

# LEBANON 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution states there shall be “absolute freedom of conscience” and guarantees the free exercise of religious rites for all religious groups provided they do not disturb the public order. The constitution also states there shall be a “just and equitable balance” in the apportionment of cabinet and high-level civil service positions among the major religious groups, a situation reaffirmed by the Taef Agreement, which ended the country’s civil war and mandated equal representation between Christians and Muslims in parliament. Parliamentary elections in May resulted in the confessional balance of parliament remaining unchanged. The government continued to enforce laws against defamation and contempt for religion. On July 19, the cybercrime unit interrogated online activist Charbel Khoury when one of his Facebook posts raised public controversy for allegedly mocking a popular Maronite Christian saint. On May 15, a judge dropped all criminal charges against poet Ahmad Sbeity for reportedly insulting the Virgin Mary in an online post. According to Human Rights Watch, some municipal governments of largely Christian cities have, since 2016, forcibly evicted mostly Muslim Syrian refugees and expelled them from localities. Some members of unregistered religious groups, such as Baha’is and nonrecognized Protestant faiths, continued to list themselves as belonging to recognized religious groups to ensure their marriage and other personal status documents remained legally valid. Government officials repeatedly and publicly reiterated the country’s commitment to religious freedom and diversity. At least 30 cases of interreligious civil marriage remained pending following the government’s continuation of the halt on their registration. Hizballah, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, continued to exercise control over territory, particularly the southern suburbs of Beirut and southern areas of the country, both of which are predominantly Shia.

There was one report of a religiously motivated killing when a Sunni sheikh and his two brothers allegedly killed another Sunni man on August 25 over a blasphemy allegation. Muslim and Christian community leaders reported the continued operation of places of worship in relative peace and security and said relationships among individual members of different religious groups continued to be amicable. Once again, the Jewish Community Council reported acts of vandalism at Jewish cemeteries in Beirut and Sidon.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officers engaged government officials to encourage tolerance and mutual respect among religious communities, and to highlight the importance of combating violent religious extremism. The Ambassador and other embassy officers met with religious leaders and members of civil society to engage in dialogue on religious tolerance and the role of confessional dynamics in the country's society and politics, and also investigated claims of religious discrimination in the provision of assistance to Iraqi Christian refugees. Embassy public outreach and assistance programs continued to emphasize tolerance for all religious groups; these included projects to counter violent extremism related to religion, and interfaith summer exchange programs.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 6.1 million (July 2018 estimate). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other organizations estimate the total population includes approximately 4.5 million citizens and an estimated 1.3 million refugees fleeing the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, the vast majority of whom are Syrian, as well as a Palestinian refugee population present in the country for nearly 70 years.

Statistics Lebanon, an independent firm, estimates 61.1 percent of the citizen population is Muslim (30.6 percent Sunni, 30.5 percent Shia, and small percentages of Alawites and Ismailis). Statistics Lebanon estimates that 33.7 percent of the population is Christian. Maronite Catholics are the largest Christian group, followed by Greek Orthodox. Other Christian groups include Greek Catholics (Melkites), Armenian Orthodox (Gregorians), Armenian Catholics, Syriac Orthodox (Jacobites), Syriac Catholics, Assyrians (Nestorians), Chaldeans, Copts, Protestants (including Presbyterians, Baptists, and Seventh-day Adventists), Latin (Roman) Catholics, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

According to Statistics Lebanon, 5.2 percent of the population is Druze and is concentrated in the rural, mountainous areas east and south of Beirut. There are also small numbers of Jews, Baha'is, Buddhists, and Hindus. The Jewish Community Council, which represents the Lebanese Jewish community, estimates that approximately 100 Jews remain in the country.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates there are approximately 1.3 million refugees from Syria in the country, mainly Sunni Muslims, but also including Shia Muslims, Christians, and Druze. UNRWA

estimates that there are between 250,000 and 280,000 Palestinians still living in the country as UN-registered refugees in 12 camps and surrounding areas. Comprised of refugees who entered the country in the 1940s and 1950s, including their descendants, they are largely Sunni Muslims but also include Christians.

UNHCR estimates there are just under 30,000 Iraqi refugees in Lebanon. Refugees and foreign migrants also include largely Sunni Kurds, Sunni and Shia Muslims and Chaldeans from Iraq, and Coptic Christians from Egypt and Sudan. According to the secretary-general of the Syriac League, an NGO that advocates for Syriac Christians in the country, approximately 10,000 Iraqi Christians of all denominations and 3,000 to 4,000 Coptic Christians reside in the country.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states there shall be “absolute freedom of conscience” and declares the state will respect all religious groups and denominations, as well as the personal status and religious interests of persons of every religious group. The constitution guarantees free exercise of religious rites, provided they do not disturb the public order, and declares the equality of rights and duties for all citizens without discrimination or preference.

