

## The leaves of one tree: Religious minorities in Lebanon

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*'You are all fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch.'*

Bahá'u'lláh, founder of the Bahá'í faith

### Introduction

In the midst of a region in turmoil, where the very future of religious minorities seems to be at stake, Lebanon has always been known for its rich diversity of faiths. With a population of only 4.5 million people,<sup>1</sup> the country hosts more than 1 million refugees and officially recognizes 18 different religious communities among its population.<sup>2</sup>

Lebanon's diversity has also posed significant challenges. The country's history indicates the potential for religious tensions to escalate, especially in a broader context where sectarian violence has ravaged both Iraq and Syria and threatens to create fault lines across the region. The war in Syria has specifically had an impact on the country's stability and raises questions about the future of its minorities.

This background paper aims to examine the current situation of religious minorities in Lebanon. It draws on a desk review of existing materials and media reports, together with first-hand field research and interviews with members of different religious communities, including activists belonging to currently unrecognized groups. On 25 October 2014, MRG organized a roundtable event in Beirut, which gathered various religious minority activists, experts and analysts from Lebanon and the wider region. The preliminary findings of this research were shared and discussed with the participants. The present paper draws on some of these discussions and recommendations. Its aim is to outline some of the inequalities and protection gaps facing minorities in the country today, while drawing on the regional dynamics and the existing threats to minorities.

MRG wishes to thank all the respondents who provided testimony during the research. For security reasons, their

names and details have been withheld. MRG would also like to thank all those who took part in its roundtable event for their thoughts and contributions.

### Country background

While Lebanon's history of Confessionalism – a form of consociationalism where political and institutional power is distributed among various religious communities – can be traced further back, its current form is based on the unwritten and somewhat controversial agreement known as the National Pact. Developed in 1943 by Lebanon's dominant religious communities (predominantly its Christian and Sunni Muslim populations), its stated objectives were to unite Lebanon's religious faiths under a single national identity.

It laid the ground for a division of power along religious lines, even if many claim it was done in an unbalanced manner: the National Pact relied on the 1932 population census, the last official census to have been conducted in Lebanon, to allocate parliamentary seats between Lebanese Christians and Muslims on the basis of a 6-to-5 ratio respectively.

With the outbreak of the civil war in 1975, which lasted for 15 years, the fragile nature of Lebanon's inter-Confessional entente and the rising discontent of various religious communities became too apparent to ignore. In November 1989, the 'Document of National Accord' was ratified in Al Taef, Saudi Arabia. While the Taef agreement, as it is known, has been credited by some with ending the long civil war, it was in reality only made possible by a general readiness among the warring parties to cease hostilities and a broader regional and international commitment to ending the conflict.

The Taef agreement, despite setting the goal of a secular Lebanon in the future, did not define the terms or timeline for achieving a secular state but instead further institutionalized Lebanon's political sectarianism. The

balance of power was divided equally between Muslim and Christian communities, and the powers awarded to the president, by custom a Maronite Christian, were also reduced.

Despite the relative peace it created, Lebanon's various communities have since been in an almost constant state of alert, with the threat of war and internal strife often exploited by its political elite. Inter-sectarian tensions have been on the rise, particularly since the inception of the conflict in Syria and its increasing inter-religious dimensions over the last few years.

The country's many internal challenges are further exacerbated by the large influx of refugees into the country, which has strained its capacity to provide basic services and security. In addition to the large Syrian and Palestinian population residing in the country since 1948, 8,000 refugees and asylum seekers from other countries are also registered in Lebanon.<sup>3</sup> The last few years have seen a large flow of refugees into Lebanon, particularly following the outbreak of the war in Syria. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has predicted that by the end of 2014, the country may host as many as 1.5 million Syrian refugees.<sup>4</sup>

## The limits of Confessional representation

Despite the trauma of its recent history, Lebanon has so far managed to avoid a return to the widespread violence of civil war. However, significant challenges and contradictions remain in place to this day, including the survival of much of Lebanon's Confessional political structure. As a result, religion continues to play a central role in Lebanese government and broader society.

While the government officially recognizes 18 different religious groups in the country, including 12 Christian and 4 Muslim denominations, as well as the Druze faith and Judaism, not all of these groups are adequately represented within the Confessional system. Furthermore, the tensions between dominant religious groups and the sectarian representational system, based on religious demography, frequently leads to a stalemate on issues such as nationality rights or the conduct of an official census, among others. As deputies are elected on the basis of their religious affiliation, they serve as *de facto* representatives of their religious communities, rather than seeking a common national interest. This has a direct impact on minorities, who are seldom represented or considered as a priority.

