

GREECE 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states freedom of religious conscience is inviolable and provides for freedom of worship with some restrictions. The constitution recognizes Greek Orthodoxy as the “prevailing religion.” The law prohibits offenses against “religious peace,” including blasphemy and religious insult, punishable by prison sentences of up to two years. The government continued enforcing the blasphemy laws, leading to the arrests of at least five citizens in four separate cases. The constitution prohibits proselytizing, and no rite of worship may “disturb public order or offend moral principles.” At least 28 different religious communities are officially registered with the government under various laws, and a 2014 law outlines the procedures for other groups to obtain government recognition. Religious groups without legal recognition are able to function but may face administrative difficulties and additional tax burdens. The Greek Orthodox Church and, to a lesser extent, the Muslim minority of Thrace and the Catholic Church receive some government benefits not available to other religious communities. A court granted legal recognition to the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian community. The government granted a permit for the first time for a polytheistic group to operate a house of prayer. Some members of the Thrace Muslim community opposed the government’s appointment of muftis, advocating that the community elect them. The government amended a series of laws to allow private citizens and municipal authorities to apply for permits to operate crematory facilities for those whose religious beliefs do not permit burial in Greek cemeteries; to allow Muslim students in primary and secondary schools to be absent from school on Islamic religious holidays; and to establish an administrative committee for a mosque in Athens. The law also allowed for the descendants of deceased Greek Jews born in the country prior to May 9, 1945 to obtain Greek citizenship. The government improved the process for mosque modifications in Thrace. Jehovah’s Witnesses said, the government did not approve their requests to be exempted from military service in several instances. The criminal trial of 69 members and supporters of the Golden Dawn (GD) political party, widely considered anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim, continued. They were charged with multiple attacks, including several against Muslim migrants, from 2011 to 2014. GD members of parliament (MPs) continued to make anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim comments. The government continued to fund Holocaust education programs and commemorate Greek Holocaust victims.

Media reports of incidents of anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim discrimination and hate speech continued, including some directed at immigrants. Jehovah's Witnesses continued to report incidents of discrimination by some private citizens while preaching or when distributing information material in Athens and in other cities. There were reports of vandalism against religious properties, including Holocaust memorials and a Greek Orthodox church. Police launched investigations and made some arrests; however, the prosecutor had not filed charges in these cases by the end of the year.

The U.S. Ambassador, visiting U.S. officials, and other embassy and consulate representatives met with officials and representatives from the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs, including the minister of education and the secretary general for religious affairs. They confirmed minority communities could apply for and establish houses of worship, learned about government initiatives that affect the Muslim minority in Thrace and immigrants, and expressed concern about anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim acts and rhetoric. Embassy officials also engaged the archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church and other metropolitans, as well as members of the Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, Bahai, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Jehovah's Witness communities to promote religious tolerance and encourage interfaith dialogue. The embassy sponsored two international exchange participants for a program on minority migrant integration and tolerance. The embassy promoted religious tolerance through the Ambassador's remarks via social media, including his remarks at the Conference on Religious Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 10.8 million (July 2017 estimate), of whom it estimates 98 percent are Greek Orthodox, 1.3 percent Muslim, and 0.7 percent other religions. According to a 2015 poll by Kappa Research Firm, a local private research firm, 81.4 percent of the population self-identifies as Greek Orthodox, 2.9 percent identifies with other religious groups, and 14.7 percent is atheist.

Muslims constitute a number of distinct communities including, according to the Council of Europe's European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance, approximately 100,000-120,000 individuals in Thrace descending from the Muslim minority officially recognized in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. According to local religious leaders and migrant activists, approximately 150,000 Muslim immigrants

and foreign workers from Southeastern Europe, South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa continue to reside mostly in and around Athens, clustered together based on their countries of origin. Additionally the UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that approximately 49,000 recently arrived migrants and asylum seekers remained in the country at year's end – mostly from Muslim-majority countries.

Other religious communities report that their members combined constitute between 3 and 5 percent of the population. These include Old Calendarist Orthodox, atheists and agnostics, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, members of polytheistic Hellenic religions, Scientologists, Bahais, Mormons, Sikhs, Seventh-day Adventists, Buddhists, and members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKON).

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution recognizes Greek Orthodoxy as the “prevailing religion.” The constitution states freedom of religious conscience is inviolable and provides for freedom of worship under the protection of the law with some restrictions. The constitution prohibits proselytizing, and no rite of worship may “disturb public order or offend moral principles.” The constitution allows prosecutors to seize publications that offend Christianity or other “known religions.” The law prohibits offenses against “religious peace,” including blasphemy and religious insult, which are punishable by prison sentences of up to two years. Blasphemy cases may be brought before civil and criminal courts. Development of religious conscience among citizens is listed as one of the goals of state education according to the constitution. Greek Orthodox priests and government-appointed muftis and imams in Thrace receive their salaries from the Greek government but are not considered to be state officials.

The constitution stipulates ministers of all known religions shall be subject to the same state supervision and the same obligations to the state as clergy of the Greek Orthodox Church. It also states individuals shall not be exempted from their obligations to the state or from compliance with the law because of their religious convictions.

The Greek Orthodox Church, the Jewish community, and the Muslim minority of Thrace have long-held status as official religious legal entities. The Catholic

Church, the Anglican Church, two evangelical Christian groups, and the Ethiopian, Coptic, Armenian Apostolic, and Assyrian Orthodox Churches automatically acquired the status of religious legal entities under a 2014 law. The same law also provides for groups seeking recognition to become religious legal entities under civil law. The recognition process involves filing a request at the civil court, providing documents proving the group has open rituals and no secret doctrines, supplying a list of 300 signatory members who do not adhere to other religious groups, demonstrating that there is a leader who is legally in the country and is otherwise qualified, and showing that their practices do not pose a threat to public order. Once the civil court recognizes the group, it sends a notification to the Secretariat General for Religions.

