

FINLAND 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination “without an acceptable reason” and provides for the right to profess and practice a religion and to decline to be a member of a religious community. The law prohibits breaching the sanctity of religion, which includes blasphemy, offending that which a religious community holds sacred, and disturbing worship or funeral ceremonies. In September, the Supreme Court affirmed the ban on the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), the largest neo-Nazi group in the country. Authorities continued to investigate NRM members for engaging in banned activities as part of the successor group Towards Freedom, including public demonstrations. According to representatives of their respective groups, immigration authorities denied most asylum applications from Jehovah’s Witnesses from Russia and Ahmadi Muslims from Pakistan. More than 50 cases of Jehovah’s Witness asylum applicants were pending before the Supreme Administrative Court at year’s end. In July, a court upheld an ethnic agitation fine for a Finns Party Member of Parliament (MP), while parliament declined to remove the immunity from prosecution of another Finns Party MP who was being investigated for ethnic agitation concerning comments he made during a parliamentary session that equated Muslim asylum seekers with invasive species. In August, police completed their investigation into anti-Semitic comments made by an MP from the Social Democratic Party (SDP). In August, the Ministry of Interior created a working group dedicated to improving security at religious sites, including synagogues and mosques. In January, a municipal councilor in Polvijärvi from the SDP resigned after posting comments to Facebook questioning whether the Holocaust occurred. In February, the Oulu District Court fined an Oulu city councilor for two counts of ethnic agitation for posting videos online depicting Muslims and other immigrants as being inferior to other human beings.

Police reported 133 hate crimes involving members of religious groups in 2019, the most recent statistics available, compared with 155 such incidents in 2018, but did not specify how many were motivated solely by religion. The nondiscrimination ombudsman’s office received 37 complaints of religious discrimination in 2019, compared with 35 in 2018. The NRM continued to post anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic statements online and acted to circumvent the ban of the organization by continuing activities as part of Towards Freedom. There were several demonstrations by neo-Nazi or nativist groups. Towards Freedom burned an Israeli flag during a rally in Tampere on January 27, which coincided with International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Also in late January, vandals targeted

the Israeli embassy and Jewish property, including the Helsinki and Turku synagogues. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working with migrants, including the Finnish Refugee Advice Centre, continued to raise concerns about the ability of religious minorities housed in migrant reception centers to worship without harassment from other migrants housed within the same center. Muslim groups reported a shortage of funds needed to establish houses of worship to match their growing population.

U.S. embassy staff engaged with government ministries to discuss government support for religious freedom and interfaith dialogue, the government's response to anti-Semitic incidents, and the treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses and Ahmadis seeking asylum. Embassy staff met with the Jewish and Muslim communities to discuss their shared concerns about the impact of government guidelines discouraging male circumcision, and addressed religiously motivated crimes and continuing problems involved in establishing a sufficient number of mosques for the Muslim population. Embassy staff also discussed the state of religious freedom with these communities, other religious minority groups, and interfaith networks.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.6 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to Finnish government statistics from December 2019, which count only registered members of registered congregations, 68.7 percent of the population belongs to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELC) and 1.1 percent to the Finnish Orthodox Church, while 0.3 percent (approximately 17,000 individuals) have official membership in Islamic congregations, and 28.5 percent do not identify as belonging to any religious group. The census combines other minority religious communities, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jews, and members of the Free Church of Finland, which together account for 1.4 percent of the population.

Multiple sources indicate the Muslim population has grown rapidly in recent years because of a significant inflow of immigrants. Muslim religious leaders estimate the number of Muslims rose to 100,000 in 2018 (most recent data available), of which approximately 80 percent is Sunni and 20 percent Shia. In 2017, the Pew Research Center estimated 2.7 percent of the population, or approximately 150,000 persons, were Muslim. According to a survey by the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC), the Muslim population numbered approximately 65,000 in 2016. According to the Islamic Society of Finland, discrepancies among these sources

and between them and official government statistics may occur because only a minority of Muslims register with registered Islamic societies. Apart from Tatars, who emigrated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as well as during the Soviet Union period, most Muslims are immigrants or descendants of immigrants who arrived in recent decades from Somalia, North Africa, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Balkans, Syria, Turkey, and Iran.

