

# **GREECE 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution states freedom of religious conscience is inviolable and provides for freedom of worship, with some restrictions. It recognizes Greek Orthodoxy as the “prevailing religion.” On June 11, the parliament passed legislation amending the penal code to remove laws criminalizing malicious blasphemy and religious insult. The penal code passed in June requires court witnesses to take a secular oath, thereby removing the option to choose a religious oath. In April the parliament approved eight million euros (\$8.99 million) for the construction of the Holocaust Museum of Greece. In September the country’s highest administrative court, the Council of State (CoS), ruled the curricula for religious education in elementary and secondary schools violated the constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and should be restructured to further differentiate Orthodox Christianity from other religions and to better develop an Orthodox Christian conscience, as mandated by the constitution. The CoS also ruled the inclusion of religious identity on student transcripts at the secondary level was unconstitutional. In June a presidential decree specified how official muftis in Thrace would administer decisions made under Islamic law, following a 2018 legislative amendment requiring notarized consent from all parties if they wished to adjudicate family matters using sharia instead of the civil courts. The same decree included organizational requirements for muftiates providing public sector services. A criminal trial continued for 69 members and supporters of the Golden Dawn (GD) political party accused of a series of violent attacks and arson, including targeting Muslim migrants. In July the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs granted a house of prayer permit to a religious community that worshipped ancient Greek gods. The government issued an additional 12 new house of prayer permits, including to Jehovah’s Witnesses, Muslim groups, and Pentecostals, but revoked five others on the grounds the houses of worship had ceased operation or did not comply with construction or security regulations. The Greek Orthodox Church, the Muslim minority of Thrace, Jewish communities, and the Roman Catholic Church continued to receive some government benefits not available to other religious communities. Some members of Thrace’s Muslim minority continued to oppose the government’s appointment of muftis, stating the community should elect them. The government continued to fund Holocaust education programs. In February the government adopted the working definition of anti-Semitism in accordance with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), and in November, Greece became the first country to adopt the alliance’s working definition of Holocaust denial and distortion.

Vandalism of religious properties, including Holocaust memorials, a Muslim cemetery in Alexandroupolis, and Greek Orthodox churches, continued. On January 24, a previously unknown organization, the Iconoclastic Sect, claimed responsibility for a December 2018 explosion outside a Greek Orthodox church. Unknown vandals desecrated a monument marking the site of a former Jewish cemetery on the campus of Aristotle University in Thessaloniki. Archbishop Ieronymos of the Greek Orthodox Church and government officials, including the then mayor of Thessaloniki, Yannis Boutaris, denounced the attack. On April 10, individuals vandalized two metal memorial plaques at the Thessaloniki port dedicated to persons who perished during the Holocaust. In September the country's first crematorium began operations, implementing a 2006 law permitting the cremation of remains.

The U.S. Ambassador, visiting U.S. government officials, and other embassy and consulate representatives met with officials of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, including the minister and the secretary general for religious affairs, and officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and governors. They discussed the ability of minority religious communities to establish houses of worship and government initiatives affecting both the Muslim minority in Thrace and Muslim immigrants. In meetings with government officials and religious leaders, including the head of the Greek Orthodox Church, U.S. government officials expressed concern about anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim acts and rhetoric and attacks on Orthodox churches. On May 7- 8, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom visited Mount Athos and met with the governor of the peninsula, representatives of the governing Holy Community, an abbot, and monks from three monasteries, emphasizing U.S. support for religious freedom. He and his advisors also held meetings with the Archbishop of Athens and All Greece, the secretary general for religious affairs, the three official muftis in Thrace, advocates of the religious rights of ethnic Turks, representatives of Pomaks and of Alevites, the Jewish community in Thessaloniki, and members of the Evangelical Church.

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

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.8 million (midyear 2019 estimate), with 81 to 90 percent identifying as Greek Orthodox, 4 to 15 percent atheist, and 2 percent Muslim.

In Thrace, there are approximately 140,000 Muslims, according to government sources using 2011 data; they are largely descendants of the Muslim minority officially recognized in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. According to a Pew Research Center study released in November 2017, an additional 520,000 Muslims – mostly immigrants and asylum seekers from Southeastern Europe, South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa – reside throughout the country, clustered in communities by their countries of origin or in reception facilities. Government sources estimate half reside in Athens.

