Executive Summary

The constitution protects freedom of religion and the right of religious communities to establish their own institutions. Relations between the state and the Catholic Church are independent, governed by a concordat granting the church a number of privileges, benefits, and financial support. Non-Catholic religious groups can request another type of accord with the government that provides most of the same benefits. Muslims in some locations continued to encounter difficulties acquiring permission from local governments to construct mosques. The government took action to prosecute and punish individuals for delivering anti-Semitic public statements and posting such material on the internet.

Anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim sentiment persisted in society. Individuals and extremist groups vandalized synagogues and Jewish-owned businesses, and made anti-Semitic speeches, especially during the conflict in Gaza. Rightist political leaders made new efforts to disallow the practice of Islam in public as part of values-based political platforms.

Officials from the U.S. embassy and consulates general met regularly with national and local government officials, civil society representatives, and religious groups to stress the importance of respect for religious freedom and dialogue among different faith groups. U.S. officials also monitored minority religious communities’ religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population of Italy at 61.7 million (July 2014 estimate). According to a 2014 poll, 75 percent of native-born citizens identify themselves as Roman Catholic. Religious groups accounting for less than five percent of the population include non-Catholic Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Bahais, and Buddhists. Non-Catholic Christian groups include Eastern Orthodox, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Assemblies of God, the Confederation of Methodist and Waldensian Churches, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and a number of smaller Protestant groups. According to the research branch of the non-governmental organization (NGO) Caritas, of an estimated five million resident foreigners, there are 1.6 million Muslims, 1.5 million Eastern Orthodox Christians, one million Roman Catholics, and 200,000 Protestants. The Jewish community is estimated at 30,000, and includes one of the
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largest proportions of Jews in Europe who trace their presence in Europe to before the historical Ashkenazi-Sephardi divide in Judaism.

The Muslim population is composed of Italian citizens and foreigners, but most of its growth comes from large numbers of immigrants from Eastern Europe; Sub-Saharan, North, and East Africa; the Middle East; and South Asia, most of whom live in Italy’s north. Moroccans and Albanians make up the two largest groups. Muslims are overwhelmingly Sunni. Italian converts to Islam are estimated at between 20,000 and 35,000, most of whom are women who converted for marriage.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states all citizens are equal before the law regardless of religion, and each religious community has the right to establish its own institutions according to its own statutes so long as these do not conflict with the law. The constitution specifies that the state and the Catholic Church are independent of each other; Italy considers the Holy See to be a sovereign state and uses a concordat to govern relations. The constitution allows legally recognized non-Catholic religious groups to request an accord (intesa) with the government.

Representatives of a non-Catholic faith requesting such an accord must first submit their request to the Office of the Prime Minister. The government and the group’s representatives then negotiate a draft agreement, which the Council of Ministers must approve. The prime minister then signs and submits the agreement to parliament for final approval. Once the parliament approves the implementing legislation, the accord governs the relationship between the government and the religious group, including state support. Non-Catholic groups with an accord include the Confederation of Methodist and Waldensian Churches, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Jews, Baptists, Lutherans, Mormons, Orthodox Church of the Constantinople Patriarchate, the Italian Apostolic Church, the Buddhist Union, and Hindus. The government continues to negotiate an accord with the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Negotiations remain suspended with the Soka Gakkai, a Japanese Buddhist group.

The law provides religious groups, regardless of whether they have an accord, with tax-exempt status and the right to recognition as legal entities as long as they have
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completed a registration process with the Ministry of Interior (MOI). A religious group may apply for recognition of its legal status by submitting to a prefect, a local representative of the MOI, a request including the group’s statute, a report on its goals and activities, the disposition of its administrative offices, a three-year budget, certification of its credit status by a bank, and certification of the Italian citizenship or residency of its representative. If approved, the MOI is then obliged to monitor the religious group. The MOI may appoint a commissioner to administer the group if it identifies irregularities in the group’s activities. Legal recognition is a precondition for any group seeking an accord with the government.

An accord grants clergy automatic access to state hospitals, prisons, and military barracks; allows for civil registry of religious marriages; facilitates special religious practices regarding funerals; and exempts students from school attendance on religious holidays. Any religious group without an accord may request these benefits from the MOI on a case-by-case basis. An accord also allows a religious group to receive funds collected by the state through a voluntary 0.8 percent set-aside on taxpayer returns.

The government provides permits and public land for constructing places of worship. Government funding also helps preserve and maintain historic places of worship, sheltering much of the country’s artistic and cultural heritage.

The government allows the Catholic Church to select teachers, paid by the state, to provide instruction in “hour of religion” courses taught in the public schools. The courses are optional, and students who do not wish to attend can study other subjects or, in certain cases, leave school early with parental consent. Church-selected instructors are either lay or religious, and the instruction includes material relevant to non-Catholic religious groups. Government funding is available only for these Catholic Church-approved teachers. If a student requests a religion teacher from a non-Catholic religious group, that group must cover the cost of instruction. Some local laws provide scholarship funding for students to attend private, religiously affiliated schools meeting government educational standards.

The Italian Islamic Confederation (CII) and the Union of Islamic Communities of Italy (UCOI) are the two largest networks of Muslim congregations and places of worship. A limited agreement between the CII and the government allows it to receive the support of foreign governments for its activities. The secretary general of the CII is a member of the Moroccan Ministry of Religious Affairs and heads
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The Great Mosque of Rome, the largest mosque in Italy. UCOII and the CII compete for political support and influence at the local and national level.

