainees may not be “coerced to speak or to undergo questioning, on pain of nullity of their statements.”

The law excludes from this protection suspects accused of homicide, drug crimes, endangerment of state security, violent crimes, crimes involving terrorism, and those with a previous criminal conviction.

Authorities may prosecute officials responsible for prolonged arrest on charges of depriving personal freedom, but in practice they rarely filed charges.

Authorities failed to observe many provisions of the law, and government security forces as well as armed nonstate actors such as Hizballah continued the practice of extrajudicial arrest and detention, including incommunicado detention. Additionally, the law permits military intelligence personnel to make arrests without warrants in cases involving military personnel or involving civilians suspected of espionage, treason, weapons possession, or terrorism.

Arbitrary Arrest: According to local NGOs, cases of arbitrary arrest occurred, but most victims chose not to report violations committed against them to authorities. NGOs reported most cases involved vulnerable groups such as refugees, drug users, LGBTQI+ individuals, and migrant workers who often feared retribution by authorities while having limited access to legal recourse. Civil society groups reported authorities frequently detained foreign nationals arbitrarily.

In June 2020 the Mount Lebanon public prosecutor pressed charges against Shia cleric Sayyed Ali al-Amine, accusing him of stirring sectarian strife and criticizing religious rituals. Media initially reported that al-Amine was charged with meeting Israeli officials during a conference in Bahrain, stirring public sentiment against him, but news outlets later stated this was reported in error. There were no reports of any progress on the case as of December.

Pretrial Detention: The law states the period of detention for a misdemeanor may not exceed two months. Officials may extend this period by a maximum of two additional months. For felonies, the initial period of custody may not exceed six months, but the detention may be renewed. Due to judicial backlogs, pretrial detention periods for felonies sometimes lasted for months or years.

Pretrial detention periods were often lengthy due to delays in due process, in some cases equal to or exceeding the maximum sentence for the alleged crime. As of October the ISF reported 3,700 prisoners in pretrial detention, or approximately 50 percent of the 7,401 total detainees. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and closure of many courts, judges were instructed by the then minister of justice to conduct investigations and hearings via video calls to expedite the judicial process as well as to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among pretrial detainees, lawyers, and judges. This resulted in the release of 1,200 detainees as of May 2020 and a sustained significant decrease in the overall number of pretrial detainees. According to a study by the Lebanese Center for Human Rights, before May detainees spent on average one year in pretrial detention prior to sentencing, although those suspected of terrorism, espionage, and violent homicide were often held much longer. According to local NGOs, some Lebanese Sunni militants who had fought in Syria with ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra were detained after returning in 2014 and had remained in pretrial detention for more than five years.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

Although the constitution provides for an independent judiciary, government officials subjected the judiciary to political pressure, particularly through negotiations among political factions regarding the appointment of key prosecutors and investigating magistrates. As of December President Michel Aoun had still not signed a routine draft decree for judicial reassignments that had been with him since April 2020.

Defendants involved in routine civil and criminal proceedings sometimes solicited the assistance of prominent individuals to influence the outcomes of their cases.

Trial Procedures

The constitution and law provide for the right to a fair and public trial.

Defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty and have the right to be promptly informed of the charges against them. Trials are generally public, but judges have the discretion to order a closed court session. Defendants have the right to be present at trial, to consult with an attorney in a timely manner, and to question witnesses against them. Defendants may present witnesses and evidence. Defendants have the right to free interpretation; however, interpreters were rarely available. Defendants have the right not to be compelled to testify or confess guilt; they have the right of appeal.

The Military Court has jurisdiction over cases involving the military, police, and government officials, as well as those involving civilians accused of espionage, treason, weapons possession, and draft evasion. It also may try civilians on security charges or for violations of the military code of justice. While civilian courts may try military personnel, the Military Court often heard these cases, including for charges unrelated to official military duty. Human rights activists raised concerns that such proceedings created the potential for impunity.

Governance and justice in Palestinian refugee camps varied greatly, with most camps under the control of joint Palestinian security forces representing multiple factions. Palestinian groups in refugee camps operated an autonomous system of justice mostly nontransparent to outsiders and beyond the control of the state. For example, local popular committees in the camps attempted to resolve disputes through informal mediation methods but occasionally transferred those accused of more serious offenses (for example, murder and terrorism) to state authorities for trial.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no known reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

There is an independent judiciary in civil matters, but plaintiffs seldom submitted civil lawsuits seeking damages for government human rights abuses. During the year there were no examples of a civil court awarding a person compensation for such abuses.

Property Seizure and Restitution

Municipalities and security services continued to evict Syrian refugees from informal settlements and other irregular housing. Evictions decreased in the second half of 2020 and the first half of the year due to the COVID-19 pandemic and general lockdowns; however, evictions increased starting in the third quarter of the year due to intercommunal tensions. While collective evictions due to security reasons and tensions continued to be reported, in most cases evictions were still ordered by Lebanese landlords, mostly due to nonpayment of rent, or for reappropriating land or property. Collective and individual evictions were implemented with only a limited opportunity for legal challenge.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The law prohibits such actions, but there were reports that authorities interfered with the privacy of persons regarded as enemies of the government. There were reports that security services monitored private email and other digital correspondence. The law allows the interception of telephone calls with prior authorization from the prime minister at the request of the minister of interior or minister of defense.

Militias and non-Lebanese forces, such as Palestinian militant groups, operating outside the area of central government authority frequently violated citizens’ privacy rights. Various nonstate actors, such as Hizballah, used informer networks, telephone monitoring, and electronic monitoring to obtain information regarding their perceived adversaries.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media

The constitution provides for freedom of expression, including for members of the press, and stipulates that restrictions may be imposed only under exceptional circumstances. The government generally respected this right, but in July 2020 a coalition of 60 NGOs cited what they characterized as an upward trend in restrictions on freedom of expression, especially on social media, particularly regarding political and social topics.

Freedom of Expression: Individuals were generally free to criticize the government and discuss matters of public interest; however, several legal restrictions limit this right. The law prohibits discussing the dignity of the president or insulting him or the president of a foreign country. The military code of justice prohibits insulting the security forces, and the Military Court prosecuted civilians under this statute.

On January 15, LAF Intelligence Directorate personnel surrounded the al-Jadeed television news station in an attempt to arrest journalist Radwan Mortada, who writes for pro-Hizballah newspaper *al-Akhbar* and independent outlet al-Jadeed. Mortada was summoned by the Military Court for allegedly insulting the army and fabricating crimes against the military establishment. Press syndicates, NGOs, and various journalists called for Mortada’s case to be transferred to the civilian Publications Court, which has jurisdiction over defamation cases. Mortada declined to submit to LAF questioning, and Public Prosecutor Ghassan Oueidat withdrew the arrest warrant after summoning Mortada, noting it was inappropriate for the LAF to summon a civilian journalist. The Military Court issued a ruling in absentia against Mortada and on November 26 sentenced him to 13 months’ imprisonment. The Military Court had not taken action to arrest Mortada by year’s end.

In January 2020 the ISF Cybercrimes Bureau questioned journalist and activist Nidal Ayoub regarding posters she carried during protests displaying slogans such as, “God is great, but the revolution is greater.” Ayoub was previously the subject of a smear campaign in 2019 during which she was accused of working for Israel; she faced numerous threats and insults after her address was released on social media. In response Ayoub filed a defamation lawsuit against the alleged instigator of the smear campaign, who has yet to be called for questioning. The alleged instigator responded by filing a countersuit accusing Ayoub of having attacked the president, the sovereignty of the state, and religion. The courts had not taken up the lawsuits by year’s end.

Freedom of Expression for Members of the Press and Other Media, Including Online Media: A law on print media holds journalists responsible for erroneous or false news; threats or blackmail; insult, defamation, and contempt; causing prejudice to the president’s dignity; insulting the president or the president of a foreign country; instigation to commit a crime through a publication; and sectarian provocation. The law further contains detailed rules governing the activities of printing houses, press media, libraries, publishing houses, and distribution companies. This law provides rules and conditions for becoming a journalist and for obtaining licenses for new publications.

There was uncertainty regarding which legal framework is applicable to online news sites in the country. No specific law regulates online speech. The law does, however, contain restrictions on expression, such as defamation of public officials, public entities, and individuals. Authorities are accordingly able to prosecute individuals, journalists, and bloggers for what they express online under various authorities including cybercrime statutes. Authorities heard these cases in both civil and military courts; they generally carried sentences of between one and three years in prison as well as a fine.

The law governing audiovisual media bans live broadcasts of unauthorized political gatherings and certain religious events, as well as any broadcast of “any matter of commentary seeking to affect directly or indirectly the well-being of the nation’s economy and finances, material that is propagandistic and promotional, or promotes a relationship with Israel.” Media outlets must receive a license from the Council of Ministers to broadcast any type of political news or programs. The law prohibits broadcasting programs that harm the state or its relations with foreign countries. The law also prohibits the broadcast of programs that seek to harm public morals, ignite sectarian strife, or insult religious beliefs.

Violence and Harassment: Journalists continued to face intimidation and harassment. Political tension led some outlets to fear entering certain “politically affiliated” areas to report without removing brandings and logos identifying the outlets.

