

LEBANON 2020 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 provision amended by the Taif Agreement, which ended the country’s civil war and mandated proportional representation between Christians and Muslims in parliament, the cabinet, and other senior government positions. On March 9, President Michel Aoun publicly expressed support for a unified personal status law as part of the civil code to replace current personal status laws, which are based on religious affiliation, but no legislation was drafted or considered. The Internal Security Forces (ISF) questioned journalist and activist Nidal Ayoub on January 7 in relation to posters she carried during protests with slogans such as “God is great but the revolution is greater.” Authorities released Ayoub after questioning. On June 23, the Mount Lebanon Public Prosecutor of the Appeals Court pressed charges against anti-Hizballah Shia cleric Sayyed Ali al-Amine, accusing him of “attacking the resistance and its martyrs,” “inciting strife among sects,” “violating the legal rules of the Shia sect,” and for meeting with Israeli officials at a conference in Bahrain. Authorities postponed al-Amine’s hearing until January 15, 2021. On November 13, a young man attacked the muezzin of the Sultan Abdel Majid bin Adham mosque in Jbeil, prompting condemnation from across the religious and political spectrum. Authorities detained the attacker the same day. On April 16, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Military Intelligence Bureau detained activist Michel Chamoun for posting a video in which he criticized Maronite Patriarch Rai. Authorities later released Chamoun after the Patriarch said he did not want the matter pursued. Some members of unregistered religious groups, such as Baha’is and unrecognized Protestant faiths, continued to list themselves as belonging to recognized religious groups to ensure their marriage and other personal status documents remained legally valid.

Hizballah, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, continued to exercise control over some territory, particularly the southern suburbs of Beirut, parts of the Bekaa valley, and southern areas of the country, which are predominantly Shia Muslim. Hizballah supporters clashed with other Shia groups, including members of the Amal Movement, and with Sunnis in Loubye, Nabaa, and Khalde around the Ashura holiday over the hanging of banners, resulting in three deaths and multiple

injuries. In a June 18 report, *Teaching Antisemitism and Terrorism in Hezbollah Schools*, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) stated that textbooks used in schools run by Hizballah's education branch "are filled with systematic and egregious incitement to antisemitism and support for terrorism."

Shia and Sunni protesters clashed in Beirut on June 6. Two persons were injured during the clashes and Shia protesters, mostly supporters of Amal and Hizballah, led chants disparaging the Prophet Mohammed's wife, Aisha. The Jewish Community Council reported that dumping of trash and rubble at Jewish cemeteries in Beirut and Sidon continued during the year. Muslim and Christian community leaders said relationships among individual members of different religious groups continued to be amicable. The press reported that in a series of Sunday sermons, Maronite Patriarch Rai appeared to criticize Hizballah, stressing the need to both expand the country's policy of distancing the country from regional conflicts and maintain the current sharing of political power among the country's religious groups.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officers engaged government officials to encourage tolerance, dialogue, and mutual respect among religious communities and to highlight the importance of combating violent religious extremism. The Ambassador spoke with Christian, Shia, Sunni, and Druze religious leaders throughout the year to discuss the impact of the economic situation on different religious communities. Embassy public outreach and assistance programs continued to emphasize tolerance for all religious groups, including through interfaith programs.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.5 million (midyear 2020 estimate). The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other organizations estimate the total population includes 4.5 million citizens and an estimated 1.5 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 more than 70 years. United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East estimates there are more than 180,000 currently in the country.

Statistics Lebanon, an independent firm, estimates 67.8 percent of the citizen population is Muslim (31.9 percent Sunni, 31.2 percent Shia, and small percentages of Alawites and Ismailis). Statistics Lebanon estimates 32.4 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, Armenian Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, Assyrians, Chaldean Catholics, Copts, Protestants (including Presbyterians, Baptists, and Seventh-day Adventists), Roman (Latin) Catholics, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ).

According to Statistics Lebanon, 4.5 percent of the population is Druze, 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 country's Jewish community, estimates 70 Jews reside in the country.

