



## Greece

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

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.

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.

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 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 81,935 square miles and a population of 10.9 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 Old Calendarist Orthodox, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, Protestants, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Scientologists, Jews, Baha'is, Hare Krishna devotees, and followers of polytheistic Hellenic religions.

The majority of noncitizen residents and immigrants are not Greek Orthodox. The largest groups are secular, Muslim, and Roman Catholic and resided largely in Athens.

#### Section II. Status of 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.

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 acting muftis) in Thrace and provides a small monthly allowance to imams in Thrace. No other religious group enjoys governmental financial assistance and some groups, such as the Jewish community, have requested equal treatment with the Orthodox Church on this issue.

The Orthodox Church, Judaism, and Islam are the only religious groups legally 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, defined by the courts as having a publicly taught doctrine with rites of worship that are open to the public, is nonprofit in nature, not adversely affecting public order or morality, and may or may not have a hierarchy of religious authorities. Groups may be recognized as "known religions" by actions of the Ministry of Education and Religion such as being issued a permit for a "house of prayer" or by the courts. A religious group recognized as a "known religion" is protected by the Constitution. Some Christian denominations such as Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, Methodists, evangelicals, and the Jehovah's Witnesses are recognized as "known religions." No new religious entities have been recognized by the Ministry of Education and Religion since 2006. Other religious groups face additional legal and administrative burdens because they cannot function as legal entities. Some new religious groups, such as Scientologists, and followers of ancient polytheistic Hellenic religions practice their faith under several registered nonprofit civil law organizations. The Baha'i and members of other religious groups have expressed their desire to operate within a legal framework as legally recognized religions, rather than as "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 while 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." During the trial, the first of its kind in the country, a group of neo-Nazis made Nazi salutes in the corridors of the courthouse, put up "Fans of Hitler" posters, and handed out anti-Semitic leaflets. Plevris appealed the sentence; an appellate hearing was scheduled for September 2008.

On March 5, 2008, the three-member misdemeanors court of Athens sentenced three journalists of *Eleftheros Kosmos* to 7-month suspended sentences for insulting Jews.

The Government recognizes the Orthodox Church's canon law, both within the Church and in areas of civil law, such as marriage. The law extends legal recognition as a private entity to Roman Catholic churches and related entities established prior to 1946. The Catholic Church unsuccessfully has sought government recognition of its canon law since 1999. The Government recognizes the Catholic Church's canon law only in civil issues. The Catholic Church has sought unsuccessfully for a legal procedure to recognize its religious institutions built after 1946. In 2006 the Ministry of Education and Religion established a committee to study the issue and propose a legislative arrangement to this problem for the Catholic Church. The Committee last met in February 2007 but produced no results as of the end of the reporting period.

During the reporting period, Catholic Church leaders complained that funds promised by the Government to assist in making repairs to the Catholic Cathedral of Athens after the earthquake of 1998 were still not forthcoming.

Leaders of some non-Orthodox religious groups claimed that all taxes on religious organizations are discriminatory because the Government subsidizes the Orthodox Church, while other groups are self-supporting. In 2007 taxation legislation significantly reduced taxes on revenue received by Orthodox churches and institutions from rentals, with the view of abolishing such taxes entirely in 2008. It remains unclear whether this legislation is applicable to other religious groups.

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

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 1 month, typically 23 months. Conscientious objector groups and Amnesty International generally characterized legal provisions for conscientious objector status as a positive step, but criticized the longer service term as punitive. They also reported that uneven administration of the civilian service in some cases led to poor working conditions and noted that it would be preferable for the civilian service to be under civilian administration rather than under the Ministry of Defense.

Mandatory military service is 3 months for "repatriated" citizens, those who emigrated from the former communist bloc and are of Greek ethnic background, and 5 months for repatriated conscientious objectors. Repatriated conscientious objectors who have in the past completed military service in their country of origin and became conscientious objectors later in their life are ineligible for alternative service. They have taken their cases to the courts. Those who became conscientious objectors after they performed their military service and were placed on reservist lists do not have their status recognized. There is no legal provision covering those who change their status after having completed military service. 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 is mandatory for all Orthodox students. Non-Orthodox students are exempt. However, schools offer no alternative activity for these children; they sometimes attended Orthodox religious instruction. Some Thracian Muslims resident in Athens have lobbied unsuccessfully for Islamic religious instruction for their children.

