



THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF
JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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From the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses

**Contribution for the
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Lebanon

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SUMMARY OF THE SUBMISSION

This submission to the Human Rights Council (HRC) on Lebanon highlights human rights issues and current failures to implement accepted recommendations by Lebanon during the previous UPR cycle.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Lebanon, and as a worldwide organisation, respectfully request the government of Lebanon to:

- (1) Legally register Jehovah's Witnesses as a Christian religion, allowing them the right to worship freely as guaranteed by Lebanon's Constitution;
- (2) Allow Jehovah's Witnesses to have simple, dignified places of worship where they can meet for worship as they do elsewhere, in congregations of up to 100 adherents, without interference;
- (3) Allow Jehovah's Witnesses to import Bibles and the Bible literature used in their weekly programme of scriptural education and worship all around the world; and
- (4) Abide by their commitment to uphold the fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution of Lebanon, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for all citizens, including Jehovah's Witnesses.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses is a charity registered in the United Kingdom. It provides support to Jehovah's Witnesses facing fundamental human rights violations in various parts of the world.
2. Jehovah's Witnesses have been practising their religion in Lebanon since the 1920's. During the 1930's, they held regular Christian meetings and imported Bible study aids without restriction or hindrance. However, in 1952, *The Watchtower*, the main religious journal used in the liturgy of Jehovah's Witnesses, was banned from entering the country. In 1956, Decision No. 135, issued and signed by the Minister of Information Mr Mohamad Sabra, confirmed the previous Decision No. 1574/1952, which did not specify the issuing party. This decision was based on Article 20 of the Lebanese Law on Printed Material issued on 22 October 1952, which states: "*It is forbidden to publish books, letters, articles and pictures that are in contradiction with the general ethics and morals ...*". This law is couched in such general terms as to allow effectively unfettered discretion to the authorities, contrary to the provisions of Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).
3. Further, in 1960, the *Awake!* magazine, published by Jehovah's Witnesses in the United States, was banned from entering Lebanon.
4. Paradoxically, Jehovah's Witnesses won a lawsuit in Lebanon that recognised their identity as a Christian religious group having the right to hold religious meetings. This lawsuit was initiated in February 1960 against two persons who attacked and disturbed the Witnesses' peaceful

religious meetings. A ruling in favour of the Witnesses was rendered on 25 August 1960. It relied on Decision No. 228, issued on 20 April 1960 by the Governor of Mount Lebanon, Mr Fawzi Bardawil, granting Jehovah's Witnesses the right to hold religious meetings within the limits of the province of Mount Lebanon. The judgment also referred to a report from the General Security Department dated 8 August 1960, stating that there is nothing in their files proving a relationship between Jehovah's Witnesses and either Zionism or Communism.

5. On 12 May 1964, the Israel Boycott Office of the League of Arab Nations Secretariat in Damascus issued Recommendation No. 570, effectively banning the worship of Jehovah's Witnesses in all Arab countries. The ban was based on the demonstrably false charge that Jehovah's Witnesses are inspired by world Zionism. On 27 January 1971, the Lebanese Council of Ministers approved the suggestions of the Ministry of National Economy, Boycott Office of Israel, to ban Jehovah's Witnesses in Lebanon based on the same false charge.
6. Jehovah's Witnesses are not and have never been "inspired by International Zionism," which was defined by political analysts and experts as "an ideology and a political movement." As a matter of religious doctrine, Jehovah's Witnesses do not participate in any political activities.
7. An official statement of the Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses dated 10 May 2006 states: "We wish to go on record ... that Jehovah's Witnesses have no relationship with Zionism and we continue to maintain our neutral position toward all political movements and governments." Even the Central Israeli Council for Coordination and Advice clearly denies that any connection exists or has ever existed between Jehovah's Witnesses and Zionism.
8. Jehovah's Witnesses in Lebanon appealed to the Supreme Court against the 1971 decree. The Supreme Court ruled against Jehovah's Witnesses in November 1996. A subsequent plea to the Supreme Court was submitted in 1997. On 21 January 2010, the Supreme Court issued a unanimous negative verdict stating that there was no ground to reopen that case. Thus, the decree issued in 1971 remains in force.
9. In January 2007, the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses wrote to the Israel Boycott Office in Damascus to request a meeting to discuss the formal rescinding of the unfounded and discriminatory 1964 recommendation. The answer that was received stated that it was not the proper time to discuss that issue. A similar answer was received to a comparable letter in 2008.