UNHCR reports that the refugees from Syria in the country are mainly Sunni Muslims, but also Shia Muslims, Christians, and Druze. Palestinians live in the country as UN-registered refugees in 12 camps and surrounding areas. They are mostly the descendants of refugees who entered the country in the 1940s and 1950s. Most are Sunni Muslims but some are Christians.

UNHCR states there are approximately 12,200 UNHCR-registered Iraqi refugees in the country. Refugees and foreign migrants from Iraq include mostly Sunni Kurds, Sunni and Shia Muslims, and Chaldeans. There are also Coptic Christians from Egypt and Sudan. According to the secretary-general of the Syriac League, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that advocates for Syriac Christians in the country, approximately 4,000 Iraqi Christians of all denominations and 3,000 to 4,000 Coptic Christians reside in the country. According to the same NGO, the majority of Iraqi Christian refugees are not registered with UNHCR and so are not included in their count. The NGO noted that the population size of Iraqi Christians had decreased by 60 percent since 2019, largely because of emigration driven by the country's economic crisis.

Persons from all religious groups emigrated from the country during the year, in large part due to the country's deteriorating economic situation. There is anecdotal evidence that Christians constituted a significant portion of those who left the country, especially following the August 4 Beirut Port explosion, with some citing fears for their security and potential treatment in an unpredictable political environment as a reason for their departure.

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, allowing the convert to register her or his new religion with the Ministry of Interior’s (MOI’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 and does not change or remove the individual’s registration with the Personal Status Directorate.

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. A publications law regulates print media. The law includes provisions that impose potential fines or jail terms for sectarian provocation and prohibit the press from publishing blasphemous content regarding the country’s officially recognized religions or content that may provoke sectarian feuds.

The law governing audiovisual media bans live broadcasts of certain religious events and prohibits the broadcast of programs that seek to harm public morals, ignite sectarian strife, or insult religious beliefs. 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. Elements of the law permit censorship of religious material considered a threat to national security or offensive to the dignity of the head of state or foreign leaders. 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. Officials from any of the recognized religious groups may

request that the Directorate of General Security (DGS) ban a book. The government may prosecute offending journalists and publications in the publications court. Authorities occasionally also refer such cases to criminal courts, a process not established in law.

The penal code criminalizes defamation and contempt for religion and stipulates a maximum prison term of three years for either of these offenses.

By law, religious groups may apply to the government for official recognition. To do so, a religious group 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, a nonrecognized religious group may apply for recognition by seeking affiliation with another recognized religious group. In doing so, the nonrecognized 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: five Muslim groups (Shia, Sunni, Druze, Alawite, and Ismaili), 12 Christian groups (Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Assyrian, Chaldean, Copt, evangelical Protestant, and Roman Catholic), and Jews. Groups the government does not recognize include Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, several Protestant groups, and the Church of Jesus Christ.

Official recognition of a religious group allows baptisms and marriages performed by the group to receive government recognition, which 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. While the religious courts and religious laws are legally bound to comply with the provisions of the constitution, the Court of Cassation, the highest civil court in the judicial system, has very limited oversight of religious court proceedings and decisions.

There are no formalized procedures for civil marriage or divorce. The government recognizes heterosexual 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 often require the nonbelonging partner to pledge to raise his or her children in the religion of the partner and/or to relinquish certain rights, such as inheritance or custody claims, in the case of divorce.

Nonrecognized religious groups may own property, assemble for worship, and perform religious rites freely. They may not perform legally recognized marriage or divorce proceedings, and they have no standing to determine inheritance issues. Due to 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 nonrecognized groups have no 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.

According to the constitution, recognized religious communities may operate 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. The government permits but does not require religious education in public schools. 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 major 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). 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. This proportional distribution also applies to high-level positions in 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 equal representation between Christians and Muslims, and cabinet positions must be allocated on the same basis. Druze and sometimes Alawites are included in this allocation within 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.

