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2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Afghanistan

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion but stipulates followers of religions other than Islam may exercise their faith within the limits of the law. Conversion from Islam to another religion is considered apostasy, which is punishable by death, imprisonment, or confiscation of property, according to the Sunni Islam Hanafi school of jurisprudence. The constitution states the Hanafi school of jurisprudence shall apply “if there is no provision in the constitution or other laws about a case.” The penal code includes punishments for verbal and physical assaults on a follower of any religion and punishment for insults or distortions directed towards Islam, including in cyberspace. Representatives from the predominantly Shia Hazara community said the government’s provision of security in Shia-predominant areas was insufficient. The government again sought to address security issues in Western Kabul’s Shia Hazara Dasht-e Barchi area, a target of major attacks during the year, by announcing plans to increase Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) presence. According to the Shia community, they saw no increase in ANDSF forces despite the plans; however, they said the government distributed arms directly to the guards of Shia mosques in areas considered more targeted for attacks. Hindu and Sikh community leaders estimated approximately another 200 Sikhs and Hindus, compared with 500-600 in 2018, fled the country during the year to either India or Western countries because of security threats and a perceived lack of government protection. According to the Hindu and Sikh communities, their members continued to avoid settling disputes in the courts due to fear of retaliation and instead chose to settle disputes through community councils. Representatives of minority religious groups reported the courts again did not grant non-Muslims the same rights as Muslims. A small number of Sikhs and Hindus continued to serve in government positions. Shia Muslims continued to hold some major government positions; however, Shia leaders said the number of positions still did not reflect their demographics.

ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K), an affiliate of ISIS and a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, continued to target and kill members of minority religious communities, and the Taliban again targeted and killed individuals because of their beliefs or their links to the government. According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), consistent with trends observed in the past four years, many of the suicide and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on civilians targeted Shia Muslims, particularly ethnic Hazaras. During the year, UNAMA recorded 20 attacks targeting places of worship, religious leaders, and worshippers, compared with 22 attacks in 2018 – causing 236 civilian casualties (80 deaths and 156 injured), compared with 453 civilian casualties (156 deaths and 297 injured) in 2018. All were attributed to ISIS-K and other antigovernment elements. The Taliban continued to kill or issue death threats against Sunni clerics for preaching messages contrary to its interpretation of Islam. Taliban gunmen killed progovernment imams and other religious officials throughout the country. The Taliban continued to warn mullahs not to perform funeral prayers for government security officials and to punish residents in areas under Taliban control according to their interpretation of Islamic law, including shooting or hanging any person suspected of adultery or other “moral crimes.” Insurgents claiming affiliation with ISIS-K reportedly engaged in similar activities. In August ISIS-K attacked a wedding hall in a predominately Shia neighborhood of Kabul, killing 91 persons and wounding 143 others. According to media,

antigovernment forces also targeted Sunni mosques. During the year, antigovernment forces carried out several deadly attacks on religious leaders, particularly those who spoke out against the Taliban. On June 28 in Samangan Province, the Taliban detonated a remote-controlled IED inside a Sunni mosque during Friday prayers, wounding 14 civilians. On October 18, at least 62 civilians were killed and another 58 wounded, including children, following the bombing of a Sunni mosque in Deh Bala District of Nangarhar Province during Friday prayers. No organization claimed responsibility for the attack. According to religious community leaders, some mullahs in unregistered mosques continued to preach in support of the Taliban or ISIS-K in their sermons.

According to international sources, Baha'is and Christians lived in constant fear of exposure and were reticent to reveal their identities to anyone. One Christian citizen described being disowned by his family after they learned he had converted to Christianity. Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, and other non-Muslim minority groups reported continued verbal harassment by some Muslims, although Hindus and Sikhs stated they were able to practice their respective religions in public. Hindus and Sikhs said their children were teased and harassed in public schools, sometimes to the point that parents withdrew them from classes. Christian groups reported public sentiment, as expressed in social media and elsewhere, remained hostile towards converts and to Christian proselytization. They said individuals who converted or were studying Christianity reported receiving threats, including death threats, from family members. Christians and Ahmadi Muslims reported they continued to worship privately, sometimes in nondescript places of worship, to avoid societal discrimination and persecution. Women of several different faiths reported continued harassment by local Muslim religious leaders over their attire, which they said made it necessary for almost all women, both local and foreign, to wear some form of head covering. Observers said local Muslim religious leaders continued their efforts to limit social activities they considered inconsistent with Islamic doctrine. According to minority religious leaders, only a few places of worship remained open for Sikhs and Hindus, who said they continued to emigrate because of discrimination and a lack of employment opportunities. Hindu and Sikh groups also reported continued interference with efforts to cremate the remains of their dead, in accordance with their customs, by individuals who lived near cremation sites. Despite requesting and receiving local authority support for security during their cremation ceremonies, the community continued to face protests and threats of violence that prevented them from carrying out the sacred practice. Before every cremation ceremony, the community requested police support, who sent security forces to the area to help avoid any disturbance. In August police arrested one protester. A special committee, promised by the Ulema Council in 2018 to oversee social reform to address government corruption and “moral corruption” that religious clerics deemed incompatible with the teachings of Islam, had not been established by year's end.