With legal status, the religious group may legally transfer property and administer houses of prayer and worship, private schools, charitable institutions, and other nonprofit entities. Some religious groups have opted to retain their status as civil society nonprofit associations that they acquired through court recognition prior to the 2014 law. Under this status, religious groups may operate houses of prayer and benefit from real estate property tax exemptions, but they may face administrative and fiscal difficulties in transferring property and operating private schools, charitable institutions, and other nonprofit entities.

The law allows religious communities without status as legal entities to appear before administrative and civil courts as plaintiffs or defendants.

A religious group that has obtained at least one valid permit to operate a place of prayer is considered a “known religion” and thereby acquires legal protection, including a tax exemption for property used for religious purposes. Membership requirements for house of prayer permits differ from the requirements for religious legal entities. The granting of house of prayer permits is subject to approvals from local urban planning departments attesting to the compliance of a proposed house of prayer with local public health and safety regulations, and the application requires at least five signatory members of the group. Once a house of worship receives planning approvals, a religious group must submit a file including documents describing the basic principles and rituals of the religious group, as well as a biography of the religious minister or leader; the file must be approved by the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs. The leaders of a religious group applying for a house of prayer permit must be Greek citizens, European Union nationals, or legal residents of the country and must possess other professional qualifications, including relevant education and experience. A separate permit is required for each physical place of worship.

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne gives the recognized Muslim minority of Thrace the right to maintain mosques and social and charitable organizations (*auqafs*). Government-appointed muftis are allowed to practice sharia and render religious judicial services in the area of family law for those members of the Muslim community in Thrace who opt to use the services of a mufti instead of civil courts. The government, in consultation with a committee of Muslim leaders, appoints three muftis in Thrace to 10-year terms of office, with the possibility of extension. Civil courts in Thrace routinely ratify the family law decisions of the muftis. The muftis also appoint imams to serve in the community's mosques.

The law protects an individual's right to predetermine his or her form of funeral service and burial location in the presence of a notary. Individuals are allowed to designate the location and the method of funeral service under conditions that relate to public order, hygiene, or moral ethics, as well as a person responsible for the execution of funeral preferences. On July 28, the parliament amended existing legislation to allow private citizens and municipal authorities to apply for permits to operate crematory facilities to benefit those whose religious beliefs do not permit burial in Greek cemeteries. On October 18, the parliament passed an amendment changing the use of land in Eleonas region, in central Athens, thus paving the way for the construction by the local municipality of a crematory facility.

All religious groups are subject to taxation on their property used for nonreligious purposes. Property used solely for religious purposes remains exempt from taxation, as well as municipal fees, for groups classified as religious legal entities or "known religions."

A law passed by parliament on August 8 exempts monasteries on the peninsula of Mount Athos from paying pending property tax on any properties owned inside or outside Mount Athos.

Home schooling is not permitted for children. The law requires all children to attend nine years of compulsory education in state or private schools and one year of compulsory preschool education in accordance with the official school curriculum. Greek Orthodox religious instruction in primary and secondary schools is included in the curriculum. School textbooks focus mainly on Greek Orthodox teachings; however, they also include some basic information on some other "known" religions – ones the courts define as having "open rituals and no hidden doctrines." Students may be exempted from religious instruction upon

request, but parents of students registered as Greek Orthodox in school records must state the students are not Greek Orthodox believers in order to receive the exemption. There are no private religious schools, although certain foreign-owned private schools and individual churches may teach optional religious classes on their premises, which students may attend on a voluntary basis. The law provides for optional Islamic religious instruction in public schools in Thrace for the recognized Muslim minority and optional Catholic religious instruction in public schools on the islands of Tinos and Syros.

A law passed on August 4, effective for the 2017-2018 school year, enables members from the Muslim minority and Catholic communities who teach in state schools to retain these positions if they are also called to serve as muftis or bishops. The law also provides for excused absences for Muslim students in primary and secondary school for Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha and the following day.

The government operates secular Greek-Turkish bilingual schools and two Islamic religious schools in Thrace. The law in Thrace provides for Islamic religious instructors to teach Islam to the Muslim minority in Greek-language public schools in lieu of mandatory twice weekly Greek Orthodox religious courses. Muslim students in Thrace wishing to study the Quran may also attend after-hours religious classes in mosques.

The law establishes an annual 0.5 percent quota for admission of students from the recognized Muslim minority to universities, technical institutes, and civil service positions. Two percent of students entering the national fire brigade school and academy should be from the Muslim minority in Thrace. On February 14, the parliament amended existing legislation to standardize and simplify the certification process for teaching staff from the Muslim minority in Thrace.

The law provides for alternative forms of mandatory service for religious conscientious objectors in lieu of the nine-month mandatory military service. Conscientious objectors are required to serve 15 months of alternate service in state hospitals or municipal and public services.

The law prohibits discrimination and criminalizes hate speech on the grounds of religion. Individuals or legal entities convicted of incitement to violence, discrimination, or hatred on the basis of religion, among other factors, may be sentenced to prison terms of between three months and three years and fined 5,000 to 20,000 euros (\$6,300 to \$24,000). Violators convicted of other crimes

motivated by religion may be sentenced to an additional six months to three years, with fines doubled. The law criminalizes approval, trivialization, or malicious denial of the Holocaust and “crimes of Nazism” if that behavior leads to incitement of violence or hatred, or has a threatening or abusive nature towards groups of individuals. The National Council against Racism and Xenophobia, an advisory body under the Ministry of Justice, Transparency, and Human Rights, is charged with preventing, combating, monitoring, and recording racism and intolerance and protecting individuals and groups targeted on several grounds, including religion. The National Commission for Human Rights, comprised of government and nongovernmental organization (NGO) members, serves as an independent advisory body to the government on all human rights issues.

