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## Lebanon

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2010**

**November 17, 2010**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and the freedom to practice all religious rites, provided that the public order is not disturbed. The constitution declares equality of rights and duties for all citizens without discrimination or preference but establishes a balance of power among the major religious groups. The government generally respected religious rights; however, there were some restrictions, and the constitutional provision for apportioning political offices according to religious affiliation can be viewed as discriminatory.

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

There were periodic reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There was tension among religious groups, attributable to competition for political power, and citizens continued to struggle along sectarian lines with the legacy of a 15-year civil war (1975-90). Despite tensions generated by the competition for political power, places of worship of every confession continued to exist side by side, reflecting the country's centuries-old heritage as a place of refuge for those fleeing religious intolerance.

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

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 4,035 square miles and a population of four million. Because the relative size of confessional groups remains a sensitive issue, a national census has not been conducted since 1932. However, the most recent demographic study conducted by Statistics Lebanon, a Beirut-based research firm, indicate 27 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, 27 percent Shi'a Muslim, 21 percent Maronite Christian, eight percent Greek Orthodox, five percent Druze, and five percent Greek Catholic, with the remaining seven percent belonging to smaller Christian denominations. Over the past 60 years, there has been a steady decline in the proportion of Christians relative to Muslims, mostly due to emigration of large numbers of Maronite Christians and a higher-than-average Muslim birth rate. There are also very small numbers of Jews, Baha'is, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Buddhists, and Hindus.

The 18 officially recognized religious groups include four Muslim sects, 12 Christian sects, the Druze sect, and Judaism. The main branches of Islam practiced are Shi'a and Sunni. The Alawites and the Isma'ili ("Sevener") Shi'a order are the smallest Muslim communities. The Maronite community, the largest Christian group, maintained its centuries-long affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church but has its own patriarch, liturgy, and ecclesiastical customs. The second-largest Christian sect is Greek Orthodox. Other Christians are divided among Greek Catholics, Armenian Orthodox (Gregorians), Armenian Catholics, Syriac Orthodox (Jacobites), Syriac Catholics, Assyrians (Nestorians), Chaldeans, Copts, evangelicals (including Protestant groups such as Baptists and Seventh-day Adventists), and Latins (Roman Catholic). The Druze, who refer to themselves as al-Muwahhideen, or "believers in one God," are concentrated in the rural, mountainous areas east and south of Beirut. Divisions and rivalries among various groups have existed for many centuries and, while relationships among adherents of different confessions were generally amicable, group identity was highly significant in most aspects of cultural interaction.

Many persons fleeing religious mistreatment and discrimination in neighboring states have immigrated to the country, including Kurds, Shi'a, and Chaldeans from Iraq, as well as Coptic Christians from Egypt and Sudan. According to the secretary general of the Syriac League, 50,000 Iraqi Christians and approximately 3,000 to 4,000 Coptic Christians reside in the country.

## Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

### Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and the freedom to practice all religious rites, provided that public order is not disturbed. The constitution requires the state to respect all religious groups and denominations and declares respect for the personal status and religious interests of persons of every religious sect. The constitution declares equality of rights and duties for all citizens without discrimination or preference but stipulates a balance of power distributed among the major religious groups. The government generally respected these rights in practice; however, there were some restrictions, and the constitutional provision for apportioning political offices according to religious affiliation may be viewed as inherently discriminatory.

The constitution provides that Christians and Muslims be represented equally in parliament, the cabinet, and high-level civil service positions, which include the ministry ranks of secretary general and director general. It also provides that these posts be distributed proportionally among the recognized religious groups. The constitutional provision for the distribution of political power and positions according to the principle of religious representation is designed to prevent a single confessional group from gaining a dominant position. The 1943 "National Pact" stipulates that the president, prime minister, and speaker of parliament be Maronite Christian, Sunni Muslim, and Shi'a Muslim, respectively. This distribution of political power operates at both the national and local levels of government.

