

USDOS – US Department of State

2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Belgium

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the law prohibits discrimination based on religious orientation. Federal law bans covering one's face in public. In June, the Flemish government resumed accepting applications for recognition from houses of worship after suspending them in 2017. The Flemish government also moved to withdraw existing recognition from four mosques. Numerous mosque recognition applications remained pending in the Brussels and Flanders regions. A Ghent criminal court fined the Kraainem Jehovah's Witness congregation 12,000 euros (\$13,600) for inciting hatred or violence against former members. The federal government expelled a Turkish imam from the country, stating he had posted homophobic comments online. All regions except Brussels retained their ban on the slaughter of animals without prior stunning, which Muslim and Jewish groups criticized for infringing on halal and kosher practices. Despite an announcement by the coalition government elected in 2020 of its intention to recognize the Belgian Buddhist Union, which first applied for such status in 2008, at year's end, the group remained unrecognized.

Unia, the Interfederal Center for Equal Opportunities, an independent government agency that reviews discrimination complaints, reported that in 2020, the most recent year for which data were available, there were 115 antisemitic incidents (compared with 79 in 2019) and 261 incidents (336 in 2019) against other religious groups, 88 percent of which targeted Muslims. Media reported increased hate speech against Jews during the year, and some Jews reported accusations blaming Jews for the spread of COVID-19. On December 16, Minister of Justice Vincent Van Quickenborne stated that foreign influence and mismanagement within the Muslim Executive could justify a cutoff of government subsidies in 2022 if the executive did not carry out reforms. In September, the Brussels-based NGO Action and Protection League issued the results of its European antisemitism survey, which found that 8 percent of 1,000 respondents ages 18-75 in Belgium said they had negative feelings towards Jews.

U.S. embassy officials continued to meet regularly with senior government officials in the Office of the Prime Minister; at the Ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Justice; and with members of parliament to discuss anti-Muslim and antisemitic incidents and discrimination. The Charge d'Affaires and other embassy officials met with civil society and religious leaders in Brussels and other communities to address anti-Muslim and antisemitic incidents and sentiment and to advocate religious tolerance. The embassy continued to provide funding for a nongovernmental organization (NGO) to implement a project to educate elementary aged students from varied backgrounds on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to break down stereotypes and combat antisemitism and anti-Muslim sentiment.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.8 million (midyear 2021). According to the most recent survey in December 2018 by the GESIS-Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, 57.1 percent of residents are Roman Catholic, 2.3 percent Protestant, 2.8 percent other non-Orthodox Christian, 6.8 percent Muslim (mostly Sunni), 0.6 percent Orthodox Christian, 0.3 percent Jewish, 0.3 percent Buddhist, 9.1 percent atheist, 20.2 percent "nonbeliever/agnostic," and 0.5 percent "other." A 2015 study by the Catholic University of Louvain estimated that 42.2 percent of Muslims reside in Flanders, 35.5 percent in Brussels, and 22.3 percent in Wallonia. According to Catholic University of Louvain sociologist Jan Hertogen, based on 2015 data, 24.2 percent of the Brussels population and 7.5 percent of the Antwerp population is Muslim.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution provides for freedom of worship, including its public practice, and freedom of expression, provided no crime is committed in the exercise of these freedoms. It states no individual may be required to participate in any religious group's acts or ceremonies or to observe the group's religious days of rest, and it bars the state from interfering in the appointment of religious clergy or blocking the publication of religious documents. It obligates the state to pay the salaries and pensions of clergy (according to law, to qualify clergy must work in recognized houses of worship and be certified by those religious groups), as well as those of representatives of organizations recognized by the law as providing moral assistance based on a nonconfessional philosophy.

The law prohibits discrimination based on religious or philosophical (e.g., nonconfessional) orientation. Federal law prohibits public statements inciting religious hatred, including Holocaust denial. Discrimination based on Jewish descent is distinguished from discrimination against Jewish religious practices. The maximum sentence for Holocaust denial is one year in prison. Courts have interpreted that an antiracism law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of nationality, race, skin color, ancestry, national origin, or ethnicity may be applied to cases of antisemitism.