The Taif Agreement, which ended the country’s 15-year civil war in 1989, also mandates elections based on the principle of proportional representation between Muslims and Christians in parliament but reaffirms the Christian and Muslim allocation at 50 percent each. The agreement reduced the constitutional powers of the Maronite Christian presidency and increased those of the Sunni Muslim Prime Minister while also subjecting the designation of the Prime Minister to binding consultations with parliament and the designations of all ministers to a parliamentary vote of confidence.

In addition, the Taif 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 ISF and the DGS 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 any change or accommodation generally must be mutually agreed by the confessions concerned.

The Taif Agreement’s stipulations on equality of representation among 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. Authorities allocate every government-recognized religion, except Ismaili Islam and Judaism, at least one seat in parliament, regardless of the number of its adherents.

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*, its most senior religious leader. The cabinet must endorse the nomination of Sunni and Shia muftis, as well as the *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; 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 ISF’s Cybercrimes Bureau questioned journalist and activist Nidal Ayoub on January 7 about posters she carried during protests with slogans such as “God is great but the revolution is greater.” Authorities released Ayoub after questioning.

On June 23, Mount Lebanon Public Prosecutor of the Appeals Court pressed charges against anti-Hizballah Shia cleric Sayyed Ali al-Amine following a lawsuit filed by lawyer Ghassan al-Mawla. The lawsuit accused al-Amine of “attacking the resistance and its martyrs,” “inciting strife among sects,” “violating the legal rules of the Shia sect,” and meeting with Israeli officials in a conference in Bahrain. The court scheduled al-Amine’s hearing to begin September 18 but postponed it to January 15, 2021.

On November 13, a young man assaulted the muezzin of the Sultan Abdel Majid bin Adham mosque in the town of Jbeil. The LAF Military Intelligence Bureau arrested the perpetrator the same day and referred him to the ISF for investigation. The LAF Military Intelligence Bureau issued a statement reporting that the incident was a personal dispute that led to the injury of the muezzin. Jbeil Sunni Mufti Sheikh Ghassan Laqqis condemned the attack and described it as “brutal,” while the press office of the Jbeil Maronite Archbishopric issued a statement saying, “Jbeil will remain a city of coexistence.” Grand Mufti of the Republic Abdel Latif Derian called on authorities to investigate and reveal what happened. The Prime Minister-designate and other political figures condemned the attack and stressed the importance of peaceful coexistence between religious groups.

On April 16, the LAF Military Intelligence Bureau detained activist Michel Chamoun for posting a video in which he criticized Maronite Patriarch Bechara Rai and asked him to use the Church’s funds to help the poor during the difficult

economic situation and the COVID-19 pandemic. Authorities later released Chamoun after the Patriarch said he did not want the matter pursued.

The government continued to enforce laws against defamation and contempt for religion.

The DGS reviewed all films and plays released in the country during the year, although it did not ban any. NGOs said this had more to do with the lack of film releases in the country due to prevailing economic and social circumstances rather than any loosening of censorship. Civil society activists continued to state that the DGS's decision-making process lacked transparency and that the opinions of religious institutions and political groups influenced it.

According to local NGOs, 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 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, while members of the Church of Jesus Christ said they registered as evangelical Protestant.

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 Israelite Communal Council (the group's officially recognized name). Additionally, the Jewish community faced difficulty importing material for religious rites; customs agents were reportedly wary of allowing imports of any origin containing Hebrew script due to a national ban on trade of Israeli goods. During the year, the council faced difficulty in renewing the mandate of its members, a legal requirement for groups that wish to continue to be recognized by the government, due to government officials' unwillingness to put their signatures on any document with the group's name on it, owing to concern this might be misinterpreted as support for Israel. The council's lawyer reported that the MOI official told him they were "not prepared to sign anything for the Jews."

