

AFGHANISTAN 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion, but stipulates followers of religions other than Islam are free to exercise their faith within the limits of the law. Conversion from Islam to another religion is apostasy, which is punishable by death, imprisonment, or confiscation of property according to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, which the constitution states shall apply “if there is no provision in the constitution or other laws about a case.” According to the Supreme Court, the Bahai Faith is distinct from Islam and is a form of blasphemy, which is also a capital offense under Hanafi jurisprudence. The law prohibits the production and publishing of works contrary to the principles of Islam or offensive to other religions. The criminal code punishes verbal and physical assaults on a follower of any religion with a prison sentence of not less than three months. As in the past two years, there were no reported prosecutions for apostasy or blasphemy, but individuals who converted from Islam to other religions stated they continued to fear punishment from the government and reprisals from family and society. Members of the Hindu and Sikh communities reported they continued to avoid settling disputes in the courts for fear of retaliation and preferred to settle disputes through community councils. Representatives of minority religions continued to report the courts denied non-Muslims the same rights as Muslims. A small number of Sikhs and Hindus continued to serve in government positions. Shia Muslims, although holding some major government positions, said the number of positions did not reflect their demographics and complained the government neglected security in majority-Shia areas.

The Taliban and the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), an affiliate of ISIS and a U.S. designated terrorist organization, continued to attack and kill members of minority religious communities because of their beliefs or their links to the government. The ISKP publicly claimed responsibility for attacks killing over 100 members of the Shia community. In July a suicide bombing targeted a protest attended primarily by members of the Shia-majority Hazara community, killing at least 97 and injuring more than 260. In October gunmen entered the Karte-Sakhi mosque and opened fire on worshippers gathering to mark the Shia holiday of Ashura, killing 17 worshippers and wounding 58, including women and children. The ISKP claimed responsibility for both attacks. The Taliban were responsible for a number of kidnappings of Shia Hazaras and continued to threaten clerics with death for preaching messages contrary to the Taliban’s interpretation of Islam.

They warned mullahs not to perform funeral prayers for government security officials. The Taliban also continued to impose punishments on residents in areas under Taliban control according to their interpretation of Islamic law.

Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, and other non-Muslim minorities stated they continued to face harassment and occasional violence. Hindus and Sikhs said they were still able to practice their religions publicly, although Sikhs reported instances in which they were told they did not belong in the country. Christians continued to report hostile public opinion towards Christian proselytizing and said they continued to worship privately to avoid societal discrimination and persecution. Women of several different religions reported local Muslim religious leaders initiated confrontations with them over their attire. As a result, they said, almost all women wore some form of head covering. Minority religious leaders stated only a few places of worship remained available for the decreasing numbers of Sikhs and Hindus, who were emigrating because of discrimination and the lack of employment opportunities. Hindus and Sikhs reported continued interference in their efforts to cremate the remains of their dead from individuals who lived near cremation sites, including an incident in which unknown individuals threw stones at a cremation site following a Sikh's cremation. Observers stated discrimination against the Shia minority by the Sunni majority continued to decline, although there continued to be reports of discrimination in some localities.

U.S. embassy officers met with senior government officials to promote religious tolerance, to discuss the protection of religious minorities, and to enhance the government's capacity to counter violent extremism. In particular, the embassy met with the Office of the National Security Advisor (ONSC) to assist in the creation of a national strategy to combat violent extremism. The embassy continued to meet with leaders of major religious groups, scholars, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to discuss ways to introduce the public to a broader range of religious perspectives and enhance religious tolerance. Embassy outreach programs facilitated religious dialogue and the government's effort to identify and counter the sources of violent extremism.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 33.3 million (July 2016 estimate). There are no reliable statistics available concerning the percentages of Shia and Sunni Muslims in the country; the government's Central Statistics Office does not collect data disaggregated in this way. Shia leaders claim Shia make up

approximately 20-25 percent of the population, while Sunni leaders claim the Shia comprise only 10 percent.

The Shia population includes Ismailis and a majority of ethnic Hazaras. Other religious groups, mainly Hindus, Sikhs, Bahais, and Christians, comprise less than 0.3 percent of the population. The number of Sikhs and Hindus is declining due to emigration. Sikh and Hindu leaders estimate there are 180 Sikh and Hindu families totaling 900 individuals, which is a decline from 343 families totaling 2,000 individuals in 2015. Reliable estimates of the Bahai and Christian communities are not available. There are small numbers of practitioners of other religions, including one Jew.