An amendment passed by the parliament on March 28, allows the descendants of deceased Greek Jews born in the country prior to May 9, 1945 to obtain Greek citizenship.

The law requires all civil servants, including cabinet and parliament members, to take an oath before entering office; individuals are free to take a religious or secular oath in accordance with their beliefs. Witnesses in trials must also take oaths before testifying in court, and can also select between a religious and a secular oath in both civil and criminal cases.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Summary paragraph: The government continued enforcing the blasphemy laws, leading to the arrests of at least five citizens in four separate cases. All blasphemy cases during the year related to statements against Orthodox Christianity. Charges against six of the organizers of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex (LGTBI) group Thessaloniki Pride for malicious blasphemy were dropped, but the case remained open as authorities continued to search for the individuals who created the artwork cited in the complaint. A soccer player was suspended for several games because he “cursed the divine.” An appeals court annulled the sentence of a blogger convicted in 2014 of “habitual blasphemy and offense of religion.” The criminal trial of 69 party members and supporters from the GD political party, widely considered anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim by scholars, media, and other observers, on charges including murder, membership in a criminal organization, conspiracy, weapons possession, and racist violence, continued through the end of the year. Some of the victims were Muslim migrants. A court

granted legal recognition to the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian community. The government approved, for the first time, a permit to operate a prayer house for the Supreme Council of Ethnic Greeks (YSEE). Two religious groups – an Old Calendarist and an evangelical Christian – applied to courts seeking legal recognition. Religious groups without religious entity status and no house of prayer permits were still able to function as registered nonprofit civil law organizations. The government continued to provide funding and other benefits to the Greek Orthodox Church and, to a lesser extent, the Muslim community of Thrace and the Catholic Church. Muslim leaders continued to criticize the lack of Islamic cemeteries outside of Thrace and the absence of a mosque in Athens. Deputy Foreign Minister Ioannis Amanatidis issued a statement on May 25 supporting the opening of an Athens mosque. GD MPs made anti-Semitic references, portraying Jewish individuals as those with the most decision-making and economic power.

In January police announced the arrest of two individuals in Epirus who each accused the other of committing multiple crimes, including malicious blasphemy. In April police in Volos reported that a suspect refused to comply with police instructions. He was charged with resisting arrest, insulting an officer, and malicious blasphemy, and sentenced to a 17-month suspended prison sentence, only to be served if he repeats the offense within three years. According to police statistics, another individual in central Greece was charged with malicious blasphemy in March; additional details were not available in this case. In May, according to local press reports, coast guard officials in Rafina charged a 17-year-old with resisting arrest, criminal threats, physical injury to an officer, and malicious blasphemy. In February a soccer player was suspended for four games by the soccer association in northern Greece because he “cursed the divine.” On March 2, an appeals court annulled the 10-month sentence of a blogger convicted in 2014 of “habitual blasphemy and offense of religion” for creating a satirical page on social media mocking a dead Orthodox monk who was later proclaimed a saint. The acquittal was the result of a legal provision that cleared a backlog of misdemeanor offenses committed up until March 31, 2016.

According to research conducted by the Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM), in 2016 the Hellenic (national) Police opened 254 cases for malicious blasphemy involving 328 defendants, 312 of whom were Greeks and 16 foreigners. The Hellenic Police arrested 159 of these suspects; in the vast majority of cases, malicious blasphemy was not the only charge. Additionally, in 2016 police opened 43 cases for disturbing the religious peace; 46 individuals were arrested in these cases.

In October, according to GHM, authorities dropped malicious blasphemy charges against the organizers of Thessaloniki Pride after concluding that the group was not responsible for producing the poster cited in the case. In 2016 Metropolitan of Kalavryta Amvrosios and five private citizens had filed separate police complaints for malicious blasphemy and offending religion against a group of six individuals involved in the organization of the Thessaloniki Pride. The complaint centered on an unofficial version of the 2016 Thessaloniki Pride poster, which featured an artistic depiction of Jesus on a cross with the text, “He was crucified for us too.” At the end of the year, the case remained open and had been referred to the cyber police to identify the creators of the poster.

The criminal trial of 69 GD party members and supporters, including 18 of its current and former MPs, continued through the end of the year, with the examination of witnesses. The charges were related to a string of attacks, including against Muslim migrants and Greeks; they included murder, conspiracy, weapons possession, and membership in a criminal organization.

On April 12, the media reported that the national police took precautionary measures to protect the three Coptic churches in Athens following attacks against Copts in Egypt. Measures included adding undercover police, frequent patrolling around the churches’ locations, and contacting the churches’ leaders to urge them to establish direct communication with police if they noticed something unusual or suspicious.

Early in the year a court granted legal recognition to the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian community as a religious entity. Two religious groups – an Old Calendarist and an evangelical Christian – applied to courts seeking legal recognition as religious entities. Rulings for these two applications were pending at year’s end.

Religious groups without religious entity status and no house of prayer permits, including Scientologists and the ISKCON, were still able to function as registered nonprofit civil law organizations. The government did not legally recognize weddings conducted by members of those religious groups, whose only option was a civil marriage.

