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2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Spain

Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination based on religion. It is a crime to prevent or disrupt religious services or to offend or scorn religious beliefs, ceremonies, or practitioners. By law the definition of hate crimes includes acts of "humiliation or disrespect" based on the religion of the victim. While the law provides that no religion shall have a "state character," the government has cooperative relations with religious faiths. The government's bilateral agreement with the Holy See grants the Catholic Church additional benefits not available to the three other groups with which it has agreements: Muslims, Protestants and Jews. Groups without agreements may register with the government and receive some benefits.

In October, the national Supreme Court ruled that a municipality in Cantabria violated the fundamental rights of citizens by passing a Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) resolution in 2016. The ruling established a precedent nationwide that pro-BDS resolutions are illegal. The Supreme Court of the region of Murcia ruled in February that the local government violated the right to freedom of religion in failing to provide Islamic studies courses in schools; the regional education ministry began providing these courses later in the year. A nongovernmental organization (NGO) stated 90 percent of Muslim students in the country were unable to access Islamic studies classes. Multiple human rights NGOs stated that the part of the penal code that criminalizes offending "religious sentiments" unduly restricted freedom of expression. The Ministry of the Presidency convened the first meeting of the Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom since 2019. The governmental Pluralism and Coexistence Foundation (FPC) expanded a program with local governments to promote religious diversity and protect religious freedom. The Ministry of the Interior implemented a new action plan outlining concrete measures to address hate crimes, including crimes committed on the basis of religious belief.

The Ministry of the Interior documented multiple instances of hate crimes. There were five sentences in 2021 for incitement to hatred. Several cases of antisemitism and anti-Muslim sentiment were investigated or brought to trial. Christian and Jewish groups reported incidents of vandalism and harassment.

U.S. Embassy and Consulate General in Barcelona representatives met with national and regional government officials to discuss antisemitism, anti-Muslim sentiment, concerns about societal

discrimination, religiously motivated hate crimes, and hate speech against religious minorities. The Ambassador also hosted and participated in several engagements with Muslim and Jewish communities. The embassy and consulate sponsored speakers to discuss antisemitism and anti-Muslim sentiment with government officials, academics, students, and the press. Messages delivered emphasized the importance of learning from the past to promote religious tolerance and diversity in the present and defending democratic values and combating antisemitism and anti-Muslim sentiment. The embassy and consulate also sponsored several participants in U.S. exchange programs on topics related to religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 47.2 million (midyear 2022). According to a survey conducted in May by the governmental Center for Sociological Research (CIS), 56 percent of respondents identify as Catholics and 2.8 percent as followers of other religious groups. In contrast, in its 2017 survey, CIS reported that 71.5 percent of respondents identified as Catholic. In addition, in the 2022 survey, 11.7 percent described themselves as “nonbelievers,” 12.5 percent as agnostics, and 14.8 percent as atheists; the remaining 2.3 percent did not answer the question.

In 2017, the Catholic Church’s Episcopal Conference of Spain estimated there were 32.6 million Catholics, although news reports indicate the number has decreased since that time. The Islamic Commission of Spain (CIE) estimates there are 2.5 million Muslims; the Federation of Evangelical Religious Entities (FEREDE) estimates there are 1.5 million Protestants; the Federation of Jewish Communities of Spain (FCJE) estimates there are 45,000 Jews; the Episcopal Orthodox Assembly of Spain and Portugal, an umbrella organization for the various Orthodox churches, stated in 2014 there were 1.5 million Orthodox Christians; Jehovah’s Witnesses report approximately 119,000 members; the Buddhist Union of Spain-Federation of Buddhist Entities (UBE-FEBE) estimates there are 100,000 Buddhists; and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) reports nearly 57,000 members. Other religious groups include Christian Scientists, other Christian groups, Hindus (40,000), Church of Scientology (11,000 members), and Baha’is (5,000 members). The autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla in North Africa contain the highest percentages of non-Christians; nearly 50 percent of the population in both cities is Muslim.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion and provides for freedom of religion and worship for individuals and communities. The constitution states no one may be compelled to testify about his or her religion or beliefs. It also states, “No religion shall have a state character,” but “public authorities shall take into account the religious beliefs of Spanish society and consequently maintain appropriate cooperative relations with the Catholic Church and other denominations.” The Catholic Church is the only religious group explicitly mentioned in the constitution. Under the penal code, it is a crime to prevent or disrupt religious services or to offend or scorn religious beliefs, ceremonies, or practitioners. The constitution allows limits on expression if “necessary to maintain public order.”

