



## U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

### Lebanon

#### International Religious Freedom Report 2006

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The constitution provides for absolute freedom of belief and guarantees 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 these rights; however, there were some restrictions, and the constitutional provision for apportioning political offices according to religious affiliation may be viewed as inherently discriminatory.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period. The status of religious freedom continued to be affected by the 1989 Ta'if Agreement that, in accordance with demographic developments in the country, mandated an increase in Muslim representation in Parliament so that it would be equal to the representation of the country's Christian community. In addition, the Ta'if Agreement, which concluded the country's fifteen-year civil war, endorsed the constitutional provision of appointing most senior government officials according to religious affiliation. This practice is operative in all three branches of government. The Ta'if Agreement also stipulated a cabinet with power equally allocated between Muslims and Christians. The political establishment has been reluctant to change this "confessional" system, because citizens perceive it as an element critical to the country's stability. Some religious groups do not enjoy official recognition, such as Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and unregistered Protestant Christian groups. They are disadvantaged under the law in that their members do not qualify for certain government positions, but they do not suffer discrimination in the practice of their faith.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. There were, however, periodic reports of tension between religious groups, attributable to competition for political power, and citizens continued to struggle with the legacy of a fifteen-year civil war that was fought largely along sectarian lines. Despite sectarian tensions caused by the competition for political power, churches, mosques, and other places of worship continued to exist side-by-side extending a centuries-long national heritage as a place of refuge for those fleeing religious intolerance.

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

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country, founded as a modern state in 1943, has an area of 4,035 square miles and a population of four million. Because parity among confessional groups remains a sensitive issue, a national census has not been conducted since 1932. However, according to three reputable demographic studies conducted over the past two years, 28-35 percent of the population was Sunni Muslim, 28-35 percent Shi'a Muslim, 25-39 percent Christian, and 5-6 percent Druze. Over the past sixty years, there has been a steady decline in the number of Christians as compared to Muslims, mostly through emigration of large numbers of the Christian Maronite community. There were also very small numbers of the Jews, Baha'is, Mormons, Buddhists, and Hindus.

Of the eighteen officially recognized religious groups, four were Muslim, twelve Christian, one Druze, and one Jewish. The main branches of Islam were Shi'a and Sunni. The smallest Muslim communities were the Alawites and the Ismaili ("Sevener") Shi'a order. The Maronite community, by far the largest Christian group, has had a centuries-long affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church but has its own patriarch, liturgy, and ecclesiastical customs. The second largest Christian group is the Greek Orthodox Church, principally composed of ethnic Arabs who maintain a Greek-language liturgy. Other Christians were divided among Greek Catholics, Armenian Orthodox (Gregorians), Armenian Catholics, Syrian Orthodox (Jacobites), Syrian Catholics, Assyrians (Nestorians), Chaldeans, Copts, evangelicals (including Protestant groups such as the 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 between various groups date back many centuries, and while relationships between religious adherents of different confessions were generally amicable, group identity was highly significant in most aspects of cultural interaction.

Foreign missionaries operating in the country, primarily from Catholic and evangelical Christian churches, operated missions, schools, hospitals, and places of worship.

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. Precise figures were unavailable due to the lack of census data and the tendency of these groups to assimilate into the culture.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for absolute freedom of religion and guarantees the freedom to practice all religious rites provided that public order is not disturbed. The constitution requires the state to respect all religions and denominations and guarantee 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; however, there were some restrictions, and the constitutional provision for apportioning political offices according to religious affiliation may be viewed as inherently discriminatory.

The Government permits recognized religious groups to exercise authority over matters pertaining to personal status, 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 administer family and personal status law. The constitutional provision for the distribution of political power and positions according to the principle of religious representation is designed to prevent a dominant position being gained by any one confessional group. The "National Pact" of 1943 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 functions at both the national and local levels of government. The 1989 Ta'if Agreement, which ended the country's fifteen-year civil war, reaffirmed this arrangement but, significantly, mandated increased Muslim representation in Parliament so that it would be equal to that of the Christian community, and reduced the power of the Christian Maronite presidency.