Jewish community representatives reported that the MOI delayed the verification of the results of the Jewish Community Council's election of members that occurs every six years. Regulations governing such councils require ministry verification of council election results. The council, which represents the interests of the country's Jewish citizens, has repeatedly submitted requests to change its

government-appointed name to reduce social stigma, with no success. The council blamed its official name in part for the difficulties experienced with renewals every six years. The issue continued as of November 17, when the Minister of Interior said that he was conducting investigations into allegations that several council members were forging signatures of nonresident Lebanese Jews to illegally acquire property. As of December 31, the case had not been referred to the judiciary.

Non-Maronite Christian groups reiterated criticisms made following the May 2018 parliamentary election that the government had made little progress toward the Taif 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 and other organizations such as the Syriac Union Party 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. During protests that occurred across the country beginning in 2019, some of the protesters, religious figures, and politicians began calling for an electoral law that was not based on religious affiliation. In August, shortly before a visit from French President Emmanuel Macron, who was expected to encourage governmental reform, President Aoun publicly called for a secular state.

Some women's rights advocates who helped lead the protests highlighted the absence of a civil code governing issues of personal status and objected to the country's reliance on gender-discriminatory family codes adjudicated solely by religious courts.

Members of all confessions may serve in the military, intelligence, and security services. While most confessions had members serving in these capacities, some groups did not do so, usually because of their small number of adherents in the country. Members of the largest recognized confessions dominated the ranks of senior positions.

On March 9, President Aoun publicly expressed support for a unified personal status law as part of the civil code to replace current personal status laws, which are based on religious affiliation, but no legislation was drafted or considered.

According to NGO representatives, civil society figures cautiously engaged both Christian and Muslim leaders to assuage fears that civil marriage would pose a

threat to religious leaders' ability to administer their own confessional affairs. During the year, the MOI took no action on the 30 or more cases of civil marriage that awaited registration with the ministry since 2013.

Actions by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Hizballah, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, continued to exercise control over some territory, particularly the southern suburbs of Beirut and southern areas of the country, both of which are predominantly Shia Muslim. 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 Valley and South Lebanon.

Amal party supporter Hussein Khalil was killed and 10 others injured in a confrontation between Amal and Hizballah supporters in the southern town of Loubye on August 20. On August 19, Amal members, reportedly angered by Hizballah banners commemorating the Shia holiday of Ashura, harassed a local Hizballah-aligned sheikh, resulting in a larger brawl on August 20 that led to both sides discharging firearms. The LAF subsequently intervened to restore security and demanded that both groups surrender members who had drawn weapons. Physical disputes regarding Ashura banners and banners celebrating Salim Ayyash, who was convicted in absentia by the United Nation Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which investigated the 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, also broke out in Nabaa and Khalde.

In Khalde, violence broke out for a second time on August 27 between local Sunnis and supporters of Amal and Hizballah regarding the hanging of Ashura banners. Several injuries were reported, as well as two Sunni deaths, including a 13-year-old boy and a Syrian citizen. According to Reuters, mourners at the boy's funeral chanted, "There is no God but God, and Hizballah is the enemy of God." The LAF said it arrested four individuals following the violence.

In a June 18 report, *Teaching Antisemitism and Terrorism in Hezbollah Schools*, the ADL stated that textbooks used in schools run by Hizballah's education branch "are filled with systematic and egregious incitement to antisemitism and support for terrorism." In reviewing two sixth-grade textbooks used by these schools, *Islam is our Message* and *Us and History*, the ADL found what its executive director described as "a diet of anti-Semitism, drawing on pernicious canards such

as Jews are satanic, the Jews killed Christ, and the Jews are trying to undermine other religions to control the world.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Shia and Sunni protesters clashed during wider demonstrations against official corruption and failed economic policies in Beirut on June 6. Two persons were injured during the clashes, and Shia protesters, mostly supporters of Amal and Hizballah, led chants disparaging the Prophet Mohammed’s wife, Aisha. Political and religious figures including President Aoun, Amal chief and Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, and head of the Shia Higher Islamic Council Sheikh Abdul-Amir Qabalan spoke out strongly against the religious slurs. A group of 43 Shia intellectuals also released a statement denouncing the sectarian slogans and stressing that sectarian behavior was part of a “petty policy that feeds on divisions and discord.”