The government approved permits for 18 houses of prayer, including the first prayer house for the YSEE, a polytheistic group revering the ancient Hellenic gods. The government did not deny any applications for permits during the year. The government granted 12 permits to Jehovah’s Witnesses. It also granted a

permit to a group of Muslims from Bangladesh and three permits to Pentecostals. The government revoked one permit at the request of a small religious community that no longer wished to operate its house of prayer. There were no pending applications at year's end.

The government continued to provide funding for religious leaders' salaries and other benefits to the Greek Orthodox Church and, to a lesser extent, to the Muslim community of Thrace and the Catholic Church. The government also supported seminars for teachers to raise awareness of the Holocaust among students and funding for educational visits for students to Auschwitz.

The government continued to provide direct support to the Greek Orthodox Church, including for religious training of clergy and funding for religious instruction in schools. Greek Orthodox priests continued to receive their salaries from the state. Some Greek Orthodox officials stated this direct support was given in accordance with a series of legal agreements with past governments, and in exchange for religious property previously expropriated by the state. The Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs continued to partially fund retirement pensions of Orthodox monks and monitor vocational training for Orthodox clergy.

The government continued to state that Muslims not part of the recognized minority created by the Treaty of Lausanne were not covered by that treaty and therefore did not have the rights related to it, such as the right to bilingual education, special quotas for university entry and jobs in the public sector, the optional use of sharia in family and inheritance matters, and optional Islamic religious classes in public schools.

Some members of the Thrace Muslim community continued to object to the government's practice of appointing muftis, pressing for direct election of muftis by the Muslim community. The government continued to state that government appointment was appropriate because the muftis had judicial powers and the constitution requires the government to appoint all judges. Academics and activists said the ability of courts in Thrace to provide judicial oversight of muftis' decisions was limited by the lack of translation of sharia into Greek and lack of familiarity with sharia in general. On November 13, the prime minister announced the government's plans to make the use of sharia in Thrace optional and consensual by all parties. The Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs subsequently issued a draft legislative amendment and an explanatory framework. The bill was approved in principle by the relevant parliamentary

committee on December 21 and scheduled for a plenary vote after the end of the year.

On November 13, the media reported that a Thessaloniki Misdemeanor Court convicted the unofficial mufti in Xanthi of impersonating a public authority and an unofficial local imam of disturbing the peace for unlawfully and violently preventing the official mufti from performing the funeral service for a Muslim soldier in Glafki village in 2016. The sentences were suspended for three years, only to be served if the defendants commit a repeat offense during this time. The defendants appealed the decision.

On March 28, the minister for education, research and religions issued a decision establishing a working group on the upgrading and modernization of the muftiates in Thrace. The group comprised four employees of the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs – three from the Directorate for Religious Administration under the Secretariat General for Religions and one from the General Directorate of the ministry's Financial Services. The minister tasked the working group with drafting an analytical report on the existing situation and compiling recommendations for operational improvements. The decision also called for assistance from other individuals, including the head of the Directorate for Minority Education and the school advisor for the minority program in minority schools, a member of the Muslim minority. The group was granted full access to all archives, information, books, and financial data kept in the muftiates, with guarantees to respect data protection laws.

Some members of the Muslim minority in Thrace continued to criticize the appointment by the government, rather than the election by the Muslim community, of members entrusted with the administration of the *auqafs*, which oversee endowments, real estate, and charitable funds of the minority community. Muslim leaders also continued to criticize the lack of Muslim cemeteries outside of Thrace, stating this obliged Muslims to transport their dead to Thrace for Islamic burials. They also continued to state that municipal cemetery regulations requiring exhumation of bodies after three years because of shortage of space contravened Islamic religious law. Several MPs supported the Muslim leaders' complaints. On May 19, 34 MPs from the ruling political party SYRIZA submitted a question in the parliament asking about the delayed implementation of a 2016 decision by the Holy Synod of the Greek Orthodox Church, which had been made at the request of the government, to grant 20,000 square meters (215,000 square feet) inside an existing cemetery at Schisto, in greater Athens, for the burial of Muslims. The MPs also inquired about the status of a similar government proposal to the Holy

Synod for the granting of land inside the cemetery of Evosmos, in Thessaloniki. At least three sites continued to be used unofficially on an ad hoc basis for the burial of Muslim migrant and asylum seekers on Lesbos Island, in Schisto, and near the land border with Turkey in Evros.

At year's end, there were still no crematories in the country. In 2016, three municipalities – Athens, Thessaloniki, and Patras – had initiated the process to establish crematories by searching for suitable land and seeking approval of the necessary municipal committees. The cities of Athens and Patras reportedly had identified suitable plots of land. The latter had also requested the issuance of a presidential decree pre-certifying the land transfer as constitutional in an effort to deter potential legal complaints.

The Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs continued to have three Islamic experts assigned to offer religious services in camps hosting Muslim refugees and migrants in the region of central and eastern Macedonia. The three included an imam from Xanthi, the director of one of the two Islamic religious schools in Thrace, and a scholastic expert in Islamic law and studies. Government authorities again issued directives to managers of reception facilities hosting migrants and refugees, instructing them to alter food distribution times and the type of food served to allow Muslims to observe the Ramadan fast.

A law passed by parliament on May 30 provided for the establishment of an “administrative committee for the Athens Islamic Mosque” as a nonprofit legal entity under private law, supervised by the minister of education, research and religions. Media and government sources reported progress on the construction of an official mosque in Athens, originally expected to be completed in August, but the mosque was not operational at year's end. GD held protests against the mosque in January and throughout the year. MP Ilias Panagiotaros said at the January rally that GD would step up protests, and that “this mosque will not have a good end.”

