

ARGENTINA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and laws provide for freedom of religion and the right to profess freely one's faith. The constitution grants the Roman Catholic Church preferential legal status, but there is no official state religion. Several religious groups continued to express frustration that the government required them to register as both civil associations and religious groups in order to be eligible for tax-exempt status, receive visas for foreign clergy, and hold public activities, noting that the Catholic Church was exempt from this requirement. They also criticized an August General Inspectorate of Justice (IGJ) resolution requiring all civil associations, including religious groups, to have gender parity on their administrative and oversight bodies as unconstitutional and a violation of religious freedom. Restrictions imposed by the national and provincial governments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic severely limited religious groups' ability to meet in person, including for ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. Although many religious leaders supported the measures as being in the interest of public health, the president of the interfaith Argentine Council for Religious Freedom (CALIR) criticized the national government's restrictions for not expressly including religious workers as "essential." The executive branch formally adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism in June, and the National Congress did the same in September. According to media, in July, President Alberto Fernandez told Jewish community leaders he wanted to see progress in bringing to justice those responsible for the 1994 bombing of the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA) Jewish Community Center in which 86 persons died. On December 23, a federal court acquitted Carlos Telleldin of direct involvement in the bombing. Further appeals were expected. In July, President Fernandez publicly stated that Holocaust denial "cannot be tolerated." On December 30, senators voted in favor of legislation legalizing abortions until 14 weeks of pregnancy. The Chamber of Deputies approved the bill earlier in the month. Religious figures of various faiths opposed the legislation.

The Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations (DAIA) reported 918 complaints of anti-Semitism in 2019, the most recent year for which statistics were available, compared with 834 reported complaints in 2018. The most commonly reported incidents tracked by the report were anti-Semitic slurs posted on websites. On April 1, Jewish organizations and the Ambassador of Israel criticized remarks by television journalist Tomas Mendez in which he blamed Israel for the COVID-19

virus; Mendez later apologized. In June, a Jewish cemetery in Rosario, Santa Fe Province, was vandalized, according to community members who denounced the act. Religious communities worked together to support people in need as a result of the pandemic, including through the #SeamosUno initiative that delivered its goal of one million boxes of food and sanitary necessities by the end of September. Interreligious groups, such as the Interreligious Committee for Peace in Argentina, whose members include Catholic, Protestant, evangelical Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Baha'i, and indigenous religious groups, and the Argentine Council for Religious Freedom continued work to promote tolerance and increase opportunities for interreligious action on common societal challenges.

U.S. embassy officials met with senior government officials, including the Secretariat of Worship and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship's (MFA) human rights office, and the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, to discuss ways to promote respect for religious minorities and counteract religious discrimination. The Ambassador recorded a message in September for an AMIA-produced remembrance video for the victims of 9/11 and another in October for a video commemoration organized by the Latin American Jewish Congress, marking the anniversary of a 2017 terrorist attack in New York in which five Argentines perished. Embassy officials supported interfaith cooperation and universal respect for freedom of religion through both public statements and social media postings.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. Government estimates the total population at 45.5 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to a 2019 survey by CONICET, the country's national research institute, 62.9 percent of the population is Catholic; 15.3 Protestant, including evangelical groups; 18.9 percent no religion, which includes agnostics; 1.4 percent Jehovah's Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ); 1.2 percent other, including Muslims and Jews; and 0.3 percent unknown. Other sources state Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutherans, Methodists, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ together total 3 percent of the population. According to AMIA, there are 220,000 Jews in the country, and the Islamic Center estimates the Muslim population at 800,000 to 1,000,000. Evangelical Christian communities, particularly Pentecostals, are growing, but no reliable statistics are available. There are also small numbers of Baha'is, Buddhists, and adherents of indigenous religions.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the right to profess, teach, and practice freely one's faith. It declares the support of the federal government for "the Roman Catholic Apostolic faith," but the Supreme Court has ruled that it is not an official or state religion.

The government provides the Catholic Church with tax-exempt subsidies, institutional privileges such as school subsidies, significant autonomy for parochial schools, and licensing preferences for radio frequencies. The law does not require the Catholic Church to register with the Secretariat of Worship in the MFA. Registration is not compulsory for other religious groups, but registered groups receive the same status and fiscal benefits as the Catholic Church, including tax-exempt status, visas for religious officials, and the ability to hold public activities. To register, religious groups must have a place of worship, an organizational charter, and an ordained clergy, among other requirements. To access many of these benefits, religious groups must also register as a civil association through the IGJ.