In a report released in October, the Institute of Jewish Policy Research estimated the Jewish population at 1,300.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution bars discrimination based on religion “without an acceptable reason.” It stipulates freedom of religion and conscience, including the right to profess and practice a religion, to express one’s convictions, and to be a member or decline to be a member of a religious community. It states no one is under the obligation to participate in the practice of a religion. The law criminalizes the “breach of the sanctity of religion,” which includes “blaspheming against God,” publicly defaming or desecrating to offend something a religious community holds sacred, and disturbing worship or funeral ceremonies. Violators are subject to fines or imprisonment of up to six months. Authorities have occasionally applied the law, most recently in 2019. The constitution cites the ELC, the only religious group it mentions, stating that “provisions on the organization and administration [of the ELC] are laid down in the Church Act.”

The law prohibits religious discrimination and establishes the position of a nondiscrimination ombudsman responsible for supervising compliance with the law, investigating individual cases of discrimination, and having the power to issue fines in noncriminal cases. The ombudsman advocates on behalf of victims, offers counseling, promotes conciliation, and lobbies for legislation, among other duties and authorities. The ombudsman may also refer cases to the National Non-Discrimination and Equality Tribunal (NDET), which also enforces fines issued by the ombudsman and assists plaintiffs seeking compensation in court. Individuals alleging discrimination may alternatively pursue legal action through the NDET, which may issue binding decisions that may be appealed to the courts or through the district court system. Litigants may appeal the decisions of the NDET and the district courts to the higher Administrative Court. Neither the ombudsman nor the NDET has the authority to investigate individual cases of religious discrimination

involving employment. Such cases fall under the purview of the Occupational Safety and Health Authority.

Individuals and groups may exist, associate, and practice their religion without registering with the government. To be eligible to apply for government funds, however, religious groups must register with the Patent and Registration Office as a religious community. To register as a religious community, a group must have at least 20 members, the public practice of religion as its purpose, and a set of rules to guide its activities. A registered religious community is a legal entity that may employ persons, purchase property, and make legal claims. A religious group may also acquire legal status by registering as an association with a nonprofit purpose that is not contrary to law or proper behavior. Registered religious groups and nonprofit associations are generally exempt from taxes. According to the MEC, as of 2019 there were approximately 142 registered religious communities, most of which had multiple congregations. Persons may belong to more than one religious community.

All citizens who belong to either the ELC or Finnish Orthodox Church pay a church tax, collected together with their income tax payments. Congregations collectively decide the church tax amount, currently set at between 1 to 2 percent of a member's income. Those who do not want to pay the tax must terminate their ELC or Orthodox congregation membership. Members may terminate their membership by contacting the official congregation or the local government registration office, either electronically or in person. Local parishes have fiscal autonomy to decide how to use funding received from taxes levied on their members.

Registered religious communities other than the ELC and Finnish Orthodox Church are eligible to apply for state funds in lieu of the church tax. In addition to receiving the church tax, the ELC and Finnish Orthodox Church may also apply for state funds. The law states registered religious communities that meet the statutory requirements, including ELC and Orthodox congregations, may apply to receive an annual subsidy from the government budget in proportion to the religious community's percentage of the population.

The law requires the ELC to maintain public cemeteries using its general allocation from state funds and church taxes and to account for monies used for this purpose. Other religious communities and nonreligious foundations may maintain their own cemeteries. All registered religious communities may own and manage property and hire staff, including appointing clergy. The law authorizes the ELC and

Finnish Orthodox Church to register births, marriages, and deaths for their members in collaboration with the government Digital and Population Data Services Agency. State registrars do this for other persons.

Parents may determine their child's religious affiliation if the child is younger than 12. The religious affiliation of children between the ages of 12 and 17 may only be changed by a joint decision of the child and his or her parents or guardian, and the family must pursue specific administrative procedures with their religious community and the local population registration officials to change or terminate the religious affiliation.

All public schools provide religious teaching in accordance with students' religion. All students must take courses either in religious studies or ethics, with the choice left up to the student. Schools must provide religious instruction in religions other than the Lutheran faith if there is a minimum of three pupils representing that faith in the municipal region, the religious community in question is registered, and the students' families belong to the religious community. Municipalities may arrange for students from different schools to take a combined course to meet this requirement. Students who do not belong to a religious group or belong to a religious group for which special instruction is not available may study ethics. Students aged 18 or older may choose to study either the religious courses pertaining to their religion or the ethics courses. If a student belongs to more than one religious community, the parents decide in which religious education course the student participates. The national and municipal governments fund private, including religiously based, schools. Despite the name, private schools are in fact completely financially dependent on government funding, in order to ensure equitable education nationwide. With the exception of international and foreign-language schools, by law private schools may not charge tuition. They do not practice selective admission based on students' religion.

