

GREECE 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states freedom of religious conscience is inviolable and provides for freedom of worship with some restrictions. It recognizes Greek Orthodoxy as the “prevailing religion.” The law prohibits offenses violating “religious peace,” including blasphemy and “religious insult,” punishable by prison sentences of up to two years. Police arrested two Jehovah’s Witnesses for religious insult, releasing them the following day. At least 30 different religious communities are officially registered with the government. In August parliament passed legislation requiring all Greek Orthodox priests, imams in Thrace, and rabbis to register in the same electronic database used for other registered religious communities. The same law requires mandatory retirement for muftis at the same age as other judicial officials, authorizes the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs to fund the muftiates, and tasks the Ministry of Finance with their financial oversight. On March 20, the Council of State deemed changes introduced to religious instruction in primary and middle schools in 2016 were unconstitutional and contrary to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). In October parliament passed legislation requiring notarized consent from all parties wishing to adjudicate a family matter using sharia instead of the civil courts. A criminal trial continued for 69 members and supporters of the Golden Dawn (GD) political party accused of a string of violent attacks and arson, including on Muslim migrants. The government issued 11 new house of prayer permits: eight to Jehovah’s Witnesses, two to Muslim groups, and one to Pentecostals. The Greek Orthodox Church, Muslim minority of Thrace, Jewish communities, and Roman Catholic Church continued to receive some government benefits not available to other religious communities. Some members of the Muslim minority of Thrace continued to oppose the government’s appointment of muftis, advocating that the community elect them. The government continued to fund Holocaust education programs; on January 19, the parliamentary president announced the government would fund a museum inside the Auschwitz concentration camp commemorating Greek Jews who perished there.

Media reported continued incidents of anti-Semitic discrimination, hate speech, vandalism, and anti-Muslim assaults. Incidents of vandalism affecting religious properties, including Holocaust memorials and Greek Orthodox churches, continued. On March 6, a group of self-described anarchists placed an explosive device outside the Diocese of Neapoli and Stavroupolis, near Thessaloniki; the explosion damaged the building entrance. On December 27, a small explosive

device left by self-proclaimed anarchist group “Iconoclastic Sect” detonated outside Greek Orthodox Agios Dionysios Church in central Athens. A police officer and the churchwarden sustained minor injuries. On May 4, unidentified individuals destroyed nine marble stones in the Jewish section of a historic Athens cemetery. The president of the Athens Jewish Community said the destruction was “the most severe [anti-Semitic] incident in Athens in the past 15 years.” Secretary General for Religious Affairs George Kalantzis condemned the vandalism in a statement that said, in part, “What kind of people are those who hate the dead? . . . The vandalism of the Jewish cemetery should be for us a cause, a reason to intensify even more our efforts so as the poison of anti-Semitism stays away from our society.” The Mayor of Athens, George Kaminis immediately issued a statement condemning the attack, noting, “Such events have no place in Athens, in a city free and open that is not intimidated.” The secretary general for human rights said these types of incidents “attack human dignity and harm society as a whole.” On May 13, national government and municipal officials joined the Jewish community in a silent protest against violence, intolerance, and racism. Police investigated the case but made no arrests by year’s end.

The U.S. Ambassador, visiting U.S. government officials, and other embassy and consulate representatives met with officials and representatives from the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs, including the secretary general for religious affairs, and officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including Deputy Minister Markos Bolaris and Special Secretary for Religious and Cultural Diplomacy Efstathios Lianos Liantis. They discussed the ability of minority religious communities to establish houses of worship, government initiatives affecting both the Muslim minority in Thrace and immigrants, laws against undermining religious belief through coercion or fraud, and government initiatives promoting worldwide interfaith and interreligious dialogue. U.S. government officials expressed concern about anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim acts and rhetoric, and attacks on Orthodox churches. On December 28, the Charge d’Affaires sent a letter to Archbishop of Athens and All Greece Ieronymos condemning the December 27 attack on Agios Dionysios Orthodox Church. Embassy officials also engaged Archbishop of Athens and All Greece Ieronymos and metropolitans, as well as members of the Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, Baha’i, and Jehovah’s Witnesses communities, to promote religious tolerance and encourage interfaith dialogue. On November 29, a senior embassy official hosted representatives from a range of religious communities and government agencies to discuss legal protections related to religious freedom and challenges faced by various communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.8 million (July 2018 estimate), of whom approximately 81 to 90 percent is Greek Orthodox, 4 to 15 percent atheist, and 2 percent Muslim.