The Hazaras live predominantly in the central and western provinces, while the Ismailis live mainly in Kabul and in the central and northern provinces. Followers of the Bahai Faith are based predominantly in Kabul, with a small community in Kandahar.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares Islam the official state religion and says no law may contravene the beliefs and provisions of the “sacred religion of Islam.” It further states there shall be no amendment to the constitution’s provisions with respect to adherence to the fundamentals of Islam. According to the constitution, followers of religions other than Islam are “free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of the law.”

There is no definition of apostasy in the criminal code. Apostasy falls under the seven offenses making up the *hudud* as defined by sharia. According to Sunni Hanafi jurisprudence, which the constitution states shall apply “if there is no provision in the constitution or other laws about a case,” beheading is appropriate for male apostates, while life imprisonment is appropriate for female apostates, unless they repent. A judge may also impose a lesser penalty, such as short-term imprisonment or lashes, if doubt about the apostasy exists. Under Hanafi jurisprudence, the government may also confiscate the property of apostates or prevent apostates from inheriting property. This guidance applies to individuals who are of sound mind and have reached the age of maturity. Civil law states the age of majority for citizens is 18, except it is 16 for females with regard to marriage. Islamic law defines it as the point at which one shows signs of puberty.

Conversion from Islam to another religion is apostasy according to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence applicable in the courts. If someone converts to another religion from Islam, he or she shall have three days to recant the conversion. If the person does not recant, then he or she shall be subject to the punishment for apostasy. Proselytizing to try to convert individuals from Islam to another religion is also illegal according to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence applicable in the courts and subject to the same punishment.

Blasphemy, which may include anti-Islamic writings or speech, is a capital crime according to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence applicable in the courts. Similar to apostates, blasphemers have three days to recant or face death, although there is no clear process for recanting under sharia. Some hadiths (sayings or traditions of the Prophet Muhammad that serve as a source of religious law or guidance) address the issue, suggesting discussion and negotiation with an apostate to encourage the apostate to recant.

According to a 2007 ruling from the General Directorate of Fatwas and Accounts under the Supreme Court, the Bahai Faith is distinct from Islam and is a form of blasphemy. All Muslims who convert to it are considered apostates; Bahai practitioners are labeled infidels.

The law prohibits the production, reproduction, printing, and publishing of works and materials contrary to the principles of Islam or offensive to other religions and denominations. It also prohibits publicizing and promoting religions other than Islam and bans articles on any topic the government deems might harm the physical, spiritual, and moral well-being of persons, especially children and adolescents. The law instructs National Radio and Television Afghanistan (RTA), a government agency, to provide broadcasting content reflecting the religious beliefs of all ethnic groups in the country. The law also obligates RTA to adjust its programs in light of Islamic principles as well as national and spiritual values.

Licensing and registration of religious groups are not required. Registration as a group (which gives the group the status of a shura or council) or an association conveys official recognition and the benefit of government provision of facilities for seminars and conferences. By law, anyone who is 18 years of age or older may establish a social or political organization. Such an entity must have a charter consistent with domestic laws as well as a central office. The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) may dissolve such organizations through a judicial order. Groups recognized as shuras or councils may cooperate with one another on religious

issues. Associations may conduct business with the government or the society as a whole. Both groups and associations may register with the MOJ. According to the MOJ database, 2,215 Sunni and Shia organizations are registered, while the Sikh and Hindu National Shura is registered with the Ministry of Border and Tribal Affairs.

The criminal code punishes “crimes against religions,” which include verbal and physical assaults on a follower of any religion. It specifies a person who attacks a follower of any religion shall receive a prison sentence of not less than three months but no more than a year, and a fine of between 3,000 and 12,000 afghanis (\$44 to \$177).

The criminal code states persons who forcibly stop the conduct of rituals of any religion, those who destroy or damage “permitted places of worship” (a term not defined by the code) where religious rituals are conducted, or those who destroy or damage any sign or symbol of any religion are subject to a medium-term punishment. The criminal code defines medium-term as confinement in jail for a minimum of one year and a maximum of five years and/or a fine of between 12,000 and 60,000 afghanis (\$177 to \$884).