The law imposes a sentence of between eight to 12 months against an individual who offends the feelings of members of a religious group, publicly disparages the dogmas, beliefs, rights, or

ceremonies of a religious group, or publicly insults members of a religious group. The law imposes the same penalties against an individual who publicly disparages those who do not profess any religion or belief. The law also imposes a six-month to one-year prison sentence or a fine against anyone who perpetrates “profane acts” in a place of worship or at religious ceremonies that “offend the feelings” of persons belonging to legally protected religious confessions.

The penal code’s definition of hate crimes includes acts of “humiliation or disrespect” against victims because of their religion, with penalties of one to four years in prison. Antisemitism is specifically defined in the penal code as a hate crime. By law, authorities may investigate and prosecute criminal offenses committed by neo-Nazi groups as terrorist crimes. Genocide denial is a crime if it incites violent attitudes, such as aggressive, threatening behavior or language. The law requires public school curricula to include instruction regarding the Holocaust in addition to other historical events and conflicts that involve serious human rights violations. The law also provides for a “Declaration of Reparation and Personal Recognition” for those who experienced violence or persecution for political, ideological, or religious beliefs during the 1936-39 Spanish Civil War or the subsequent dictatorship of Francisco Franco.

On July 14, the Equal Treatment and Non-Discrimination Law came into force. The law establishes an independent oversight authority to monitor cases of discrimination based on a range of categories, including religious beliefs. The law imposes fines of up to €500,000 (\$534,000) for violators.

The government does not require religious groups to register, but registration confers on religious groups certain legal benefits. Groups registered in the Registry of Religious Entities maintained by the Office of Religious Affairs in the Ministry of the Presidency, Relations with Parliament, and Democratic Memory (Ministry of the Presidency) may buy, rent, and sell property, and may act as a legal entity in civil proceedings. Registration entails completing forms available on the ministry’s website and providing notarized documentation of the foundational and operational statutes of the religious group, its legal representatives, territorial scope, religious purposes, and address. All persons or groups have the right to practice their religion whether or not the community of which they are members is registered as a religious entity. New religious communities may register directly with the Ministry of the Presidency, or religious associations may register on their behalf.

The government maintains a bilateral agreement with the Holy See, executed in part by the Episcopal Conference of Spain. The Episcopal Conference interacts with the government on behalf of the entire Catholic community. While other religious groups are required to register each place of worship, per a 1979 agreement with the Holy See, individual Catholic dioceses and parishes are not required to register with the government. The Catholic Church is the only religious entity to which persons may voluntarily allocate 0.7 percent of their taxes. The government also has cooperation agreements with CIE, FEREDE, and FCJE. These agreements with the country’s four predominant religions – Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism, and Judaism – are legally binding and provide the religious groups with certain tax exemptions and the ability to buy and sell property, open a house of worship, and conduct other legal business. The agreements also grant civil validity to weddings performed by clergy and permit the placement of teachers in schools and chaplains in hospitals, the military, and prisons. Groups with cooperation agreements are also eligible for independently administered government grants. The agreements cover legal, educational, cultural, and economic affairs; religious observance by members of the armed forces; and the military service of clergy and members of religious orders.

Registered groups that wish to sign cooperation agreements with the state must first acquire *notorio arraigo* (“deeply rooted” or permanent) status through the Ministry of the Presidency’s Office of

Religious Affairs. To achieve this status, groups must have an unspecified “relevant” number of followers, a presence in the country for at least 30 years, and a “level of diffusion” in the general population that the government considers demonstrates a “social presence,” which is not further defined. Groups must also submit documentation demonstrating the group is religious in nature to the Office of Religious Affairs, which maintains the Register of Religious Entities. Jehovah’s Witnesses, UBE-FEBE, the Church of Jesus Christ, and the Episcopal Orthodox Assembly of Spain and Portugal are registered religions with notorio arraigo status.

If the Office of Religious Affairs deems an applicant for registration a nonreligious group, the applicant may instead be included in the Register of Associations maintained by the Ministry of the Interior. Inclusion in this register grants legal status but confers no other benefits. Registration itself simply lists the association and its history in the government’s database. Registration as an association is a precursor to requesting that the government deem the association to be of public benefit, which affords the same tax benefits as charities, including exemption from income tax and taxes on contributions. For such a classification, the association must be registered for two years and maintain a net positive fiscal balance.

