

# **GREECE 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution states freedom of religious conscience is inviolable and provides for freedom of worship with some restrictions. The constitution recognizes Greek Orthodoxy as the “prevailing religion.” The government passed legislation on October 1 that provides for the establishment of religious legal entities; previously only the Greek Orthodox Church, the Jewish community, and the Muslim minority of Thrace were officially recognized as religious groups under the law. The new law granted automatic recognition to several other groups with historical presence in the country, and established a procedure for other groups to seek legal recognition. The government also passed legislation which sets stricter penalties for hate speech, and criminalizes, under certain conditions, the “approval, trivialization, or malicious denial” of the Holocaust. The government granted some privileges to the Greek Orthodox Church it did not grant to other religious groups and maintained some restrictions affecting members of non-Greek Orthodox religious groups. A new ministerial directive regarding the granting of house of prayer permits requires the compliance of a proposed house of prayer with local, public health, and safety regulations. The government promoted Holocaust education through a variety of programs.

Discrimination and hate speech, including both anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic statements, were directed at members of minority religions and immigrants. There were incidents of vandalism of cemeteries and religious memorials and desecrations of houses of worship of a variety of religious groups, and many of the incidents were condemned by government leaders.

The U.S. Ambassador, visiting U.S. officials, and embassy and consulate representatives met regularly with government officials and religious groups to promote religious tolerance, encourage interfaith dialogue, and express concern about anti-Semitic acts and rhetoric. The U.S. embassy supported programs to share best practices in support of religious freedom and tolerance with a range of partners including government, law enforcement, and civil society.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 10.8 million (July 2014 estimate). There are no available official statistics on religious groups.

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Private Greek research firms estimate 95 percent of the population self-identifies as Greek Orthodox. Muslims constitute a number of distinct communities: approximately 120,000 individuals residing in Thrace and descended from the officially recognized Muslim minority established by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, as well as approximately 300,000 immigrants and foreign workers located mostly in the Attica region and clustered together based on their countries of origin in Southeastern Europe, South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. Other groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Old Calendarist Orthodox, atheists, agnostics, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, members of polytheistic Hellenic religions, Scientologists, Bahais, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Sikhs, Seventh-day Adventists, and Hare Krishnas.

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

#### **Legal Framework**

The constitution recognizes Greek Orthodoxy as the "prevailing religion." The constitution states that freedom of religious conscience is inviolable and provides for freedom of worship under the protection of the law with some restrictions. Development of religious conscience among citizens is listed as one of the goals of state education. Proselytizing is prohibited, and no rite of worship may "disturb public order or offend moral principles." The constitution allows prosecutors to seize publications that offend Christianity and other known religions. The law prohibits offenses against "religious peace," including blasphemy and religious insult, which are punishable by prison sentences of up to two years. Blasphemy cases can be brought before civil and criminal courts.

The Greek Orthodox Church, the Jewish community, and the Muslim minority of Thrace have status as official religious legal entities under public law. On October 1, parliament passed legislation that for the first time provides for the establishment of religious legal entities beyond these three groups. The law automatically recognized as legal entities the Catholic Church; the Anglican Church; two evangelical Christian groups; and the Ethiopian, Coptic, Armenian, and Assyrian Orthodox Churches. The October 1 law also provides recognition of Catholic Church canon law.

For groups not automatically granted legal status, the law sets criteria for legal recognition of religious groups, provided the groups meet certain requirements

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related to the number of members, qualifications of the leadership, and adherence to public order. Once a religious group has legal status, it can legally transfer property and administer houses of prayer and worship, private schools, charitable institutions, and other non-profit entities. The new law also allows religious communities without status as legal entities to appear before administrative and civil courts as plaintiffs or defendants.

Since 2013 the law provides tax exemptions to facilities of known religions used solely for religious purposes.

The law requires all civil servants, including cabinet and parliament members, to take an oath before entering office, but individuals are free to take a religious or secular oath in accordance with their own beliefs. Witnesses in trials must also take oaths before testifying in court, but since 2012 can select between a religious and a secular oath in both civil and criminal cases.

Greek Orthodox religious instruction in primary and secondary schools is included in the school curriculum; students may be exempted upon request, regardless of religious affiliation. The law does not allow non-Greek Orthodox religious instruction in public schools, except for optional Islamic religious instruction in public schools in Thrace for the recognized Muslim minority, and optional Catholic religious instruction in public schools on the islands of Tinos and Syros.

