



Greece

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contribute to the generally free practice of religion. The Constitution establishes the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ (Greek Orthodox Church) as the prevailing religion, but also provides for the right of all citizens to practice the religion of their choice.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, non-Orthodox groups sometimes faced administrative obstacles or encountered legal restrictions on religious practices. The Constitution and law prohibit proselytizing and stipulate that no rite of worship may disturb public order or offend moral principles. No new "house of prayer" permits have been issued since 2006. Overall, there was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Some non-Orthodox citizens complained of being treated with suspicion by fellow citizens or told that they were not truly Greek when they revealed their religious affiliation. The number of anti-Semitic incidents increased after Israeli military action in Gaza in December 2008.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 50,502 square miles and a population of 11.2 million. The Government does not keep statistics on religious groups. An estimated 97 percent of the population identifies itself as Greek Orthodox. The remaining 3 percent is comprised of Muslims, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Old Calendarist Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Scientologists, Baha'is, Hare Krishna devotees, and followers of polytheistic Hellenic religions.

The majority of noncitizen residents and immigrants are not Greek Orthodox. Among migrants, the largest religious groups are Muslim, Roman Catholic, and Protestant and their adherents reside largely in Athens. An officially recognized Muslim minority of 100,000 to 120,000 members resides in Thrace. The Muslim community in Athens has a population of more than 200,000 and is composed primarily of migrants from the Middle East and South Asia.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The Constitution establishes the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ (Greek Orthodox Church) as the prevailing religion, but also provides for the right of all citizens to practice the religion of their choice. Some religious groups faced administrative restrictions on forming legally recognized religious organizations or operating

places of worship. The Constitution and law prohibit proselytizing.

The Government financially supports the Orthodox Church; for example, the Government pays for the salaries and religious training of clergy and finances the maintenance of Orthodox Church buildings. The Government also pays the salaries and some expenses of the three official Muslim religious leaders (muftis) and 183 imams in Thrace and provides a small monthly allowance to other imams in Thrace. No other religious group receives governmental financial assistance. Some groups, such as the Jewish community, have requested equal treatment with the Orthodox Church on this issue.

The Government recognizes the canon law of the Orthodox Church, both within the Church and in areas of civil law such as marriage. The Orthodox Church, Jews, and Muslims are the only religious groups deemed to be "legal entities of public law," able to own, bequeath, and inherit property and appear in court under their own names as religious organizations. Other religious organizations may be registered as "legal entities of private law," which cannot own "houses of prayer" or other property directly as religious entities but must create other corporate legal entities in order to own, bequeath, or inherit property, or to appear in court. To be recognized as a "legal entity of private law," a religious group must be a "known religion" or dogma. Court rulings require "known religions" to have publicly taught doctrine with rites of worship that are open to the public, to be nonprofit in nature, to not affect public order or morality adversely, and to have a clear hierarchy of religious authorities. The Ministry of Education and Religion recognizes groups as "known religions" by issuing them "house of prayer" permits. A religious group recognized as a "known religion" is protected by the Constitution. Some religious groups such as Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, Baha'is, Methodists, Mormons, evangelicals, and Jehovah's Witnesses are recognized as "known religions." Other groups, such as Scientologists, Hare Krishna devotees, and polytheistic Hellenic religious groups have applied for but not received recognition as "known religions." No new religious groups have been recognized by the Ministry of Education and Religion since 2006.

In March 2008 the Ministry of Education and Religion adopted new requirements for religious groups applying for new "house of prayer" permits to build or operate a religious venue. According to the new requirements, applicants must receive certification from the local Urban Planning Department attesting that a place of worship meets city planning regulations and "requirements for safe congregation." Many religious groups consider the new requirements as additional administrative obstacles to freedom of religious worship and as unfounded in law. As of the end of the reporting period, no religious group had yet received a "house of prayer" permit under the new requirements.

Some religious groups face additional legal and administrative burdens because they cannot function as legal entities. Scientologists and members of ancient polytheistic Hellenic religious groups practice their faiths as registered nonprofit civil law organizations, but without "house of prayer" permits. Without the recognition afforded by such permits, weddings officiated by religious leaders are not legally recognized. The Baha'is and members of other religious groups have expressed a desire to operate within a legal framework as fully recognized religions, rather than as private associations.

The law punishes "whoever intentionally incites others to actions that could provoke discrimination, hatred, or violence against persons or groups of persons on the basis of their race or ethnic origin or expresses ideas insulting to persons or to groups of persons because of their race or ethnic origin."

