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2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Greece

Executive Summary

The constitution states freedom of religious conscience is inviolable and provides for freedom of worship with some restrictions. The constitution recognizes Greek Orthodoxy as the “prevailing religion.” The Greek Orthodox Church, the Jewish community, and the Muslim minority of Thrace have long been recognized as official religious legal entities by law. Other established Christian religious groups automatically acquired the status of religious legal entities under a 2014 law. The same law also provided for other groups to seek recognition through the court system. Groups without legal recognition as religious entities are able to function as civil nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) but they may face administrative and fiscal difficulties in transferring property and operating private schools, charitable institutions, and other nonprofit entities. The government continued granting some privileges to the Greek Orthodox Church it did not grant to other religious groups and maintained some restrictions affecting members of non-Greek Orthodox religious groups. Some members of the Thrace Muslim community complained about the government appointment of muftis to serve the community. The government enacted legislation allowing individuals to predetermine disposition of their remains upon death and addressing longstanding penal issues of conscientious objectors. In July participants in a demonstration organized by the Golden Dawn Party (GD) threw rocks and shouted slogans at a member of the Muslim minority commemorating the death of a Muslim former member of parliament. The government granted permits for 11 houses of prayer including, for the first time, a Muslim prayer house outside of Thrace and greater Athens. The criminal trial of 69 GD party members and supporters resumed on charges that included murder, membership a criminal organization, conspiracy, weapons possession, and racist violence related to a string of attacks against migrants and others. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported incidents of police harassment while preaching or distributing religious materials. Political leaders made anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim comments. The government funded Holocaust education programs and commemorated Greek Holocaust victims.

There were incidents of anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic discrimination and hate speech, including some directed at immigrants. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported physical violence, verbal attacks, harassment, and intimidation by individuals, including Greek Orthodox priests, while preaching or distributing information material in Athens and in other cities. Individuals vandalized Greek Orthodox churches, a Jewish synagogue and memorial, an army camp intended to house Muslim refugees, and other religious property. Police launched investigations but made no arrests. Some

Muslim asylum seekers reported that two aid workers working for an NGO at a reception and registration center in Lesbos attempted to convert them to Christianity through distribution of translated citations from the Gospels in Arabic. The aid workers were removed from their positions.

The U.S. Ambassador, visiting U.S. officials, and embassy and consulate representatives met with officials and representatives from the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religions, including the Minister for Education and the Secretary General for Religious Affairs. Embassy officials also met with the Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church, as well as members of the Muslim, Jewish, Yezidi, Bahai, and Jehovah's Witnesses communities to promote religious tolerance, encourage interfaith dialogue, and express concern about anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim acts and rhetoric. The embassy supported two interfaith and outreach projects to bring together members of different religious groups to promote religious tolerance, acceptance, and understanding.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 10.8 million (July 2016 estimate), of whom 98 percent are Greek Orthodox, 1.3 percent Muslim, and 0.7 percent other religions. Kappa Research Firm, a local private research firm, estimated that in 2015, 81.4 percent of the population self-identified as Greek Orthodox, 2.9 percent as belonging to other religious groups, and 14.7 percent as atheist.

Muslims constitute a number of distinct communities including, according to the Council of Europe's European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance, approximately 100,000-120,000 individuals in Thrace descending from the Muslim minority officially recognized in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. According to local religious leaders and migrant activists, approximately 150,000 Muslim immigrants and foreign workers from Southeastern Europe, South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa reside mostly in the Attica region, in and around Athens, and are clustered together based on their countries of origin. Other religious groups that together are estimated to constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Old Calendarist Orthodox, atheists and agnostics, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, members of polytheistic Hellenic religions, Scientologists, Bahais, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Sikhs, Seventh-day Adventists, and the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKON).

According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, between January 1 and September 25, approximately 166,000 migrants and asylum seekers from mainly Muslim majority countries arrived in the country, many transiting to other nations in Europe. As of November 21, the government estimated approximately 62,517 remained. The Migration Ministry, as of October 21, estimates there are 2,437 Yezidi migrants and asylum seekers from Iraq and Syria in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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

The constitution stipulates ministers of all known religions shall be subject to the same state supervision and the same obligations to the state as clergy of the Greek Orthodox Church. It also states individuals shall not be exempted from their obligations to the state or from compliance with the law because of their religious convictions.