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne gives the recognized Muslim minority of Thrace the right to maintain mosques and social and charitable organizations (*awqafs*), allows government-appointed muftis to render religious judicial services in the area of family law, and provides for bilingual education for the Muslim minority. The government, in consultation with a committee of Muslim leaders, appoints three muftis in Thrace to 10-year terms of office, with the possibility of extension. Courts in Thrace routinely ratify the decisions of the muftis, who have judicial powers in domestic matters. The muftis also appoint imams to serve in the community's mosques.

In Thrace, the government operates secular bilingual schools and two Islamic religious schools. Muslim students in Thrace who wish to study the Quran may attend after-hours religious classes in mosques. A law passed in 2013 provides for 240 Islamic religious instructors to teach Islam to the Muslim minority in Greek-language public schools in Thrace. Through the end of the year, 89 of these positions have been filled. In lieu of mandatory Greek Orthodox religious courses

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offered twice a week for two hours in all public schools, Muslim students may take Islamic religious courses. The law provides special consideration to students from the recognized Muslim minority for admission to universities and technical institutes, setting aside an annual 0.5 percent quota for admission to universities and civil service jobs.

A real estate corporation established under private law in which the state and the Greek Orthodox Church of Athens each hold a 50 percent stake manages the real estate assets of the church via a 99-year lease. The corporation is administered by a five-member board, including representatives from the finance and education ministries. Revenues are to be split between the church and state.

On July 31, the parliament approved a law containing technical provisions enabling the creation of crematory facilities.

A law passed in March amends immigration provisions to reinstate citizenship to Jews born in Greece through May 9, 1945 who had previously lost their citizenship.

The law prohibits discrimination and criminalizes hate speech on the grounds of religion. A new law passed in September amends the existing hate speech law and sets stricter penalties for individuals or legal entities convicted of incitement to violence, discrimination, or hatred on the basis of religion, among other factors. Violators may be sentenced to prison terms of between three months and three years, and fined 5,000 to 20,000 euros (\$6,083 to \$24,331). The law criminalizes approval, trivialization, or malicious denial of the Holocaust and crimes of Nazism if that behavior leads to incitement of violence or hatred, or has a threatening or abusive nature towards groups of individuals. The new law also amends the penal code to provide for stricter penalties for other crimes motivated by religion, although it does not provide specifics on the types of crimes included. Violators may be sentenced to an additional six months to three years, and fines would double.

The law provides for alternative forms of mandatory service for religious conscientious objectors in lieu of mandatory military service. Conscientious objectors must work in state hospitals or municipal and public services for a total of 15 months of alternate service.

### Government Practices

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Some government measures continued to restrict the activities and practices of minority religious groups. The government provided limited funding and several tax exemptions and privileges to the three groups recognized as public law entities. The Orthodox Church continued to receive the largest amount of direct support from the government, including payment of salaries and training for clergy, although in contrast to previous years there were no recorded complaints that government support of this type was discriminatory. The government promoted interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance in education.

On January 16, an Athens court convicted a blogger for “habitual blasphemy and offense of religion” for creating a satirical page on social media mocking a dead Orthodox monk. The arrest of the blogger in 2012 resulted in many people accusing the government of infringing on the freedom of speech. The court gave the man a 10-month suspended sentence.

A number of religious groups stated the October 1 law on religious legal entities positively addressed requests they had made in past years to receive treatment equal to the Greek Orthodox Church with regard to legal status and, in the case of the Catholic Church, to obtain recognition of its canon law. Although the legislation did not address the issue of financial support from the government, in contrast to previous years there were no recorded complaints that government practices subsidizing Greek Orthodox Church activities were discriminatory. As part of the financial reforms required by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund, all religious groups, including the Greek Orthodox Church, were subject to taxation on their property owned and used for non-religious purposes. Property used solely for religious purposes remained exempt from taxation per the 2013 change in the law.

In May the Ministries of Education and Religious Affairs; Environment, Energy and Climate Change; Public Order and Citizen Protection; and Health issued a joint ministerial decision regarding the granting of house of prayer permits. The decision required approvals from local urban planning departments to attest to the compliance of a proposed house of prayer with local, public health, and safety regulations. Once obtained, planning approvals had to be submitted to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs together with the documents describing the basic principles and rituals of the religious group, along with a biography of the religious minister or leader. Groups eligible to apply for house of prayer permits had to be classified as known religions without hidden doctrines

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and with rites of worship open to the public. Proselytism was prohibited, and the groups must not have adversely affected public order or morality. A separate permit was required for each physical place of worship.

