

FRANCE 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and the law protect the right of individuals to choose, change, and practice their religion. The government investigated and prosecuted crimes and other actions against religious groups, including anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim violence, hate speech, and vandalism. Following terrorist attacks on January 7-9 that included the killing of 12 people at the satirical *Charlie Hebdo* magazine, the killing of a traffic policewoman, and the killing of four people at a kosher supermarket, the government mobilized security forces to protect religious sites, especially Jewish ones. Citing the attacks, one parliamentarian spoke of a “new anti-Semitism” linked to violent extremism. Following the November 13 terrorist attacks in Paris that killed 130 people and led the government to declare a state of emergency, authorities closed three mosques they deemed to be radical. The government continued to enforce laws prohibiting face coverings in public spaces and government buildings, which predominantly affected Muslim women, and the wearing of religious symbols at public schools, which included a ban on Sikh turbans. The government publicly condemned anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim acts and continued efforts to promote interfaith understanding through public awareness campaigns and by encouraging dialogue among local officials, police, and citizen groups. In April the government released a national action plan to fight racism and anti-Semitism, pledging 100 million euros (\$109 million) over three years to this effort. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported 22 instances in which authorities interfered with proselytizing by their community.

Subsequent to the January and November terrorist attacks, there were reports of violent attacks against Muslims around the country. The Interior Ministry reported a sharp increase in anti-Muslim incidents, up by 223 percent over the previous year. Incidents included violence against men and women, destruction and vandalism of Muslim places, and hate speech. Following a surge in reported anti-Semitic incidents early in the year, the government reported a slight decrease in the total number of such acts during the year, compared to 2014. Anti-Semitic incidents included cases of physical violence where individuals were beaten or stabbed, as well as the fatal January attack on the kosher supermarket. Jehovah’s Witnesses also cited incidents of violence against their members, and they and other Christian groups reported societal abuses or discrimination. Representatives of the Jewish, Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant communities took steps to condemn intolerance and promote religious understanding and freedom.

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The U.S. embassy continued to discuss religious freedom issues with the government, including anti-Semitic acts. The embassy promoted interfaith dialogue and tolerance among the country's major religious groups and engaged with civil society, religious groups, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) throughout the country. The Ambassador hosted a lunch for the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State where faith leaders discussed tensions following the Charlie Hebdo and the kosher supermarket attacks and ways to begin addressing them. In January the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism visited and engaged government and community leaders to discuss anti-Semitism and racism. The U.S. Special Representative to Muslim Communities conducted a series of meetings and engagements in May with Muslim youth and community leaders. The Consuls General in Strasbourg and Marseille and American Presence Post representatives in Toulouse, Rennes, Bordeaux, and Lyon participated in outreach to Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 66.6 million (July 2015 estimate). The French government does not maintain official statistics on religious affiliation, but government studies occasionally provide estimates. According to the most recent study by the National Institute for Demographic Studies, conducted in 2008 and published in 2010, 45 percent of respondents aged 18-50 reported no religious affiliation, 43 percent identified as Catholic, 8 percent as Muslim, 2 percent as Protestant, and the remaining 2 percent as Orthodox Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, and others.

A 2012 poll by the private firm Conseil, Sondage et Analyse found 56 percent of respondents older than 18 years identify as Roman Catholic. The Ministry of Interior estimates 8 to 10 percent of the population is Muslim. The Muslim population primarily consists of immigrants from former French North African and sub-Saharan colonies and their descendants.

The daily newspaper *Le Parisien* estimates there are 1.2 million Protestants, 500,000 of whom are evangelical. Many evangelical churches primarily serve African and Antillean immigrants. The Buddhist Union of France estimates there are one million Buddhists, mainly consisting of Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants and their descendants. The Jewish community numbers approximately 500,000; approximately 40 percent identifies as Sephardic, 26 percent as Ashkenazi, and 14 percent as a mix from the two communities; the remaining 20

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percent identify only as Jewish. Jehovah's Witnesses estimate they have approximately 120,000 members. Orthodox Christians number between 80,000 and 100,000; most are associated with the Greek or Russian Orthodox Churches. The Church of Scientology estimates it has 45,000 members. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) estimates its membership at 36,000 in metropolitan France and 22,000 in overseas departments and territories. According to the Sikh community, there are 30,000 Sikhs, with the largest concentration in the Parisian suburbs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states the country is a secular republic and the state "shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law," regardless of religion, and respect all beliefs. The law provides for the separation of religion and state and guarantees the free exercise of religious worship except in the interest of maintaining the public order.

The law, as well as international and European covenants, which carry the force of law in the country, protects the freedom of individuals to choose, change, and practice their religion. Interference with the freedom of religion is subject to criminal penalties, including a fine of 1,500 euros (\$1,632) and imprisonment of one month. Individuals who are defendants in a trial may challenge the constitutionality of any law they say impedes their freedom of religion.

Laws increase the penalties for acts of violence or defamation when they are committed because of the victim's actual or perceived membership or nonmembership in a given religious group. For religiously motivated acts of violence the penalties are three to five years' imprisonment and fines of 45,000-75,000 euros (\$49,000-\$81,600), depending on the severity of the victims' injuries. For religiously motivated acts of public defamation, the penalties are one year's imprisonment and/or a fine of 45,000 euros (\$49,000). The government may expel noncitizens for inciting discrimination, hatred, or violence against a specific person or group of persons based on religion.