Journalists covering protests were on several occasions attacked or harassed by rioters and security forces. On January 18, Hizballah supporters launched a harassment campaign against journalist Kassem Kassir, defaming him and accusing him of treason. The harassment stemmed from his January 6 appearance on the NBN television show *Ninety Minutes* when his remark that Hizballah should distance itself from Iran circulated online. The station then deleted the episode from its website, while Kassir was forced to issue an apology and clarify his remarks on his Facebook account.

On January 25, the SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom reported that ISF riot police officers assaulted Ibrahim Fatfat, a reporter with online news website *Sawt Beirut International* while he was covering the January 25 Tripoli protests. ISF officers allegedly beat Fatfat with batons, kicked him in the head, and broke his camera. Footage of the assault was posted on social media.

On April 13, the Court of Appeals refiled a summons against *Nidaa al-Watan* newspaper and its editor, Bechara Charbel, resurfacing charges of offending the president, which were originally levied in 2019.

On June 28, Hizballah detained and released two accredited foreign journalists, Briton Matt Kynaston, who worked for media outlet NOW Lebanon, and German Stella Manner, for filming long lines at a gas station located in Hizballah's stronghold of Beirut's southern suburbs. Hizballah told media the two journalists did not have permission to enter the area. They were later transferred to the DGS and released.

Authorities continued to prosecute online, print, and television journalists for violations of the country's publications law. Prosecutors sometimes referred these cases to criminal courts based on both private complaints and their own discretion, but more often they referred such cases to the Publications Court. Publications Court cases typically remained open for a year or more and ended with fines or dismissal.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: Authorities selectively applied elements of the law that permit censorship of pornographic material, political opinion, and religious material considered a threat to national security or offensive to the dignity of the head of state or foreign leaders. The DGS may also review and censor any foreign newspapers, magazines, and books to determine admissibility into the country, but these reviews were mostly for explicit, pornographic content. The law prohibits the press from publishing blasphemous content regarding the country's officially recognized religious groups or content that may provoke sectarian feuds. Some journalists reported that political violence and extralegal intimidation led to self-censorship.

The law includes guidelines regarding materials deemed unsuitable for publication in a book, newspaper, or magazine. Any violation of the guidelines may result in the author's imprisonment or a fine. Authors could publish books without prior permission from the DGS, but if the book contains material that violates the law, including material considered a threat to national security, the DGS may legally confiscate the book and put the author on trial. Publishing without prior approval a book that contained unauthorized material could put the author at risk of a prison sentence, fine, and confiscation of the published materials.

Authorities from any of the recognized religious groups could request that the DGS ban a book. The government may prosecute offending journalists and publications in the Publications Court. According to NGOs as of September 29, each of the 30 book-banning cases the government registered in the Publications Court in 2017 – mainly from libel suits filed by politicians, political parties, and private citizens – remained in the process of being resolved. Authorities occasionally also referred such cases to criminal courts, a process not established in law.

Libel/Slander Laws: In most cases criminal courts heard libel and other defamation complaints, which may carry sentences of one to three years in prison but typically resulted in fines or a promise to remove offending material from the internet. NGOs and activists reported increased prosecutions under such laws, and political figures or their representatives filed several complaints against critics throughout the year. Human rights NGO ALEF reported that in several dozen cases during the year, criminal defamation suits were filed against journalists, bloggers, political activists, and private citizens, including for posting their opinions in WhatsApp groups or on Facebook. While these cases rarely, if ever, resulted in prolonged detentions or jail sentences, interrogations by police and lengthy, expensive trials reportedly created a chilling effect on political speech.

In June 2020 DGS personnel detained activist brother and sister Bandar el-Khatib and Kinda el-Khatib in Halba, Akkar. The pair had allegedly criticized Hizballah and President Michel Aoun in social media posts. While Bandar was released shortly thereafter, prosecutors referred Kinda to the Military Court and held her for nine months on charges of spying for Israel and illegally entering the West Bank before releasing her March 16 on a three million Lebanese pound (\$2,000) bail. Her next court date had not been set by year's end. Although Kinda admitted to corresponding with an Israeli journalist, she maintained that she reported this contact to the ISF as required.

Private citizens may file criminal complaints, which the law requires an investigating judge to consider, and many defamation cases were initiated via the allegations of private citizens. Politicians at times responded to allegations of wrongdoing leveled at them by filing criminal complaints alleging defamation. On August 24, Speaker Nabih Berri filed an antidefamation lawsuit against three journalists for their coverage of the August 8 demonstrations. The military justice code also prohibits defamation of the army.

The ISF Cybercrimes Bureau reported that as of September 1, it had received referrals of 442 defamation cases for investigation. The bureau reportedly investigated all the defamation cases during the year, with half of the investigations ongoing at year's end.

Nongovernmental Impact: Political and religious figures sometimes sought to rally public outcry aimed at inhibiting freedom of expression and the press, including through coercion and threats of violence. Amal and Hizballah leaders cited “foreign interference” as a justification for limiting media publications in areas that they controlled.

Internet Freedom

The law does not restrict access to the internet. The government maintained a monopoly over the internet backbone, as well as over the fixed and mobile telephone industry in general, and therefore it exercised tight control over internet service providers (ISPs). Private ISPs obtain a permit by decree from the Ministry of Telecommunications.

The government reportedly restricted access to some websites to block online gambling, pornography, religiously provocative material, extremist forums, and Israeli websites, but there were no verified reports the government systematically attempted to collect personally identifiable information via the internet. Generally, websites are censored through court orders filed with the ISF’s Cybercrimes Bureau for further investigation, which issues a final order to the Ministry of Telecommunications. Website owners were not notified that their websites were blocked, but they must appeal the blocking within 48 hours to have the decision overturned. NGOs reported that the Ministry of Telecommunications continued to block websites without warning. On March 10, government-run telecommunications network Ogero blocked the website The961 for approximately nine hours without giving a clear reason for doing so.

Restrictions on freedom of speech concerning government officials applied to social media communications, which authorities typically considered a form of publication rather than private correspondence. Human rights groups reported that political parties and their supporters intimidated individuals online and in person in response to online posts deemed critical of political leaders or religious figures. The ISF’s Cybercrime Bureau and other state security agencies also summoned journalists, bloggers, and activists to question them about social media and blog posts, especially when they criticized political figures or religious sects. On April 13, authorities summoned activists Nisrine Chahine and Hiba Dandachli to the Barbar Khazen police station after lawyer Majed Boueiz, who represents former ministers Gebran Bassil and Fadi Jreissati, filed a defamation lawsuit against them. This followed an incident in June 2020 when dozens of protesters chanted “Don’t let me hear your voice” to Boueiz when he was representing Jreissati in his lawsuit against activists Gino Raidy and Teymour Jreissati. Chahine and Dandachli were later released.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions specific to academic freedom, but libel and slander laws applied.

Most private universities enjoyed freedom of expression, and students were free to hold student elections and organize cultural, social, and political activities.

On October 2, the DGS banned the performance of the play *Tanfise* at al-Madina theater for criticizing the presidency and the government. The performers continued performing the play on the streets. Authorities summoned the play’s director for questioning on October 4, and later gave him permission to continue the performance.

The DGS Censorship Bureau did not ban any films during the year. In 2019 the DGS Censorship Bureau requested the banning of two films, *Hard Paint* (2018) and *Damascus Cover* (2017), on the premise that they promoted homosexuality and the Israeli intelligence service, respectively. As of October 19, the Ministry of Interior had not issued final judgment on the DGS request. The DGS reviewed all films and plays, and there were complaints among the public that the DGS decision-making process lacked transparency and was influenced by the opinions of religious institutions and political groups.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The constitution provides for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, and the government generally respected these freedoms.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The constitution provides for the freedom of peaceful assembly with some conditions established by law. Organizers are required to obtain a permit from the Ministry of Interior three days prior to any demonstration.

Security forces occasionally intervened to disperse demonstrations, usually when protesters caused property damage or clashes broke out between opposing protesters. Security forces generally allowed demonstrators to protest peacefully during the widespread mass protests that began in October 2019 and during which the ISF and LAF predominantly demonstrated restraint and professionalism in interactions with protesters. The ISF occasionally used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse protesters who authorities alleged were engaging in violence or vandalism, and the LAF in some instances used nonlethal force to disperse protesters who resisted LAF efforts to clear key thoroughfares. The NGOs Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, however, reported security forces used excessive force against protesters on some occasions.

On June 6, dozens of protesters gathered in downtown Beirut, denouncing what they described as a corrupt and incompetent government and tried to storm the Ministry of Economy and Trade. Protesters tried to knock down the doors of the building before the ISF riot police stopped them.

On July 13, demonstrations took place outside the residence of the then minister of interior Mohamed Fehmi over his refusal to allow the interrogation of the head of the DGS in the Beirut port explosion investigation. ISF riot police fired tear gas to disperse the protesters.

On August 4, protesters marking the one-year anniversary of the Beirut port explosion clashed with security forces in downtown Beirut near the parliament. ISF riot police reportedly used tear gas and water cannons against the crowds and beat protesters with batons as they tried to storm the main parliament building. The Lebanese Red Cross reported it had transported six individuals to hospitals and treated dozens more on site.

