

# AUSTRIA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

Historical and modern constitutional documents provide for freedom of religious belief and affiliation and prohibit religious discrimination. The law prohibits public incitement to hostile acts against religious groups and classifies registered religious groups into one of three categories: religious societies, religious confessional communities, and associations. The 16 groups recognized as religious societies receive the most benefits. Unrecognized groups may practice their religion privately if the practice is lawful and does not offend “common decency.” In December, the government recognized Sikhs as a confessional community. On December 11, the Constitutional Court struck down the ban on headscarves for children in elementary schools, stating it was discriminatory for singling out Muslim students. The Church of Scientology and the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church) said that government-funded organizations continued to advise the public against associating with them. After a mass shooting in Vienna in November by a gunman described as an ISIS supporter, the government presented draft legislation introducing a new criminal code provision on “religiously motivated extremism” that would expand government monitoring of Muslim groups in the country. The Islamic Religious Authority of Austria (IGGO) criticized the establishment of a new office in the Federal Chancellery with the stated aim of combating political Islam and Muslim extremism. In October, the government said it would strip 40 percent of Turkish/Islamic associations of their charity status because of tax violations. In February, parliament unanimously adopted a resolution condemning any form of anti-Semitism and calling on the government to condemn and end any support for the Boycott, Divest, and Sanction (BDS) movement against Israel. In August, the government, in cooperation with the Jewish Community of Vienna (IKG), announced measures to combat anti-Semitism among immigrants and refugees. The opposition Freedom Party (FPÖ) continued to use anti-Muslim rhetoric and imagery, particularly during campaigning for Vienna municipal/provincial elections in October.

According to the Ministry of Interior, there were 13 anti-Semitic and six anti-Muslim incidents reported to police in the first half of 2020. For all of 2019, the ministry cited 30 anti-Semitic and six anti-Muslim incidents, compared with 49 and 22 incidents, respectively, in the previous year. Most incidents involved hate speech. For 2019, IGGO cited 1,051 anti-Muslim incidents and the IKG reported 550 anti-Semitic incidents. Government figures, unlike those from the IKG and

IGGO, only included incidents in which authorities filed criminal charges. In August, a Syrian man living in the country attempted to assault Graz Jewish Community leader Elie Rosen with a baseball bat and vandalized the Graz synagogue. Rosen escaped uninjured, and police arrested the suspect, who was awaiting trial at year's end. Chancellor Sebastian Kurz and other senior government and political figures and religious representatives condemned the assault and vandalism. As a result of the incident, the government provided additional security protection for the Graz Jewish Community. In March, also in Graz, youths assaulted a Jewish teen, shouting "Are you a Jew?" at him and injuring his face.

U.S. embassy representatives met with officials from the Federal Chancellery and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Interior on religious freedom, the protection of religious minorities, and measures to combat anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim sentiment. In August, the Secretary of State, accompanied by the Ambassador and the head of the IKG and the country's senior Roman Catholic prelate, laid a wreath at the Vienna Holocaust Memorial. The Ambassador met with leaders from the IGGO, IKG, Roman Catholic Church, Lutheran Church, and various Orthodox churches to discuss their relations with the government, instances of discrimination and interreligious dialogue, and the impact on their respective communities of the COVID-19 crisis. The embassy continued its engagement with the Muslim Youth Organization of Austria to promote religious dialogue and tolerance, particularly with a training program that covered how nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can counter violent extremism and promote religious tolerance online. Embassy officials continued to serve on the advisory board of the Mauthausen Memorial Agency, a governmental agency that promotes Holocaust remembrance. Embassy representatives spoke on religious freedom at public ceremonies and supported programs to combat anti-Semitism and promote religious dialogue.

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

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 8.9 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to religious groups and December 2019 figures from the government's Austrian Integration Fund, Roman Catholics constitute 56 percent of the population, and Muslims – predominantly Sunni – 8 percent, while approximately 25 percent is unaffiliated with any religion. According to estimates from the fund and religious groups, Eastern Orthodox churches (Russian, Greek, Serbian, Romanian, Antiochian, and Bulgarian) constitute 5 percent of the population, and Protestants (Augsburg and Helvetic confessions) 3.2 percent.

Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, and other Christian and non-Christian religious groups.

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

### **Legal Framework**

A combination of historical and modern constitutional documents guarantees freedom of "conscience and creed." The law provides for freedom of religious belief and the rights of all residents to join, participate in, leave, or abstain from association with any religious community. It stipulates, "Duties incumbent on nationals may not be impeded by religious affiliation."

Several constitutional provisions protect religious freedom. The main pillars are historical laws on fundamental rights and freedoms, including religious freedom, and treaties and conventions, such as the European Convention on Human Rights, which form part of the constitution. Antidiscrimination legislation prohibits discrimination on religious grounds. Citizens have the right to sue the government for constitutional violations of religious freedom.

The law prohibits public incitement to hostile acts against a church group, religious society, or other religious group if the incitement is perceivable by "many people," which an official government commentary on the law and the courts interpret as 30 or more individuals. The prohibition also applies specifically in the case of incitement in print, electronic, or other media available to a broad public. The law also prohibits incitement, insult, or contempt against religious groups, if such action violates human dignity.

The law divides registered religious groups into three officially recognized legal categories (listed in descending order of rights and privileges): religious societies, religious confessional communities, and associations. Each category possesses specific rights, privileges, and legal responsibilities. Members of religious groups not legally recognized may practice their religion at home "insofar as this practice is neither unlawful nor offends common decency."

There are 16 recognized religious societies: the Roman Catholic Church; Protestant churches (Augsburg and Helvetic confessions); the IGGO; Old Catholic Church; IKG; Eastern Orthodox Church (Bulgarian, Greek, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, and Antiochian); The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; New Apostolic Church; Syrian Orthodox Church; Coptic Orthodox Church; Armenian

Apostolic Church; Methodist Church of Austria; the Buddhist Community; Jehovah's Witnesses; Alevi Community in Austria; and Free Christian Churches.

The law grants registered religious societies the right to public practice and independent administration of their internal affairs; to participate in the program requiring mandatory church contributions by church members; to bring religious workers into the country to act as ministers, missionaries, or teachers; and to provide pastoral services in prisons and hospitals. Under the law, religious societies have "public corporation" status, permitting them to engage in a number of public or quasi-public activities, such as government-funded religious instruction in both public and private schools, which the government denies to confessional communities and associations. The government grants all recognized religious societies tax relief in two main ways: donors do not pay taxes on donations and the societies receive exemption from property tax for all buildings dedicated to the active practice of religion or administration of such. Additionally, religious societies are exempt from a surveillance charge, otherwise payable when the state provides security to religious groups, and a municipal administrative fee for garbage collection and other municipal services. Responsibilities of religious societies include a commitment to sponsor social and cultural activities that serve the common good and – like all religious groups – to ensure their teachings do not violate the law or ethical standards, which the law does not define.

Religious groups seeking to achieve religious society status for the first time must apply for recognition with the Office for Religious Affairs in the Federal Chancellery. Religious groups recognized as societies prior to 1998 retained their status. The government grandfathered in 14 of the 16 recognized religious societies under this provision of the law. To gain recognition as a religious society, religious groups not recognized prior to 1998 must have membership equaling 0.2 percent of the country's population (approximately 17,700 persons) and have existed for 20 years, at least 10 of which must have been as an association and five as a confessional community. The government recognizes Jehovah's Witnesses and Alevi Muslims as religious societies under these post-1998 criteria. Groups that do not meet these criteria may still apply for religious society status under an exception for groups that have been active internationally for at least 100 years and active as an association in the country for 10 years. Groups sharing a broad faith with an existing society or confessional community, for example Christianity, may register separately as long as they can demonstrate that they have a different theology.

The law allows religious groups not recognized as societies to seek official status as confessional communities with the Office for Religious Affairs in the Federal Chancellery. The government recognizes 10 confessional communities: the Baha'i Faith, Movement for Religious Renewal-Community of Christians, Pentecostal Community of God, Seventh-day Adventists, Hindu Community, Islamic-Shiite Community, Old-Alevi Community in Austria, Unification Church, United Pentecostal Community of Austria, and Sikhs.