The Greek Helsinki Monitor and the Central Board of Jewish Communities brought charges against the newspaper *Eleftheros Kosmos* and former Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) party candidate Kostas Plevris for racism and anti-Semitism. On December 4, 2007, *Eleftheros Kosmos* was acquitted, but the court convicted Plevris and sentenced him to a 14-month suspended sentence for inciting hatred and racial violence through his book *The Jews--The Whole Truth*. The book denied the Holocaust took place and called Jewish people "mortal enemies" and "subhuman." Plevris appealed his sentence, and on March 27, 2009, an appeals court declared him innocent of all

charges, concluding that the accused "did not aim at the Jews because of their racial and ethnic origin but, primarily, because of their pursuits [in seeking] world domination [and] the methods they use in order to fulfill their conspiratorial activity." Local and international Jewish and human rights organizations criticized the decision. A spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Plevris' views did not represent the beliefs or feelings of Greeks and branded them as "insulting to the Greek people." An assistant prosecutor of the Supreme Court filed an appeal against the acquittal verdict on July 1, 2009. The appeal is "in favor of the Law," and not aimed at the specific verdict that absolved Plevris. A hearing on this latest appeal was not scheduled but was expected in fall 2009.

Roman Catholic churches and related religious bodies established prior to 1946 are legally recognized as private entities, but Catholic institutions built since 1946 are not extended the same recognition. Since 1999 the Catholic Church has unsuccessfully sought government recognition of its canon law. In 2006 the Ministry of Education and Religion established a committee to propose a legislative arrangement for the legal status of the Catholic Church. According to Catholic Church leaders, this committee has not met since February 2007. During the reporting period, Catholic Church leaders also complained that funds promised by the Government for repairing the Catholic Cathedral of Athens, damaged in a 1998 earthquake, were still not forthcoming. Church leaders noted that funds for repairing the Greek Orthodox cathedral had already been disbursed.

Leaders of non-Orthodox religious groups claimed that taxes on their organizations were discriminatory because the Government subsidizes Orthodox Church activities and Orthodox religious instruction in public schools. It remains unclear whether laws giving preferential tax treatment to the Orthodox Church apply also to other religious groups.

The Government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Epiphany Day, Clean Monday, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Holy Spirit Day, the Assumption of Mary, and Christmas Day.

The law provides for alternative forms of mandatory national service for religious and ideological conscientious objectors. Conscientious objectors may, in lieu of mandatory military service, work in state hospitals or municipal and public services for twice the length of military service minus one month, typically 23 months.

Mandatory military service is three months for "repatriated" citizens (those who emigrated from the former communist bloc and are of Greek ethnic background) and five months of alternative service for repatriated conscientious objectors. Repatriated conscientious objectors who have in the past completed military service in their country of origin but became conscientious objectors later in life are ineligible for alternative service. Those who became conscientious objectors after they performed their military service and were placed on reservist lists do not have their objector status recognized. Several cases involving such conscientious objectors were pending before the Council of State, but were dropped after a change to the law exempted persons over 35 years of age from conscription.

Orthodox religious instruction in public primary and secondary schools, at government expense, is mandatory for all Orthodox students. Non-Orthodox students may exempt themselves. However, schools offer no alternative activity or religious instruction for these children.

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne gives the Muslim minority in Thrace the right to maintain social and charitable organizations called wakfs, allows muftis to render religious judicial services (under Islamic law, Shari'a) in the area of family and inheritance law, and provides the right to Turkish-language education. Thrace has secular bilingual schools and two Muslim religious schools funded by the state. The Government gives special consideration to Muslim minority students from Thrace for admission to technical institutes and universities, setting aside 0.5 percent of the total number of places for them annually.

The Government maintains that Muslims living outside of Thrace are not covered by the Treaty of Lausanne and

therefore do not enjoy those rights provided by the Treaty. Some Thracian Muslims resident in Athens have lobbied unsuccessfully for state-funded Islamic religious instruction for their children.

The Government recognizes Shari'a as the law regulating family and civic issues for Muslims who reside in Thrace. First instance courts in Thrace routinely ratified the decisions of the muftis, who have judicial powers in civil and domestic matters. The National Human Rights Committee (an autonomous body that advises the Government on human rights) stated that the Government should limit the powers of the muftis to religious duties and not recognize Shari'a, since it can restrict the civil rights of some citizens. In past reporting periods, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern regarding the impediments that Muslim women in Thrace face under Shari'a. In 2006 the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Special Rapporteur for Religion or Belief reported that they were informed of cases of both early marriages and marriages by proxy.

