

KUWAIT 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution declares Islam to be the religion of the state but declares freedom of belief is “absolute.” It declares the state protects the freedom to practice one’s religion, provided such practice does not conflict with established customs, public policy, or morals. The constitution declares sharia to be a main source of legislation and all individuals to be equal before the law regardless of religion. Defamation of the three Abrahamic faiths (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity), publication or broadcast of material the government deems offensive to religious groups, and practices the government finds inconsistent with Islamic law are prohibited by law. In January, the government announced it had prosecuted 57 individuals in 48 cases on charges of “stirring up sectarian strife” between 2016 and 2019. In March, the Court of Cassation, the country’s highest court, upheld the 10-year prison sentences of three citizens and the two-year sentence for one Syrian national for joining ISIS and plotting to blow up Shia mosques. The government prosecuted numerous individuals for remarks deemed religiously offensive, mostly for comments made online, and sentenced some to prison terms. In March, authorities arrested three Indian nationals working at the Kuwait National Petroleum Corporation for insulting Islam and Muslims on Twitter. The government continued to appoint and pay the salaries of Sunni imams and provide the full basic text for weekly sermons preached at mosques. It did not exercise the same oversight of Shia imams. The Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs (MAIA) fined, reprimanded, or suspended several Sunni imams for giving sermons perceived as politically motivated, insulting to other religious groups, or violating the national unity law. Minority religious groups said they could worship in private spaces without government interference provided they did not disturb their neighbors or violate laws regarding assembly and restrictions on proselytizing. Members of registered churches reported that as of October, the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) had refused their attempts to renew lists of authorized signatories, stating that only citizens would be granted the authority to sign official documents on behalf of the churches, despite many congregations lacking citizen members. Representatives of registered churches also reported that banks would no longer process donations on behalf of the churches unless they received approval from MOSA to fundraise and collect donations, requests that the churches say MOSA denied. In addition, church members reported MAIA refused to recognize marriage certificates that were not signed by Kuwaiti nationals, despite Kuwaitis not being among their ordained clergy. At year’s end, church representatives reported that they hoped to reach a resolution on this issue with government

authorities in 2021. Most minority religious groups reported a continued lack of facilities for worship and difficulty obtaining permission to construct new facilities. The government did not accredit any religious schools or permit Shia religious training within the country, notwithstanding an increased need for qualified judges to staff the newly-approved Shia personal status courts. The Ministry of Education continued to ban or censor instructional materials referring to the Holocaust or Israel. Some Shia leaders continued to report discrimination in clerical and public sector employment.

Individuals continued to face societal pressure against conversion from Islam; some citizens who converted outside the country said their families harassed them because of their conversion. Leaders and members of religious communities said they did not convert Muslims in the country. An NGO reported that “Although Shia have the same legal rights as Sunnis and access to education, health care, and other state benefits, they are often perceived as being lower on the social scale and marginalized in religious, economic, social, and political terms.” Shia representatives consistently said, however, that discrimination was not an issue for their community. Hotels, stores, and businesses continued to mark non-Islamic holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali. News media continued to publish information about celebrations of religious holidays, including material on the religious significance of Christmas. Some Muslim clerics continued to express disapproval on social media of the celebration of non-Islamic holidays and called for more government action to restrict public expression of these holidays.

In June, the Ambassador hosted a virtual roundtable with representatives from minority faiths to discuss a broad range of religious freedom issues. The group discussed the status of religious freedom in the country, the impact of COVID-19 shutdowns on their communities, and the challenges the pandemic has presented for worship and fundraising. During the year, embassy officials and religious leaders continued to discuss various religious groups’ needs, which continued to include more space for worship, more transparency in the registration process for new churches, and permission to obtain religious school accreditation.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.0 million (midyear 2020 estimate). U.S. government figures also cite the Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI), a local government agency, as reporting that the country’s total population was 4.4 million for 2019. As of January 1, PACI also reports there are 1.4 million citizens and 3.1 million noncitizens. The national census does not

distinguish between Shia and Sunni Muslims. PACI estimates approximately 70 percent of citizens are Sunni Muslims, while the remaining 30 percent are Shia Muslims (including Ahmadi and Ismaili Muslims, whom the government counts as Shia). Community leaders have indicated there are 290 Christian citizens and a handful of Baha'i citizens. There are no known Jewish citizens.

