



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice

Lebanon

Lebanon – LBN38401 – Jehovah’s Witnesses – Treatment – State Protection

10 March 2011

For Jehovah’s Witnesses followers in Lebanon:

1. What are the limits, if any, on their legal rights, such as recognition of their religious ceremonies, ability to congregate and worship, ability to proselytise?

According to the United States Department of State (USDOS), the Lebanese constitution provides for “freedom of religion and the freedom to practice all religious rites, provided that the public order is not disturbed”.¹ There are 18 officially recognised religious groups in Lebanon, four of which are Muslim, twelve Christian, the Druze and Judaism.² Jehovah’s Witnesses (JWs) is not an officially sanctioned religion in Lebanon.

Formal recognition by the government is a legal requirement for religious groups to conduct most religious activities. Unrecognised groups can be disadvantaged under the law in that their members may not qualify for certain government positions. Unrecognised groups may own property and assemble for worship without government interference; however, they are disadvantaged under the law as they may not legally marry, divorce or inherit property in Lebanon.³ Although there are no legal barriers to proselytising, traditional attitudes discourage such activity.⁴

In Lebanon, there are an estimated 3,613 Jehovah’s Witnesses making up 70 congregations, many of which are located in Qalamoun and Akkar.⁵ In 2010, an article in the *LA Times* reported on an undercover Jehovah’s Witnesses congregation outside Beirut. It is estimated that there are over 15 ‘Kingdom Halls’ in Lebanon, which appear to be tolerated by the community, and well attended despite members’ fears that they could be harassed or deported. According to the article, Jehovah’s Witnesses say they feel like an oppressed and silenced minority, particularly vilified by the Maronite community who reportedly spread lies claiming Jehovah’s Witnesses are Jews.⁶

¹ US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010 – Lebanon*, 17 November, Section II – Attachment 1

² US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010 – Lebanon*, 17 November, Section I – Attachment 1

³ US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010 – Lebanon*, 17 November, Section II – Attachment 1

⁴ US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2009 – Lebanon*, 11 March, Section 2.c – Attachment 2

⁵ Nash, M. 2008, ‘Faith comes knocking’, NOW Lebanon, 16 November

<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=67298#> – Accessed 19 June 2009 – Attachment 3

⁶ ‘Lebanon: In Muslim Middle East, Jehovah’s Witnesses congregate in secret’ 2010, *LA Times*, 17 April <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2010/04/lebanon-christian-muslim-religion-jihad-beirut-illegal-underground.html> – Accessed 11 August 2010 – Attachment 4

2. What are the limits, if any, on their access to public institutions, such as schools, healthcare, government services?

No information could be found regarding limits to Jehovah's Witnesses' access to public institutions such as schools, healthcare or government services. It is noteworthy that Jehovah's Witness children are generally home-schooled, as inter-faith interaction is discouraged by their church.⁷

According to USDOS, each officially recognised religion has its own court system to adjudicate matters of personal status, including marriage, divorce, inheritance and child custody according to each religion's principles.⁸ As they are not officially sanctioned, Jehovah's Witnesses have no such court. As a result, Jehovah's Witnesses cannot get married in Lebanon, and must travel abroad to do so. As a non-recognised religion, Jehovah's Witnesses are unable to officially register their houses of worship, and are therefore excluded from the property tax exemption enjoyed by churches and mosques. Instead, Kingdom Halls are registered as private property owned by individuals.⁹ Another issue encountered by Jehovah's Witnesses relates to identity cards, which display an individual's religion, but only those that are officially recognised. Jehovah's Witnesses reportedly defer to their ancestral religious traditions on their papers.¹⁰

3. Have there been reports of harm perpetrated on them by state actors? If yes, please provide details.

No information could be found regarding state actors perpetrating harm against Jehovah's Witnesses in Lebanon. According to USDOS, the government generally respected religious freedom in practice, and in recent years, including 2010, there have been no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.¹¹

According to advice from 2008, DFAT did not identify any cases of serious harm to JWs following the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, nor any instances of proselytising JWs being harmed in Lebanon. DFAT noted that in general, however, proselytising by JWs was not welcomed among the population, and attempts to convert people's faith are frowned upon and considered 'trouble making' by security authorities.¹²