II. ISSUES

10. Lebanon's Constitution recognises and protects fundamental freedoms and human rights. The Constitution Preamble (Part 1 — Fundamental provisions) states: "Lebanon is a parliamentary democratic republic based on respect for public liberties, especially the freedom of opinion and belief, and respect for social justice and equality of rights and duties among all citizens without discrimination."
11. These freedoms are detailed in Articles 9 and 13 of the Constitution (freedoms of conscience, religion, opinion, assembly, association). Article 9 states: "There shall be ***absolute freedom of conscience***. The state in rendering homage to the God Almighty ***shall respect all religions and creeds*** and shall guarantee, under its protection ***the free exercise of all religious rites*** provided that public order is not disturbed. It shall also guarantee that the personal status and religious interests of the population, to whatever religious sect they belong, shall be respected." (Emphasis added.)

12. Moreover, Lebanon is party to the major human rights instruments, which demonstrates its commitment to human rights. Lebanon acceded to the ICCPR on 3 November 1972. The Constitution Preamble underlines that "*Lebanon is also a founding and active member of the United Nations Organization and abides by its covenants and by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Government shall embody these principles in all fields and areas without exception.*"
13. However, the past decrees issued against Jehovah's Witnesses in Lebanon prohibit them from importing religious literature, publicly sharing their beliefs and holding Christian meetings for worship in Kingdom Halls (places of worship of Jehovah's Witnesses). Therefore, they are forced to meet covertly in private homes to study the Bible in small groups, and they have limited access to their religious texts. Jehovah's Witnesses in Lebanon have expressed on several occasions their gratitude for the generally reasonable treatment shown by the authorities, who tolerate their well-known peaceful Christian meetings and allow them to gather peacefully. They are, however, requesting the full enjoyment of their rights in a non-discriminatory way as enshrined in the Constitution and the international commitments of Lebanon, including Articles 21 and 22 of the ICCPR and Article 20 of the UDHR.
14. In view of Lebanon's commitment to the ICCPR and other international protocols, it is a violation of fundamental freedoms enshrined in these commitments for the State authorities to continue to deny legal registration to Jehovah's Witnesses for more than 50 years. The principle of neutrality and impartiality of State authorities does not permit the government of Lebanon to establish themselves as arbiters of religious doctrine as a basis for denial of registration. The European Court of Human Rights has reiterated on many occasions that "the State's duty of neutrality and impartiality is incompatible with any power on the State's part to assess the legitimacy of religious beliefs or the ways in which those beliefs are expressed". (*Izzettin Doğan and Others v. Turkey* [GC], no. 62649/10, § 68, ECHR 2016)

III. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

15. Jehovah's Witnesses in Lebanon, and as a worldwide organisation, express concern at the restrictions placed on the peaceful manifestation of their religious faith. The past decrees issued against Jehovah's Witnesses in Lebanon prohibit them from importing religious literature, publicly sharing their beliefs, and openly holding public meetings for peaceful Christian worship.
16. Jehovah's Witnesses in Lebanon request the full enjoyment of their rights in a non-discriminatory way as enshrined in the Constitution and Lebanon's international commitments.
17. In particular, Jehovah's Witnesses respectfully request the government of Lebanon to take the necessary steps to:
 - (1) Legally register Jehovah's Witnesses as a Christian religion, allowing them the right to worship freely as guaranteed by Lebanon's Constitution
 - (2) Allow Jehovah's Witnesses to have simple, dignified places of worship where they can meet for worship as they do elsewhere, in congregations of up to 100 adherents, without interference
 - (3) Allow Jehovah's Witnesses to import Bibles and the Bible literature used in their weekly programme of scriptural education and worship all around the world; and

- (4) Abide by their commitment to uphold the fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution of Lebanon and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for all citizens, including Jehovah's Witnesses