

# **BULGARIA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and conscience. The law requires religious groups to register to be eligible for certain benefits, including the right to receive state funding, operate schools and hospitals, and receive property tax exemptions. The constitution recognizes Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the country's "traditional" religion, and the law exempts the Bulgarian Orthodox Church from the registration requirement. In September the National Assembly passed a law restricting the wearing of face-covering garments in public places. In July the Supreme Cassation Court vacated the guilty verdict of one Muslim leader charged with spreading Salafi Islam and hatred of other religious groups. In February the Pazardjik District Court started a trial against 14 Roma Muslims for propagating antidemocratic ideology and incitement to war and aiding foreign fighters. Minority religious groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Muslims reported incidents of harassment and hostile rhetoric by members of some political parties and said the government failed to prosecute religiously motivated attacks against their members. Schools banned the wearing of religious symbols, including the hijab and cross, and some local governments continued to deny requests to construct new mosques or repair old ones. The Supreme Cassation Court suspended the Muslim community's restitution claims, pending review of whether it was the rightful successor to confiscated properties. Minority groups reported discrimination and prejudice from local authorities in certain municipalities.

Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses reported physical assaults and harassment against members of their communities. Jewish organizations expressed concern over hate speech and commemoration of World War II figures associated with Nazism. Muslims, Jews, and Jehovah's Witnesses reported incidents of vandalism against their places of worship.

The U.S. embassy regularly discussed discrimination cases and the construction of new places of worship with government officials and infringements of religious freedom with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs and the Ambassador discussed religious affairs with Foreign Minister Daniel Mitov. The Ambassador met with Sofia Mayor Yordanka Fandakova twice to discuss religious tolerance issues, including to protest a march to commemorate a pro-Nazi, World War II-era politician. The

embassy also issued a statement urging people to speak out against intolerance following the march. The Ambassador wrote to a newspaper expressing disappointment in its publication of Jewish caricatures, after which the editor issued an apology. The Ambassador and Charge d'Affaires advocated for tolerance in meetings with religious groups and leaders. Embassy officials discussed religious freedom concerns with minority religious groups, especially the Jewish, Muslim, Mormon, and Jehovah's Witnesses communities.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 7.1 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 76 percent of the population identifies as Eastern Orthodox Christian, mostly affiliated with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. The census reports Muslims, the second-largest religious group, are approximately 10 percent of the population, followed by Protestants at 1.1 percent and Roman Catholics at 0.8 percent. Orthodox Christians from the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church (AAOC), Jews, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishnas, and others together make up 0.2 percent of the population, while 4.8 percent of respondents said they had no religion, and 7.1 percent did not indicate a religion, according to the census.

Some religious minorities are concentrated geographically. Many Muslims, including ethnic Turks, Roma, and Pomaks (descendants of Slavic Bulgarians who converted to Islam under Ottoman rule) live in the Rhodope Mountains along the southern border with Greece and Turkey. Ethnic Turkish and Roma Muslims also live in large numbers in the northeast and along the Black Sea coast. Some recent Roma converts to Islam live in towns in the central part of the country, such as Plovdiv and Pazardjik. According to the census, nearly 40 percent of Catholics live in and around Plovdiv. The majority of the small Jewish community lives in Sofia, Plovdiv, and along the Black Sea coast. Protestants are widely dispersed, but many Roma are Protestant, and Protestants are more numerous in areas with large Roma populations. Approximately 80 percent of the urban population and 62 percent of the rural population identify as Orthodox Christian. Approximately 25 percent of the rural population identifies as Muslim, compared with 4 percent of the urban population.

### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states freedom of conscience and choice of religion or no religion are inviolable, prohibits religious discrimination, and stipulates the state shall assist in maintaining tolerance and respect among believers of different denominations as well as between believers and nonbelievers. It states the practice of any religion shall be unrestricted and religious beliefs, institutions, and communities shall not be used for political ends. It restricts freedom of religion to the extent that its practice would be detrimental to national security, public order, health, and morals, or the rights and freedoms of others. It states no one shall be exempt from obligations established by the constitution or the law on grounds of religious or other convictions. The constitution also stipulates the separation of religious institutions from the state and prohibits the formation of political parties along religious lines, as well as organizations that incite religious animosity. The law does not allow any privilege based on religious identity.

