



Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

International Religious Freedom Report for 2014



Israel and The Occupied Territories

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Executive Summary

The Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty establishes freedom of religion, and the government continued to enforce legal protection for religious freedom. The government arrested dozens of persons, including minors, in connection with “price tag” attacks by settler groups against Christian and Muslim religious sites during the year, and government officials quickly and publicly criticized the attacks. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), religious institutions, and press reports noted that those arrests rarely led to successful prosecutions. The government limited Jewish religious observance at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, though some Jewish groups sought to either legally overturn this policy or modify it to permit Jewish prayer, actions that were at times followed by a violent response from Muslim worshippers. The government continued to enforce a prohibition on mixed gender prayer services at the Western Wall; however, a public debate about accommodating “egalitarian prayer,” i.e., permitting men and women to pray as they wished, continued throughout the year. A platform, south of the Mughrabi ramp and adjacent to but not touching the Western Wall, was open to both men and women where each person could practice individual religious rituals as desired. Governmental and legal discrimination against non-Jews and non-Orthodox streams of Judaism continued and was debated by public officials and civil society organizations. The government provided proportionately more funding to Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox religious institutions, sites, and services than to non-Orthodox and non-Jewish institutions, sites, and services. The Orthodox Chief Rabbinate maintained hegemony over Jewish marriage and conversion procedures and, while civil union legislation remained pending, non-Orthodox or interfaith couples could not exercise their right to marry in their denomination or in a civil ceremony within the country.

There was an increase in interethnic tension and violence involving different religious communities. On November 18, two Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem killed four Israeli worshippers, three of them also U.S. citizens, and one Israeli policeman, and wounded dozens, some seriously, in an attack on a synagogue in the Har Nof neighborhood of West Jerusalem during morning prayers. Events including the June kidnapping and killings of three Jewish Israeli minors, one of them also a U.S. citizen, in the West Bank, the kidnapping and killing of a Palestinian minor in East Jerusalem, and over 4,600 rocket attacks and several terror tunnel infiltration attempts by Gazan militants into Israel in June, July, and August and the resulting Israeli military response strained Arab-Jewish relations. Because religion, ethnicity, and nationality are closely linked in the Israel-Palestinian conflict, it was difficult to categorize many societal actions against specific groups as being solely based on religious identity. “Price tag” attacks continued within Israel. Search for Common Ground (SFCG) and the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land (CRIHL) documented 25 “price tag” attacks against religious sites within the country, including five against Muslim, eight against Christian, and 12 against Jewish religious sites. (“Price tag” attacks refer to property crimes and violent acts, often but not exclusively committed by settler groups, primarily against Muslim and Christian Palestinians and Israeli Arabs, their religious sites, and cemeteries.) There was an increase in violent attacks between segments of the Jewish population and segments of the non-Jewish Arab population, many of whom self-identify as Palestinian, including an increase in attacks on Muslim and Christian religious sites and Arab-affiliated property during Israeli military operations in the Occupied Territories. On October 29, a Palestinian East Jerusalem resident shot an Israeli activist (and U.S. citizen) after the activist spoke at a conference advocating expanded Jewish visitation and prayer on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Police killed the attacker during a subsequent attempt to arrest him in East Jerusalem.

Embassy officials engaged the highest levels of the Israeli government to raise concerns about an increase in societal, religious, and ethnic tension during Israeli military operations in the Occupied Territories and after the summer’s high profile killings of three Israelis and one Palestinian. In response to a rise in tensions at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in October and November, the U.S. Secretary of State, the National Security Advisor, the Ambassador, and embassy officers engaged government officials and relevant Knesset leaders on the importance of maintaining the agreed-upon status quo at the religious site and not escalating an already tense situation through provocative actions and statements. The embassy supported programs countering the “price tag” attack phenomenon, including programs supporting interreligious solidarity, interreligious dialogue, mixed Jewish-Arab educational and communal initiatives, and programs leveraging the influence of religious leaders to combat familial and societal violence. The U.S. Special Advisor for Faith-Based Initiatives met with local leaders in interreligious engagement during a November visit to Tel Aviv. The Ambassador and other embassy officials highlighted the importance of religious plurality and encouraged respect for non-Orthodox streams of Judaism in their regular engagement with Israeli officials and religious leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population is 7.8 million (July 2014 estimate that includes settlers living in the Occupied Territories). According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), approximately 75 percent of the population is Jewish, 17 percent Muslim, 2 percent Christian, and 1.6 percent Druze. The remaining 4 percent consists of relatively small communities of Bahais, Samaritans, Karaites, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and those the CBS classifies as “other” – mostly persons who identify themselves as Jewish but do not satisfy the Orthodox Jewish definition of “Jewish” the government uses for civil procedures, including many immigrants from the former Soviet Union. The majority of non-Jewish citizens are of Arab origin.

According to an April poll by the Rafi Smith Institute conducted for the media outlet Ynet, more than half of Jewish Israelis define themselves as secular (53 percent), 26 percent define themselves as “traditional, religious,” and 21 percent define themselves as “ultra-Orthodox/religious.” Among those aged 34 and younger, 30 percent define themselves as ultra-Orthodox/religious while among adults over 50 only 15 percent defined themselves as such. A 2013 Israel Democracy Institute’s (IDI) Guttman Center poll shows that between 500,000 and 600,000 traditional and secular Jews feel a sense of belonging to the Conservative or Reform streams of Judaism. There is also a community of approximately 20,000 Messianic Jews.

Religious communities often are concentrated in geographical areas according to religious beliefs, with a high concentration of communities of Bedouin Muslims in the Negev (south) and many majority Druze, Christian, and Muslim communities in the Galilee (north), some of which are homogenous and some a mix of these religious groups. There are many Druze Syrian and mixed Christian and Druze communities in the Occupied Golan Heights. The country continues to undergo demographic changes due to the higher birth rate of the Haredi community and certain Muslim communities.

According to the CBS, there are approximately 109,000 foreign workers and an additional 93,000 illegal foreign workers and 54,000 African migrants and asylum seekers residing in the country. Foreign workers were members of many different religious groups, and include Protestants, Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

There is no constitution. The Supreme Court has repeatedly held that the Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty protects freedom to practice religious beliefs, including freedom of conscience, faith, religion, and worship, regardless of an individual’s religion. The law incorporates religious freedom provisions of international human rights covenants into the country’s body of domestic law, and customary international law is enforceable as long as it does not contradict a domestic law. The Supreme Court has ruled domestic law operates under the presumption of compatibility with international norms. The Basic Law describes the country as a “Jewish and democratic state” and references the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, which promises freedom of religion and conscience and full social and political equality, regardless of religious affiliation.