Individuals who coerce another person to cover his or her face on account of gender by threat, violence, force, or abuse of power or authority are subject to a

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fine of 30,000 euros (\$32,600) and can receive a sentence of up to one year in prison. The fine and sentence are doubled if the victim is a minor.

Although not required by law, religious groups may apply to register to gain official recognition and become eligible for tax-exempt status. The law defines two categories under which religious groups may register: associations of worship, which are exempt from taxes; and cultural associations, which normally are not exempt. Associations in either category are subject to oversight by the state to ensure fiscal responsibility. An association of worship may organize only religious activities, defined as liturgical services and practices. Although not tax-exempt, a cultural association may engage in profit-making, as well as nonprofit activity and receive government subsidies for its cultural and educational operations. Religious groups normally register under both of these categories. For example, Mormons perform religious activities through their association of worship and operate a school through their cultural association.

Religious groups must apply at the local prefecture to be recognized as an association of worship and receive tax-exempt status. Once granted, the tax-exempt status is applicable nationwide. In order to qualify, the group's sole purpose must be the practice of religion, which may include religious training and the construction of buildings serving the religious group. Among excluded activities are those purely cultural, social, or humanitarian in nature. The government does not tax associations of worship on donations they receive. If the prefecture determines an association is not in conformity with the law, however, the government may change the association's status and require it to pay taxes at a rate of 60 percent on past, as well as future, donations until it regains tax-exempt status. According to the Ministry of Interior, approximately 109 Protestant, 100 Catholic, 50 Jehovah's Witnesses, 30 Muslim, and 15 Jewish associations have tax-exempt status.

The law prohibits covering one's face in public places, including public transportation, government buildings, and other public spaces such as restaurants and movie theaters. If the police encounter someone in a public space wearing a face covering such as a mask or burqa, they are legally required to ask the individual to remove it to verify the individual's identity. Police officials may not remove it themselves. If an individual refuses to remove the garment, police may take the person to the local police station to verify his or her identity. An individual, however, may not be questioned or held for more than four hours. Refusal to remove the face-covering garment after being instructed to do so by a

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police official carries a maximum fine of 150 euros (\$163) or attendance at a citizenship course.

According to the law, the government may not directly finance religious groups to build new mosques, churches, synagogues, or temples. The government may, however, provide loan guarantees or lease property to groups at advantageous rates. The law also exempts places of worship from property taxes. The state owns and is responsible for the upkeep of most places of worship, primarily Catholic, built before 1905. The government may fund cultural associations with a religious connection.

There are three classes of territories where the law separating religion and state does not apply. Because Alsace-Lorraine was part of Germany when the law was enacted, members of Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, and Jewish groups there may choose to allocate a portion of their income tax to their religious group. Local governments in that region may also provide financial support for building religious edifices. French Guiana, which is governed under 19th century colonial laws, may provide subsidies to the Catholic Church. Overseas departments and territories, which include island territories in the Caribbean, the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans, and several sub-Antarctic islands as well as a claim in Antarctica, may also provide funding for religious groups.

Public schools are secular. The law prohibits public school employees and students from wearing “conspicuous religious symbols,” including the Muslim headscarf, Jewish skullcap, Sikh turban, and large Christian crosses. Religious instruction is not provided in public schools, except in Alsace-Lorraine, French Guiana, and overseas departments and territories. Information about religious groups, however, is taught as part of the history curriculum. Parents who wish their children to wear conspicuous religious symbols or to be given religious instruction in school may homeschool or send their children to a private school. Homeschooling and private schools must conform to the educational standards established for public schools.

By law the government subsidizes private schools, including those affiliated with religious organizations. In 98 percent of private schools, in accordance with the law, the government pays the teachers’ salaries, provided the school accepts all children regardless of an individual child’s religious affiliation. The law does not address the issue of religious instruction in government-subsidized private schools or whether students must be allowed to opt out of such instruction.

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The law states “detained persons have the right to freedom of opinion, conscience, and religion. They can practice the religion of their choice ... without other limits than those imposed by the security needs and good order of the institution.”

Missionaries from countries not exempted from entry visa requirements must obtain a three-month tourist visa before traveling to the country. All missionaries who wish to remain longer than 90 days must obtain long-duration visas before entering the country. Upon arrival, missionaries must provide a letter from their sponsoring religious group to apply with the local prefecture for a temporary residence card.

Government Practices

The government investigated and prosecuted crimes against religious groups, including anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim violence, hate speech and vandalism. The government’s ban against face coverings in public places was confirmed by various court rulings. Following terrorist attacks on January 7-9 that included the killing of 12 people at the satirical *Charlie Hebdo* magazine and the killing of four people at a kosher supermarket, the government mobilized to protect religious sites, especially Jewish ones. In particular, the government deployed 7,000 soldiers and 3,000 police to protect Jewish sites in the country. Citing the attacks, one parliamentarian spoke of a “new anti-Semitism” linked to violent extremism.

In the wake of the November 13 terrorist attacks in Paris and Saint-Denis against a sports stadium, a concert venue, and other sites, in which 130 people were killed and 350 wounded, President Francois Hollande declared a state of emergency. On November 20, parliament extended the nationwide state of emergency for three more months, effective November 26. The extended state of emergency gave significantly expanded powers to the police and other state authorities. The government was allowed to dissolve associations deemed to be working towards the serious disruption of public order. Prefects in all regions were given the authority to order the provisional closure of concert halls, restaurants or any public place. They were also granted authority to prohibit public demonstrations or gatherings, as they deemed appropriate.