The Jewish Community Council restored and cleaned the Sidon cemetery at the end of 2019 after a municipality permit was issued to the council following several years of administrative inaction after acts of vandalism damaged the cemetery in 2018 and in previous years. During 2020, the council hired a custodian to maintain the cemetery. 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. During the year, dumping of rubble continued in the Jewish cemetery in Beirut despite the fact the council submitted a formal complaint to the municipality of Beirut in 2019. The council did not receive a response to this complaint.

On February 8, singer Ali al-Attar uploaded a performance of a song titled “We will Pray in Jerusalem” to YouTube and Facebook. The lyrics of the song included a verse that said, “There will be no trace of Zionism left on the land ..., the final war will soon be waged upon the land, and Zionism will suffer the most horrible holocaust [...], in Israel the temple will be destroyed when we meet, and the Star of David will be buried in the ground.”

On March 29, during an interview on OTV channel, associated with the Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) political party, political satirist Charbel Khalil said, “Personally, I believe that atheism is the religion of donkeys. I see atheists as donkeys.”

According to press reports, May Khoreiche, a senior FPM official, tweeted a recommendation for the book, *The Last Days of Mohammed*. This led the Dar al-Fatwa, the country's highest Sunni religious authority, to state that it "regretted and condemned" the publicity that Khoreiche created for the work, saying that the tweet endangered "civil peace and coexistence." The Dar al-Fatwa demanded an official apology for the tweet's "blasphemous" message, saying it "violated" the country's constitution. A group of Muslim lawyers transmitted an information note to the prosecutor of the Court of Cassation, describing the tweet as an "incitement to discord" and a "mockery of the sacred" and calling for the arrest of its author. A member of parliament said that those who recommended the book were "blind fanatics" who "persecute Islam"; another said the book was "an attack on the sacred truths of Islam." In response, Khoreiche apologized for the tweet, saying she respected all faiths and had no desire to attack the Prophet Mohammed. She deleted the tweet and reiterated her support for diversity and freedom.

The press reported that in a series of Sunday sermons, Maronite Patriarch Rai appeared to criticize Hizballah. He stressed the need to maintain the country's neutrality beyond the current policy of distancing the country from regional conflicts and the current sharing of political power among its religious groups. Observers said they interpreted Rai's comments as an implicit criticism of Hizballah's support for Iran. The Patriarch also called for the disarming of militias and state control of ports and weaponry. Without mentioning them specifically, Rai singled out Shia parties' insistence on retaining the finance portfolio in any new government as being responsible for blocking government formation and for causing the country's continuing political paralysis. The Shia Supreme Islamic Council, without naming Rai, said that comments by a "major religious leader" amounted to "sectarian incitement that stirs up bigotry and distorts the facts."

Religious leaders stated relationships among individual members of different religious groups remained amicable. During a September 3-4 visit of Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Muslim and Christian religious leaders gathered with him at St. George Cathedral and the al-Amine Mosque in downtown Beirut for interfaith prayers.

At year's end, approximately 70 percent of students, not including students from the refugee population, attended private schools, many of which were tied to religiously based organizations. These include schools subsidized by the government. The schools generally continued to accommodate students from other religious and minority groups.

Local pluralism and religious freedom NGO Adyan Foundation initiated a project titled “Women, Religions, and Human Rights in Lebanon.” The project’s stated long-term objective was to end discrimination against women through reforms that would amend the country’s laws by altering or ending the role played by religious communities and their courts in personal status issues.

During the year, Adyan published the results of a 2019 survey conducted with Peace Labs on the attitude and views of the country’s youth towards sectarianism. More than half of respondents stated that they considered themselves to be religious, but the vast majority also said that their religious views were a personal matter between them and God and did not affect their attitude and relationship with others. The survey showed that approximately 82 percent of Alawites, 67 percent of Sunnis, and 63 percent of Shia considered themselves religious, compared with approximately 50 percent of Maronite, Orthodox, and Greek Catholic respondents. Sixty-seven percent of respondents of all faiths supported mixed marriages between Muslims and Christians.