The constitution names Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the country's traditional religion. The law establishes the Bulgarian Orthodox Church as a legal entity, exempting it from the court registration that is mandatory for all other religious groups wishing to acquire national legal recognition.

The penal code prescribes up to three years' imprisonment for participants in attacks on individuals or groups based on their religious affiliation. Instigators and leaders of an attack may receive prison sentences of up to six years. Those who obstruct the ability of individuals to profess their faith or carry out their rituals and services or for compelling another to participate in religious rituals and services may be sentenced to up to one year in prison. Violating a person's or group's freedom of acquiring or practicing a religious belief is subject to a fine of between 100 and 300 leva (\$54 to \$162). If the infraction is committed by any legal entity, the fine can range from 500 to 5,000 leva (\$269 to \$2,694).

To receive national legal recognition, the law requires groups other than the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to register with the Sofia City Court. Applications must include: the group's name and official address; a description of the group's religious beliefs and service practices, organizational structure and bodies, management procedures, bodies, and mandates; a list of official representatives and the processes for their election; procedures for convening meetings and making decisions; and information on finances and property and processes for termination and liquidation. The Directorate for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers provides expert opinions on registration matters upon request of the court. Applicants have the right to appeal negative registration decisions to the Sofia Appellate Court. The law does not require the formal registration of local

branches of registered groups, only that the branches notify local authorities of the national registration of their group. There are 156 registered religious groups in addition to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

The law requires the government to provide funding for all registered religious groups, though there is no legal requirement on how to allocate the budgetary funds among each group. Registered groups have the right to perform religious services, own assets such as houses of worship and cemeteries, provide medical, social, and educational services, receive property tax exemptions, and participate in commercial ventures. Unregistered religious groups may practice their religion freely but lack privileges granted to registered groups, such as access to government funding and the right to own property, establish financial accounts in their name, operate schools and hospitals, receive property tax exemptions, or sell religious merchandise.

In September the National Assembly passed a law restricting the wearing of face-covering garments in public places. The law, widely known as the “burqa ban,” imposes a fine of 200 levs (\$108) for a first offense and 1,500 levs (\$808) for repeat offenders. In April and May the municipal councils in Pazardjik, Stara Zagora, Sliven, and Burgas had passed local regulations imposing similar restrictions, which were superseded by the national law passed in September.

The law allows registered, but not unregistered, groups to publish, import, and distribute religious media. The law does not restrict proselytizing by registered or unregistered groups. Some municipal ordinances, however, require local permits for distribution of religious literature in public places, and some municipalities have adopted local regulations that restrict proselytizing.

By law public schools at all levels are allowed, but not required, to teach the historical, philosophical, and cultural aspects of religion and introduce students to the moral values of different religious groups as part of the core curriculum. A school may teach any registered religion in a special course as part of the elective curriculum upon request of at least 13 students, subject to the availability of books and teachers. The Ministry of Education and Science approves and provides books for these special religion courses. If a public school is unable to pay for a religion teacher, it may accept financial sponsorship from a private donor or a teacher from a registered denomination. The law also allows registered religious groups to open schools and universities. Education in schools operated by religious groups must meet government standards for secular education.

The Commission for Protection against Discrimination is an independent government body charged with preventing and protecting against discrimination, including religious discrimination, and ensuring equal opportunity. It functions as a civil litigation court adjudicating discrimination complaints. If the commission decides to accept a case, it assigns it to a panel and then reviews it in open session. If it makes a finding of discrimination, the commission may impose a fine of 250-2,000 levs (\$135-\$1,078). The commission may double fines for repeat violations. Regional courts may also try civil cases involving religious discrimination.