A recognized confessional community has the juridical standing needed to engage in such activities as purchasing real estate in its own name and contracting for goods and services, but it is not eligible for the financial and educational benefits available to recognized religious societies. Contributions to confessional communities' charitable activities are tax deductible for those who make them and tax free for the groups receiving them, but the communities are not exempt from property taxes. Confessional communities may provide pastoral care in prisons and hospitals.

To gain government recognition as a confessional community, a group must have at least 300 members and submit to the Office for Religious Affairs its statutes describing the goals, rights, and obligations of members as well as membership regulations, a list of officials, and financing information. A group must also submit a written description of its religious doctrine, which must differ from that of any previously recognized religious society or religious confessional community. The Office for Religious Affairs determines whether the group's basic beliefs are consistent with public security, order, health, and morals and with the rights and freedoms of citizens. A religious group seeking to obtain confessional community status is subject to a six-month waiting period from the time of application to the chancellery. After this period, groups that have applied automatically receive the status unless the government issues a decree rejecting the application.

Religious groups not qualifying for either religious society or confessional community status may apply to become legal associations, a status applicable to a broad range of civil groups. Some groups organize as associations while waiting for the government to recognize them as confessional communities.

The Church of Scientology and a number of smaller religious groups, such as Sahaja Yoga and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, have association status.

According to the law, any group of more than two persons pursuing a nonprofit goal qualifies to organize as an association. Groups may apply to the Ministry of Interior to gain such status. To become an association, a group must submit a written statement citing its common, nonprofit goal and commitment to function as a nonprofit organization. Associations have juridical standing, the right to function in public, and many of the same rights as confessional communities, including the right to own real estate and to contract for goods and services. Associations may not offer pastoral care in hospitals or prisons or receive tax-deductible contributions.

Pursuant to the law governing relations between the government and the Roman Catholic Church, the Church is the only religious group to receive government funding for pastoral care it provides in prisons. The law also makes various Catholic holidays official national holidays.

The law governing relations between the government and the IGGO and Alevi Muslim groups stipulates that funding for the day-to-day operations of mosques must be derived from domestic sources, Islamic teachings and practices must not violate federal law (compliance with which is determined by the Office for Religious Affairs in the Federal Chancellery), and Islamic institutions should “take a positive stance” toward the state and society. According to the Office for Religious Affairs, there are similar restrictions on foreign funding for other religious groups, and religious groups generally are obliged to finance themselves from domestic sources and not violate federal law. The law provides an explicit legal definition of, and legal protection for, Islamic practices, such as circumcision and preparation of food in conformity with religious rules, and states Muslims may raise children and youth in accordance with Islamic traditions. Muslim groups with at least 300 members and a theology not distinct from a pre-existing Islamic religious society or confessional community are considered cultural communities and fall under the umbrella of the pre-existing, legally recognized Islamic religious society or confessional community. This includes the IGGO and the Alevi Community in Austria, which are both religious societies, or the Islamic-Shiite Community and the Old-Alevi Faith Community in Austria, both of which have confessional community status. The law allows for Islamic theological university studies, which the University of Vienna offers.

Separate laws govern relations between the government and each of the other 14 state-recognized religious societies. The laws have similar intent but vary in some details, since they were enacted at different times over a span of approximately 140

years. As with the Muslim community, a law provides explicit protections for Jewish religious practices, including circumcision and ritual slaughter.

The law bans full-face coverings in public places as a “violation of Austrian values,” with exceptions made only for artistic, cultural, or traditional events, in sports, or for health or professional reasons. Failure to comply with the law is an administrative violation. The law prescribes a 150-euro (\$180) fine but does not entitle police to remove the face covering.

Until a Constitutional Court ruling in December struck it down, the law banned headscarves and other head coverings for children in elementary schools. The ban exempted *kippahs* and Sikh *patkas*. Prior to the Constitutional Court ruling, in some federal states, parents of children in violation of the ban were subject to fines of up to 440 euros (\$540).

The government funds, on a proportional basis, religious instruction for any of the 16 officially recognized religious societies by clergy or instructors provided by those groups for children in public schools and government-accredited private schools. The government does not offer such funding to other religious groups. A minimum of three children is required to form a class. Attendance in the respective religion classes is mandatory for all students who are members of those religious groups unless they formally withdraw at the beginning of the school year; students younger than age 14 require parental permission to withdraw from religion classes. Religious instruction takes place either in the school or at sites organized by religious groups. Some schools offer ethics classes for students not attending religious instruction. Religious education and ethics classes include the tenets of different religious groups as comparative religious education.