The following holy days are considered national holidays: New Year, Armenian Christmas, Eid al-Adha, St. 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, Eid al-Fitr, and Christmas. The Government also excuses Armenian public sector employees from work on St. Vartan Day.

Formal recognition by the Government is 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 conveys 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 approves of this change.

Citizens belonging to a faith not recognized by the Government are permitted to perform their religious rites freely; however, some rights may not be secure in that they fall outside the "confessional" system of allocating political power. For example, a Baha'i cannot 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, as these are also allocated on a confessional basis. However, a number of members of unregistered religious groups are recorded under the recognized religions. For example, most Baha'is are registered under the Shi'a sect. As such, a member of the Baha'i community can run for office and fill a seat allocated to the Shi'a sect. Similarly, Mormons are registered under the Greek Orthodox faith. Government decisions on granting official recognition of religious groups do not appear to be arbitrary.

The Government permits the publication in different languages of religious materials of every registered religion.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The 1989 Ta'if Agreement called for the eventual elimination of political sectarianism in favor of "expertise and competence;" however, little progress has been made in this regard. One notable exception is the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), which has significantly reduced the role of confessionalism in the appointment and promotion of officers and noncommissioned officers. 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.

Officially unrecognized groups such as Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and some evangelical denominations, 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. Protestant evangelical churches are required to register with the Evangelical Synod, a non-governmental advisory group that represents those churches with the Government. It is self-governing and oversees religious matters for Protestant congregations. Representatives of some churches have complained that the Synod has refused to accept new Protestant groups into its membership since 1975, thereby crippling their clergy's ability to minister to the members of those communities.

In February 2004 the Government denied a residency permit to the nonresident leader of a local Pentecostal community, who entered the country on a visitor's visa, and granted him seven days to depart the country. The Government informed him he needed to register as a religious worker and re-apply for a residency permit. He left the country as ordered, but was unable to return. He claimed he could not fulfill the requirement of registering as a religious worker because the head of the Evangelical Synod refused to register his congregation.

In October 2004 the minister of labor ordered shops in the coastal city of Sidon to close on Fridays at the request of the predominantly Muslim Merchants' Association of Sidon. This order was reportedly only partially observed.

Many families have relatives who belong to different religious communities and intermarriage is not uncommon; however, intermarriage is difficult to arrange in practice between members of some groups. Shari'a, which applies to personal status matters of Muslims, forbids the marriage of a non-Muslim male to a Muslim woman. Druze religious leaders will only perform marriages of Druze couples. There are no procedures for civil marriage; however, the Government recognizes civil marriage ceremonies performed outside the country.

There are no legal barriers to proselytizing; however, traditional attitudes of the clerical establishment strongly discourage such activity. The

respective sect's leadership councils make appointments to senior clerical posts. For example, the nomination of Sunni and Shi'a muftis is officially endorsed by the Government's Council of Ministers, and they receive monthly salaries from the Government. The Government appoints and pays the salaries of Muslim and Druze ecclesiastical judges. The leaders of other religious groups, such as Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholics, do not receive salaries from the Government.

The Government does not require citizens' religious affiliations to be indicated on their passports; however, religious affiliation is encoded on national identity cards.

In most cases, religious groups administer their own family and personal status laws. Many of these laws discriminate against women. For example, Sunni inheritance law provides 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.

In 2003 the cabinet endorsed a draft law allowing the country to adopt a curriculum proposed by the Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization making Islamic culture the core of the educational curriculum at all levels in schools and universities. Following strong condemnation and opposition from a wide range of Christian figures, including the head of the Maronite Church, the Shi'ite speaker of parliament argued that the bill violated the spirit of the constitution. The Government withdrew the bill in late 2003.

Article 473 of 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.