According to data provided by other religious communities, their members combined constitute 3 to 5 percent of the population. These include Old Calendarist Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, members of polytheistic Hellenic religions, Scientologists, Baha'is, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Sikhs, Seventh-day Adventists, Buddhists, and members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). . Independent and media sources estimate Ethiopian Orthodox number 2500, and Assyrians less than 1,000. The Armenian Orthodox Archbishop, interviewed in 2018, estimated there are 100,000 Armenian Orthodox

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution recognizes Greek Orthodoxy as the “prevailing religion.” It states freedom of religious conscience is inviolable and provides for freedom of worship under the protection of the law, with some restrictions. The constitution prohibits “proselytizing,” defined by law as “any direct or indirect attempt to intrude on the religious beliefs of a person of a different religious persuasion with the aim of undermining those beliefs through inducement, fraudulent means, or taking advantage of the other person’s inexperience, trust, need, low intellect, or naivete.” The constitution prohibits worship that “disturbs public order or offends moral principles.” It allows prosecutors to seize publications that “offend Christianity” or other “known religions.” The law provides penalties of up to two years in prison for individuals who maliciously attempt to prevent or who intentionally disrupt a religious gathering for worship or a religious service, and for individuals engaging in “insulting action” inside a church or place of worship. On June 11, the parliament passed legislation that amended the penal code by abolishing articles criminalizing malicious blasphemy and religious insult. The constitution enumerates the goals of public education, including “the development of religious

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

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

The Greek Orthodox Church, Jewish community, and Muslim minority of Thrace have long-held status as official religious public law legal entities. The Catholic Church, Anglican Church, two evangelical Christian groups, and the Ethiopian, Coptic, Armenian Apostolic, and Assyrian Orthodox Churches automatically acquired the status of religious legal entities under a 2014 law. The same law also allows groups seeking recognition to become “religious legal entities” under civil law.

The recognition process requires filing a request with the civil courts, providing documents proving the group has “open rituals and no secret doctrines,” supplying a list of 300 signatory members who do not adhere to other religious groups, demonstrating there is a leader who is legally in the country and is otherwise qualified, and showing their practices do not pose a threat to public order. Once a civil court recognizes a group, it sends a notification to the Secretariat General for Religions. Under the law, all religious officials of known religions and official religious legal entities, including the Greek Orthodox Church, the muftiates of Thrace, and the Jewish communities, must register in the electronic database maintained by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs.

The law also provides a second method for groups to obtain government recognition: any religious group that has obtained at least one valid permit to operate a place of prayer is considered a “known religion” and thereby acquires legal protection, including a tax exemption for property used for religious purposes. Membership requirements for house of prayer permits differ from the requirements for religious legal entities. Local urban planning departments in charge of monitoring and enforcing public health and safety regulations certify that facilities designated to operate as places of worship fulfill the necessary standards. Once a house of worship receives planning approvals, a religious group must submit a description of its basic principles and rituals and a biography of the religious minister or leader to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs for final approval. The application for a house of prayer permit requires at least five signatory members of the group. The leaders of a religious group applying for a

house of prayer permit must be Greek citizens, European Union nationals, or legal residents of the country, and must possess other professional qualifications, including relevant education and experience. A separate permit is required for each physical place of worship.

A religious group possessing status as a religious legal entity may transfer property and administer houses of prayer and worship, private schools, charitable institutions, and other nonprofit entities. Some religious groups have opted to retain their status as civil society nonprofit associations acquired through court recognition prior to the 2014 law. Under this status, religious groups may operate houses of prayer and benefit from real estate property tax exemptions, but they may face administrative and fiscal difficulties in transferring property and in operating private schools, charitable institutions, and other nonprofit entities.

All recognized religious groups are subject to taxation on property used for nonreligious purposes. Property used solely for religious purposes remains exempt from taxation, as well as from municipal fees, for groups classified as religious legal entities or “known religions.”

The law allows religious communities without status as legal entities to appear before administrative and civil courts as plaintiffs or defendants.