The curriculum for both public and private schools includes compulsory antibias and tolerance education, including religious tolerance, as part of civics education across various subjects, including history and German-language instruction.

Holocaust education is part of history instruction and is also treated in other courses such as civics.

The Equal Rights Agency, an independent agency falling under the jurisdiction of the Federal Chancellery Minister for Women and Integration, oversees discrimination cases, including those based on religion. The agency provides legal counseling and mediation services, and it assists with bringing cases before the Equal Treatment Commission, another independent government agency. In cases

where it finds discrimination, the commission makes a recommendation for corrective action. In a case of noncompliance with the recommendation, the case goes to court. The commission may issue expert reports for plaintiffs to present before the court. Only a court may order corrective action and compensation.

The law bans neo-Nazi activity and prohibits public denial, belittlement, approval, or justification “of the National Socialist genocide” or other Nazi crimes against humanity in print, broadcast, or other media.

In August, a 2019 amendment of the Citizenship Act that extends citizenship to descendants of Austrian victims of Nazi crimes entered into force. Direct descendants, such as children, grandchildren, or great grandchildren of victims, may obtain citizenship by reporting to Austrian consulates. Dual citizenship is also possible.

The law bans certain symbols the government considers extremist, including those pertaining to the Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS, al-Qa’ida, and the Croatian *Ustasha*.

The government requires a visa for visitors from non-visa waiver countries or individuals who would stay beyond 90 days, including religious workers of confessional communities or associations. Foreign religious workers of groups recognized as confessional communities or associations must apply for a general immigrant visa that is not employment or family based and is subject to a quota. Foreign religious workers belonging to religious societies also require immigrant visas but are exempt from the quota system. Religious workers from Schengen or EU-member countries are exempt from all visa requirements.

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

### **Government Practices**

In December, the government granted Sikhs status as a confessional community, after they had applied for the status in 2019.

On December 11, the Constitutional Court ruled that the ban on headscarves introduced in 2019 for children in elementary school was unconstitutional because it singled out Muslim students. Judge Christoph Grabenwarter told the *Catholic News Agency* that the ban carried the risk of “hindering Muslim girls’ access to education and more precisely of shutting them off from society.” The ruling was based on complaints that two Muslim families, supported by the IGGO, filed in



January. The complaints stated the ban interfered with religious freedom and the right to raise children in a religious manner and called for lifting the ban. After the ruling in December, the government abandoned a proposal, first made in January, to expand the ban to middle school students up to age 14, and possibly to teachers.

Scientologists continued to state the Federal Office of Sect Issues and other government-associated entities fostered discrimination against religious groups not registered as religious societies or confessional communities. The office offered advice to persons with questions about groups that it considered “sects” and “cults,” including Scientologists and members of the Unification Church. A scientologist representative stated that the office provided biased information against the Church of Scientology when counseling its clients by not including sufficient input on how Scientologists view themselves. The office was nominally independent but government-funded, and the Minister of Labor, Family, and Youth appointed and oversaw its head.

A counseling center in Vienna managed by the Society Against Sect and Cult Dangers, an NGO that described itself as an organization working against harm caused by “destructive cults” such as Scientology, continued to distribute information to schools and the general public and provide counseling for former members of such groups. According to the website of the society’s founder, Friedrich Griess, the society received funding from the government of Lower Austria. All provinces funded family and youth counseling offices that provided information on “sects and cults,” which members of some minority religious groups, such as Scientologists or the Unification Church, stated were biased against them.

On November 2, Kujtim Fejzullai, a man described as an ISIS supporter, shot and killed four persons and injured 22. Police killed the gunman. Chancellor Kurz called the incident “clearly an Islamist terror attack,” and said, “We will create a ‘criminal offense’ called political Islam ... to take action against those who are not terrorists themselves, but who create the breeding ground for them.”