Religious education focuses on familiarizing students with their own religion, other religions, and on general instruction in ethics. Teachers of religion must have state-mandated training for religious instruction. The state appoints them, and they are not required to belong to any religious community. The National Board of Education provides a series of textbooks about Orthodox and Lutheran Christianity, Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam, as well as a textbook on secular ethics.

By law, conscientious objectors, including those who object on religious grounds, may choose alternative civilian service instead of compulsory military service.

Conscientious objectors who refuse both military and alternative civilian service may be sentenced to prison terms of up to 173 days, one-half of the 347 days of alternative civilian service. Regular military service ranges between 165 and 347 days.

The law requires that animals be stunned prior to slaughter or be stunned and killed simultaneously if done pursuant to religious practice. On December 17, the European Union Court of Justice ruled EU member states may impose a requirement that animals be stunned prior to slaughter and that such a requirement does not infringe on the rights of religious groups.

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

Government Practices

On September 22, the Supreme Court upheld a ban on the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM). The organization was originally banned in 2017 by the Pirkenmaa District Court, but the Supreme Court, while keeping the ban in place, granted the organization the right to appeal the decision in 2019. According to the September ruling, NRM's activities violated or sought to violate fundamental and human rights protected by the constitution and international human rights treaties. In addition, the Supreme Court found that some of the group's activities violated the criminal code. Police continued to implement the 2017 ban of the NRM, but the organization continued to demonstrate in public and maintain a website, despite the Supreme Court's order that it refrain from all activities. The National Bureau of Investigation concluded an investigation in April that found that nine members of the NRM continued to operate the group under the name Towards Freedom. On its website, Towards Freedom publicized events it held in multiple cities. At these events, individuals gave out flyers and stickers advertising the organization, and recruited new members.

As of December, parliament had not voted on an amendment to the Church Act, which governs the practices of the ELC. Parliament took up the bill in 2018 after the General Synod of the ELC approved it but did not enact the bill that year. The amended Church Act has the stated intent of clarifying and facilitating administration, enhancing church autonomy, and facilitating internal decision-making in the ELC. The amended act would clarify the ELC's decision-making procedures. The Constitutional Law Committee argued that these details should not be addressed in the Church Act but rather in the Church Order, which is enacted by the ELC alone without parliament's approval.

According to a representative of the National Forum for Cooperation of Religions (CORE Forum), an interfaith group, the Ministry of Interior created a working group in August dedicated to improving security at religious sites. According to the ministry's website, the goal of the working group was to gather information on security threats directed at religious communities, especially Jewish synagogues and Muslim prayer rooms or mosques, and to propose suggestions for how safety could be enhanced through training and other measures.

According to the Secretary General of the Finnish Association of Museums, Kimmo Leva, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted plans to prepare a formal study of the state of research on the provenance of Holocaust-era art in museum collections, as recommended by the MEC in June, 2019. According to the MEC, the study was intended to address the lack of such research in order to better meet the requirements for the implementation of the Terezin Declaration on restitution of assets seized during the Holocaust. Leva said a national project to research all insufficient provenance information would be too large scale to conduct under restrictions caused by the coronavirus pandemic. He suggested the Finnish Association of Museums might crowdsource the research, following the example of the Finnish National Gallery, which, prior to the pandemic, had published a list online of all its art lacking sufficient provenance from the period 1933-1945. Leva said the MEC supported the strategy.

According to *Yle News*, in July, the Ministry of the Interior postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic an investigation into whether religious symbols, including headscarves, could be worn as part of police uniforms. The ministry was considering how the regulation on police uniforms could be amended. Minister of the Interior Maria Ohisalo said she would consider the results of the investigation when completed, then decide whether to launch a legislative reform proposal. The nondiscrimination ombudsman said current police uniform regulations ran counter to religious freedom and equality. According to the *Yle News* article, police were reluctant to alter the uniform. Ohisalo said the Ministry of Interior considered permitting religious symbols on police uniforms to be a means of integrating immigrants into society and giving them an equal chance to become police officers.

Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (MSAH) guidelines discouraged circumcision of males and continued to withhold public healthcare funding for such procedures. In its guidelines, which were recommendations rather than requirements per prior Supreme Court rulings, the ministry stated only licensed

physicians should perform nonmedical circumcision of boys, a child's guardians should be informed of the risks and irreversibility of the procedure, and it should not be carried out on boys old enough to understand the procedure without their consent. Members of the Muslim and Jewish communities continued to express disagreement with the guidelines. The ombudsman for children in the Ministry of Justice did not renew her 2018 request to the MSAH asking it to establish legally binding regulations on nonmedical circumcision.

Members of the opposition National Coalition Party (NCP) serving on parliament's Legal Affairs Committee called on the government to enact laws regarding nonmedical male circumcision. Parliamentarian Pihla Keto-Huovinen said that the nonmedical circumcision of boys could be problematic in terms of other existing domestic laws and international agreements, including the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, and that the fundamental rights of a child must not be violated by invoking the freedom of religion and conscience of another person. The call to revisit the legal status of nonmedical male circumcision was prompted by a separate citizen's initiative in 2019 calling for legislation banning female genital mutilation, though the citizen's initiative did not include the nonmedical circumcision of boys.

According to representatives from the Jehovah's Witnesses, the number of Russian-origin members of Jehovah's Witnesses applying for asylum based on stated religious persecution declined significantly compared to previous years. The Finnish Immigration Service (FIS) rejected most of the claims by members of Jehovah's Witnesses, and confirmed that asylum adjudicators did not consider membership in the Church alone to be sufficient basis for an asylum claim. More than 50 cases of Jehovah's Witnesses asylum applicants were pending before the Supreme Administrative Court at year's end. Authorities stated the government planned to deport applicants whose appeals were denied, and some Russian Jehovah's Witnesses whose asylum claims were rejected returned to Russia voluntarily.

According to representatives of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Finland, the FIS continued to deny most asylum applications for Ahmadi Muslims from Pakistan. The representatives said the FIS only considered "prominent persons" in the Ahmadi community to be in danger, while other Ahmadis should be able to move to safer areas of Pakistan instead of seeking asylum. The representatives said that when deportation orders were appealed, authorities requested proof that the individuals in question were in danger instead of considering the systematic persecution Ahmadis faced in Pakistan. The representatives said the group had

requested to meet with the Ministry of Interior to discuss the challenges the community faced, but the ministry declined.

According to a senior military officer, the military continued to maintain a zero-tolerance policy regarding hate speech and hate crimes, including religiously motivated incidents. Unit commanders initiated investigations of reported incidents. If a commander judged the infraction to be minor, he or she administered a formal reprimand or other punishment. For more serious offenses, the commander reported the investigation up the chain of command, and military authorities might refer the case to civilian courts. The officer also said the military accommodated, per regulation, religious dietary needs and fasting requirements, and granted religious leave and prayer time to all personnel. The officer said that these procedures were maintained during the COVID-19 pandemic and that recruits still had access to military chaplains while pandemic protocols were in place.

According to the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, in July, the Rovaniemi Court of Appeal upheld Finns Party MP Sebastian Tynkkynen's fine for ethnic agitation in connection with his 2016 Facebook post on Islam and terrorism. In the post, Tynkkynen had said immigrants moved to the same areas where people were being radicalized. He blamed terrorist attacks in Europe on multiculturalism. He wrote, "The fewer Islamic envoys in Finland, the better. The fewer Muslims we have, the safer." Tynkkynen denied having committed a crime and said his trial was politically motivated. The prosecutor in the case stated that Tynkkynen must have known his Facebook post was racist in nature and constituted defamatory hate speech directed at Muslims. In 2017, Tynkkynen was additionally convicted of ethnic agitation and the separate crime of breaching the sanctity of religion for other Facebook comments he posted in 2016. A third case for ethnic agitation was also pending at year's end that involved anti-Muslim Facebook posts Tynkkynen wrote in 2017. Oulu police referred that case to the district prosecutor for consideration of charges.