The law recognizes the following religious communities according to the adopted Ottoman millet (court) system: Eastern Orthodox, Latin (Roman Catholic), Gregorian-Armenian, Armenian Catholic, Syrian Catholic, Chaldean (Chaldean Uniate Catholic), Greek Catholic Melkite, Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, Druze, Evangelical Episcopal, and Bahai. Other religious communities, including Muslims and major Protestant Christian denominations, have a presence in the country, but are not recognized by the government as distinct religio-ethnic communities according to the millet system per se, though Muslims have a separate legal court system recognized under Israeli law that deals with personal status issues of the Muslim community. Protestant Christians do not have a separate legal court system for personal status issues. Five religious communities have applied for official recognition but their applications have been pending for years: Ethiopian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Evangelical Lutheran Church, Evangelical Alliance of Israel, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. All recognized religious communities are exempt from taxation for places of worship and may have separate courts that apply their religion’s personal status law. It is not mandatory to seek recognition. While members of recognized religious communities only require approval for visas from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, visas for members of unrecognized religious communities also require Ministry of Interior (MOI) approval for stays longer than five years. Members of unrecognized religious groups may practice their beliefs.

Proselytizing is legal for all religious groups. The law prohibits offering a material benefit as an inducement to conversion. It is also illegal to convert a person under 18 unless one parent is an adherent of the religious group seeking to convert the minor.

Under laws inherited from the Ottoman Empire and British Mandate periods, the legal system gives jurisdiction over personal status issues to certain religious communities. Under this system, each officially recognized religious community operates religious courts and has legal authority over its members in matters of marriage, divorce, and burial. Jewish, Druze, Muslim, and Christian families may ask for personal status cases, including alimony, child custody, guardianship, domestic violence, paternity, and property division, to be adjudicated in civil courts. Exceptions to this provision include cases of divorce where Jewish women are subject to the exclusive jurisdiction of the rabbinical courts if their spouses file the case there first, and paternity cases among Muslim citizens which are the exclusive jurisdiction of Islamic law courts. Societal pressures frequently prevent Muslim women from adjudicating personal status issues in civil courts, and Jewish women often prefer the civil courts because they are considered fairer to women. Members of religious groups that do not permit divorce, such as Catholics, cannot obtain a divorce unless they change their religious affiliation to a different religious authority that authorizes divorces.

Secular courts have primary jurisdiction over questions of inheritance, but parties may file such cases in religious courts by mutual agreement. Decisions by these bodies are subject to Supreme Court review. The rabbinical courts, when exercising their power in civil matters, apply religious law, which varies from civil law, including in matters relating to the property rights of widows and daughters.

Some, but not all, unrecognized religious communities are authorized by the Ministry of Religious Services (MRS) to perform marriage ceremonies (and the marriages could later be civilly registered), although judicial jurisdiction in marriage and divorce is granted only to recognized communities. Members of these groups may attempt to process their personal status issues, including marriage, with authorities within one of the recognized religious communities if the authority agrees. Since the state does not permit civil marriages, interfaith marriages, or marriages performed by non-Orthodox rabbis or unrecognized religious authorities, many marriages must take place outside the country in order to be legally recognized. This provision restricts the ability of individuals to choose their own religious authorities and prevents several hundred thousand Israeli citizens from marrying within the country. The law allows for civil registration of couples only if both partners are recognized as being of “no religion,” which applies to a few dozen people each year.

The MOI has jurisdiction over religious matters concerning non-Jewish groups, while the Ministry of Tourism is responsible for the protection and upkeep of non-Jewish religious sites. The MRS has jurisdiction over the country’s 133 Jewish religious councils, which oversee the provision of religious services for Jewish communities. The MOI Department of Non-Jewish Affairs oversees one non-Jewish religious council for the Druze. Legislation establishing religious councils does not include non-Jewish religious communities other than the Druze. The government finances approximately 40 percent of the religious councils’ budgets, and local municipalities fund the remainder.

The law provides the right for any Jew, or any child or grandchild of a Jew, to immigrate to Israel from a foreign country with his or her spouse and children. Non-Orthodox converts to Judaism are entitled to the civil right of return, citizenship, and registration as Jews in the civil population registry. Descendants of Jews qualify for immigration under the Law of Return regardless of the religious beliefs into which they were born, though those who convert to other religious groups, including Messianic Judaism, as adults are considered to have “opted out” of the protections of the Law of Return.

The Chief Rabbinate determines who is buried in Jewish state cemeteries, limiting this right to individuals considered Jewish by Orthodox standards. The law provides for the right of any individuals to be buried in a civil ceremony.

According to a November 2 cabinet decision, local Orthodox rabbinic courts have full authority to perform conversions in Israel, allowing for a more flexible determination regarding whether someone has met the *halachic* (Jewish law) standards for conversion. The Chief Rabbinate retains the authority to issue certificates of conversion to Judaism within the country under Orthodox rabbinic law, leaving the possibility that it could refuse to accept the decision of a local rabbinic court. The Israel Democracy Institute, a domestic think tank, supported the decision, but stated it did not address the question of retroactive annulment of conversions or provide recognition of non-Orthodox conversions. The Chief Rabbinate does not recognize non-Orthodox converts to Judaism as Jews and, as such, Reform and Conservative converts cannot marry or divorce in the country or be buried in Jewish cemeteries.

The government provides funding for Orthodox and non-Orthodox conversion programs following a 2009 High Court of Justice ruling requiring it to cease discriminating against non-Orthodox conversion courses. Relatives of Jewish converts cannot receive residency rights, except for the children of female converts born after the mother's conversion is complete.

The law provides for the protection of sites considered holy places of all religious groups by criminalizing the "desecration or other violations" of religious sites (subject to seven years imprisonment) and actions to "harm the freedom of access" of worshippers to religious sites (subject to five years imprisonment). Certain religious sites considered antiquities are provided further protection under the antiquities law. The law also provides for up to five years imprisonment for actions "likely to violate the feelings of the members of the different religions with regard" to their religious sites. The government, not the courts, has the authority to decide the scope of the right to worship at certain religious sites, and the Supreme Court has upheld that governmental authority. The government provides some resources for the upkeep of religious sites of Muslims and all recognized religious communities but provides significantly greater levels of government resources to Jewish religious sites. The government also funds construction of Jewish synagogues and cemeteries.