On August 15, protesters gathered in front of Prime Minister Najib Mikati’s residence to protest his appointment. Several protesters reportedly breached the property, threw rocks, and broke a glass door. ISF riot police reportedly fired tear gas and beat some of the protesters. Authorities arrested and later released four persons.

Freedom of Association

The constitution provides for freedom of association, with some conditions established by law, and the government generally respected the law.

No prior authorization is required to form an association, but organizers must notify the Ministry of Interior to obtain legal recognition, and the ministry must verify that the organization respects “public order, public morals, and state security.” In some cases, the ministry sent an NGO’s notification papers to the security forces to initiate inquiries about an organization’s founding members. Organizations must invite ministry representatives to any general assembly where members vote on bylaws, amendments, or seats on the board of directors. The ministry must then validate the vote or election. Failure to do so can result in the dissolution of the organization by a decree issued by the Council of Ministers.

The cabinet must license all political parties.

In areas under Hezbollah’s sway, independent NGOs faced harassment and intimidation, including social, political, and financial pressures. Hezbollah reportedly paid youth who worked in “unacceptable” NGOs to leave the groups.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country

The law provides for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation. The government generally respected these rights for citizens but placed extensive limitations on the rights of refugee populations and asylum seekers, most of whom were from the West Bank and Gaza, Syria, and Iraq (see section 2.f., Protection of Refugees).

In-country Movement: Armed nonstate actors hindered or prevented movement in areas they controlled. Armed Hezbollah members controlled access to some areas under Hezbollah’s control, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine prevented access to a border area under its control, according to the security services. Within families, men sometimes exercised considerable control over female relatives, restricting their activities outside the home or their contact with friends and relatives.

Citizenship: Citizenship is derived exclusively from the father. A citizen mother married to a noncitizen father may not transmit Lebanese citizenship to her children (see section 2.g., Stateless Persons).

e. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons

Fighting in 2007 destroyed the Nahr el-Bared Palestinian Refugee Camp, displacing approximately 30,000 residents, of whom an estimated 27,000 were registered Palestinian refugees. Many of the displaced resided in areas adjacent to the camp or in other areas of the country where services of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) were available. A comprehensive, multiyear plan to rebuild the Nahr el-Bared Camp began in 2008; the project was approximately 70 percent completed at year’s end. Remaining reconstruction was not fully funded, with a 60 billion Lebanese pound (\$40 million at the official exchange rate) shortfall remaining. Of the 27,000 Palestinians originally displaced following the camp’s destruction, 14,706 had returned to newly reconstructed apartments in the camp as of June, and the temporary settlements that provided housing for them near Nahr el-Bared Camp were being decommissioned. As of September, two of the five plots had been closed and the land handed back to the respective landlords in their original condition, a third plot was almost fully vacated, and the two remaining plots were being dismantled.

f. Protection of Refugees

As of August there were approximately 850,000 Syrian refugees in the country registered with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Since the government instructed UNHCR to stop registering Syrian refugees in early 2015, this total did not include Syrian refugees who arrived after that time. There were no formal refugee camps in the country for Syrians. Most Syrian refugees resided in urban areas, many in unfinished,

substandard, or nonresidential buildings. Approximately 20 percent lived in informal tented settlements, often adjacent to agricultural land, according to UNHCR. According to a UN study, refugees often took loans to cover basic needs such as rent, food, and health care, leaving more than 90 percent in debt and food insecure.

In 2015 entry of Syrians to Lebanon was restricted to those individuals falling within specific categories, such as those with a Lebanese sponsor, or traveling for the purposes of transit, or attending a medical or embassy appointment. Existing immigration rules do not explicitly permit access to Lebanon for refugees and asylum seekers from Syria, except those falling within a narrow set of “humanitarian exceptions.” During recent years the Ministry of Social Affairs has not acknowledged or submitted any humanitarian admission cases, according to UNHCR.

Nearly 10,205 UNHCR-registered Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers resided in the country, including 143 additional Iraqis who registered as of August 31 to escape violence. As of August 31, UNHCR also registered 2,303 refugees and asylum seekers from Sudan and 2,286 refugees and asylum seekers from other countries. More than 27,700 Palestinian refugees from Syria registered with UNRWA resided in Lebanon, as well as an additional approximately 180,000 registered Palestinian refugees.

The government cooperated with UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations to provide protection and assistance to refugee residents, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

Access to Asylum: The law does not provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status. Nonetheless, the country hosted an estimated 1.5 million refugees, the vast majority of them Syrian. To address the low number of refugees obtaining and renewing legal residency, the government has waived residency fees since 2017 for refugees who registered with UNHCR prior to 2015. This ruling excluded unregistered refugees or those who had renewed based on Lebanese sponsorship. DGS implementation of the waiver continued to be inconsistent, and there was minimal improvement in the percentage of refugees with legal status. According to UNHCR, only 16 percent of refugees held a legal residency permit, a drop from 20 percent in 2020.

Due to the slow implementation of residency determinations, most Syrian refugees were unable to renew their legal documents, which significantly affected their freedom of movement due to the possibility of arrests at checkpoints, particularly for adult men. While authorities released most detainees within a few days, some refugees reported that authorities required them to pay fines before releasing them or confiscated their identification documents (IDs). Syrian refugees faced barriers in obtaining Syrian IDs required to renew their residency permits in Lebanon, which they said was due to the hostility of the Syrian government to the refugee population and exorbitant fees assessed by Syrian embassies and consulates. Obtaining and maintaining legal residency was also a challenge for refugees of other nationalities, particularly Iraqis, due to high renewal fees and sponsorship requirements. There is no official limitation of movement for Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS) in the country; however, PRS without legal status faced de facto obstacles, mainly the threat of arrest at checkpoints.

The DGS facilitated the entry of PRS into Lebanon during the early stages (2011-2013) of the Syria conflict. DGS support for PRS border transit was never formalized, and restrictions were imposed on PRS trying to enter Lebanon from 2013. Since 2014, entry visas were only granted at the Syria-Lebanon border to PRS who have either a verified embassy appointment in Lebanon, a pre-approved visa from DGS, or an airline ticket and visa to a third country. Most visas were only granted for 24-hour transit.

Since 2015, the DGS has issued several memoranda allowing refugees to renew their residency documents free of charge, and in 2017 a memorandum was issued granting unlimited free renewals on a six-month basis to PRS who entered Lebanon regularly before September 2016, with no financial penalty for delays. But this did not include anyone who entered Lebanon irregularly in the first place or received a departure order before September 2016. In September the DGS issued a statement also allowing those who entered legally but received a departure order before 2016 to regularize their residency status free of charge.

Since 2017 the government has waived the condition of valid residency for birth and marriage registration for the PRS, expanding the application of a previous circular issued in 2017 applicable to Syrians. Since 2018 the Ministry of Interior has waived the costly court proceedings to obtain birth registration of PRS and Syrian refugee children older than one year who were born in Lebanon between 2011 and 2020. The proof of marriage requirement remained in effect during the year, and a valid residency permit of at least one of the parents was needed to obtain a marriage certificate.

PRS turning 15 years old have been obliged either to obtain identity documents through Syria, risking getting an exit stamp on their identity documents and therefore no longer being able to maintain residency in Lebanon, or to obtain a passport through the Syrian embassy at a cost of at least 600,000 Lebanese pounds (\$400), which is beyond the means of most. In September DGS issued a statement indicating that 15-year-olds may use their birth certificates as a substitute identity document until the age of 18. Residency and identity documents for those turning 18, however, remained a problem.

Refoulement: The government reaffirmed its commitment to the principle of nonrefoulement with respect to Syrians. Some political party representatives, however, employed antirefugee rhetoric, stating that assistance to Syrian refugees placed an additional burden on the state, already facing an economic crisis. Unlike previous years, the DGS did not facilitate the voluntary return of refugees to Syria.

In July 2020 the government approved a new refugee returns policy, which outlined its desire for Syrian refugees to return to Syria. The policy committed the government to eliminating obstacles that impeded returns and to facilitating exit procedures, including waiving fees that departing refugees would otherwise have to pay as a condition of their exit. Despite reaffirming the government’s commitment to the principle of nonrefoulement, the policy reportedly downplayed the protection risks and lack of basic services returnees would face in Syria. Significant financial and human resource hurdles prevented the government from implementing the new policy during the year.

The Higher Defense Council (HDC), a body the president chairs that includes cabinet ministers and security service heads, decision enacted in 2019 requiring the deportation of anyone arrested and found to have entered the country illegally thereafter continued to be implemented by the DGS during the year. Deportations halted in mid-2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic before picking up again toward the end of 2020 and throughout the year. Humanitarian organizations considered the government’s deportation policy – particularly the HDC decision – to be creating a high risk of refoulement given the lack of a formal review process to assess credible fear of persecution or torture. Human rights groups and the international community raised concerns regarding the risk of turning refugees over to Syrian authorities. Government officials maintained that the policy only applied to illegal migrants, not refugees, although it did not appear there was sufficient respect for due process to make such a determination. UNHCR and international donors continued to urge the government to provide for a judicial or independent administrative review of each case, and the application of procedural safeguards before carrying out deportations. The government maintained that while the law required a court hearing on all deportation cases, it did not have the capacity to process the existing caseload.