According to information from PACI released in 2018, 64 percent of the expatriate population is Muslim, 26 percent Christian, and 10 percent from non-Abrahamic faiths. Sources in various noncitizen communities state that approximately 5 percent of the expatriate Muslim population is Shia, while Buddhists and Hindus account for half of the non-Abrahamic faith population. Informal estimates by members of different faiths indicate there are approximately 250,000 Hindus, 25,000 Bohra Muslims, 10,000 to 12,000 Sikhs, 7,000 Druze, and 400 Baha'is.

While some geographic areas have higher concentrations of either Sunnis or Shia, the two groups are distributed uniformly throughout most of the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares Islam to be the religion of the state and the freedom of belief to be “absolute.” It provides for state protection of the freedom to practice all religions, provided such practice is “in accordance with established customs, and does not conflict with public policy or morals.”

The constitution declares sharia to be a main source of legislation and all individuals to be equal before the law regardless of religion. It declares the Amir shall be Muslim (the Amir and ruling family are Sunni) and the state shall safeguard the heritage of Islam.

The law prohibits the defamation of the three Abrahamic religions and denigration of Islamic and Judeo-Christian religious figures within accepted Islamic orthodoxy (e.g., prophets mentioned in the Quran or companions of the Prophet Muhammad), and prescribes a punishment of up to 10 years in prison for each offense.

A national unity law prohibits “stirring sectarian strife,” promoting the supremacy of one religious group, instigating acts of violence based on the supremacy of one group, or promoting hatred or contempt of any group. Violations of this law by individuals are punishable by up to seven years' imprisonment, a fine of 10,000 to

100,000 Kuwaiti dinars (\$32,900-\$329,000), or both. Repeated crimes carry double penalties. If a group or an organization violates the law, it could have its license to operate revoked temporarily or permanently, and it could be fined up to 200,000 dinars (\$658,000). Noncitizens convicted under this law are also subject to deportation.

The law allows citizens to file criminal charges against anyone they believe has defamed any of the three recognized Abrahamic religions or harmed public morals.

The law criminalizes publishing and broadcasting content, including on social media, which the government deems offensive to religious “sects” or groups, providing for fines ranging from 10,000 to 200,000 dinars (\$32,900-\$658,000) and up to seven years’ imprisonment.

There is no promulgated process outlining what steps religious groups must take to register with the government. Groups must navigate this process without guidance from government offices. Although all religious groups must apply in writing for a license from their municipality to establish an official place of worship and to gain full benefits from the central government, there are no fixed criteria for an application to be approved. To obtain a license, groups must first receive approval by the local municipality for their place of worship. The municipality then turns to MAIA for its “opinion” on the application for a worship space (MAIA indicates that it does not have the authority to give formal registration of the building). MAIA then issues a certificate that lists board members for the organization, making the religious group a legal entity. Once this certificate is granted, further approvals are required by MOSA and the Ministry of Interior (MOI). Once these ministries give these approvals, the municipality must grant the final license, which requires the community leaders to obtain written permission from all the immediate neighbors occupying the properties around the proposed place of worship. The government often provides applicants no information about the status of their pending registration or if they have been rejected at any point. There is no recourse to appeal the decision; it is considered a “sovereign act” and cannot be challenged in court.

The officially registered and licensed Christian churches in the country are: National Evangelical Church of Kuwait (NECK) (Protestant); Roman Catholic; Greek Catholic (Melkite); Coptic Orthodox; Armenian Orthodox; Greek Orthodox; Anglican; and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. There are no officially recognized synagogues, and according to MAIA, no application has ever been submitted for one. The government does not recognize any non-Abrahamic

religions. Nonrecognized religious groups include Hindus, Sikhs, Druze, Bohra Muslims, and Baha'is.

A religious group with a license to establish a place of worship may hire its own staff, sponsor visitors to the country, open bank accounts, and import texts needed for its congregation. Nonregistered religious groups do not have these rights, may not purchase property or sponsor workers, and must rely on volunteers from within their community for resources (although some registered religious groups have agreed to assist nonregistered groups in these matters).