A court has upheld the right of minors to choose a secular education regardless of parental preference. Public Hebrew-language secular schools teach Jewish history and religious texts. These classes primarily cover Jewish heritage and culture rather than religious belief. Public Arabic-speaking schools with Arab student bodies teach religion classes on the Quran and the Bible to both Muslim and Christian Arab students. A few independent mixed Jewish-Arab schools also exist and offer religion classes.

Military service is compulsory for Jews, Druze (except those living in the Israeli occupied Golan Heights), and the 5,000-member Circassian community (Muslims originally from the northwestern Caucasus region who migrated in the late 19th century). The law provides the minister of defense some discretion to provide exemptions from compulsory military service for conscientious objectors. A special committee evaluates applications for conscientious objection and can recommend exemptions if it determines that an applicant objects to the inherent use of violent force in the military framework and to war in a way that prevents him or her from serving in the military. The committee is also authorized to recommend certain accommodations to conscientious objectors' concerns, including permission to not hold weapons or wear uniforms. The committee chair is authorized to grant exemptions, and committee decisions can be appealed. Arab Christian and Muslim citizens are exempt from compulsory service. Jehovah's Witnesses are exempt from service on the basis of their conscientious objection upon periodic presentation of documentation that they remained affiliated with that religious community. In March the Knesset overturned previous law allowing Haredi males to avoid military service for religious reasons. By June 40 percent of the 3,357 Haredi males requested to present themselves at the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) induction center had done so and a total of 1,972 Haredi men enlisted in 2014. To receive similar national benefits accorded military veterans, Arabs and Haredi Jews could enlist in a national civil service program run by the Ministry of Science and Technology for one or two years as volunteers in health, education, and welfare with NGOs and institutions focused on improving their local communities.

The law criminalizes calling for, praising, supporting, or encouraging acts of violence or terrorism where such actions are likely to lead to violence, including calls for violence against religious groups. The government operates a special department in the state attorney's office for prosecution of "incitement-related" crimes and a police unit based in Jerusalem for the investigation of such crimes in Israel and the West Bank, including "price tag" attacks. The law criminalizes incitement to racism, defined as "persecution, humiliation, vilification, the display of enmity or violence, or the causing of animosity" by reason of color, race, or national-ethnic origin.

Government Practices

The government restricted access to certain religious sites and implemented some policies based on Orthodox Jewish interpretations of religious law. The government investigated attacks on religious sites and prosecuted perpetrators. The perpetrator of a 2012 violent attack against a 62-year-old female Jehovah's Witness targeted for her religious beliefs was indicted and prosecuted.

From July 8 to August 26, Israel conducted a military operation in response to increased rocket attacks from Gaza toward Israeli civilian areas beginning in late June, as well as militants' attempts to infiltrate the country through tunnels from Gaza to commit terrorist acts. The government recognized a murdered Palestinian teenager as a victim of terrorism, granting his family compensation.

Dozens of persons, including minors, were arrested in connection to "price tag" attacks during the year, including attacks on Christian institutions before Pope Francis' May visit. In April individuals slashed the tires of four cars and wrote slogans such as "Jesus is a cow" and "Mary is a monkey" on the walls of a Catholic monastery in Deir Rafat. In April the door of the Abu-Bakr Al-Siddiq mosque in Umm al-Fahm was set on fire and vandals wrote the words "Arabs out" on the mosque walls. There were multiple examples of Arab cars damaged or painted with a Star of David when parked in Jewish towns. The government designated "price tag" vandals as members of "illicit organizations" and a police unit specializing in nationalist crimes, including "price tag" attacks and attacks on places of worship, investigated these acts. Government officials quickly and publicly criticized the attacks. The police reported investigating all known instances of religiously motivated attacks and making arrests when possible. For example, in April police arrested three Jewish minors suspected of desecrating graves in a Muslim cemetery in Jerusalem. In May the attorney general said the law permits using administrative detention for "price tag" suspects, a practice widely used in cases of Palestinians arrested for security offenses but rarely applied to Israeli citizens. The prime minister, minister of justice, public security minister, and attorney general, as well as the CRIHL spoke out against "price tag" attacks. (The CRIHL is an umbrella body of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious institutions that includes the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA) Ministry of Islamic Waqf (endowments), the PA sharia courts, and the leaders of the major Christian denominations in Jerusalem.

NGOs, religious institutions, and press reports stated that arrests for "price tag" attacks rarely led to successful prosecutions, many for lack of sufficient evidence. Some "price tag" perpetrators were sentenced, some investigations were ongoing, and some prosecutions were pending at year's end. On

December 21, the Lod District Court sentenced two men to 30 months in prison for perpetrating an arson attack motivated by racism, the most significant sentence handed down for “price tag” related violence to date.

On November 29, members of Lehava (an anti-intermarriage organization) set afire two first grade classrooms in the Arabic-Hebrew bilingual Max Rayne Hand in Hand school in West Jerusalem and scrawled graffiti with racist messages, including “Death to Arabs.” Prime Minister Netanyahu condemned the attack, as did Justice Minister Tzipi Livni and Housing Minister Uri Ariel in their visits to the school the following day. In December three members of Lehava were arrested and reportedly confessed to setting fire to the school. Police also arrested other Lehava members, including the organization’s leader Bentzi Gopstein on December 16, on charges of incitement to racism against non-Jews.

The MOI relied on the guidance of the Jewish Agency, a non-profit NGO with strong ties to the government, to determine who qualifies to immigrate as a Jew. Prospective immigrants routinely faced questioning about their religious beliefs to determine their qualifications for citizenship. MOI officials continued to deny citizenship or deny or delay services such as child registration and issuance of social benefits, identity cards, and passports to some citizens based on their religious beliefs, according to the Jerusalem Institute of Justice, an NGO. This included cases of individuals who immigrated under the Law of Return as Jews but were discovered to hold Messianic or Christian beliefs.