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne accords the recognized Muslim minority of Thrace the right to maintain mosques and social and charitable organizations (*awqaaf*). A 1991 law authorizes the government, in consultation with a committee of Muslim leaders, to appoint three muftis in Thrace to 10-year terms of office which may be extended. The law also allows a regional official to appoint temporary acting muftis until this committee convenes. The law mandates official muftis in Thrace must request notarized consent from all parties wishing to adjudicate a family matter based on sharia. Absent notarized consent from all parties, family matters fall under the jurisdiction of civil courts. The law also provides for the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs to assume all operating expenses for the muftiates in Thrace, under the supervision of the Ministry of Finance Directorate General for Fiscal Monitoring.

The law establishes an individual’s right to choose his or her burial or cremation location and mandates that death certificates detail this information. In the presence of a notary, individuals may designate the location and method of funeral service under conditions that adhere to public order, hygiene, or moral ethics, as well as to designate a person responsible for carrying out funeral preferences.

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

Home schooling of children is not permitted. The law requires all children to attend 11 years of compulsory education in state or private schools, including two years of preschool education, in accordance with the official school curriculum. Religious instruction in primary and secondary schools is included in the curriculum. School textbooks focus mainly on Greek Orthodox teachings; however, they also include basic information on some other “known religions.” Students may be exempted from religious instruction upon request if their parents state in writing that the students are not Greek Orthodox believers. Exempted students have a free hour, but no alternative class is offered.

The law provides for optional Islamic religious instruction in public schools in Thrace for the recognized Muslim minority and optional Catholic religious instruction in public schools on the islands of Tinos and Syros. The law also includes provisions to make it easier for schools to hire and retain religious instructors for those optional courses. On January 29, the parliament amended legislation regarding Catholic teachers who serve in public schools and become bishops in the Catholic Church. Upon teachers’ requests, the law grants them exemption from teaching and administrative duties to undertake responsibilities related to Catholic teaching and the lifelong training of Catholic teachers, which allows them to keep a salary, which bishops do not receive.

The law allows Muslim students in primary and secondary schools throughout the country to be absent for two days each for Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.

According to the law, parents may send their children to private religious schools. Private Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish schools operate in the country. As per the Lausanne Treaty, the government operates bilingual secular schools in Thrace, which totaled 128 in 2018-2019. Bilingual schools operate in Greek and Turkish, and their number may vary according to the number of registered students, with a minimum of five students per school. There are two Islamic religious schools in Thrace. Muslim students in Thrace wishing to study the Quran may attend after-hours religious classes in mosques.

The law establishes an annual 0.5 percent quota for admission of students from the recognized Muslim minority in Thrace to universities, technical institutes, and civil

service positions. Similarly, 2 percent of students entering the national fire brigade school and academy are required to be from the Muslim minority in Thrace.

The law provides for alternative forms of mandatory service for religious conscientious objectors in lieu of the nine-month mandatory minimum military service for men. Conscientious objectors must serve 15 months of alternative service in state hospitals or municipal and public services. On May 3, parliament amended legislation regarding conscientious objectors.

Individuals or legal entities convicted of incitement to violence, discrimination, or hatred based on religion, among other factors, may be sentenced to prison terms of between three months and three years and fined 5,000 to 20,000 euros (\$5,600-\$22,500). Violators convicted of other crimes motivated by religion may be sentenced to an additional six months to three years, with fines doubled. The law criminalizes approval, trivialization, or malicious denial of the Holocaust and “crimes of Nazism” if that behavior leads to incitement of violence or hatred or has a threatening or abusive nature towards groups of individuals.

The law requires all civil servants, including cabinet and parliament members, to take an oath before entering office; individuals are free to take a religious or secular oath in accordance with their beliefs. Witnesses in trials must also take oaths before testifying in court. The new penal code that took effect July 1 requires witnesses in courts to take only a secular oath. Previously, witnesses could choose a religious or secular oath.

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

### **Government Practices**

On May 7, the parliament passed legislation defining as “religious community archives” all the archival material filed or processed at the muftiates of Thrace; the Central Board of the Jewish Communities in Greece; the organizations for the management of *awqaaf* land property on the islands of Rhodes and in Kos; the private *awqaaf* of Rhodes; religious and ecclesiastical legal entities; and known religions and licensed houses of worship. The law also provides that archives be preserved in good condition, be accessible to the public, and be catalogued under the national directory for archives of the state archives authority. The law includes similar provisions for the archives of the Church of Greece, the Church of Crete, the dioceses of the Dodecanese Islands, the Patriarchal Exarchate of Patmos, Mount Athos, monasteries, parish churches, and Orthodox Church foundations.