The law establishes an independent ombudsman to serve as an advocate for citizens who believe that public or municipal administrations or public service providers have violated their rights and freedoms, through their actions or inaction. The ombudsman may request information from authorities, act as an intermediary in resolving disputes, make proposals for terminating existing practices, refer information to the prosecution service, and request the Constitutional Court to abolish legal provisions as unconstitutional.

The penal code provides up to three years' imprisonment for forming "a political organization on religious grounds" or using a church or religion to spread propaganda against the authority of the state or its activities; and up to three years in prison and a fine of 5,000 levs (\$2,694) for using a religious organization to spread "fascist or another antidemocratic ideology" or to advocate replacing public and governmental order by force. It provides for up to four years' imprisonment and a fine of 5,000 to 10,000 levs (\$2,694 to \$5,388) for propagating hatred on religious grounds by means of mass and electronic information systems, and up to three years' imprisonment and a fine of 3,000 to 10,000 levs (\$1,616 to \$5,388) for religious desecration, including the destruction or damage of religious buildings, places of prayer, symbols, or gravestones.

In April the National Assembly passed amendments to the law that specifically identified foreign members of religious denominations as a category of persons eligible to obtain long-term residence, making it easier for foreign religious workers to serve in the country.

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

### **Government Practices**

The Supreme Cassation Court revoked the guilty verdict and ordered a retrial of one Muslim leader and rescinded the administrative punishments of 12 other

Muslims charged with spreading Salafi Islam and hatred of other religious groups. The Pazardjik District Court started a trial against 14 Roma Muslims on charges of propagating antidemocratic ideology and incitement to war and aiding ISIS. Jehovah's Witnesses and other minority religious groups continued to state that local authorities in certain municipalities discriminated against them, despite their national registration status. Schools banned the wearing of religious symbols, including the hijab and cross, and local governments continued to deny requests to construct new mosques or other religious buildings or repair existing ones. The Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria (Shalom) expressed concern over hate speech and what they said was government passivity in addressing it. The National Assembly passed on first reading amendments that would criminalize "radical Islam," but by year's end the amendments had not become law. The assembly was also considering five amendments affecting the practices of religious groups, which generated significant controversy. In September the city of Sofia cosponsored the Festival of Religions to promote religious tolerance.

In July the Supreme Cassation Court vacated the guilty verdict against Ahmed Mussa for preaching Salafi Islam, which a lower court had determined was an "antidemocratic ideology." The court also rescinded the guilty verdict and administrative punishment against 12 other Muslims on the same charges. In its decision, the Supreme Court stated that the lower court had failed to identify what traits of Salafism determined its antidemocratic nature and had instead focused on its differences in ritual from the "traditional" Islam in the country. The Supreme Cassation Court ordered the Plovdiv Appellate Court to retry Mussa and the 12 other defendants. At year's end, the cases were ongoing.

In February the Pazardjik District Court began hearing the case against 14 Roma Muslims, including Ahmed Mussa, who were standing trial for supporting ISIS, assisting foreign fighters, and propagating antidemocratic ideology and incitement to war. As of the end of the year, the trial was ongoing and Mussa remained in custody, 12 others were under house arrest, and the 14th defendant was released on his own recognizance.

On June 23, a National Assembly committee took the first step towards enacting amendments to the penal code that would criminalize "radical Islam." According to the draft amendments, preaching of radical Islam would be understood as calling for establishing a caliphate, enforcing the rule of sharia, or forcing religious principles and norms on others. Conviction would carry up to three years' imprisonment or a maximum fine of 5,000 leva (\$2,694). Theologians and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) argued that proving "radical Islam" was a

crime would be practically impossible and the punishments would effectively restrict religious freedom. The Office of the Grand Mufti made efforts to highlight the distinction between Islam and religious extremists, particularly ISIS. At year's end, the assembly had not enacted the amendments into law.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that two nationalist political parties, the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB) and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO), which together comprised the Patriotic Front political alliance in the National Assembly, continued a campaign against them. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, in March approximately 10 IMRO supporters intruded on a Witnesses meeting in Petrich, repeatedly interrupted the service, harassed the attendees, and refused to leave. Witnesses reported they were the targets of harassment, insults, and death threats for days after local media publicized the incident.