After both the January and November attacks, the government condemned “cowardly anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic attacks.” It continued efforts to promote

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interfaith understanding through public awareness campaigns and by encouraging dialogue among local officials, police, and citizen groups.

On December 2, Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve announced that authorities had closed three “radical” mosques under the state of emergency. Cazeneuve said a police operation conducted in a mosque of Lagny-sur-Marne, an eastern suburb of Paris, led to 22 people being banned from leaving the country and nine others being placed under house arrest. Security officers found ammunition, “jihadist” propaganda, and an unauthorized madrassa at the mosque and related premises. Authorities closed two other mosques the previous week, at Gennevilliers, a northern suburb of Paris, and in L’Arbresle, a small town near Lyon. “The Council of Ministers will now dissolve these three pseudo-cultural associations which used clandestine prayer rooms on the premises,” Cazeneuve announced. “Such measures to close mosques because of radicalization have never before been taken by any government,” Minister Cazeneuve said.

A judicial investigation into a violent extremist cell connected to a 2012 attack on a kosher grocery store in the Paris suburb of Sarcelles ended at the beginning of the year. Approximately 20 individuals were indicted on charges of criminal association with ties to a terrorist enterprise and weapons possession but had not yet been brought to trial at year’s end.

On February 20, a Paris judge issued international arrest warrants for three suspects in the August 1982 shooting attack at Goldenberg restaurant in Paris’ Marais district (a historically Jewish neighborhood) that killed six persons and wounded 22 others. The three men had been members of the Fatah Revolutionary Council or Abu Nidal Organization. The media identified the suspects as Norway-based Walid Abdulrahman (aka Abou Zayed), 56 years old; Ramallah-based Mahmoud Khader Abed (aka Hicham Harb), 60 years old; and Jordan-based Mohamed Souhair al-Abassi (aka Amjad Atta), 64 years old. Atta, a Jordanian of Palestinian origin who was believed to have planned the attack, was arrested on June 1 in Jordan and released on bail awaiting a decision on an extradition request. At the beginning of August the Paris judge issued a fourth arrest warrant for a Palestinian accused of taking part in the 1982 attack.

Jehovah’s Witnesses officials reported 22 cases of authorities interfering with the community’s public proselytizing during the year and three cases where officials refused to rent community centers for religious celebrations. In October the Council of State ruled in favor of the Deyvillers municipal government, which

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forbade the Jehovah's Witnesses from building a 1,500-seat prayer hall on land which the group had purchased.

In September the Versailles prosecutor's office opened a preliminary investigation for mental harassment, abuse of weakness, misappropriation of corporate assets, and bankruptcy and concealment against the Church of Scientology and a private company, Arcadia, following complaints by 12 employees of the company, who said its owner had joined the Church. Plaintiffs stated they were forced to undergo a training routine that amounted to psychological harassment. The investigation continued at year's end.

The Interministerial Mission for Vigilance and to Combat Sectarian Abuses (MIVILUDES) continued to observe and analyze the activities of minority "sectarian" groups, including "new age" and other religious and "jihadist" groups, which it considered to constitute potential threats to public order. MIVILUDES coordinated responses to abuses, violations of law, and threats to public order, and provided assistance to "victims" of these groups. It offered training to public service employees (1,500 were trained between April 2014 and May 2015) providing support to families touched by "radical jihadism."

As of September 1, the Ministry of Interior reported the government had convicted and fined 200 individuals for violating the law prohibiting face coverings in public spaces and government buildings since the beginning of the year. According to the ministry, the government had convicted 1,546 individuals since the law went into effect in 2011. In December Prime Minister Manuel Valls stated it was necessary to be extremely firm in applying this law and called on prefects to do so "with the greatest vigor and rigor."

Members of the Sikh community continued to express concern about the law prohibiting public school employees and students from wearing religious symbols, including Sikh turbans, and asked the government to exempt them from this law.

According to the government, the number of prison chaplains had increased since 2008, and the government made efforts to improve access to food appropriate for prisoners with religious dietary restrictions, specifically by providing vegetarian and nonpork meal options. Prisons observed religious occasions, such as Ramadan. According to the Ministry of Justice, the penitentiary system employed 760 Catholic, 377 Protestant, 193 Muslim, 75 Jewish, 52 Orthodox, 111 Jehovah's Witness, 10 Buddhist, and 50 chaplains representing other religious groups. In the

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general detainee visiting area, any visitor could bring religious objects to an inmate or speak with the prisoner about religious issues, but could not pray. Prisoners could pray individually in their cells, with a chaplain in the designated prayer rooms, or, in some institutions, in special apartments in which they could receive family for up to 48 hours.

On June 30, the Observatory for Secularism, a body comprised of 15 senior civil servants, parliamentarians, legal experts, and intellectuals who advise the government on the implementation of the “principle of secularism,” released its second annual report evaluating secularism in schools, public spaces, and hospitals. The report recommended increasing the number of training classes in secularism offered to public and private sector employees. Some religious groups reported feeling targeted by this policy recommendation, and that increased emphasis on secularism negatively affected their freedom to practice their religion.