The FPC is a governmental entity attached to the Ministry of the Presidency that promotes religious freedom and diversity. It provides funding to non-Catholic religious denominations that have a cooperation agreement with the government in support of activities that promote cultural, educational, and social integration. It provides nonfinancial assistance to other religious groups registered with the government to increase public awareness. The foundation also promotes dialogue and rapprochement among religious groups and the integration of religion in society. It works closely with the Office of Religious Affairs.

The government funds religious services within the prison system for Catholic and Muslim groups, including Sunday Catholic Mass, Catholic confession, and Friday Islamic prayer. The cooperation agreements of FCJE and FEREDE with the government do not include provisions for publicly funded services. These groups provide religious services in prisons at their own expense. Other religious groups registered as religious entities with the Office of Religious Affairs may provide services at their own expense during visiting hours upon the request of prisoners.

The government guarantees access to centers for asylum seekers and refugees for religious workers of groups with cooperation agreements with the state so that these groups may provide direct assistance, at their expense, to their followers in the centers. Religious workers from groups without a cooperation agreement with the government may enter internment centers upon request to the Ministry of the Presidency.

Military rules and cooperation agreements with the government allow religious military funerals and chaplain services for Catholics, Muslims, Protestants, and Jews, should the family of the deceased request it. Other religious groups may conduct religious military funerals upon request.

The government recognizes marriages performed by all religious communities with notorio arraigo status. Members of religious groups without this status must marry in a civil ceremony for the marriage to be legally recognized.

The regions of Madrid and Catalonia maintain agreements with several religious groups that have accords with the national government. These regional agreements permit activities such as providing religious assistance in hospitals and prisons under regional jurisdiction. The central government funds

these services for prisons and the military, and the regional governments fund hospital services. According to the central government, these subnational agreements may not contradict the principles of the federal agreements, which take precedence.

Religious groups must apply to local governments for a license to open a place of worship or other establishments intended for public use. Requirements for licenses vary from municipality to municipality. Documentation required is usually the same as for other business establishments seeking to open a venue for public use and includes information such as architectural plans and maximum capacity. Religious groups must also inform the Office of Religious Affairs after opening new places of worship.

Local governments are obligated to consider requests for use of public land to open a place of worship. If a municipality decides to deny such a request after weighing factors such as availability and value added to the community, the city council must explain its decision to the requesting party.

The law requires a minimum of 10 interested students to initiate new religious education classes in public schools for religions other than Catholicism. As outlined in the cooperation agreements with religious groups, the government provides funding for salaries of teachers of Catholic religious education classes in public schools and, when at least 10 students request it, funding for Islamic and Protestant teachers. The Jewish community is also eligible for government funding for Jewish instructors but has declined it. The courses are not mandatory. Those students who elect not to take religious education courses are required to take an alternative course covering general social, cultural, and religious themes. In March, the government approved new curriculum guidelines for primary school students reducing the hours for religious education, which remains optional, in favor of other topics. Regional governments are responsible for developing curricula and financing teachers for religious education, with the exception of Andalusia, Aragon, the Canary Islands, Cantabria, and the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla, which leave the curricula and financing of education to the national government in accordance with their respective regional statutes.

Autonomous regions generally have the authority to develop the requirements for religious education instructors and certify their credentials, although some defer to the national government. Prospective instructors must provide personal data, proof that the educational authority of the region where they are applying to work has never dismissed them, a degree as required by the region, and any other requirement as stipulated by the religious association to which they correspond. The religious associations must provide a list of approved instructors to the government. Ministry of Education-approved CIE guidelines stress instruction in "moderate Islam" in worship practices, with emphasis on pluralism, understanding, religious tolerance, conflict resolution, and coexistence. CIE also requires instructors to have a certificate of training in Islamic education. Private religious schools, whether or not they receive public funds, must comply with governmental education regulations. Private religious schools that do not receive public funds must additionally obtain authorization from regional educational authorities to function.