Deputy Foreign Minister Amanatidis issued a statement on May 25 supporting the opening of the Athens mosque, commenting that such a measure would allow Greeks and other EU Muslims to perform their religious duties unhindered. He encouraged to vote in favor of the draft education bill with provisions for the operation of the mosque, which he said would enhance the country's international image with respect to human rights. Passed on May 25, the law provided for the establishment of a seven-member administrative committee for the Athens Mosque as a nonprofit legal entity under private law, to be supervised by the minister of

education, research, and religions and to include at least two Muslim community representatives. Committee members were officially named on August 21 and began their work soon after. The administrative committee was tasked with selecting the imams who will preach at the mosque, de-conflicting requests from various communities to use the space, and overseeing the general administration of the property.

On September 8, the Migration Ministry transferred 82 Yazidi Kurds from the Yiannitsa Migrant Center to an all-Yazidi migrant camp located at a former agricultural training facility in Serres. Yazidis at Yiannitsa had stated Syrian Sunni Arabs were harassing them because of the Yazidis' religious beliefs. According to the NGO The Liberation of Christian and Yazidi Children, as of September 7, there were 2,535 Yazidis migrants in the country, with the majority living in an open air camp at the base of Mount Olympus.

On April 3, the Ministries of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs; Environment and Energy; and Culture and Sports issued a joint circular codifying the process for construction, expansion, repair, and demolition of existing or new mosques in Thrace. The government stated this codification was necessary to provide an accessible, transparent, unified, and coherent framework. Some religious groups, including Muslims, reiterated complaints from previous years that the house of prayer permit process – for example, requirements that buildings used for prayer have fire exits – constrained freedom of religion by making it difficult to find a suitable location.

Central and local government authorities continued to provide public space free of charge to groups of Muslims whose members requested places of worship during Ramadan and for other religious occasions.

On June 27, following discussions between the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs and the Greek Orthodox Church, the Standing Holy Synod of the Church of Greece approved guidelines provided by the ministry in 2016 on religious instruction. According to the guidelines, religious education should not be based solely on the official textbook, which primarily covers Greek Orthodox doctrine. The government stated students needed to become more familiar with other religions present in the country and the world. Some Greek Orthodox Church leaders had objected to the new guidelines, stating the government was disrespectful to the constitution and to the faith of the majority of the country's citizens.

The government continued to provide funding to the Muslim minority in Thrace to select and pay salaries of teachers of Islam in state schools and the salaries of the three official muftis and some imams, in accordance with Greece's obligations under the Lausanne Treaty. It also continued to fund Catholic religious training and teachers' salaries in state schools on the islands of Syros and Tinos, as well as to fund awareness raising activities and trips for non-Jewish students to Holocaust remembrance events, and for Holocaust education training for teachers.

Some leaders of the recognized Muslim minority continued to press for fully bilingual kindergartens in Thrace, modeled after the already operating bilingual primary schools. Government authorities historically asserted that Greek-language kindergartens helped students to better integrate into the larger society, and that kindergarten classes are not mentioned in the Lausanne Treaty. In response to the Muslim community's concerns, the Institute for Educational Policy, an agency supervised by the minister for education, research, and religious affairs, announced in March a plan to fund, under a pilot project, assistant teachers in kindergarten classrooms fluent in the child's native language to facilitate the children's integration into school life. This program had not yet begun at year's end.

Some religious groups and human rights organizations continued to state the discrepancy between the length of mandatory alternate service for conscientious objectors (15 months) and for those serving in the military (nine months) was discriminatory. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that in several instances, government committees, tasked with examining requests for exemption from military service as conscientious objectors on religious grounds, denied requests for unbaptized members of their community. The committees, consisting of two army officials, one psychologist, and two academics, decided that unbaptized individuals, despite studying the Bible and attending sessions jointly with Jehovah's Witnesses, "are not yet ready to fully embrace their teachings." The committees ordered the immediate conscription of those individuals into the armed forces and did not allow the applicants to defend their cases in person to the committee.

The Union of Atheists filed a complaint on August 1 with the Data Protection Authority and the ombudsman objecting to the listing of students' religion on school transcripts; the inclusion of religion in the administrative school databases and university records; and the need for parents to officially declare and justify their request to have their children exempted from religion classes. The union argued that religious and philosophical beliefs constitute sensitive personal data and should not be recorded.

GD MPs, as well as the GD official website and weekly newspaper, continued making references to conspiracy theories portraying Jewish individuals as those with the most decision-making and economic power. On October 5, GD MP Elias Panagiotaros stated during an interview on the web-based television channel “Eleftheri Ora” that nonperforming business and household loans in the country would be administered by a company headed by the President of the Jewish Community in Athens, whom he incorrectly categorized as the President of the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece (KIS). Panagiotaros also said the company was successful because of the Jewish community’s connections to the minister of finance.

There continued to be numerous instances of anti-Semitism online. In May the *European Jewish Press* estimated there were at least 48 active anti-Semitic blogs in the country and called GD, which had issued more than 30 cases of anti-Semitic speeches and multiple anti-Semitic articles, “one of the most dangerous neo-Nazi parties in Europe.”

On July 18, the secretaries general for human rights and for religious affairs each independently referred the case of an excommunicated Old Calendarist monk, Father Kleomenis, to the public prosecutor, the racist crimes department of the police, and the cybercrime police department for investigation. The monk had posted a video on July 17 on social media showing him in front of the Jewish Martyrs Holocaust Monument in Larissa, cursing the Jews, denying the Holocaust, spitting, kicking, and throwing eggs at the monument, and calling for its destruction. The Holy Synod of the Greek Orthodox Church and the local Metropolitans of Larisa and Tyrnavos issued statements disassociating themselves from Kleomenis and condemning his actions. The Municipality of Larissa also issued a statement denouncing the attack. On July 19, the prosecutor in Larissa filed charges against Kleomenis and three more individuals for vandalizing the Holocaust memorial and for violating the law against racism.