By law, an individual is free to convert to a different religion if a local senior official of the religious group the person wishes to join approves the change. The newly joined religious group issues a document confirming the convert's new religion, and allowing the convert to register her or his new religion with the Ministry of Interior’s Personal Status Directorate. The new religion is included thereafter on government-issued civil registration documents.

Citizens have the right to remove the customary notation of their religion from government-issued civil registration documents or change how it is listed. Changing the documents does not require approval of religious officials.

The penal code stipulates a maximum prison term of one year for anyone convicted of “blaspheming God publicly.” It does not provide a definition of what this entails.

The penal code also criminalizes defamation and contempt for religion, and stipulates a maximum prison term of three years.

By law, religious groups may apply to the government for official recognition. To do so, it must submit a statement of its doctrine and moral principles to the cabinet, which evaluates whether the group's principles are in accord with the government's perception of popular values and the constitution. Alternatively, an unrecognized religious group may apply for recognition by applying to a recognized religious group. In doing so, the unrecognized group does not gain recognition as a separate group, but becomes an affiliate of the group through which it applies. This process has the same requirements as applying for recognition directly with the government.

There are 18 officially recognized religious groups. These include four Muslim groups (Shia, Sunni, Alawite, and Ismaili), 12 Christian groups (Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Assyrian, Chaldean, Copt, Evangelical, and Latin Catholic), Druze, and Jews. Groups the government does not recognize include Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and several Protestant groups.

Official recognition of a religious group allows baptisms and marriages performed by the group to receive government sanction. Official recognition also conveys other benefits, such as tax-exempt status and the right to apply the religious group's codes to personal status matters. By law, the government permits recognized religious groups to administer their own rules on family and personal status issues including marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Shia, Sunni, recognized Christian, and Druze groups have state-appointed, government-subsidized clerical courts to administer family and personal status law.

Religious groups perform all marriages and divorces; there are no formalized procedures for civil marriage or divorce. The government recognizes civil marriage ceremonies performed outside the country irrespective of the religious affiliation of each partner in the marriage. While some Christian and Muslim religious authorities will perform interreligious marriages, clerics, priests, or religious courts will often require the non-belonging partner to pledge to raise their children in the religion of their partner and/or to give up certain rights such as inheritance or custody claims in the case of divorce.

Nonrecognized religious groups may own property and may assemble for worship and perform their religious rites freely. They may not perform legally recognized marriage or divorce proceedings and they have no standing to determine inheritance issues. Given agreements in the country's confessional system that

designate percentages of senior government positions, and in some cases specific positions, for the recognized religious confessions, members of unrecognized groups do not have any opportunity to occupy certain government positions, including cabinet, parliamentary, secretary-general, and director general positions.

The government requires Protestant churches to register with the Evangelical Synod, a self-governing advisory group overseeing religious matters for Protestant congregations, and representing those churches to the government.

The law allows censorship of religious publications under a number of conditions, including if the government deems the material incites sectarian discord or threatens national security.

According to the constitution, recognized religious communities may have their own schools, provided they follow the general rules issued for public schools, which stipulate schools must not incite sectarian discord or threaten national security. Approximately 70 percent of students attend private schools, which despite many having ties to confessional groups, are often open to children of other religious groups as well. The Ministry of Education does not require or encourage religious education in public schools, but it is permitted, and both Christian and Muslim local religious representatives sometimes host educational sessions in public schools.

The constitution states “sectarian groups” shall be represented in a “just and equitable balance” in the cabinet and high-level civil service positions, which includes the ministry ranks of secretary-general and director general. It also states these posts shall be distributed proportionately among the recognized religious groups. This distribution of positions among religious groups is based on the unwritten 1943 National Pact, which used religious affiliation data from the 1932 census (the last conducted in the country), and also applies to the civil service, the judiciary, military and security institutions, and public agencies at both the national and local levels of government. Parliament is elected on the basis of “equality between Christians and Muslims.” Druze and Alawites are included in this allocation with the Muslim communities.

The constitution also states there is no legitimacy for any authorities that contradict the “pact of communal existence,” thereby giving force of law to the unwritten 1943 National Pact, although that agreement is neither an official component of the constitution nor a formally binding agreement. According to the pact, the

president shall be a Maronite Christian, the speaker of parliament shall be a Shia Muslim, and the prime minister shall be a Sunni Muslim.