Non-Syrian asylum seekers arrested due to irregular entry or residency faced administrative detention without being sentenced by a court. The DGS held these individuals in a migrant retention facility where officials processed their immigration files before making administrative deportation decisions. Such cases usually resulted in the deportation of the detainee, except for instances where the person expressed international protection needs and UNHCR managed to secure their resettlement to a third country. Deportations of non-Syrian refugees and asylum seekers were not observed by UNHCR during the year.

Abuse of Migrants and Refugees: In 2019 the HDC issued guidance to the security services to increase enforcement of building codes. This resulted in the destruction of thousands of refugee shelters. While demolition of hard structures paused throughout 2020, the government reinitiated demolitions in midyear. As of August 31, at least 115 refugee families have been reportedly affected by instructions from the LAF to dismantle hard structures in central and north Bekaa.

NGOs and UN agencies continued to report incidents of sexual harassment and exploitation of refugees by employers and landlords, including paying workers below the minimum wage, working excessive hours, debt bondage, and pressuring families into agreeing to early marriages of their daughters to relieve economic hardship. There were multiple reports of foreign migrant domestic workers (mainly from East Africa and Southeast Asia) tied to their employers through legal sponsorship, known as the *kafala* system, who faced physical, mental, and sexual abuse; unsafe working conditions; and nonpayment of wages. According to NGOs that assisted migrant workers in reporting these abuses to authorities, security forces and judges did not always adequately investigate these crimes, and victims sometimes refused to file complaints or retracted testimony due to threats and fear of reprisals or deportation.

Freedom of Movement: Authorities imposed curfews in several municipalities across the country, allegedly to improve security of all communities. Some international observers raised concerns that these measures might be discriminatory and excessive, since authorities typically enforced them for Syrian refugees, who mostly lack legal residency status and could face greater consequences if detained for a curfew violation.

The only restrictions on other Lebanese residents were general restrictions on movement except for emergencies, according to these reports. Some municipalities and neighborhoods hosting Syrian refugee populations continued to impose movement restrictions through curfews (outside of COVID-19-related curfews), evictions, and threats of evictions. UN agencies reported that local municipal officials frequently used the threat of evictions to exert control over refugees or to appease host communities competing with refugees for jobs and other resources.

Cases of ID confiscation and fines for breaking curfews continued, and a few violent incidents against refugees occurred. UNHCR staff reported restrictions on movement increasingly forced families to send children and young women, whom authorities were less likely to stop but were more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, to perform family errands.

Employment: Authorities continued requiring Syrian refugees who wished to obtain residency permits to pledge to abide by the country’s laws, under which Syrians may work only in agriculture, construction, and cleaning. Employment restrictions that began in 2019 remained in effect, although enforcement was not as strict during the year.

The law allows a special account to provide end-of-service indemnities or severance pay to Palestinian refugees who retire or resign. These benefits were available only to Palestinians working in the legal labor market. Palestinians did not benefit from national sickness and maternity funds or the family allowances fund. UNRWA continued to bear the cost of basic medical, maternity, or family health-care expenses (excluding worker’s compensation).

Palestinian refugees received partial access to the benefits of the National Social Security Fund if they worked in the regular labor market and had a work permit. A law expanding employment rights and removing some restrictions on Palestinian refugees was not fully implemented, and Palestinians remained barred from working in 39 skilled professions, including medicine, law, and engineering that require membership in a professional association, although since July they were permitted to practice nursing when no Lebanese candidate was available. Informal restrictions on work in other industries left many refugees dependent on UNRWA for education, health care, and social services. According to UN agencies, government officials, and Palestinian advocacy groups, Palestinian refugees consistently reported discrimination in hiring due to excessive bureaucracy and societal stigma. Lack of written contracts, lack of employment benefits, and insecure job tenure contributed to unstable working conditions.

Access to Basic Services: The government did not consider local integration of any refugees a viable solution.

The law considers UNRWA-registered Palestinian refugees to be foreigners. UNRWA provided health, education, social services, and emergency assistance to registered Palestinian refugees residing in the country. The amount of land allocated to the 12 official Palestinian refugee camps in the country has changed only marginally since 1948, despite a fourfold increase in the population. Consequently, most Palestinian refugees lived in overpopulated camps, some of which suffered heavy damage in past conflicts (see also section 2.e., Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons). By agreement with the government, Palestinian security committees provided security for refugees in the camps.

The government did not permit UNRWA to install individual electricity meters in apartments, preferring that UNRWA pay a single bill rather than collecting from thousands of households, which limited access to electricity for residents.

Palestinian refugees typically could not access public-health and education services or own land. By law Palestinians are excluded from purchasing or inheriting property. Palestinians who owned and registered property prior to the 2001 law's entry into force could bequeath it to their heirs.

Palestinian refugees residing in the country could not obtain citizenship and were not considered citizens of any other country. Palestinian refugee women married to citizens were able to obtain citizenship after one year of marriage. By law the father transmits citizenship to children. Palestinian refugees, including children, had limited social and civil rights and no access to government-provided health, education, or other social services. Children of Palestinian refugees faced discrimination in birth registration, as bureaucratic and administrative procedures at the Directorate of Political Affairs and Refugees (DPRA) made it difficult to register these children after the age of one year. Additionally, many Palestinian refugee children had to leave school at an early age to earn an income.

Palestinian refugees who fled Syria for the country since 2011 received limited basic support from UNRWA, including food aid, cash assistance, and winter assistance, such as cash to purchase fuel for heating. Authorities permitted children of PRS to enroll in UNRWA schools and access UNRWA health clinics.

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education facilitated the enrollment of more than 260,000 non-Lebanese students, predominantly Syrian refugees, in public schools (basic education from kindergarten to grade nine) in the 2020-21 academic year. Instruction includes both formal and nonformal education pathways, with approximately 64,000 non-Lebanese learners in informal education and approximately 196,000 in formal education. UNHCR estimated that there were almost 500,000 registered Syrians of school age (three to 14 years old) in the country. Donor funding to UN agencies covered school-related expenses, such as school fees, books, and uniforms. Syrian refugees had access to many nonprofit and private health centers and local clinics for primary care services, and UN agencies and NGOs funded most associated costs with international donor support. Syrian refugees had access to a limited number of UNHCR-contracted hospitals for lifesaving and obstetric care. In July 2020 Human Rights Watch alleged there was a dearth of protection facilities such as safe shelters in the country for male and transgender women survivors of sexual and gender-based violence fleeing Syria. As of December there had been no improvement in the situation.

Iraqi refugees had access to both the public and private education systems. Iraqi refugees also had access to the primary health-care system. UNHCR, through NGOs, provided secondary health care with donor support.

g. Stateless Persons

Citizenship is derived exclusively from the father, resulting in statelessness for children of a citizen mother and a noncitizen father when registration under the father's nationality is not possible. This legal discrimination particularly affected Lebanese, Palestinians, and increasingly Syrians from households headed by women. Moreover, undocumented Syrian refugees were unable to register their marriages and births of their children due to their lack of official status. Additionally, some children born to citizen fathers did not have their births registered due to administrative obstacles or a lack of understanding of the regulations. There were no official statistics on the size of the stateless population.

Approximately 3,000 to 5,000 Palestinians were not registered with UNRWA or the government. These Palestinians began to arrive in the country during the 1960s and do not hold any formal valid identification documentation. The government does not recognize their legal status in the country. Without documentation and legal status, nonregistered Palestinians faced restrictions on movement, risked arrest or detention, and encountered obstacles completing civil registration procedures.

Undocumented Palestinians not registered in other countries where UNRWA operates, such as Syria or Jordan, were not necessarily eligible for the full range of services provided by UNRWA. In most cases UNRWA nonetheless provided primary health care, education, and vocational training services to undocumented Palestinians. The majority of these were men, many of them married to UNRWA-registered refugees or Lebanese citizen women, who could not transmit refugee status or citizenship to their husbands or children.

The Directorate of Political and Refugee Affairs (DPRA) is responsible for late registration of children of Palestinian refugees. According to the law birth registration of children older than one year requires a court procedure, an investigation by the DGS in some cases, and final approval from the DPRA. Where paternity is in doubt or where the applicant is age 18 years and older, he/she may also be required to take a DNA test. Birth registration can take more than a year and was extremely complex for all Palestinian refugee children whose parents were registered with DPRA. Approximately 1,500 of an estimated 100,000 Kurds living in the country lacked citizenship, despite decades of family presence in the country. Most were descendants of migrants and refugees who left Turkey and Syria during World War I, but authorities continued to deny them citizenship to preserve the country’s sectarian balance. The government issued a naturalization decree in 1994, but high costs and administrative obstacles prevented many individuals from acquiring official status. Some individuals who had previously received official status had their citizenship revoked in 2011 under a presidential decree. Others held an “ID under consideration” document without a date or place of birth.