In February 2009 two Muslim women in Thrace successfully challenged mufti decisions in Greek courts. In Komotini, a Muslim woman appealed a decision by the local mufti to give custody of two of her four children to her husband, reportedly an alcoholic suffering from psychological problems. On February 18, the Greek first instance Court of Rodopi overturned the mufti's decision and gave the woman custody of all four children. In Xanthi a woman filed a lawsuit against the local mufti, who had awarded her former husband custody of their child despite a signed private agreement allowing her to retain custody. A court overturned the mufti's decision and awarded custody to the woman.

On divorce, Muslim female activists claimed that because all Muslim women in Thrace were married under Shari'a, they were obliged to acquire mufti consent to obtain a divorce. These activists noted that some interpretations of Shari'a do not exist in written form and that much of the legal code is unavailable in an official Greek translation, thus limiting women's ability to appeal mufti decisions to Greek courts.

In May 2008 the mufti of Komotini announced the start of a project to translate Shari'a family law into Greek and English. The initiative was undertaken at the request of the European Union. The translation had not been completed by the end of the reporting period.

The law requires an oath for all civil servants, including legislators, lawyers, police officers, firefighters, and soldiers, upon assumption of duties. Non-Orthodox Christians and persons not belonging to any religious group may take an oath in accord with their own beliefs.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. However, the Government limits the ability of some religious groups to register or obtain legal recognition as religions. The Constitution and law prohibit proselytizing.

Jehovah's Witnesses have 12 pending "house of prayer" permit applications, some dating from 2005. As of the end of the reporting period, the Ministry of Education and Religion had not replied to repeated requests from the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Ombudsman for action on these applications.

The Church of Scientology applied for a "house of prayer" permit in 2008 but had received no response from the Ministry of Education and Religion by the end of the reporting period. In 2000 the Ministry denied the Scientologists a permit on the grounds that Scientology "is not a religion." The Church of Scientology is currently registered as a nonprofit organization.

Polytheistic Hellenic religious groups have multiple pending applications for "house of prayer" permits and have previously protested delays to the Ombudsman. In 2006 the Ministry of Education and Religion responded to one of

the groups, stating that it would "delay its formal response due to the seriousness and peculiarity of the matter." The Ministry provided no further response during the reporting period.

Leaders of some religious groups wanted the Government to abolish entirely the system of "house of prayer" permits, noting that the process administratively hinders freedom of religion and that under the current legal framework, police have the authority to take unregistered religious organizations to court. During the reporting period, there were no reports of police prosecuting unregistered religious organizations in this manner.

Leaders of the Jehovah's Witnesses claimed that the Athens Registrar's Office (an authority under the Ministry of Interior) stopped officially recognizing and issuing marriage certificates for some religious marriages in 2008. The Registrar's Office reportedly stated that these marriages were not officiated by ministers on an approved list at the Ministry of Education and Religion, and that the marriages were not conducted in premises with valid "house of prayer" permits. The Jehovah's Witnesses claimed that the Registrar's Office had registered their marriages since 1975 and that the change constituted a breach of freedom of religion.

Several religious denominations reported difficulties in dealing with the authorities on a variety of administrative matters. Certain legal privileges granted to the Orthodox Church are not extended routinely to other recognized religions. Orthodox officials have an exclusive institutionalized link between the church hierarchy and the Ministry of Education and Religion to handle administrative matters. Religious groups also complained that the Orthodox Church enjoys tax and fee exemptions not extended to other denominations.

In 2006 the Supreme Administrative Court dismissed on technical grounds an appeal by the Jehovah's Witnesses over property taxation for their headquarters. When the area was rezoned, Orthodox Church properties were exempt from rezoning fees; the Jehovah's Witnesses claimed that, as a "recognized religion," they should also be exempt. The case was pending in court at the end of the reporting period.

Members of the Muslim minority in Thrace were underrepresented in public sector employment and in state-owned industries and corporations. Few Muslim military personnel have advanced to officer ranks. In 2008 the Government passed legislation establishing a new program to assign 0.5 percent of civil service jobs to Muslims. In the fall of 2008, as part of this program, seven members of the Muslim minority were appointed as career soldiers in the army. Two members of the Muslim minority from Thrace held seats in Parliament. In Xanthi and Komotini, Muslims held seats on the prefectural and town councils and served as local mayors. Municipalities in Thrace hired Muslims as public liaisons in citizen service centers and provided Turkish lessons for other civil servants.