According to the Ministry of Education, for the 2013-2014 school year, the last year for which data were available, 17 percent of schools were private, and 13.4 percent (898,000) of primary school students were enrolled in private institutions. Of the private schools, 97 percent were Catholic; and the remaining private schools were Jewish, Muslim, Protestant, or not religiously affiliated. There were two million primary and secondary school students attending 8,970 Catholic schools, and 30,500 Jewish students attending approximately 300 Jewish schools. There were also small numbers of students attending Protestant and Muslim schools.

According to media reports, public schools in certain localities provided alternative meals for students with religious dietary restrictions, although in some cases local officials challenged the provision of such meals. On August 13, the administrative court of Dijon rejected a request for an emergency injunction filed by a Muslim association after the mayor of Chalon-sur-Saone in eastern France announced on March 10 his intention to ban alternative meals in the city’s public schools. The court decided that there was no urgency to rule since no pork meal would be served to students before October 15. On September 29, the city council voted to end alternative menus and meals served with pork began to be served in Chalon-sur-Saone public schools on October 15. The mayor hailed a “first victory for secularism” on his Twitter account. The Muslim Judicial Defense League’s lawyer, Jean-Baptiste Jacquenet-Poillot, announced the association would decide if it would appeal the case before the Council of State – France’s highest court for administrative issues. The Muslim Judicial Defense League filed a separate legal procedure to address the substantive issue on whether nonpork alternative menus

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must be provided in public schools. A court hearing of this petition had not yet taken place at year's end.

On October 8, Union of Democrats and Independents (UDI) party parliamentarian Yves Jego introduced a draft bill making vegetarian meals obligatory in all schools as an alternative for religious minorities as well as vegetarians. As of year's end, the National Assembly had yet to debate the bill.

In May the mayor of Beziers, elected with the support of the far-right populist National Front (FN) party in 2014, said on television that he kept records on "Muslim-sounding" names of schoolchildren enrolled in Beziers schools. He said he wanted to have his own statistics on the number of Muslim schoolchildren. "I know I don't have the right to do it. Sorry to say this, but their first names tell us their religion. To say otherwise is to deny the evidence," he stated. The city prosecutor opened an investigation but closed it on July 2 without taking further action.

By year's end a court had still not set a date for the trial of three branches and three leaders of the Church of Scientology charged in 2014 with fraud, deceptive commercial practices, and abuse of public funds for allegedly teaching Scientology precepts in 1998 to children at a private school in Vincennes without the knowledge of their parents.

The Ministry of Education continued to sponsor nationwide courses and competitive examinations designed to educate students about discrimination and tolerance. It partnered with the International League Against Anti-Semitism and Racism (LICRA), an NGO, to educate students about anti-Semitism and racism.

The government adopted a policy change at the beginning of the school year in September, whereby parents were asked to sign a charter for secularism, a set of rules governing religious expression in schools established in 2013. Education Minister Najat Vallaud-Belkacem stated there would be no sanctions for refusing to sign the charter and schools would not refuse to enroll children whose parents refuse to sign it. She added, however, that instances where parents chose not to sign the charter should "encourage the school administrators and teachers to engage in a dialogue with parents."

On October 16, the Ministry of Education distributed a 31-page "secularism notebook" to school directors. According to the education minister, the notebook

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was meant as a practical guide for kindergarten-to-high school teachers to assist them in “understanding secularism.” She said it specified “avenues for understanding and living secularity” in schools, and “provides benchmarks for educational dialogue and legal elements in case of a dispute or violation of the principle of secularism.”

In collaboration with Catholic universities and local mosques, the Ministry of Interior continued to provide funding for an education program in Lyon, Paris, Strasbourg, and Aix-en-Provence aimed at providing students, including future clergy members, with a broad understanding of national legal, historical, and social norms on secularism and fostering integration. Government officials collaborated with academic specialists to create the curriculum. The training was open to high-level officials and clergy from all religious groups, as well as representatives of affiliated religious associations. Muslims expressed the greatest interest in the program, which included French language training, since most imams came from abroad and did not speak the language, hindering communication with their congregations. Students were primarily immigrants from North and sub-Saharan Africa.

On October 12, Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve announced an agreement with the Algerian government requiring Algerian imams to obtain a university certificate in secularism within the first year of their arrival in the country. The coursework for this certificate consisted of training in the French language, French institutions, and the requirements of the 1905 Law on separation of church and state. These courses were to be coordinated by the Al-Ghazali Institute of the Grand Mosque of Paris and offered at 13 universities. The training was generally expected to last one year.

On January 7, during their annual New Year’s meeting, President Hollande and top French religious figures condemned the attack against *Charlie Hebdo* committed earlier that day. Following the attack on the kosher supermarket where four hostages were killed, President Hollande called it “an appalling anti-Semitic act,” and Prime Minister Valls said “France without Jews is not France.”

On January 11, between 1.2 and 1.6 million people participated in a March for Unity in Paris to honor the 17 victims killed in the January attacks. President Hollande led the march, accompanied by more than 50 heads of state, political party heads, and religious leaders.

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President Hollande and government ministers condemned anti-Semitism and stated support for Holocaust education on many occasions, including the February 23 annual dinner hosted by the largest Jewish umbrella organization, the Representative Council of Jewish Institutions of France (CRIF); the March 19 commemoration of the third anniversary of the killings of three Jewish children and their teacher by Mohammed Merah in Toulouse; the April 27 Holocaust Remembrance Day commemoration; the June 1 French Judaism Day observance; and the July 21 anniversary of the Velodrome d’Hiver roundup of Jews during World War II.