In partnership with the German organization Kinder Mission, in 2018 Adyan launched the Alwan Junior Program for students in grades three and four to introduce education on religious diversity at an early age. During the year, Adyan implemented the program in 19 schools, reaching 1,482 students.

According to the NGO Middle East Media Research Institute, Hizb ut-Tahrir preacher Ahmad al-Qasas in a January 31 televised sermon said that the Prophet Mohamed “had predicted that the Jews will fight the Muslims, but that the Muslims will kill the Jews until they hide behind rocks and trees, which will call out to the Muslims to kill the Jews hiding behind them.” He added that the Jews are “the most cowardly of God’s creations” who do not live lives of “honor and glory.” The International Crisis Group describes Hizb ut-Tahrir as a political party whose ideology is based on Islam and whose views “are highly radical, advocating the overthrow of governments throughout the Muslim world and their replacement by an Islamic state in the form of a recreated Caliphate.”

In a poll conducted by the Arab Center of Washington, DC and released in November, 84 percent of respondents in Lebanon either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, “No religious authority is entitled to declare followers of other religions infidels,” among the highest in the region, which compared with 65 percent region-wide.

In a regional poll conducted by a Dubai-based public relations firm in the first three months of the year and involving a team of international experts, 30 percent of Lebanese citizens ages 18 to 24 agreed that religion is “the most important” factor in their personal identity, compared with 40 percent overall for youth polled in the 17 Arab states included in the survey.

In a poll conducted by the Pew Trust in the second half of 2019 and released in July, 72 percent of respondents in the country agreed that “Belief in God is necessary to be moral and have good values,” with the median result for the 34 countries included in the survey at 45 percent. Ninety-two percent of respondents said that religion was “somewhat important” or “very important,” compared with 47 percent of those included in the overall survey.

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 frequently met with individual politicians representing different religious groups to discuss their views, including on relations with other religious groups, and to promote religious tolerance.

The Ambassador met on multiple occasions throughout the year 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 often met with civil society representatives to convey similar messages.

On February 20, the embassy hosted an event on religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue that brought together 24 youth leaders from across the religious spectrum for discussions on religious freedom and tolerance.

In March, embassy officials met with Chaldean Bishop of Beirut Michel Kassarji to explore opportunities for enhanced engagement and to identify steps to improve the eparchy’s communication and cooperation in providing assistance from international agencies, including UNHCR.

The embassy’s six-year Building Alliances for Local Advancement, Development, and Investment – Capacity Building program worked with 12 faith-based

organizations affiliated with Sunni, Druze, Alawite, Chaldean, Maronite, Catholic, and Protestant religious groups to build their organizational capacity and improve their financial management capabilities, internal administrative systems, and governance structures so they could better support their communities. The Acting Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development and embassy officials met with religious leaders associated with the program in Beirut on August 11 to discuss the impact of the August 4 Beirut Port explosion on their communities.

During the year, as the Jewish Community Council faced delay in the government's verification of the election of its members, the embassy worked with the MOI to renew the council's mandate, allowing it to continue to function.

The embassy continued for the 10th consecutive year to fund and manage a scholarship program at the American University of Beirut and the Lebanese American University that brings together religiously and geographically diverse students to increase their understanding of religious diversity. Nearly 740 religiously diverse students from 42 high schools participated during the year. Students from a variety of religious backgrounds also collaborated to develop and lead community service projects serving geographically and religiously diverse communities across the country as part of a project that directly served more than 4,000 high school students since 2007.

For the 10th consecutive year, the embassy continued a program sponsoring several students between the ages of 18 and 25 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 related cultural activities. The program was cancelled for the year due to the COVID-19 pandemic after funding was allocated but before the student lists were finalized.