U.S. embassy officials continued to work with the government to promote understanding of what religious freedom is and why it is important, as well on the need for acceptance and protection of religious minorities in meetings with senior government officials. To enhance the government's capacity to counter violent religious extremism, facilitate creation of a national strategy against such extremism, and create policies to foster religious tolerance, embassy representatives met frequently with the Office of the National Security Council (ONSC). The embassy regularly raised concerns about public safety and freedom to worship with security ministers. On August 27, a senior embassy official raised preparations for 10th of Muharram with Acting Minister of Interior Massoud Andarabi. Embassy officials continued to meet regularly with leaders of major religious groups, including minorities, scholars, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), to discuss ways to enhance religious tolerance and interreligious dialogue. The embassy hosted a religious freedom roundtable discussion to commemorate U.S. National Religious Freedom Day with Sunni and Shia Ulema leaders, a female Islamic scholar, a Sikh priest, and a Hindu priest. The embassy continued to sponsor programs for religious leaders to increase interreligious dialogue, identify means and ways to counter violent religious extremism, and promote tolerance for religious

diversity. The embassy also used social media to highlight the National Religious Freedom and International Religious Freedom Days, and the Ambassador used social media to condemn attacks on places of worship.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 35.7 million (midyear 2019 estimate). There are no reliable statistics available concerning the percentages of Sunni and Shia Muslims in the country; the government's Central Statistics Office does not track disaggregated population data. According to the Pew Forum, Shia make up approximately 10-15 percent of the population.

According to religious community leaders, the Shia population, approximately 90 percent of whom are ethnic Hazaras, is predominantly Jaafari, but it also includes Ismailis. Other religious groups, mainly Hindus, Sikhs, Baha'is, and Christians, constitute less than 0.3 percent of the population. Sikh and Hindu leaders estimate there are 120 Sikh and Hindu families totaling approximately 550 individuals, down from 700 in 2018 and 1,300 individuals estimated in 2017, mostly in Kabul, with a few communities in Nangarhar and Ghazni Provinces. Hindu community leaders estimate there are 35 remaining Afghan Hindus, all male and primarily businessmen with families in other countries.

The Ahmadi Muslim community estimates it has 450 adherents nationwide, down from 600 in 2017. Reliable estimates of the Baha'i and Christian communities are not available. There are small numbers of practitioners of other religions, including one Jew.

Hazaras live predominantly in the central and western provinces as well as in Kabul; Ismaili Muslims live mainly in Kabul and in the central and northern provinces. Followers of the Baha'i Faith live predominantly in Kabul, with a small community in Kandahar. Ahmadi Muslims largely live in Kabul.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares Islam the official state religion and says no law may contravene the beliefs and provisions of the “sacred religion of Islam.” It further states there shall be no amendment to the constitution's provisions with respect to adherence to the fundamentals of Islam. According to Article 2 of the constitution, followers of religions other than Islam are “free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of the law.”

The penal code outlines provisions that criminalize verbal and physical assaults on religion and protects individuals' right to exercise their beliefs for any religion. The penal code includes punishments for verbal and physical assaults on a follower of any religion and punishment for insults or distortions directed towards Islam, including in cyberspace. According to the General Directorate of Fatwas and Accounts of the Supreme Court, there were no cases filed during the year. An article in the penal code specifies what constitutes an insult to religion, stating, “A person who intentionally insults a religion or disrupts its rites or destroys its permitted places of worship shall be deemed as a perpetrator of the crime of insulting religions and shall be punished according to provisions of this chapter.” The penal code specifies that deliberate insults or distortions directed towards Islamic beliefs or laws carry a prison sentence of one to five years. Article 817 of the penal code states, “A person who insults Islam using a computer system, program, or data, shall be imprisoned.”

Another article of the penal code states persons who forcibly stop the conduct of rituals of any religion, destroy or damage “permitted places of worship” (a term not defined by the code) where religious rituals are conducted, or destroy or damage any sign or symbol of any religion are subject to imprisonment of three months to one year or a fine ranging from 30,000 to 60,000 afghanis (\$390-\$770). In cases where killings or physical injury result from the disturbance of religious rites or ceremonies, the accused individual is tried according to crimes of murder and physical injury as defined by law.

While apostasy is not specifically provided for under the penal code, it falls under the seven offenses making up the *hudood* as defined by sharia. According to the penal code, perpetrators of *hudood* are punished according to Hanafi jurisprudence. According to Sunni Hanafi jurisprudence, which the constitution states shall apply “if there is no provision in the constitution or other laws about a case,” beheading is appropriate for male apostates, while life imprisonment is appropriate for female apostates, unless the individual repents. A judge may also impose a lesser penalty, such as short-term imprisonment or lashes, if doubt about the apostasy exists. Under Hanafi jurisprudence, the government may also confiscate the property of apostates or prevent apostates from inheriting property. This guidance applies to individuals who are of sound mind and have reached the age of maturity. Civil law states the age of maturity for citizens is 18, although it is 16 for females regarding marriage. Islamic law defines it as the point at which one shows signs of puberty, and puberty is usually applied as the marriageable age, particularly for girls.