The criminal trial of 69 GD party members and supporters, including 18 of its former members of parliament, continued through the end of the year. The charges related to a string of attacks, including on Muslim migrants and Greeks, and included murder, conspiracy, weapons possession, and membership in a criminal organization.

On September 17, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs announced it would comply with a recommendation by the Data Protection Authority and stop indicating religion and nationality in school records. Following an appeal by the Hellenic League for Human Rights and the Atheist Union, the authority ruled that references to religion and nationality in school records were unconstitutional, unlawful, and contrary to the provisions of the European Convention of Human Rights. The authority also ruled that requiring written declarations that students who were not Christian Orthodox be exempted from attending religious class was unlawful. According to the authority, a written declaration by students (or their parents, in the case of minors) requesting exemption on the grounds of religious conscience was sufficient. On October 31, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled in favor of five Greek plaintiffs who had appealed ministerial decisions requiring written declarations that they were not Christian Orthodox. According to the ECHR, such requirements placed an undue burden on parents to disclose information that implied that they and their children held, or did not hold, a specific religious belief. The court ruled the requirement for such declarations could discourage exemption requests, especially from families residing on small islands where the risk of stigmatization was higher. The judgment found the requirement to be a violation of the right to education, and cited freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. On September 25, the CoS ruled the inscription of religion on school transcripts at the secondary level of education was unconstitutional. According to the CoS, “Freedom of religious conscience entails, inter alia, the right of persons not to disclose, whether directly or indirectly, their religion or religious beliefs. No state authority or body is allowed to seek a person’s religious belief and, even more, enforce its disclosure.”

On September 20, the plenary session of the CoS ruled the curricula for religious education in primary and secondary schools must be restructured because they were unconstitutional and violated the European Convention on Human Rights. The constitution requires the state to develop a religious conscience in students, and it was not doing so, the CoS ruled. Because non-Orthodox Christian students may request and be granted an exemption from religious classes, the CoS ruled that the teaching of religion, as currently implemented, must focus on the Orthodox

Christian students who take the classes. The current curricula did not provide a holistic approach to the tradition and ethics of Orthodox Christianity and clearly differentiate it from other religions, and ultimately did not serve the needs of Orthodox Christian students, the CoS ruled. The ruling also reiterated that if a “sufficient” number of students were excused from the religious classes, the state would be obliged to hold a different class for them during that time slot.

The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church in Athens and an Old Calendarist group applied to the courts seeking recognition as religious legal entities. Their applications were pending at year’s end.

On July 31, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs announced it would close five primary minority schools, citing low student attendance. From 2011-2019, 50 minority schools in Thrace closed according to government data.

Religious groups lacking religious-entity status and no house of prayer permits, including Scientologists and ISKCON, continued to function as registered, nonprofit civil law organizations. The government did not legally recognize weddings conducted by members of those religious groups, whose only option was a civil marriage.

On July 3, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs granted for the first time a house of prayer permit, in Athens, to a religious community that worships ancient Greek gods. The government also approved an additional 12 permits for houses of prayer, including nine for Jehovah’s Witnesses (in Attica Region and in the cities of Serres, Trikala, Aegio, and on Paros Island), one for Pentecostals, and two for Sunni Muslim groups in the municipality of Aspropyrgos and in the district of Metaxourgio, in greater Athens. The government revoked permits of the Armenian Evangelical Church in Athens and in Thessaloniki because the churches ceased operations. The government also revoked the permit of a Jehovah’s Witness house of prayer in Thessaloniki on the grounds the facility did not meet fire protection requirements. It also revoked a permit of an Old Calendarist group on the grounds its facility did not conform with construction regulations, as well as one permit of an evangelical Christian group on the island of Zakyntos because the group had changed its official name. There were no pending applications at year’s end. The government approved the construction of three Jehovah’s Witnesses Kingdom Halls and one structure for the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church. On December 10, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs licensed three mosques on the islands of Kos and Rhodes that had been operating as places of worship prior to 1955 but lacked construction permit documents,

according to media reports. The lack of permits had resulted in several bureaucratic issues regarding licensing, operation, and restoration requirements.