Registration is not required for private religious services, such as those held in homes, but is sometimes necessary to conduct activities in public spaces pursuant to local regulations. City authorities may require groups to obtain permits to use public parks for events, and they may require religious groups to be registered with the Secretariat of Worship to receive a permit. Once registered, an organization must report to the secretariat any significant changes or decisions made regarding its leadership, governing structure, size of membership, and the address of its headquarters.

The mandatory curriculum in public schools is secular by law. Students may request elective courses of instruction in the religion of their choice in public schools, which may be conducted in the school or at a religious institution. Many Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious groups operate private schools, which receive financial support contingent on registration with the government.

Foreign officials of registered religious groups may apply for a specific visa category to enter the country. The validity period of the visa varies depending on the purpose of the travel. Foreign missionaries of registered religious groups must apply to the Secretariat of Worship, which in turn notifies immigration authorities to request the issuance of appropriate documents.

The law prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, nationality, ideology, politics, sex, economic or social condition, or physical characteristics, and requires those found guilty of discriminatory acts to pay damages or serve jail time. Discrimination may also be an aggravating factor in other crimes, leading to increased penalties. The board of the National Institute against Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Racism (INADI), a government agency under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, includes representatives of the major religious groups. INADI investigates suspected and reported incidents of discrimination based on religion. INADI is not authorized to enforce recommendations or findings, but its reports may be used as evidence in civil court. The agency also supports victims of religious discrimination and promotes proactive measures to prevent discrimination. INADI produces and distributes publications to promote religious tolerance.

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

Government Practices

There was little progress in bringing the accused perpetrators of the 1994 AMIA bombing to justice. On December 23, a federal court acquitted defendant Carlos Telleldin of direct involvement in the AMIA bombing. According to the indictment, Telleldin provided the vehicle that attackers filled with explosives. AMIA and DAIA said they would appeal the verdict. An AMIA spokesperson stated that the country's Jewish community has fought for justice for the victims and closure for the families for decades and said, "The court's decision shamefully consolidates the path of impunity." During a December interview with Radio 10, President Fernandez said he was now convinced that AMIA investigator Alberto Nisman committed suicide in 2015. A 2017 crime scene analysis by the country's Gendarmerie concluded his death was a homicide, although an earlier study by the Federal Police suggested Nisman had shot himself.

According to media, in July, Fernandez told Jewish community leaders he wanted to see individuals brought to justice for the AMIA bombing. On July 16, Fernandez joined the director of AJC's Belfer Institute for Latino and Latin American Affairs for a virtual conversation to mark the 26th anniversary of the AMIA bombing. Fernandez reaffirmed his commitment to bring those responsible to justice, and added, "We are all Argentines, and we respect each other's religion, place of worship, and origin." He also stated remembrance of the Holocaust must

be absolute, adding, “We must foster collective memory so that we never forget what happened and so that it never happens again.”

Representatives of several religious groups continued to state that a government requirement for religious groups to register first with the Ministry of Worship and then with the Ministry of Interior as a civil association was redundant, noting the Catholic Church faced no such requirement. The groups said these legal processes were prerequisites for seeking tax-exempt status, visas for foreign clergy, and permission to hold public activities. Religious group representatives said they deserved a unique process, separate from that for civil associations.

On August 3, pursuant to the registration process, the IGJ announced a requirement that all civil associations and foundations have equal numbers of male and female members on their administrative and oversight bodies. Several religious groups and CALIR released statements saying this requirement was unconstitutional and violated religious freedom. The president of the Christian Alliance of Evangelical Churches of the Argentine Republic (ACIERA), Ruben Proietti, told local media that if the requirement were applied to registered religious groups, it would be “an undue intrusion into the organization of churches.”

Some religious groups criticized the government’s May 20 decree establishing health restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic as unfairly treating religious workers as nonessential compared with doctors, nurses, home health workers, and members of the security services. The decree’s ban on gatherings effectively prohibited in-person religious gatherings, including weddings and funerals, for several months. In August, Raul Sciabbala, the president of CALIR, noted the decree’s effects on religious freedom and criticized it for not expressly including religious workers as “essential.”

Several religious leaders expressed support for the pandemic-related measures. Omar Abboud, a local legislator and copresident of the Institute for Interreligious Dialogue in Buenos Aires, said protecting lives was paramount and “no principle of religious freedom was damaged” in the city of Buenos Aires. Chief Rabbi Gabriel Davidovich issued a statement in May criticizing weddings held by two couples from the community in violation of the quarantine, adding that his rabbinate had not “endorsed nor consented” to either celebration.