The 1989 Ta'if Agreement, which ended the country's 15-year civil war, reaffirmed this arrangement while mandating equal Muslim and Christian representation in parliament and reducing the power of the Maronite Christian presidency. In addition the agreement endorsed the constitutional provision of appointing most senior government officials according to religious affiliation. This practice functions in all three branches of government. The Ta'if Agreement also stipulated a cabinet with power allocated equally between Muslims and Christians. On January 13, 2010, parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri called for the formation of a national commission to abolish political sectarianism, a proposal which drew criticism from various political parties. The constitution also provides for the formation of such a commission. The political establishment was reluctant to change this "confessional" system, because citizens perceived it as critical to the country's stability.

The leadership councils for Christians and Druze nominated candidates for their respective senior clerical posts; however, the nomination of Sunni and Shi'a muftis was officially endorsed by the government's council of ministers, and they received monthly salaries from the government. The government appointed and paid the salaries of Muslim and Druze clerical judges. The leaders of other religious groups, such as Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholics, did not receive salaries from the government.

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In most cases the government permitted recognized religious groups to administer their own family and personal status laws, such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. The "Twelver" Shi'a, Sunni, Christian, and Druze confessions have state-appointed, government-subsidized clerical courts that administered family and personal status law. However, many of these laws discriminated against women. For example, Sunni inheritance law provided a son twice the inheritance of a daughter. Although Muslim men may divorce easily, Muslim women may do so only with the concurrence of their husbands.

The penal code stipulates a maximum prison term of one year for anyone convicted of "blaspheming God publicly." There were no prosecutions reported under this law during the reporting period.

There were no legal barriers to proselytizing; however, traditional attitudes of the clerical establishment strongly discouraged such activity.

Many families have relatives who belong to different religious communities, and intermarriage was not uncommon; however, interfaith marriage was difficult to arrange in practice between members of some groups. Islamic law, which applies to personal status matters of Muslims, forbids the marriage of a non-Muslim man to a Muslim woman. Druze religious leaders will perform marriages only of Druze couples. There were no procedures for civil marriage; however, the government recognized civil marriage ceremonies performed outside the country.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Armenian Christmas, Eid al-Adha, Saint Maroun Day, Islamic New Year, Ashura, Good Friday, Easter (both Western and Eastern rites), the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, All Saints' Day, Feast of the Assumption, Annunciation, Eid al-Fitr, and Christmas. The government also excused Armenian public sector employees from work on Saint Vartan Day.

The government permitted the publication of religious materials of every religious group in different languages.

Formal recognition by the government was a legal requirement for religious groups to conduct most religious activities. A group that seeks official recognition must submit a statement of its doctrine and moral principles for government review to ensure that such principles do not contradict popular values or the constitution. The group must ensure that the number of its adherents is sufficient to maintain its continuity.

Alternatively, religious groups may apply for recognition through recognized religious groups. Official recognition conveyed certain benefits, such as tax-exempt status and the right to apply the religion's codes to personal status matters. An individual may change religions if the head of the religious group the person wishes to join approved of this change. Refusal was not reported to occur in practice.

Some religious groups did not enjoy official recognition, such as Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and unregistered Protestant Christian groups. These groups were disadvantaged under the law in that their members did not qualify for certain government positions, but they were permitted to perform their religious rites freely. For example, a Baha'i could not run for parliament as a Baha'i candidate because there is no seat allocated for the confession, nor could such an individual hold senior positions in the government, since these are also allocated on a confessional basis. However, a number of members of unregistered religious groups were recorded in government records under recognized religions. For example,

most Baha'is were registered under the Shi'a sect. A member of the Baha'i community could therefore run for office and fill a seat allocated to the Shi'a sect. Similarly, Mormons were registered under the Greek Orthodox faith. Government decisions on granting official recognition to those religious groups that applied were timely and did not appear to be arbitrary.