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

The government continued to provide direct support to the Greek Orthodox Church, including funding for religious leaders' salaries, estimated at 200 million euros (\$224.7 million) annually; the religious and vocational training of clergy; and religious instruction in schools. Greek Orthodox officials stated the government provided this direct support in accordance with a series of legal agreements with past governments and as compensation for religious property previously expropriated by the state, a statement that government officials acknowledged. The government also provided direct support to the muftiates in Thrace, including salaries for the three official muftis and for teachers contracted to teach the optional class of Islamic religion in local public schools.

Some members of the Muslim minority in Thrace continued to object to the government's practice of appointing muftis, pressing instead for direct election of muftis by the Muslim minority. The government continued to state that government appointment was appropriate because the muftis retained judicial powers and because the constitution does not permit the election of judges. On June 11, a presidential decree determined how official muftis in Thrace would administer decisions made under Islamic law in the wake of a 2018 legislative amendment requiring notarized consent of all parties if they wished to adjudicate family matters using sharia instead of the civil courts. The same decree also included provisions on how the muftiates would operate in terms of internal organization, staffing, and transparency. During the year, all three muftiates in Thrace continued to be led by temporary, acting muftis appointed under the latter procedure.

Some members of the Muslim minority in Thrace continued to object to the government appointment of members entrusted to oversee endowments, real estate, and charitable funds of the *awqaaf*, stating the Muslim minority in Thrace should elect these members. Muslim leaders continued to criticize the lack of Islamic cemeteries outside Thrace, stating this obliged Muslims to transport their dead to Thrace for Islamic burials. They also continued to state that municipal cemetery regulations requiring exhumation of bodies after three years because of a shortage of space contravened Islamic religious law. At least three sites, on Lesbos Island,

in Schisto, and near the land border with Turkey in Evros, continued to be used unofficially for the burial of Muslim migrants and asylum seekers.

The government completed the construction and landscaping of a government-funded mosque in Athens in June. According to government sources, however, time-consuming requirements for hiring new personnel prevented the mosque from opening by year's end. On May 20, a presidential decree determined the bylaws of the managing committee of the mosque made it a public organization under private law. The bylaws addressed internal administration, personnel, budget, procurement, and contracts. On April 2, the mosque's managing committee unanimously recommended the appointment of Moroccan-born, naturalized Greek citizen Zaki Mohammed as its imam.

In the absence of an official mosque in Athens, central and local government authorities continued to provide space free of charge to groups whose members requested places of worship during Ramadan and for other religious occasions.

On March 13, media reported that the Ministry of Environment issued a decree determining the location and use of space for the establishment of a municipally managed crematorium in Eleonas, Athens.

The government continued to fund Catholic religious training and teachers' salaries in state schools on the islands of Syros and Tinos, trips for non-Jewish students to Holocaust remembrance events and Auschwitz, and Holocaust education training for teachers. Throughout the 2018-2019 school year, 120 students participated in a government-funded educational trip to the Auschwitz concentration camp. The government also supported and organized initiatives promoting religious tolerance. In a February 12 statement, the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece (KIS) hailed the adoption on February 11 by the General Secretariat for Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Education of a working definition of anti-Semitism, in accordance with the IHRA. On November 8, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis affirmed this position. During the same period, the country became the first to adopt the IHRA's working definition of Holocaust denial and distortion.

On October 10, KIS issued a statement denouncing an anti-Semitic attack in Germany and welcomed the timely response by the Ministry for Citizen Protection that provided protection for the headquarters of Jewish foundations in Greece. It hailed the statement by Minister of Education and Religious Affairs Niki Kerameus condemning the incident. On April 23, the Ministry of Education and

Religious Affairs for the first time hosted a Passover seder, organized by the Jewish community of Athens. In addition to 350 Jewish participants and the ministry's leadership, Archimandrite Dionysios represented the Archbishop of Athens and All Greece at the event. On February 28 and March 1, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized an international conference on religious and ecclesiastical diplomacy in the 21st century that brought together religious leaders of various faiths, as well as academics and government officials. Participants from Orthodox churches, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Armenians, Coptic Christians, Assyrians, and Syrian Orthodox Christians all discussed ways they could cooperate.