Conversion from Islam to another religion is apostasy according to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence applicable in the courts. If someone converts to another religion from Islam, he or she shall have three days to recant the conversion. If the person does not recant, then he or she shall be subject to the punishment for apostasy. Proselytizing to try to convert individuals from Islam to another religion is also illegal according to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, which is applied in the courts and subject to the same punishment.

Blasphemy, which may include anti-Islamic writings or speech, is a capital crime, according to the Hanafi school. Accused blasphemers, like apostates, have three days to recant or face death, although there is no clear process for recanting under sharia. Some *hadiths* (sayings or traditions that serve as a source of Islamic law or guidance) suggest discussion and negotiation with an apostate to encourage the apostate to recant.

According to a 2007 ruling from the General Directorate of Fatwas and Accounts under the Supreme Court, the Baha’i Faith is distinct from Islam and is a form of blasphemy. All Muslims who convert to it are considered apostates; Baha’is are labeled infidels.

Licensing and registration of religious groups are not required. Registration as a group (which gives the group the status of a council, known as a *shura*) or an association conveys official recognition and the benefit of government provision of facilities for seminars and conferences. By law, anyone who is 18 years of age or older may establish a social or political organization. Such an entity must have a central office as well as a charter consistent with domestic laws. Both groups and associations may register with the Ministry of Justice. The ministry may dissolve such organizations through a judicial order. Groups recognized as *shuras* may cooperate with one another on religious issues. Associations may conduct business with the government or the society as a whole.

A mass media law prohibits the production, reproduction, printing, and publishing of works and materials contrary to the principles of Islam or offensive to other religions and denominations. It also prohibits publicizing and promoting religions other than Islam and bans articles on any topic the government deems might harm the physical, spiritual, and moral well-being of persons, especially children and adolescents. The law instructs National Radio and Television Afghanistan, a government agency, to provide broadcasting content reflecting the religious beliefs of all ethnic groups in the country, all based on Islam. Some radio stations provide religious programming for Sunni Muslims, and a smaller number of radio stations provide religious programming for Shia Muslims. The law also obligates the agency to adjust its programs in light of Islamic principles as well as national and spiritual values.

According to the constitution, the “state shall devise and implement a unified educational curriculum based on the provisions of the sacred religion of Islam, national culture, as well as academic principles” and develop courses on religion based on the “Islamic sects” in the country. The national curriculum includes materials designed separately for Sunni-majority schools and Shia-majority schools, as well as textbooks that emphasize nonviolent Islamic terms and principles. The curriculum includes courses on Islam but not on other religions. Non-Muslims are not required to study Islam in public schools. The registration process for madrassahs requires a school to demonstrate it has suitable buildings, classrooms, accredited teachers, and dormitories if students live on campus. The Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs (MOHRA) registers madrassahs collocated with mosques, while the Ministry of Education (MOE) registers madrassahs not associated with mosques. In MOHRA-run madrassahs, students receive instruction, with one imam teaching approximately 50 to 70 children studying at various levels. Only certificates issued by registered madrassahs allow students to pursue higher education at government universities.

According to the law, all funds contributed to madrassahs by private or international sources must be channeled through the MOE.

The civil and penal codes derive their authority from the constitution. The constitution stipulates the courts shall apply constitutional provisions as well as the law in ruling on cases. For instances in which neither the constitution nor the penal or civil codes address a specific case, the constitution declares the courts may apply Hanafi Sunni jurisprudence within the limits set by the constitution to attain justice. The constitution also allows courts to apply Shia law in cases involving Shia followers. Non-Muslims may not provide testimony in matters requiring sharia jurisprudence. The constitution makes no mention of separate laws applying to non-Muslims.

A Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman, but the woman must first convert if she is not an adherent of one of the other two Abrahamic faiths – Christianity or Judaism. It is illegal for a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim man.

The government’s national identity cards indicate an individual’s religion, as well as nationality, tribe, and ethnicity. Individuals are not required to declare belief in Islam to receive citizenship.

The constitution requires the president and two vice presidents to be Muslim. Other senior officials (ministers, members of parliament, judges) must swear allegiance and obedience to the principles of Islam as part of their oath of office. No occasion to determine if this applies to non-Muslims has arisen since the constitution was adopted in 2004.

The constitution allows the formation of political parties, provided the program and charter of a party are “not contrary to the principles of the sacred religion of Islam.” The constitution states political parties may not be based on sectarianism.

The law mandates an additional seat in parliament’s lower house be reserved for a member of the Hindu and Sikh community. Four seats in the parliament are also reserved for Ismaili Muslims.

MOHRA is responsible for managing Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages, revenue collection for religious activities, acquisition of property for religious purposes, issuance of fatwas, educational testing of imams, sermon preparation and distribution for government-supported mosques, and raising public awareness of religious issues. MOHRA has an office dedicated to assisting the faith practices of religious minorities, specifically Sikhs and Hindus.