Those who are unrepresented fall into the gaps of a rigid representational system. Besides the larger Christian, Sunni and Shi'a denominations, many of the smaller religious groups find themselves under-represented or altogether excluded from the country's sectarian power-sharing system. Judaism, for instance – whose followers are officially referred to as 'Israelis' or sometimes as *Mousawiyin*, literally 'the followers of Moses' – have

## The disappearance of Lebanon's Jewish community

*'It is not yet safe to be a Lebanese Jew.'*

Lebanese of the Jewish faith, March 2014.

Unlike other Arab countries, where Jews were declared *personae non gratae* following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, Lebanon did not expel its Jewish population. During the 1960s, there were thousands of Lebanese Jews living in the country. They resided all over the country, and were mainly known as the inhabitants of the area of Wadi Abu Jmil in downtown Beirut. Yet, while there was an initial increase in the Jewish population due to their migration from neighbouring Arab countries following 1948, the defeat of the Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian armies in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war created increasing uncertainty for Lebanon's Jewish population. Growing anti-Israeli sentiment drove attacks against Jews in Lebanon and the onset of the civil war in 1975 put their future into further doubt. Many migrated as a result, leaving much of their property and old way of life behind.

There are no official estimates as to the size of Lebanon's remaining Jewish community today, though estimates suggest that there are now only 200–400 in the whole country. Most have chosen to change their names and do not reveal their religious identity out of fear of persecution. Jewish synagogues and cemeteries have been closed down and heavily damaged by the war or desecrated. The last official Jewish rabbi left Lebanon after the onset of the civil war and no religious official authority remains today. Acts of vandalism against Jewish-owned cemeteries and hate speech linking Jewish communities with Israel and Zionism have continued since the war, encouraging a climate of hostility towards the country's few remaining Jews. Due to their small size and political marginalization, the Lebanese Jewish community has become invisible and its future in Lebanon becomes more uncertain by the day.

mostly left the country as a result of social pressure, unpunished violence against them, fears of persecution and the various wars with Israel, which have had a significant impact on their existence across the Arab world and in Lebanon in particular.

## Lebanon's unregistered religious groups

Lebanon's religious diversity in reality extends well beyond the 18 recognized faiths. For many years Lebanon has also hosted a number of small religious groups that are unrecognized and therefore remain for many reasons unknown, even to the country's inhabitants. These include, but are not limited to, Bahá'i, Hindus, Buddhists,

Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints (locally known as Mormons) and various Protestant evangelical groups.<sup>5</sup> The wars in Iraq and Syria have also resulted in a number of smaller minorities finding shelter in Lebanon, such as Zoroastrians, and even some displaced Yezidis.<sup>6</sup>

For a religion in Lebanon to be officially registered, it first has to gain formal recognition by submitting a statement of doctrine and moral principles. Followers of an unrecognized religious community can register under one of the 18 recognized faith groups to secure equal access to their rights. Those who belong to minorities that are not recognized in Lebanon are also allowed to freely follow their beliefs and religious practices. Article 9 of the Lebanese Constitution protects 'absolute freedom of conscience' without any reference to recognition. It further protects 'the free exercise of all religious rites provided that public order is not disturbed' and guarantees that 'the personal status and religious interests of the population, to whatever religious sect they belong, shall be respected'.<sup>7</sup> Article 7 of the Constitution stipulates that 'all Lebanese shall be equal before the law' and enjoy the same civil and political rights.<sup>8</sup>

Yet despite all the assurances present in the Constitution, Lebanon's laws are tailored in favour of recognized religions, and specifically the dominant ones. In practice, belonging to an unrecognized religious group in Lebanon means its members are invisible in some areas of life. For example, in line with the country's sectarian political system, members of unrecognized religious groups are not allowed to take governmental positions, run for office or engage in higher public functions. Furthermore, most voters need to register under one of the recognized religions in order to access voting polls. Although the Taef agreement recognized the need to overcome the Confessional system in the future and have representation based on 'merit and competence',<sup>9</sup> as stipulated by the Constitution, equality in civil and political rights still remains elusive 25 years on.

As religious courts control personal status and family law in Lebanon, these inequalities extend into the private sphere. Without official recognition, members of unregistered religions cannot marry, divorce or inherit according to their own rules, nor in a civil court since the latter does not exist for issues pertaining to personal status. To undertake formal proceedings, they must therefore resort to the courts of recognized groups or leave the country to access them elsewhere. Respondents mentioned marriage as one of the main areas where their difference as a member of an unrecognized religious group was felt most sharply. Bahá'í who were interviewed mentioned that it had been a common practice for decades for members of their community to leave the country and go to Cyprus, for instance, in order to marry.