The law considers insults against any divinity to be blasphemy, a crime punishable by a fine ranging from 51 euros ($62) to 309 euros ($376), although the law is not generally enforced. Holocaust denial is a crime punishable by up to four years in prison. A seldom-cited law forbids individuals from hiding their identities, and an antiterrorism law requires persons to show their faces in public for security reasons. An antiterrorism decree penalizes those who attempt to hide their identity with up to two years’ imprisonment. There are no restrictions on wearing the hijab in public.

Missionaries and other religious workers must apply for special religious activity visas before arriving in the country.

**Government Practices**

The presence of Catholic symbols such as crucifixes in courtrooms, schools, and other public buildings continued to draw some criticism. On June 25, the newly elected mayor of Padua, a member of the right-wing Northern League, a political party centered in northern Italy, announced the purchase and acquisition of crucifixes intended for display in all municipal schools and offices. On October 23, a teacher and member of the association ArciGay removed a crucifix from a classroom in Trieste to protest what he called the homophobia of the Catholic Church.

Muslims in some locations continued to encounter difficulties acquiring permission from local governments to construct mosques (as of October, there were four official mosques, but 386 unofficial places of worship); local officials usually cited a lack of zoning plans authorizing the establishment of places of worship on specific sites. In Imola on September 8, a local representative of the Northern League requested the closure of an Islamic cultural center used also as a place of worship, stating the municipal zoning plan did not provide for the establishment of a place of worship in the area.

Other groups obtained construction permits in two northern cities. On January 11, the Mayor of Genoa reserved a site for construction of a mosque previously authorized in 2009. On October 7, the mayor of Milan announced the municipality had identified three construction sites for two mosques as well as an evangelical
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church. The city, home to an estimated 100,000 Muslims, had several small cultural centers informally known as “garage mosques,” but there was no true mosque. In August the Northern League announced a Milan initiative to collect signatures requesting a referendum to block the construction of the two mosques.

Online hate speech was the fastest growing source of anti-Semitism. In April prosecutors in Bolzano charged seven people associated with the anti-Semitic website Holywar with racial discrimination and defamation following a complaint by Federico Steinhaus, a leader of the Jewish community in Merano. The Ministry of Education funded training courses for teachers designed to prevent anti-Semitism in social media.

On July 22, Foreign Minister Federica Mogherini issued a joint statement with the German and French foreign ministers, stating, “Anti-Semitic rhetoric and hostility against Jews, attacks on people of Jewish belief and synagogues have no place in our societies.” On August 5, the government expelled Abd Al-Barr Al-Rawdhi, a Moroccan imam, who prayed God would “kill the Jews to the very last one” during a sermon in San Dona’ di Piave.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Office to Combat Racial and Ethnic Discrimination (UNAR) in the Ministry of Equal Opportunity reported that one third of the 1,142 reports received in 2013, the last year for which data was available, involved religious or ethnic discrimination. UNAR did not break down religious discrimination.

Some prominent individuals as well as extremist groups were responsible for anti-Semitic remarks and actions, including vandalism and anti-Semitic statements in the media and on the internet. The Observatory of Contemporary Anti-Jewish Prejudice recorded 70 acts of anti-Semitism between January and September. On February 1, police arrested an individual accused of having sent three pig’s heads to the main Rome synagogue, the Israeli embassy, and a museum promoting an exhibition on the Holocaust. Rome Mayor Ignazio Marino condemned what he called intimidation of the city's Jewish community. The mayor spoke out again in July and August during the conflict in Gaza, when swastikas and anti-Semitic graffiti and posters appeared on shops owned by Jews across the city.
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In May during an interview on the talk show Le Iene, Roberto Jonghi Lavarin of the far-right National Project movement praised World War II fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, saying that the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust had died because the Nazis were “precise” and “well organized.”

In September the Union of Italian Jewish Communities and the Foundation of Jewish Contemporary Documentation of Milan created an anti-Semitism hotline, “Anti-Semitism Antenna,” for Italian victims and witnesses to report anti-Semitic incidents.

There were reports of cases of pressure or threats against women accused of not respecting religious traditions and ethics. On April 28, a Muslim woman reported to online media that the owner of a hotel refused to offer her an internship as she wore a hijab. On October 3, the daily *Il Tempo* reported that a woman in the province of Viterbo filed for divorce from her Egyptian husband after his beatings for her failure to convert to Islam put her in the hospital. There were also reports some citizens objected to women wearing head-covering garments.

In early November Matteo Salvini, Secretary of the Northern League announced the creation of a People’s League party whose values-based platform includes the banning of mosques in Italy.

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

Officials from the U.S. embassy and consulates general met regularly with national and local government officials to encourage respect for religious freedom. They also met with civil society representatives and religious groups to promote dialogue among various groups, and monitor their ability to practice their religion freely. Embassy and consulates general officials engaged regularly with Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish religious leaders to discuss issues important to their communities, such as the social inclusion of immigrants and political engagement with local governments. Outreach continued to second-generation Muslim youth groups, and the embassy and consulates general provided small grants to promote moderate voices through new media and communication training, and sponsored exchange programs for Muslim community leaders. The embassy and consulates general also worked with provincial and city governments on religious freedom programs.