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

Government Practices

Representatives from the predominantly Shia Hazara community said promised government security and development initiatives in Shia-predominant areas were insufficient, symbolic measures and the government had not implemented them. Media reported members of the Shia community continued to state the government did not provide them with adequate protection from attacks by nonstate actors. The Ministry of Interior again promised to increase security around Shia mosques and authorized the arming of Shia civilians, under police authority, to provide extra security for Ashura. On August 27, Acting Minister of Interior Massoud Andarabi confirmed preparations were in place that involved integrating all the security forces. The minister stated he understood that ISIS-K posed a particular threat to the Shia community. According to the Shia community, the government distributed arms directly to the guards of Shia mosques in areas considered more targeted for attacks. Media reported the government arrested a group of three ISIS-K leaders just two days before the Shia community’s observance of Ashura in Kabul. Although National Directorate of Security (NDS) forces told the press these arrests thwarted attacks during Ashura, they provided no evidence these leaders were plotting to target the Shia community, and ISIS-K did not claim it had planned attacks. For the second year in a row, there were no reports of violence during Ashura processions.

As in the previous five years, there were no reports of government prosecutions for blasphemy or apostasy; however, individuals converting from Islam reported they continued to risk annulment of their marriages, rejection by their families and communities, loss of employment, and possibly the death penalty. Baha’is continued to be labeled as “infidels,” although they were not considered converts; as such, they were not charged with either crime.

The government again allowed both Sunnis and Shia to go on pilgrimages. The government set aside a number of Hajj slots for residents of each province, with the higher-population provinces receiving more slots, and with no sect-based discrimination in the distribution of slots. The government charged fees for Hajj participants to cover transportation, food, accommodation, and other expenses. MOHRA also continued to facilitate pilgrimages for Hindus and Sikhs to India, but it did not collect any revenue for or from non-Muslims. Ahmadi Muslims continued to report they chose not to interact with MOHRA because they feared MOHRA would deem them non-Muslims and forbid them from participating in the Hajj.

MOHRA officials said the ministry had no official statistics because it lacked the financial resources to generate a comprehensive registry of mullahs and mosques in the country. MOHRA continued to estimate that of the approximately 120,000 mullahs in the country, 6,000 registered mullahs were working directly for MOHRA at year’s end. They said registered mullahs working directly for MOHRA continued to receive an average monthly salary of 12,000 afghanis (\$150) from the

government. Mullahs of central mosques delivering special Friday sermons, or *khatibs*, were paid a salary of 14,000 afghanis (\$180) by MOHRA. MOHRA again estimated 66,000 of the estimated 160,000 mosques in the country were registered.

MOHRA reported it continued to allocate a portion of its budget for the construction of new mosques, although local groups remained the source of most of the funds for the new mosques. Unless the local groups requested financial or other assistance from the ministry, they were not required to inform the ministry about new construction.

Hindu and Sikh groups again reported they remained free to build places of worship and to train other Hindus and Sikhs to become clergy, but per the law against conversion of Muslims, the government continued not to allow them to proselytize. Hindu and Sikh community members said they continued to avoid pursuing land disputes through the courts due to fear of retaliation, especially if powerful local leaders occupied their property.

Although the government provided land to use as cremation sites, Sikh leaders stated the distance from any major urban area and the lack of security in the region continued to make the land unusable. Hindus and Sikhs reported continued interference in their efforts to cremate the remains of their dead by individuals who lived near the cremation sites. In response, the government continued to provide police support to protect the Sikh and Hindu communities while they performed their cremation rituals. The government promised to construct modern crematories for the Sikh and Hindu populations. Despite these challenges, community leaders acknowledged efforts by MOHRA to provide free water, electricity, and repair services for a few Sikh and Hindu temples, as well as facilitate visas for religious trips to India.

According to MOHRA, the ministry did not have access to most of the country, especially in districts, villages, and rural areas. MOHRA officials said there were up to hundreds or thousands of unregistered mosques and madrassahs located in Taliban-controlled areas. They said in rural areas and most villages, mosques were used as madrassahs, and because most mosques were not registered, most madrassahs were not either. According to MOHRA, there was no system or mechanism for opening a new madrassah, particularly at the district level and in villages. MOHRA officials said it did not have a database or information on the number of madrassahs or mosques, except for information on the number of mosques located at provincial or district centers with imams on the MOHRA's payroll. According to the ministry, there were 4,500 registered madrassahs and “Quran learning centers” throughout the country. The government registered additional madrassahs during the year but did not report how many. More than 300,000 students were enrolled in these registered madrassahs during the year, mostly in Kabul, Balkh, Nangarhar, and Herat Provinces, according to MOHRA's estimates.