On May 2, GHM announced it had filed a lawsuit against Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Bishop Seraphim of Piraeus on hate speech grounds. GHM’s lawsuit also referred to legislation about “aggravating” conditions when a “state official” commits a hate speech offense. The lawsuit was in response to a statement Seraphim publicized on the official website of the Archdiocese of Piraeus on April 28, in which he complained he had been selected by the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece to light the holy light of Easter at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, but that he was replaced because Israel declared him as *persona non*

grata. In the statement, he quoted the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and referred to Freemasonry and other organizations as “the arms used by Zionism to secure infiltration and state manipulation.” He accused Israel of interfering with the Church’s issues. The KIS denounced Seraphim’s statement.

On January 26, the minister of education, research, and religious affairs, the president of the Jewish Museum of Greece, and the president of Yad Vashdem cosigned a memorandum of understanding regarding the implementation of programs on the teaching of Holocaust. One program entailed a July 9-12 seminar for 39 public high school teachers. The seminar was organized by the Olga Lengyel Institute for Holocaust Studies and Human Rights in cooperation with the Jewish Museum of Greece, under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs.

On January 27, the minister for education, research, and religious affairs unveiled in a school in Athens an honorary plaque in memory of the Greek Jewish children killed in concentration camps during World War II. During the German occupation, German troops had ordered the school’s closure, and the pupils, along with their parents, had been arrested and sent to concentration camps in central Europe. Also on January 27, the Department for Preschool Education of the University of Thessaly, the local Jewish community, and the Piraeus Bank Foundation organized an event entitled “Approaching the Holocaust in the School and in the Museum.”

The head of the central board of Jewish communities, David Saltiel, welcomed the amendment passed in March allowing all descendants of deceased Greek Jews, mostly Holocaust survivors, to apply for citizenship as “a moral victory” and a “fresh step forward in the recognition of the history of the Holocaust and of Greek Jews.” The GD, the fourth largest party in the parliament, voted against the legislation.

On January 21, opposition MP Adonis Georgiadis posted on social media the following announcement: “In the past I’ve coexisted with and tolerated the views of people who showed disrespect to Jewish co-patriots, and for this reason I feel the need to apologize to the Jewish Community. I feel even sorrier for supporting and promoting the book of Kostas Plevris, which is insulting for the Jews. The Holocaust of the Jewish people constitutes the greatest disgrace of our contemporary culture and its sacrifice strengthened democracy, anti-racism, and the belief in the equality and freedom of nations.”

The Secretariat General for Religious Affairs funded in May an annual commemorative trip to Auschwitz for 82 high school students and 10 teachers from schools throughout the country. The students took part in a contest organized by the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs, which involved producing a video on “The Kid and the Holocaust.” Participating schools were from the Athens, Thessaloniki, Chania, Arcadia, Aetoloakarnakia, and Evrytania regions.

On March 22, the minister for education, research, and religious affairs issued a statement expressing his sorrow for the damages caused to a mosque of historic significance in Thrace from a fire. The minister committed to take steps for the prompt investigation of the fire’s causes and to restore the mosque. Although no official report was made public, firefighters on the scene told local press that electric welding during restoration likely caused the fire.

The Inter-Orthodox Center of the Greek Orthodox Church organized a training program under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and funded by the German government entitled, “Getting to know and teaching Judaism through the coexistence of Christians and Jews in Greece.”

On September 8, in the garden of a former middle school in Thessaloniki and the location of the cultural foundation of the National Bank of Greece, a metal commemorative plate was placed in memory of 40 Jewish students sent to concentration camps in 1943.

On September 27, the Aristotle University Law School, the Aristotle University School of Theology, and the Religious Studies Institute of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople organized a conference on “Church and the Constitution: The issue of Constitutional Reform.” Participants discussed Greek Orthodox Church relations with the state, including whether constitutional reform should encompass continued reference to Orthodox Christianity as the official and dominant religion; whether the state should be involved with administrative matters of the Greek Orthodox Church; whether state officials should appoint priests or determine their number; and whether the Church should be involved with civil issues it opposes, such as the cremation of the dead.

From October 19-21, the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs, the Jewish community in Thessaloniki, the Holocaust Memorial of the Jews in Skopje, and the Memorial de la Shoah in Paris, organized a training seminar on Holocaust education. The

seminar, entitled “The Holocaust as a Starting Point: Comparing and Sharing” involved 40 teachers.

On October 29 and 30, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized for the second time an international summit on the protection of religious communities and civilizations in the Middle East, hosted by the minister of foreign affairs, with the participation of the Archbishop of Athens and all Greece, several Greek Orthodox metropolitans, representatives of Jewish, Catholic, Protestant communities from abroad, and two Muslim muftis from Thrace.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Summary paragraph: Incidents of anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim discrimination and hate speech, including against immigrants, continued. The Racist Violence Recording Network and the GHM reported several incidents of vandalism against religious property, including Holocaust memorials and a Greek Orthodox church. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported instances of societal discrimination when preaching or while distributing and displaying information and religious material in public. On October 23, hundreds of demonstrators, including members of parents and ecclesiastical associations, theologians, and clergy, nuns, and monks, gathered outside the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs to protest against the reforms to the government-mandated religious course. The protestors objected to five new chapters referring to Judaism and Islam.