According to the *Helsinki Times*, in July, 121 members of parliament voted in favor of and 54 members voted against lifting immunity from prosecution for Finns Party MP Juha Maenpaa. This was short of the five-sixths majority (167 votes) required to revoke immunity and thereby made it impossible for the prosecutor general to bring charges against Maenpaa for ethnic agitation or disturbance of religious peace. During a June 2019 session of parliament, Maenpaa had equated asylum seekers from Muslim majority countries with alien or invasive species. Prosecutor Raija Toiviainen said she was disappointed with

the result. “It gives the impression that a minority voted to express its acceptance of racist hate speech.” Centre Party MP Mikko Karna, who voted against lifting Maenpaa’s immunity, wrote on Twitter, “Maenpaa used reprehensible and repulsive language in the Chamber, but in democracy, MPs cannot be brought to justice for speeches in the Chamber. The reprimands of the Speakers' Council must suffice.”

According to *Yle News*, in February, the Oulu District Court fined Oulu city councilor Junes Lokka for two counts of ethnic agitation. The court found that Lokka had posted online videos in 2016 depicting Muslims and other immigrants as being inferior to other human beings. According to the prosecutor, the speaker in one of the videos called immigrants and Muslims “worthless” and “sick” and stated that they should not even exist. One video showed a demonstration in Helsinki featuring anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim speech. The court ruled the videos violated laws on human dignity and religious freedom.

According to *Yle News*, in August, Helsinki police completed their investigation of SDP MP Hussein al-Tae for alleged anti-Semitic Facebook posts from 2011-2012, before he was elected to parliament, and referred the case to the prosecutor. The investigation began in August 2019, when existence of the posts was reported in media and police determined the prosecutor’s ability to act had not expired because the posts were still in circulation. At a press conference in September, 2019, al-Tae apologized to Jewish and Sunni Muslim communities for the posts and did not contest the police findings that his posts promoted ethnic agitation. Al-Tae had also in 2014, and possibly as late as 2016, made anti-Semitic comments online, including comparing Israel to ISIS. During that time, he was a private citizen. By the end of 2020, neither the Social Democratic Party nor parliament had taken any disciplinary action against al-Tae in light of the police findings.

According to the newspaper *Iltalehti*, in January, Pauliina Kuhlmann (SDP), a municipal councilor of Polvijarvi in North Karelia, questioned in a Facebook post whether the Holocaust had occurred. Kuhlmann posted that the estimate of six million deaths was “about 25 times the upper limit” of actual deaths, and referred to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp website as “false propaganda” and Israel’s Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum as a “propaganda museum.” Other members of the municipal council denounced Kuhlmann's post and in January she was expelled from the council. Kuhlmann resigned from the SDP in January and formally tendered her resignation from the council on January 31, which was accepted at the council’s next meeting on June 15. As of year’s end, there was no pending police investigation.

On February 20, the *Helsinki Times* reported Helsinki police questioned Christian Democrat MP Paivi Rasenen, a former Minister of Interior, for possible incitement to hatred on the basis of sexuality in connection with a booklet she published in 2004. According to the *Helsinki Times* article, the booklet, titled “Male and Female He Created Them – Homosexual Relationships Challenge the Christian Concept of Humanity,” argued that LGBTI relationships were incompatible with the Christian faith. Incitement to hatred on the basis of sexuality was outlawed in 1995. In June, 2019, Rasenen responded to news that the ELC was partnering with the Helsinki Pride Festival by posting a Bible passage coupled with the caption, “How can the church’s doctrinal foundation, the Bible, be compatible with the lifting up of shame and sin as a subject of pride?” At year’s end, the prosecutor was considering whether to bring charges in both cases.

The government allocated 115.6 million euros (\$141.84 million) to the ELC, compared with 114 million euros (\$139.88 million) in 2019, and 2.58 million euros (\$3.17 million) to the Finnish Orthodox Church, compared with 2.54 million euros (\$3.12 million) in 2019. The MEC allotted a total of 824,000 euros (\$1.01 million) to all other registered religious organizations, an increase of 300,000 euros (\$368,000) over 2019. The entire increase went to the Helsinki Jewish Congregation to continue its investments in security at facilities and events following anti-Semitic incidents. This was the second consecutive year the government provided this level of funding to this congregation for improving security; similar funding levels were included in the government’s fiscal plan for the next three years. According to the parliament’s Finance Committee, “The threats have not diminished, but increased anti-Semitism in many countries is also affecting the Finnish Jewish community.” In June, the government allocated an additional 4.5 million euros (\$5.52 million) to the ELC and the Finnish Orthodox Church to support their work in helping local communities during the pandemic.