A religious group that had obtained at least one valid permit was considered a “known religion” and acquired protection under the law; this protection was reiterated by the October 1 religious entities law. Religious groups that had never received house of prayer permits and did not receive legal status under the October 1 law, including Scientologists, Hare Krishnas, and polytheistic Hellenic groups, could not function as religious legal entities, and some religious groups functioned as registered nonprofit civil law organizations. The government did not legally recognize weddings conducted by those religious groups.

During the year, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs issued eight house of prayer permits and did not reject any applications. Prior to the May ministerial decision, the ministry returned requests for permits pending approval to applicants for revision and resubmission under the new process. Some religious groups argued that the house of prayer permit process administratively constrained freedom of religion.

The government continued to provide space free of charge to some groups of Muslims whose members requested places of worship during Ramadan and for other religious occasions. Police reportedly closed some informal mosques for operating without permits and in locations which did not meet safety standards for public spaces.

The Orthodox Church received the largest amount of direct support from the government, including payment of salaries, religious training for clergy, and funding religious instruction in schools. It maintained an institutionalized link to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, which sets provisions for retirement of Orthodox monks and monitors vocational training for Orthodox clergy.

Muslim leaders in Athens continued to criticize the absence of a government-funded mosque and the lack of Muslim cemeteries outside of Thrace, stating that this obliged Muslims to travel to Thrace for Islamic burials; additionally, municipal cemetery regulations requiring exhumation of bodies after three years were said to contravene Islamic religious law. In July the Council of State rejected a complaint opposing construction of a government-financed mosque in Athens

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and approved the use of 1.1 million euros (\$1.3 million) in state funding for the project. The court deemed the mosque's construction necessary in accordance with Greece's constitution and international treaty obligations. Although administrative procedures moved forward, construction of the mosque had not begun by year's end.

In response to the July 31 passage of a law enabling the creation of crematory facilities, the Orthodox Church issued a statement opposing establishing crematory facilities within Orthodox Church parish cemeteries and stated its legal experts would review existing laws to determine to what extent cremation followed church practice and tradition.

Members of the Thrace Muslim minority continued to press for direct election of muftis and imams. In response, the government stated that it appointed all judges and the muftis had judicial powers. Observers said the ability of courts in Thrace to provide judicial oversight of muftis' decisions was limited by lack of translation of most sharia into Greek. On February 7, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs announced the establishment of an unpaid committee, consisting of the three muftis in Thrace, to produce a handbook on interpersonal relations according to the Hanafi School of Islamic law as a nonbinding guide for family and succession law. Some leaders of the recognized Muslim minority criticized the absence of bilingual kindergartens in Thrace as required by law.

The government maintained that Muslims not part of the recognized minority created by the Treaty of Lausanne were not covered by that treaty and therefore did not have the rights provided under it.

Some religious groups and human rights organizations argued the discrepancy between the length of mandatory alternate service for conscientious objectors (15 months) and for those serving in the military (nine months) was discriminatory.

On October 2, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) published its finding in a case from 2009 in which an individual complained he had to assert he did not adhere to the Greek Orthodox faith in order to avoid taking the standard oath that was religious in nature in a criminal proceeding. The ECHR found the requirement to reveal one's religious affiliation in this way was interference with the individual's freedom of religion.

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On October 16, the prosecutor handling the criminal investigation of the Golden Dawn Party released a 700-page document recommending that 70 party members, including all 18 of the party's members of parliament, be indicted and stand trial for criminal offenses, including attacks on minority groups. Golden Dawn representatives had also made anti-Semitic statements, including during parliamentary debate, and had performed Nazi salutes. Of the original 78 defendants, 30 were in custody, and all of the original Golden Dawn members of parliament were stripped of their parliamentary immunity from prosecution.

On March 7, a Thessaloniki court gave a 16-month suspended sentence and a 2,500 euro fine (\$3,041) to a doctor for violating the anti-racism law after he put up a sign outside his office that said "Jews not welcome" in German. Police found extremist propaganda and Nazi symbols in a search of his home; an appeal was pending at the end of the year.

The government took a number of steps to promote interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance. On January 22, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs and the Jewish Museum of Greece signed a memorandum of understanding to promote the history and culture of Greek Jews, train educators to teach about the Holocaust, organize activities to promote sensitivity among citizens, and provide scientific advisory support by the Jewish Museum to the ministry on those issues. On January 28, the prime minister attended a Holocaust remembrance ceremony at the European Parliament and in his speech underscored the importance of remembrance and of lessons learned from history.