According to a Pew Research Center study released in November 2017, Muslims were approximately 5.7 percent of the population in 2016, including approximately 100,000 individuals in Thrace descending from the Muslim minority officially recognized in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. According to the same source, an additional 520,000 Muslims, mostly immigrants and asylum seekers from Southeastern Europe, South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, reside throughout the country, clustered together based on their countries of origin, or in reception facilities.

According to data provided by other religious communities, their members combined constitute 3-5 percent of the population. These include Old Calendarist Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, members of polytheistic Hellenic religions, Scientologists, Baha'is, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Sikhs, Seventh-day Adventists, Buddhists, and members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON).

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,” defined by law as “any direct or indirect attempt to intrude on the religious beliefs of a person of a different religious persuasion with the aim of undermining those beliefs through inducement, fraudulent means, or taking advantage of the other person’s inexperience, trust, need, low intellect, or naivete.” The constitution prohibits worship that “disturbs public order or offends moral principles.” It allows prosecutors to seize publications that “offend Christianity” or other “known religions.” The law prohibits offenses against “religious peace,” including “malicious blasphemy” and “religious insult,” both punishable by prison sentences of up to two years. Blasphemy cases may be brought before civil and criminal courts. The constitution enumerates the goals of public education, including “development of

religious conscience among citizens.” Greek Orthodox priests and government-appointed muftis and imams in Thrace receive their salaries from the government.

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

The Greek Orthodox Church, Jewish community, and Muslim minority of Thrace have long-held status as official religious legal entities. The Catholic Church, Anglican Church, two evangelical Christian groups, and Ethiopian, Coptic, Armenian Apostolic, and Assyrian Orthodox Churches automatically acquired the status of religious legal entities under a 2014 law. The same law also allows groups seeking recognition to become “religious legal entities” under civil law. The recognition process requires filing a request with 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 there is a leader who is legally in the country and is otherwise qualified, and showing 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.

A law passed on August 3 requires all religious officials of the Greek Orthodox Church, the muftiates of Thrace, and Jewish communities to register within a year in the electronic database maintained by the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs. Established in 2014, the registry includes clergy and other staff of known religions and religious legal entities, but there was previously no requirement for Greek Orthodox priests, imams in Thrace, and rabbis to register.

With legal status, a religious group may transfer property and administer houses of prayer and worship, private schools, charitable institutions, and other nonprofit entities. Some religious groups 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 in 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.

The law also provides a second method for groups to obtain government recognition; any 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. Local urban planning departments in charge of monitoring and enforcing public health and safety regulations certify that facilities designated to operate as places of worship fulfill the necessary standards. Once a house of worship receives planning approvals, a religious group must submit a description of its basic principles and rituals and a biography of the religious minister or leader to the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs for final approval. The application for a house of prayer permit requires at least five signatory members of the group. 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 accords the recognized Muslim minority of Thrace the right to maintain mosques and social and charitable organizations (*auqafs*). On October 11, parliament passed a law mandating that a local mufti request notarized consent from all parties if the parties wish for the mufti to adjudicate a family matter based on sharia. Absent this notarized consent from all parties in each dispute, family matters fall under the jurisdiction of civil courts. A law passed on August 1 requires muftis to retire at the same age – 67 – as other judicial authorities. This law also provides for the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs to assume all operating expenses for the muftiates under the supervision of the Ministry of Finance Directorate General for Fiscal Monitoring. On December 19, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruled Greece violated the ECHR by applying sharia to an inheritance case in 2014 in which a widow lost three-fourths of her inheritance after family members requested a sharia ruling on the matter without her consent. Under the updated law, the widow could request a review of this case by judicial authorities. A 1991 law authorizes the government, in consultation with a committee of Muslim leaders, to appoint three muftis in Thrace to 10-year terms of office, with the possibility of extension. The law also allows a regional official to appoint temporary acting muftis until this committee convenes. During the year, all three muftiates in Thrace had temporary, acting muftis appointed under the latter procedure.