Catholic and Jewish clergy may include time spent on missions abroad in calculations for social security. Protestant clergy are eligible to receive social security benefits, including health insurance and a government-provided retirement pension with a maximum credit of 15 years of service, but pension distributions for these clergy are more restrictive than for Catholic clergy, who are entitled to a government-provided pension that covers their entire career up to a maximum of 38.5 years of service. Muslim, Orthodox, and Jehovah's Witnesses clergy are also eligible for social security benefits

under the terms of separate social security agreements each of these groups negotiated with the state.

The Ombudsman is the High Commissioner of the Parliament in charge of defending the fundamental rights and public liberties of citizens by supervising the activity of the country's public administrations. The Ombudsman enjoys inviolability and immunity in the exercise of the office's duties.

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

Government Practices

In January, the Episcopal Conference of Spain announced it would establish commissions to hear complaints from victims following press reports of an estimated 1,200 alleged cases of child sexual abuse by members of the church since the 1930s, a number that by December had increased to more than 1,700. On February 16, the public prosecutor's office announced it was investigating 68 cases of alleged sexual abuse of children by Catholic Church staff throughout the country. On March 10, the Congress of Deputies overwhelmingly approved an investigation by an ombudsman-led experts' commission into sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. In September, the ombudsman announced the expert commission had received 230 credible complaints of sexual abuse. In November, the public prosecutor's office requested information from all 70 dioceses in the country on allegations of child sex abuse within their dioceses, including in parishes, schools, and any other religious institution.

Various NGOs continued to call for the government to reform the part of the penal code that criminalizes offending "religious sentiments," which, they stated, unduly restricted freedom of expression. Some organizations said the laws criminalizing public statements disparaging religious beliefs or nonbelief, or perpetrating "profane acts" that "offend the feelings" of persons equated to criminalizing blasphemy.

On March 15, a Valencia court opened an investigation to determine whether a crime had been committed after the Spanish Association of Christian Lawyers filed a complaint against a nightclub for publishing an advertisement showing a drag queen portraying the Virgin Mary. In April, a Burger King restaurant in Seville retracted an advertisement and issued an apology after social media users accused the fast-food chain of offending religious sentiments and mocking Christianity with an advertisement for the chain's vegetarian hamburgers referencing a common prayer during Holy Week.

On May 26, Minister of the Presidency Félix Bolaños convened the first meeting of the Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom since late 2019. The committee – composed of government officials, religious representatives, and experts on religious issues – met again July 11. The committee was preparing its annual report on religious freedom, last published in 2019.

CIE continued to express concern about the lack of cemeteries with dedicated plots for Islamic burials in four of the country's 17 autonomous communities (Cantabria, Castile-La Mancha, Extremadura, and Galicia). In November 2021, CIE conveyed to Minister of the Presidency Bolaños its concern that there were only 36 Islamic cemeteries throughout the country, which it stated was insufficient for the country's Muslim population.

On April 14, a law criminalizing the obstruction of women seeking to voluntarily terminate a pregnancy or of health care professionals assisting them in doing the same went into force, punishable by fines and up to one year's imprisonment. The NGO Observatory for Freedom of Religion and Conscience stated the new law would prohibit praying outside of abortion clinics and unduly restrict freedom of

expression and freedom of religion. In June, without specifically mentioning the law, the Episcopal Conference of Spain issued a statement denouncing “legislative projects” against the “defense of life.” In September, the Vox political party filed an appeal against the law with the Constitutional Court.

Several religious groups cited continuing obstacles to providing religious education and integrating teachers of religion in schools, given the legal requirement for a minimum of 10 interested students to initiate non-Catholic religious education classes in public schools. During the year, there were three autonomous communities without Islamic studies courses in public schools: Asturias, Cantabria, and Galicia. The Andalusian Astronomy Observatory estimated that 90 percent of Muslim students in the country were unable to access Islamic studies classes.

In February, the Supreme Court of Murcia ruled that the region’s Ministry of Education violated the constitutional right to freedom of religion and the right of children to receive religious education in accordance with their beliefs. The court ruled in favor of a family that had previously contacted the ministry to initiate Islamic studies classes at a public school. According to the ruling, the ministry failed to respond to the request although the family had collected 50 signatures in favor of initiating the classes, well above the 10 required by the law. The court also ordered the regional government to pay the legal costs associated with the case. In October, the Murcia Ministry of Education began offering Islamic studies classes in 10 public schools in the region. Media reported the lack of teachers for the classes meant only an estimated 30 percent of students selecting Islamic studies courses in the region would be able to attend the new classes.