Unrecognized groups may own property and assemble for worship without government interference; however, they are disadvantaged under the law because legally they may not marry, divorce, or inherit property in the country. Therefore, these religious groups may choose to register as part of other known religious organizations. For example, Protestant evangelical churches were required to register with the Evangelical Synod, a nongovernmental advisory group that represents those churches with the government. It is self-governing and oversees religious matters for Protestant congregations. Representatives of some churches complained that the synod has refused to accept new Protestant groups into its membership since 1975, thereby preventing their clergy from ministering to adherents in accordance with their beliefs.

Religious workers not working under the auspices of a government-registered religious organization and found to be working while on tourist visas may be deemed to have violated their visa status and deported. The government issued religious workers a one-month visa; if they planned on staying longer, they would have had to finalize their residency permits during that one month. Religious workers were also obliged to sign a "commitment of responsibility" form before being issued their visa that committed them to legal prosecution and immediate deportation if they carried out any activity that may prompt community, confessional, or religious instigation and criticism against the Lebanese state or any other country except Israel.

Religion was generally encoded on national identity cards and noted on ikhraaj qaid (official registry) documents; however, the government does not require citizens' religious affiliations to be indicated on passports. Following the Ministry of Interior's February 11, 2009, circular, citizens were not required to have their religious affiliation encoded on national identity cards or official registry documents. The ikhraaj qaid is a civil document that indicates personal status information and can be presented by citizens instead of an identity card when they apply for various purposes, such as to obtain government employment or to enroll in or be employed at a university. Citizens had the right to have their religion removed from their national identity cards and official registry documents and did so during the reporting period. The government also complied with requests of citizens to change their civil records to reflect a new religious status.

Government documents referred to Jewish Lebanese citizens as Israelis, although they are not Israeli citizens. In 2009 the interior minister submitted a proposal to the cabinet to amend legislation by referring to "Jewish Lebanese" citizens instead of "Israelis," but the proposal was not approved.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

The 1989 Ta'if Agreement calls for the eventual elimination of political sectarianism in favor of "expertise and competence"; however, little progress has been made in this regard. Representatives from the lesser represented, or "minority," Christian groups, such as Syriac Christians, stated that the government discriminated against them because no one from their religious classification has been appointed a minister. While they have served in some high-level civil service positions, such as director general, these groups stated that most positions were filled by Maronites and Greek Orthodox. These groups further stated that while they estimated their population at 54,000, they were allocated only one representative in parliament.

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

### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

### Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were periodic reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Political tension between religious groups decreased after Sunni Prime Minister Saad Hariri formed a national unity government that included representatives of Shi'a opposition parties. While there were periodic reports of tension and occasional confrontations between religious groups during the reporting period, most of this activity could be attributed to political differences and the legacy of the civil war.

During the reporting period, Hizballah directed strong rhetoric against Israel, with which the country remained in a state of war, and its Jewish population. While Hizballah's Al-Manar television broadcast anti-Semitic material in the past, no examples were noted during the reporting period.

Representatives from the Israeli Communal Council, a legally registered Jewish organization, reported continued vandalism of a Jewish-owned cemetery in downtown Beirut, including damage to a cemetery structure and theft of iron objects there in late May 2010.

On September 28, 2009, Khaled Shebli Khelo allegedly threw a Molotov cocktail at the Maghen Abraham synagogue, the last remaining synagogue in the country. Security authorities arrested Khelo the same day, and investigation of the incident was ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

On July 26, 2009, one day before renovation of the Maghen Abraham synagogue was to begin, unknown perpetrators attempted to set the synagogue on fire.

### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. embassy advanced this goal through contacts at all levels of society, public remarks, embassy public diplomacy programs, and funding projects designed to increase crossconfessional dialogue.

The ambassador and embassy officers met regularly with leaders of religious communities and regularly discussed matters related to religious freedom and tolerance. The U.S. government supports the principles of the Ta'if Agreement, and embassy staff regularly discussed the issue of sectarianism with political, religious, and civic leaders.

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