On July 19, parliament passed legislation reiterating an individual's right to choose his or her burial and cremation location and mandating the creation of a new type of death certificate to detail this information. Disciplinary boards may fine employees of registries, medical doctors, forensic doctors, midwives, or employees in cremation facilities who do not comply with the law. 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 may designate the location and the method of funeral service under conditions that relate to public order, hygiene, or moral ethics, as well as to designate a person responsible for carrying out funeral preferences. Private citizens and municipal authorities may apply for permits to operate crematory facilities to benefit those whose religious beliefs do not permit burial. A presidential decree issued on June 29 standardizes permits for religious buildings, cemeteries, and crematory facilities.

The law allows halal and kosher slaughtering of animals in slaughterhouses but not in private residences or public areas.

All religious groups are subject to taxation on 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."

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. 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." Students may be exempted from religious instruction upon request if their parents state the students are not Greek Orthodox believers. 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, and it includes provisions to make it easier for schools to hire and retain these religious instructors. The law also allows Muslim students in primary and secondary schools throughout the country to be absent for two days each for Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.

According to the law, parents may send their children to private religious schools, and private Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish schools operate in the country. As per the Lausanne Treaty, the government operates 148 secular Greek-Turkish bilingual

schools and two Islamic religious schools in Thrace. Muslim students in Thrace wishing to study the Quran may 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 in Thrace to universities, technical institutes, and civil service positions. Similarly, 2 percent of students entering the national fire brigade school and academy are required to be 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 for men. Conscientious objectors must serve 15 months of alternative 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 based on 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 (\$5,700 to \$22,900). 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 responsible for preventing, combating, monitoring, and recording racism and intolerance and for protecting individuals and groups targeted on several grounds, including religion. The National Commission for Human Rights, which comprises governmental and nongovernmental organization (NGO) members, serves as an independent advisory body to the government on all human rights issues.

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 choose 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

Police in Agrinio, located in the central part of the country, reported the arrest and detention of two Jehovah's Witnesses after an Orthodox priest accused them of religious insult for distributing their materials in front of his church. Police released the accused individuals the following day without charge. On February 9, Metropolitan Seraphim of Kythira filed a lawsuit for malicious blasphemy and religious insult against a theater group performing *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Two lawyers and another Orthodox priest filed separate lawsuits against the same theater group on similar grounds. There were no reports of government action against the theater group. Unlike in the previous year, there were no reports of arrests for blasphemy.

The criminal trial of 69 GD party members and supporters, including 18 of its current and former members of parliament, continued through the end of the year. The charges related to a string of attacks, including against Muslim migrants and Greeks; they included murder, conspiracy, weapons possession, and membership in a criminal organization. As of the end of the year, media reported 253 trial sessions had taken place and nearly 250 prosecution witnesses had testified in court since the trial began in 2015. The examination of approximately 230 defense witnesses was still pending at year's end.

On March 8, police arrested 11 suspects during operations to dismantle the self-identified extreme-right militant group Combat 18. The prosecutor pressed for criminal and other charges for a series of offenses, including forming a criminal organization. Authorities ordered pretrial detention for four of the individuals. Combat 18 was accused of organizing 30 attacks, including arson and homemade bombs deployed in venues frequented by Muslim migrants and refugees.

No religious group applied to courts seeking recognition as a religious legal entity during the year.

Religious groups without religious entity status and no house of prayer permits, including Scientologists and ISKCON, continued 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 11 houses of prayer, including eight for Jehovah's Witnesses, one for Pentecostals, and two for Muslim groups. 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. On October 19, the Ministry for Education, Research, and Religious Affairs issued guidance allowing houses of prayer continually operating since before 1955 to obtain permits regardless of any failure to comply with modern town planning regulations.