The MEC awarded a total of 110,000 euros (\$135,000) to promote interfaith dialogue, an increase of 30,000 euros (\$36,800) over 2019. Three organizations split the funding: the CORE Forum, composed of representatives from the largest religious denominations; Fokus, an interfaith and intercultural organization; and Ad Astra, an organization promoting dialogue, interfaith projects, and inclusivity for children in schools, preschools, and daycare facilities.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In 2019, the latest period for which data were available, police reported 133 hate crimes against members of religious groups, including crimes involving assault, threats and harassment, discrimination, and vandalism, compared with 155 such incidents in 2018. There were 65 incidents involving Muslims, 42 involving Christians, including six involving Jehovah's Witnesses, 12 involving Jews, and 14 involving others or unknown religious groups. Police did not, however, cite any details of the incidents or release information on how many were motivated solely by religion. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

Despite the ban against it, the self-described neo-Nazi NRM continued to operate a website, made statements promoting discrimination or violence against Jews and Muslims, and participated in demonstrations, according to press reports. According to authorities, members of the NRM began operating as part of the Towards Freedom group, considered to be the NRM's successor by the National Bureau of Investigation.

Media reported Towards Freedom burned an Israeli flag during a rally in Tampere on January 27, meant to coincide with International Holocaust Remembrance Day, and said on its website that it carried out the burning. Officers of the Central Finland Police Department were present at the rally and spoke to those burning the flag, but they made no arrests. A spokesperson for the department said only the burning of the national flag (and not another nation's flag) is a criminal offense. Police subsequently announced they were investigating the flag burning as a case of illegal ethnic agitation. Media reported that on the same day, the front door, steps, and walls of Turku Synagogue were defaced with red paint. Police were investigating the incident as a property damage case but had made no arrests as of year's end. President Sauli Niinisto and other government officials denounced both incidents in official statements.

According to the newspaper *Ilta Sanomat*, on January 31, vandals defaced the building housing the Embassy of Israel with NRM stickers. The same night, unknown individuals placed similar stickers on Helsinki Synagogue. Israeli Ambassador Dov Segev-Steinberg told media that similar incidents had occurred numerous times in the last two years and that stickers were just one example of the vandalism and intimidation the embassy and Jews living in the country faced. Following the two incidents of vandalism, representatives of the Jewish

community reported feeling threatened and specifically targeted due to their beliefs.

According to *Yle News*, in April, unknown individuals vandalized a Jewish cemetery in Hamina by knocking over a tombstone and painting a white swastika on another. The more than 200-year-old cemetery was no longer in use. The mayor of Hamina, Hannu Muhonen, denounced the vandalism, and the Helsinki Jewish Congregation filed a criminal report concerning the incident. The police confirmed the matter was under investigation but said no perpetrators had been identified. Yaron Nadbornik, head of the Central Council of Jewish Communities in Finland, stated vandalism of Jewish cemeteries was uncommon, but said neo-Nazi leaflets had been distributed to mailboxes of nearby Hamina residents at the time of the incident. A pastor of the Hamina Orthodox Parish also reported seeing a leaflet advertising the neo-Nazi group Towards Freedom.

According to media reports, on August 16, the anti-immigrant National Alliance again organized a memorial march in Turku to commemorate the victims of a 2017 stabbing by a Moroccan asylum seeker. Approximately 300 persons joined the demonstration, holding banners that read, “White lives matter.” On the same day, the group Turku Without Nazis held a counterdemonstration. The website *Freigner.fi* showed a picture of one counter protester holding a sign reading, “No Nazis on our streets.”

NGOs working with migrants, including the Finnish Refugee Advice Centre, continued to raise concerns about the ability of religious minorities housed in migrant reception centers to worship without harassment from other migrants housed within the same center. A representative of the center said converts to Christianity in migrant reception facilities often experienced harassment, including social exclusion, threats, and blackmail.

A representative of the Core Forum said that in June or July, a mosque in Jarvenpaa was defaced with stickers promoting the NRM.

A representative of the Core Forum said that Muslim groups, including the Islamic Congregation of Finland, continued to seek adequate houses of worship that could accommodate their growing population, but that they were hindered by insufficient funds from purchasing property, given that most Muslims did not belong to congregations registered with the government and did not choose to register. Except for a handful of purpose-built mosques, most mosques were located in converted commercial spaces. A representative of the Core Forum said on

September 15 that this problem was driven by many Muslim congregations being too small to be able to raise the resources necessary to fund property purchases or construction.