The Taef Agreement, which ended the country's 15-year civil war in 1989, also mandates equal Muslim and Christian representation in parliament, but makes changes to the powers of the Maronite Christian presidency, including subjecting the designations of the prime minister and other cabinet ministers to consultations with parliament. In addition, the agreement endorses the constitutional provision of appointing most senior government officials according to religious affiliation, including senior positions within the military and other security forces. Customarily, a Christian heads the army, while the directors general of the Internal Security Forces and Directorate of General Security are Sunni and Shia, respectively. Several other top positions in the security services are customarily designated for particular confessions as well. While specific positions are designated by custom rather than law, deviating from custom is rare and could provoke a political crisis if an acceptable swap or accommodation were not mutually agreed by the confessions concerned. The Taef Agreement mandates a cabinet with seats allocated equally between Muslims (to include Druze and Alawites) and Christians. The Taef Agreement's stipulations on equality of representation between members of different confessions do not apply to citizens who do not list a religious affiliation on their national registration, and thus they cannot hold a seat designated for a specific confession.

In June 2017 parliament approved a new electoral law replacing the country's winner-take-all system for parliamentary elections with a proportional vote. The law does not affect the Christian-Muslim proportionality of parliament.

By law, the synod of each Christian group elects its patriarchs; the Sunni and Shia electoral bodies elect their respective senior clerics; and the Druze community elects its *sheikh al-aql*. The government council of ministers must endorse the nomination of Sunni and Shia muftis, as well as the Druze *sheikh al-aql*, and pay their salaries. The government also appoints and pays the salaries of Muslim and Druze clerical judges. By law, the government does not endorse Christian patriarchs and does not pay the salaries of Christian clergy and officials of Christian groups.

The government issues foreign religious workers a one-month visa; in order to stay longer a worker must complete a residency application during the month. Religious workers also must sign a "commitment of responsibility" form before receiving a visa, which subjects the worker to legal prosecution and immediate

deportation for any activity involving religious or other criticism directed against the state or any other country, except Israel. If the government finds an individual engaging in religious activity while on a tourist visa, the government may determine a violation of the visa category has occurred and deport the individual.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

The government continued to enforce laws against defamation and contempt for religion. On July 19, the Internal Security Force's cybercrime unit interrogated online activist Charbel Khoury when one of his Facebook posts generated public controversy for allegedly mocking a popular Maronite Christian saint. The judge in the case ordered Khoury to sign a pledge to abstain from his Facebook account for one month and not to criticize religions. On May 15, a judge dropped all criminal charges against poet Ahmad Sbeity for a Facebook post that reportedly insulted the Virgin Mary. In September government censors banned the screening of the U.S. film *The Nun* for insulting Christianity. For the third year in a row, there was no judicial action on the lawsuit filed in 2015 by Member of Parliament Ziad Aswad of the Free Patriotic Movement against "You Stink" activist Assad Thebian for "defamation and contempt of religion" for comments he made about Christianity.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported in April that, since 2016, some municipal governments engaged in forcibly evicting Syrian refugees from their homes and expelling them from their localities to other locations in Lebanon. The HRW report stated that religious affiliation was among several reasons for the evictions. Most of those interviewed by HRW said that their eviction was due, in part, to their religious identity. According to UNHCR, the municipalities identified as being involved in forcibly evicting and expelling Syrian refugees were predominantly Christian. Monthly community tension reports prepared jointly by the UN Development Program (UNDP) and UNHCR along with NGO and implementing partners using population survey data from UNDP, however, did not identify religious discrimination as the key driver of tension between refugees and host communities. NGOs and international organizations, including the UNDP, UNHCR, and other UN agencies, also reported that perceptions of competition for jobs, resources, and land were the predominant factors driving refugee evictions, along with security concerns and Lebanon's history with Syria.

Some members of unregistered religious groups, such as Baha'is and members of nonrecognized Protestant faiths, continued to list themselves as belonging to recognized religious groups in government records in order to ensure their marriage and other personal status documents remained legally valid. Many Baha'is said they chose to list themselves as Shia Muslims in order to effectively manage civil matters officially administered by Shia institutions.

The government again failed to take action to approve a request from the Jewish community to change its official name to the Jewish Community Council from the Israeli Communal Council (the group's current officially recognized name). Additionally, the Jewish community faced difficulty importing material for religious rites, as customs agents were reportedly wary of allowing imports of any origin containing Hebrew script given the ban on trade of Israeli goods.

Following the May 6 parliamentary elections, non-Maronite Christian groups reiterated criticism that the government made little progress toward the Taef Agreement's goal of eliminating political sectarianism in favor of "expertise and competence." Members of these groups, which include Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, and Chaldeans, among others, said the fact that the government allotted them only one of the 64 Christian seats in parliament, constituted government discrimination. The Syriac League continued to call for more representation for non-Maronite and non-Greek Orthodox Christians in cabinet positions, parliament, and high-level civil service positions, typically held by members of the larger Christian religious groups.

Members of all confessions serve in all military, intelligence, and security services, including in high-ranking positions.