Ministry officials said the government continued its efforts to raise awareness of the benefits of registering madrassahs, including recognition of graduation certificates and financial and material assistance, such as furniture or stationery. Government officials said they were concerned about their inability to supervise unregistered madrassahs that could teach violent extremist curricula intolerant of religious minorities and become recruitment centers for antigovernment groups. In February the NDS arrested Kabul University lecturer Mawlai Mubashir Muslimyar on charges of encouraging approximately 16 students to carry out terrorist attacks targeting Shia Muslims. On June 30, two Kabul University sharia law faculty members were arrested by the NDS for promoting Salafist religious ideology and actively recruiting university students for ISIS-K.

Mosques continued to handle primary-level religious studies. Eighty MOE-registered public madrassahs offered two-year degree programs at the secondary level. An estimated 1,200 public madrassahs were registered with the MOE, each receiving financial support from the government.

There were no estimates of unregistered madrassas available.

Ulema Council members continued to receive financial support from the state, although it officially remained independent from the government. The council also provided advice to some provincial governments; however, according to scholars and NGOs, most legal decision making in villages and rural areas continued to be based on local interpretations of Islamic law and tradition. President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah also held meetings with Ulema Council members on promoting intrafaith tolerance and “moderate practices” of Islam.

Minority religious groups reported the courts continued not to apply the protections provided to those groups by law, and the courts denied non-Muslims equal access to the courts and other legal redress, even when the non-Muslims were legally entitled to those same rights.

Representatives from non-Muslim religious minorities, including Sikhs and Hindus, reported a consistent pattern of discrimination at all levels of the justice system. As Taliban representatives engaged in peace process discussions, some Sikhs and Hindus expressed concern that in a postconflict environment, they might be required to wear yellow (forehead) dots, badges, or armbands, as the Taliban had mandated during its 1996-2001 rule. Non-Muslims said they continued to risk being tried according to Hanafi jurisprudence. Sikhs and Hindus again reported their community members avoided taking civil cases to court because they believed they were unprotected by dispute resolution mechanisms, such as the Special Land and Property Court. Instead, their members continued to settle disputes within their communities.

Leaders of both Hindu and Sikh communities continued to state they faced discrimination in the judicial system, including long delays in resolving cases, particularly regarding the continued appropriation of Sikh properties.

Some Shia continued to hold senior positions in the government, including Second Vice President Sarwar Danish; High Peace Council Chairman Karim Khalili; Minister of Transportation Mohammad Hamid Tahmasi; Minister of Telecommunication Mohammad Fahim Hashimi; and Minister of Refugees and Returnees Hussain Alemi Balkhi. Shia leaders, however, continued to state the proportion of official positions held by Shia did not reflect their estimate of the country's demographics. Sunni members of the Ulema Council continued to state, however, that Shia remained overrepresented in government based on Sunni estimates of the percentage of Shia in the population. According to some observers, Hazaras often faced discrimination based on their ethnicity and predominance in the country's Shia population. Observers also said the country's Shia were underrepresented in government not because of their religion, but because of their Hazara ethnicity.

A small number of Sikhs and Hindus continued to serve in government positions, including one at the municipal level, one at the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries, one as a presidentially appointed member of the upper house of parliament, one as an elected member in the lower house, one as a presidential advisor, and one as a member of the Ministry of Transportation.

Although four Ismaili Muslims remained members of parliament, Ismaili community leaders continued to report concerns about what they called the exclusion of Ismailis from other positions of political authority.

The government continued to support the efforts of judicial, constitutional, and human rights commissions composed of members of different Islamic religious groups (Sunni and Shia) to promote Muslim intrafaith reconciliation. The Ministry of Women's Affairs and MOHRA continued

working toward their stated goal of gaining nationwide acceptance of the practice of allowing women to attend mosques. The Ulema Council, the Islamic Brotherhood Council, and MOHRA also continued their work on intrafaith reconciliation. Ministry officials and NGOs promoting religious tolerance, however, said it was difficult to continue their programs due to funding and capacity constraints.

The ONSC continued its work on addressing religiously motivated violent extremism, which included policies to foster religious tolerance. The ONSC continued to sponsor provincial-level conferences on religiously motivated violent extremism to collect data for use in its effort to develop a strategy to counter violent extremism. Government officials said the ONSC approved, and the president signed, an interministerial strategy in mid-September; however, it was not widely publicized due to “sensitivities surrounding the issue.” According to the ONSC, it continued to work on an action plan for implementation of the policy, which was expected to be finalized before the end of the year.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

According to journalists, local observers, and UNAMA, attacks by ISIS-K and other insurgent groups continued to target specific religious and ethnoreligious groups, including the Hazara Shia. During the year, UNAMA documented a 48-percent decrease from 2018 in civilian casualties from attacks targeting places of worship, religious leaders, and worshippers – mainly due to a reduction in such attacks by ISIS-K. UNAMA recorded 20 attacks targeting places of worship, religious leaders, and worshippers, compared with 22 attacks in 2018. The attacks caused 236 civilian casualties (80 deaths and 156 injured), compared with 453 civilian casualties (156 deaths and 297 injured) in 2018. All were attributed to ISIS-K and other antigovernment elements. Despite the overall decrease, civilian casualties from these types of attacks by the Taliban more than doubled compared with 2018. Suicide attacks were again the leading type of attacks targeting places of worship, religious leaders, and worshippers, resulting in 127 civilian casualties (62 killed and 65 injured), compared with 402 casualties (136 killed and 266 injured) in 2018. In addition to suicide attacks, UNAMA documented six incidents of targeting places of worship, religious leaders, and worshippers with the use of nonsuicide IEDs, causing 88 civilian casualties (6 killed and 82 injured), compared with 35 civilian casualties (15 deaths and 20 injured) in 2018.