On December 16, the government presented draft legislation to parliament that would introduce a new statutory offense banning “religiously motivated extremism.” The legislation would also oblige the IGGO to present registries of all its mosques and imams to the government and speeds up processes enabling the government to close down radical mosques. It would also raise fines for Muslim organizations failing to provide information on their accounts and more strictly monitor how Muslim organizations are financed. Interior Minister Karl Nehammer

called the legislation a “strong signal against extremism.” On December 18, the government sent the draft legislation for a six-week review to stakeholders and legal experts.

In the aftermath of the November attack, the government and the IGGO agreed to close the Tewhid Mosque, registered with the IGGO, which Fejzullai attended. According to a government spokesperson, the Tewhid Mosque lacked “a positive attitude toward Austrian society and the state” as required by the law governing relations between the government and Muslim groups. The government also closed an unregistered facility, the Melit Ibrahim Association, used as a mosque and also attended by Fejzullai and other persons previously convicted on terrorism charges.

In a separate police action in November, authorities raided homes, businesses, and associations that they said were affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as Hamas, arresting 30 individuals. The Office of the Public Prosecutor stated the raids were preceded by “extensive and intensive investigations lasting more than a year” and had “no connection with the terrorist attack in Vienna on November 2.” Individuals detained in the raids, who were reportedly questioned and released, told media the raids were “mere guesswork by the police” and that there was no evidence of terrorist financing.

In July, Integration Minister Susanne Raab established a new office in the Federal Chancellery with the stated aim of combating political Islam and documenting religiously motivated Islamic extremism, including scientific research on the structures of various Muslim organizations. Raab stated the new office was not directed against Islam itself, but only against the “extremist ideology of political Islam.” IGGO President Uemit Vural criticized the government for not including the IGGO in the planning of the office and called for expanding the office’s mandate to include all forms of religiously motivated extremism and racism. Vural also said establishment of the office demonstrated the government’s “hostile attitude” toward Muslims in the country.

At year’s end, the government had not closed the Vienna-based, Saudi Arabia-funded King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue. In 2019, the foreign ministry announced it would close the center, consistent with a nonbinding parliamentary resolution calling on it to do so because of Saudi Arabia’s human rights record.

In October, revenue authorities reported investigating 211 Turkish/Islamic associations in the country since 2019 and finding a large number of instances of tax evasion. Revenue authorities stated they would strip 40 percent of these associations of their charity status, since they abused that status to conduct business activities. The Turkish Islamic Union for Cultural and Social Cooperation (ATIB) and the Islamic Federation, an organization affiliated with the Turkish Islamic group Milli Gorus, criticized the announcement.

According to media, the Federal Office for Foreigner Affairs and Asylum (BFA) continued to refuse to issue or renew residence permits for foreign imams financed by foreign sources. The BFA rejected the permits and renewals on the grounds that, since the law forbids foreign funding of religious groups, it considered that imams receiving foreign funding had no income and were therefore ineligible for a residence permit. ATIB reported in April that, because of the ban on foreign financing, it had no imams in half of its 65 mosques. There were no reports that other religious groups faced similar problems in obtaining residence permits for their foreign clerics, although the government stated the restrictions on foreign funding applied to all religious groups.

In September, Federal Chancellery Minister for the EU and Constitution Karoline Edtstadler announced the government was developing a national strategy to combat anti-Semitism and would establish a new office in the Federal Chancellery to coordinate measures by all ministries to implement the new strategy. At year's end, the government had not yet announced the strategy or established the office.

In a resolution adopted unanimously in February, parliament called upon the government to condemn and end any support for the BDS movement against Israel. The resolution stated that parliament condemned any form of anti-Semitism, including Israel-related anti-Semitism. IKG President Oskar Deutsch said he welcomed parliament's initiative to counter anti-Semitism "veiled as criticism of Israel."

Jewish leaders condemned the FPÖ's appointment of Johannes Huebner to the Bundesrat, the upper house of parliament, due to an anti-Semitic comment he made at a 2016 political rally in Germany. Moshe Kantor, President of the European Jewish Congress, said, "It is unconscionable that a renowned anti-Semite would be given such a respectable position," while IKG President Oskar Deutsch commented, "The political return of Mr. Huebner is a confirmation of the lack of credibility of the Freedom Party."