During the year, in separate cases, local authorities in Pazardjik fined a total of 11 Roma women 300 leva (\$162) each for wearing *niqabs* in violation of regulations banning face veils passed by the municipal council in May. By year's end, the police had not issued any fines under the national law enacted in September.

The High Muslim Council called the law banning face-covering garments in public places an act of "Islamophobia" which "offends Muslims' religious rights and feelings" and incriminated an established Islamic tradition. The country's Helsinki Committee, an NGO, said the law violated the constitution and encouraged the national ombudsman to petition the Constitutional Court and request its abolition. The ombudsman had not reacted to the law by year's end.

The government permitted religious headdresses in official photos for national identity documents as long as both ears and 1 centimeter (2/5 of an inch) of hair were visible. The Commission for Protection from Discrimination and most schools interpreted the law denying privileges based on religious identity as banning the display of all "religious symbols," such as hijabs and crosses, in public schools.

Five amendments to the law that would prohibit noncitizens from participating in the leadership and day-to-day running of religious organizations, as well as from preaching and proselytizing and would place other restrictions on religious groups' activities were pending in the National Assembly at year's end. An independent member of parliament, the Socialist Party, and the nationalist Ataka (Attack) Party each submitted one amendment and the Patriotic Front the other two. The

amendments would stipulate the obligatory use of the Bulgarian language for religious purposes, allowing simultaneous use of a foreign language in “certain rituals.” They would also restrict the religious activities of persons who did not obtain their theological education in the country and require religious denominations to report their financing and donors. The National Council of Religious Communities, an NGO promoting religious tolerance, protested, stating the amendments would infringe on religious freedom and attempt to put religious denominations under government control. The Patriotic Front stated the intent was to remove the possibility that foreign individuals would abuse faith for political purposes, and that the amendments would protect national security by preventing attempts by Turkey to interfere in the internal religious affairs of the country. Georgi Kadiev of the Normal State Party said the aim of the amendments was to introduce accountability for registered religious groups, so that authorities could ensure national security and prevent Islamic or other religious radicalism. The Muslim community, Shalom, and many NGOs stated that, while their professed purpose was to protect national security, the draft amendments would violate basic human rights and religious freedom and affect nearly every religious denomination in the country.

Minority religious groups continued to report discrimination and prejudice from local authorities in certain municipalities. At least 27 municipalities, including regional cities such as Burgas, Kyustendil, Stara Zagora, Silistra, Vratsa, Shumen, Razgrad, Haskovo, Pleven, and Varna, had ordinances, cited on their websites, prohibiting door-to-door proselytizing and the distribution of religious literature.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses said many municipalities had ordinances restricting their religious activities, including ones preventing them from expressing their religious convictions in public, carrying out “religious agitation on city streets” by distributing free printed materials, and prohibiting “religious propaganda” in the homes of citizens. They cited multiple instances in which police fined, threatened, warned, or issued citations to Witnesses for violating these ordinances. For example, on May 19, two police officers approached two Jehovah’s Witnesses in Burgas and told them that offering and distributing religious literature was against the law. The police officers seized their books and issued a fine. In some cases, the Witnesses appealed the fines. Jehovah’s Witnesses accused the VMRO and NFSB political parties of seeking to ban them, using the media to libel them, and encouraging enactment of ordinances to prohibit Witnesses from proselytizing.

Despite letters of protest by the Directorate for Religious Affairs and the ombudsman against the municipal restrictions on religious activities, only the



regional governor of Silistra appealed to the Administrative Court of Silistra to revoke the ordinance. Eight municipalities applied the ordinances and imposed fines. Jehovah's Witnesses challenged the ordinances in administrative courts in Kyustendil and Burgas. The courts ruled the ordinances violated the country's constitution, declaring them null and void. By year's end, both municipalities had appealed the decisions to the Supreme Administrative Court.