At year’s end, the status of reopenings specifically for religious institutions varied by province and locality. On September 23, the government authorized in-person gatherings for worship in the city of Buenos Aires, with a maximum of 20

attendees and under strict protocols. The Province of Cordoba, however, suspended religious events in October in certain areas following an increase in COVID-19 cases, a measure the Archdiocese of Cordoba publicly opposed. In a statement, Archbishop Carlos Nanez noted the churches under his supervision carefully followed all health and safety protocols, adding that he hoped the churches would be allowed to attend to the “spiritual health” of their congregations.

On December 30, the National Congress passed legislation legalizing abortions up to and including the 14th week of pregnancy and in later stages if the pregnancy was the result of rape or if it threatened the life of the person gestating. Religious figures of various faiths opposed the government’s efforts to pass the legislation. On March 8, Catholic Church leaders held a “Mass for life” in Lujan, Buenos Aires Province. In his homily at the event, Bishop of San Isidro Oscar Ojea said “It is not legal to eliminate any human life.” On November 28, prolife groups marched in 267 cities as discussion of the law formally began in the lower house of congress. Approximately 150 prolife groups supported the march, which also received public backing from ACIERA and the CEA. In November, ACIERA bioethics director Jael Ojuel published an op-ed stating that legalizing abortion was not simply a “matter of public health” and that prolife groups sought to protect both mothers and their unborn children.

Numerous religious and prolife groups, including ACIERA, expressed continued concern over the case of a doctor arrested in 2017 for refusing to perform an abortion. In March, an appeals court in Rio Negro Province upheld a suspended sentence of one year and two months for misconduct against Leandro Rodriguez. The sentence prohibited him from practicing medicine for two years and four months. In 2017, Rodriguez treated a woman suffering from severe pain and an infection after taking misoprostol, an abortion-inducing drug, in her fifth month of pregnancy. Rodriguez treated the infection and halted the abortion. Three months later, the woman delivered the baby and offered it up for adoption. Rodriguez’s legal team said he had halted the abortion on medical grounds and the patient had agreed to continue the pregnancy and give up the baby for adoption. Some religious groups, including local evangelical Christian churches, said the case set a precedent against abortion-related conscientious objection.

Catholic Church representatives continued to discuss measures to reduce their use of federal funding following a 2018 agreement between the government and the Argentine Episcopal Conference (CEA), representing the Catholic Church, that delineated a formal, mutually agreed plan to reduce the state’s direct financial

support to the Church. Under the agreement, government funding primarily allocated for the salaries of bishops and stipends for seminarians decreased from 130 million pesos (\$1.46 million) in 2018 to 126 million pesos (\$1.41 million) in 2019. On June 30, the CEA announced a program to generate increased private contributions toward Church activities.

According to media, in May, some Jewish community leaders opposed the government's proposal to issue a new 5,000 peso banknote in honor of two historically prominent physicians, stating that one of them, Ramon Carrillo, was a Nazi sympathizer during World War II. Other Jewish groups, including DAIA, said they would wait until the government made a decision before commenting on the issue. Carrillo's family rejected allegations regarding Carrillo's pro-Nazi views and said there was a "smear campaign" against him.

On June 4, the MFA formally adopted the definition of anti-Semitism established by the IHRA, and on September 16, the National Congress did so as well. DAIA President Jorge Knoblovits told media it was "crucial to the battle against anti-Semitism."

Secretary of Worship Guillermo Oliveri, Human Rights Secretary Horacio Pietragalla, Buenos Aires Director General for Religious Affairs Federico Hernan Pugilese, and other government representatives participated in religious freedom conferences, interreligious dialogues, rabbinical ordinations, Catholic services, and Rosh Hashanah, Eid al-Adha, and Eid al-Fitr celebrations, as well as other religious activities, including those held by Protestant and Orthodox churches. They often did so virtually or through recorded videos, given COVID-19 restrictions on public gatherings.

On May 13, leading bioethicists representing the Catholic, evangelical Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Church of Jesus Christ communities published a joint framework to assist doctors in performing triage and in assigning scarce health resources in the event that hospitals or practices were overwhelmed with patients as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. On July 16, the city of Buenos Aires' legislature formally recognized the framework.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

DAIA reported 918 complaints of anti-Semitism in 2019, the most recent year for which statistics were available, compared with 834 reported complaints in 2018. The most commonly reported incidents were anti-Semitic slurs posted on websites

and social media. Included among these were commentaries that depicted Jews as outsiders as well as propagators of conspiracy theories and described Jews as avaricious or exploitative. Other recorded acts included graffiti, verbal slurs, and the desecration of Jewish cemeteries.

On April 1, television journalist Tomas Mendez associated the origin of the COVID-19 virus with “the world’s wealthiest people born in the United States and Israel” during his program “Federal Journalism.” DAIA, the Ambassador of Israel, and INADI criticized the remarks. On April 2, Mendez publicly apologized.