The government officially recognizes Roman Catholicism, Protestantism (including evangelicals and Pentecostals), Anglicanism (separately from other Protestant groups), Orthodox (Greek and Russian) Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and secular humanism.

The law does not define requirements to obtain official recognition. The Ministry of Justice specifies the legal basis for official recognition. A religious group seeking official recognition applies to the Ministry of Justice, which then recommends approval or rejection to parliament, which votes on the application. The government evaluates whether the group meets organizational and reporting requirements and applies criteria based on administrative and legislative precedents in deciding whether to recommend granting recognition to a religious group. The religious group must have a structure or hierarchy, a "sufficient number" of members, and a "long period" of existence in the country. It must offer "social value" to the public, abide by the laws of the state, and respect public order. The government does not formally define "sufficient number," "long period of time," or "social value." Final approval is the sole responsibility of the federal parliament; however, parliament generally accepts the ministry's recommendation.

The law requires each officially recognized religious group to have an official interlocutor, such as an office composed of one or more representatives of the religion plus administrative staff, to support the government in its constitutional duty of providing the material conditions for the free exercise of religion. The functions performed by the interlocutor include certification of clergy and teachers of the religion, assistance in the development of the religious curriculum in schools, and oversight of the management of houses of worship.

The federal and regional governments provide financial support for officially recognized religious groups. Federal government subsidies include direct payment of clergy salaries and pensions, while regions subsidize maintenance and equipment costs for facilities and places of worship, as well as clergy housing, and oversee finances and donations when the legal exemption amount is exceeded. Denominations or divisions within the recognized religious groups (Shia Islam, Reform Judaism, or Lutheranism, for example) do not receive support or recognition separate from their parent religious group. Parent religious groups distribute subsidies according to their statutes, which may also include salaries to ministers and public funding for renovation or facility maintenance. Unrecognized religious groups may worship freely and openly but do not receive the subsidies that recognized groups do. In addition, the law stipulates a separate federal government subsidy for three organizations: the Belgian Muslim Executive, the Secular Central Council, and the Belgian Buddhist Union. Although the Buddhist Union receives this separate subsidy, the government has not officially recognized Buddhism as a religious group.

There are procedures for individual houses of worship of recognized religious groups to apply to obtain recognition and federal subsidies. To do so, a house of worship must meet requirements set by the region in which it is located and receive final approval by the federal Ministry of Justice. These requirements include transparency and legality of accounting practices, renunciation of foreign sources of income for ministers of religion working in the facility, compliance with building and fire safety codes, and certification of the minister of religion by the relevant interlocutor body. Recognized houses of worship also receive subsidies from the linguistic communities and municipalities for the upkeep of religious buildings. Houses of worship or other religious groups that are unable or choose not to meet these requirements may organize as nonprofit associations and benefit from lower taxes but not government subsidies. Individual houses of worship in this situation (i.e., not completing the recognition process) may still be affiliated with an officially recognized religious group.

The Flemish government has a policy of conducting enhanced security screening for possible radicalization of imams or worshippers and against foreign influence at mosques, including by requiring all religious communities and places of worship to submit to a four-year probation period prior to official recognition. This policy applies to all places of worship regardless of religion.

There is a federal ban on covering one's face in public. Individuals wearing face coverings that cover all or part of the face in public are subject to a maximum fine of 137.50 euros (\$160). In addition, the penal code stipulates violators may be sentenced to a maximum of seven days' imprisonment.

Outside of the Brussels region, which still allows ritual slaughter without stunning, the law prohibits the slaughter of animals without prior stunning. The legislation does not prevent halal and kosher meat from being imported from abroad.

By longstanding practice rather than law, the government bans the wearing of religious symbols by employees in public sector jobs requiring interaction with the public. The ban does not apply to teachers of religion in public schools.