As in previous years, the MRS failed to fully implement a 1996 law which established the right of any individual to be buried in a civil ceremony. A September court ruling granted damages to citizens who wanted civil burials but were only offered religious burials, but found they were responsible for payment for burials outside of their municipality. There were 44 cemeteries that contained plots for people without religious status. The government employed civilian non-Jewish clergy as chaplains at military burials when a non-Jewish soldier died in service. The MOI provided imams to conduct funerals according to Muslim customs. All Jewish chaplains in the IDF were Orthodox.

The IDF sponsored expedited Orthodox Jewish conversion courses for Jewish soldiers who were not recognized as Jewish by the Orthodox rabbinical authorities.

The government continued to control access to the site referred to as Haram al-Sharif by Muslims (containing the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque) and the Temple Mount by Jews (who recognize it as the foundation of the first and second Jewish temples). The location has been under Israeli control since 1967 when Israel captured the eastern sector of the city (the Israeli government formally annexed East Jerusalem in 1980, and Israel applies its laws in East Jerusalem). The Jerusalem Islamic Waqf, a Jordanian-funded and administered Islamic trust and charitable organization, continued to administer the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. The government continued to prevent non-Muslim worship and prayer at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, although it ensured limited access to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif to everyone regardless of religious belief. This policy has repeatedly been upheld by the Supreme Court and was enforced by the police, who cite security concerns. The government instead directed Jewish worshippers to the Western Wall, the place of worship nearest the holiest site in Judaism. The Waqf restricted non-Muslims from entering the Dome of the Rock shrine and al-Aqsa Mosque and prohibited non-Muslim religious symbols from being worn on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif (a practice enforced by the Israeli National Police).

The Israeli National Police (INP) was responsible for security at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, with police stationed both inside the site and outside each entrance. The INP conducted routine patrols on the outdoor plaza, regulated traffic in and out of the site, screened non-Muslims for religious paraphernalia, and generally prohibited them from praying publicly on the site. Israeli police had exclusive control of the Mughrabi Gate entrance – the only entrance through which non-Muslims could enter the site – and in general allowed visitors through the gate during set visiting hours, although the INP sometimes restricted this access, citing security concerns.

Citing security concerns, the Israeli government restricted access to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount by Muslims from Jerusalem and the West Bank, frequently barring entry of male, and sometimes female, residents under the age of 50. The Israeli government in November stated the INP had imposed age restrictions 76 times until that point in the year, compared with 12 times in 2013 and three times in 2012. According to media reports, the Israeli government provided Muslims from Gaza very occasional access to the site, including permitting entry to 1,500 Muslim Gazans over 60 during Eid al-Adha on October 5, 6, and 7, and 200 Gazans on Fridays in December – primarily Muslims over 60. Israeli security authorities frequently restricted Muslim residents of Jerusalem from entering the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site for Friday prayer, and imposed age restrictions on male prayer on several days during Ramadan, including every Friday and on the Night of Destiny (Laylat al Qadr). On several days in August, Israeli police prohibited all Muslim women regardless of age from visiting the site during non-Muslim visiting hours. Israeli authorities cited altercations between specific groups of female worshippers and Jewish tourists attempting to break the injunction against non-Muslim prayer on site as a reason for these temporary blanket bans. Authorities infrequently closed the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif entirely, often after skirmishes at the site between Palestinians and Israeli police. Following the October 29 shooting of an Israeli-American activist and a subsequent shootout in the Abu Tor neighborhood of East Jerusalem during which police killed the attacker during an arrest attempt, the INP on October 30, denied entry to the Temple Mount /Haram al-Sharif for all Muslims for a full day. Waqf officials described the closure as unprecedented since 1967, although some reports indicate the site was also completely closed to Muslims in 2000. On November 14, the government lifted all age restrictions on Muslims seeking to enter the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif.

A wide range of Muslim officials, including representatives of the Waqf, objected to Israeli-imposed access restrictions for Muslim worshippers to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, and opposed calls from some Israeli groups to divide visiting hours between Muslims and non-Muslims and to allow non-Muslim prayer there. Waqf officials complained that Israeli police violated status quo agreements regarding control of access to the site, as the INP did not fully coordinate with the Waqf its decisions to allow non-Muslim visitors onto the site. Waqf employees were stationed inside each gate and on the plaza. They could object to the presence of particular persons, such as individuals dressed immodestly or causing disturbances, but they lacked the authority to remove persons from the site.

Israeli authorities in some instances barred specific individuals from the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site, most frequently Jerusalem Islamic Waqf employees, and also barred Jewish activists who had repeatedly violated rules against non-Muslim prayer on the site, including members of Knesset (MKs). Israeli authorities banned all non-Muslim visitors to the site for the last two weeks of Ramadan, citing security concerns. Israeli reinforcement of the ramp leading to the Mughrabi Gate of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, as well as excavations in the immediate vicinity, continued during the year despite calls from the Islamic Waqf to coordinate any excavation or construction and concerns that the excavations could destabilize the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. Israeli authorities briefly constructed a second ramp on the site in August, before removing it a few weeks later after criticism from the Waqf and Jordanian officials.

Many Jewish leaders continued to promote the view that Jewish law prohibited Jews from entering the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, a view strongly supported by the ultra-Orthodox or Haredi community. Increasing numbers of the “national religious” community, however, supported ascending to the site.

Some prominent members of the ruling coalition in the Knesset called for reversing the policy of banning non-Muslim prayer at the site, and the Knesset's Interior Committee held hearings to discuss the issue and press the INP to allow Jewish visitors to pray there. These discussions intensified following the October 29 attack on a Jewish activist (and U.S. citizen) well known for advocating Jewish prayer at the site. Some Israeli officials, including cabinet members, visited the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif and issued statements asserting Israeli control over it. For example, on September 24, Minister of Housing and Construction Uri Ariel visited the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif and stated, "the sovereignty over the Temple Mount is in our hands and we must strengthen it." Some coalition members of the Knesset (MKs) and Israeli NGOs, such as the Temple Institute and Temple Mount Faithful, called on the Israeli government to implement a time-sharing plan at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif that would set aside certain hours for Jewish worship, similar to one used at the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. The Ministry of Tourism also reportedly was considering a plan to open another gate to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif to non-Muslims – a move condemned by Muslim leaders as a change from the status quo at the site. Despite an Israeli High Court ruling stating that "Jews, even though their right to the Temple Mount exists and stands historically, are not permitted to currently actualize their right to perform public prayer on the Temple Mount," the government considered international agreements with Jordan restricting Jewish prayer at the site to remain authoritative. The prime minister reiterated repeatedly his support for maintaining the status quo arrangement at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif – as did Police Commissioner Yohanan Danino – and following the October attack on a Jewish activist, specifically called on Knesset members and Israeli officials to avoid inflaming tensions through provocative actions such as visits to the site. MK Moshe Feiglin, however, visited the site several times following the attack, and the attorney general, on November 25, upheld the right of MKs to visit the site according to the visitation rules for members of the non-Muslim public.