The Greek Orthodox Church, the Jewish community, and the Muslim minority of Thrace have long-held status as official religious legal entities. The Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, two evangelical Christian groups, and the Ethiopian, Coptic, Armenian Apostolic, and Assyrian Orthodox Churches automatically acquired the status of religious legal entities under a 2014 law. The same law also provided for groups seeking recognition to become religious legal entities under civil law. The recognition process involves filing a request at the civil court, providing documents proving the group has open rituals and no secret doctrines, supplying a list of 300 signatory members who do not adhere to other religious groups, and demonstrating that there is a leader who is legally in the country and is otherwise qualified, and that their practices do not pose a threat to public order. Once the civil court recognizes the group, it sends a notification to the Secretariat General for Religions. With legal status, the religious group can legally transfer property and administer houses of prayer and worship, private schools, charitable institutions, and other nonprofit entities. Some religious groups have opted to retain their status as civil society nonprofit associations that they acquired through court recognition prior to the 2014 law. Under this status, religious groups may operate houses of prayer and benefit from real estate property tax exemptions, but may face administrative and fiscal difficulties in transferring property and operating private schools, charitable institutions, and other nonprofit entities.

The law allows religious communities without status as legal entities to appear before administrative and civil courts as plaintiffs or defendants.

On February 21, parliament passed a law that protects the individual’s right to predetermine his or her form of funeral service and burial location in the presence of a notary. The law ensures “the choice of burial location is an individual right,” and provides for the designation of location, method of funeral service (provided that it is “not against public order, hygiene or moral ethics”), and person responsible for the execution of the individual’s funeral preference. The law protects the individual’s wishes from objections by direct relatives not designated by the individual to carry out funeral responsibilities. It also facilitates the establishment of crematory facilities by allowing these facilities to be established both on municipally-owned plots of land and on real property donated to the municipality for that specific purpose.

A religious group that has obtained at least one valid permit to operate a place of prayer is considered a “known religion” and thereby acquires protection under the law, including a tax

exemption for property used for religious purposes. Membership requirements for house of prayer permits differ from the requirements for religious legal entities. The granting of house of prayer permits is subject to approvals from local urban planning departments attesting to the compliance of a proposed house of prayer with local public health and safety regulations, and the application requires at least five signatory members of the group. Once a house of worship receives planning approvals, a religious group must submit a file including documents describing the basic principles and rituals of the religious group as well as a biography of the religious minister or leader; the file must be approved by the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs. The leaders of a religious group applying for a house of prayer permit must be Greek citizens, European Union nationals, or legal residents of the country and must possess other professional qualifications, including relevant education and experience. A separate permit is required for each physical place of worship.

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne gives the recognized Muslim minority of Thrace the right to maintain mosques and social and charitable organizations (*awqafs*). Government-appointed muftis are allowed to practice sharia and render religious judicial services in the area of family law for those members of the Muslim community in Thrace who opt to use the services of a mufti instead of civil courts. The government, in consultation with a committee of Muslim leaders, appoints three muftis in Thrace to 10-year terms of office, with the possibility of extension. Civil courts in Thrace routinely ratify the family law decisions of the muftis. The muftis also appoint imams to serve in the community's mosques.

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

Greek Orthodox religious instruction in primary and secondary schools is included in the official school curriculum. School textbooks include some basic information on other known religions but focus mainly on Greek Orthodox teachings. Students may be exempted from religious instruction upon request, but parents of students registered as Greek Orthodox in school records are required to state the students are not Greek Orthodox believers in order to receive the exemption. There are no private religious schools, although individual churches may teach optional religious classes on their premises, which students may attend on a voluntary basis. The law provides for optional Islamic religious instruction in public schools in Thrace for the recognized Muslim minority and optional Catholic religious instruction in public schools on the islands of Tinos and Syros.

In Thrace, the government operates secular Greek-Turkish bilingual schools and two Islamic religious schools. The law in Thrace provides for Islamic religious instructors to teach Islam to the Muslim minority in Greek-language public schools in lieu of mandatory twice weekly Greek Orthodox religious courses. Muslim students in Thrace who wish to study the Quran may also attend after-hours religious classes in mosques.