The law prohibits practices the government deems inconsistent with Islamic law, including anything the government deems to be sorcery or black magic, which under the penal code constitutes “fraud and deception” and carries a maximum penalty of three years’ imprisonment, a fine, or both.

The law does not specifically prohibit proselytizing by non-Muslims but individuals proselytizing may be prosecuted under laws criminalizing contempt of religion.

The law prohibits eating, drinking, and smoking in public between sunrise and sunset during Ramadan, including for non-Muslims, with a prescribed maximum penalty of up to 100 dinars (\$330), one month’s imprisonment, or both.

It is illegal to possess or import pork products and alcohol. Importing alcohol carries a penalty of up to 10 years’ imprisonment; consuming alcohol may result in a fine of up to 1,000 dinars (\$3,300).

Islamic religious instruction is mandatory at all levels for all Muslim students in both public and private schools with one or more Muslim students enrolled, regardless of whether the student is a citizen. Non-Muslim students are not required to attend these classes. The law prohibits organized religious education in public high schools for faiths other than Islam. All Islamic education courses are based on Sunni Islam.

The law states apostates lose certain legal rights, including to inherit property from Muslim relatives or spouses, but it does not specify any criminal penalty. If a Muslim man married to a Muslim woman converts from Islam, his existing marriage is annulled. If he is married to a non-Muslim woman and converts from Islam, the marriage remains valid. If a Muslim woman married to a Muslim man converts to another Abrahamic faith (Christianity or Judaism), the marriage is not

automatically annulled, but the Muslim husband may request an annulment. If a Muslim woman married to a Muslim man converts to a non-Abrahamic faith, the marriage is automatically annulled.

Religious courts administer personal status law dealing with issues of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. For non-Muslims, courts apply Sunni sharia in matters of personal status and family law. Noncitizens not belonging to the three recognized Abrahamic religions are also subject to sharia if family matters are taken to court. According to the law, sharia governs inheritance for all residents regardless of their religious affiliation if the case is brought to court.

Courts may follow Shia jurisprudence in matters of personal status and family law for Shia Muslims at the first instance and appellate levels. If the case proceeds beyond the appellate level to the Court of Cassation, the country's highest court, the case may be adjudicated via Sunni personal status law. The law allows for the creation of separate courts for Shia Muslims for cases pertaining to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. According to local sources, these courts have only three judges, none of whom has a formal background in Shia jurisprudence. The law also allows personal status cases to be adjudicated through the Court of Cassation under Shia doctrine. An independent Shia *waqf* (trust) administers Shia religious endowments. Cases are assigned to either Sunni or Shia judges based on the religious affiliation of the man. If a man is married to a non-Muslim woman, the husband's religious practice is followed. If a couple is from one of the registered churches, the settlement offered by the church may be taken into consideration, although if the dispute is not settled, Sunni sharia is applied.

The law forbids, and the state does not recognize, marriage between Muslim women and non-Muslim men, but Muslim men may marry women of other recognized Abrahamic faiths. The law requires the raising of children of such marriages in their father's faith, and the father's religion governs the settlement of marital disputes. Muslim marriage and divorce cases are heard in Sunni or Shia religious courts, depending on whether the marriage certificate is Sunni or Shia. Both Sunni and Shia marriage certificates need to be authenticated by appropriate notaries. Non-Muslim divorce and child custody cases are heard in Sunni religious courts. Christian couples who are part of a registered church may marry and divorce following their religious customs, with local authorities and courts recognizing their documents. Except for Hindus and Sikhs of Indian nationality, who may marry at the Embassy of India, members of non-Abrahamic faiths and nonregistered churches may not marry legally in the country but may have their

foreign wedding certificates recognized. Citizens who are members of the Baha'i Faith may marry abroad and petition the court to recognize their marriage.

If a religious group wishes to purchase land, a citizen must be the primary buyer and must submit a request for approval to the local municipal council, which allocates land at its discretion. Citizens may also rent or donate land to religious groups.

The law prohibits the naturalization of non-Muslims but allows male citizens of any religion to transmit citizenship to their descendants. Female citizens, regardless of religion, are unable to transmit nationality to their children.

An individual's religion is not included on passports or national identity documents except for birth and marriage certificates, on which it is mandatory. On birth certificates issued to Muslims, there is no distinction between Sunni and Shia. Members of non-Abrahamic faiths are not able to list their religion on their birth certificate and a dash (-) is denoted in place of their religion.