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne gives Muslims 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 law, and provides the right to Turkish-language education. Thrace has secular bilingual schools and two Qur'anic schools funded by the state. Special consideration is given to Muslim minority students from Thrace for admission to technical institutes and universities, which set aside 0.5 percent of the total number of places for them annually.

The Government maintains that Muslims outside Thrace are not covered by the Treaty of Lausanne and therefore do not enjoy those rights provided by the Treaty. Muslim parents complained that hundreds of Turkish-speaking children in the Athens area attending Greek language schools did not receive instruction of Greek as a second language and that therefore their ability to succeed was limited. There is one multicultural elementary "pilot school" in the Athens neighborhood of Gazi, which is funded by the school system and supported by a University of Athens project. Its teachers specialize in teaching Greek to non-Greek-speaking children.

The Government recognizes Shari'a as the law regulating family and civic issues for Muslims who reside in Thrace. The first instance courts in Thrace routinely ratified decisions of the muftis who have judicial powers in civic and domestic matters. The National Human Rights Committee (an autonomous body that is the Government's advisory organ on protection of human rights) stated that the Government should limit the powers of the muftis to religious duties and stop recognizing Shari'a because it can restrict the civic rights of the citizens to whom it is applied. 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. No marriage statistics are available for the Muslim minority living in Thrace, but according to Professor Yiannis Ktistakis, a noted author on the subject of Shari'a in Thrace, the number of divorces is thought to be five times higher than the average for the rest of the country. He believes this can be linked directly to the proportion of people who marry young.

In March 2008 a Court of First Instance in Rodopi Prefecture refused to ratify a mufti's decision based upon Shari'a that awarded a woman only a small share of her parental inheritance, instead of one-half as provided by Greek law. The court held that Greek and European law should prevail over Shari'a. The Court stated the use of Shari'a should not deprive Greek Muslim women of their rights and should not be applied if it violates the basic principles of the Constitution regarding equality of the sexes and equality before the law. The Court

granted the woman one-half of her parental inheritance.

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. A mufti's decisions on requests for divorce are based on interpretations of Shari'a that do not exist in written form and therefore cannot be appealed by the parties to the divorce. The courts routinely ratified most mufti decisions regarding divorce.

The law requires a religious oath for all civil servants (from legislators and lawyers to police officers, firefighters, and soldiers) upon assumption of duties. Non-Orthodox Christians, non-Christians, and persons not belonging to any religious group may take an oath in accord with their own beliefs. In February 2008 the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) found the country to be in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights' Article 9 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion) and Article 13 (right to an effective remedy) in the case of a lawyer who claimed he was forced to state publicly that he was not an Orthodox Christian before being permitted to take a nonreligious affirmation during the admission ceremony to the state bar. The ECHR awarded the plaintiff \$2,600 (€2,000) for nonmonetary damage.

### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

The Ministry of Education and Religion rejected the Church of Scientology's application for recognition and a house-of-prayer permit in 2000 on the grounds that Scientology "is not a religion." The Scientologists subsequently registered as a nonprofit organization.

Different groups that follow the ancient polytheistic Hellenic tradition applied in each of the last four years for house-of-prayer permits. In the past, the Ministry of Education and Religion had not responded despite advice from the Ombudsman for Human Rights. In 2006 the Ministry responded to one of these groups, stating that it "would delay its formal response due to the seriousness and the peculiarity of the matter." There was nothing further from the Ministry. The Jehovah's Witnesses had 11 pending house-of-prayer permit requests, some dating from 2005. They sent a protest letter to the Ombudsman in December 2006, who contacted the Ministry and recommended that it send an official response as mandated by law. The Ministry sent no response as of the end of the reporting period. Members of the Jehovah's Witnesses community reported that two Greek Orthodox bishops made requests to a local court that the Jehovah's Witnesses house-of-prayer permits be repealed. The matter is still pending in the court system. Reportedly, Jehovah's Witnesses filed four additional applications for permits for Kingdom Halls in 2007. They had not received a reply and a construction permit remained pending due to bureaucratic delays at the end of the reporting period.