In December, parliament passed a law on hate speech, effective January 1, 2021, requiring online platforms to identify and delete posts considered to be hateful or defamatory. The platforms may be sued in court for failing to remove posts that plaintiffs allege are hateful or defamatory. The legislation received widespread support from civil society groups, including Amnesty International and the Association for Civil Courage and Anti-Racism. National media reported the legislation was partly motivated by an increase in online hate speech and government advocacy for better protection of victims, including by Justice Minister Alma Zadic (Green Party), who was born in Bosnia and Herzegovina and had been a target of online hate speech during the year.

Following the assault against a Jewish leader in the Styrian capital Graz in August, police provided additional protection to the Graz Jewish community. Police also continued to provide extra protection to the Vienna Jewish community's offices and other Jewish community institutions, such as schools and museums throughout the country, to combat historically higher numbers of incidents directed at Jewish institutions. In addition, Integration Minister Raab announced special measures to combat anti-Semitism among immigrants and refugees, in cooperation with the IKG. These included special courses on anti-Semitism for refugees in the context of mandatory integration classes and expanding a program for Jewish youth to visit schools to talk about Judaism.

The governing coalition agreement between the People's Party (OeVP) and Green Party, presented in January, stated the government was committed to fighting anti-Semitism and that the country would not support any initiatives or resolutions in international organizations that ran counter to its commitment to the state of Israel.

Following the IKG's presentation of its annual report on anti-Semitic incidents in 2019, Chancellor Kurz stated in May that the country must be "even more united and determined in fighting any form of anti-Semitic tendencies."

The international NGO Anti-Defamation League continued to conduct teacher-training seminars on Holocaust awareness with schools in the country, reaching approximately 100 teachers. School councils and the Ministry of Education, Science, and Research again invited Holocaust survivors to talk to school classes about National Socialism and the Holocaust.

In October, the government announced it would provide 200,000 euros (\$245,000) for the maintenance and restoration of the historic Waehring Jewish cemetery in Vienna over the next three years. Chancellor Kurz had promised aid for the

cemetery in 2018. IKG President Deutsch welcomed the support. President Alexander Van der Bellen also visited the cemetery in September with Deutsch and stated it was “Austria’s duty to maintain the cemetery.”

In a video message from Jerusalem ahead of the World Holocaust Forum in January, President Van der Bellen deplored the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe and pledged continued engagement to fight it: “Racism, anti-Semitism, human degradation must never again become political instruments.” While many Holocaust victims were Austrians – predominantly Jews – Austrians were also perpetrators, Van der Bellen stated.

Following slogans on FPÖe posters for the Vienna municipal election in October that equated traditionally dressed Muslims with radical, violent Islamism, the Association of Social Democrat Academics filed incitement charges against the FPÖe in Vienna with the Vienna Prosecutor’s Office. The association stated that the posters violated human dignity and religious freedom. The case was pending at year’s end.

In September, the Vienna public prosecutor requested lifting the immunity of FPÖe Third Parliamentary President Norbert Hofer after Hofer stated at a June party rally that the Quran was more dangerous than COVID-19. The IGGO filed charges against Hofer of denouncement of religious teachings and incitement. In October, the case was dismissed after the parliamentary immunity committee decided against lifting Hofer’s immunity, stating he made the statement in the context of his political activity.

Following clashes in Vienna between Turkish nationalists and Kurdish groups in July, FPÖe Secretary General Michael Schnedlitz said he considered his party “a weed killer against unlimited immigration.” Three parliamentary parties – the Social Democrats (SPOe), Greens, and NEOS – condemned the language as “Nazi rhetoric” and called for Schnedlitz’s resignation. Vienna FPÖe Chairman Dominik Nepp stated Schnedlitz had been misunderstood and that he had not equated immigrants with weeds.

Following the outbreak of COVID-19 cases in refugee shelters in Vienna in May, Nepp called COVID-19 an “asylee virus” and “intolerable.”

The government continued to allow headwear for religious purposes in official identification documents, provided the face remained sufficiently visible to allow for identification of the wearer.

According to statistics presented by Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg in December, the government granted citizenship to 633 descendants of Austrian victims of Nazi crimes, including persons from the United States, Israel, and Great Britain.