The constitution requires teaching in public schools to be neutral with respect to religious belief. The public education system requires neutrality in the presentation of religious views outside of religion classes. All public schools offer religious or "moral" instruction oriented toward citizenship and moral values. Outside of Flanders, these courses are mandatory; parents in schools in Flanders may have their children opt out of such courses. Francophone schools offer a mandatory one-hour per week "philosophy and citizenship" course plus an additional one-hour mandatory course on either philosophy and citizenship or one of the recognized religions, based on a constitutional court ruling.

Schools provide teachers, clerical or secular, for each of the recognized religious groups, as well as for secular humanism, according to the student's preference. The degree of religious expression varies but must follow a principle of "neutrality." Because "neutrality" is not defined explicitly in the constitution in the context of religious expression, most state-funded institutions follow one of two principles: "inclusive neutrality," where individuals must remain neutral in their behavior but may wear religious symbols, or "exclusive neutrality," where there is a total ban on religious attire. In either case, the education provided outside of the religious classes must remain neutral.

Public school religion teachers are nominated by a committee from their religious group and appointed by the linguistic community government's education minister. Private, authorized religious schools (limited to schools operated by recognized religious groups), known as "free" schools, follow the same curriculum as public schools but may place greater emphasis on specific religious classes. Teachers at these religious schools are civil servants, and their salaries, as well as subsidies for the schools' operating expenses, are paid for by the respective linguistic community, municipality, or province.

Unia is a publicly funded independent agency responsible for reviewing discrimination complaints, including those of a religious nature, and attempting to resolve them through mediation or arbitration. The agency lacks legal powers to enforce resolution of cases but may refer them to the courts.

The federal justice minister appoints a magistrate in each judicial district to monitor discrimination cases and oversee their prosecution, including those involving religion, as a criminal act.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

During the year, according to Justice Minister Van Quickenborne and reported by media outlet *La Libre*, mosque applications for government recognition stagnated due to changes in the leadership of the Muslim Executive and an announced internal restructuring of the organization, as well as unfavorable decisions by intelligence services following the review of some mosques' applications. Some observers continued to state that a number of mosques opted not to seek official recognition because they received sufficient foreign funding and preferred to operate without government oversight. Some observers stated the lengthy, bureaucratic process of obtaining recognition also acted as a deterrent.

On June 4, the Flemish government approved a decree to resume accepting and reviewing applications for recognition by religious houses of worship that then regional Interior Minister Liesbeth Homans had suspended in 2017. In 2020, a senior Flemish government official estimated there were 50-100 local places of worship with pending applications for recognition, some dating back to the 2017 moratorium. Local media reported in June that in the province of Antwerp alone, 31 mosques were awaiting official recognition.

On June 9, Flemish Minister of Civic Integration Bart Somers withdrew the recognition of a Pakistani mosque in Antwerp due to what he said was its failure to meet the criteria of social value. Somers stated the mosque disrupted social cohesion and had insufficient support within the community. According to the civil intelligence service, Surete d'Etat, the mosque had faced internal disputes since

2013, which in some cases required police intervention. On October 18, Somers withdrew recognition of the De Koepel Mosque in Antwerp for what he said was a failure to meet administrative obligations, such as providing annual accounts, budget, and board meeting records.

According to local media and academics, recognition applications by eight mosques in the Brussels-Capital region remained pending. Minister of Justice Van Quickenborne denied recognition to the Great Mosque of Brussels in December 2020 after a negative report from Surete d'Etat. The Surete cited what it described as questionable ties to Moroccan authorities.

At year's end, there were 87 recognized mosques, the same number as at the end of 2020 – 39 in Wallonia, 27 in Flanders, and 21 in Brussels. The Belgian Muslim Executive estimated there were a total of 300 mosques in the country, both recognized and unrecognized.