On January 12, Interior Minister Cazeneuve announced the appointment of a prefect (senior government official) responsible for protecting Jewish schools, synagogues, and community institutions. Speaking before Jewish community leaders on June 7, Cazeneuve stated that these sites numbered up to 1,354. Visiting a Jewish school in Montrouge and a synagogue in Paris’ Marais district January 12 to inspect security measures, Cazeneuve said “the republic is determined to protect” the country’s Jews.

During his address at the February 23 dinner, President Hollande stressed the government’s solidarity with the Jewish community and its commitment to respond to anti-Semitic incidents. He recognized the concerns of the Jewish community following a doubling of anti-Semitic incidents over the previous year.

On April 17, Prime Minister Valls released a national action plan to fight racism and anti-Semitism, pledging 100 million euros (\$109 million) over three years to this effort. The 40 measures included in the plan were structured around justice, the internet, education, and allowing anti-Muslim sentiment and anti-Semitism to be considered as an “aggravated circumstance” in all crimes. The measures integrated the suppression of hate speech into the criminal code and allowed for individuals to take joint legal action against discrimination.

On June 29, government officials hosted Israeli counterparts at the first meeting of a new bilateral working group on combating anti-Semitism. Participants reviewed existing programs and shared best practices.

On July 23, the government signed into law the French-American Holocaust Compensation Agreement to provide compensation to victims of forced deportations on French railways during World War II. The agreement was adopted

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by the National Assembly June 24 and the Senate on July 9. It entered into force November 1.

On October 8, at a ceremony commemorating Jews deported in World War II, President Hollande reiterated the government's intention to introduce legislation which would treat anti-Semitism as "aggravating circumstances" in the prosecution of offenses. Hollande stressed that anti-Semitism had "no role in the republic's gardens."

On numerous occasions, President Hollande, the prime minister, and other senior government officials met with leaders from the Muslim community, including Dalil Boubakeur, President of the French Council of Muslim Faith (CFCM). They strongly denounced anti-Muslim acts and stressed the government's commitment to fight against acts of hatred directed against Muslims.

On January 13, President Hollande denounced retaliatory attacks against the Muslim community following the January 7 killings by terrorists as "also attacks against the republic." He added that "anti-Muslim acts, like anti-Semitism, should not just be denounced but severely punished." In remarks to parliament the same day, Prime Minister Valls emphasized the country was not at war with Islam or Muslims. In March Interior Minister Cazeneuve issued a statement condemning attacks against Muslims and expressing the government's determination to respond to anti-Muslim acts.

In September the government condemned statements of the mayors of Roanne and Belfort, who said they would only take in Christian refugees. Prime Minister Valls said, "You don't sort [refugees] on the basis of religion."

On February 25, following a meeting of the Council of Ministers, Interior Minister Cazeneuve announced a government plan to broaden the scope of its dialogue with Islamic communities. The plan called for a meeting with Muslim representatives on June 15 to examine issues such as "the security of places of worship, the prevention and repression of anti-Muslim acts, the civil training of imams, the creation of additional chaplaincies, and the valuation of the charitable, cultural, and educational works of Islam."

The government held the first annual meeting under this new Islamic dialogue on June 15 under the auspices of the prime minister's office. The closed-door meeting, opened by Prime Minister Valls and outgoing CFCM President

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Boubakeur, brought together 150 representatives of Islam nominated by local prefects for their “knowledge of the Muslim community and their respect for the laws of the republic.” Agenda topics for this first meeting included: security of places of worship and combating anti-Islamic hate crimes; construction and management of places of worship; training and status of religious staff, including military chaplains; and religious rituals (including halal slaughter, Eid festivities, and burial rites). While some journalists questioned the absence of an agenda item dealing with radicalization of young Muslims, the prime minister’s office said the purpose of the dialogue was to “listen and respond to questions from the Muslim community” and rejected any approaches that would “stigmatize” the Muslim community.

On March 3, speaking at Strasbourg’s Grand Mosque, Prime Minister Valls said he wanted to reduce “the reflex” of asking foreign states for financial support in building mosques in the country. He explained that “there are in France all the energies and necessary resources for Islam’s development.” Speaking later at the University of Strasbourg – one of six national universities offering courses in Islamic studies and theology – Valls said he wanted more imams and chaplains to undergo training in the country so that they “learn French, love France, and adhere to its values.” Valls added, however, that “there will be no laws, decrees, or government directives to define what Islam means. The state will never attempt to take control of a religion.”

On June 29, Interior Minister Cazeneuve announced that since 2012, the government had deported 40 imams, including approximately 10 deported since January, whom it considered to be radical. He stated the government was investigating 22 additional cases for radicalism.

On October 20, FN leader Marine Le Pen appeared in a Lyon court on charges of making “racist public statements” in 2010 when she said that praying in the streets by Muslims was comparable with Nazi occupation. On December 15, Le Pen was acquitted of charges of inciting hatred.

On October 6, the police disciplinary board sentenced a police officer to a two-year suspension from his duties over racial and religious hatred charges after he posted an anti-Muslim comment on his Facebook page. In a separate procedure on April 28, a Lyon criminal court had sentenced him to a fine of 5,000 euros (\$5,441) for the same offense. The police officer appealed both rulings. No appeal trial date had been set at year’s end.