While somewhat dated, DFAT advice from 2000 noted that JWs were able to engage in private religious activity without harassment by Lebanese authorities. While acknowledging Lebanese security agencies monitor the activities of religious groups and other community associations, "agencies do not impede those activities if they are non-

⁷ Nash, M. 2008, 'Faith comes knocking', NOW Lebanon, 16 November

<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=67298#> – Accessed 19 June 2009 – Attachment 3

⁸ US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2009 – Lebanon*, 11 March, Section 2.c – Attachment 2

⁹ Nash, M. 2008, 'Faith comes knocking', NOW Lebanon, 16 November

<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=67298#> – Accessed 19 June 2009 – Attachment 3

¹⁰ Nash, M. 2008, 'Faith comes knocking', NOW Lebanon, 16 November

<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=67298#> – Accessed 19 June 2009 – Attachment 3

¹¹ US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report – Lebanon*, 17 November, Section II – Attachment 1

¹² Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2008, *DFAT Report 784 - RRT Information Request: LBN32899*, 27 February – Attachment 5

political, do not threaten state security and do not offend definitions of public morality.”¹³
No information could be found to suggest any change in this situation.

4. Have there been reports of harm perpetrated on them by recognised religions in Lebanon? If yes, please provide details.

While no reports of harm against JW's by recognised religions in Lebanon could be found, prominent Christian identity Father George Rahme regularly denounces JW's on his weekly television programme, and reportedly encourages viewers to “keep a stick near their door to beat any Witnesses who visit.”¹⁴

5. Have there been reports of harm perpetrated on them by members of the public? If yes, please provide details.

No specific reports of organised and concerted harm against Jehovah's Witnesses by members of the public could be found. By definition, Jehovah's Witness members are required to proselytise as a key tenet of their faith, but reception to their proselytising in Lebanon is mixed, with one member claiming he has been beaten, assaulted and has had doors slammed in his face.¹⁵ According to NOW Lebanon, abuse is not the standard reaction encountered by Jehovah's Witnesses. Many non- Jehovah's Witness Christians in Lebanon, particularly Maronites, put signs on their doors warning Jehovah's Witnesses against knocking.¹⁶

6. If the answer to either of questions 4 and 5 is yes, have there been reports of a failure of the organs of state, such as the police, to afford them protection?

No information was found of failures in state protection afforded to Jehovah's Witnesses.

7. Are there parts of Lebanon where the practice of their religion, in particular proselytising, is tolerated without them suffering harm?

As previously noted, despite the absence of legal barriers preventing proselytising, the practice is generally not welcomed by the community. However, no information was found relating to endemic harm against Jehovah's Witnesses as a result of their beliefs or practices.

¹³ DIMA Country Information Service 2000, *Country Information Report No. 465/00 – Lebanon – Jehovah's Witnesses*, (sourced from DFAT advice of 17 August 2000), 24 August – Attachment 6

¹⁴ Nash, M. 2008, 'Faith comes knocking', NOW Lebanon, 16 November
<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=67298#> – Accessed 19 June 2009 – Attachment 3

¹⁵ Nash, M. 2008, 'Faith comes knocking', NOW Lebanon, 16 November
<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=67298#> – Accessed 19 June 2009 – Attachment 3

¹⁶ Nash, M. 2008, 'Faith comes knocking', NOW Lebanon, 16 November
<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=67298#> – Accessed 19 June 2009 – Attachment 3

Attachments

1. US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report – Lebanon*, 17 November.
2. US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2009 – Lebanon*, 11 March.
3. Nash, M. 2008, 'Faith comes knocking', NOW Lebanon, 16 November
<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=67298#> – Accessed 19 June 2009.
4. 'Lebanon: In Muslim Middle East, Jehovah's Witnesses congregate in secret' 2010, *LA Times*, 17 April <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2010/04/lebanon-christian-muslim-religion-jihad-beirut-illegal-underground.html> – Accessed 11 August 2010. (CISNET – Lebanon – CX247271)
5. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2008, *DFAT Report 784 – RRT Information Request: LBN32899*, 27 February.
6. DIMA Country Information Service 2000, *Country Information Report No. 465/00 – Lebanon – Jehovah's Witnesses*, (sourced from DFAT advice of 17 August 2000), 24 August. (CISNET Lebanon CX44063)