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

Government Practices

The government pursued several cases against individuals for violating the national unity law and fomenting sectarianism. In January, the government announced it had prosecuted 57 individuals in 48 cases on charges of "stirring up sectarian strife" between 2016 and 2019.

In March, the Court of Cassation upheld the 10-year prison sentences of three citizens and the two-year sentence of one Syrian national for joining ISIS and plotting to blow up Shia mosques.

In March, authorities arrested three Indian nationals working at the Kuwait National Petroleum Corporation for insulting Islam and Muslims on Twitter. The three individuals were referred to authorities for legal action, but there was no update on the trial at year's end.

In September, the MOI issued a statement saying that it had arrested a foreign national who posted a video clip on social media showing him "deliberately infringing on the sanctity of the Holy Quran." The ministry added that the man was arrested and referred to "competent authorities."

Although the law does not prohibit apostasy, the government continued its policy of not issuing new official documents for recording a change in religion unless the conversion was from another religion to Islam. According to press reports, in January, Yusuf Mehanna stated that the MOI had revoked his citizenship after he gave a public interview noting his intention to convert to Judaism. The government explicitly denied that it revoked any Kuwaiti's citizenship during the year. At year's end, Mehanna was living in the United Kingdom under the name Naftali ben-Yehuda.

In accordance with MAIA policy, the government continued to vet and appoint all new Sunni imams to ensure compliance with the government's guidance on moderate and tolerant religious preaching. The Shia community continued to select its own clerics without government oversight. The government funded Sunni religious institutions, including mosques, and paid the salaries of all Sunni imams. The Shia community generally did not receive funding from the state for religious institutions and mosques. The government paid the salaries of some Shia imams. Some Shia mosques requested government assistance and received funds to pay for salaries and maintenance of their facilities.

According to the government, during the year, MAIA did not suspend, terminate, or discipline any imams for violating laws or insulting other religious groups. In August, Mohammed al-Mutari, MAIA Assistant Undersecretary for Mosques Department, told the *Al-Rai* newspaper that the ministry had received complaints from a number of worshippers at a Kuwait City mosque regarding the mosque's imam, who had predicted that doomsday would arrive in 2024. Al-Mutari said that the incident was under review by the authorities.

Imams could add content to the sermons but needed to ensure the text adhered to the laws on political speech and avoided stoking sectarianism. Media sources reported that MAIA continued to caution imams to ensure their sermons were consistent with MAIA guidelines to refrain from discussing political issues and insulting other religions in their sermons or at any other time while under MAIA jurisdiction. MAIA required Sunni imams to send a recorded audio of their sermons to MAIA for review after the fact. MAIA also relied on reports of worshippers and others who might be dissatisfied if the imam discussed politics or insulted other faiths.

Shia sources and government authorities said the government did not officially monitor Shia clerics, who were free to write their own sermons if they did not

violate existing laws or instigate sectarianism. If a questionable video appeared on social media or a worshipper reported a cleric, the government investigated. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were fewer religious gatherings during the year and, unlike previous years, Shia representatives and government officials reported no incidents. According to officials at MAIA and members of the Shia community, MAIA did not monitor sermons or other activities at *husseiniyas* (Shia halls for religious commemorations) or at private gatherings. Some sources stated they believed the government unofficially monitored Shia clerics.

During the year, due to the pandemic, MAIA organized several online courses for Sunni imams to make their messages more effective in promoting tolerance and countering radicalization. In December, the Director of the Center for the Promotion of Moderation, Abdullah al-Shuraika, said that the center had not received any reports of cases of extremism during the year and also stated that the center had launched a hotline for receiving such reports. The center also continued its efforts to promote tolerance and moderation via television, radio, and online media as well as to rehabilitate prison inmates who were convicted in terror and extremism cases.

Representatives of registered churches continued to state the government was generally tolerant and respectful of their faiths. Members of non-Abrahamic faiths and unregistered churches continued to state they remained free to practice their religion in private but faced harassment and potential prosecution if they disturbed their neighbors or violated laws regarding assembly and proselytizing. They also continued to say they avoided conflict with authorities by not proselytizing or disparaging the government or other faiths. The government continued to allow such groups to operate in rented villas, private homes, or the facilities of registered churches. Many of these groups said they did not publicly advertise religious events or gatherings to avoid bringing unwanted attention to their organizations, both from the public and from government authorities.