Representatives of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Finland said other Muslim congregations continued to block the group's formal membership in interfaith organizations. A representative of the Core Forum said this was possibly because many Muslim groups did not consider Ahmadis to be "true Muslims."

Representatives of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Finland said the group planned to create a mosque and cultural center in the future and that although the mosque would be built solely with funds from the Ahmadi community, it would be open to all religious and nonreligious individuals.

The nondiscrimination ombudsman's office reported receiving 37 complaints of religious discrimination in 2019 – 4 percent of total discrimination complaints – compared with 35 complaints in 2018. In one example the report cited, a swimming hall prevented women and girls dressed in burkinis from swimming. The ombudsman recommended that swimming halls allow the wearing of burkinis.

Research by theologian Esko Kahkonen published in January by the Diakonia University of Applied Sciences indicated most religiously motivated hate crimes targeting Muslims were committed by Muslims from groups he said were more extreme. Individuals he termed "liberal Muslims," or Muslims from minority schools of Islam, were the most common victims, as well as individuals who had converted from Islam to Christianity. According to Kahkonen's research, which covered the period 2015-2016, only 8 percent of cases during that time were incidents in which non-Muslims targeted Muslims. Jenita Rauta, a researcher from the National Police Academy, said that the 2015-2016 data included many instances of hate crimes between Sunni and Shia Muslims and that an increase in the number of asylum seekers who were placed in reception centers without extensive background checks – intended to identify individuals with a history violent or illegal behavior – drove the phenomenon. Rauta said that more recent National Police Academy data from 2017-2018 showed a larger proportion of hate crimes targeting individuals who converted from Islam to Christianity.

The website *Magneettimedia* continued to post anti-Semitic content. In September, it published an article stating, "Harmful immigration to Europe is not the fault of the Islamic religion or Muslims, but is the fault of international Zionists and their global henchmen," and, "Israel and the related Khazar-mafia have taken as their objective causing confrontation between the Christian world and the

Islamic world.” Major companies and consumer brands continued to boycott the department store chain owned by the former owner of *Magneettimedia*, Juha Karkkainen, due to his anti-Semitic views.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, representatives of religious groups participated in virtual events hosted by other religious groups. Finn Church Aid (FCA), associated with the ELC, again hosted an interfaith iftar, bringing together virtually representatives from the major religious groups, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and municipal governments.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Throughout the year, embassy staff engaged with officials from the Ministries of Justice, Interior, and Foreign Affairs to discuss religious intolerance, the promotion of interfaith dialogue, and the treatment of Jehovah’s Witnesses in asylum adjudications. The embassy engaged with the police following several anti-Semitic incidents in January and encouraged the government to identify and prosecute those responsible. The Ambassador met with the Israeli Ambassador on several occasions to discuss these incidents and raised the concerns of the Israeli embassy with government officials and in media. The Ambassador also hosted a virtual board meeting of the Core Forum on November 17 to discuss the government’s response to COVID-19 and the ongoing parliamentary debate on nonmedical male circumcision.

Embassy staff engaged with Christian, Jewish, and Muslim clergy, lay activists from these communities, the Finnish Ecumenical Council, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other minority religious groups to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country. Embassy staff and members of the Jewish and Muslim communities discussed these communities’ shared concerns about the impact of the government guidelines discouraging male circumcision, religiously motivated crimes, and problems establishing a sufficient number of mosques for the Muslim population. Embassy staff also discussed anti-Muslim discrimination with representatives from different Muslim congregations and met regularly with NGOs such as the Core Forum and FCA. Embassy staff continued to engage with representatives of Jehovah’s Witnesses concerning the high rate of application denials for Jehovah’s Witnesses from Russia seeking asylum on grounds of religious persecution. Embassy staff met with representatives of the Ahmadi Muslim community, who expressed concerns over the high rate of denials of asylum applications for Ahmadis from Pakistan. Embassy staff also engaged with the Uyghur Muslim community.

A senior embassy official hosted the administrative head of the Jewish Community of Helsinki at an event intended to introduce the head to senior representatives from other foreign missions in the country to amplify the challenges of anti-Semitism in Finland.