Despite Israeli government prohibitions against non-Muslim worship at the site, some Jewish groups escorted by Israeli police performed religious acts such as prayers and prostration. The police then acted to prevent Jewish persons from praying and arrested those who did. Waqf officials criticized the visits. In some instances the visits sparked violence between Palestinians at the site who responded to the visits of Jews by directing violence – usually rocks and firecrackers – at the visitors and at the Israeli police, sometimes leading to clashes with the police. Jewish visits to the site increased compared to 2013, particularly during Jewish holidays in September and October. During this period, Israeli police at times imposed restrictions on Muslim and non-Muslim access to the site, for example on September 24, limiting access to Muslims under age 50. In several instances Israeli police prevented non-Muslim access to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in anticipation of clashes. Israeli police also temporarily denied Muslims access to the site on at least one day during September to accommodate Jewish visits. Clashes sometimes occurred in areas of the Old City and East Jerusalem where Muslim worshippers who had been denied entry to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif had gathered to pray, such as on the last Friday of Ramadan when worshippers from Jerusalem's Wadi Joz neighborhood, blocked from the Old City by Israeli police, prayed in the street, and then clashed with police after the conclusion of prayers. Following the U.S. Secretary of State's November engagement with Palestinian, Jordanian, and Israeli leaders in Amman, all sides took significant steps to reduce tensions, and the government facilitated freer access for Muslims to the site.

The Western Wall, the place of worship nearest the holiest site in Judaism, was open to visitors from all religions during the year, and the Israeli government permitted Muslims and Christians to make individual prayers at the site. The rabbi of the Western Wall, appointed by the prime minister and chief rabbis, continued to set the guidelines for religious observance at the Western Wall, including the strict separation of women and men. The government continued to enforce this prohibition on mixed gender prayer services at the site on all visitors. Men and women at the Western Wall had to use separate areas to visit and pray, with the women's section being less than half the size of the men's section. Women were not permitted to bring a Torah scroll onto the plaza and were prevented from accessing the public Torah scrolls at the religious site. Women were permitted to pray with tefillin and prayer shawls pursuant to an April 2013 Jerusalem District Court ruling stating it was illegal to arrest or fine them for such actions. The police continued to assist Women of the Wall, an NGO and prayer group, in entering the women's area of the Western Wall for their monthly service.

A platform, south of the Mughrabi ramp and adjacent to but not touching the Western Wall, was open to both men and women where each person could practice religious rituals as desired. The platform was equipped to accommodate approximately 450 worshippers and designated for members of the Conservative and Reform movements of Judaism. Non-Orthodox and mixed gender groups used this structure for religious ceremonies such as bar and bat mitzvahs.

A public debate about accommodating "egalitarian prayer," i.e., men and women praying as they wished, continued throughout the year. Cabinet Secretary Mandelblit continued to chair a committee on "egalitarian prayer" at the Western Wall. The government developed plans to construct an "egalitarian prayer" space at the Robinson's Arch area of the wall in accordance with a 2013 agreement between the government and Jewish groups dissatisfied with restrictions placed on prayer, including gender segregation and a prohibition on women singing out loud, or holding or reading from Torah scrolls. The government halted an effort to give administration of this new area to Elad (the City of David Foundation), an association dedicated to asserting Jewish presence in the Silwan area abutting the Old City. Some groups stated this compromise did not sufficiently accommodate women who wanted to lead prayers in a women-only setting.

Israeli police obstructed access through security checkpoints to the Old City's Church of the Holy Sepulchre during major religious holidays, including the April 19 Orthodox Easter "holy fire" service and the April 20 Orthodox Easter holiday, which reduced Christians' ability to enter Jerusalem and the Old City to participate in religious services. Christian leaders said these restrictions significantly reduced the ability of congregants and clergy to enter the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Some Christians also noted, however, that restrictions on pilgrims and coordination with the Israeli police had improved compared to 2013. During busy periods the Israeli police site commander provided security for and facilitated access to the site, employing metal barricades and specially-designed fire extinguishers, and managing tensions among followers of different streams of Christianity at the site. Some Christians accused police of using excessive force during efforts to regulate crowds in the Old City during the Easter events.

Israeli government restrictions on movement between Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza limited the access of both Israelis and Palestinians to religious sites and gatherings. The Israeli government prohibited Israeli citizens in unofficial capacities from traveling to the parts of the West Bank under the civil and security control of the Palestinian Authority (Area A). This restriction prevented Jewish Israelis from routinely visiting several Jewish religious sites, although the IDF occasionally provided security escorts for groups to visit selected Jewish religious sites. Beginning in 2009, the Israeli Ministry of Defense gradually lifted restrictions on Arab Israelis visiting Area A cities in the West Bank.

According to the government, travel to hostile countries, including travel to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj, required a permit from the minister of interior or prime minister, and illegal travel was punishable by a prison sentence or fine if the traveler did not request prior approval. There were no reports of this requirement hindering the ability of citizens to participate in the Hajj.

The MRS upheld a complaint made against an advertising campaign for Yad L'Achim, an NGO opposed to missionary activity and intermarriage with Muslims, in which it promised that a prominent state-employed rabbi would pray for anyone who donates money to the group. According to the laws

pertaining to the state civil service, it was forbidden for state employees to raise money for any organization or purpose other than for the state.

A Netanya court ruled that a public school was justified in refusing to rent an event hall to Jehovah's Witnesses, saying that the "conduct" of the community "conflicts with the character of the school" which educates a majority Jewish population. The decision cited the Jehovah's Witnesses' conscientious objection, "principled non-participation in State ceremonies," avoidance of certain medical treatments, and other religious and theological beliefs that it said contradict the goal of state-sponsored education. An appeal of the decision was pending at year's end.