Members of registered churches reported that as of October, MOSA refused their attempts to renew lists of authorized signatories, stating that only citizens have the authority to sign official documents on behalf of the churches. Representatives of the registered churches also reported that banks would no longer process donations on behalf of the churches unless they received approval from MOSA to fundraise and collect donations, requests that the churches say MOSA denied. In addition, church members said that MAIA refused to recognize marriage certificates for some churches that were not signed by Kuwaiti nationals, despite Kuwaitis not

being among their ordained clergy. At year's end, church representatives reported that they hoped to reach a resolution with government authorities in 2021.

Members of non-Abrahamic faiths and unregistered churches continued to say they experienced hardships in commemorating major religious or life events. Almost uniformly across these communities, members said they lacked sufficient religious facilities and religious leaders or clerics to lead prayers, bless births and marriages, and conduct appropriate death rituals. In many cases, members of these religious groups stated they resolved conflicts, such as child separation issues in divorce, marital status, or inheritance, internally within their communities rather than take legal action in the courts where they would be subject to sharia.

The government continued to require religious groups to obtain licenses from their respective municipalities for religious celebrations. Authorities retained the right to withdraw the license of any husseiniya not complying with the municipality's rules. Minority religious communities continued to state they tried to keep a low profile and did not request permission for public celebrations from authorities, which they presumed would be rejected if they applied for it.

The MOI continued to provide added security and protection at religious sites for all recognized non-Sunni religious groups. Muslim and Christian leaders continued to report that the government, citing security concerns, kept in place the ban on outdoor religious observances instituted following an ISIS bombing of a Shia mosque in 2015 that killed 27 persons.

The government continued to require the Shia community to conduct Ashura activities inside closed structures rather than at outdoor locations. The government did not permit public reenactments of the martyrdom of Hussein or public marches in commemoration of Ashura. The government continued to station security forces outside some Sunni mosques and all Shia and Christian religious venues during times of worship throughout the year as a deterrent to possible attacks. The government also continued to provide security to Shia neighborhoods during Muharram and Ashura.

Authorities continued the government's longstanding practice of prohibiting churches from displaying exterior signs, such as a cross or church bell.

Only private shops owned by religious organizations could legally import, display, or sell non-Islamic religious literature. The government did not permit non-Islamic religious publishing companies, although several churches published religious

materials solely for their congregations' use. Church leaders continued to report the government permitted registered Christian churches to import religious materials for use by their congregations under the condition that none of the content insulted Islam. Registered churches reported they were able to import religious materials in any language. According to the Ministry of Information, the MOIA reviewed books of a religious nature. Members of non-Abrahamic faiths and nonregistered churches continued to state they could import religious materials for their congregations if they brought in the materials as personal items when entering the country and did not try to sell them in public stores. While minority religious communities said they continued to be selective in the religious materials they imported and even more selective in giving access to the materials, many noted that this was less of an issue in the past year, given that their activities had moved almost entirely online due to COVID-19. They said they did not allow the circulation of these materials outside their congregations.

In March, the government announced that all mosques would be closed indefinitely to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In June, the government reopened some mosques for daily prayers while keeping them closed for Friday congregation prayers. At this time, Friday prayers were performed only in the Grand Mosque and broadcast live on television. By mid-July, more mosques were reopened and Friday congregation prayers were permitted. In August, all mosques were fully reopened. In December, the Council of Ministers announced that all Christmas gatherings, both inside and outside of churches, would be banned through January 10 over COVID-19 concerns.

Kuwait municipalities handled building permits and land issues for religious groups. The government said it received no applications for construction of new churches from religious groups during the year. The Greek Catholic Church indicated that it had requested additional land near its location in April to accommodate more worshippers. The government said it did not receive additional requests for registrations of new groups during the year.

Christian churches continued to report that government authorities did not respond to their petitions for expanding existing places of worship. Some churches said they stopped submitting such requests because the government did not respond.