In January the Supreme Cassation Court ruled that the Muslim denomination that had filed for a determination that it was the rightful successor to the properties of pre-1940s Muslim religious communities seized by the communist government had done so under the wrong procedure. The case was returned for review to the Sofia City Court. Pending resolution of the issue, all restitution claims by the Office of the Grand Mufti remained suspended.

Muslims complained of a lack of cooperation from the authorities on the restoration and maintenance of historic mosques, such as Makbul Ibrahim Pasa in Razgrad, which were declared national cultural monuments and managed by the Ministry of Culture. The municipality of Gotse Delchev continued to withhold issuance of a construction permit to build a mosque, arguing that the plot's zoning designation was for a shopping center. The Sofia municipal government continued to withhold permission to build a second mosque in Sofia on the grounds that the application for a building permit was not complete. By year's end, the Muslim community had yet to take further action in either case.

Jehovah's Witnesses stated local authorities refused to issue building permits or deliberately altered zoning regulations to prevent them from erecting buildings for religious purposes. By year's end, the local administration of Kyustendil continued to ignore a ruling by the Kyustendil Administrative Court directing the municipality to overcome the obstacles to issuing a building permit for a Jehovah's Witness prayer house. In November 2015, the Shumen Administrative Court ruled in favor of the Jehovah's Witnesses' appeal of the Shumen mayor's refusal of a construction permit and the religious group was in the process, at year's end, of building a prayer house there.

Some registered minority religious groups, including Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, reported the government continued to fail to prosecute past cases of assault and harassment against their members. According to the groups, some of these attacks were carried out by members of nationalist political parties, particularly NFSB and IMRO.

On April 25, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses, IMRO Party member and Vratsa Municipal Councilor Marin Tsvetkov approached two Jehovah's Witnesses on the street and threatened to "destroy their sect so that there will be no more such people in Vratsa." The police issued a warning to the councilor. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, a few days later Tsvetkov wrote a highly critical newspaper article about the group.

In May Member of Parliament Atanas Stoyanov called the Jehovah's Witnesses a "dangerous sect," stating the group was banned in numerous European Union countries.

The Jewish service organization B'nai B'rith expressed concern over what it stated was pressure at a high political level to revise Holocaust history, deny that the country was involved in the deportation of Jews from Macedonia and Northern Greece to death camps, and to identify "saviors" who "included persons of questionable reputation who had been on the side of the persecutors."

In June President Rosen Plevneliev hosted his third annual iftar, inviting leaders of the six religious communities comprising the National Council of Religious Communities: Bulgarian Orthodox Church members, Muslims, evangelical Protestants, Catholics, AAOC members, and Jews. The council is a government-supported nonprofit group with the goal of promoting religious tolerance. At the iftar, Plevneliev said a nation should build its unity on all communities and their joint cause for peace and prosperity.

In September the Sofia municipality, in partnership with the National Council of Religious Communities, organized the third annual Festival of Religions, a day of arts and music performances, open houses, and sharing of information about each religious group. Titled "Together for a Better World," the event included written remarks by Sofia Mayor Fandakova, who said the city continued to be an example of tolerance and that the presence of houses of worship of five different denominations within a few blocks of each other was proof that peaceful coexistence of different religions was possible.

The government continued to recognize Orthodox Christianity, Hanafi Sunni Islam, Judaism, and Roman Catholicism as holding a historic place in the country's culture, expressed a willingness to work more closely with these groups, and provided specific funding for them in the national budget.