According to the constitution, the “state shall devise and implement a unified educational curriculum based on the provisions of the sacred religion of Islam” and develop courses on religion on the basis of the “Islamic sects” in the country. The national curriculum includes materials designed separately for Sunni-majority schools and Shia-majority schools, as well as textbooks which emphasize nonviolent Islamic terms and principles. The curriculum includes courses on Islam, but not on other religions. Non-Muslims are not required to study Islam in public schools.

According to the law, all funds contributed to madrassas by private or international sources must be channeled through the Ministry of Education (MOE).

The civil and penal codes derive their authority from the constitution. The constitution stipulates the courts shall apply constitutional provisions as well as the law in ruling on cases. For instances in which neither the constitution nor the penal or civil code address a specific case, the constitution declares the courts may apply Hanafi Sunni jurisprudence within the limits set by the constitution to attain justice. The constitution also allows courts to apply Shia law in cases involving Shia followers. Non-Muslims may not provide testimony in matters requiring

sharia jurisprudence. The constitution makes no mention of separate laws applying to non-Muslims.

A Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman, but the woman must first convert if she is not an adherent of one of the other two Abrahamic faiths – Christianity or Judaism. It is illegal for a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim man.

The government's national identity cards indicate an individual's religion. Individuals are not required to declare belief in Islam to receive citizenship.

The constitution requires the president and vice presidents to be Muslim. Other senior officials (ministers, members of parliament, judges) must swear allegiance and obedience to the principles of Islam as part of their oath of office.

The constitution allows the formation of political parties, provided the program and charter of a party are “not contrary to the principles of the sacred religion of Islam.” The constitution states political parties may not be based on sectarianism.

In September parliament passed electoral reform legislation mandating an additional seat in parliament's lower house be reserved for a member of the Hindu/Sikh community.

According to the MOJ's database, the country has signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), but the parliament has not yet ratified the country's signature.

Government Practices

The supreme court upheld the appellate court's reversal of a death sentence handed down to four individuals convicted of the 2015 mob killing of a woman who allegedly had burned a Quran. The court ordered a review of one-year prison sentences given to seven police officers in the case, which resulted in the appellate court increasing their punishments. As in the past two years, there were no reported prosecutions for apostasy or blasphemy, but individuals who converted from Islam continued to state they feared government punishment as well as reprisals from family and society. Members of the Hindu and Sikh communities reported they continued to avoid settling disputes in the courts for fear of retaliation. They preferred to settle disputes through community councils. Representatives of minority religions continued to report the courts denied non-Muslims the same rights as Muslims. A small number of Sikhs and Hindus

continued to serve in government positions. Although some Shia held senior positions in the government, Shia leaders said the number of official positions held by Shia did not reflect the country's demographics.

In March the supreme court upheld an appellate court's 2015 decision to reduce four death sentences handed down in the case of a woman killed by a mob in March 2015 for allegedly burning a Quran to 20 years imprisonment. The supreme court upheld the 16-year prison sentences given to eight other civilian suspects in the case, but rejected the sentences of seven police officers who had received suspended one-year prison terms. The court ruled the suspended sentences were too lenient. The court also called on the attorney general's office to investigate the acquittals of 11 more officers who had been indicted in the case. The supreme court did not release the reasoning for its ruling or provide guidance to the appellate court. On August 7, the appellate court changed the one-year suspended sentences for the seven police officers to two-year suspended sentences, stipulating the police officers would not serve any prison time as long as they maintained clean records and committed no further crimes. The appellate court also sentenced a civilian who had not been sentenced in the initial decision to 16 years in prison.

Individuals who converted from Islam continued to report they risked annulment of their marriages, rejection by their families and communities, loss of employment, and possibly the death penalty.

As in the previous two years, there were no reports of prosecutions for blasphemy or apostasy during the year, including of Bahais who, although labeled infidels, were not considered to be converts and as such not charged with either crime. One individual convicted of blasphemy in 2013 remained in prison serving a 20-year sentence.

The Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs (MOHRA) continued to be responsible for managing pilgrimages (Hajj and Umrah), revenue collection for religious activities, acquisition of property for religious purposes, issuance of fatwas, educational testing of imams, sermon preparation and distribution for government-supported mosques, and raising public awareness of religious issues. The government continued to permit both Sunnis and Shia to go on pilgrimages, with no quota on either group. MOHRA also facilitated pilgrimages for Hindus and Sikhs to India, but did not collect any revenue for or from non-Muslims.