Non-Catholic religious groups continued to express concern about what they said was unequal legal treatment by the government. The Catholic Church remained the only religious entity to which persons could voluntarily allocate 0.7 percent of their taxes. According to media, one in three Spaniards chose to allocate some of their taxes to the Catholic Church during the year, yielding almost €391 million (\$417.7 million), an 8.5 percent increase in donations compared with 2021. Other religious groups were not listed on the tax form as potential recipients of funds. Several religious groups, including Protestants, Muslims, Buddhists, and the Church of Jesus Christ, continued to express their desire to have their groups included on the tax form. They said they would prefer to receive voluntary contributions from taxpayers without preconditions rather than rely on funding from the FPC, which has specific conditions for use of its funds.

CIE, FEREDE, and FCJE relied on government funds provided through the FPC to cover their administrative and infrastructure costs. The Ministry of the Presidency continued to allocate funding to different groups according to the number of their registered entities and the approximate number of adherents. In October, it provided FEREDE with €526,780 (\$563,000), CIE with €433,130 (\$463,000), and FCJE with €210,712 (\$225,000). In addition to infrastructure and administrative funding, foundation funds also covered small publicity and research projects.

The Ministry of Justice continued processing applications under the 2015 law that provided descendants of Sephardic Jews expelled from the country more than 500 years earlier the right of return as full Spanish citizens, as long as the applications were submitted before the law’s expiration in September 2019. As of December 31, the government had granted citizenship to 64,702 descendants of Sephardic Jews and rejected 4,318 applications. Of the rejected applicants, 647 had submitted appeals.

In March, regional government education authorities in Andalusia confirmed they had received a complaint filed on behalf of a Muslim family related to a high school’s prohibition on the wearing of

head scarves. The school, known as a *concertado* institution, is private but receives public funds. According to the complaint, in February, school officials isolated a 14-year-old girl from her peers after she wore a head scarf to school. School officials maintained the school dress code prevents all types of head coverings and therefore did not seek to specifically restrict individuals' religious freedom. The regional government education authorities confirmed the school was acting in accordance with its established dress code regulations and offered the student the opportunity to voluntarily enroll in another school.

In October, the national Supreme Court ruled that the municipality of Reinosa (Cantabria) violated the fundamental rights of citizens by declaring itself a "space free of Israeli apartheid" in a pro-BDS resolution passed in 2016. The ruling established precedent nationwide that pro-BDS resolutions are illegal. Courts continued to rule against municipal and provincial government resolutions supporting the BDS movement against Israel, although there were no reports of municipalities issuing new pro-BDS resolutions during the year. In January, the Supreme Court of Valencia upheld the antisemitism conviction and €1,000 (\$1,100) fine against the municipality of Valencia. The Valencia City Council had appealed the conviction, which was based on the 2018 passage of a pro-BDS resolution. Also in October, the Congress of Deputies accepted for debate a proposed law that would bar public funding for entities that "promote antisemitism." The Podemos political party stated the proposed law could be used to restrict freedom of expression by targeting entities expressing opposition to Israel's policies. At year's end the proposed law was still up for debate.

The FPC and Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces expanded a joint project originally announced in 2021 to promote religious diversity and increase local governments' capacity to protect religious freedom. The project seeks to help local governments better manage religious diversity in a democratic and inclusive manner by sharing best practices and giving local governments access to expert consultants. During the year, 11 municipalities joined the initiative, bringing the total number to 20. The FPC reported that during the year it developed resources and training for municipalities, including recommendations for police on the management of religious diversity.

The FPC continued outreach campaigns, including hosting virtual events, aimed at promoting a better understanding of different religions and respect for religious freedom. It continued working with religious groups on the opening and operation of places of worship, the impact of religious education, and the effects of discrimination and limits to religious freedom in the workplace. The Office of Religious Affairs maintained an online portal for information to aid new immigrants or citizens moving into a community to find his or her locally registered religious community and place of worship. The Ministry of the Interior's Office on Hate Crimes continued to provide assistance to victims of religiously motivated hate crimes and training for law enforcement.

In April, the Ministry of the Interior published the *Second Action Plan to Combat Hate Crimes*, which is funded and in effect through 2024. The plan outlines concrete measures to address hate crimes, including those carried out based on religious belief, by enhancing support for victims, providing training and resources to law enforcement, and increasing cooperation with NGOs and other organizations working to combat hate crimes.