According to the 2014 *Religion and State Index* published by Hiddush, a local NGO, 89 percent of secular Jewish Israelis, 80 percent of immigrants, and 61 percent of traditionally religious Jewish Israelis were unhappy with the policies of the Chief Rabbinate. Hiddush also reported that the majority of Jewish citizens objected to exclusive Orthodox control over fundamental aspects of their personal lives, particularly the right to marry, and public opinion polls showed a majority of Jewish citizens also supported the formal recognition of other strands of Judaism as valid, such as Reform and Conservative Judaism.

The government implemented some policies based on Orthodox Jewish interpretations of religious law. This system limited the personal freedom of individuals who otherwise would not subject themselves to the authority of a religious community, despite a 2013 IDI poll showing a majority of Israeli Jews supported equalizing the legal status of different denominations. For example, the only in-country Jewish marriages the government recognized were those performed by the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate, which excluded citizens without maternal Jewish lineage since such persons are not considered Jewish according to *halacha*. Those who did qualify to marry under the Rabbinate were required to follow a strict procedure which included sessions with a rabbi and classes the bride was required to take to learn about her duties and responsibilities under *halacha*. Divorces also had to take place through the framework of the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate. According to CBS figures released in August, 2 percent fewer couples married or registered for marriage in country in 2012 and 5 percent more chose to wed abroad as compared with the prior year. One-fifth of the 7,698 couples who married outside Israel and then registered as married in Israel in 2012 were couples in which both spouses were Jewish. A total of 50,474 couples registered their marriages in 2012. In the case of Anna Varsanyi, despite being considered Jewish by the standards of the Rabbinate and having been married in an Orthodox Jewish ceremony in 2012, during the year the government refused to consider her Jewish because her mother had converted to Christianity. To marry in government-recognized ceremonies, Jews were required to undergo marriage counseling from Orthodox religious authorities.

The High Court has repeatedly ruled that the segregation of men and women on public streets and sidewalks in the ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighborhood of Mea She'arim in Jerusalem was illegal, and that gender segregation on public buses could not be imposed or ordered. Authorities generally enforced the law. Communities that desired segregation on public transportation could do so voluntarily, but buses were required to post signs informing passengers they are free by law to sit in any available seat. In March a court convicted a Haredi man from Jerusalem of sexually harassing a female soldier because she was standing among a group of men on a public bus in 2012.

Following the attorney general's 2013 adoption of the recommendations of a Ministry of Justice team established to investigate the exclusion of women in the public sphere (including by religious communities), in March several ministers introduced a proposal by which each ministry would be required to report to the government steps it took to prevent the exclusion of women. Also in March a government resolution declared that segregation of women constituted a serious negative phenomenon requiring governmental action; the government required all local authorities to ensure segregation of women did not occur in public events, funerals, public transportation, or any other area of the public sphere.

According to government figures, the year's budget for religious services for the Jewish population, including funding for religious councils, salaries for religious personnel, funding for the development of cemeteries, and funding for the construction of synagogues and ritual baths, was approximately 344.1 million new Israeli shekels (NIS) (\$88.7 million). Religious minorities, which constituted slightly more than 20 percent of the population, received approximately NIS 66.2 million (\$17.1 million), which included NIS 6.7 million (\$1.7 million) for development of religious sites and structures and 3.76 million (\$968,800) for the development of non-Jewish cemeteries. Allocation of a special budget for the restoration of Arab religious sites, including a special budget for maintaining Muslim cemeteries, was pending at year's end. Some Muslims stated there was insufficient state funding for Muslim affairs, including for building and restoring mosques and cemeteries, although the state provided municipalities with religious development budgets and religious institutions with operational support funds. Many mosques lacked an appointed imam, a responsibility of the MOI's Muslim Affairs Department. The government allowed non-state employees to be imams in mosques if the community preferred.

The State Attorney's Office in 2012 adopted a High Court recommendation that the state pay the salaries of non-Orthodox rabbis in rural areas. Following a December 2013 High Court ruling that the MRS ease the funding conditions for activities by the Reform and Conservative communities, the government, through a mechanism whereby funding is routed through the Ministry of Culture and Sport, began paying the salary of a non-Orthodox rabbi for the first time. The government also provided funding for non-Orthodox Jewish religious institutions, which it designated "seminaries," according to the Israeli Religious Action Center.

The government provided resources to both religious and nonreligious schools. The government subsidized between 55 and 100 percent of the operating costs of recognized Haredi schools, which were required to teach a corresponding percentage of the national curriculum, with many schools receiving funding for all operating costs from the government. Government resources available for religious or heritage studies to Arab and non-Orthodox Jewish public schools were significantly less than those available to Orthodox Jewish public schools. Public and private Arab schools offered studies in both Islam and Christianity, but state funding for such studies was proportionately less than the funding for religious education courses in Jewish schools.

Although Arab, Christian, and Muslim citizens were exempt from compulsory military service, the government began sending letters to Christian citizens encouraging them to volunteer for service to increase their participation in the military, and in September the prime minister recorded a video message encouraging Christian pro-military service groups.

The government launched a nationwide campaign to implement a 2007 MOI decision to eliminate "national identification" on official identity cards in response to complaints that the majority of identity cards still in circulation identified non-Jews. The new identity cards noted only name and birthday. Religious identification was listed in the central population registry. A petition to require the government to issue official birth documents listing both parents' names, even when one was not Jewish, remained pending before the High Court of Justice, and birth certificates still regularly omitted the names of non-Jewish fathers.

On September 17, the Minister of Interior ordered the Population, Immigration, and Border Authority to allow Christians to register as Aramean instead of Arab as their national or ethnic group. Many church leaders complained that the measure was aimed at dividing the Arab minority, while a small number of Christians applauded the decision.

The government was a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. The government participated in the OSCE Berlin Conference on Anti-

Semitism.