The budget allocated 5 million leva (\$2.7 million) for construction and maintenance of religious facilities. The government allocated 3.76 million leva (\$2.0 million) for the Bulgarian Orthodox Church; 360,000 leva (\$194,000) for the Muslim community; and 50,000 leva (\$26,900) each for the Roman Catholic Church, AAOC, and the Jewish community. It distributed 80,000 leva (\$43,100) among nine other registered denominations, which applied for funds to the Directorate for Religious Affairs. The directorate stated its goal was to make sure denominations that had not received funds previously received funding if they applied. The government also allocated 450,000 leva (\$242,000) for maintenance of religious facilities of national importance, 50,000 leva (\$26,900) for publication of religious books and research, and 15,000 leva (\$8,080) to the National Council of Religious Communities, while maintaining another 135,000 leva (\$72,700) in reserve, including 15,000 leva (\$8,080) for updating the electronic register and digital database of religious facilities in the country.

The country is an observer at the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons reported physical assaults, harassment, and threats. Social network and online media users posted anti-Semitic statements. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, the media published libelous information about them. Vandals desecrated religious buildings and painted offensive graffiti.

As of November, Mormons reported 31 instances of physical assault and harassment of missionaries in Blagoevgrad, Burgas, Plevna, Sliven, Ruse, Veliko Turnovo, Haskovo, Plovdiv, and Sofia. They said police did not identify the attackers in any of these incidents and speculated that in some cases the police may have decided the incidents were not worth pursuing.

On September 18, in Veliko Turnovo, a young man attacked two Mormon missionaries on the street. The man punched one of the missionaries in the face as they were passing by, knocking him down. The victim required surgery. At year's end, the police had not identified the perpetrator.

On May 13, a man approached two Mormon missionaries in one of the public parks in central Sofia and insulted them. When they started to move away, he chased them and attempted to attack one of them with a knife. The missionaries escaped unharmed. When the missionaries tried to file a report of the incident, police told them a written report was unnecessary because no one was hurt.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported six cases of physical assault and threats in Petrich, Vratsa, Shumen, Elhovo, Mezdra, and Sofia. They stated that, while the police usually noted their complaints, prosecutors later closed the cases due to lack of evidence.

On July 30, after a Jehovah's Witness invited a man in Shumen ~~city park~~City Park to a convention, the man attacked him, causing multiple bruises and a concussion. The court initially placed the alleged perpetrator under house arrest, but released him in December. At year's end, authorities were reportedly still investigating the incident and had not charged the man. The newspaper *Vseki Den* wrote an article about the attack, which, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses, contained several false and derogatory statements, including a statement that the Witness was beaten because he was "agitating" people.

On October 1, a man chased two Jehovah's Witnesses who were proselytizing door-to-door in a residential building. The man yelled at them, pushed them down the stairs, spat at them, and hit them. He then followed them onto the street and emptied a bottle of water over them, threatening to break their teeth if they ever returned. Police had not made an arrest by year's end.

On October 21, approximately 30 persons participated in a protest organized by nationalist political parties IMRO, NFSB, and Ataka in front of the court in Pazardjik prior to the hearing of the case against 14 Roma Muslims accused of supporting ISIS. The participants stated their protest was against the spread of radical Islam and in defense of constitutional order.

In February Shalom and B'nai B'rith, with the support of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms Party and the Bulgarian Socialist Party, protested and called for a ban of the annual march on February 13 honoring Hristo Lukov. Lukov headed the pro-Nazi Union of Bulgarian National Legions prior to and during World War II. Sofia municipality officials again withheld permission for the march on grounds it would pose a risk to public order and only allowed supporters to lay flowers at Lukov's memorial plaque. Despite the prohibition, the nationalist Bulgarian National Union Party organized a march of several hundred people in downtown Sofia under tight police security. Prior to the march, police detained three participants for wearing masks and carrying batons and later released them without pressing charges.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, the media continued to misrepresent their activities and beliefs on a regular basis. They said reporters from the SKAT TV cable television company harassed them, accused them of criminal acts, and encouraged their audience to report the Jehovah's Witnesses to the police each time they came across any. On October 31, the Burgas Administrative Court rejected SKAT TV's appeal against a decision of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination levying a 2,000 lev (\$1,077) fine on SKAT and a 1,200 lev (\$647) fine on two of its journalists for spreading false information and making comments constituting discrimination against the Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's Witnesses stated national dailies *Trud* and *24 Chasa*, as well as the regional daily *Konkurent*, regularly published libelous statements about them as part of an ongoing campaign to discredit them as a "dangerous sect."