On May 3, a large delegation including then parliament speaker Nikos Voutsis, President of Jewish Communities of Greece David Saltiel, and other members of parliament participated in the 31st annual "March of the Living" at the site of Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. The march highlighted the history of Greek Jews in the Holocaust; Voutsis marked the occasion by presenting artifacts from the new permanent Greek exhibit in the Auschwitz museum. The exhibit, entitled "Remember Me, as I Remember You," was funded by parliament and organized through cooperation with the Jewish Museum of Greece.

On February 27, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized a conference in conjunction with the country's leadership of the International Tracing Service that focused on the work of the International Documentation Center on Nazi Persecution. The ministry also hosted an exhibition, "Stolen Memory," which featured the efforts of victims of Nazi atrocities to trace their relatives and recover personal items stored at the Arolsen Archives.

On February 28, then deputy foreign minister Markos Bolaris addressed the fifth National Peace Symposium, organized in Athens by the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community of Greece. Bolaris highlighted the importance of cross-cultural efforts to promote peace.

Some religious groups and human rights organizations continued to label as discriminatory the discrepancy between the length of mandatory alternative service for conscientious objectors (15 months) and the length of mandatory minimum military service (nine months).

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

On July 13, the Minister for Agricultural Development and Food, Makis Voridis, defended himself against accusations he had expressed anti-Semitic views in the past. Voridis said he “denounced any action, omission, or tolerance of any action by a third party that could be interpreted as anti-Semitic or neo-Nazi.” On July 16, KIS issued a statement that it “takes into consideration and values the explanations” provided by the minister and that it hoped to see him undertake concrete initiatives to demonstrate his sincerity and to combat intolerance and anti-Semitism. On July 22, Voridis visited the Jewish Museum of Greece to signal the government’s support in highlighting the history and longstanding presence of Jews in the country.

On April 24, the parliament passed legislation to grant eight million euros (\$8.99 million) for the construction of the Holocaust Museum of Greece.

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

Statistics by the Racist Violence Recording Network (RVRN) for 2018, the most recent year available, showed 74 cases in which immigrants or refugees were targeted for their religion, among other grounds, compared with 34 cases in 2017, a development it attributed to global political polarization, among other factors. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as solely or primarily based on religious identity. The RVRN recorded nine incidents in which the targets were sacred or symbolic for the Jewish community: six incidents of desecration of Holocaust memorials in Athens and Thessaloniki, two involving the desecration of the Jewish cemeteries in Nikaia and Trikala, and one incident of vandalism of the synagogue in Volos.

In its 2018 report, the RVRN included information communicated to the network by police regarding incidents reported to law enforcement authorities that potentially involved racist motives. Based on this information, police received 28 reports of racist violence based on religion – as many as in the previous year. Police reported, without providing details on specific cases, that approximately 40 percent were hate-speech related cases, without any physical violence. Hate-crime-related data provided to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe by police in 2018 showed eight cases of anti-Semitism, six cases of bias against Muslims, six against Christians, and three against other religious groups.

On January 25, media reported that a court held a trial in absentia for an Old Calendarist, excommunicated monk (“Father Kleomenis”), who had attacked and vandalized the Holocaust Monument in Larissa in July 2017. The court sentenced

him to an 18-month suspended prison sentence and a 7,500 euro fine (\$8,400). Police spotted and arrested him on November 17.

On April 18, a misdemeanor appeals court in Thessaloniki sentenced a medical doctor to a suspended 14-month jail term for displaying an anti-Semitic sign in 2014 at his municipal practice that read, “Jews Are Not Welcome Here” in German.

On January 19, a previously unknown group called the Iconoclastic Sect claimed responsibility in a post on a Spanish website for a December 2018 explosion outside the Greek Orthodox Church of Agios Dionysios, in central Athens. The group stated on the website that its objective was to cause the “greatest possible damage to a priest and/or to the herd of the faithful.”

Vandalism of Holocaust monuments and memorials continued in the city of Thessaloniki. On January 25, unknown individuals damaged a monument on the campus of Aristotle University in Thessaloniki marking the site of the former Jewish cemetery. On January 28, Archbishop Ieronymos of the Greek Orthodox Church denounced the attack, identifying “the desecration and vandalism of synagogues, Jewish cemeteries, and Holocaust memorials” as “hideous acts that brutally offend our history, culture, nation, and faith.” Government officials, including then mayor of Thessaloniki Yannis Boutaris, denounced the incident and held a silent protest at the site.