MOHRA estimated between 4,800 and 5,000 mullahs were registered with and worked directly for MOHRA out of a total of approximately 300,000 mullahs in

the country as of the end of 2015, the last year for which data was available. The mullahs continued to receive an average monthly salary of 4,700 afghanis (\$69) from the government. MOHRA continued to require mullahs who applied to be prayer leaders in MOHRA-registered mosques to hold at least a bachelor's degree or equivalent, verified by the Ministry of Higher Education. According to MOHRA, approximately 50,000 of the approximately 150,000 to 160,000 mosques in the country were registered, including the registration of an additional 700 mosques during the year. MOHRA said the ministry continued to lack the financial resources to create a comprehensive registry of mullahs and mosques in the country.

MOHRA continued to allocate a portion of its budget for the construction of new mosques. Local groups continued to pay the largest portion of the costs for new mosques and continued not to be required to inform the ministry about the new construction unless they wished to request financial or other assistance.

According to Hindus and Sikhs, the government continued not to restrict them from training other Hindus and Sikhs to become clergy, but per the law punishing conversion, they could not proselytize. The government continued not to hinder their communities from building places of worship.

According to Sikh and Hindu community members, they continued not to pursue land disputes through the courts for fear of retaliation, particularly when powerful local leaders occupied their property.

MOHRA reported there were 5,000 registered madrassas and "Quran learning centers" throughout the country. While the government did register some madrassas during the year, it did not report how many. More than 340,000 students were enrolled in the madrassas, mostly in Kabul, Balkh, Nangarhar, and Herat provinces, according to the latest available estimate from 2015.

The registration process continued to require a school to demonstrate it had suitable buildings, classrooms, accredited teachers, and dorms if students lived on campus. MOHRA registered madrassas collocated with mosques, while MOE registered madrassas not associated with mosques. In MOHRA-run madrassas, students received individual instruction, with one imam teaching approximately 50 to 70 children studying at various levels. Registration did not mean the government controlled a madrassa, but qualified the madrassa's diplomas and certificates for government recognition. Only certificates issued by registered madrassas allowed students to pursue higher education at government universities.

MOHRA did not offer data on the number of unregistered madrassas, but estimated registered madrassas “far outnumbered” unregistered madrassas following the registration effort. The MOE had the authority to close unregistered madrassas, but ministry officials said in practice it was almost impossible to close any due to local sensitivities. The ministry officials reported the government did not close any madrassas during the year due to the potential for negative societal repercussions. They said the government was attempting to raise awareness within the madrassa community of the benefits of registering madrassas, including recognition of graduation certificates and financial and material assistance, such as furniture or stationery.

MOHRA did not operate primary level madrassas; mosques provided primary-level religious studies instead. While MOHRA operated no madrassas offering standard two-year degree programs, there were 80 madrassas registered with the MOE offering two-year degree programs. There were 1,200 public and 200 private madrassas registered with the MOE.

According to government authorities, the legal requirement for registered madrassas to route private or international donations through the MOE allowed the government to monitor financial assistance to institutes of learning, but the MOE seldom imposed a ban for failing to comply with this requirement. The tendency to make cash donations directly to the madrassas made it difficult, they said, for the government to track funds coming from private sources or abroad. Despite this, the government continued its efforts to solicit donations from other Muslim countries and from private individuals to support the madrassas. The MOE also continued to require independent madrassas to be accredited and disclose their funding sources.

Registered madrassas continued to follow the standardized curriculum provided by the MOE’s Department of Islamic Education. This curriculum specified 60 percent of the subjects taught in madrassas had to be religious in nature, while the other 40 percent consisted of mathematics, history, geography, and Dari literature.

There remained one government-sponsored school for Sikh children, located in Kabul. The government continued to provide the same proportionate funding to cover staff salaries, books, and maintenance as it did for other schools. The MOE also continued to provide the curriculum for the Sikh school, except for religious studies. The community appointed a teacher for religious studies, and the MOE paid the teacher’s salary.

The Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, a Swedish NGO, continued to support a privately-funded Sikh school in Jalalabad. A few Sikh children continued to attend private international schools. Hindus did not have separate schools but sometimes sent their children to Sikh schools. There continued to be no Christian schools.

According to observers, the courts relied primarily on statutory law in both civil and criminal cases. In some instances, however, members of minority religious groups reported the courts used Hanafi jurisprudence, even where such law conflicted with the country's international commitments to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled Persons.