In July, President Pedro Sánchez met with a delegation from the American Jewish Committee to strengthen ties between the country and the Spanish-speaking Jewish community in the United States. Following the meeting, Sánchez expressed support for the country's "strong historical and cultural ties" with the Jewish community and "firm commitment in the fight against antisemitism."

Several regional and municipal government offices continued to conduct outreach with the stated goal of promoting religious diversity. In October, the Department of Religious Affairs of the Catalan regional government published the *2021 Map of Religions in Catalonia*, identifying a total of 7,275 places of worship in the region comprising 14 religious groups.

The Barcelona City Council's Office for Religious Affairs and Office for Non-Discrimination facilitated and promoted religious celebrations and provided grants for projects of various religious groups. The municipal government organized roundtables to discuss the status of religious freedom in the city, emphasizing the role of women in religious communities.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to the Ministry of the Interior's 2021 annual report on hate crimes, the most recent available, there were 63 hate crimes based on religious beliefs or practices – and, separately, 11 motivated by antisemitism – in 2021, compared with 45 and three such crimes, respectively, in 2020. Only crimes involving antisemitism and anti-Roma sentiment were disaggregated, as the penal code treats those as distinct offenses. Most of the religiously motivated crimes occurred in Valencia (11 hate crimes based on religious beliefs, and one specifically of antisemitism), followed by Madrid (10 and two crimes), Catalonia (seven and five), Andalusia (nine and one), and the Balearic Islands (seven and zero).

The ministry's report did not cite specific examples or provide a breakdown of religiously motivated incidents by type of crime. According to a ministry official, the figures in the annual report only included officially filed complaints and not incidents gathered from press reports.

The public prosecutor's 2021 annual report reported one new prosecution in that year for a hate crime involving religion, the same as in 2020.

According to the Observatory for Freedom of Religion and Conscience 2022 report released in December, there were 214 incidents it described as violating religious freedom as of December 5, 19 more incidents than in 2021. Of these incidents, 184 (86 percent) targeted Christians, six targeted Muslims, three targeted Jews, and 21 were classified as being against several or all faiths. There were three incidents of violence, 34 attacks on places of worship, and 24 cases of harassment of believers.

In May, the Barcelona hate crimes prosecutor brought charges of antisemitism against a man who participated in an October 2021 demonstration of an estimated 200 persons reportedly associated with far-right groups. In the complaint, the prosecutor said the man was motivated by his aversion to Jews and Israel and led prolonged antisemitic chants with incitement to hate, violence, and harassment against the Jewish community, including "death to Jews," "kill Jews," and "death to Israel." The prosecutor sought three years' imprisonment and a 3,600-euro fine. The trial had not commenced by year's end.

The FCJE's Observatory of Antisemitism reported multiple antisemitic incidents, including clashes and antisemitic insults in May during a basketball tournament in Bilbao in which an Israeli team was competing. In August, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned a series of "serious antisemitic attacks" in the town of Castrillo Mota de Judíos, in the Castile and Leon Autonomous Community. Local officials reported multiple instances of antisemitic graffiti in various parts of the town. The FCJE urged

authorities to identify those responsible and to enact measures to prevent such incidents. In October, the Civil Guard arrested three neo-Nazis for seven hate crimes involving places of special significance for the Jewish communities in Castrillo Mota de Judíos as well as two towns in Madrid. Press reported the three were accused of defacing Jewish cemeteries with neo-fascist graffiti and of burning the Israeli flag. Searches of the homes of the suspects found material with fascist symbolism, books extolling Nazism, and “paraphernalia and documentation of Nazi ideology.”

In December, a court in Madrid acquitted the president of the organization Social Home (Hogar Social), Melisa Domínguez, for incitement of hate related to linking Islam with terrorism. The court ruled it could not be proven that Domínguez sought to directly or indirectly incite hate, violence, or discrimination against Muslims. Prosecutors had sought three years’ imprisonment for Domínguez’s role in hanging a large banner reading “Today Brussels, tomorrow Madrid?” on Madrid’s main mosque in 2016 in reference to the terrorist attacks in Brussels that year. Prosecutors also argued Domínguez and Social Home members congregated outside the mosque shouting “out with the Moors” (a slur used to describe Muslims of North African descent) and “down with mosques.”