Stateless persons lacked official identity documents that would permit them to travel abroad and could face difficulties traveling internally, including detention, for not carrying identity documents. They had limited access to the regular employment market and no access to many professions. Additionally, they could not access public schools or public health-care facilities, register marriages or births, or own or inherit property.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

Although the law provides citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections conducted by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage, lack of government control over parts of the country, defects in the electoral process, previous prolonged extensions of parliament’s mandate, and corruption in public office restricted this ability.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: Following the passage of a new electoral law in 2018, parliamentary elections were held that year for the first time in nine years. Observers concluded that the elections were generally free and fair. In 2020 eight members of parliament resigned following the August 4 Beirut port explosion, and three passed away. According to the constitution, parliamentary by-elections must be held within 60 days of resignation or death to fill vacant seats, but by-elections never occurred. Parliamentary elections were scheduled for May 15, 2022, and a presidential election was anticipated sometime between August and October 2022.

Political Parties and Political Participation: All major political parties and numerous smaller ones were almost exclusively based on confessional affiliation, and parliamentary seats were allotted on a sectarian basis.

Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: No law limits participation of women or members of minority groups in the political process, and they did participate. There were, however, significant cultural barriers to women’s participation in politics. Prior to 2004 no woman held a cabinet position, and there have only been 14 female ministers subsequently, including one sitting minister. One woman became the country’s first female deputy prime minister, minister of defense, and acting minister of foreign affairs and emigrants in 2020. Six of the 128 members of parliament were women; however, one of them resigned her seat in August. Several female members of parliament were close relatives of prominent male politicians, and female leadership of political parties was limited. Three parties introduced voluntary quotas for women. Since 2017 women have been able to run in municipal elections in their native towns instead of the municipality of their spouse.

On October 19, parliament failed to pass a law establishing a quota for women for the 2022 parliamentary elections and instead referred it back to the parliamentary committees for further discussions. There was no further action by the end of the year.

Members of minority groups participated in politics. Regardless of the number of its adherents, authorities allocated every government-recognized religious group, except Ismaili Islam and Judaism, at least one seat in parliament. Voters elected three parliamentarians representing minorities (one Syriac Orthodox Christian and two Alawites) in the 2018 elections. None of the minority parliamentarians were women.

Since refugees are not citizens, they have no political rights in the country.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The country suffers from endemic corruption. Although the law provides criminal penalties for official corruption, the government has not implemented the law effectively, and officials reportedly engaged in corrupt practices with impunity on a wide scale. Government and security officials, customs agents, and members of the judiciary were subject to laws against bribery and extortion, but the lack of strong enforcement limited the law’s effectiveness.

In May 2020 parliament approved a law lifting the secrecy of bank accounts of sitting and former ministers, parliamentarians, and civil servants. The law gives power to the Special Investigation Commission of the Central Bank and the National Anticorruption Commission to investigate corruption cases against these groups.

In September 2020 the government signed a contract with an accounting firm to conduct forensic and financial audits of the Central Bank’s accounts, but the auditor withdrew in November 2020 over a political impasse related to obtaining financial records. The auditor signed a new contract with the government on September 17.

The Central Inspection Board (CIB), an oversight body within the Office of the Prime Minister, is responsible for monitoring administrative departments, including procurement and financial actions, and remained mostly independent of political interference. The CIB may inspect national and municipal government employees and has the authority to seek their removal or refer cases for prosecution. The CIB’s authority does not extend to cabinet ministers or to municipal officials. The Social Security Fund and the Council for Development and Reconstruction, public entities that managed large funding flows, were outside the CIB’s jurisdiction.

In the wake of the massive Beirut port explosion in August 2020, which many citizens blamed on systemic government corruption and negligence, tens of thousands of protesters demanded the resignation of the second government in less than a year, ousting of the political elite, and accountability for the port disaster. The judge leading the inquiry into the explosion paused the investigation under political pressure after he pursued indictments against several current and former high-ranking officials, before being dismissed from the case on February 18. The new judge assigned on February 19 was also forced to pause the investigation on September 27 under political pressure. The investigation resumed, however, following rulings by the Court of Appeals on October 4 and November 4, and the Court of Cassation on October 11 and 14, which rejected protests from the three politicians under investigation. Media sources continued to report that political interference has delayed the investigation.

There was contention between politicians and judges on whether elected government officials suspected of criminal activity should be tried in the Supreme Council for the Trial of Presidents and Ministers or in normal criminal courts. This divisive matter has also delayed the Beirut port explosion investigation.

Corruption: The government continued to lack control over corruption. There was limited parliamentary or auditing oversight of revenue collection and expenditures. Various government initiatives intended to limit corruption were not successful. Parliament approved the public procurement law on June 30, which was intended to improve transparency and promote open tendering in the public procurement process. In April 2020 parliament endorsed the anticorruption law and approved the establishment of the Anticorruption Commission. In May 2020 the government approved the *Anticorruption National Strategy* drafted by the Ministry of Administrative Reform and the UN Development Program. During the mass protests that began in October 2019 and continued to varying degrees during the year, demonstrators accused the government and public sector of widespread endemic corruption, lack of transparency, and limited accountability, all of which generated popular outrage. Within the first month of protests in 2019, there was an uptick in the number of corruption-related investigations and prosecution actions, but no verdicts were reached in any cases involving high-ranking officials during the year.

The most common types of corruption generally included political patronage; judicial failures, especially in investigations of official wrongdoing; and bribery at multiple levels within the national and municipal governments. Several cases were referred to the judiciary, including one involving off-speculation fuel oil purchased by the national electricity utility. Ministers and directors general were questioned, and more than 20 individuals were indicted in that case. On February 23, financial prosecutors pressed money-laundering charges against foreign exchange dealers and forwarded the case to an investigative judge. Investigations were ongoing at year’s end. On April 7, a prosecutor pressed charges against Central Bank governor Riad Salameh, Chairman of the Societe General Banque du Liban Antoun Sehnaoui, Michel Mecattaf from Mecattaf company, and Central Bank Banking Control Commission president Maya Dabbagh based on suspect transfers of large sums by the bank leading to the depreciation of the pound. The case was referred to an investigative judge and was ongoing as of December.

On April 29, the Prosecutor General launched an investigation against Salameh after a Swiss legal request alleged that more than two billion Lebanese pounds (\$300 million) were embezzled from the bank through a company owned by his brother, Raja. On August 1, a judge questioned Salameh on charges of money laundering, embezzlement, forgery, tax evasion, and illicit enrichment. The case was ongoing. France also launched a parallel investigation into charges of aggravated money laundering in May.

Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

A number of domestic and international human rights groups operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were sometimes responsive to these groups’ views, but there was limited accountability for human rights abuses.

There was no information on reports from previous years of international and local human rights groups being targeted by security services for harassment.

Government Human Rights Bodies: Parliament’s Committee on Human Rights struggled to make legal changes to guide ministries in protecting human rights. As of September 28, neither the 10-member National Human Rights Institute nor the five-member National Preventive Mechanism against Torture located within it had a budget or commenced its work (see section 1.c., Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment).

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalizes rape and the use of threats or violence to claim a “marital right to intercourse,” although it does not explicitly outlaw spousal rape. While the government effectively enforced the law, its interpretation by religious courts in cases brought before them, and not to civil courts, precluded full implementation of civil law in all provinces, such as in the case of an abused wife compelled to return to her husband under personal status law, despite battery being outlawed. The minimum prison sentence for a person convicted of rape is five years, or seven years for raping a minor. The law no longer frees rapists from prosecution or nullifies their convictions if they married their victims.

The law criminalizes domestic violence, calls for provision of shelters, gives women the ability to file a restraining order against the abuser, and assigns special units within the ISF to receive domestic violence complaints. NGOs alleged that the definition of domestic violence was narrow and as a result did not provide adequate protection from all forms of abuse, such as spousal rape. Although the law provides for a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison for battery, religious courts could cite personal status law to require a battered wife to return to a home shared with her abuser. Some police, especially in rural areas, treated domestic violence as a social, rather than criminal, matter.

NGOs and activists criticized the domestic violence law, claiming that it does not sufficiently protect victims or punish abusers, who they alleged often received disproportionately light sentences.

Police and judicial officials worked to improve their management of domestic violence cases, but they noted that social and religious pressures – especially in more conservative communities – led to underreporting of cases. Some victims, often under pressure from relatives, sought arbitration through religious courts or between families rather than through the justice system. There were reports and cases of foreign domestic workers, usually women, suffering from mistreatment, abuse, and in some instances rape or conditions akin to slavery.

According to women’s rights NGO KAFA, victims reported that police responses to complaints submitted by battered or abused women improved during the reporting period. During the year ISF and judicial officials received training on best practices for handling cases involving female detainees, including victims of domestic violence and sexual exploitation. NGOs that provided services to such victims reported increased access to potential victims in ISF and DGS custody. The ISF continued its practice of alerting its human rights unit to all cases involving victims of domestic violence and other vulnerable groups, so officers could track the cases and provide appropriate support to victims.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the ISF encouraged reporting of domestic violence including raising awareness on social media of their hotline for abuse survivors. NGO ABAAD was quoted in 2020 saying that the government needed to increase services and availability of shelters to keep up with demand.