Students and teachers found to be working while on tourist visas are deemed to have violated their visa status and are consequently deported. The same sanction applies to religious workers not working under the auspices of a government-registered religious organization.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees during the reporting period.

#### Anti-Semitism

In 2003 Hizballah's Al-Manar television aired a Syrian-made, anti-Semitic mini-drama that it claimed to accurately portray the history of the Zionist movement. The station aired the inflammatory series *Al-Shatat* (The Diaspora) in daily segments during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan when television audiences peak. The Arab-Israeli conflict and Israel's former occupation of south Lebanon nurtured a strong antipathy for Israelis, and the country's media sometimes referred to Israel as "the Jewish State" to avoid referring explicitly to Israel. During the reporting period, the Shi'a terrorist organization Hizballah, through its media outlets, regularly directed strong rhetoric against Israel and its Jewish population and characterized many events in the region as part of a "Zionist conspiracy." Moreover, anti-Semitic literature was published and distributed with the cooperation of Hizballah.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

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

#### Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In October 2004, the outgoing minister of education yielded to years of pressure from Muslim leaders and ordered the closure of public schools on Fridays, the Islamic day of prayer. The decree stipulated that if students, teachers, and the neighborhood religious authority agreed, a local public school could continue to operate on Fridays and close over the Saturday-Sunday weekend, which Christians generally prefer. The decree resulted in the recognition of Muslim sensibilities in those neighborhoods where Muslims are the majority.

#### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there were periodic reports of tension between religious groups during the reporting period, which may be attributed to political differences and the fact that citizens still struggled with the legacy of a fifteen-year civil war that was fought largely along religious lines.

During the reporting period, several bombs were detonated in commercial areas of predominantly Christian neighborhoods. Leaders of all religious denominations condemned the bombings, but responsibility had not been determined by the end of the reporting period. It was presumed that these bombings were acts of violence aimed at provoking religious tensions.

In the months of March through May 2005, in the run-up to parliamentary elections, sectarian rhetoric steadily increased, culminating in a statement by the Maronite Bishops' Council that implied Muslim voters should not have a deciding voice in the election of Christian candidates. This statement by the council, as well as other politically motivated rhetoric from other religious groups, exacerbated sectarian tensions.

On February 5, 2006, in the aftermath of the publication of controversial cartoons in Europe, a crowd of several thousand predominantly Sunni protestors staged a demonstration outside the Danish Consulate, situated in the mainly Christian neighborhood of Achrafieh in downtown Beirut. The demonstration turned violent when protestors attempted to burn down the building housing the consulate and also attacked St. Maroun church (Maronite) and the St. Nicholas church (Greek Orthodox) causing slight material damage. Authorities arrested

441 persons, mostly for damage to the diplomatic facility. These cases were pending at the end of the reporting period.

In 2003 a bomb exploded outside the home of a western Christian missionary in Tripoli, killing one person.

A permanent search warrant remained in effect for the 2002 killing of an American citizen missionary affiliated with the Christian and Missionary Evangelical Alliance in Sidon, although the case was officially closed in April 2004. Investigations at the time of the killing suggested that Sunni extremists, possibly operating from the nearby Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp, were responsible.

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

The U.S. government actively promotes religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy in promoting human rights. The U.S. embassy advances this goal through contacts at all levels of society, public remarks, embassy public diplomacy programs, and the funding of relevant projects. Embassy officers met regularly with leaders of religious communities and regularly discussed issues relating to religious freedom and tolerance. The embassy complained to the minister of foreign affairs and minister of information about the airing of anti-Semitic programs by Al-Manar television. The U.S. government supports the principles of the Ta'if Agreement and embassy staff regularly discuss the issue of sectarianism with political, religious, and civic leaders.

In 2004 the embassy sent a member of the Islamic-Christian Dialogue Committee on a U.S. Department of State International Visitor Program to participate in an inter-faith program in the United States. Additionally, U.S.-funded programs in rural areas required civic participation, often involving villages of different religious backgrounds, with the aim of promoting cooperation between religious groups.

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