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On May 15, center-right Republicans (LR) (former Union for a Popular Movement) party Vice President Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet announced that Robert Chardon, Mayor of Venelles (Bouches-du-Rhone Department), had been suspended from the party following his May 14 tweet that “the Muslim religion must be banned in France,” and that “followers of Islam should be immediately escorted to the border.” Chardon also predicted that Islam would be banned in the country by 2027. In an interview with *Le Monde*, Chardon called for a Marshall Plan in the Muslim world and said Muslims should practice their religion in their “country of origin.”

On March 18, a Paris criminal court sentenced controversial entertainer Dieudonne M’Bala to a two-month suspended jail sentence for praising Amedy Coulibaly, who killed four Jewish hostages and a policewoman during the January Paris attacks. Dieudonne posted his comment, “As far as I am concerned, I feel like Charlie Coulibaly,” on Facebook following the January 11 national unity march. Two associations that filed a lawsuit as civil plaintiffs in the case received symbolic damages of one euro (\$1.09) each. In its ruling, the court stressed Dieudonne’s demonstrable “hostility towards the Jewish community.” The prosecutor noted that Dieudonne chose to praise Coulibaly, and not *Charlie Hebdo* newspaper attackers Cherif and Said Kouachi, because Coulibaly specifically targeted Jews.

On March 19, a court fined Dieudonne 22,500 euros (\$24,480) for making anti-Semitic comments during one of his stand-up shows in 2013, when he commented about radio journalist Patrick Cohen, “Gas chambers...a shame.”

On October 15, the Paris Court of Appeals upheld a fine of 1,000 euros (\$1,088), half of which was suspended, against the anti-Muslim activist Christine Tasin and the director of website *Boulevard Voltaire*, Benjamin Jamet, for inciting hatred against Muslims. The case dated to 2013 when Tasin posted a note on *Boulevard Voltaire* expressing her wish to see a law passed banning Islam.

In response to a February 12 desecration of a Jewish cemetery in Saare-Union, President Hollande issued a statement condemning the acts and asked for “all means to be rapidly deployed to ensure that the perpetrators of this heinous and barbaric act are identified and punished.” Interior Minister Cazeneuve called the act “odious,” adding, “the republic will not tolerate this new wound which

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damages the shared values of all French.” Hollande and Cazeneuve visited the site of the attack on February 17 for a ceremony attended by local Jewish leaders.

On April 15, President Hollande issued a statement condemning “in the strongest terms” the desecration of dozens of Christian graves in Saint-Roch cemetery, Castres (Tarn Department), saying, “These unworthy acts undermine the core values of our republic.” Police arrested a man on April 15. On October 19, he was formally charged with the desecration and placed under house arrest until his court date. No trial date had been set at year’s end.

In an August 3 statement, Interior Minister Cazeneuve announced that approximately 40 Christian graves were desecrated with headstones uprooted or broken in the cemetery of Labry, eastern France. “These unacceptable acts require a firm response,” Cazeneuve stated. Prime Minister Valls also expressed his “indignation” at the vandalism and called for strong measures to bring the perpetrators to justice. On August 4, the prosecutor in charge of the case announced the arrest of three minors. On August 5, two of them were formally charged with the desecration.

On January 8, citing lack of evidence, the Arras criminal court dropped charges against two men accused of the 2008 desecration of the graves of Muslim soldiers in the Notre-Dame-de-Lorette military cemetery. The two men were accused of having vandalized 148 tombs with swastikas and anti-Muslim graffiti.

On October 7, Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo became the first European mayor to join Mayors United Against Anti-Semitism, an initiative calling on municipal leaders to publicly address and take concrete actions against anti-Semitism. Hidalgo said, “Paris, which is home to the biggest Jewish community of Europe, needs to be a pioneer in the fight against hate so that other cities can benefit from its expertise and commitment.”

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On January 9, Amedy Coulibaly killed four Jewish hostages and critically injured four others at a Hyper Cacher kosher supermarket in Paris. According to media reports citing survivors of the siege, Coulibaly was explicit about wishing to kill

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Jews. Police killed Coulibaly during a raid on the supermarket. By year's end six men had been charged and placed in pretrial detention for their suspected links to Coulibaly.

The Interior Ministry reported a 5 percent decrease in anti-Semitic incidents, which included killings, assaults, and fire bombings, during the year compared to 2014, the highest year on record. Anti-Muslim acts increased by 223 percent and were mainly directed at mosques and women wearing veils and headscarves. According to a Pew Research Center survey published in June, 25 percent of respondents had strong positive feelings about the Muslim community, up from 14 percent in 2014. Other acts affecting both Jews and Muslims included hate speech, vandalism, and desecration of religious property. Catholic and Jehovah's Witness communities also reported receiving threats and violence against individuals and property. Representatives from the Jewish and Muslim communities, the Protestant Federation, and the Catholic Conference of Bishops took steps to condemn intolerance and promote interfaith dialogue. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

The Interior Ministry and the NGO Jewish Community Protection Service (SPCJ) reported 808 anti-Semitic acts were committed during the year, a five percent decrease compared to 2014. In November Interior Minister Cazeneuve commented that the decrease in incidents up to that time had occurred despite a surge in anti-Semitic acts in January and February. He stated that, since June in particular, the monthly number of reported anti-Semitic acts had fallen to a level significantly lower than that of the previous year, which he said was still far too high. Cazeneuve added that the decrease still had to be treated with caution and that "the state must never relax its efforts."