Actions by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

Militant and terrorist organizations, including Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and members of global extremist organizations, carried out attacks against citizens of the country in the form of missile, rocket, and mortar attacks from the Gaza Strip and by kidnapping and killing civilians, as in the case of the kidnapping and killing of three Israeli teenagers. Terrorists' statements often contained anti-Semitic rhetoric and appeals to Islamic religious beliefs in conjunction with the attacks. According to Israeli government sources, 88 individuals were killed as a result of terrorist attacks during the year, including 67 soldiers during military operations in the Occupied Territories from July to August. Militant and terrorist organizations from Gaza and the Sinai launched more than 4,660 projectiles at the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Relations between religious and ethnic groups, including between Muslims and Christians, Arabs and non-Arabs, and secular and religious Jews, continued to be strained. On November 18, two Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem killed four Israeli worshippers, three of them also U.S. citizens, and one Israeli policeman, and wounded dozens, some seriously, in an attack on a synagogue in the Har Nof neighborhood of West Jerusalem during morning prayers. There were reports of anti-Semitic acts by members of minority religious groups and of acts of intolerance against minority religious groups. Following the killing of three Jewish Israeli minors in the West Bank and a Palestinian minor in East Jerusalem, which were designated as terror attacks and condemned by the prime minister and other government officials, rioters in the Arab town of Qalanswa attacked some Jewish visitors to the town and set fire to a Jewish-owned vehicle. In response, the police set up temporary checkpoints at the entry points to certain Arab towns and advised Jewish Israelis not to enter.

During Israeli military operations in the Occupied Territories from July to August, there was an increase in tension, intolerant statements in the media, and violent attacks between segments of the Jewish population and segments of the non-Jewish Arab population, many of whom identified themselves as Palestinian, including an increase in attacks on Muslim and Christian religious sites and Arab-affiliated property. An unidentified cartoonist created an image of Gaza as a veiled Muslim woman in a lascivious pose asking for sexual favors. In November a Palestinian artist depicted al-Aqsa mosque as a jailed woman about to be raped by Israeli soldiers. Because religion, ethnicity, and nationality are closely linked, it is difficult to categorize such societal actions against specific groups as being solely based on religious identity.

Vandals used swastikas in graffiti targeted at Jews and non-Jews, including in an attack at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in October. An unidentified person sent a threatening letter to the Latin Patriarchate in Nazareth, warning that if Arab Christians did not leave the country by May 5, 100 Christians would be killed for each hour of delay. Attacks on Jewish religious sites continued, including attacks that appear to have been perpetrated against non-Orthodox Jewish sites by other Jewish groups. For example, on January 30, apparent Jewish vandals defaced a reform synagogue in Ra'anana with rulings by Maimonides that in context implied the worshippers there were nonbelievers.

"Price tag" attacks continued within Israel. SFCG and the CRIHL documented 25 "price tag" attacks against religious sites within the country, including five against Muslim, eight against Christian, and 12 against Jewish religious sites. In April vandals defaced a mosque in Fureidis with graffiti saying, "close mosques, not yeshivas." Members of another nearby Arab community in Shefamr subsequently renovated an unused synagogue in the town as a statement against violence, and Jewish residents of the area joined in peaceful activities protesting the attack. Unknown attackers threw a firebomb at the renovated synagogue November 12. There were arson attacks against a synagogue in Petah Tikva and a Chabad trailer near Baka al-Gharbiyye on May 31. The organization Tag Meir organized visits to victimized areas and activities to promote tolerance in response to the attacks; the group's name is a play on the Hebrew phrase for "price tag" and a reference to the traditions of the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. At a time of increased tensions in October and leading up to the confluence of the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur and the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha, civil society organizations, including the Abraham Fund Initiative, convened Jewish and Muslim religious leaders to call for religious tolerance and respect for each other's traditions during the holiday period. The holidays passed uneventfully.

Societal attitudes toward missionary activities and conversion to other religions were generally negative. Many Jews opposed missionary activity directed at Jews, considering it tantamount to religious harassment, and some were hostile to Jewish converts to Christianity. Various religious groups proselytized, however, and invited members of the public to participate in religious observance in public spaces regularly and peacefully. On December 27, a Jehovah's Witness reported being physically assaulted in Beer Sheba while discussing the Bible with residents door-to-door. Individual Messianic Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses were reportedly harassed regularly by Lehava, Yad L'Achim and Lev L'Achim, Jewish religious organizations opposed to missionary activity and intermarriage.

Yad L'Achim continued to offer assistance to Jewish women in "escaping" situations of cohabitation with Arab men, in some cases reportedly facilitating the kidnapping of children away from the women's spouses. The anti-intermarriage organization Lehava continued to operate a hotline for citizens to inform on Jewish women who were suspected of having romantic relationships with Arab men and made the names and phone numbers of the men available to facilitate members of the general public contacting them and discouraging intermarriage. Lehava organized a protest of an August marriage between a Muslim man and a Jewish woman who converted to Islam; the police provided protection for the wedding. A court upheld the organization's right to protest but ordered protestors not to approach within 200 meters of the wedding party. The president issued a statement supporting the couple's civil right to marry. According to an August Haaretz poll, 75 percent of Jews and 65 percent of Arabs would avoid having a relationship with someone of a different religion.

There continued to be tension between the Haredi community and the majority of Israelis, including concerns related to housing, service in the IDF, and participation in the workforce. In April Haredi demonstrators protesting against military conscription threw stones and bottles at police.

The first woman was appointed in February to advise the council that selects sharia court judges.

Expressions of animosity between secular and religiously observant Jews continued. As in past years, there were instances of Haredi Jews throwing rocks at passing motorists driving on the Sabbath in predominantly Haredi neighborhoods, and harassing or assaulting women whose appearance they considered immodest. There continued to be numerous reports of Haredi men spitting at non-Haredi Jews and persons of different faiths.

Although many Orthodox rabbis continued to discourage Jewish visits to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site, other prominent rabbis reiterated their view that entering the site was permissible, and Jewish proponents of accessing and performing religious rituals at the site were increasingly vocal. For example, groups such as the Temple Mount Faithful and the Temple Institute regularly called for increased Jewish access and prayer at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, as well as the construction of a Third Jewish Temple on the site. The Temple Institute in August began a crowdfunding campaign to finance architectural plans for the Third Temple, and a promotional video on its website depicted the Third Temple built atop the al-Aqsa Mosque site. The northern

branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel, a political and religious group opposed to participation in local or national governance, frequently called on members to “defend” al-Aqsa mosque and spoke of the religious site as “under attack.” Multiple reports indicated tens of members of the movement may have received funding to remain present at the site to counter violations of the status quo.