Minority religious groups have requested that the Government abolish laws regulating house-of-prayer permits, which are required to open houses of worship. Local police have the authority to bring to court minority churches that operate or build places of worship without a permit. In practice, this happens rarely.

Several religious denominations reported difficulties in dealing with the authorities on a variety of administrative matters. Privileges and legal prerogatives granted to the Orthodox Church are not extended routinely to other recognized religions. In contrast, Orthodox officials have an institutionalized link between the church hierarchy and the Ministry of Education and Religion to handle administrative matters.

Although Jehovah's Witnesses are legally recognized as a "known" religion, officials continued to harass members during the period covered by this report. This usually took the form of arbitrary identity checks (although Jehovah's Witnesses representatives reported that this problem has largely abated) and local officials' resistance to construction of places of worship. In 2006 the Supreme Administrative Court dismissed on nonsubstantive technical grounds an appeal by the Jehovah's Witnesses regarding a property dispute over taxation rates involving their officially recognized headquarters. When the area was rezoned, the Orthodox Church was exempt from the resulting rezoning fees; Jehovah's Witnesses claimed that they should also be exempt. As a consequence of the dismissal, the case was referred to the administrative court, where it was pending at the end of the reporting period.

Non-Orthodox citizens claimed that they face career limitations within the military, police, fire service, and civil service because of their religious affiliations. In the military, generally only members of the Orthodox Church become officers, leading some members of other religious groups who wished to advance professionally to declare themselves Orthodox. Few Muslim military personnel have advanced to the rank of reserve officer. There were reports of pressure exerted on Orthodox military personnel, such as being passed over for promotion if they chose to marry non-Orthodox partners or if they get married in non-Orthodox religious ceremonies.

Muslim citizens in Thrace were underrepresented in public sector employment and in state-owned industries and corporations. In 2008 the Government passed legislation establishing a system of filling 0.5 percent of civil service jobs with Muslims. Two Muslim minority members from Thrace held seats in Parliament. In Xanthi and Komotini, Muslims held seats on the prefectural and town councils and served as local mayors. Thrace municipalities hired Muslims as public liaisons in citizen service centers and provided Turkish lessons for other civil servants.

The growing Muslim community in Athens did not have an official mosque or any official cleric to officiate at religious functions, including funerals. Members of the Muslim community used the official Muslim clerics in Thrace for official religious rites. Muslims in Athens and other cities traveled to Thrace or abroad for wedding ceremonies and some transported their deceased to Thrace or abroad for religious burials; those who could not afford to travel to Thrace had unrecognized religious rites performed. Remains buried in cemeteries were subject to exhumation after 3 years, a practice overseen by municipalities. This practice has presented a problem for Muslims, since Islamic law does not permit exhumation of remains. The Orthodox Church gave 3 hectares of land for creating an Islamic cemetery in Attica. The cemetery was not established during the reporting period. The Orthodox Church also opposes cremation. In 2007 the Mayor of Athens instructed the main cemetery of Athens to build a cremation facility. Construction had not started in the period covered by this report.

Parliament approved a bill in 2000 allowing construction of the first Islamic cultural center and mosque in an Athens suburb, but construction had not started by the end of the period covered by this report. In 2006 the Government passed legislation providing for the establishment of a mosque (without a cultural center) in the central Athens neighborhood of Votanikos. Leaders of the local Muslim community expressed satisfaction with the new location, but submitted a written request for action on the matter to the Minister of Education and religion in October 2007 calling the issue "one of grave importance" to the Muslims of Athens, who, according to the letter, numbered in the "hundreds of thousands."