According to media reports, in August, posters stating “Jews are the virus” and “Argentines, awaken to the world Jewish dictatorship” appeared in the city of Neuquen, in the southern part of the country. The regional president of DAIA condemned the posters and called on the local government to investigate and take action. On August 25, federal prosecutors in Neuquen announced a formal investigation, stating the posters constituted acts of discrimination punishable with a prison sentence of between one month and one year in length.

Following the death of Kobe Bryant and his daughter in a helicopter crash in California on January 26, journalist Salim Sad tweeted, “Sikorsky S76 helicopter, of Jewish surname, kills Kobe Bryant.” The tweet was subsequently deleted. Sad said someone had hacked his account; however, according to DAIA, Sad had previously posted anti-Semitic tweets.

In March, media reported soccer player Arnaldo Gonzalez made an anti-Semitic gesture after being ejected from a game against a team with many Jewish supporters, leading calls for his prosecution under the country’s law that prohibits displays of discrimination. In November, the Argentine Football Association, rejecting his request for leniency, upheld a 10-game ban against Gonzalez.

In July, a professor at the 21st Century Business University in Cordoba told his students during an online class that the creation of the State of Israel was a concession to the “Zionist lobby” in exchange for money. He also said, “Why do you guys think the Nazis killed so many Jews? Because of the envy they had. Imagine Germans bleeding to death in a terminal economic crisis, with hyperinflation, and [while] the Jews...kept getting rich.” A student recorded the class and submitted the recording to DAIA, which submitted a complaint. After investigating the case, the university fired the professor.

In October, the National Soccer Association (AFA) adopted the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism. AFA President Claudio Tapia said it was part of a broader initiative to “combat racism, discrimination, and anti-Semitism.”

In June, a Jewish cemetery in Rosario, Santa Fe Province, was vandalized, according to community members who denounced the acts. The vandalism included the theft of dozens of plaques and gravestones as well as the destruction of tombs. No suspects were detained.

In September, DAIA denounced anti-Semitic graffiti placed on an advertising banner promoting journalist Eduardo Feinmann’s program on Radio Rivadavia. The graffiti included swastikas and anti-Semitic language. DAIA denounced a similar attack on a poster of journalist Baby Etchecopar in July.

On September 28, vandals spray-painted slogans on an evangelical Christian church in Neuquen. The slogans included threats and accusations against prolife movements.

Religious communities worked together to support people in need as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These efforts included the #SeamosUno (“We are one”) initiative organized by the Jesuit-run Center for Research and Social Action in collaboration with Caritas, ACIERA, AMIA, and the Association of Christian Business Leaders, among others. On September 30, the organization delivered its one-millionth box of food and sanitary necessities.

Interreligious groups, such as the Interreligious Committee for Peace in Argentina, whose members included Catholic, Protestant, evangelical Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Baha’i, and indigenous religious groups, and the Argentine Council for Religious Freedom, continued to work on increasing opportunities for interreligious action on common societal challenges. In September, they organized an online speaker series at a local university to provide viewpoints from various religious leaders on life and worship during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

In February, the Pew Research Center published findings on attitudes towards democratic principles, such as regular elections, free speech, and free civil society, as well as religious freedom, in 34 countries, based on interviews it conducted in its *Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey*. According to the findings, 74 percent of the country’s respondents considered religious freedom to be “very important,” ranking it high among the nine democratic principles covered in the survey.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with government representatives, including the Secretariat of Worship, the MFA's human rights office, and the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, to discuss ways to promote respect for religious minorities and interfaith cooperation. In meetings with government officials, the Ambassador and other embassy officials discussed tolerance, the country's interfaith movement, and measures to counteract religious discrimination.

The embassy's engagement continued virtually after the government imposed restrictions on public gatherings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In July, the Ambassador attended an online commemoration to mourn the victims of the 1994 terrorist attack on the AMIA. He also recorded a message in September for an AMIA-produced remembrance video for the victims of 9/11 and another in October for a video commemoration organized by the Latin American Jewish Congress that marked the anniversary of the 2017 terrorist attack in New York in which five Argentines were killed. In February, a senior embassy official met with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country and ways in which the embassy could support communities of all faiths.

Embassy outreach included virtual conversations with religious and community leaders, including those at DAIA, AMIA, and the Islamic Center. In the meetings, embassy officials discussed the status of religious freedom and interfaith dialogue and ways to promote them. Embassy officials met with religious groups and NGOs focused on social work and community service (for example, #SeamosUno) and discussed promoting respect for religious diversity as well as faith-based responses to poverty, drug addiction, domestic violence, homelessness, and malnutrition.