In January, the deputy head of the Muslim Executive, Salah Echallaoui, resigned after Minister of Justice Van Quickenborne accused him of mismanagement; he was subsequently replaced by Nouredine Smaili. On January 27, the Muslim Executive reported that an internal evaluation found several of its members had ties to extremist movements and networks. The organization subsequently announced it would undergo internal restructuring. On October 6, Justice Minister Van Quickenborne requested an investigation to be led by Surete d'Etat into the operations of the Muslim Executive, since, he said, it had failed to make progress restructuring. On October 19, several media outlets quoted President of the Muslim Executive Mehmet Ustun stating that he was considering renouncing state subsidies due to excessive "political meddling." In response, Van Quickenborne threatened to withdraw state funding for the Muslim Executive, which amounts to 500,000 euros (\$567,000) per year, if the organization failed to comply with the government's conditions for maintaining official recognition – greater transparency, reduced concentration of power among a small group of persons within the organization, and elimination of foreign influence. On December 16, during a plenary session of the House of Representatives, Van Quickenborne stated that the "current circumstances" of foreign influence and mismanagement within the Muslim Executive could justify cutting it off from subsidies in 2022, and he urged the executive to institute reforms.

An application from the Belgian Hindu Forum for the government to recognize Hinduism as a religion, submitted in 2013, remained pending, as did its application to receive a government subsidy. There were no other pending requests by religious groups.

In March, the Ghent Correctional Court ruled against the Kraainem Jehovah's Witness congregation, finding it guilty of inciting discrimination and inciting hatred or violence against former members of the congregation and fining it 12,000 euros (\$13,600). The Ghent prosecutor filed a criminal case against the group in 2020 following a five-year investigation based on a complaint by a former member of the congregation, Patrick Haeck, who said he had been shunned after he exposed a case of sexual abuse.

Although the ban on face coverings remained unchanged, police did not enforce the law in the context of COVID-19.

On January 27, media reported that the State Secretary for Asylum and Migration, Sammy Mahdi, said he had ordered a Turkish imam to leave the country within 30 days for making homophobic remarks. The man, who was the imam of the Green Mosque in the Flemish municipality of Houthalen-Helchteren and a member of the Belgian branch of the Turkish religious authority Diyanet, reportedly posted the comments on the mosque's and his personal Facebook pages. Mahdi stated that the imam's comments could incite hate and "harm public order or national security" and refused to renew his residence permit. On April 23, Mahdi's cabinet confirmed via a press release that the imam had left Belgium. At the same time, Flemish Minister for Civic Integration Somers began procedures to remove the recognition of the mosque due to what he said were discriminatory messages against the LGBTQI+ community on its Facebook page. At year's end, the government continued to recognize the mosque.

In January, the city of Charleroi approved a construction project for a mosque in its municipality of Lodelinsart after a second public comment period, which the city opened in 2020 after approving the project in 2019. However, in June, Walloon Minister for Urbanism Willy Borsus denied a construction permit for the mosque, citing parking and noise concerns.

On March 8, media reported that a mosque in Court-St-Etienne had been completed. The project was approved in 2018 after four construction permit rejections.

In a newspaper interview, Mayor of Antwerp Bart De Wever stated that the city's historic community of Orthodox Jews risked bringing a "wave of antisemitism" upon themselves because of noncompliance with COVID-19 social distancing and testing requirements. De Wever threatened to close one synagogue for violation of COVID-19 restrictions, stating that police had raided the synagogue twice on the Sabbath, evicting 37 persons in one incident and 22 persons in the other. A

spokesperson in Antwerp for the Forum of Jewish Organizations called De Wever's criticism of the Jewish community "undiplomatic," but added that the mayor was "a close and good friend of the Jewish community."