If they are converts, members of these various unrecognized communities continue to be, in most cases,

registered under their previous faith of origin in Lebanon. Therefore, most of them continue to vote, inherit and otherwise follow the personal status codes of the main recognized religious communities. Bahá'í interviewed in the course of MRG's research state that their other religious denomination usually stems from the government registries, where many of them were kept under the original religion from which they converted to the Bahá'í faith. Only a very small number of Bahá'í have their faith mentioned on their national identify card. Consequently, most of them are still registered as Shi'a, with others registered as Sunni, Christian and a small number as Druze.

One positive step occurred in February 2009, when a circular by the Ministry of the Interior formally allowed all Lebanese to remove their religion from their ID and civil registry papers. However, this was a cosmetic move, as it was not paralleled by a reform in family or personal status law. Religious authorities continue to have full control over these areas of life. As this measure alone does not address the deeper roots of discrimination, institutional barriers and lack of implementation persist. For example, one voter who chose to remove religion from his ID was caught off-guard when the registrar at the polling station would not register his name unless he revealed his religious background.<sup>10</sup> Electoral law also remains in need of reform.

## Living as an unrecognized minority in Lebanon

*'We do not dream of a separation between religion and other issues. Religion in Lebanon is other issues: it is social and political.'*

Jehovah's Witness, September 2014

In the course of MRG's research, there were some reports suggesting that unrecognized religious minorities might be subjected to discrimination or hostility. Some religious groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, seem to attract more social and religious prejudice than others because of their beliefs and preaching methods. For instance, the group was reportedly denounced on a number of occasions by a priest on his weekly television programme.<sup>11</sup> There have also been reports suggesting that members may be more vulnerable to harassment from security forces.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, though some interviewees expressed their mistrust of law enforcement agents and their fear as unrecognized minorities of potential persecution in future, a significant number of respondents did not believe they were discriminated against and felt their relationship with the authorities was good. The sense of integration appeared to vary between different communities. Social recognition is clearly stronger for unrecognized communities that have been living with other religious communities for decades in areas outside of Beirut, where social linkages tend to be more developed. A number of individuals described cases

of inter-marriage with members of recognized religious groups, where each had chosen to maintain and practise his or her personal beliefs.

While recognition is for all of them an ideal, many seemed to view it as an administrative hurdle rather than a limitation to their freedom of belief. Among some members of unrecognized groups, this may mean that the situation is seen as relatively tolerable and that the potential gains from greater advocacy are not at present worth the risks:

*'We would of course dream of being recognized one day. But as we are, we are okay now. This is not time for us to be pushing.... I have personally never been discriminated against, and I feel that we are silently protected, as long as we know our limitations.'*  
Bahá'í respondent, July 2014

## Social discrimination and its impact

If legal and administrative discrimination seems often to be referred to as a hurdle rather than a threat, social discrimination appears to be taking the greatest toll on people's lives. Although no respondents mentioned specific attacks or incidents of physical violence against them, there were accounts of verbal abuse and acts of discrimination that at times created a sense of exclusion. One interviewee, a Jehovah's Witness, expressed her feeling of always being an outsider:

*'We, Jehovah's Witnesses, are seen as the Anti-Christ... [People think] that we do not believe in Jesus or Mary. I think of myself as a Christian and a Jehovah's Witness, but people see me as an outsider to Christianity, a heretic.... They think of my religion as a bad religion, mostly because we actively proselytise ... but also because of all the prejudice around our beliefs and practices.'*<sup>13</sup>  
Jehovah's Witness, Beirut, August 2014

Two Bahá'í individuals described the typical reactions they experienced when someone discovered their religious identity:

*'They start off by being curious and asking questions about our faith. As time passes, however, some of them start avoiding us .... By then, they would have had time to ask around them and [may have] heard the many prejudices surrounding our faith.'*  
Bahá'í respondents, July 2014

One Bahá'í woman described an incident of discrimination she experienced when applying for a position in a large hotel in Beirut. To her surprise, her

interviewer – who, it soon became clear, knew nothing about the Bahá'í faith – informed her that as a Bahá'í she would not be able to compete for the position because of the hotel's fixed quota, divided between the main recognized religions. 'As a Bahá'í', she said, 'they did not know what to do with me.'<sup>14</sup>

So, while unrecognized minority members do not face regular harassment or intimidation at present, some respondents suggested that their position in Lebanese society is nevertheless characterized by a sense of separation. The limited acceptance among some families and the wider community of mixed marriages was often raised as the most burdensome challenge in everyday life.