Incidents targeting places of religious importance by such means as vandalism, burglaries, and the placement of explosive devices increased by 6 percent in 2018 from the previous year, according to the annual report released on December 19 by the Ministry of Education’s Department of Religious Freedom and Interfaith Relations, Secretariat General for Religions. In total, 591 incidents were recorded, 569 of which targeted Christian sites, 20 Jewish sites (an increase of 81 percent, compared with 2017), three Jehovah’s Witnesses sites, and two Islamic sites. On April 10, perpetrators vandalized two memorial plaques at the port of Thessaloniki dedicated to victims of the Holocaust. Throughout the year, media and police recorded numerous incidents of vandalism targeting Greek Orthodox premises and chapels. For example, on March 3 media reported that unknown individuals vandalized a church on the island of Chios, also removing ecclesiastical objects. On August 26, the anarchist group Nucleus of Anarchist Witches vandalized a chapel in the district of Sepolia, western Athens, using graffiti to desecrate five religious icons displayed in the shrine. On May 28, unknown perpetrators desecrated the Muslim cemetery in Alexandroupolis in the Thrace region, spray-

painting graffiti, nationalist slogans, and the GD emblem, and scattering flyers that proclaimed, “Greece belongs to the Greeks.” On May 29, GD leader Nikos Michaloliakos denounced these acts and denied his party’s involvement. On May 30, the then secretary general for transparency and human rights referred the case to the public prosecutor. No arrests were reported for any of these 2019 incidents.

In May the European Commission carried out a study in each EU-member state on perceptions of discrimination and published the results in September. According to the findings, 50 percent of respondents believed discrimination on the basis of religion or belief was widespread in Greece, while 49 percent said it was rare; 66 percent would be comfortable with having a person of different religion than the majority of the population occupy the highest elected political position in the country. In addition, 99 percent said they would be comfortable working closely with a Christian, and 82 percent said they would be with an atheist, 82 percent with a Jew, 78 percent with a Buddhist, and 73 percent with a Muslim. Asked how they would feel if their child were in a “love relationship” with an individual belonging to various groups, 99 percent said they would be comfortable if the partner were Christian, 67 percent if atheist, 63 percent if Jewish, 56 percent if Buddhist, and 48 percent if Muslim.

The direct and indirect linking of Jews to conspiracy theories with regard to the country’s sovereignty continued; individuals mostly expressed these views on social media. On September 7, several local media reported that Jews do not suffer from cancer because they control chemotherapy medication bound for non-Jewish persons around the world and use for themselves “biological methods” to address cancer, such as body, mind, and soul detoxification, and healthy nutrition.

In January the European Commission published a Special Eurobarometer survey of perceptions of anti-Semitism based on interviews it conducted in December 2018 in each EU-member state. According to the survey, 68 percent of residents believed anti-Semitism was not a problem in Greece, and 52 percent believed it has stayed the same over the previous five years. The percentage who believed that anti-Semitism was a problem in nine different categories was as follows: Holocaust denial, 36 percent; on the internet, 32 percent; anti-Semitic graffiti or vandalism, 31 percent; expression of hostility or threats targeting Jews in public places, 30 percent; desecration of Jewish cemeteries, 33 percent; physical attacks on Jews, 31 percent; anti-Semitism in schools and universities, 29 percent; anti-Semitism in political life, 30 percent; and anti-Semitism in media, 28 percent.

According to the Pew Research Global Attitudes Survey released in October, 57 percent of respondents in the country expressed unfavorable opinions of Muslims, while 38 percent expressed unfavorable opinions of Jews.

On May 13, KIS expressed concern about political cartoons and images in media that exploited political controversies by using Jewish symbols and comparisons to the Holocaust, or by equating Jews with Nazis. KIS issued a statement criticizing journalist Kostas Vaxevanis for using in a political commentary a cartoon that displayed the “Arbeit macht Frei” (“Work sets you free”) sign at the entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp. Vaxevanis said he was arguing against statements by then-opposition leader Mitsotakis supporting a seven-day work week, paraphrasing the entrance sign as “12 hours of labor set you free.”