In October, the Constitutional Court rejected the appeals launched by Muslim and Jewish associations against the ban on animal slaughter without stunning in Flanders and Wallonia. The office of the Central Israelite Consistory of Belgium (the official representative of the Jewish community in dealings with the government) unanimously decided to lodge an appeal with the European Court of Human Rights against the decision rendered by the court. Representatives of the Islamic faith, the Muslim Executive, and the Coordination Council of Islamic Institutions in Belgium said they were also considering an appeal.

A large slaughterhouse performing kosher and halal slaughter continued to operate in Brussels, where slaughter without prior stunning remained permitted, but it could not accommodate all requests, particularly during religious holidays. The Brussels government said it had no policy on animal slaughter without prior stunning. In February, Brussels Minister for Animal Welfare Bernard Clerfayt held discussions on the subject with Muslim and Jewish leaders in Brussels who followed halal and kosher practices, as well as with animal welfare organizations. Sources stated that Clerfayt had been due to present a draft ordinance to the Brussels Council of Ministers in October that would prohibit the slaughter of animals without prior stunning, including for religious reasons, but he had not done so by year's end.

On January 9, national media reported that, in a civil case, the Antwerp Court of First Instance ruled that the Antwerp-based NGO Mothers for Mothers, which stated its aim was to assist families and mothers in financial difficulties, was guilty of discrimination for refusing aid to veiled women. The organization allowed veiled women to access only the entrance hall to its offices, excluding them from the rest of the premises. The court ruled that the association had to remove the restrictions on veiled women or incur a penalty of 500 euros (\$570) for each documented violation. On January 15, the association closed its building in Antwerp to avoid complying with the court order. A notice on the building door stated that the association deemed the court ruling "incomprehensible."

During the year, the government appointed Ihsane Haouch, who wears a hijab, as government commissioner to the Institution for the Equality of Women and Men.

In May, the Brussels Labor Court found the Brussels-based public transportation company STIB/MIVB guilty of gender and religious discrimination after a Muslim woman was denied interviews for jobs at the company for wearing a religious head covering. The court ordered the company to end its policy of "exclusive neutrality," which bans all outward display of religious symbols and ruled that it disproportionately affected Muslim women. In June, following internal discussions, the Brussels government announced it would not appeal this decision. In a press release, Brussels authorities highlighted the "importance of the principle of neutrality of staff in the organization of public services" and called on parliament to hold a debate on the issue.

In February, the Ghent public prosecutor's office called for the criminal prosecution of nine members of the youth movement *Schild & Vrienden* (Shield and Friends), commonly characterized as far right in Flemish and Francophone news media, for violating the antiracism law. The accused included Dries Van Langenhove, a founder of *Schild & Vrienden* and a Member of Parliament for the Flemish political party Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest), commonly characterized as extreme right. The public prosecutor's office opened an investigation in 2018 after public broadcaster VRT documented antisemitic, anti-Muslim, xenophobic, racist, and sexist messages exchanged by the members in an online chat room. Some of the individuals were also accused of Holocaust denial. On December 28, the media outlet *De Morgen* reported that procedural issues in the case had arisen following accusations of a lack of impartiality by investigating judge Annemie Serlippens. Serlippens subsequently resigned, and Van Langenhove's lawyer requested that the evidence obtained through her investigation be declared null and void. The Ghent Chamber of Indictments rejected this request. At year's end, the case had not been referred to the criminal court.

On September 1, the government ended Operation Vigilant Guardian (OVG), which since 2015 had provided domestic military protection in the face of increased terror threats. With the change, responsibility for protection of Antwerp's Jewish quarter shifted from the military to the Antwerp municipal police, although Antwerp Mayor De Wever stated on multiple occasions that his municipality lacked the resources to protect the Jewish quarter. According to media, the Antwerp police department would need to expand significantly to meet the increased security requirement. Community members stated publicly that they felt less secure due to the end of OVG. They said the military had withdrawn the military protection because the government assessed the threat to the Jewish community was a tier lower than it had been several years earlier when the threat had been rated at the highest of four possible tiers. Community members expressed concern that police might provide less effective security because, unlike the military, the police could be called away. On Jewish high holy days, the city assigned extra police to protect synagogues and other sites.