The Women’s Affairs Division in the Ministry of Social Affairs and several NGOs continued projects to address sexual or gender-based violence, such as providing counseling and shelter for victims.

Other Harmful Traditional Practices: In February 2020 dozens of women gathered in front of the Higher Islamic Shia Council to protest the law giving full child custody to the father automatically upon divorce. The organizers, Protecting Lebanese Women and the National Campaign to Raise the Age of Custody, called for raising the age of custody (age of emancipation) recognized by Shia courts. The protest was in reaction to a widely viewed video of a woman sneaking into the funeral service of her late daughter, who had been killed by stray bullets. The mother had lost custody of both her children when she filed for divorce, and her husband had forbidden her to attend the funeral.

Marriage is governed by 18 different sect-based personal status laws, and all sects allow girls to be married before age 18.

Sexual Harassment: A law criminalizing sexual harassment was adopted by parliament in December 2020. Despite the new law sexual harassment remained a widespread problem that ranked among the October 2019 protesters’ most vocal complaints. On September 22, the Public Prosecution pressed charges against journalist and director Jaafar al-Attar for sexual harassment and referred the case to the Beirut criminal judge. A group of women pressed charges against al-Attar on May 26 for sexual harassment after posting their experiences under the hashtag #Expose_the_harasser and #Believesurvivors. The investigation was ongoing at year’s end. This was the only case in the year where the Public Prosecution pressed charges for sexual harassment.

Reproductive Rights: Couples and individuals have the right to decide the number, spacing, and timing of their children and to manage their reproductive health.

Women, including survivors of sexual violence, generally had the information and means to manage their reproductive health, free from discrimination, coercion, or violence, although women in rural areas faced social pressure on their reproductive choices due to long-held societal values. According to a 2017 study conducted by the

UN Population Fund (UNFPA), the most recent available, 32 percent of male respondents indicated that their wives used oral contraceptive pills, while 32 percent of female respondents indicated that they used natural methods; followed by 29 percent using intrauterine devices; 4.6 percent tubal ligation; and the remainder using female condoms, hormonal injections, or suppositories.

There were no known reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Discrimination: Women suffered discrimination under the law and in practice, including under the penal and personal status codes. The constitution does not explicitly prohibit discrimination based on sex. In matters of marriage, child custody, inheritance, and divorce, personal status laws provide unequal treatment across the various confessional court systems but generally discriminate against women. All 18 recognized religious groups have their own personal status courts responsible for handling these matters, and laws vary depending on the religious group. For example, Sunni religious courts apply an inheritance law that provides a daughter one-half the inheritance of a son. Religious law on child custody matters favors the father in most instances, regardless of religion. Sharia courts weigh the testimony of one man as equal to that of two women. Nationality law also discriminates against women, who may not confer citizenship to their spouses and children, although widows may confer citizenship to their minor children born of a citizen father. By law women may own property, but they often ceded control of it to male relatives due to cultural norms and family pressure. The law does not distinguish between women and men in employment and provides for equal pay for men and women, although workplace gender discrimination, including wage discrimination, exists.

Since 2018 divorced women have been allowed to include the names of their children on their civil records.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

Lebanese of African descent reported instances of race-based discrimination and reported harassment by police, who periodically demanded to see their papers. Foreign Arab, African, and Asian students, professionals, and tourists reported being denied access to bars, clubs, restaurants, and private beaches at the direction and discretion of venue owners or managers.

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship is derived exclusively from the father, which may result in statelessness for children of a citizen mother and noncitizen father who may not transmit his own citizenship (see section 2.g., Stateless Persons). If a child's birth is not registered within the first year, the process for legitimizing the birth is long and costly, often deterring families from registration. Syrian refugees no longer need legal residency to register the birth of their children. Authorities also waived several requirements for late birth registration by Syrian refugees. Birth registration remained inaccessible to some because the government required proof of legal residence and legal marriage, documentation often unavailable to refugees.

Education: Education for citizens is free and compulsory through the primary phase. Noncitizen and stateless children, including those born of noncitizen fathers and citizen mothers and refugees, lacked this right. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education directed that non-Lebanese students could not outnumber Lebanese in any given classroom during the regular school shift, which sometimes limited enrollment. Syrian refugee children were not legally entitled to enroll in public schools at regular hours, although they could attend schools' second shifts.

Educational institutions reported that, due to the economic crisis, the depreciation of the Lebanese pound, and lack of funding, some schools were forced to close during the year. In addition, many teachers were either laid off or resigned. According to the Syndicate of Private School Teachers, every school in the country lost between 10 to 40 teachers during the year.

Child Abuse: The country lacked a comprehensive child protection law, although legal provisions furnished some protection to children who were victims of violence.

The Ministry of Social Affairs has a hotline to report cases of child abuse. In a typical example from 2020, representatives of a local shelter for abused women and children described the case of a father who sexually and physically abused a child in the shelter's care. According to the organization, the father escaped punishment through religious courts, as many families chose to handle such cases through these courts rather than the national justice system.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: There is no legal minimum age for marriage, and the government does not perform civil marriage. Most religious leaders oppose civil marriage, despite the law recognizing heterosexual civil marriages conducted outside the country. Each sect has its own religious courts governing matters of personal status, such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. The minimum age of marriage varies from ages 14 to 18, depending on the sect. UN agencies, NGOs, and government officials noted high rates of early marriage among the Syrian refugee population, in some cases four times the rate of child marriage as before the conflict began. They partially attributed this circumstance to social and economic pressure on families with limited resources.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibits and punishes commercial sexual exploitation, child pornography, and child sex trafficking. The minimum age for consensual sex is 18 for both men and women, and statutory rape penalties include hard labor for a minimum of five years and a minimum of seven years' imprisonment if the victim is younger than 15 years old. The government generally enforced the law.

Displaced Children: Some refugee children lived and worked on the street. In view of the poor economic environment, limited freedom of movement, and little opportunity for livelihoods for adults, many Syrian refugee families often relied on children to earn money for the family, including by begging or selling small items in the streets. Refugee children were at greater risk than Lebanese children for exploitation, gender-based violence, and child labor since they had greater freedom of movement compared to their parents, who often lacked residency permits. Some refugee children and the children of foreign domestic workers also faced obstacles to equal treatment under the law. NGOs reported discrimination against them, including bullying linked to race, skin color, religion, and nationality, although some could attend public school.

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education facilitated enrollment of almost 200,000 non-Lebanese children in the 2019-20 academic year. More than one-half of refugee children ages three to 18 were out of school, according to UNHCR. The government and some NGOs offered several informal education programs to eligible students.

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State’s *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

Anti-Semitism

At year’s end there were an estimated 70 Jews living in the country and 5,500 registered Jewish voters who lived abroad but had the right to vote in parliamentary elections.

The Israelite Communal Council (the officially recognized name of the Jewish Community Council) reported that a construction site adjacent to the Jewish cemetery in Beirut regularly dumped trash and rubble into the cemetery in the beginning of the year, but the dumping stopped during the year.

The Ministry of Interior continued the delay in the verification of the results of the election of members of the Israelite Communal Council, which occurs every six years (see section 2.b., Freedom of Association). The council has repeatedly submitted requests to change its government-appointed name to reduce stigma, with no success. The council blames its official name in part for the difficulties experienced with renewals every six years.

A June 2020 report from the Anti-Defamation League found anti-Semitic educational material and incitement to anti-Semitism at educational institutions run by the education branch of Hizballah.

Rooms, shops, and a gas station were built on the land of the Jewish cemetery in Tripoli, and a lawsuit was filed in 2011. While the suit remained pending, authorities had taken no action on it by year’s end.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Persons with Disabilities

By law persons with disabilities have the right to employment, education, health services, accessibility, and the right to vote; however, there was no evidence the government effectively enforced the law. Although prohibited by law, discrimination against persons with disabilities continued.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and the National Council of Disabled are responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. According to the president of the Arab Organization of Disabled People, little progress has occurred in the 20 years since parliament passed the law on disabilities.

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education stipulated that for new school building construction, “Schools should include all necessary facilities in order to receive the physically challenged.” Nonetheless, the public school system was ill-equipped to accommodate students with disabilities.

Depending on the type and nature of the disability, children with a disability may attend mainstream school. Due to a lack of awareness or knowledge, school staff often did not identify a specific disability in children and could not adequately advise parents. In such cases children often repeated classes or dropped out of school. According to NGOs, children with disabilities lacked access to education, as both public and private schools often improperly refused to admit them or charged additional fees, citing a lack of appropriate facilities or staff.

The law mandates access to buildings for persons with disabilities, but the government failed to amend building codes to implement these provisions. The law does not mandate access to information or accommodations for communication for persons with disabilities.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

HIV/AIDS is stigmatized due to sensitivities about extramarital relations and LGBTQI+ identities. NGOs reported that resources to direct patients to clinics where they can receive tests without stigma or discrimination were limited. Marsa, a sexual health center, reported six cases of discrimination against HIV-positive individuals within their workplaces in 2020 and two cases of foreign persons living with HIV who faced difficulty in receiving treatment and accessing medical care. In addition to stigma and discrimination, many persons with HIV/AIDS were unable to pay

for routine tests that the Ministry of Public Health does not cover, including the blood test that must be completed and submitted to the Ministry of Public Health before any treatment may begin. The law requires the government to provide treatment to all HIV-positive citizens and Palestinian and Syrian refugees living in the country. Nonetheless, treatment was only available at one hospital in Beirut, making it difficult for patients outside of Beirut to receive treatment.