Interfaith dialogue often was linked to ongoing regional peace efforts and combatting extremism and violence. A number of NGOs sought to build understanding and create dialogue among religious groups and between religious and secular Jewish communities. These organizations included Neve Shalom-Wahat al-Salam; the Abraham Fund Initiative; Givat Haviva; the Hagar and Hand-in-Hand bilingual schools; Hiddush; the Israeli Religious Action Center of the Reform Movement; and the Interreligious Coordinating Council, which promoted interfaith dialogue among Jewish, Muslim, and Christian institutions.

Construction of the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s Museum of Tolerance in West Jerusalem continued. The center intends to open a museum on the grounds of the Mamilla cemetery, a 1,000-year-old Muslim cemetery containing the gravesites of several prominent Palestinian families and, according to Islamic tradition, several of Prophet Muhammad’s companions and tens of thousands of Salah ad-Din’s warriors. The Israeli Supreme Court has upheld the validity of the building plans. Supporters of the center cited an 1894 ruling by an Islamic court stating that the cemetery was no longer sacred because it was abandoned, and claimed that its service as a municipal parking lot for almost 50 years and pre-1948 plans by local authorities to build a hotel, offices, a bank and other buildings on the site set the precedent for civil use of the area. The museum continued to face opposition from human rights groups and relatives of those buried in the cemetery, which disputed the Wiesenthal Center’s assertions and demanded the site be treated as a heritage site. The chief Israeli excavator assigned by the Israeli Antiquities Authority (IAA) to evaluate the site concluded it should not be approved for construction based on his preliminary excavations, but his findings were not part of IAA’s advisory opinion to the Supreme Court in its 2008 hearing on the case.

The CRIHL standing committees met quarterly and the organization continued to implement its Universal Code on Holy Sites in partnership with Search for Common Ground, which included research and documentation of attacks on religious sites and joint interreligious responses to religious site attacks.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy officials engaged with the highest levels of the Israeli government to raise concerns about an increase in societal, religious, and ethnic tensions after the summer’s high profile killings of three Israelis and one Palestinian, and the subsequent Israeli military operation in the Occupied Territories from June to August. The Ambassador attended the funeral of a U.S. citizen killed by Palestinian militants affiliated with Hamas, visited the families of U.S. citizens killed in the attack on a Har Nof synagogue, and paid a condolence call on the family of the Druze policeman who was wounded responding to the Har Nof attack and later died of his injuries.

In response to a rise in tensions at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif and several high profile violent incidents in Jerusalem in October and November, the U.S. Secretary of State, the National Security Advisor, the Ambassador, and embassy officers engaged government officials and relevant Knesset leaders on the importance of maintaining the agreed-upon status quo at the religious site and not escalating an already tense situation through provocative actions and statements. In light of concerns about possible clashes between Jews and Muslims during the coinciding observances of Yom Kippur and Eid al-Adha, embassy-supported organizations focusing on police-society relations, community development, and mediation advised public authorities on how order could be maintained while respecting religious customs, and thereby helped prevent a repeat of clashes that had erupted before in mixed cities on Yom Kippur. Embassy officials consistently highlighted the importance of religious pluralism and respect for non-Orthodox streams of Judaism in their engagements with top Israeli officials.

The U.S. Special Advisor for Faith-Based Initiatives met with local leaders involved in interreligious engagement during a November visit to Tel Aviv, and in February a U.S. government-sponsored speaker from George Mason University conducted workshops in narrative mediation with community mediation organizations working with diverse religious and ethnic communities.

Embassy officials participated in religious events of various Jewish, Muslim, Druze, and Christian denominations and used widely-viewed embassy social media channels to amplify U.S. support for freedom of religion, openness to other religions, and tolerance in connection with these events. The Ambassador and U.S. Agency for International Development director paid a solidarity visit to the Hand in Hand school within 48 hours of the November attack on it. The Deputy Chief of Mission hosted 80 guests from various religious groups and denominations for an interfaith Thanksgiving dinner that received wide praise from the religious leaders, government officials, and celebrities who attended. The event emphasized U.S. interest in fostering an ongoing dialogue with the diverse communities in the country and promoting interreligious and intercultural communication and partnership within society. The embassy facilitated the inclusion of four *hanukkiyot* (menorahs) representing organizations committed to tolerance and diversity in two Hanukkah receptions hosted by the President in Washington. The receptions and the President’s remarks on the importance of religious tolerance received widespread media and social media coverage.

The embassy supported programs countering the “price tag” attack phenomenon, including programs supporting interreligious solidarity, interreligious dialogue, mixed Jewish-Arab educational and communal initiatives, and programs leveraging the influence of religious leaders to combat familial and societal violence. The embassy used official U.S. assistance grants to support the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel’s Religious Voice for Peace interfaith initiative, a film project in Abu Ghosh on religious coexistence, the Bible Lands “Image of Abraham” elementary school religious coexistence program, and programs aimed at increasing the Haredi community’s participation in the economy and integration into society, including in Israel’s high-tech workforce. The embassy supported Yod-Bet B’Heshvan, an organization responding to religiously and ethnically-motivated “price tag” attacks through demonstrations of solidarity with the victims and development of anti-racism curricula. The embassy regularly brought Jewish and Arab audiences together for English language classes and visiting artist events, using language, dance, music, and visual arts to encourage interaction between communities often geographically segregated by religion.

The embassy managed a conflict management and mitigation grant program as part of a Congressionally mandated effort to support people-to-people reconciliation activities that bring together individuals of different ethnic, religious, or political backgrounds to address the root causes of tension and instability. Under this program, grants were often provided to organizations advocating religious tolerance among different ethnic groups. For example, the embassy supported the Rosh Pina Mainstreaming Network’s efforts to bring together Israeli Arab and Jewish (religious and secular) early childhood teachers in Acre for joint training on reducing aggressive behavior and bullying. A grant to the Association for Community Development in Acre also focused on building strong community networks in areas of potential ethnic conflict, including mixed public housing units in the city center and rival teens in Jewish and Arab high schools.

A grant to the Jezreel Valley Center for the Arts supported that organization’s efforts to reduce social, ethnic, and religious tensions among Arab and Jewish youth living in the lower Galilee through joint musical activities. Teachers and students (ages 10 to 18) in this program learned to play each other’s music in their respective schools and met throughout the year for joint rehearsals and performances.

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