Police continued to offer a voluntary, day-long course, “The Holocaust, the Police, and Human Rights,” at the Dossin Barracks in Mechelen, site of a Holocaust museum and memorial.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Media and NGOs, including Amnesty International, the Collective Against Islamophobia in Belgium, the NGO Antisemitism Belgium, and Unia, reported incidents of violence, threats, harassment, discrimination, and hate speech against Muslims and Jews.

In 2020, the most recent period for which data were available, Unia reported 115 antisemitic incidents, a 45 percent increase from 2019. Unia defined these as incidents against Jewish persons rather than against Jewish practices, which it tracked separately. Of these, 70 percent were related to hate speech and 49 percent took place on the internet. Unia reported four cases of destruction of public property and four cases of verbal harassment related to antisemitism. No cases of physical assault or attacks were recorded.

Unia reported 261 cases of other religious discrimination or harassment in 2020 and noted that the decreased number of in-person social interactions due to COVID-19 might account for the decrease in cases from 2019, when 336 cases were recorded. Of the 2020 incidents, 37 percent were media related, and 30 percent occurred in the workplace, mostly against Muslims. Approximately 88 percent of the cases targeted Muslims. There were 11 incidents against Jewish religious practices, seven against Christians, and 13 in which the religious link was categorized as “other” or “unclear.”

Unia cited 112 cases of religious hate speech in its 2020 annual report. Approximately 90 percent of these were related to “inciting hatred, discrimination or violence.” A total of 29 religious hate crimes were recorded by Unia, with 93 percent being cases of intimidation or harassment and no cases of physical attacks.

In February, Flemish media outlets *De Morgen* and *Gazet Van Antwerpen* reported that Flemish Jews pointed to increasing antisemitic comments on social media following news reports about large gatherings in synagogues and higher infection rates in the Antwerp Jewish community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Security services also reported an increase in hate messages targeting Jews, including some accusing the Jewish community of spreading COVID-19.

In March, the Flemish television program *TelefactsNU* reported it had infiltrated and exposed an extreme right online chat group called “Volksverbond” that praised violence and spread racist and anti-Muslim propaganda. Members of the chat group created fake online Muslim profiles and posted provocative and purportedly Islamist messages, such as calling for adoption of sharia, to “open the eyes of the people.” Others proposed dressing as Muslims and throwing Molotov cocktails at protestors during a far-right demonstration. Group members also shared information on how to acquire weapons and arms licenses. According to the Flemish media outlet *Het Laatste Nieuws*, the group had 350 followers on Instagram and 26 core members in its private chat.

On June 3, the Court of Mechelen sentenced a man to six months in prison and fined him 800 euros (\$910) for performing the Nazi salute in Fort Breendonk, located near the city of Mechelen, which had served as a Nazi prison hub for the transit and deportation of the country’s Jews during World War II. The man was a member of Right-Wing Resistance Flanders, listed as a right-wing extremist group by the government’s Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis.

In May, press reported that the Royal Belgian Football Association had begun an ethics investigation of a Dutch soccer player for the Brugge soccer club after video appeared of the man singing with club fans that he would “rather die than be a Jew” following a match with Brussels club Anderlecht. According to local media, other teams commonly referred to Anderlecht players and supporters as “Jews.” The player said on social media he had not intended to offend, and the Brugge club said he “had no antisemitic undertone.” Jewish parliamentarian Michael Freilich said the player needed to hear “how offensive his words have been to Belgian Jews.”

The Aalst Carnival, which in previous years was marked by open displays of antisemitism, did not take place due to COVID-19. In January, press reported that the director of the carnival, Sven de Smet, posted a message on Facebook referencing accusations that Orthodox Jews did not follow COVID-19 restrictions. The message read, “Hey, Jew, the rules apply to you, too. Anything! The chosen people of God.” Journalist Rudi Roth filed a complaint with Unia about de Smet’s post.

