Responses to Information Requests

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Lebanon: Situation of Christians, including treatment by society and authorities; treatment of Christians by Hezbollah and Al-Qaeda; state protection (2011-2013)

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1. Background

Sources report that it is difficult to obtain statistics on religious affiliation, as Lebanon's last census took place in 1932 (Middle East Online 12 Sept. 2012; Christian Science Monitor 7 Oct. 2012). Some sources estimate that Christians make up approximately 39 percent of the population in Lebanon (ibid.; US 7 Jan. 2013). The US International Religious Freedom Report for 2012 indicates that, according to Statistics Lebanon, a Beirut-based research firm, the religious breakdown of the population in Lebanon is as follows:

- an estimated 27 percent is Sunni Muslim,
- 27 percent Shia Muslim,
- 21 percent Maronite Christian,
- 8 percent Greek Orthodox,
- 5.6 percent Druze, and
- 5 percent Greek Catholic, with the remaining 6.5 percent belonging to smaller Christian groups. There are also very small numbers of Jews, Bahais, Buddhists, Hindus, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). (20 May 2013, 1)

The same report states that there are 12 officially recognized Christian groups: Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics, Armenian Orthodox (Gregorians), Armenian Catholics, Syriac Orthodox (Jacobites), Syriac Catholics, Assyrians (Nestorians), Chaldeans, Copts, evangelicals (including Baptists and Seventh-day Adventists), and Latins (Roman Catholics) (ibid., 2).

2. Situation of Christians

The US International Religious Freedom Report for 2012 indicates that, according to the constitution, Christians and Muslims should be equally represented in "parliament, the cabinet, and high-level civil service positions ...It also provides that these posts be distributed proportionally among the recognized religious groups" (ibid.). Sources indicate that, according to the "National Pact" of 1943, the president of Lebanon must be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister must be a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament must be a Shia Muslim (ibid., 2-3; Freedom House 2013). According to the US International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, members of "minority" Christian groups," such as Syriac Christians, have indicated that they have been excluded from ministerial positions, and that Maronite and Greek Orthodox Christians are given most positions (20 May 2013, 5). The US Department of State's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012 states that Coptic Christians were not allocated any seats in Parliament (19 Apr. 2013, 25).

Sources report that a draft law called the Orthodox Gathering Law states that citizens can only vote for candidates of their own religious sect in elections (Al Monitor 22 Feb. 2013; Al Arabiya News 23 Feb. 2013). The draft law was approved by Lebanon's parliamentary committees and needs to pass a parliamentary vote to become a law (ibid.; Al Monitor 22 Feb. 2013). Naharnet, a digital news source based in Lebanon (Naharnet
n.d.), indicates that parliament did not convene to vote on the law (ibid. 15 May 2013). It also reports that a former MP has proposed "a new electoral law that combines winner-takes-all system with the Orthodox Gathering law" (ibid. 3 Dec. 2013). Further information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Al Jazeera reports that, due to the approximately one million Syrian refugees that have fled to Lebanon, there is acute overcrowding (Al Jazeera 20 Oct. 2013). It also reports that, in the “predominantly Christian Jdeideh-Fakehe community in the Bekaa Valley ...water, electricity, and food production have all been severely taxed, causing months-long shortages” (ibid.). According to the mayor of Jdeideh-Fakehe [Bekaa Valley], as reported by Al Jazeera, Hezbollah has been assisting "poor Christian and Muslim families with petrol and food" in the area affected by overcrowding due to the influx of Syrian refugees (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. Treatment

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a visiting lecturer on human rights at Saint Joseph University in Beirut, who has also worked for several international organizations in the Arab region, provided information based on his personal knowledge (Visiting Lecturer 5 Jan. 2014). In his view, Christians - as a collectivity - in Lebanon did not face targeted violence [from 2011 to 2013] because of their religious affiliation. The Christians who died because of security incidents during that period were not targeted in particular, but happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. (ibid.)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The visiting lecturer also indicated that

On individual level, there were incidents targeting Christians in some areas (Tripoli city and the South namely Sidon, East-Sidon villages, Tyr and surrounding areas). However, analyzing this trend would lead to the conclusion that these incidents were mainly motivated by the professional activity of the targeted persons (i.e., selling alcoholic drinks, managing pubs or nightclubs...) and not the religious affiliation. Now it happens that a significant number of those involved in such types of businesses in Muslim areas are Christians because it is socially embarrassing for many Muslims to do so. However, the record of these incidents shows that such businesses owned by Muslims were also targeted with almost the same frequency and intensity. Hence the conclusion that these attacks were not motivated by the religious affiliation but rather by the type of business, considered by some groups as contrary to "Islamic values" (at least as per their own definition). (ibid.)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Media sources report that in January 2014, a library [bookstore (AP 9 Jan. 2014)] in Tripoli owned by a Greek Orthodox priest was burned down, damaging thousands of books, after rumours that the priest allegedly wrote an "anti-Islamic tract" (AP 9 Jan. 2014; AFP 3 Jan. 2014). The Associated Press (AP) reports that, Muslims and Christians volunteered to repair the "shop" (AP 9 Jan. 2014). The AP also reports that, two days prior to the incident, gunmen fired at an employee in the bookstore (ibid.). AP indicates that, according to relatives of the priest, he had been "harassed ...for years to move" (ibid.). Agence France Presse (AFP) reports that "[s]ectarian violence involving the city’s Christians has been extremely rare in recent years" (3 Jan. 2014).