The country is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

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

According to the Ministry of Interior, there were 13 anti-Semitic and six anti-Muslim incidents reported to police in the first half of the year. In all of 2019, there were 30 anti-Semitic and six anti-Muslim incidents, compared with 49 and 22 such incidents, respectively, in 2018. Most incidents, according to the ministry, involved hate speech. Government figures included only cases where authorities filed criminal charges. The ministry did not provide details on any of the incidents.

The IGGO's Documentation Center on Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Racism reported 1,051 anti-Muslim incidents in 2019, while the IKG reported 550 anti-Semitic incidents in the same year. The data were the most recent available. Both groups included incidents regardless of whether they were reported to police or criminal charges were filed.

In September, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) released an overview of anti-Semitic incidents covering January 1, 2009 – December 21, 2019 across EU member states where data from official and unofficial sources were available. According to FRA, the overall trend for recorded anti-Semitic offenses in Austria was increasing, despite the decrease in the number of offenses from 49 in 2018 to 30 in 2019. In the period 2009-19, recorded cases of anti-Semitic offenses reached a peak of 58 in 2014.

In August, a Syrian living in the country attempted to assault Graz Jewish Community President Elie Rosen with a baseball bat. Rosen escaped to his car uninjured. The suspect also vandalized the Graz synagogue and an LGBT community center. Police arrested the man, who was awaiting trial at year's end. The Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, federal ministers, governors, opposition leaders, and religious representatives stated there was no place for anti-Semitism in the country. IGGO President Vural stated that "we must be determined and united in fighting anti-Semitism." Following the incident, the IKG reiterated its concern

regarding what it described as anti-Semitism by Muslims in the country and participated in government programs to address anti-Semitism among refugees and immigrants.

In March, two unidentified youths attacked a Jewish teen wearing a Star of David ring in the Styrian provincial capital Graz, shouting, “Are you a Jew?” The victim was treated in a local hospital for cuts and bruises to his face. Police had not identified the assailants by year’s end.

In November, according to press reports, a woman accosted a Jewish rabbi at knifepoint, knocking the skullcap off his head, ripping it, and yelling anti-Semitic insults before fleeing. Police were unable to find the woman. Interior Minister Nehammer condemned the incident as an “attack on Jewish life in Vienna,” and the agency that investigates acts of extremism and terrorism took over the case.

The IGGO reported that the number of anti-Muslim incidents almost doubled in 2019 to 1,051, compared with the 540 reported in 2018. In 2015, the first full year in which it collected such statistics, IGGO reported 156 anti-Muslim incidents. Most 2019 cases (700) concerned hate speech and insinuations of violence on the internet, followed by insulting language and property damage. Six cases involved physical assaults. Men were more likely to face anti-Muslim behavior on the internet, while Muslim women were more likely to face it in person. According to the report, in October 2019, a man who had posted threatening comments on social media was caught bringing a knife to a university lecture; in February 2019, a man slapped a Muslim woman in the face on a streetcar; and in May 2019, a man wrote on social media “ragheads, shut up or go home.” Property damage cited in the report consisted primarily of graffiti, with slogans such as “[expletive] Islam” on toilets, public walls, or elsewhere.

The IKG reported anti-Semitic incidents increased by 9 percent in 2019, compared with the 503 cited in 2017 (it did not publish figures for 2018). Most of the reported incidents concerned insulting behavior, followed by mass mailings/internet, property damage, and threats. Six reports concerned physical assaults. According to the report, in one case of assault in October 2019, a teenager kicked a Jewish teenager wearing a *kippa* on the subway and insulted him; the Jewish teenager ran away. In December 2019, a man in a subway shouted “[expletive] Jews” to two Jewish teenagers wearing kippas, adding, “If I see you again, I will kill you.”

A report presented in June by the NGO Initiative for Discrimination-Free Education listed a total of 403 cases of discrimination in schools in 2019 and attributed 43 percent of these cases to religion, with 73 percent of those cases connected to what the NGO called Islamophobia and 25 percent to anti-Semitism. The remaining 2 percent involved discrimination against atheists. Examples included pressure on a Muslim religion teacher to participate in extracurricular activities by other teachers, who stated that the teacher otherwise was “not integrated in Austria.” The NGO classified the incident as discrimination based on religion. In another example, school pupils posted Nazi symbols in their WhatsApp group. The NGO stated the headscarf ban in elementary schools was discriminatory.