According to Antisemitism Belgium, in early May five men insulted a man, his wife, and children, shouting “Free Palestine”; one of them later punched the man twice in the face. The victim received medical care at the hospital, and the perpetrator was arrested by local guards and transferred to the police. There was no further information on the status of the case.

Also in May, two persons threw rocks at a group of Jews in Antwerp. Police were unable to identify the individuals responsible.

In July, an Antwerp resident assaulted two members of the Antwerp Jewish community near a synagogue. The police later arrested a suspect. There was no further information on the status of the case.

Other cases reported by Antisemitism Belgium include online antisemitic hate messages, for example postings comparing Israel and Zionists to Nazis or calling for the killing of Jews or the destruction of Israel; in-person verbal harassment, for example, instances of calling persons “dirty Jews”; and discrimination and vandalism, such as the defacement of posters highlighting the issue of violence against Jews.

In September, the Brussels-based NGO Action and Protection League issued the results of its European antisemitism survey based on data from December 2019-January 2020. According to the survey, 8 percent of 1,000 respondents ages 18-75 in Belgium said they had negative feelings towards Jews. Four percent said they would be “totally uncomfortable” or “uncomfortable” with having Jewish neighbors. The survey cited stereotypical statements about Jews and asked respondents the degree to which they agreed or disagreed. The proportion who responded “strongly agree” or “tend to agree” with the following statements were: “The interests of Jews in this country are very different from the interests of the rest of the population” (23 percent); “There is a secret Jewish network that influences political and economic affairs in the world” (23 percent); “Jews have too much influence in this country” (14 percent); “Jews will never be able to fully integrate into this society” (24 percent); “Jews are more inclined than most to use shady practices to achieve their goals” (16 percent); “Many of the atrocities of the Holocaust were often exaggerated by the Jews later” (9 percent); “Jews are also to blame for the persecutions against them” (12 percent); and “Jews exploit Holocaust victimhood for their own purposes” (22 percent).

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials discussed anti-Muslim and antisemitic incidents and sentiment in meetings with representatives from the Office of the Prime Minister; the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Interior, and Justice; and regional governments.

A U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor met with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director for Democracy and Human Rights in November to discuss the government’s efforts to promote religious freedom in the country and combat antisemitism.

Embassy officials regularly met with religious leaders to discuss incidents of religious discrimination and ways to counter public manifestations of anti-Muslim and antisemitic sentiment. They continued engagement with activists from the Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish communities. On October 29, embassy representatives met with the Forum of Jewish Organizations in Antwerp to discuss animal slaughter, government regulations, antisemitic incidents, and security concerns following the end of the OVG program. In December, the Charge d’Affaires met with leaders from the Central Israelite Consistory and the Coordinating Committee of Jewish Organizations in Belgium to discuss interreligious understanding and listen to concerns within the Jewish community.

Embassy officials met with various university professors to discuss the animal slaughter ban outside of Brussels and its effect on the Muslim and Jewish communities, the veil in public schools and institutions, and the process for recognition of mosques and imam training in Belgium.

The embassy engaged with the Antwerp municipal government and police to ensure the continued protection of the Jewish community as responsibility shifted from the military to local police forces.

The embassy continued its grant support to Actions in the Mediterranean (AIM), a Brussels-based NGO, to implement a project to educate elementary-aged students on the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The program brought 40 students from various Brussels schools from a wide variety of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds together to learn about the history of the conflict and travel to Israel and Palestinian areas for a week to learn to break down stereotypes and combat antisemitism and anti-Muslim sentiment alongside young Israelis and Palestinians. Upon return, they shared their experience with peers and others. The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials discussed the project with the president of AIM on December 14.

The embassy supported participation by an archivist from Kazerne Dossin Institute, a museum and documentation center on the Holocaust and human rights, in a virtual U.S. government program on preserving Holocaust history in July.

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