Jewish community leaders continued to express concern over increasing incidents of anti-Semitism on social media and online forums. They said examples included accusations that Jews hated all other people and were enemies of the state, that Jews caused the crises in the Middle East with the intent to cause a refugee wave that would destroy Europe, and statements such as "Crush the dastardly Jewish scum! Khazar plague!" In some cases, the same statements were reposted or shared on mainstream media websites.

Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, and the Office of the Grand Mufti continued to report incidents of desecration such as painted swastikas, offensive graffiti, and broken windows in their places of worship. On several occasions, vandals painted graffiti on the mosques in Karlovo, Pleven, and Medovets. In September vandals spray-painted nationalist symbols on the front of the Office of the Grand Mufti. Jehovah's Witnesses reported vandalism involving the throwing of stones and breaking of windows at their prayer houses in Pleven on April 21 and in Sofia on April 21 and July 30. Police had not made arrests in any of the incidents by year's end.

In January Grand Mufti Mustafa Hadji delivered a public lecture at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in which he reviewed the doctrinal problems in the ideology of terrorist organizations. He stated the justification for violence espoused by that ideology was the complete opposite of what the Quran extolled, which was to "live in peaceful coexistence with others, resort to war only as a measure of self-defense, and commit to interreligious mutual cooperation in order to build and affirm universal values in society."

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. embassy officials regularly communicated with the Directorate for Religious Affairs, the ombudsman's office, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, local government administrations, and law enforcement agencies to discuss religious freedom issues such as the Pazardjik trials, discrimination cases, legislative initiatives, and the denial of permits for construction of new places of worship.

In January the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs and the Charge d'Affaires discussed religious affairs with Foreign Minister Mitov and encouraged him to consult with the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe regarding draft legislation affecting religious activity, such as the five legislative amendments under consideration in the National Assembly. On a number of occasions, the Ambassador met with Foreign Minister Mitov, and embassy representatives met with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to encourage support for religious freedom and to express the need for relevant draft legislation to balance measures to protect security with religious freedom considerations.

In December the Ambassador met with Sofia Mayor Fandakova to plan a visit by an ex-neo-Nazi speaker and activist from the United States to speak to high school youth on the dangers of hate groups and to promote tolerance. As part of a group of concerned ambassadors, the Ambassador met with Sofia Mayor Fandakova to protest the march held in honor of Hristo Lukov. In February the embassy released a statement in response to the march, encouraging people to speak out against intolerance and urging respect for human dignity.

The embassy maintained an active dialogue on the state of religious freedom with leaders of the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, other Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities, human rights groups, and other activists.

The Ambassador met with the patriarch of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the grand mufti, and Shalom to discuss religious freedom issues, such as the need for tolerance of different religious communities and the need to counter hate speech. Embassy representatives met with the regional muftis of Gotse Delchev and Razgrad to learn more about their communities, local religious relations, property disputes, and court trials. Embassy representatives met frequently with leaders of the Jewish community, the Office of the Grand Mufti, Mormons, Catholics, and Jehovah's Witnesses to discuss infringements on freedom of religion and proposed changes in legislation related to religion.

The Ambassador expressed support for religious tolerance in his remarks at a gathering with the B'nai B'rith Turkish and Bulgarian Chapters in October, in his speech at a Shabbat dinner in July, and while attending the commemoration of the 73rd anniversary of the saving of the country's Jewish population in March. A senior embassy representative discussed religious tolerance during the iftar hosted by President Plevneliev in June and at a meeting with the abbot of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church's Rila Monastery in March.

In September the Ambassador wrote a letter to the editor-in-chief of newspaper Segi, expressing his disappointment in its publication of cartoons of Jews that perpetuated anti-Semitic stereotypes and calling for the paper to issue an apology. In response, the editor-in-chief wrote a letter apologizing for the publication.