On March 26, media reported a private citizen in Chania, Crete, filed a complaint with the Supreme Court prosecutor accusing the author of the book *Redemption*, Dimitris Alikakos, of religious insult and spreading inaccuracies. In his book, Alikakos said the Holy Fire, which is lit every year at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem on Holy Saturday before Easter, was not the result of a miracle, as per Orthodox Christian tradition. There were no reports of action taken by the Supreme Court prosecutor.

On September 30, the country’s first crematorium, located in Ritsona and privately owned, began operations. Prior to the facility’s establishment, cremation was not an option for residents, many of whom had to travel to neighboring countries for the procedure. Efforts by some local governments to establish municipally owned crematories continued throughout the year.

There was no public decision on the 2018 judicial complaint filed by the NGO Greece Helsinki Monitor against local governments, Orthodox priests, and some media for propagating the custom of the “burning of Judas” during Orthodox Easter celebrations.

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

The Ambassador, visiting officials, and embassy and consulate representatives discussed religious freedom with officials and representatives of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, including the minister and the secretary general for religious affairs, and officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, such as Deputy Minister Markos Bolaris, Special Secretary for Religious and Cultural Diplomacy Eftsathios Lianos Liantis, and Civil Governors for Mount Athos Kostis

Dimtsas and Athanasios Martinos. They discussed the ability of minority religious communities to exercise their rights to religious freedom, government initiatives affecting both the Muslim minority in Thrace and Muslim immigrants, progress regarding the opening of the first public mosque in Athens, the enforcement of counter-proselytism legislation by law enforcement, keeping the independence of churches and religions from foreign malign influence, and government initiatives promoting interreligious dialogue. U.S. officials expressed concerns about anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim acts and rhetoric throughout the year and denounced vandalism of religious sites, including the desecration of the Islamic cemetery in Alexandroupolis. The Ambassador worked with the minister of defense to facilitate Ministry of Defense contributions to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum archives.

On May 7-8, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom visited Mount Athos and met with the governor, representatives of the governing Holy Community, an abbot, and monks from three of the monasteries. The Ambassador and his advisors met with Archbishop Ieronymos, Secretary General for Religious Affairs Kalantzis, the three official muftis in Thrace, advocates of the religious rights of ethnic Turks, representatives of Pomaks and of Alevites, the Jewish community in Thessaloniki, and members of the Evangelical Church.

Embassy officials, including the Ambassador and the Consul General, met with religious leaders, including the archbishop and other representatives of the Greek Orthodox Church, as well as members of the Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, Baha'i, and Jehovah's Witnesses communities, to promote interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance, and diversity. Through these meetings, the embassy monitored the ability of minority religious groups to practice freely their religion and the extent of societal discrimination against both indigenous religious minorities and newly arrived minority religious group migrants.

The Ambassador met with representatives of the Eastern Orthodox Church, including Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Archbishop Ieronymos, Metropolitan Emmanuel of France, Archbishop of America Elpidophoros, and the Metropolitan of Karpenisi. The Ambassador discussed with Greek Orthodox leaders the importance of religious tolerance and dialogue. The Ambassador also met with representatives from the Athens and Thessaloniki Jewish communities.

On October 17-18, the Consul General in Thessaloniki visited the monastic peninsula of Mount Athos and met with the governing Holy Community, abbots, and monks from two monasteries. The Consul General also met with the

Metropolitans of Thessaloniki, Langadas, Xanthi, Komotini, and Alexandroupoli, with David Saltiel, president of the Greek Jewish community, with the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community of Greece, as well as with academics and theologians, to discuss the status of religious freedom in the northern part of the country and concerns of religious communities. The Consul General attended events organized by the Thessaloniki Jewish Community to honor the memory of Holocaust victims and promote tolerance, including a January 28 silent protest denouncing vandalism of Jewish sites at the former Jewish cemetery on the Aristotle University campus. He met with government officials, including then mayor of Thessaloniki Yannis Boutaris, in February.

As part of engagements by U.S. officials, the embassy and consulate promoted religious tolerance and the right of religious freedom on social media and emphasized that religious freedom is a U.S. government priority.