Jehovah's Witnesses continued to report some doctors in public hospitals did not understand or respect their refusal to receive blood transfusions.

On March 20, the Council of State ruled changes introduced to religious instruction in primary and middle schools in 2016 were unconstitutional and contrary to the ECHR. On April 25, the Council of State issued a ruling that changes introduced in 2016 to religious instruction in high schools were also unconstitutional and contrary to the ECHR. The changes directed teachers to supplement religious textbook material, which primarily covers Greek Orthodox doctrine, with material introducing the basic tenets of other religions. The Council of State ruled the new curriculum violated Articles 13 and 16 of the constitution because the classes were mandatory only for Greek Orthodox students; students of other religions could apply for an exemption. The Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs issued revised guidelines in 2017 for religious instruction in public schools, including supplemental materials on the tenets of various religions and the importance of interfaith dialogue. Several complaints regarding the 2017 guidelines were still pending with the Council of State, including one that the course did not adequately cover the needs of Greek Orthodox students, another that the course did not include enough information on non-Orthodox religions, and a third from atheist parents requesting the abolition of the class entirely. The council issued no decisions on these appeals by year's end.

The government continued to provide direct support to the Greek Orthodox Church, including funding for religious leaders' salaries, religious and vocational training of clergy, and religious instruction in schools. Greek Orthodox officials stated the government provided this direct support in accordance with a series of legal agreements with past governments and in exchange for religious property previously expropriated by the state.

Some members of the Muslim minority in Thrace continued to object to the government's practice of appointing muftis, pressing for direct election of muftis by the Muslim minority. The government continued to state government appointment was appropriate because the muftis had judicial powers, albeit now only in cases where both parties proactively request the mufti's adjudication, and the constitution requires the government to appoint all judges. On August 16,

following passage of the law requiring muftis and acting muftis to retire at the same age as other judicial officials – 67 – the government announced the dismissal of the two official muftis in Xanthi and Rodopi regions – age 77 and 81 respectively. The government appointed two acting muftis to replace them. On September 12, the two former muftis issued a statement announcing they would file an appeal to the Council of State and to the European Commission, stating their dismissals violated the religious freedom of the Muslim minority in Thrace.

Some members of the Muslim minority in Thrace continued to criticize government appointment of members entrusted to oversee endowments, real estate, and charitable funds of the *auqafs*, stating the Muslim minority in Thrace should elect these members. Muslim leaders also continued to criticize the lack of Islamic cemeteries outside of Thrace, stating this obliged Muslims to transport their dead to Thrace for Islamic burials. They also continued to state municipal cemetery regulations requiring exhumation of bodies after three years because of shortage of space contravened Islamic religious law. At least three sites continued to be used unofficially for the burial of Muslim migrants and asylum seekers on Lesbos Island, in Schisto, and near the land border with Turkey in Evros.

Media reported delays in the construction of a government-funded mosque in Athens, originally slated for completion in 2017. On December 19, the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs posted a job vacancy for an imam to serve in this mosque. Applications were due by January 18, 2019. On August 24, the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport announced the obligation of 2.6 million euros (\$2.98 million) to complete exterior construction and landscaping around the mosque. On October 3, the government published the bylaws of the Athens mosque's managing committee, determining how to operate the mosque to share space among diverse Muslim communities in the wider region of Attica and how to resolve disagreements on these issues. On September 9, according to YouTube videos and media reports, approximately 200 GD supporters held a protest in front of the mosque objecting to its construction, shouting "whoever does not want Greece and [its] religion should ... go to Asia." In the absence of an official mosque in Athens, 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 26, 29 parliamentarians from ruling SYRIZA party requested the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs to stop listing students' religion on school transcripts, stating doing so violated freedom of conscience and data

protection laws because employers requested transcripts from job applicants. The ministry had not responded to this request by year's end.

NGO Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM) and the Humanist Union of Greece continued to state some judicial and other authorities did not comply with the country's legislation and ECtHR judgments on religious oaths by continuing to record witnesses' and defendants' religions and not offering a choice between a civil affirmation and a religious oath.