Shia community members reported a continued lack of facilities for worship and difficulties obtaining permission to construct new facilities caused by the government's delay in approving repairs to existing mosques or constructing new ones. MAIA reported there were 1,686 mosques in the country, including 31

mosques opened during the year. According to 2018 government statistics, of the 1,601 mosques existing that year, 1550 were Sunni and 51 Shia. Five new Shia mosques received permission to be built that year. A source from the Shia community said the government opened no new Shia mosques in 2019. There were 20-30 husseiniyas registered with the MOI and thousands of smaller Shia gatherings that took place in private homes.

Again citing security concerns, authorities stated they continued to act against unlicensed mosques. The government tasked MAIA, MOI, the municipality of Kuwait, and other agencies with finding solutions to end the use of such unregistered mosques. During the year, the government continued to raid makeshift mosques in remote areas and close them for operating without proper licenses. MAIA continued to operate under a mandate from the Council of Ministers to demolish unregistered mosques, stating that some of those mosques served as platforms of extremism. The demolition of these mosques continued during the year. Authorities said new unlicensed mosques continued to open. MAIA attempted to bring some underground mosques under its supervision by appointing and vetting imams, monitoring sermons, and licensing them.

According to *Al-Rai* newspaper, the parliament and the government approved a proposal in October to teach the Quran in kindergarten. Mohammed Haif, the member of parliament who proposed the bill, said that the measure would help build a generation “adhering to genuine Islamic values and teachings.”

All Islamic education courses – mandatory for Muslims – use the Sunni interpretation of Islam. According to the NGO Minority Rights Group International, Shia Muslims are not allowed to organize religious courses in public high schools or establish religious training centers.

The Ministry of Education continued to ban or censor instructional materials, including fiction and nonfiction books and textbooks, referring to the Holocaust or Israel. The ministry permitted public schools to teach and celebrate only Islamic holidays. Members of non-Islamic faiths largely said the government did not interfere with religious instruction inside private homes and on church compounds.

According to church leaders, although most churches provided faith-based instruction for children, none of them had government-accredited church-based schools. Accreditation for church-based schools would enable students to receive religious education while fulfilling government requirements and allow graduates to move on to higher education. The NECK repeatedly requested accreditation for

its church-based school for many years, most recently in 2017, but authorities had not responded by year's end. The Armenian Church and the Bohra Muslim community continued to operate accredited community schools in lieu of seeking accreditation as religious schools. Other groups continued to report they conducted religious studies in their places of worship.

Local sources suggested that the passage of the Shia Personal Status Law increased the need for Shia religious training facilities to help staff the courts with qualified judges. The government continued its practice of not responding to requests to establish Shia religious training institutions. Shia Muslims had to seek religious training and education abroad. According to members of the Shia community, the College of Islamic Law at Kuwait University, the only institution in the country that trains imams, provided some Shia jurisprudence courses but did not permit Shia professors on its faculty.

According to a September report in the newspaper *Al-Qabas*, more than 1,000 individuals applied for the first time to work as mosque imams and muezzins amid a vigorous drive to replace migrant workers with citizens. According to the report, MAIA eased testing criteria for these jobs in order to encourage qualified nationals to apply with the aim of raising the number of citizens working as imams and muezzins to 20 percent, up from the current 6 percent. Observers saw this as part of an ongoing and longstanding effort by the government to reduce reliance on foreign workers and to provide economic opportunities to its own nationals, an effort which accelerated during the year due to the economic slowdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Shia leaders continued to report that the lack of Shia imams limited their ability to staff Shia courts, causing a backlog of personal status and family cases. To address the backlog and shortage of staff, an ad hoc council the government created many years ago under the regular marital issues court to apply Shia jurisprudence continued to function.

Even though Shia make up an estimated 30 percent of the population, they remained underrepresented at all levels of government: six of 50 elected members in parliament, one of 16 cabinet members, one of six Amiri Diwan advisors, and disproportionately few senior officers in the military and police force. Shia community leaders continued to say there was a "glass ceiling" in promotions and difficulties in obtaining government jobs. Shia rarely held leadership positions in the security forces. Some Shia leaders said discrimination continued to prevent Shia from obtaining training for clerical positions and leadership positions in

public sector organizations, including the police force and the military/security apparatus. According to the NGO Minority Right Group International (MRGI), “while Shia are able to work in the public sector without restrictions, some Shia have reported discrimination and barriers preventing them from obtaining senior leadership positions.”