UNAMA continued to report high levels of ISIS-K-directed, sectarian-motivated violence targeting the Shia Muslim, mostly ethnic Hazara, population. It documented 10 incidents of sectarian-motivated violence against Shia Muslims resulting in 485 civilian casualties (117 killed and 368 injured), representing a 35 per cent decrease from such attacks, compared with 2018 when there were 19 incidents resulting in 747 civilian casualties (233 killed and 514 injured). ISIS-K claimed seven of the 10 incidents, stating its aim was to target the Shia Muslim religious minority. These seven incidents caused 473 civilian casualties (112 killed and 361 injured).

On August 17, ISIS-K attacked a wedding hall in a predominately Shia neighborhood of Kabul. According to UNAMA, this was the year’s deadliest attack, killing 91 persons and wounding 143 others, including 15 children killed and 25 injured. On March 7, ISIS-K fired mortar rounds towards a gathering to commemorate the killing of Hazara leader Abdul Ali Mazari, in the Mosalla-e-Mazari area of Kabul – causing 115 civilian casualties (11 killed and 104 injured). On July 5, ISIS-K also attacked a Shia mosque in Ghazni City. The detonation of a remote-controlled IED inside of the Mohammadiyah Mosque resulted in 24 civilian casualties (two killed and 22 injured), mostly children. On October 8, ISIS-K detonated an IED in a classroom of Ghazni University classroom, targeting Shia students and causing 27 civilian casualties.

UNAMA also documented 17 civilian casualties (10 killed and seven injured) as a result of incidents in which religious leaders and worshippers were targeted and shot. On June 27, a religious scholar and acting head of the provincial Hajj and Religious Affairs Department was shot and killed by ISIS-K in Jalalabad, Nangarhar Province. Many other progovernment Islamic scholars were killed in attacks for which no group claimed responsibility. On July 6, two unknown gunmen on a motorcycle killed the chairperson of the local Shia Ulema Council in Kunduz after he made statements supportive of the Afghan government and the peace process.

According to media, antigovernment forces also targeted Sunni mosques. During the year, antigovernment forces carried out several deadly attacks on religious leaders, particularly those who spoke out against the Taliban. On June 28, in Samangan Province, the Taliban detonated a remote-controlled IED inside a mosque during Friday prayers, wounding 14 civilians. According to sources, the Taliban were targeting the mullah, who had praised ANDSF in previous services. Many progovernment Islamic scholars were killed in attacks during the year for which no group claimed responsibility. For example, on May 24, a remote-controlled IED placed inside the Al-Taqla mosque in Kabul detonated while more than 700 individuals were gathered during Friday prayers. The explosives were positioned under the podium where a religious scholar, Mawlawi Rayhan, was leading prayers. The explosion killed him and two other civilians and injured 34 others. Rayhan was known as a supporter of the Afghan national security forces and a critic of the Taliban and ISIS-K. UNAMA attributed this incident to the Taliban.

On June 24, in the Nangarhar community of Qalatak, unidentified gunmen shot and killed Mawlawi Safiullah Hanafi, the imam of Qalatak's central mosque, an Islamic schoolteacher and progovernment figure. President Ghani condemned the “inhumane attack on the wedding hall” and stated via Twitter, “My top priority for now is to reach out to the families of victims of this barbaric attack.” By year's end, the government had not detained any individuals suspected of having been involved in these killings.

The Taliban continued to kill religious leaders and threaten them with death for preaching messages contrary to the Taliban's interpretation of Islam or its political agenda. On May 26, unidentified armed men shot and killed Mawlawi Shabir Ahmad Hashem Kamawal, a well-known religious scholar and legal advisor for the International Legal Foundation for Afghanistan in Kabul who had called on the Taliban to end the fighting.

In several cases, the responsibility for attacks on progovernment religious leaders was unclear. In these instances, although no individual or group claimed responsibility for the attacks, local authorities said they suspected that ISIS-K or, less frequently, the Taliban were responsible. On October 18, at least 62 civilians were killed and another 58 wounded, including 20 children killed and 10 injured, following the bombing of a Sunni mosque in Deh Bala District, Nangarhar Province, during Friday prayers. No organization claimed responsibility for the attacks. The investigation continued at year's end. On May 3, unknown gunmen shot and killed a progovernment religious scholar in the Behsod District, Nangarhar Province. As an official imam on the MOHRA payroll, the scholar was targeted for his support of the government, according to sources. No group claimed responsibility for the attack.

On March 3, an IED exploded at the Haji Chaman Mosque, injuring Mawlawi Rahimullah (the religious advisor to the president) and his bodyguard and killing his driver. On May 27, a magnetic IED attached to an official government shuttle bus belonging to MOHRA exploded, wounding 10 MOHRA employees. No group claimed responsibility for these attacks.