Differences remained between some members of the Muslim minority community and the Government over the process of selecting muftis and imams. Under existing law, the Government appoints all three muftis in Thrace to 10-year terms of office, in consultation with a committee of Muslim leaders. The Government maintained that it reserved the right to appoint muftis since they enjoy a state salary and perform judicial Shari'a functions as well as religious duties. Some members of the Muslim minority objected to the fact that the Government was not bound by the recommendations of the selection committee.

While some members of the Muslim minority accepted the authority of the government-appointed muftis, others elected two unofficial muftis to serve their communities, objecting that the government of a non-Islamic country had no right to appoint muftis. These two muftis are not recognized by the Government, and as such do not have the civil authority to perform weddings and divorces or make rulings on family legal matters such as inheritance rights. Government courts previously prosecuted the unofficial muftis for usurping the functions of the official, appointed muftis. In July 2006 the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that these prosecutions violated the rights of the elected mufti of Xanthi. Some members of the Muslim minority continued to lobby the Government to allow the direct election of muftis.

The Government took steps to address controversy over the management and taxation of wakfs in Thrace. In the past, some Muslim activists sought the right for wakfs to be self-governed and to enjoy tax-free status. In 2007 the Government passed legislation allowing wakf management committees to be directly elected and writing off all tax liens against the wakfs, amounting to approximately \$9.1 million (6.5 million euro). However, wakf elections did not take place during the reporting period, and the tax write-off had not been finalized.

The Muslim community in Athens is demographically distinct from the officially recognized Muslim minority in Thrace and has an estimated population of more than 200,000, composed primarily of migrants from the Middle East and South Asia. During the reporting period, Muslim leaders in Athens stated that their biggest complaints were the continued absence of an official mosque or recognized Muslim clergy, and the lack of an Islamic cemetery.

Despite parliamentary approval nine years ago for the establishment of an official mosque, construction had not started. In 2000 Parliament approved a bill permitting construction of a combined mosque and Islamic cultural center. In 2006 Parliament passed legislation providing for the establishment of a mosque, without a cultural center, in the central Athens neighborhood of Votanikos, on a plot of land owned by the Ministry of Defense and occupied by naval facilities. Muslim leaders expressed satisfaction with the proposed location, but in October 2007 they requested quicker action from the Minister of Education and Religion, calling the mosque issue "one of grave importance" to the Muslim community. In May 2009, in response to a parliamentary inquiry, the Ministry of Defense stated that it was unable to vacate the land designated for the mosque, claiming that relocating the naval facilities would cost \$128 million (91.25 million euro), and that it did not have sufficient funding to do so.

Due to the lack of an official mosque or clerics in Athens, Muslims living in Athens or other areas outside of Thrace had to travel to Thrace or go abroad in order to have official Islamic marriages or funerals. Those who could not afford the expense of travel had unrecognized religious rites.

Muslims in Athens also complained about the continued lack of an Islamic cemetery in Athens, stating that municipal cemetery regulations required the exhumation of bodies after three years, and that this exhumation was a violation of Islamic religious law. In 2005 the Orthodox Church announced that it would set aside three hectares of land for an Islamic cemetery. However, construction never commenced. In May 2009, in response to a parliamentary inquiry, several government ministries provided conflicting accounts of the cemetery's status. The Ministry of Interior stated that the Athens City Planning Office was reviewing the land for suitability as a cemetery, but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the land was "not suitable for a cemetery" and that alternative options were being reviewed.

In the absence of an official mosque, Muslims throughout the country operated more than a hundred unofficial mosques and prayer rooms. The Islamic Cultural Center of Moschato, Athens, opened in 2006 and continued to operate as an unofficial mosque without a "house of prayer" permit. Some unofficial prayer rooms were ethnic-specific, serving the needs of particular Muslim migrant communities.

Cremation is prohibited by Orthodox Church tradition, and members of several religious organizations complained about the lack of crematory facilities in the country. In March 2009, the government issued a decree specifying the construction of municipal crematoria, but at the end of the reporting period no construction had begun.