In 2019, the most recent year for which data were available, the government recorded 740 investigations into cases of incitement to hatred based on national origin, race, or religion and 43 convictions, compared with 1,005 investigations into cases and 72 convictions in 2018. The government did not provide information on how many of the cases involved religion.

The organizers of the annual May gathering of Croatians and Bosnians in Bleiburg to commemorate Nazi-allied Croatian troops and civilians killed in 1945 canceled the event due to COVID-19 concerns. In a parliamentary resolution passed in May, the OeVP, SPOe, Greens, and NEOS called on the Ministry of Interior to prohibit the event in coming years.

In August, a court in the Lower Austrian capital of St. Poelten convicted a former FPOe member of the provincial legislature on charges of neo-Nazi activity and issued him a 12-month suspended prison sentence. On April 20, 2014, the 125th birthday of Adolf Hitler, the man had written on Facebook “congratulations to all whose birthday is today.”

In August, in a separate case, a court in St. Poelten convicted a former local FPOe politician in Melk on charges of neo-Nazi activity, issuing a 15-month suspended prison sentence. The man had displayed the Nazi salute on several occasions in 2014 and had shouted “Heil Hitler.”

In March, a court in the Carinthian capital of Klagenfurt convicted a man on charges of neo-Nazi activity and sentenced him to 18 months’ imprisonment. The man had neo-Nazi tattoos and had called for “reopening concentration camps” on Facebook in 2010.



In an interview in May, the Secretary General of the IKG, Benjamin Naegele, stated that anti-Semitic sentiments occasionally surfaced at demonstrations against COVID-19-related restrictions or in debates about COVID-19 in social media. Naegele did not provide details or examples.

Fourteen Christian groups, consisting of the Roman Catholic Church, various Protestant denominations, and eight Orthodox and Old Oriental Churches, continued to meet twice a year within the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Austria to discuss religious cooperation. Baptists and the Salvation Army had observer status on the council. Two permanent working groups on “Religion and Society” and “Media” remained in place.

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

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy representatives met regularly with government officials, including from the Federal Chancellery’s Office of Religious Affairs, the Department for Integration and Division of Dialogue of Cultures at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Interior, to discuss religious freedom and the protection of religious minorities. Topics discussed included the concerns of religious groups, integration of Muslim refugees, cooperation with religious groups in combating terrorism, and measures to combat anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment.

The Ambassador met with religious group representatives from the IGGO, IKG, Roman Catholic Church, Protestant churches, and various Orthodox churches to discuss their relations with the new coalition government, instances of discrimination, and interreligious dialogue, as well as how their communities were handling the COVID-19 crisis. Embassy officers also met with youth groups of religious organizations to discuss issues such as anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment.

The embassy continued to engage with and support the Jewish community to discuss ways of promoting religious tolerance and combating anti-Semitism. The embassy hosted a university seminar on “The Jewish Entrepreneurs of Hollywood,” which showed how religiously persecuted groups could succeed and counter the religious intolerance of others. Embassy representatives continued to serve on the International Advisory Board of the Mauthausen Memorial Agency to promote remembrance of the Holocaust and Holocaust education. In November, the Department of State Deputy Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues made a presentation to the advisory board on the challenges museums, memorials, and

other institutions face in organizing Holocaust remembrance activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The embassy continued its engagement with the Muslim Youth Organization of Austria to promote religious dialogue and tolerance. The embassy nominated three members of the organization to participate in a training program that covered how NGOs can counter violent extremism and promote religious tolerance online.

In August, the U.S. Secretary of State, accompanied by the Ambassador, IKG President Deutsch, and Roman Catholic Cardinal Christoph Schoenborn, laid a wreath at the Vienna Holocaust Memorial in remembrance of the 65,000 Austrian Jews killed in the Holocaust.

In May, the Ambassador and the U.S. Department of State Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues recorded video messages for the virtual commemoration of the liberation of the Mauthausen concentration camp. In their remarks, they stressed the importance of religious freedom, Holocaust remembrance, and never forgetting the horrors of the Nazi regime to ensure they are never again repeated.