On September 20, the Union of Atheists requested the Council of State remove all icons and religious symbols from the courtroom while hearing its appeal related to religion classes in public schools. On September 21, the Council of State denied the request by a 30-6 majority.

The government continued to fund Catholic religious training and teachers' salaries in state schools on the islands of Syros and Tinos, trips for non-Jewish students to Holocaust remembrance events and Auschwitz, and Holocaust education training for teachers. The government organized Holocaust-themed contests for high school students. It also supported and organized initiatives promoting religious tolerance, including a one-day seminar on Islam for prison staff guarding Muslim inmates in detention facilities in the northern part of the country. On August 9, the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs issued a decree officially incorporating Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina into the program of students attending Islamic religious schools in Thrace. The students paid for the trip expenses, while the ministry set guidelines on field trip safety and organization. On January 18, Parliament Speaker Nikos Voutsis announced parliament would fund the creation of a museum space inside the Auschwitz concentration camp commemorating Greek Jews who perished there. Government officials also continued to participate in Holocaust remembrance events around the country.

Some religious groups and human rights organizations continued to state the discrepancy between the length of mandatory alternative service for conscientious objectors (15 months) and for those serving in the military (nine months) was discriminatory. On May 14, the Council of State issued a decision in favor of an unbaptized Jehovah's Witness seeking such alternative service, finding he had supplied sufficient evidence to prove he was a Jehovah's Witness even though he was not baptized.

On June 8, the head of the main opposition New Democracy Party expelled the Mayor of Argos-Mycenae, Dimitris Kamposos, over a comment targeting the Mayor of Thessaloniki, Yannis Boutaris. Criticizing Boutaris over his stance on national and LGBT-related issues, Kamposos stated in a television interview, “He gets away with it because he is liked by the Jews,” adding, “We, on the other hand, cannot say what we want because we have never worn the kippah.”

On several occasions, government officials publicly denounced acts of vandalism of Holocaust memorials and Jewish sites around the country.

On December 19, the General Secretariat for Human Rights at the Ministry of Justice hosted in Athens the first bilateral dialogue with Israel on fighting anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and racism. According to a statement from the Israeli embassy in Athens, participants discussed ways to tackle hate speech on social media, methods for conducting criminal investigations, opportunities for training prosecutors and judges, and best practices for government responses.

On February 14, Metropolitan Anthimos of Alexandroupolis and the local municipal board announced they would erect a monument on the grounds of a local church in honor of 150 local Jewish residents whom Nazis arrested in March 1943 and transported to concentration camps.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On December 19, the General Secretariat for Religious Affairs released a report showing a 159 percent increase in attacks on religious sites in 2017, compared with the previous year. In 2017 there were 556 reported cases of violence or vandalism against religious sites; 535 of the sites were Orthodox Christian, 11 Jewish, eight Muslim, and two Catholic. Statistics by the Racist Violence Recording Network (RVRN) for 2017, the most recent year available, showed 34 cases in which immigrants or refugees were targeted for their religion, among other grounds, compared with 31 cases the previous year. The RVRN also recorded two separate incidents in which a citizen was targeted because of his or her religious beliefs. During the same period, police received 28 reports of racist violence based on religion, compared with 24 reports the previous year.

Incidents of vandalism and desecration targeting Holocaust monuments and memorials continued throughout the year. On May 4, unidentified individuals destroyed nine marble stones in the Jewish section of a historic Athens cemetery. President of the Athens Jewish Community Minos Moissis called the destruction

“the most severe [anti-Semitic] incident in Athens in the past 15 years.” The secretaries general for religious affairs and for human rights and transparency, the Mayor of Athens, and other elected officials condemned the vandalism and participated in a ceremony of solidarity with the Jewish community in the cemetery. According to Moissis, police responded immediately to gather evidence and file charges, but by year’s end, no arrests were made.