According to statistics provided by the Ministry of Interior there were an estimated 400 anti-Muslim acts identified, compared to 133 in 2014. According to Abdallah Zekri, president of the National Observatory Against Islamophobia, part of the CFCM, there were 429 actions or threats against Muslims in 2015, a figure not seen since the observatory's creation in 2011.

Two polls, including one conducted by the Ipsos/Sopra-Steria polling institutes for *Le Monde* and Europe 1 taken immediately after the January terrorist attacks in Paris, reported somewhat more positive societal views of Muslims as compared with the previous year.

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On February 3, a knife-wielding man attacked three French soldiers providing security to a Jewish community center in Nice and wounded two of them. Police arrested the assailant, identified as Moussa Coulibaly, and a second suspect shortly after the attack. They were charged with attempted murder in connection with a terrorist enterprise. The investigation was continuing at year's end. President Hollande condemned the attack "in the strongest terms" and "reaffirmed the state's determination to act to protect the security of our compatriots."

On April 25, three assailants attacked a 53-year-old man as he was leaving a synagogue in Saint-Ouen following the Shabbat service. Assailants reportedly struck the victim on the head, spat on him, and repeatedly called him a "dirty Jew." One of the attackers threatened the victim with a knife but fled when bystanders intervened. A police investigation was ongoing at year's end.

On October 24, a drunken, mentally disturbed man stabbed a rabbi and two worshippers in an attack outside a synagogue in Marseille. One of the victims sustained serious injuries from multiple stab wounds to the abdomen. According to a judicial source, police arrested the assailant and placed him in pretrial detention. On December 9, a Marseille criminal court sentenced the attacker to four years in prison, of which 18 months were suspended. During the trial, the man admitted a religious motivation for his crime.

In May a criminal court in Gap sentenced two young adults to three months and six months in prison, respectively, for throwing stones and firecrackers and shouting anti-Semitic slurs at the apartment of a handicapped woman in 2014 because she was displaying an Israeli flag visible from the street. They were also ordered to pay compensation of 3,000 euros (\$3,264) to the victim and 3,000 euros to LICRA.

On March 24, two young men attacked a pregnant, headscarf-wearing Muslim woman on a street in Toulouse. Authorities opened an investigation into the attack, the outcome of which was pending at year's end.

Following the January 7 attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* magazine staff, on January 8 two Muslim places of worship, in Le Mans and Narbonne, were hit by grenades and gunshots. No one was hurt. An explosion the same day at a kebab shop near a mosque in Villefranche-sur-Saone also left no casualties. Local prosecutors described the explosion as a "criminal act."

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In April a Muslim family's cars were burned and Nazi symbols drawn on the family's home in Thieffoss. Also in April, a fire destroyed a Muslim prayer room in a house in Marne; police opened an investigation.

According to media reports, on July 13, a Muslim man lodged a complaint in Metz against his supervisor, whom the plaintiff accused of threatening to behead him because of the plaintiff's faith. The city prosecutor launched an investigation.

Jehovah's Witnesses officials reported 28 cases where members were physically attacked during the year, representing a slight decrease in violent acts compared to 2014.

Debate continued over Muslim women wearing veils at public universities. In February a professor at the Paris XIII university said that he did not support "religious symbols in public places," referring to a young woman wearing a hijab in his class. The professor was fired for his comments.

On February 12, teenagers vandalized approximately 250 tombs at a Jewish cemetery in Saare-Union. Five teenagers were arrested by police and placed in custody February 16. The suspects said the attack was not anti-Semitic in origin as they believed the cemetery to be abandoned. Their trial was scheduled to take place in 2016.

On April 10, police arrested three young men in Nancy suspected of having vandalized the Vandoeuvre-les-Nancy mosque. Hateful messages, swastikas, and the letters "FN" (presumably in reference to the National Front party) were painted on the walls of the mosque. The investigation was ongoing at year's end.

On October 8, anti-Muslim graffiti was discovered on a mosque in Beziers. Interior Minister Cazeneuve condemned the "intolerable inscriptions" and urged the prefect of the Hérault department to file legal proceedings against the suspects, whose names were not announced. The investigation was ongoing at year's end.

In 2014, the last year for which data were available, the Ministry of Interior reported 467 Christian sites were vandalized, including 206 Christian cemeteries desecrated, representing a 15 percent increase in anti-Christian incidents compared with 2013.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported 57 acts of vandalism on places of worship.

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According to statistics released by the Jewish Agency, a record high of 7,900 people left France to live in Israel during the year compared to 7,231 people in 2014. Some leaders in the Jewish community linked the increase in emigration to the rise in anti-Semitism and violent acts against Jews.

The annual report of the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (CNCDH), an advisory body to the prime minister, included the results of a poll conducted by the BVA Institute, involving face-to-face interviews with a representative sample of more than 1,000 residents over the age of 18. According to the poll, 48 percent of the respondents considered Muslims to “be a separate group,” compared to 28 percent holding that view of Jews. The report also noted persistent societal rejection of Islamic religious practices.

According to an Ipsos/Sopra-Steria poll taken after the January 7-9 terrorist attacks in Paris, 51 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement that “Islam is not compatible with the values of French society,” compared to 63 percent in 2014. The poll also found 66 percent of those polled considered Islam as peaceful as other religions.

According to a Pew Research Center survey published June 2, 76 percent of those questioned had a positive view of Muslims, four percentage points higher than in 2014. The poll also showed 25 percent of respondents had strong positive feelings about the Muslim community, up from 14 percent in 2014.