The Ulema Council, a group of senior Sunni and Shia scholars, imams, and Muslim jurists, continued to advise the president on Islamic legal issues. It met with the president every two months, discussing topics such as support for the Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and peace negotiations with insurgent groups. The Ulema Council also continued to advise the parliament and ministries on the formulation of new legislation and the implementation of existing law. In November the council voiced its support for the peace agreement between the government and the insurgent group Hizb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HIG) led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

Although the Ulema Council remained officially independent from the government, its members continued to receive financial support from the state. The council also continued to advise some provincial governments, although in villages and rural areas scholars, NGO representatives and government officials said decisions continued to be based mostly on local interpretations of Islamic law and tradition.

Representatives of minority religions continued to report the courts did not apply protections provided to them by the law and denied non-Muslims the same rights as Muslims, even when the non-Muslims were legally entitled to those same rights. Members of minority religious communities said the state, including the courts, continued to treat all citizens as if they were Muslims, and some basic citizenship rights of non-Muslims were not codified. As a result, they said, non-Muslims continued to risk being tried according to Hanafi jurisprudence.

Sikhs and Hindus stated their community members continued not to take civil cases to court because they continued to feel unprotected by dispute resolution

mechanisms such as the Special Land and Property Court. Instead, their members continued to prefer to settle disputes within their communities.

Leaders of both Hindu and Sikh communities stated they continued to face discrimination, including long delays to resolve cases in the judicial system. The most common judicial issues concerned illegal appropriation of Sikh properties. In one case reported by a Sikh community leader, a high-ranking Ministry of Interior official reportedly occupied a piece of land owned by a member of the Sikh community who was still a resident of the country. In another instance, according to the Sikh community leader, a National Directorate of Security (NDS) official reportedly stole the land of a Sikh who had emigrated to Germany and threatened the owner's proxy at gunpoint when the proxy went to claim the land. Court proceedings continued in both cases, albeit very slowly according to the plaintiffs.

A small number of Sikhs and Hindus continued to serve in government positions, including one at the municipal level, one at the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries, and one as a presidentially appointed member of the upper house of parliament. Although Shia Muslims held senior positions in government, they said appointments to government administrative bodies continued not to reflect the country's demographics based on their estimate of the percentage of Shia in the country's population. Sunni members of the Ulema Council stated Shia were overrepresented in government based on Sunni estimates of the percentage of Shia in the population.

Shia leaders stated the law placed no restrictions on their participation in public life, but the government continued to neglect security in majority-Shia areas.

Although four Ismailis continued to serve as members of parliament, members of the Ismaili community continued to raise concerns about what they called the exclusion of Ismailis from other positions of political authority.

Judicial, constitutional, and human rights commissions composed of members of different Islamic religious groups (Sunni and Shia) and supported by the government continued to meet to work towards Muslim intrafaith reconciliation. The Ministry of Women's Affairs and MOHRA continued to work together toward the stated goal of allowing women to attend mosques. The government funded Moderation Center of Afghanistan continued to promote what the government viewed as a moderate interpretation of Islam. The center continued educational exchanges to send Shia and Sunni clerics to Kuwait for training, and then appointed them as teachers in various provinces to train other clerics. Other

organizations continued to work on intrafaith reconciliation as well, including the Ulema Council, the Islamic Brotherhood Council, and the MOHRA.

The ONSC continued to work on addressing religiously-motivated violent extremism as part of its effort to develop an overall strategy to counter violent extremism (CVE). Beginning in September, the ONSC sponsored a series of provincial-level conferences on religiously-motivated violent extremism to collect data to use in this effort. Concurrently, the ONSC established an inter-ministerial working group to coordinate the efforts of relevant government institutions and NGOs to implement the strategy.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

The media continued to report attacks by the Taliban, the ISKP, and other insurgent groups targeted at specific religious and ethno-religious groups, such as the Hazara Shias, as well as at individual religious leaders because of their reported links to the government or their interpretations of Islam.

In July suicide bombers attacked a protest demonstration in Kabul organized by the Enlightenment Movement, an NGO composed primarily of Hazara Shias. At least 97 people were killed and more than 260 injured. Shortly after the attack, the ISKP claimed responsibility for the bombing in a statement on the group's Amaq News Agency, calling it a "martyrdom attack" against the Shia community.

In November a suicide bomber struck a gathering of Shiite Muslims commemorating Arbäeen, a Shiite observance of loss and grief, in the Baqir ul-Uloom mosque in western Kabul, killing at least 30. ISIS subsequently claimed responsibility.