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The law prohibits “sexual intercourse against nature” and effectively criminalizes consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults. Due to recent legal decisions, some government and judicial officials, along with NGOs and legal experts, question whether same-sex sexual conduct actually fits that legal definition. The law was occasionally enforced in civilian and military courts, and it carries a penalty of up to one year in prison.

No provisions of law provide antidiscrimination protections to LGBTQI+ persons based on their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics. NGOs continued to report employment discrimination faced by transgender women due to the inconsistency between official documentation and gender self-presentation.

NGOs stated that official and societal discrimination against LGBTQI+ persons persisted. Observers received reports from LGBTQI+ refugees of physical abuse by local gangs, which the victims did not report to the ISF. Observers referred victims to UNHCR-sponsored protective services.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, NGOs noted that the government-enforced lockdown posed increased risks to the LGBTQI+ community, which depended on community centers, tight social networks, and NGOs for emotional and financial support. NGOs also reported that the August 2020 Beirut port explosion destroyed areas frequented and inhabited by LGBTQI+ members, which severely impacted their livelihoods and well-being.

The DGS continued to maintain a travel ban on foreign attendees of the Networking, Exchange, Development, Wellness, and Achievement (NEDWA) sexual health conference, which was organized by LGBTQI+ rights NGO Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality (AFE). Starting in 2019 this conference was relocated outside of the country due to security concerns following DGS and other agencies’ threats to expose attendees from LGBTQI+-hostile countries to their governments.

The government did not collect information on official or private discrimination in employment, occupation, housing, statelessness, or lack of access to education or health care based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Individuals who faced problems were reluctant to report incidents due to fear of additional discrimination or reprisal. There were no government efforts to address potential discrimination.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides for the right of private-sector workers to form and join trade unions, bargain collectively, and strike but places restrictions on these rights. In principle, the penalties were commensurate with those for other laws involving denial of civil rights, such as discrimination. Some private sector worker groups, however, do not enjoy the right to organize and bargain collectively, especially agricultural, domestic, and migrant workers in the informal economy. The Ministry of Labor must approve the formation of unions, and it controlled the conduct of all trade union elections, including election dates, procedures, and ratification of results. The law permits the administrative dissolution of trade unions and bars trade unions from political activity. Unions have the right to strike after providing advance notice to and receiving approval from the Ministry of Interior. Organizers of a strike (at least three of whom must be identified by name) must notify the ministry of the number of participants in advance and the intended location of the strike, and five percent of a union’s members must take responsibility for maintaining order during the strike.

There are significant restrictions on the right to strike. The law excludes public-sector employees, domestic workers, and agricultural workers. Therefore, they have neither the right to strike nor to join and establish unions. The law prohibits public-sector employees from any kind of union activity, including striking, organizing collective petitions, or joining professional organizations. On July 12, however, the board of the Association of Public Administration Employees called for a strike and sick-out from July 15-23 and early dismissal from work on July 12-14. On August 31, public administration employees called for an extension of the strike until September 30 and reported to work only on Wednesdays to process urgent issues for the public. They demanded salary adjustments to compensate for the rising cost of living, an increase in their transportation allowance, and measures to address the decline in health and social benefits under the National Social Security Fund and State Employees Cooperatives. The strike was ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

The law protects the right of workers to bargain collectively, but a minimum of 60 percent of workers must agree on the goals beforehand. Two-thirds of union members at a general assembly must ratify collective bargaining agreements. The Association of Banks in Lebanon renewed the collective sectoral agreement with the Federation of Lebanese Bank Employees Unions in 2019 after nearly three months of mediation between the two parties led by the minister of labor. The Association of Banks in Lebanon had initially refused to renew the agreement.

The law prohibits antiunion discrimination. By law when employers misuse or abuse their right to terminate a union member's contract, including for union activity, the worker is entitled to compensation and legal indemnity and may institute proceedings before a conciliation board. The board adjudicates the case, after which an employer may be compelled to reinstate the worker, although this protection is available only to the elected members of a union's board. Anecdotal evidence showed widespread antiunion discrimination in both the public and private sectors, although this issue did not receive significant media coverage. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), the most flagrant abuses occurred in banking, private schools, retail businesses, daily and occasional workers, and the civil service.

By law foreigners with legal resident status may join trade unions. According to the ILO, however, most unions do not encourage or accept the participation of foreign workers. The law permits migrant workers to join existing unions (regardless of nationality and reciprocity agreements) but denies them the right to form their own unions. They do not enjoy full membership since they may neither vote in trade union elections nor run for union office. Certain sectors of migrant workers, such as migrant domestic workers, challenged the binding laws supported by some unions by forming their own autonomous structures that acted as unions, although the Ministry of Labor has not approved them.

Palestinian refugees generally may organize their own unions. Because of restrictions on their right to work, few refugees participated actively in trade unions. While some unions required citizenship, others were open to foreign nationals whose home countries had reciprocity agreements with Lebanon.

The government's enforcement of applicable law was weak, including prohibitions on antiunion discrimination.

Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining were not always respected. The government and other political actors interfered with the functioning of worker organizations, particularly the main federation, the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (CGTL). The CGTL is the only national confederation recognized by the government, although several unions boycotted and unofficially or officially broke from the CGTL and no longer recognized it as an independent and nonpartisan representative of workers. Since 2012 the Union Coordination Committee (UCC), a grouping of public and private teachers as well as civil servants, played a major role in pushing the government to pass a promised revised salary scale, largely overshadowing the CGTL. While the UCC is not formally recognized by any government body, it acts as an umbrella organization and guides several recognized leagues of workers in demonstrating and in negotiating demands. During the 2019 national budget debate, both the CGTL and UCC failed to take leadership of worker protest actions successfully or to express coherently the demands and aspirations of working persons. In 2019 the CGTL was further weakened when union president Antoine Bechara was interrogated by the ISF Cybercrime Bureau over a complaint filed by then minister of economy Raed Houry. In 2019 Bechara was arrested and pressured to resign after a video was leaked showing him insulting and making offensive comments against late Maronite patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir, but he was re-elected in July 2020. The National Federation of Workers and Employees in Lebanon emerged as another alternative to represent the independent trade union movement.

The economic and financial collapse, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ensuing political unrest exacerbated challenges in the labor sector, including an increased rate of unemployment, increased dismissal of employees, partial salary payments, deteriorating working conditions, and an increased number of businesses shutting down. The Syndicate of Restaurants, Nightclubs, and Pastries announced that its membership decreased from 8,500 in 2019 to 3,700 in the year. The secretary general of the Economic Institutions association announced that 60 percent of retail shops and commercial institutions had closed since 2019. The Ministry of Labor formed a crisis committee to investigate the unlawful termination of contracts, but it did not include foreign domestic workers in its review. Multiple international organizations reported in September 2020 that domestic workers were adversely affected by the port explosion since many were suddenly laid off or rendered homeless along with their employers. Antiunion discrimination and other instances of employer interference in union functions occurred. Some employers fired workers in the process of forming a union before the union could be formally established and published in the official gazette.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits and criminalizes all forms of forced or compulsory labor. It is unclear whether penalties were commensurate with those for other analogous serious crimes, such as kidnapping.

Children, foreign workers employed as domestic workers, and other foreign workers sometimes worked under forced labor conditions. The law criminalizes labor trafficking and provides protection against forced labor for domestic workers. The domestic worker population is excluded from legal protection, which leaves them vulnerable to exploitation. In violation of the law, employment agencies and employers routinely withheld foreign workers' passports, especially in the cases of domestic workers, sometimes for years. According to NGOs assisting migrant workers, in some instances employers withheld salaries for the duration of the contract, which was usually two years.

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

Child labor occurred, including in its worst forms. While up-to-date statistics on child labor were unavailable, anecdotal evidence and the accounts of NGOs suggested the number of child workers may have risen during the year and that more children worked in the informal sector. UNHCR noted that commercial sexual exploitation of refugee children continued to occur. The government did not enforce child labor law effectively. Penalties were not commensurate with those for other analogous serious crimes, such as kidnapping.

The minimum age for employment is 14, and the law prescribes occupations that are legal for juveniles, defined as children between ages 14 and 18. The law requires juveniles to undergo a medical exam by a doctor certified by the Ministry of Public Health to ensure they are physically fit for the types of work employers ask them to perform. The law prohibits employment of juveniles for more than seven hours per day, or between 7 p.m. and 7 a.m., and it requires one hour of rest for work lasting more than four hours. The law prohibits specific types of labor for juveniles, including informal “street labor.” It also lists types of labor that, by their nature or the circumstances in which they are carried out, are likely to harm the health, safety, or morals of children younger than 16, as well as types of labor that are allowed for children older than 16, provided they are offered full protection and adequate training.