On July 11, unknown individuals threw blue paint on a monument marking the site of the former Jewish cemetery at the Aristotle University campus in Thessaloniki. University and government officials, including opposition party members, denounced the act. On June 27, unidentified individuals threw red paint on the Holocaust memorial in Thessaloniki, and on June 29, a public prosecutor ordered a preliminary investigation of the case to determine offenses under the anti-racist law. Individuals spray-painted “Golden Dawn” on the same monument in January during a protest rally, and on December 15, unknown individuals drew a swastika on it with black paint. On January 5, unidentified individuals threw red paint on a Holocaust memorial in Komotini, Thrace. On January 23, the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece (KIS) reported unknown perpetrators vandalized the outside wall of the synagogue in Volos, in the central part of the country, with graffiti. KIS urged authorities to arrest the perpetrators and prevent acts of vandalism. On October 12, unidentified individuals destroyed eight tombstones in the Trikala Jewish cemetery in the northern part of the country. On December 26, unknown individuals vandalized the Holocaust memorial in the city of Kastoria. No arrests in any of the cases were reported by year’s end.

Throughout the year, media and police recorded incidents of vandalism targeting Greek Orthodox premises and chapels. On March 6, a group of self-defined anarchists placed an explosive device outside the headquarters of the Diocese of Neapoli and Stavroupolis, near Thessaloniki. The explosion damaged the building entrance. On December 27, the self-identified anarchist group Iconoclastic Sect placed an explosive device outside Agios Dionysios Church in central Athens. The churchwarden and a police officer sustained minor injuries. Government and religious leaders, including the minister for education and the secretary general for religious affairs, the ecumenical patriarch, and KIS, denounced the act, some calling it “an attack against religious freedom.” On February 26, media reported unknown individuals had vandalized a small church on the island of Paros. On January 22, media reported anarchists had painted slogans on the outside of a church in Patras. The slogans criticized priests for participating in rallies against the Prespes Agreement, an agreement between Greece and North Macedonia

resolving a long-standing dispute over the latter's name. No arrests were reported for any of these incidents.

On January 19, unidentified individuals toppled a bronze statue in the municipality of Palaio Faliro, Athens. The statue's name was "Phylax" and depicted a bright-red fallen angel. According to the Mayor of Palaio Faliro, Dionysis Hatzidakis, since its erection in December 2017, the statue had caused controversy among local residents, some of whom called it "satanic."

The direct and indirect linking of Jews with conspiracy theories targeting the country's sovereignty continued; individuals mostly expressed these views on social media. On January 21, the Mayor of Thessaloniki, Boutaris did not participate in a large rally protesting the country's negotiations with Macedonia regarding the latter's official name. After the rally, posters appeared around the city claiming Boutaris was "a closet Jew" for supporting the negotiations.

On April 27, a Thessaloniki misdemeanor court in Xanthi sentenced Mufti Ahmet Mete, an unofficial mufti not recognized by the government, and not one of the three official muftis, to eight months in prison – payable as a fine instead of jail time – for making anti-Semitic comments in 2014 and stating, "Hitler was right to turn the Jews into soap." On May 6, according to a statement released by KIS, Mete gave a speech at the Kentavros Mosque in Komotini, stating, "I accused the Jews of being murderers of infants because they slaughtered infants.... Religion upholds that, as a Muslim, if someone among you sees an evil action, let him change it with his hand; if he cannot, then with his tongue; and if he cannot, then hate him with his heart."

KIS continued to express concerns about anti-Semitic comments and cartoons in mainstream media mocking 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 4, KIS denounced cartoonist Michalis Kountouris for his April 10-11 and May 5 cartoons in the *Newspaper of the Editors* for equating Nazi practices with Israeli policy. The first sketch showed an inmate at a concentration camp wearing a symbol representing the Gaza Strip reminiscent of the yellow stars Jews were forced to wear during the Holocaust. The second showed an Israeli soldier leaving the prints of his bloodied hands on the Western Wall, next to many other bloody handprints of other individuals who had prayed before him. The third cartoon depicted an Israeli soldier with a gun giving a Nazi-style salute. On July 4, another cartoonist in the same newspaper doctored a picture of the gate at Auschwitz with

the words “12 hours of work is liberating,” comparing contemporary employment conditions in Europe to the Holocaust. KIS issued a statement criticizing the cartoonist of Holocaust trivialization.