The Islamic Cultural Center in Moschato, Athens, opened in 2006 and continued to operate without a house-of-prayer permit. Other Muslims continued congregating in dozens of unofficial prayer rooms and were forced to travel to Thrace for official weddings and funerals because there were no official Muslim clerics outside Thrace.

Differences remained within the Muslim minority community and between segments of the community and the Government regarding the means of selecting muftis. Under existing law, the Government appoints two muftis and one assistant mufti, all resident in Thrace. The Government maintained that it must appoint the muftis, as is the practice in Islamic countries, because, in addition to religious duties, they perform judicial functions under Shari'a for which the state pays them. The Government consults a committee of Muslim notables, which recommends candidates for the 10-year terms of office. Muslims objected to the fact that the Government was not legally obligated to follow the recommendation of the committee on the selection of the muftis.

Additionally, while some Muslims have accepted the authority of the two Government-appointed muftis, others have "elected" two muftis to serve their communities, maintaining that the Government of a non-Islamic country cannot appoint muftis. The Government does not recognize these muftis, and they do not have the right to perform religious rites with attendant civic powers such as weddings, divorces, or rulings on inheritance rights. Courts have on several occasions prosecuted elected muftis for usurping the functions of the official (appointed) mufti. In July 2006 the ECHR ruled that these prosecutions had violated the rights of the elected Mufti of Xanthi, who passed away in September 2006. A number of male Muslims in Thrace conducted an election to replace the late Mufti of Xanthi. Some Muslims continued to lobby the Government to allow for the direct election of muftis.

Controversy between the Muslim community and the Government over the management and self-government of the wakfs was largely resolved in 2007 with new legislation that allows for the election of the wakfs management committees. Elections did not take place during the period covered by this report.

In the past, Muslim activists have complained that the Government regularly lodges tax liens against the wakfs, although they are tax-free foundations in theory. In March 2007 the Government passed legislation writing off all tax liens against the wakfs, amounting to approximately \$8.4 million (€6.5 million), and eliminating future taxation of wakfs.

Some schoolbooks continued to carry negative references to Catholicism, Judaism, and the ancient polytheistic Hellenic tradition. The Ombudsman wrote a letter to the Ministry of National Education and Religion expressing the hope that the Pedagogical Institute (the competent authority for schoolbooks) would proceed with the necessary revision of the controversial chapters in new editions of the schoolbooks. Negative references to the Jehovah's Witnesses were taken out of 2007 schoolbooks.

The intra-Orthodox doctrinal dispute between Esphigmenou monastery on Mt. Athos and the Ecumenical Patriarchate that administers 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 Holy Mountain of Athos, recognition and commemoration of the Ecumenical Patriarch is the *sine qua non* for existence on Athos. As a result, the Ecumenical 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. In late 2005 the Holy Community governing Mt. Athos appointed a new Esphigmenou monastic order, recognized by the Patriarchate, to replace the existing order. In 2006 a Thessaloniki court convicted nine Esphigmenou monks of disturbing the peace and illegally occupying the monastery, giving each monk a 2-year suspended sentence. In late 2006 seven monks were injured in clashes between the two monastic orders over control of Esphigmenou offices. The police did not intervene. Some Esphigmenou monks continued to occupy the monastery although they lost legal access to assets and bank accounts of the monastery. The situation was calm and there were no incidents during this reporting period between Esphigmenou monks and the rest of the Mt. Athos community. Members of the newly appointed legal order are temporarily accommodated at the Simonos Petras monastery, until a new monastery is built for them. Supporters of the Esphigmenou monastery monks maintain that the Government is carrying out an embargo at the request of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. Monks allege that the Government prevented food, medicine, medical personnel, and pilgrims from reaching the monastery. The Deputy Political Governor of the Holy Mountain of Athos strongly denied such charges, noting that because of the geography of the region, such an embargo would be impossible. The Governing Authority of Mt. Athos is in regular contact with the Esphigmenou monastery monks and is trying to encourage a more flexible approach which would better integrate the Esphigmenou monks with the rest of the Mt. Athos community.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees, apart from problems of temporary police detention experienced by Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses.