There continued to be reports of the Taliban and ISIS-K monitoring the social practices of local populations in areas under their control and imposing punishments on residents according to their respective interpretations of Islamic law. On October 6, the Taliban sentenced a young girl and boy to 40 lashings in Faryab Province for having several telephone conversations. According to media reports, in May a Taliban court in Shahrak District, Ghor Province, shot and killed an underage boy and girl for allegedly having an extramarital affair. In March media reported the Taliban killed a pregnant woman and her unborn child in Sancharak District, Sar-e-Pol Province, for allegedly calling the Taliban’s war against the government “illegitimate.” The Taliban dragged her from her home, took her to a Talib commander who issued her death sentence, and immediately shot her.

There were again reports of continued Taliban warnings to mullahs not to perform funeral prayers for government security officials. As a result, according to MOHRA officials, imams continued to state they feared performing funeral rites for ANDSF and other government employees. In August media reported the Taliban put pressure on local imams to cut relations with the government and speak in favor of the Taliban or face Taliban retribution. Local communities pointed out that inaction by Islamic clerics affected security force morale. MOHRA also reported difficulty in staffing registered mosques in insecure areas because of Taliban threats.

Social media reporting showed Taliban punishing individuals who did not fast during Ramadan. They publicly shamed these individuals by coloring their faces black, putting them on donkeys, or shaving their heads.

According to religious community leaders, some mullahs in unregistered mosques continued to preach in support of the Taliban or ISIS-K in their sermons.

There were continued reports of the Taliban and ISIS-K taking over schools in areas under their control and imposing their own curricula; however, it was difficult to obtain information in Taliban-controlled territory.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Since religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was often difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, and other non-Muslim minorities reported continued harassment from Muslims, although Hindus and Sikhs stated they continued to be able to publicly practice their religions. Members of the Hindu community continued to report they faced fewer cases of harassment, including verbal abuse, than Sikhs, which they ascribed to their lack of a distinctive male headdress. Both groups attributed fewer cases of harassment of members of their communities to the continued emigration of Sikh and Hindu residents.

According to some sources, converts to Christianity and individuals studying Christianity reported receiving threats, including death threats, from family members opposed to their interest in Christianity. Reportedly, the number of Christian missionaries in the country was estimated at 60, with 30 to 40 based in the capital.

According to Christians and Ahmadi Muslims, they continued to worship privately to avoid societal discrimination and persecution.

Women of several different faiths, including Islam, continued to report harassment from local Muslim religious leaders over their attire. As a result, some women said they continued to wear burqas or other modest dress in public in rural areas and in some districts of urban areas, including in Kabul, in contrast to other more secure, government-controlled areas, where women said they felt comfortable without what they considered conservative clothing. Almost all women reported wearing some form of head covering. Some women said they did so by personal choice, but many said they did so due to societal pressure and a desire to avoid harassment and increase their security in public.

Ahmadi Muslims continued to report verbal abuse on the street and harassment when neighbors or coworkers learned of their faith. They said they also faced accusations of being “spies” for communicating with other Ahmadi Muslim community congregations abroad. They said they did not proselytize due to fear of persecution. Although Ahmadis had maintained an unmarked place of worship in past years, during the year the Ahmadis said they decided not to use it after neighbors informed police of its location. Ahmadis continued to report the need to increasingly conceal their identity to avoid unwanted attention in public and their intent to depart the country permanently if there were a peace deal with the Taliban.

Christian representatives again reported public opinion remained hostile toward converts to Christianity and to the idea of Christian proselytization. They said Christians continued to worship alone or in small congregations, sometimes 10 or fewer persons, in private homes due to fear of societal discrimination and persecution. The dates, times, and locations of these services were frequently changed to avoid detection. There continued to be no public Christian churches.

According to minority religious leaders, the decreasing numbers of Sikhs, Hindus, and other religious minorities had only a few places of worship. According to the Sikh and Hindu Council, which advocates with the government on behalf of the Sikh and Hindu communities, there were 12 *gurdwaras* (Sikh temples) and four *mandirs* (Hindu temples) remaining in the country, compared with a combined total of 64 in previous years. Buddhist foreigners remained free to worship in Hindu temples. Members of the Hindu and Sikh communities said the list of seizures of their places of worship in Ghazni, Kandahar, and Paktiya Provinces they submitted to MOHRA in 2016 remained unresolved at year’s end.

Community leaders said they perceived the large number of butchers selling beef near a Sikh temple in Kabul as a deliberate insult because neighbors were aware that Sikhs and Hindus do not eat beef for religious reasons. Sikh and Hindu leaders also reported neighboring residents tended to place household trash in their temples of worship. Although they filed official complaints to police, neither local authorities nor local imams took action to remedy the situation.