On January 22, GHM filed a judicial complaint against local governments, Orthodox priests, and some media for propagating the custom of the “burning of Judas” during Orthodox Easter celebrations. GHM listed 69 different cities, parishes, and media outlets that organized and advertised this custom, which KIS continued to criticize and the Greek Orthodox Church officially denounced. There was no public decision regarding this case by year’s end.

On March 4, media reported Greek Orthodox priests in Athens led 2,000 individuals in a march, protesting the release of new textbooks for religious studies. Some protesters carried banners stating “No to ecumenical religion” and denouncing the book authors as traitors. Protesters delivered their petition to parliament before peacefully disbanding.

According to a Pew Research study conducted from 2015 to 2017 and published in October, 76 percent of respondents agreed that to be “truly Greek” one must be Christian. Approximately 37 percent of respondents in a study published by a local think tank, Dianeosis, said the word “Jewish” meant something negative to them and approximately 45 percent of respondents stated they would be “bothered” by the construction of mosques in the country.

On October 8, media reported unidentified individuals produced flyers criticizing a municipal official who supported the construction of a crematory facility in the city and encouraging citizens to spit on and denounce the official at her home.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador, visiting officials, embassy, and consulate representatives discussed religious freedom with officials and representatives from the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs, including the secretary general for religious affairs, and officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, such as Deputy Minister Bolaris and Special Secretary for Religious and Cultural Diplomacy Lianos Liantis. They discussed the ability of minority religious communities to establish houses of worship, government initiatives affecting both the Muslim minority in Thrace and immigrants, laws against undermining religious belief through coercion or fraud, and government initiatives promoting worldwide interfaith and interreligious dialogue. U.S. officials expressed concerns about anti-

Semitic and anti-Muslim acts and rhetoric throughout the year. On December 28, the Charge d’Affaires sent a letter to Archbishop of Athens and All Greece Ieronymos condemning the attack on Agios Dionysios Orthodox Church for threatening individuals’ ability to worship in peace and safety. The Ambassador also worked with the minister of defense to facilitate Ministry of Defense contributions to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum archives.

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, Baha’i, and Jehovah’s Witnesses communities, to promote interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance, and diversity, and to express concern about anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim acts and rhetoric. On November 29, a senior embassy official hosted representatives from a range of religious communities and government agencies to discuss legal protections on religious freedom and challenges faced by various communities. Through these meetings, the embassy monitored the ability of minority religious groups to practice freely their religion and the extent of societal discrimination against both indigenous religious minorities and newly arrived migrants from religious minorities.

On April 16-17, the Ambassador visited the monastic peninsula of Mount Athos and met with the governor of the peninsula, representatives of the governing Holy Community, an abbot and monks from two of the monasteries, and the visiting Bishop of Nafpaktos. Among other topics, the Ambassador discussed U.S. government support for freedom of religion worldwide. The Ambassador met with representatives from the Eastern Orthodox Church, including Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Archbishop of Athens and All Greece Ieronymos, and Metropolitan Anthimos of Alexandroupolis. The Ambassador discussed with Greek Orthodox leaders the importance of religious tolerance and dialogue.

The Ambassador 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 the country, combating anti-Semitism, along with other concerns of the community. The Ambassador gave opening remarks at a training seminar for teachers organized by the Olga Lengyl Institute for Holocaust Studies and Human Rights, in which he highlighted the importance of teaching the history of the Holocaust to create “a culture of religious tolerance to combat hate.”

The Consul General in Thessaloniki met with Metropolitan Anthimos of Thessaloniki, Metropolitan Pavlos of Kozani, Mufti Hamza Osman of

Didimoticho, and David Saltiel, president of the Jewish community in the country, as well as academics and theologians, to discuss the status of religious freedom in the northern part of the country and concerns of religious communities.