#### Abuses of Religious Freedom

Missionaries reported police harassment and detention because of antiproselytizing laws. Church officials from missionary groups expressed concern that antiproselytizing laws remained on the books. Police occasionally detained Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses for identity checks. In all cases except one, after one to several hours the persons were released.

On January 20, 2008, police arrested and held in custody for two days two Mormon missionaries on a complaint of "proselytizing." The missionaries were tried but were acquitted of all charges. The Jehovah's Witnesses report that the number of incidents of this kind of interference has decreased dramatically in recent years, reporting approximately six during the reporting period. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that their interaction with the police improved during the reporting period because of government training and instruction given to police personnel and training undertaken by the missionaries which taught them to steer clear of antiproselytizing laws.

Most non-Orthodox religious leaders reported that their members (non-missionaries) did not encounter discriminatory treatment.

#### 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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In January 2007 the Government announced that it would hire 240 imams in Thrace and pay their salaries, establish a system to fill 0.5 percent of civil service jobs with Muslims, and write off tax liens on Islamic charitable foundations. The Government wrote off the tax liens on wakfs but did not implement the other announced measures during the reporting period.

The Government cosponsored commemorative events in Athens and Thessaloniki in February 2008 for Holocaust Remembrance Day. The President of the Republic, ministers, and Members of Parliament attended the events. The Minister of Foreign Affairs made a keynote address at an event organized by the Athens Prefecture, the Central Board of Jewish Communities, and the Jewish Communities of Athens and Thessaloniki.

The Ministry of Education distributed materials to schools on the history of the Holocaust to be read in all schools on Holocaust Remembrance Day, informed schools of educational courses available from the Jewish Museum of Athens, and sponsored a seminar for educators on the Holocaust.

#### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were some reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The Greek Orthodox Church exercised significant social, political, and economic influence and owned a considerable, although undetermined, amount of property. Many citizens assumed that any ethnic Greek was also an Orthodox Christian. 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 minority religious groups reported incidents of societal discrimination, such as local Orthodox bishops warning parishioners not to visit clergy or members of minority religious groups and requesting that the police arrest missionaries for proselytizing. However, with the exception of the burgeoning Muslim population, most members of minority religious groups considered themselves satisfactorily integrated into society. Organized official interaction between religious communities was infrequent.

Orthodox Church leaders have publicly supported the building of a mosque in Athens, although they were opposed to a cultural center. The plans approved by the Government do not include plans for such a center. The Orthodox Church offered the Muslim community in Athens a piece of land for an Islamic cemetery; the transfer of the land had not occurred at the end of the reporting period.

Expressions of anti-Semitism continued to occur, particularly in the extremist press. The mainstream press and public often mixed negative comments about Jews with criticism of Israel and its government.

On September 17, 2007, an ultra right political party, LAOS, won 3.8 percent of the popular vote to gain ten parliamentary seats in national elections. The party leader Giorgos Karatzaferis has publicly stated that the party is not racist or anti-Semitic, but he has frequently denied that the Holocaust occurred, accused "the Pope and the Jews" of a conspiracy against the country, and at various times claimed that 136 of the Members of Parliament are Freemasons.

The Jewish Community protested anti-Semitic passages in the Orthodox Holy Week liturgy, but reported that it

remained in dialogue with the Orthodox Church about their removal.

On October 5, 2007, while vacationing in the country, Nick Kolyohin, a 24-year-old man from Tel Aviv, was beaten by a group of youths, apparently from Albania, in a violent anti-Semitic attack.

There were reports of vandalism of Jewish monuments. In March 2007 swastikas appeared in a cemetery in Ioannina. The Government condemned the vandalism but did not find the perpetrators. In February 2007 swastikas were painted on an unused synagogue in Veria. In September 2007 broken glass was thrown between Jewish graves at the Athens cemetery.