Police statistics for 2016, the most recent year available, showed 84 potentially racially motivated incidents, 24 of which were believed to be linked to the victim’s religion. On September 28, the Ministry of Education published a report on acts against religious sites in 2016. According to the report, there were 209 incidents against Christian sites including vandalism, robberies, and arson attacks. The previous year the ministry recorded 147 such incidents. All targeted Greek Orthodox churches and cemeteries, except one incident against a Catholic site. The report also recorded five incidents of vandalism against Jewish sites and one against a Muslim site.

The linking of “international Zionism” with alleged plans for the “country’s Islamization,” that was related to the ongoing construction of an official mosque in Athens, continued on ultranationalist blogs. During a May 21 protest, a group of Old Calendarist Orthodox followers, opposing the building of the mosque, chanted anti-Islamic and anti-Semitic slogans such as, “Islam out” and “Resist the plans of Jewish Zionists who want you servants in the world empire of the anti-Christ.”

On May 3, the Heinrich Boell Foundation, in cooperation with the Seat for Jewish Studies at the Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, presented a study on anti-Semitism in Greece. The study showed that despite the small percentage of Jews in the country (approximately 0.05 percent) vandalism recorded against Jewish monuments and sites was proportionally higher than vandalism directed at other religious groups. The study found more than six out of 10 Greeks held anti-Semitic attitudes. Sixty-five percent of respondents in the study's questionnaire "agreed" or "absolutely agreed" with the statements "Jews have been using the Holocaust to receive better treatment from the international decision-making centers" and "Israel treats Palestinians exactly like Nazis did the Jews." When asked whether "Jews enjoy much greater power in the world of business," more than 92 percent of respondents "agreed" or "absolutely agreed." According to the findings, 64.3 percent of those surveyed believed that the proposed Holocaust Museum in Thessaloniki should be built by private funding, while 72.1 percent of respondents believed a Pontian (Greek-Russian) refugee museum should be built with government funding. The survey also indicated a large percentage of individuals were indifferent to the concept of a Holocaust museum and 11.3 percent opposed the idea altogether. The mayor of Thessaloniki said he was concerned about how to ensure future operating costs, given societal indifference to and rejection of the project.

Some metropolitan bishops of the Greek Orthodox Church made anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim statements and statements against Jehovah's Witnesses in public letters and on social media, while others said Catholicism was heresy. On June 15, in a letter addressed to Metropolitan of Argolida, the Metropolitan of Gortynia in the Peloponnese stated Orthodox followers believed that Catholicism and ecumenism were heresies and that Christians should stay away from Jehovah's Witnesses.

The KIS continued to voice concerns about anti-Semitic comments by some journalists in the media and some Greek Orthodox Church leaders. The KIS also reiterated its concerns that political cartoons and images in the media mocked political controversies through the use of Jewish sacred symbols and comparisons to the Holocaust or through drawing parallels among "Jews," "Zionists," and "Nazis," equating the first with the latter. On May 16, the KIS denounced journalist and cartoonist Stathis (Stavropoulos) for his May 10 article published on the news site "enikos.gr." The article, entitled "In Bloody Ink," stated it is impossible to criticize Israel because doing so would be interpreted as anti-Semitism. The article included a cartoon depicting Israel killing free opinion.

On an Alpha television channel morning show on January 12, journalist Dimos Verykios stated, “Global finance is concentrated in three centers: they are actually dominating the planet. One center is the banks, the global banking system. Through this banking system, two main centers are ruling the game. One of these centers is the Jewish lobby, powerful, extremely powerful in America and elsewhere! In all big deals, one will meet a Jew! Or a Mason!”

Academics, activists, and journalists stated the Greek Orthodox Church continued to exercise significant social, political, and economic influence. Members of non-Orthodox religious groups reported incidents of societal discrimination, including being told by Orthodox followers that they were “heretics” or “not truly Greek.” Jehovah’s Witnesses reported incidents of societal discrimination while preaching or when distributing informational and religious material in Athens and in other cities. In five separate cases, the excommunicated Old Calendarist monk, Father Kleomenis, attacked and completely destroyed Jehovah’s Witnesses’ information carts. Kleomenis’ partners filmed the incidents for later posting on social media. The Jehovah’s Witnesses in response asked for police intervention. Charges were pending but no hearing had taken place by year’s end.

On March 30, the KIS reported vandalism of the Holocaust monument in Arta, western Greece, noting that the incident happened “only a few days after the remembrance events organized by the municipality of Arta for the deportation and extermination of the city’s Jews in the Nazi concentration camps.”

On June 27, an anarchist group called “Nuclear FAI-IRF” set fire to Saint Basil Church in central Athens. In its statement claiming responsibility, the group cited “the sexism that the Church perpetuates, the Church’s opposition to homosexuality, and the fact that Christianity treats bodily satisfaction and sexuality as non-sacred” as reasons for the attack. The group also stated it “deliberately targeted a profitable business, as the Church owns land and untaxed wealth which is hidden behind charities to supposedly promote its humanist profile.” On August 3, anarchists threw paint on the exterior walls of Saint Basil Church and broke the windows of the nearby Zoodochou Pigi Church. There was no government reaction to any of these incidents. The main opposition party, New Democracy, issued a statement accusing the government of treating anarchists in a lenient way.

On July 7, human rights activists reported on social media that unknown perpetrators had vandalized the Athens Holocaust monument by writing with a marker “Hi, my name is death!” On July 11, police reported the arrest of four male

individuals for shattering the marble facade of the Holocaust monument in Kavala in the northern part of the country on March 30. By April 5, the city of Kavala had restored the monument. The city of Kavala, government officials, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and various political parties condemned the attack.