The intra-Orthodox doctrinal dispute between Esphigmenou monastery and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, administrator of the region under the 1924 Charter of Mt. Athos, continued during the reporting period. Esphigmenou is an Old Calendarist monastery that ceased recognizing the authority of the Patriarchate in 1972. According to the Political Governor of the Mt. Athos region, monasteries must recognize the Ecumenical Patriarchate's authority in order to operate. As a result, the Patriarchate requested the eviction of the monks, which was upheld by a Supreme Court ruling in 2003 but never implemented. The monks appealed the ruling, but in 2005 the Council of State declined to rule on the appeal on the grounds that it was not competent, under the

Constitution, to judge the ecclesiastic and administrative jurisdiction of the Patriarchate over Mt. Athos. Some Old Calendarist monks continued to occupy the monastery without legal access to the bank accounts and other assets of the monastery.

In late 2005 the Holy Community governing Mt. Athos appointed a new Esphigmenou monastic order, officially recognized by the Patriarchate, to replace the existing order. In late 2006 seven monks were injured in clashes between the two monastic orders; the police did not intervene. In November 2008 six Esphigmenou monks convicted of disturbing the peace and illegally occupying the monastery were acquitted by the Thessaloniki Court of Appeals. Members of the officially recognized order, who were temporarily residing at another monastery, criticized the continued presence of the Old Calendarist monks at Esphigmenou as illegal. Supporters of the incumbent monks claimed that the Government has prevented food, medicine, medical personnel, and pilgrims from reaching the monastery. The Governing Authority of Mt. Athos stated that it was in regular contact with the Old Calendarist monks and was trying to find a solution to better integrate them with the rest of the Mt. Athos monastic community.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Leaders from some religious groups expressed concern that antiproselytizing laws remained on the books.

In June 2008 a member of an evangelical church was detained briefly and subsequently charged with one count of proselytism for distributing Bible materials. A first instance court dismissed the charge.

On January 20, 2008, police arrested and detained two Mormon missionaries for two days on charges of proselytizing. The missionaries were subsequently tried and acquitted of all charges.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In February 2009 the Government cosponsored commemorative events in Athens, Thessaloniki, Larissa, and Volos for Holocaust Remembrance Day. Government ministers, Members of Parliament, and mayors attended the events, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs issued a public statement. On June 17, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a book, *Greeks in Auschwitz-Birkenau*, and held a public event in remembrance of Greeks killed in Nazi concentration camps.

The Government made progress on implementing a January 2007 initiative to address concerns raised by the Muslim minority. The government plan consisted of hiring 240 imams, setting aside 0.5 percent of civil service jobs for members of the Muslim minority, and writing off tax liens on wakfs. After hiring 183 imams in January 2009, the Government began paying their salaries in March. Government officials stated that they did not hire the full 240 because the remaining candidates could not certify that they had completed primary school. The Government started filling the 0.5 percent civil service job quota in September 2008, but officials stated that meeting the full quota would take time due to low job turnover and availability.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. The number of anti-Semitic incidents increased after Israeli military action in Gaza in December 2008.

The Greek Orthodox Church exercised significant social, political, and economic influence and owned a considerable, although undetermined, amount of property. Many citizens assumed that Greek ethnicity was tied to Orthodox Christianity. Some non-Orthodox citizens complained of being treated with suspicion or told that they were not truly Greek when they revealed their religious affiliation.

Members of some minority religious groups reported incidents of societal discrimination and intolerance from the Orthodox Church, citing that some Orthodox bishops warned their parishioners not to associate with members of minority religious groups and requested that the police arrest missionaries for proselytizing. The Orthodox Church maintained on an official web site a list of 74 religious practices and groups that it considered sacrilegious, including the Jehovah's Witnesses, evangelical Christians, Scientologists, Mormons, and Baha'is.

Leaders of many non-Orthodox religious groups reported that while the Orthodox Church seldom engaged in official contact with other religious groups, cordial private contacts between Orthodox Church leaders and members of minority religious groups had increased in frequency.

In December 2008, the left-of-center newspaper *Eleftherotypia* printed anti-Semitic cartoons and satire, joining smaller extremist publications that compared Jews to Nazis or held them responsible for actions of the state of Israel. In addition, the internet site Rizospastis, the official organ of the Communist Party of Greece, posted an animation that linked the Star of David with Nazi swastikas, with the slogan "imperialism dropped its mask and put out its Zionist knife."

Giorgos Karatzaferis, the party leader of LAOS, a right-wing nationalist political party with 10 parliamentary seats, has publicly stated that his party is neither racist nor anti-Semitic, but he has frequently denied that the Holocaust occurred and accused "the Pope and the Jews" of a conspiracy against the country. After Israeli military action in Gaza in January 2009, official LAOS newspaper *Alpha Ena* published an anti-Semitic article signed by Karatzaferis stating, "it is now widely known throughout the world that the Jew stinks of blood," and linking Jews to Nazis.