Negotiations between the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki and the Government to find acceptable restitution for the community's cemetery, expropriated in 1944 after its destruction by the Nazis during the Holocaust, were in progress. In May 2007 an experts' committee was formed by the Ministry of Finance (including the President of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki) to evaluate the property so that restitution negotiations between the Community and the Government could commence. The State Department's Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues spoke in June 2008 with the Finance Ministry's official in charge of the committee's work to urge a prompt resolution. Foreign Jewish NGOs expressed concern that the municipality's construction of a subway, for which excavation began, was disturbing the Jewish cemetery. Although local authorities had not provided absolute assurances that construction would not cross the boundaries of the cemetery, the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki was satisfied with current plans and the high level of cooperation they had with the local authorities responsible for subway construction. Subway authorities and Archeological Service staff worked closely with the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki in consultations regarding finds made during early stages of excavation. In June 2008 the Department's Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues met with Foreign Ministry officials and local officials in Thessaloniki to urge close cooperation with the local Jewish community and with international rabbinical groups. Plans for a particularly problematic subway system entrance had been changed since the Special Envoy's September 2007 visit. At the end of the period covered by this report, the only findings related to the Jewish Community had been 72 fragments of tombstones, which were registered by the archeological authorities and reviewed by members of the local Jewish Community. Some Jewish representatives from outside the country, including some foreign Jewish NGOs, continue to express the opinion that construction should be suspended until there can be full assurance that there would be no disturbance of Jewish grave sites during construction.

The Jewish community reported that virtually none of the publicly owned Jewish cemeteries throughout the country were being properly maintained (e.g., grass was not cut, fences were not repaired, and plants were not watered), although maintenance is required by law.

The Catholic cemetery of Chania was vandalized in October 2007 by unknown perpetrators who destroyed tombs and monuments.

On February 20, 2007, vandals threw three Molotov cocktails at a Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Hall in Menidi, Athens. There was no damage. The police investigated the incident but did not identify the perpetrators.

Some non-Orthodox religious communities encountered difficulty in communicating with officials of the Orthodox Church and claimed that the attitude of the Orthodox Church toward their religious groups increased social intolerance toward them. The Orthodox Church maintained a list of practices and religious groups, including the Jehovah's Witnesses, evangelical Protestants, Scientologists, Mormons, Baha'is, and others, which it believed to be sacrilegious. Officials of the Orthodox Church have acknowledged that they refused to enter into dialogue with religious groups considered harmful to Orthodox worshipers; church leaders instructed Orthodox believers to shun members of these religious groups.

#### 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 officials responsible for religious affairs in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Education and Religion. The Ambassador and other U.S. officials discussed religious freedom with senior government officials and religious leaders. The U.S. Embassy also regularly discussed religious freedom issues in contacts with other government officials, including mayors, regional

leaders, and Members of Parliament. Officers from the Embassy and the Consulate General in Thessaloniki met regularly with representatives of various religious groups and investigated complaints of religious discrimination brought to their attention.

The Ambassador and Deputy Chief of Mission attended Holocaust commemorations in Athens and the Consul General attended Thessaloniki events. U.S. officers continued to monitor the issue of restitution of Jewish properties in Thessaloniki. The U.S. Embassy in Athens, the Consulate General in Thessaloniki, and the U.S. Department of State in Washington, D.C. worked closely with national and municipal authorities as well as the Thessaloniki Jewish community and NGOs to assure the protection of human remains in the Thessaloniki Jewish cemetery. The U.S. Government encouraged the Jewish community in its efforts to engage Aristotle University, a public institution built on top of the expropriated cemetery, to ensure that future university construction would be conducted with proper supervision and honor the history of the property by memorializing the Jewish heritage of the site. In June 2008 the U.S. Department of State's Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues met with Foreign Ministry officials and local officials in Thessaloniki to urge close cooperate with the local Jewish community and international rabbinical groups.

The U.S. Embassy actively followed issues relating to religious workers' visas and property taxes.

The Embassy and consulate general 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.

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