In October a group of gunmen entered the Karte-Sakhi mosque in Kabul and opened fire on worshippers gathered to mark Ashura. According to an organization monitoring extremist websites, the attackers killed 17 worshippers and wounded 58, including women and children. The Amaq News Agency published an article stating the ISKP was involved in planning the attack and an ISKP fighter was among the gunmen. ISKP later claimed full responsibility for the assault. A day later, a suicide bomber killed 14 civilians and wounded 17 in a bomb blast outside a Shia mosque in Balkh province. There were no official claims of responsibility for the second day's attack. Shia community leaders condemned the attacks, and said many Shia believed the attacks were attempts by radical elements to foment sectarian tensions in the country. Shia leaders urged the

Shia community to avoid any violent reaction that might escalate tensions between Sunnis and Shias, and asked the government to investigate the incident and take necessary steps to protect Shias.

In June unknown militants kidnapped 17 Shia Hazaras from a bus in the northern province of Sar-i-Pul. A provincial council member said the Taliban likely had abducted the passengers to exchange them for a local commander who had been detained by Afghan forces during clashes the day before. The incident came two days after the Taliban killed 13 people and took several others hostage after ambushing a bus convoy in Kunduz province. Local tribal elders were reportedly able to mediate the release of the kidnap victims.

In September eight Hazaras traveling from Bamiyan to Kabul were reportedly kidnapped in Wardak province, just 150 meters away from a police checkpoint. In another incident, a group of militants stopped two passenger vans in Ghor province. The militants singled out five passengers they identified as Hazaras, and took them away at gunpoint. According to government contacts, the Hazaras were kidnapped by the Taliban, who were hoping to exchange them for one of their commanders. One student was killed when government forces attempted to secure their release, while the rest were later freed when tribal elders intervened to mediate. In Ghazni, a student was killed during a clash between the Taliban and government security forces following a Taliban attempt to abduct six Hazara students. In October the Taliban abducted 25 Hazaras traveling on the Kabul-Bamiyan Highway. They were reportedly released through the mediation of local tribal elders.

In December media reported a Kunduz Sikh community leader, Lala Del Souza, was shot dead by unknown gunmen in Kunduz city. Police reported three suspects were arrested in connection with his death. There was media speculation the Taliban were behind the killing, although there was no claim of responsibility from the Taliban.

The Taliban and other insurgents continued to threaten religious leaders with death for preaching messages contrary to the Taliban's interpretation of Islam or its political agenda. The Taliban also continued to warn mullahs not to perform funeral prayers for government security officials. Between June and September in the Rodat and Momand Dara districts of Nangarhar, the Taliban reportedly killed a number of clerics, including two imams. As a result, according to the director of madrassas at the MOHRA, imams stated they feared performing funeral rites for Afghan National Security Forces and other government employees. The Taliban

also continued to monitor the social habits of local populations in areas under their control and imposed punishments on residents according to their interpretation of Islamic law. Insurgents claiming affiliation with ISKP continued to engage in similar activities. The provincial director of MOHRA reported the ISKP seized control of 10 madrassas and removed the government curriculum, replacing it with their own, which included paramilitary training.

Government officials reported in August the Taliban replaced cultural, tourism, and sports curricula in parts of Baghlan and Logar provinces under their control with Islamic teachings administered by imams handpicked by the group. In October Kunduz provincial council members reported the Taliban had taken over more than half the schools in the province. One official estimated the Taliban controlled as many as 80 percent of schools. While the government continued to pay the salaries of the teachers, he said, the Taliban established the school curriculum and selected the teachers as well as school administrators. The government continued to pay salaries to staff selected by the group.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, and other non-Muslim minorities stated they continued to face harassment and, in some cases, violence, although Hindus and Sikhs continued to be able to practice their religions publicly. Members of the Hindu community said they continued to face fewer incidents of harassment than Sikhs, ascribing the difference to their lack of a distinctive male headdress. Despite the differences between the groups, many Afghans reportedly continued to use the terms Sikh and Hindu interchangeably. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was often difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

According to the leader of the Sikh community, in September a man with a sword reportedly pounded on the gate of a Sikh temple in Kabul, shouting “convert to Islam.” A week after the incident, the leader of the Hindu/Sikh community reported he found a cow’s head in front of its temple compound in Kabul. Some Sikhs reported instances in which residents and high-ranking government officials told them they were “not from Afghanistan,” that they were “Indians,” and “did not belong here.”