The situation for unrecognized religious groups only highlights the broader limitations of social cohesion in Lebanon today. Lebanese society will remain splintered as long as the legacy of sectarianism persists. For example, the desecration and disfigurement of a Buddha statue erected in 2008 in Basqinta, a Christian village in the Metn Mountains, is a troubling indication of the limits of religious tolerance in Lebanon.<sup>15</sup>

### Lebanon's Bahá'í – still unrecognized

Founded by Bahá'u'lláh in Persia in the nineteenth century, the Bahá'í faith is a monotheistic religion whose core belief is unity: the oneness of God, which is the source of all creation; the oneness of humanity, where all humans were created and are equal; and the oneness of religion, where all religions are believed to have the same source and speak of one God. Bahá'í are thought to have first settled in Lebanon in around 1870. Today, although their numbers are officially unknown, there are only a few hundred members living in Lebanon.

Though Bahá'í have struggled with a history of persecution in a number of countries, such as Iran and Egypt, they have avoided a similar fate in Lebanon and are allowed to practise their faith, hold religious ceremonies and assemble freely. Nevertheless, despite having existed for decades in Lebanon, the community is still unrecognized. Members of the faith commonly conclude civil marriages outside of the country and are often registered under another faith.

## The rise of religious fundamentalism in Lebanon and the Middle East

Despite the end of the Lebanese civil war, inter-sectarian tensions remained very vivid in Lebanon, especially in the years that followed the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Al Hariri in 2005. A growing Shi'a–Sunni rift across the region has further exacerbated tensions in

many parts of Lebanon. Much of this inter-sectarian strife has been directly linked to the war in Syria, with towns such as Tripoli and Saida (Sidon) replicating the inter-sectarian dimension of the conflict. Fighting between rival Alawite and Sunni factions has been exported into Lebanese cities, with a number of deadly clashes taking place.

It is worth noting, however, that so far these incidents have not escalated into broader sectarian violence within Lebanon and have received widespread condemnation, including from many religious leaders. After four Sunni Sheikhs were attacked in Beirut in March 2013, for instance, Hezbollah and Shi'a leaders spoke out against the violence while Sunni leaders called for calm. Other incidents have also been met with similar statements of solidarity from leaders and community members of different faiths. Despite attempts by certain groups to ignite inter-sectarian strife, there seems to be some sense of solidarity among different religious groups, at least regarding their reluctance to revisit civil war.

Nevertheless, a growing threat of fundamentalism across the region has been looming. Attention in 2014 has been focused on one group: Daesh, Islamic State (IS), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) – all names for one entity, which through its violence and videoed beheadings has become part of Lebanon's daily vocabulary. It has also managed to instil fear in the hearts of minorities across the region, particularly within its self-proclaimed 'caliphate'. These fears have extended to Lebanon, even if the country's social and political fabric make it more difficult to penetrate for groups such as ISIS.

In June 2014, among other incidents, a raid by security forces on an ISIS cell in a hotel in Hamra, in the heart of Beirut, prompted one of the suicide bombers to trigger explosives, leading to a generalized state of terror in the capital.<sup>16</sup> In early October, a major attack by ISIS in coordination with Al Nusra Front on Hezbollah positions close to the border villages of Brital and Nahleh added to the fears of an ISIS movement inside Lebanon.<sup>17</sup> In the towns close to the border with Syria, Christians and various minorities were reportedly arming themselves and making preparations in case of ISIS attacks – a development that some commentators have suggested has the potential to inflame mistrust among Lebanon's various religious groups.<sup>18</sup>

While ISIS statements have often targeted Lebanese Shi'a, its actions have extended to all religious communities, including Lebanese Sunni. Towards the end of August, for example, masked ISIS militants beheaded a Sunni soldier from the Lebanese army. Interviews with a prominent Lebanese Sunni Sheikh indicate that he believes that ISIS fighters see Sunni who do not support them as 'worse than apostates from other sects'.<sup>19</sup>

The probability of a large and sustained ISIS presence on Lebanese soil remains limited, and it is unlikely ISIS could rely on local support to any great extent, as it has

elsewhere. But while all the attention has been focused on ISIS and its widely publicized attacks, other threats, including internal ones, pose larger challenges to Lebanon's future and stability. Religious fundamentalism and the divisions it creates have been ravaging the region. In Iraq and Syria, this has had a significant impact on minorities first and foremost, with atrocities committed such as mass killings, rapes and displacement, as well as forced conversions and trafficking. It is the threat of radicalization, growing inter-sectarian schism and conflict that could most jeopardize Lebanon's fragile balance.