Vandalism of Jewish monuments increased during and after Israeli military action in Gaza, with 13 incidents reported in December 2008 alone, compared to just two reports during the rest of the year. From December 2008 to January 2009, Jewish synagogues, Holocaust monuments, and Jewish cemeteries were desecrated with anti-Semitic graffiti in Athens, Larissa, Volos, Corfu, Veroia, Drama, Komotini, and Ioannina. In August 2008, an anti-Semitic video boasting about the vandalism of the Holocaust memorial of Rhodes was posted on the website YouTube. In May 2008, the Athens Jewish cemetery was vandalized, with one gravestone damaged and broken glass spread throughout the area. The Jewish community protested each of these incidents. The Jewish cemetery of Ioannina was vandalized in January, March, and June 2009. The Minister of Foreign Affairs publicly condemned the acts of vandalism on June 17.

The Jewish community reported that few of the publicly owned Jewish cemeteries in the country were properly maintained, stating that grass was not cut, fences were not repaired, and plants were not watered. Maintenance is required by law.

In an improvement since the last reporting period, state tourism and media agencies no longer advertized an Easter tradition involving the burning of a life-size effigy of Judas, sometimes referred to as the "burning of the Jew." This tradition continued to occur in some parts of the country but was generally labeled the "burning of Judas" instead. The Jewish community continued to protest anti-Semitic passages in the Greek Orthodox Church's Holy Week liturgy. The Jewish community reported that it remained in dialogue with the Orthodox Church about the removal of

these passages.

The Jewish community of Thessaloniki and the Government continued discussions to find an acceptable restitution for the community's cemetery, expropriated after its destruction during the Holocaust. Aristotle University, a public institution, was built on top of the expropriated cemetery soon after the end of World War II. An experts' committee, formed by the Ministry of Finance to evaluate the property and recommend a solution on restitution for the cemetery, met again in early March 2009. In late March and April 2009, the State Department Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues met with Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials to urge a prompt resolution.

Representatives of international rabbinical nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) expressed concern that subway construction in the vicinity of the University was disturbing human remains and called for a suspension of all excavation work. The director of the company overseeing subway construction told the Special Envoy that no human remains had been unearthed.

Members of the local Jewish community reported that subway authorities and government Archaeological Service staff had consulted them on any findings of human remains, although the consultation usually occurred after excavation was completed. By the end of the reporting period, 72 fragments of tombstones had been found, registered by archaeological authorities, and reviewed by members of the local Jewish community. Although local authorities did not provide absolute assurance that construction would not cross the boundaries of the cemetery, leaders of the Thessaloniki Jewish community were satisfied with the cooperation of the local authorities responsible for subway construction.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Embassy officers met with religious leaders and the Minister of Education and Religion. The Ambassador and visiting senior U.S. officials discussed religious freedom with senior government officials and religious leaders. The U.S. Embassy also regularly discussed religious freedom issues with other government officials, including mayors, regional leaders, Members of Parliament, and members of other diplomatic missions. Officers from the Embassy and the consulate general in Thessaloniki met regularly with representatives of various religious groups and investigated reports of religious discrimination.

During the reporting period, Embassy officials attended Holocaust commemoration events in Athens and the consul general attended events in Thessaloniki. U.S. officers continued to actively engage the Government on the issue of compensating the Thessaloniki Jewish community for Jewish cemetery property expropriated by the Government. In March and April 2009, the State Department Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues met with government officials on the restitution issue to urge closer cooperation with the local Jewish community and international rabbinical groups on cemetery issues. The U.S. Government encouraged the Jewish community in its efforts to engage Aristotle University, a public institution built on the site of the expropriated cemetery, on future projects, including memorializing the Jewish heritage of the site.

In September 2008 the Ambassador hosted an iftar dinner for religious leaders, government officials, and members of the diplomatic community to commemorate the Islamic month of Ramadan and to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. Embassy actively followed legal issues relating to religious workers' visas and the legal status and taxation of religious organizations.

U.S. officials promoted and supported initiatives related to religious freedom and used the International Visitor Program to introduce Muslim community leaders to the United States and their American counterparts.

The Ambassador and other U.S. officials regularly visited religious sites and conducted religious freedom outreach throughout the country.