Christians continued to report hostile public opinion toward converts to Christianity and to the idea of Christian proselytizing. Members of the Christian community, who often had converted to Christianity while in other countries, said

they continued to worship alone or in small congregations in private homes out of fear of societal discrimination and persecution.

Women of several different religions reported local Muslim religious leaders continued to confront them over their attire. As a result, they said, many women continued to wear burqas in public in rural areas and in some urban areas. In urban areas, where most women no longer wore the burqa, almost all women said they continued to wear some form of head covering, either by personal choice or due to societal pressure. Many said they chose to cover to increase their security in public. The Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs and the National Ulema Council both stated there was no official pressure on women regarding their attire.

Minority religious leaders stated few places of worship remained for the decreasing numbers of Sikhs, Hindus and other religious minorities. According to the Sikh and Hindu Council, there had been 64 gurdwaras (Sikh temples) and mandus (Hindu temples) across the country, but residents of Kandahar, Ghazni, Paktya, and other provinces had seized approximately 30 sites in previous years. Fourteen of those remaining continued to be active, including two sites belonging to the Hindu community. The Hindu community reported it presented the list of its places of worship to the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs in an effort to stop further illegal seizures and to reclaim the land and buildings previously lost. Kabul's lone synagogue remained inactive, and there were no public Christian churches. Worship facilities for noncitizens of various faiths were located at coalition military facilities and at embassies in Kabul. Buddhist foreigners were free to worship in Hindu temples.

Hindus and Sikhs continued to report interference in their efforts to cremate the remains of their dead in accordance with their customs from individuals who lived near cremation sites. A leader of the Hindu/Sikh community reported an incident in which unknown individuals threw stones and bricks at the community's cremation site on the day following a fellow Sikh's cremation. Although the government provided land to use as cremation sites, the distance from any major urban area and the lack of security in the region rendered the land unusable, according to Sikh leaders. The government continued to provide police support to protect the Sikh and Hindu communities while they performed their cremation rituals.

Members of the Sikh and Hindu communities reported they continued not to send their children to public schools due to harassment from other students. In the past, Hindus and Sikhs said they had sent their children to private Hindu and Sikh

schools, but many of those schools had closed due to the decreasing sizes of the two communities as well as their members' declining economic circumstances. Per the Sikh and Hindu Council, there was one school in Nangarhar and two schools in Kabul which remained operational.

According to Sikh leaders, a lack of employment opportunities remained the main cause of Hindu and Sikh emigration. They reported emigration continued to increase as economic conditions worsened and security concerns increased for the two communities. Hindus and Sikhs remained largely illiterate, they said, which continued to limit their employment opportunities.

Observers stated societal discrimination against the Shia minority by the Sunni majority continued to decline. They cited as an example the response to the suicide attack on the Enlightenment Movement when hundreds of Sunnis went to hospitals to donate blood for injured Shias. The observers said there continued to be reports of discrimination in different localities, however.

According to observers, suspicion of development assistance projects continued to exist among Muslim residents, some of whom reportedly suspected such assistance projects were surreptitious efforts to advance Christianity or engage in proselytizing.

Observers reported local Muslim religious leaders continued their efforts to limit social activities inconsistent with Islamic doctrine, such as female participation in sports

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officers continued to meet with government officials to promote religious tolerance and enhance the government's capacity to counter violent extremism. Senior embassy officers and other embassy staff continued to discuss the protection of religious minorities with government officials.

Embassy representatives met with high-level government and religious officials to discuss ways to better ensure the curriculum offered by madrassas did not encourage religiously-motivated violent extremism. The embassy coordinated with the ONSC as well as other governmental and non-governmental stakeholders to assist the ONSC in creating a national strategy to combat violent extremism.

Embassy officials met with leaders of major religious groups, scholars, and NGOs to discuss ways to enhance religious tolerance and introduce the public to a broader range of religious perspectives.

During Ramadan, embassy staff hosted iftars with government, civil society, and religious leaders to promote religious dialogue and tolerance.

The embassy sponsored visits by several prominent religious leaders to the United States and third countries to broaden religious dialogue. Embassy officials facilitated several meetings of different research bodies to coordinate research efforts on violent extremism. The embassy also hosted roundtables with leading researchers and religious scholars from organizations such as the Moderation Center and MOHRA to discuss the primary sources of violent extremism and the mechanisms to counter it.