MOSA issued visas for clergy and other staff to work at licensed places of worship. The government continued to impose quotas on the number of clergy and staff of licensed religious groups entering the country but granted additional slots upon request. The government continued to require foreign leaders of unregistered religious groups to enter the country as nonreligious workers.

On February 25, The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) reported that it monitored online search engines of exhibited materials for state-run book fairs in Kuwait City and other Gulf states. In every fair, the ADL found numerous examples of anti-Semitic books through their online platforms and apparently on site as well. The ADL report stated that at the November 2019 Kuwait International Book Fair, “ADL even found that some copies of *Mein Kampf* and *The International Jew* were listed in the event’s online catalog under Children’s Books.”

Media coverage included news on events and celebrations held by various Christian denominations in the country, such as Christmas services and church inauguration anniversaries attended by high-level government officials. On Orthodox Christmas in January, the Minister of Amiri Diwan Affairs, Ali Jarrah al-Saah, visited St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Societal pressure continued against conversion from Islam, according to minority religious leaders and citizens. Leaders and members of religious communities said they did not convert Muslims in the country. Some citizens who converted outside the country said their families harassed them due to their conversion.

MRGI reported that “Although Shia have the same legal rights as Sunnis and access to education, health care, and other state benefits, they are often perceived as being lower on the social scale and marginalized in religious, economic, social, and political terms.” Shia representatives consistently said, however, that discrimination was not an issue for their community.

According to press reports, a number of imams said that authorities needed to act swiftly to save children from an updated version of *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*, a popular video game in which players appear to be worshipping idols. One Kuwait University professor said the game violated Islamic beliefs regarding prostration and bowing to idols. Another said such video games were dangerous for Muslims.

Hotels, stores, and other businesses continued to mark non-Islamic holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali. During the Christmas season, Christmas trees and lights appeared in stores, malls, and homes, and Christmas music played in public places, including songs with Christian lyrics.

News media continued to print information about religious holiday celebrations, including material on the religious significance of Christmas.

According to press and social media, anti-Semitic rhetoric generally originated from self-proclaimed Islamists or opinion writers. There were reported cases of clerics and others making statements that perpetuated negative stereotypes of Jews. Columnists often conflated Israeli government actions or views with those of Jews more broadly.

Some Muslim clerics continued to express disapproval via social media of the celebration of non-Islamic holidays and called for more government action to restrict public expression of these holidays. In response to a Saudi television show, *Om Haroun*, which portrayed Gulf Jewish communities in the 1940s and 50s, former television host Hussain al-Abdullah called for the banning of programs that “indirectly praise Jews,” which he said would be an “honorable stance towards the Palestinian cause.”

In an Arab Youth Survey poll, conducted by a public research firm in Dubai of 18- to 24-year-old Arabs from 17 regional states, 23 percent of the country's youth listed religion as being important to their identities, among the lowest in the broader Middle East. A separate poll, reported in January by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, reported that 39 percent of the public agreed at least somewhat with the proposition: “We should listen to those among us who are trying to interpret Islam in a more moderate, tolerant, and modern direction” – a percentage among the highest in the six Arab countries polled. On another question, whether or not “we should show more respect to the world's Jews, and improve our relations with them,” only 2 percent of those surveyed said yes. A similar question about showing respect towards Christians showed that 49 percent

of those polled agreed. Attitudes towards both Jews and Christians were similar to the results from the five other countries included in the survey.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In June, the Ambassador hosted a virtual roundtable with representatives from minority faiths to discuss a broad range of religious freedom issues. The group discussed the status of religious freedom in the country, the effect of COVID-19 shutdowns on their communities, and the challenges the pandemic has presented for worship and fundraising.

During the year, embassy officials and religious leaders continued to discuss the various religious groups' needs, which continued to include more space for worship, more transparency in the registration process for new churches, and permission to obtain religious school accreditation. Senior embassy officials also continued to attend religious gatherings virtually throughout the year, including Ashura, Easter, Christmas, and Baha'i events. At these events, such as the Religious Freedom Virtual Roundtable held in June 2020, the Ambassador and other officials discussed issues related to religious tolerance and emphasized the U.S. government commitment to religious freedom.