In May, the FCJE and the Complutense University of Madrid signed an agreement to create the Simone Veil Chair to promote the prevention of antisemitism and racism and promote intercultural dialogue, human rights, and the rule of law. The President of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Spain, Isaac Benzaquén, praised the inauguration of the chair and said it was important that the country’s 2020 education reform included Holocaust education as a permanent part of the school curriculum to combat lack of knowledge about the Holocaust. In a May interview, he noted that while the Holocaust might seem far away in the past, it must not be forgotten because “unfortunately, history repeats itself.”

In September, the UNESCO Association for Interreligious Dialogue, a Catalan NGO, organized its seventh “Night of Religions” in Barcelona, in which 54 places of worship representing 15 different religious groups opened their doors to local residents. More than 3,200 persons took part in the activities, which were conducted in-person and online. Due to the success of the program, the organization hosted similar events in the cities of Tarragona and Sant Cugat. The association continued to lead interreligious dialogue groups in 10 cities in the region bringing together religious leaders from different faiths to discuss religious diversity, foster social cohesion, and create neighborhood joint projects.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy and consulate general in Barcelona representatives met with various national and regional government officials as well as the Office of the Ombudsman to discuss antisemitism, anti-Muslim sentiment, and concerns about societal discrimination against religious minorities, religiously motivated hate crimes, and hate speech against religious minorities. Issues discussed also included the government’s new initiatives to promote religious pluralism.

Embassy and consulate officials also met with several religious groups and civil society organizations regarding discrimination and the free exercise of their religious rights. Other issues discussed included religious education, including access to that education, as well as religiously motivated hate crimes and hate speech.

In January, embassy and consulate officials participated in several Holocaust Remembrance Month events, including an event hosted by the Spanish Senate. The Ambassador delivered keynote remarks for the opening of the Holocaust remembrance photography exhibit “Seeing Auschwitz” at the Sefarad-Israel Center sponsored by UNESCO and the Community of Madrid in partnership with the embassy. The Ambassador stated, “Ensuring that the horrors of the Holocaust are never forgotten is a priority for the United States, not only because of what it says about our past, but because of what it means for our present and our future.... We must ensure that the next generations have the right tools to combat hatred, which is inflamed by falsehoods, sensationalism, and disinformation.”

In April, the Ambassador hosted the first embassy iftar in two years for members of Madrid’s Muslim community. Also in April, the Ambassador attended an iftar hosted by the Islamic Board (Junta Islámica) in Cordoba with members of Andalusia’s Muslim community as well as members of the local Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish communities; local government officials; civil society; and business leaders. At both events, the Ambassador highlighted the importance of religious freedom, respect for religious minorities, and issues of concern to the Muslim community. The Ambassador also sent personal letters commemorating Ramadan and promoting religious diversity and tolerance to leaders of religious groups, government offices, diplomatic missions, and NGOs.

In April as well, the Ambassador held a meeting in Cordoba with Muslim women and youth from several regions in Andalusia, including Algeciras, Cordoba, Granada, Jerez, and Seville. Participants included first-generation Spanish Muslims, Muslim converts, and several Muslim immigrants who had originally come to the country as unaccompanied minors. Participants discussed common stereotypes facing Muslims in the country, the difficulty in reconciling their identities as both Spanish and Muslim, and interfaith efforts to promote mutual understanding.

In May, the embassy and consulate general sponsored a series of speaking engagements in Madrid and Barcelona for an expert from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, including with students, civil society groups, diplomats, and press at the Sefarad-Israel Center, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and several universities. The Ambassador delivered introductory remarks at the event at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, emphasizing the importance of learning from the past to promote religious tolerance and diversity in the present.

In July, the Ambassador met with members of the country’s Jewish community and a visiting delegation from the American Jewish Committee to discuss issues impacting the Spanish and global Jewish communities and the importance of defending democratic values and combating antisemitism. In September, the Ambassador visited two synagogues in Toledo to learn about the history and legacy of the country’s Jewish community.

In October and November, the embassy sponsored the participation of Israel Doncel, Sefarad-Israel Center Communications Director, and Maria Royo, FCJE Communications Director, in a virtual exchange program on the role of the media in preventing Holocaust denial and distortion.

Throughout the year the embassy and consulate general advanced religious freedom and diversity on social media platforms, including by marking occasions such as International Religious Freedom Day and honoring religious celebrations such as Ramadan.

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