On September 15, the media reported on the application filed by a parent in Mytilene, Lesvos, requesting his child be exempted from the teaching of certain chapters of the restructured course of religious teaching in the official curriculum. The parent listed five chapters referring to Judaism and Islam, stating that the content “did not match his family’s religious beliefs” and objecting to the teaching of “prayers from other religious traditions” to his child. According to media, several parents in other schools also filed similar requests, and they returned the course’s new folder and book to the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs as “unacceptable.” On October 23, hundreds of demonstrators, including members of parents and ecclesiastical associations, theologians, clergymen, nuns and monks, gathered outside the headquarters of the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religions to protest against the new way the religious course was taught, arguing it was unconstitutional, anti-Orthodox, and antipedagogical.

On September 24, vandals desecrated a large banner advertising a cultural event in Thessaloniki entitled “Sacred Places” and bearing the symbols of the Jewish star, Muslim crescent, and Christian cross. The banner was spray-painted with the slogan “Jews Out,” and the Jewish star was ripped in half. The perpetrator was not identified by year’s end.

On December 1, unknown vandals stripped the inscriptions from two of the panels on the Athens Holocaust memorial. The secretary general for religious affairs and the city of Athens “strongly condemned the attack.” The city of Athens said it would contribute to the monument’s restoration.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador, visiting officials, and embassy and consulate representatives met with officials and representatives from the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs, including the minister of education and the secretary general for religious affairs. They discussed access for minority communities to establish houses of worship, and government initiatives that affect the Muslim minority in Thrace and immigrants. U.S. officials expressed concerns about anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim acts and rhetoric.

On September 7, the Consul General in Thessaloniki visited a new Yazidi Kurd migrant camp in Seres, in which the government segregated the Yazidis from other migrant groups for their protection.

Embassy officials met with religious leaders, including the archbishop and other representatives of the Greek Orthodox Church, as well as members of the Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, Bahai, Mormon, and Jehovah's Witness communities to promote interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance, and diversity, as well as to express concern about anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim acts and rhetoric. Through these meetings, the embassy monitored the ability of religious minority groups to freely practice their religion and the extent of societal discrimination against both indigenous religious minorities and newly arrived migrants from religious minorities. The embassy sponsored two participants for a U.S. government exchange program on minority migrant integration and tolerance. The embassy also promoted religious tolerance via social media, using several platforms to promote the Ambassador's remarks at the Conference on Religious Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East, in which he emphasized tolerance, cultural and religious pluralism, and peaceful coexistence.

The Ambassador met with representatives from the Greek Orthodox Church, including Patriarch Bartholomew, Metropolitan Anthimos of Thessaloniki, Metropolitan Anthimos of Alexandroupolis, Metropolitan Iakovos of Lesvos, Metropolitan Markos of Chios, Metropolitan Dorotheos of Syros, and Deputy Metropolitan of Rhodes Ioannis. In all meetings with religious leaders and other members of the communities, the Ambassador discussed the role of the Greek Orthodox Church in responding to the needs of 49,000 asylum-seekers, mostly from Muslim-majority countries, remaining in Greece. The Ambassador also discussed with Greek Orthodox leaders the importance of religious tolerance and dialogue.

In March an embassy official met with Greek Orthodox and Catholic leaders on the island of Syros to emphasize the importance of interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance. On August 17, the Ambassador met separately with the local Orthodox Metropolitan and the former Roman Catholic Bishop in Syros, discussing the communities' peaceful coexistence and mutual acceptance.

On July 10, the Ambassador delivered opening remarks on the Holocaust in Greece to 39 public school teachers at a seminar on teaching about the Holocaust. In his remarks he emphasized tolerance. The Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the Olga Lengyel Institute for Holocaust Studies, organized the seminar.

The Ambassador also met with representatives from the Athens and Thessaloniki Jewish communities, and the president and curator of the Jewish Museum in Athens, to discuss preserving Jewish history in Greece, combating anti-Semitism, and other concerns of the community. On January 27, the Ambassador laid a wreath at the Holocaust Monument in Athens in honor of the Day of Commemoration of the Greek-Jewish Martyrs and Heroes of the Holocaust.

The Thessaloniki Consul General participated in Holocaust Memorial ceremonies in Larissa, a wreath-laying in Hortiatis village, the National Day of Remembrance of the Greek Victims of the Holocaust in Thessaloniki, the Memorial Holocaust Walk in Thessaloniki, and a Holocaust Memorial event at the Thessaloniki Synagogue. On April 24, the Thessaloniki Consul General and her staff briefed members of the Jewish community and others about the killing by the Nazis of David Tiano, a Greek staff member of the consulate, and the need to never forget the Holocaust. She highlighted the new Human Rights and Holocaust Memorial Museum to break ground in 2018. In June the Thessaloniki Consul General attended a dinner to honor the longest living Thessalonikian Jew, Heinz Kounio, who survived the concentration camps.

In September the Thessaloniki Consul General attended a panel discussion at an exhibition which highlighted mixed religious communities that have coexisted throughout history. In her remarks, the Consul General highlighted the importance of societal respect of the freedom to worship.

On October 30, the Ambassador delivered introductory remarks for a video message from the special advisor for religious minorities in the Near East and South/Central Asia at the Second Athens International Conference on Religious and Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East. In his introduction, the Ambassador highlighted the role religious freedom plays in combatting instability, human rights abuses, and religious extremism. The special advisor's videotaped remarks further commented on the importance of protecting religious diversity.