During his September 26 remarks to the UN General Assembly in New York, President Michel Aoun repeated his call to make Lebanon a regional hub for religious dialogue. During the July 24-26 Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington, Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil reiterated the government's commitment to religious freedom and pluralism, stating that religious diversity strengthened the country.

During the year, there was no movement on the 30 or more cases of civil marriage that awaited registration with the Ministry of Interior since 2013. The cases remained unresolved, with no evidence of forthcoming action.

### **Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors**



Hizballah, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, continued to exercise control over territory, particularly the southern suburbs of Beirut and southern areas of the country, both of which are predominantly Shia. There, it provided a number of basic services such as health care, education, food aid, infrastructure repair, and internal security. There continued to be reports of Hizballah controlling access to the neighborhoods and localities under its control, including in Beirut's southern suburbs and areas of the Bekaa and South Lebanon.

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

On August 25, a Sunni sheikh and his two brothers allegedly killed another Sunni man in the northern town of Minieh. Media reported that the dispute began when the sheikh accused the man of making a blasphemous remark in a market, after which the sheikh and his two brothers followed the man outside where they attacked and killed him with knives and cleavers. Police arrested the men involved and their case was ongoing at year's end. Human rights NGOs and activists criticized the lack of an immediate condemnation by the grand mufti or other high-level Sunni or government authorities.

The Jewish Community Council reported acts of vandalism at the Jewish cemetery in Sidon, including the destruction and desecration of gravesites. Authorities granted the Jewish Community Council a permit to restore the Sidon cemetery following the acts of vandalism. The council's 2011 lawsuit against individuals who constructed buildings in the Jewish cemetery in Tripoli continued, pending additional court-ordered analysis of the site, and was unresolved by year's end. The council made little progress with the municipality of Beirut regarding construction debris and other garbage dumped in the Beirut Jewish cemetery.

Religious leaders stated that relationships among individual members of different religious groups remained amicable. On August 28, Christian and Muslim religious leaders met with the Swiss president at the summer residence of Maronite Patriarch Rai and appealed to the international community to work toward protecting peace in the region and the dignity of refugees. During the meeting, Rai said "this presence of high Muslim and Christian dignitaries clearly reflects the uniqueness of Lebanon as a country of convergence and interfaith dialogue."

Christian and Muslim religious leaders from the major denominations continued to participate in interfaith dialogues throughout the year and to call for unity against

extremism. At a February 26 conference in Vienna, the highest leaders of some of the country's major religious communities, including Maronite Patriarch Bechara Rai, Grand Mufti of the Republic Abdel Latif Deryan, and Armenian Orthodox Catholicos Aram I Keshishian, joined 23 high-ranking Arab Muslim and Christian authorities to commit to work together to rebuild and protect their communities from the effects of religiously motivated violent extremist rhetoric and actions. The group launched the first interreligious platform to advocate for the rights and inclusion of all communities in the Arab world, combat ideologies instigating hatred and sectarianism, and jointly address the challenges their communities face.

A survey by the Adyan Foundation found that nearly 70 percent of first-time voters among all religious groups between 21 and 28 years old identified "being open to all people of different beliefs and fraternizing with them in order to live their values and promote the common good" as the most important daily embodiment of their faith.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to engage government officials on the need to encourage tolerance, dialogue, and mutual respect among religious groups.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers met with individual politicians representing different religious groups to discuss the views of their constituents and promote religious tolerance. The Ambassador met with the leadership of the Sunni, Shia, Druze, and Christian communities to promote interfaith dialogue and urge them to take steps to counter violent extremism. Embassy officers met with civil society representatives to convey similar messages. On June 2, the Ambassador participated in an iftar with prominent leaders of the Muslim and Christian communities in Tripoli to promote an embassy-supported program to prevent youth religious radicalization. The Ambassador stressed the importance of interfaith dialogue and the need to provide opportunities to vulnerable youth across confessions.

On May 20, a senior embassy officer delivered remarks at the graduation ceremony for participants of an embassy-supported program bringing together 750 religiously diverse students from 42 high schools across the country to increase their understanding of religious diversity. Religiously mixed students also collaborated to develop and lead community service projects serving geographically and religiously diverse communities across the country.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers met with Iraqi Christian refugees, Chaldean Church officials, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in November to assess complaints of religious-based discrimination in the provision of refugee assistance. While finding no evidence of widespread religious discrimination in the provision of services to refugees, the Ambassador facilitated agreement on a number of steps UNHCR and the Chaldean Church could take to improve communication and cooperation in their provision of assistance. For the eighth consecutive year, the embassy selected five students between 18 and 25 years old to participate in a five-week visitor exchange program at Temple University where they learned about religious pluralism in the United States, visited places of worship, and participated in cultural activities in order to apply this knowledge to issues in Lebanon.