What the threat of ISIS does is highlight the core concern of security and protection for all religious communities. It also raises questions about the future of minorities in a region that is constantly and rapidly shifting, and where people feel daily at risk as a result of their identity and belief. This was evident even during MRG's field research, when attempts to approach some community members in the Bekaa Valley were met with suspicion. The same fears, to varying degrees, were evident when engaging various minority communities.

## An uncertain future for Lebanon's religious minorities?

*'These are times where people cannot speak of their religion openly, especially minorities.'*

Local official, Bekaa region, May 2014

Though there has been continued talk of 'minorities' in relation to the rise of sectarian violence, particularly with regard to the protection of Christian communities on the frontline of ISIS's encroachments into Lebanon, there has been no mention of the Bahá'i, the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints and the many other smaller religious minorities which have existed for decades or centuries in the country, and whose future may be most at risk.

The continued exclusion of a significant number of religious minorities, though currently manifesting in various forms of discrimination, could have more serious implications if the country witnessed another outbreak of sectarian violence. Should the recent rise of religious extremism lose its momentum, these minorities will still remain vulnerable until full recognition is achieved. While many respondents did not believe they faced serious discrimination at present, there was a definite sense that their situation could become worse in the future.

During one interview, a member of an unrecognized religious group described the threat as common to all Lebanese, regardless of their religious identity. However, he added that 'our small communities are of course the most vulnerable ... because the threat is always greatest on the smallest'. Another interviewee described the state of fear by saying: 'I presently wish to be invisible. The less we could be heard of, the better for our security.' In response to the apparent rise of religious fundamentalism, many minority

members now feel their social space shrinking and are concerned about their future in the region.

The flow of Iraqi and Syrian refugees into Lebanon has also added to the mosaic of religious communities residing in the country. While they might not be in imminent danger, acknowledging them and protecting them, along with those already living for years in Lebanon, may well become a matter of necessity for their survival. The Lebanese government needs to afford recognition to all religious groups and communities. Active measures should be taken to protect all communities, and to prosecute and punish attacks and acts of discrimination of all kinds. There is also an important role for religious and political leaders to publicly affirm the place of all Lebanon's communities, including its smaller or unrecognized faiths.

Without adequate protection, unrecognized and some recognized minorities may struggle to remain part of Lebanese society. A young Zoroastrian woman from Syria, interviewed in March 2014 in Beirut, expressed her fears of what the future might hold for her small community. Her words may speak for many of Lebanon's and the region's minorities:

*' We [the Zaradachtiyyin] are not even known of. You will hear of the word Zaradacht as a derogatory word. We were persecuted back in Syria, and now? We might just disappear.'*

Zoroastrian, Beirut, March 2014

## Notes

- 1 The last official census was conducted in 1932. As a result, the exact demography and religious composition of the Lebanese population is unknown. The World Bank puts the current (2013) population at 4.467 million. World Bank, retrieved 20 October 2014, <http://data.worldbank.org/country/lebanon>.
- 2 The 18 religious groups are: Alawite, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Assyrian Church of the East, Chaldean Catholic, Coptic Orthodox, Druze, Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Isma'ili, Jewish, Roman Catholic, Maronite, Protestant, Sunni, Shi'a, Syriac Catholic and Syriac Orthodox. These include, besides Judaism and the Druze faith, 12 Christian and 4 Islamic denominations.
- 3 UNHCR, '2014 UNHCR country operations profile – Lebanon', retrieved 20 October 2014, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486676.html>.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Protestant evangelical churches are required to register with the Evangelical Synod in order to be represented vis-à-vis the Lebanese government. However, some church representatives complain that the Synod has not recognized any new Protestant groups as members since 1975, hence disallowing them formal recognition.
- 6 Topalian, N., 'Displaced Yazidi family describes ISIL atrocities', *Al-Shorfa*, 15 September 2014.
- 7 Government of Lebanon, The Lebanese Constitution, Article 9, as amended up to 21 September 1990.
- 8 *Ibid.*, Article 7.
- 9 *Ibid.*, Article 12.
- 10 Voter's testimony, March 2014, Beirut.
- 11 'Faith comes knocking', *Now*, 16 November 2008, retrieved 20 October 2014, [https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reports/features/faith\\_comes\\_knocking](https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reports/features/faith_comes_knocking).
- 12 Australian Government, Refugee Review Tribunal, 'RRT Research Response' LBN31718, 2 May 2007, retrieved 20 October 2014, <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4b6fe283d.pdf>.
- 13 Interview with a Jehovah's Witness, Beirut, August 2014.
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- 15 Salameh, S., 'Lebanon's faithful: stoning strangers', *Al Akhbar*, 15 August 2012.
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## **The leaves of one tree: Religious minorities in Lebanon** © Minority Rights Group International, December 2014

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