On February 6, representatives of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki and Aristotle University of Thessaloniki agreed to re-establish a chair in Jewish Studies at the university, the largest in Greece. On May 12, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs announced its support for the second consecutive year of an educational trip by a group of non-Jewish teachers and students to the Auschwitz Museum.

On June 23-24, under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, the Jewish Museum of Greece organized a two-day seminar for educators on the teaching of the Holocaust.

On July 30, the Minister of Education and Religious Affairs welcomed the decision of the Theology School of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki to establish an Islamic Studies Department.

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On August 28, the re-elected mayor of Thessaloniki wore a yellow Star of David at his swearing-in ceremony in the presence of Golden Dawn members elected to the municipal council, in recognition of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki.

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

Discrimination and hate speech, including both anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic statements, were directed at members of minority religions and immigrants. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Vandalism of cemeteries and memorials and attacks on houses of worship of a variety of religious groups occurred.

The Greek Orthodox Church exercised significant social, political, and economic influence. Members of some non-Orthodox religious groups reported incidents of societal discrimination, including being told they were not truly Greek when they revealed their religious affiliations. Some Orthodox leaders attended religious ceremonies of other religious groups.

Monks from the Esphigmenou Monastery outside Thessaloniki remained in a dispute with the ecumenical patriarch and continued not to recognize his authority. The monks had been declared schismatic by the Orthodox Church, but had refused to hand over the monastery and other buildings to the church. On October 31, police forcibly evicted a monk and supporters from a hostel used by the group.

The Racist Violence Recording Network, an umbrella organization established in 2011 by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the National Commission for Human Rights, with the participation of more than 30 nongovernmental organizations, reported one of 27 incidents of verbal abuse of Muslim immigrants was combined with insults to the victim's religion.

On February 23, unknown individuals desecrated the Quran and threw Golden Dawn leaflets at the entrance of a Muslim cemetery in Rhodes. The mayor of Rhodes publicly denounced the act, and the local Golden Dawn office issued a statement denying involvement.

On March 6, a group of three individuals painted swastikas and other Nazi symbols on desks and posters belonging to leftist political parties at a law school in

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Komotini, Thrace. On May 29, unknown individuals vandalized the Jewish cemetery in Thessaloniki, smashing vases and ornaments and knocking over several headstones and plaques.

On June 27, unknown perpetrators vandalized the Holocaust Memorial in Athens with anti-Semitic graffiti containing threats against the Jewish community. On October 30, the Holocaust Memorial was vandalized again by unknown perpetrators. Police opened investigations but no arrests were made by year's end. The government, including the deputy prime minister, publicly denounced the incidents.

A small number of metropolitan bishops of the Greek Orthodox Church made anti-Semitic statements in letters and social media, including encouraging readers to read *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and blaming Jews for widespread killings of Christians in North Africa and the Middle East.

On April 16, unidentified perpetrators threw a pig's head into a Muslim place of worship near Alexandroupolis. The local Greek Orthodox bishop denounced the act; police investigated but no arrests were made by year's end.

On October 17, unknown persons placed a pig's head and wrote anti-Muslim slogans on the front of the Hellenic-Arab Educational Center in Athens. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the incident; the incident was under police investigation with no arrests made by year's end.

On September 21, unknown individuals shot at a Sikh house of prayer in Marathonas; earlier that same day, unknown individuals broke windows of a different Sikh house of prayer. Police investigated but no arrests were made by year's end.

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

The Ambassador, visiting U.S. officials, and embassy and consulate representatives met regularly with senior government officials, members of parliament, and municipal leaders to promote interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance and diversity, and to express concern about anti-Semitic acts and rhetoric. Embassy and consulate representatives also engaged regularly with civil society representatives and religious groups, including minority religious communities such as the recognized Muslim minority of Thrace, to monitor their

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ability to freely practice their religion and to investigate reports of societal discrimination. The Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism visited with government officials, civil society representatives, Jewish community representatives, and other faith leaders to discuss issues of tolerance, religious freedom, and education to reduce anti-Semitism.

The Special Envoy, the Ambassador, and embassy representatives met with members of the Jewish community and attended Holocaust memorial events. Embassy representatives supported efforts by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to obtain access to official archives in the country. The embassy sponsored the participation of a U.S. academic in a conference about the experience of Thessaloniki Jews during the Holocaust.

The embassy organized and hosted a workshop on combatting discrimination, violence, and intolerance based on religion and national origin that brought together more than 40 Greek and U.S. subject matter experts from government, law enforcement, and civil society who shared historical perspectives, policy and legal approaches, and best practices.