Child labor, including among refugee children, was predominantly concentrated in the informal sector, including in small family enterprises, mechanical workshops, carpentry, construction, manufacturing, industrial sites, welding, agriculture, and fisheries. UN agencies and NGOs reported that Syrian refugee children were vulnerable to child labor and exploitation. According to the ILO, child labor rates have at least doubled since the Syrian refugee influx. The ILO reported that instances of child labor strongly correlated with a Syrian refugee presence. The ILO equally highlighted that most Syrian children involved in the worst forms of child labor, especially forced labor, worked primarily in agriculture in the Bekaa and Akkar regions and on the streets of major urban areas (Beirut and Tripoli). Anecdotal evidence also indicated child labor was prevalent within Palestinian refugee camps.

The Ministry of Labor is responsible for enforcing child labor requirements through its Child Labor Unit. Additionally, the law charges the Ministry of Justice, ISF, and Higher Council for Childhood (HCC) with enforcing laws related to child trafficking, including commercial sexual exploitation of children and the use of children in illicit activities. The HCC is also responsible for referring children held in protective custody to appropriate NGOs to find safe living arrangements.

A Ministry of Labor unit responsible for inspections of all potential labor violations also investigates child labor matters when a specific complaint is reported or found during its other inspections.

The Ministry of Labor’s Child Labor Unit acts as the government’s focal point for child labor matters, and it oversees and implements the ministry’s national strategy to tackle child labor. The National Steering Committee on Child Labor is the main interministerial body coordinating on child labor across the government.

In 2019 the Ministry of Social Affairs developed a National Action Plan to End Street Begging by Children, but implementation was slow due to the October 2019 revolution and government resignation.

Also see the Department of Labor’s *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings>.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

The law provides for equality among all citizens and prohibits employment discrimination based on race, gender, disability, language, or social status. The law does not specifically provide for protection against employment discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, HIV status, or other communicable diseases. Although the government generally respected these provisions, they were not enforced in some areas, and aspects of the law and traditional beliefs discriminated against women. It is unclear whether penalties were commensurate to laws related to civil rights, such as election interference.

Discrimination in employment and occupation occurred with respect to women, persons with disabilities, foreign domestic workers, and LGBTQI+ and HIV-positive persons (see section 6). The law does not distinguish between women and men in employment, and it provides for equal pay for men and women, with exceptions that exclude women from a variety of industrial and construction jobs as well as jobs listed in Annex 1. The law prohibits women from working in certain industries, such as mining, factories, agriculture, energy, and transportation, although the law was not enforced in multiple sectors, including factories and agriculture. According to the UN Population Fund, the law does not explicitly prohibit sexual harassment in the workplace, although it gives an employee the right to resign without prior notice if the employer or representative commits an indecent offense toward the employee or a family member. However, there are no legal consequences for the perpetrator.

The law defines a “disability” as a physical, sight, hearing, or mental disability. It stipulates persons with disabilities must fill at least three percent of all government and private-sector positions, provided such persons fulfill the qualifications for the position. There was no evidence the government enforced the law. Employers are legally exempt from penalties if they provide evidence no otherwise qualified person with disabilities applied for employment within three months of advertisement.

Migrant workers and domestic workers faced employment discrimination. During the reporting period, Syrian workers, usually employed as manual laborers and construction workers, continued to suffer discrimination. Many municipalities enforced a curfew on Syrians’ movements in their neighborhoods in efforts to control security.

NGOs and UN agencies continued to report incidents of sexual harassment and exploitation of refugees by employers and landlords, including paying workers less than minimum wage, requiring them to work excessive hours, and debt bondage. There were multiple reports of domestic workers (mainly from East Africa and Southeast Asia) who were tied to their employers through visa sponsorship, known as the *kafala* system. They faced physical, mental, and sexual abuse, unsafe working conditions, and nonpayment of wages. According to NGOs that assisted migrant workers in reporting abuses to authorities, security forces and judges did not always adequately investigate these crimes, and victims sometimes refused to file complaints or retracted testimony due to threats and fear of reprisals or deportation.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wage and Hour Laws: The legal minimum wage was last raised in 2012. In July 2020 then minister of labor Lamia Yammine requested an increase in the minimum wage to balance purchasing power and inflation, but no further action was taken. As a result of the increase in fuel prices, public and private sector employees’ daily transportation allowances were raised during the year. Public sector employees also received a one-time social assistance payment worth one month’s salary. There was no official minimum wage for domestic workers. Observers concluded that the minimum wage was lower than unofficial estimates of the poverty income level. Official contracts stipulated monthly wages for domestic workers, depending on the nationality of the worker. A unified standard contract which was registered with the DGS for workers to obtain residency granted migrant domestic workers some labor protections. The standard contract covered uniform terms and conditions of employment, but not wages for domestic workers, depending on the nationality of the worker. The law prescribes a standard 48-hour workweek with a weekly rest period that must not be less than 36 consecutive hours. The law stipulates 48 hours of work as the maximum per week in most corporations except agricultural enterprises. The law permits a 12-hour day under certain conditions, including a stipulation that overtime pay is 50 percent higher than pay for normal hours. The law does not set limits on compulsory overtime. Workers may report violations to the CGTL, Ministry of Labor, NSSF, or through their respective unions. In most cases they preferred to remain silent due to fear of dismissal. Violations of wage and overtime pay were most common in the construction industry and among migrant workers, particularly with domestic workers. Generally, penalties for violations were commensurate with those for similar crimes, such as fraud. Domestic workers are not covered by law or other legal provisions related to acceptable conditions of work. Such provisions also do not apply to those involved in work within the context of a family, day laborers, temporary workers in the public sector, or workers in the agricultural sector. In September 2020 the caretaker minister of labor signed a new standard labor contract for all domestic workers, foreign and Lebanese, to apply to all contracts signed after November 1, 2020.

Occupational Safety and Health: The Ministry of Labor sets occupational health and safety standards. Labor experts deemed Lebanon’s occupational safety and health (OSH) standards were inappropriate for the main industries in the country and noted that the government did not regularly enforce them. The country’s OSH standards do not conform with international labor standards, and the few numbers of OSH inspectors make it difficult to enforce the established measures. Some companies did not respect legal provisions governing OSH in specific sectors, such as the construction industry. The responsibility for identifying unsafe situations remains with OSH experts and not the worker based on hazards inherent to the nature of work. Penalties for violations of OSH laws were commensurate with those for similar crimes like negligence; however, in practice, employers easily avoided such penalties. While most licensed businesses and factories strove to meet international standards for working conditions with respect to OSH, conditions in informal factories and businesses were poorly regulated and often did not meet these standards. The Ministry of Industry is responsible for enforcing regulations to improve safety in the workplace. The law requires employers to implement proper safety measures and to have fire, third-party liability, and workers’ compensation insurance. The ministry has the authority to revoke a company’s license if its inspectors find a company noncompliant, but there was no evidence this occurred.

The ministry’s enforcement team handled all inspections of potential labor violations, but it suffered from a lack of staff, resources, legal tools, and political support for its work. Interference with inspectors affected the quality of inspections, and issuance of fines for violators was common. The law stipulates workers may remove themselves from situations that endanger their health or safety without jeopardy to their employment, although government officials did not protect employees who exercised this right.

Workers in the industrial sector worked an average of 35 hours per week, while workers in other sectors worked an average of 32 hours per week. These averages, however, were derived from figures that included part-time work, including for employees who desired full-time work. Some private-sector employers failed to provide employees with family and transportation allowances as stipulated under the law and did not register them with the National Social Security Fund.

Informal Sector: Migrant workers arrived in the country through local and source-country recruitment agencies. Although the law requires recruitment agencies to be licensed by the Ministry of Labor, the government did not adequately monitor their activities. The *kafala* system tied a foreign worker’s employment visa to a specific employer, making it difficult to change employers. In cases of employment termination, the worker would lose legal status. This discouraged many migrant workers from filing complaints. Some employers subjected domestic workers, mostly of Asian and African origin, to mistreatment and abuse, including rape. In many cases domestic workers endured long hours without vacations or holidays. Victims of abuse may file civil suits or seek other legal action, often with the assistance of NGOs, but most victims, counseled by their embassies or consulates, settled for an administrative solution that usually included monetary compensation and repatriation. During the year victims

explained that, when they escaped from employers who were withholding wages, an NGO helped them file charges against their employers. Authorities commonly reached administrative settlements with employers to pay back wages or finance return to employees' home countries, but generally did not seek criminal prosecution of employers.

In June 2020 the director general of Nigeria's National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons named Lebanon among countries in which Nigerian citizens were trapped in domestic servitude. The official stated her agency had received more than 50 distress calls and collected evidence regarding cruel working conditions, unpaid salaries, 18-hour workdays, and hazardous duties. Some women were reportedly sold as slaves to third-party buyers.

Authorities typically did not prosecute perpetrators of abuse against domestic workers for reasons that included the victims' refusal to press charges and lack of evidence. Authorities settled an unknown number of cases of nonpayment of wages through negotiation. According to source-country embassies and consulates, many workers did not report violations of their labor contracts until after they returned to their home countries, since they preferred not to stay in the country for a lengthy judicial process.

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