In April the leader of the Great Mosque of Paris called for a doubling of the number of mosques in the country, stating that “with an estimated population of more than six million people, the French Muslim community only has 2,000 places of worship; the strict conditions proposed by municipalities on building permits slow down construction projects in cities with urgent need.” Monsignor Olivier Ribadeau-Dumas, spokesperson for the Bishops’ Conference of France, commented to radio station Europe 1 that “Muslims should, like Christians and Jews, be able to practice their religion.”

On March 19, the interfaith community held events in Toulouse and Montauban to commemorate the victims killed by Mohammed Merah in 2012. Three years after this attack and two months following the January 2015 attacks in Paris, religious leaders from the Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Anglican, and Buddhist faiths in the Haute-Garonne region signed a Charter of Fraternity, reaffirming the

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commitment of the various religions and communities to the values of the republic, including secularism. The charter refuted the use of religion to justify violence and extremist crimes and aimed to “promote reconciliation between people of all religions and cultures.”

An annual series of interfaith dialogues took place between Jewish and Muslim communities between November 6 and 16. Jews and Muslims, along with government and community leaders, gathered in 30 different places of worship to discuss belief systems, recent government actions, and religious activities in an effort to facilitate communication and understanding between the two groups.

The Council of Christian Churches, composed of three seven-member delegations representing Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Churches and a three-member delegation from the Armenian Apostolic Church, continued to serve as a forum for dialogue. One observer represented the Anglican Communion on the council.

The Catholic Bishops’ Conference’s National Service for Relations with Islam, an organization for engagement with Muslims, hosted an annual training session on Islam in July to maintain regular contacts with Muslim associations.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy representatives met with government officials responsible for religious freedom matters, including at the Interior Ministry and its religious affairs office, to discuss religious tolerance, cooperation on countering violent extremism, and addressing anti-Semitic actions during the year. Embassy officials discussed religious freedom, anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim acts, and interfaith dialogue and tolerance with private citizens, senior representatives from major religious groups, and NGOs, and hosted meetings with the CRIF, the CFCM, and Catholic priests working on interfaith dialogue.

Embassy officials met with interfaith leaders regularly to address issues facing both the Jewish and Muslim communities. The embassy met with Muslim community leaders, activists, and ordinary citizens throughout the country to discuss issues of discrimination and concerns over radicalization and to advocate tolerance for diversity. The Ambassador hosted a lunch for the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State where faith leaders discussed tensions following the *Charlie Hebdo* and the kosher supermarket attacks and ways to begin addressing them. The Ambassador hosted an iftar in June attended by leaders of Muslim, Jewish,

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and Christian communities, in which she emphasized U.S. support for interfaith dialogue. In November the Ambassador commemorated the victims of the Holocaust and the entry into force of the French-American Holocaust Compensation Agreement at the Shoah Memorial in Paris. In December the Ambassador hosted a Hanukkah celebration with leaders of the Jewish community and other faith representatives, where she expressed support for the Jewish community and for religious freedom and tolerance in her remarks.

Department of State representatives visited to conduct outreach activities, including the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, who met with government, religious, and community leaders to discuss anti-Semitism. The U.S. Special Representative to Muslim Communities conducted a series of meetings and engagements in May with Muslim youth and community leaders.

The embassy organized a program in the United States focused on interfaith relations and secularism for representatives of the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian faiths.

The embassy supported NGO projects furthering the values of tolerance and coexistence, including a program to provide skills and tools to combat anti-Muslim sentiment and a program to enable young people from diverse religious backgrounds to explore issues of religious tolerance with U.S. counterparts.

Staff from the consulates general and the American presence posts (APPs) met with members of religious communities in Strasbourg, Marseille, Toulouse, Rennes, Bordeaux, and Lyon in order to promote religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue.

The Consul General in Marseille met with the president of Marseille's CRIF, the leaders of local mosques in Marseille and Avignon, and the Comorian Muslim community, to discuss a rise in anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim incidents in the south. She discussed the rise in anti-Semitic attacks in the south with Marseille CRIF's president Michele Teboul and other members of Marseille's Jewish community at the CRIF's annual conference and dinner. At a talk at a local high school, she discussed with students the targeting of religious differences as a basis for bullying.

Staff from the Consulate General in Strasbourg met regularly with Muslim, Jewish, and Christian (including Catholic and Protestant) leaders in the east of the country.

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The Consul General hosted an iftar bringing together Muslim, Jewish, and Christian religious leaders, where she delivered remarks stressing the importance of tolerance and dialogue and the positive impact of religious pluralism and freedom.

On April 15, the APP in Lyon attended Holocaust commemoration events at Lyon's Grand Synagogue and met with the grand rabbi to discuss local Jewish concerns. The APP also met with local Muslim leaders including the imam at the Grand Mosque to discuss outreach and ways to counter extremism.

The staff of the APP in Toulouse met regularly with Muslim and Jewish religious leaders. Discussion topics included responses to security challenges faced by both communities, discrimination, and interfaith relations. On each occasion, APP personnel emphasized the value of interfaith dialogue and tolerance.

The staff of the APP in Bordeaux hosted an iftar in June with members of the interfaith community. The Consul gave remarks underscoring shared values of religious tolerance and freedom in the United States and France. APP staff discussed interfaith relations with the grand rabbi of Bordeaux. The APP met with leaders of local Protestant churches to better understand their activities and views on religious freedom issues in the region.