The US International and Religious Freedom Report for 2012 indicates that on May 7, 2012 unknown persons kidnapped a Christian priest at gunpoint in the Bekaa, reportedly because he baptized a Shia woman who fled her home after converting to Christianity. The kidnappers released the priest after several hours. The priest reported that the kidnappers were searching for the woman's location. (US 20 May 2013, 6)

The US International and Religious Freedom Report for 2012 also reports on the vandalism of churches, including the Holy Cross Armenian Catholic Church (ibid., 7).

3.1 Treatment by Hezbollah and Al-Qaeda

According to the US International Religious Freedom Report for 2012 for Lebanon, "there were periodic reports of tension and occasional confrontations among religious groups, exacerbated by political differences, the legacy of civil war, and the violence in neighbouring Syria" (ibid., 6). The International Crisis Group reports on concerns among Christians about "rising Islamism and growing numbers of Syrian refugees" (International
Sources indicate that Christians are divided between two political camps: the March 8 coalition and the March 14 coalition (Freedom House 2013; International Crisis Group 13 May 2013, 7, 14). According to the International Crisis Group,

the March 14 coalition derives its name from massive anti-Syrian demonstration organised on that day in 2005. At the time, the coalition included the predominantly Sunni Future Current, the Lebanese forces and Phalanges, two Christian parties led, respectively, by Samir Gaegea and former President Amine Gemayel, and Walid Jumblatt, the Druze Leader. Jumblatt withdrew from the coalition in 2009. (ibid., 14)

The International Crisis Group also says that the name of the March 8 coalition refers to a massive demonstration organised by pro-Syrian Lebanese parties on 8 March 2005, expressing gratitude to Damascus. It includes the two principal Shiite movements, Hizbollah and Amal, and other pro-Syrian parties. The Christian Free Patriotic Movement, led by Michel Aoun, joined the coalition following its alliance with Hizbollah in 2006. (13 May 2013, 7)

According to the visiting lecturer,

[t]he way Hezbollah treats Christians is defined around the organization’s strategic interests. First comes the security of the organization itself. Therefore any individual (Christian or non-Christian) who is deemed to be an existential/imminent threat to the organization’s security will be subject to close monitoring and neutralization (through intimidation, detention, physical elimination or other means). This red line is not subject to compromise. The second strategic interest in line is to avoid any unnecessary internal conflict. This is why an exclusively Shia Hezbollah deployed lot of efforts to get a "Christian" coverage of its activities through a political alliance with the Free Patriotic Movement led by former PM and Army Commander General Michel Aoun. Hezbollah translates this into a zealous attitude of tolerance and integration towards Christians living in areas under their control (always provided these Christians don’t constitute a threat to the organization’s security of course). This apparent will to show that Christians are “equal partners” and “protected” does not extend to concrete measures to strengthen the Christians’ participation in decision making; a power that the Christians lost after the end of the war in 1990. (ibid.)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources indicate that Hezbollah has been buying land from Christians (Slate 13 Jan. 2011; Ya Libnan 4 Jan. 2012). Ya Libnan, a Lebanese news source that was founded after the assassination of Lebanon’s former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri (Ya Libnan, n.d.), reports that Christians and Druze “politicians and citizens are concerned about the acquisition of land by Hezbollah” (ibid.). Human Rights Watch reports that “some municipalities have announced that they will prevent the sale of land and houses from Christians to Muslims in their areas by refusing to approve the transactions” (16 Dec. 2012).

Media sources report on attacks perpetrated by Al-Qaeda affiliated groups in Lebanon (Reuters 19 Nov. 2013; Naharnet 4 Jan. 2014). The visiting lecturer indicates that Al-Qaeda and affiliates adopt a more rigorous stand against non-Sunnis including Christians. For them, non-Sunnis are apostates who should either be reformed or killed. However, these groups do not exercise an exclusive control over any area in Lebanon. Although very few cells existed in Lebanon for the last 20 or 30 years, Lebanon witnessed a proliferation of such groups since 2011, partially due to the spillover of the Syrian
crisis to Lebanon. There were few incidents attributed to these groups especially in Northern Lebanon (Tripoli and Akkar) but not exclusively against Christians. Since 2011, these groups did not reach - yet - a critical size to constitute a real threat against Christians or other non-Sunni constituents in Lebanon. Moreover, their priority is to curb the influence of Hezbollah and the Shias; attacking Christians is not on top of their priorities.

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. State Protection

According to the visiting lecturer, "[t]here are no specific protection mechanisms for Christians or to any other constituent of Lebanese society" (5 Jan. 2014). The visiting lecturer added that the "nature of the Lebanese system and the resources put at the disposal of police forces or other state institutions do not allow an effective protection of Lebanese citizens" (5 Jan. 2014). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References


________. 20 October 2012. "WORLD; Lebanon; Car Bomb Hits a Nerve." (Factiva)


Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact the following individuals and organizations were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Toronto; Lebanese Center for Human Rights; Head Office of the Maronite Church in Montreal. Our Lady of Lebanon Parish was unable to provide information for this Response.

Internet sites, including: Al Manar TV Lebanon; Amnesty International; Catholic News Agency; Christianity Today; Conciliation Resources; Daily Star; ecoi.net; Human Rights Watch; International Christian Concern; Jamestown Foundation; Lebanon – Government of Lebanon, National News Agency; United Nations – Refworld.