According to members of the Sikh and Hindu communities, they continued to refuse to send their children to public schools due to harassment from other students, although there were only a few private school options available to them due to the decreasing sizes of the two communities and their members’ declining economic circumstances. The Sikh and Hindu Council reported one school in Nangarhar and one school in Kabul remained operational. Sikh and Hindu representatives, however, again said these schools were underequipped to teach students.

Sikh leaders continued to state the main cause of Hindu and Sikh emigration was lack of employment opportunities; they said one factor impeding their access to employment was illiteracy resulting from lack of access to education. Sikh leaders said many families in Kabul lived at community temples (*gurdwaras* and *mandirs*) because they could not afford permanent housing. Both communities stated emigration would continue to increase as economic conditions

worsened and security concerns increased. Community leaders estimated approximately another 200 Sikhs and Hindus fled the country during the year to either India or Western countries, in addition to 500-600 who fled in 2018. Some Sikhs and Hindus reported that they faced frequent calls to convert to Islam; in response, many noted that their communities' residence in the country predated Islam.

Media published reports of both Shia and Sunni leaders condemning particular secular events as contrary to Islam; however, there were no prominent reports of joint condemnations. According to media, the Provincial Shia Ulema Council in Bamyan condemned the Bamyan Music Festival, and Shia religious leaders tried without success to stop it because the provincial governor and civil society supported the event. The Ulema also issued several statements against television programs, such as *Afghan Music Star* and Indian and Turkish series. In Herat, religious leaders threatened Tolo TV for recording the *Afghan Music Star* program in Herat, which caused the show to lower its public profile during filming.

Kabul's lone synagogue remained occupied by the last remaining Jew in the country, and a nearby abandoned Jewish cemetery was still utilized as an unofficial dump; reportedly many abandoned Muslim cemeteries were also used as dumping sites. The lone Jew said it was becoming more difficult for him to perform all his religious rituals. He said in the past, Jews from international military forces and foreign embassies attended the synagogue but could no longer do so due to security concerns and threats.

Worship facilities for noncitizens of various faiths continued to be located at coalition military facilities and at embassies in Kabul, but security restrictions limited access.

Media continued to report efforts by local Muslim religious leaders to limit social activities they considered inconsistent with Islamic doctrine, such as education for females or female participation in sports.

NGOs reported Muslim residents remained suspicious of development assistance projects, which they often viewed as surreptitious efforts to advance Christianity or engage in proselytization.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In meetings with members of the president's staff, ONSC, MOHRA, and the Ulema Council, embassy officials continued to promote understanding of religious freedom as well as the need to enhance the government's capacity to counter violent religious extremism. Senior embassy officials met with government officials to emphasize the need to accept and protect religious minorities, including informing the government of the conclusions of the second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom and the U.S. government's recognition of August 22 as the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief. The Ambassador met with leaders of the Sikh and Hindu communities to understand their relationship with the government and their ability to practice their faith. The U.S. Secretary of State hosted two Afghans at the second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington on July 16-18, including one Shia victim of religious persecution whose brother, fiance, and future brother-in-law were killed in an ISIS-K suicide bombing targeting a Shia shrine.

Embassy officials met with both government and religious officials to discuss the issue of ensuring madrassahs did not offer a curriculum encouraging religiously motivated violent extremism, which could encourage intolerance towards the country's religious minorities. The embassy continued to

coordinate with the ONSC, as well as other governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders, to assist the ONSC in creating a national strategy to combat violent extremism and enhancing its relevance to promoting respect for religious diversity.

Embassy officials held regular meetings with government officials from MOHRA; leaders of religious minorities, including Shias, Sikhs, Hindus, and Ahmadis; imams; scholars; and NGOs to discuss ways to enhance religious tolerance and interreligious dialogue. Embassy officials as well as the visiting Acting Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs hosted iftars with government, civil society, and religious leaders during Ramadan to promote religious dialogue and tolerance. On January 16, a senior embassy official hosted a religious freedom roundtable discussion at the embassy to commemorate U.S. National Religious Freedom Day with Sunni and Shia Ulema leaders, a female Islamic scholar, a Sikh priest, and a Hindu priest. During the roundtable, the government representatives recognized the right of certain communities, including Sikhs and Hindus, to practice their faith short of proselytizing. The embassy reaffirmed U.S. government commitment to promoting religious freedom.

The embassy hosted roundtables with researchers and religious scholars, including MOHRA representatives, to discuss the sources and means to counter violent extremism related to religion and promote tolerance. On March 14, the embassy conducted a virtual discussion via the Lincoln Learning Centers with sharia law faculty at seven universities across the country on interpretation of Islam promoting tolerance in the negotiation and its importance for implementing a lasting peace agreement. The embassy also facilitated and funded the coordination of research efforts on violent extremism related to religion, which included policies to foster intrafaith tolerance.

The embassy highlighted National Religious Freedom Day on July 16 and International Religious Freedom Day on October 27 through Twitter and Facebook posts. The Ambassador condemned the attacks on a mosque in Nangarhar Province and in front of a children’s madrassa in Laghman Province on October 18 and 16, respectively, through Twitter. On September 12, the embassy released a public statement on Facebook and Twitter recognizing the first International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief.

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