The law establishes an annual 0.5 percent quota for admission of students from the recognized Muslim minority to universities, technical institutes, and civil service positions. A new presidential decree requires that 2 percent of students entering the national fire brigade school and academy be from the Muslim minority in Thrace.

The law provides for alternative forms of mandatory service for religious conscientious objectors in lieu of the nine-month mandatory military service. Conscientious objectors are required to serve 15 months of alternate service in state hospitals or municipal and public services. On February 1, parliament amended the law to allow conscientious objectors on religious grounds over the age of 35 to shorten their alternative service upon certain conditions. It also addressed longstanding penal issues for religious conscientious objectors prior to the 1997 law that institutionalized alternative service. New provisions allow for their acquittal on all charges and the closing of all relevant cases. For those declared insubordinate prior to this legislation, the law provides that they will be acquitted and freed from any obligation to pay administrative fines if they have already completed, or were about to complete, alternative service by December 2017.

All religious groups are subject to taxation on their property used for nonreligious purposes. Property used solely for religious purposes remains exempt from taxation and municipal fees for groups classified as “known religions.”

The law prohibits discrimination and criminalizes hate speech on the grounds of religion. Individuals or legal entities convicted of incitement to violence, discrimination, or hatred on the basis of religion, among other factors, may be sentenced to prison terms of between three months and three years and fined 5,000 to 20,000 euros (\$5,269 to \$21,075). Violators convicted of other crimes motivated by religion may be sentenced to an additional six months to three years, with fines doubled. The law criminalizes approval, trivialization, or malicious denial of the Holocaust and “crimes of Nazism” if that behavior leads to incitement of violence or hatred, or has a threatening or abusive nature towards groups of individuals. A law adopted in 2015 established the National Council against Racism and Xenophobia, an advisory body under the Ministry of Justice, Transparency, and Human Rights charged with preventing, combating, monitoring, and recording racism and intolerance and protecting individuals and groups targeted on several grounds, including religion. The National Commission for Human Rights, comprised of government and NGO members, serves as an independent advisory body to the government on all human rights issues.

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

Government Practices

The government provided funding and other benefits to the Greek Orthodox Church and, to a lesser extent, to the Muslim community of Thrace and the Jewish communities, not available to other religious groups. Courts ruled favorably on one application by a group seeking legal recognition as religious entity; rulings for the applications of two more separate religious groups were pending at year’s end. Some members of the Thrace Muslim community objected to the government’s practice of appointing muftis, pressing for direct election of muftis. Muslims also criticized the lack of government action to provide for Islamic cemeteries outside of Thrace. The government assigned three religious officials to provide services to Muslims in migrant facilities. The government had still not built a mosque for which parliament approved funding in 2014. The government approved permits for 11 houses of prayer, including the first Muslim prayer house outside of Thrace and greater Athens in Thiva. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled the government had improperly ruled against the son of a Jehovah’s Witness who had applied for civilian service as an alternative to military service in 2013.

According to media reports, on July 24 in Thrace, participants in a demonstration organized by GD threw rocks and shouted racially charged slogans, including “Turks, Mongols, murderers,” at approximately 800 members of the officially-recognized Muslim minority who were commemorating the 21st anniversary of the death of Muslim Member of Parliament (MP) Ahmet Sadik, the founder of the Muslim minority party of Equality, Peace and Friendship. This was reportedly the first time demonstrators had disrupted this memorial event. Police intervened by using tear gas and stun grenades to disperse the crowd. No arrests were made.

On May 25, the criminal trial of 69 far-right GD party members and supporters, including 18 of its current and former MPs, resumed after a five-month break. Charges, related to a string of attacks against migrants and others, include murder, conspiracy, weapons possession, and membership in a criminal organization. The trial continued through the end of the year.

On July 13, human rights activists, including members of the NGOs Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM) and the Humanist Union of Greece, reported 25 criminal prosecutions and trials since 2014 involving charges based on blasphemy law. At least one of them was registered during the year in the city of Drama, against a local soccer player who reportedly offended Christian believers by “insulting the divine” with comments he made during a game. The trial of a blogger appealing his 2014 conviction for blasphemy and his sentence to prison for 10 months remained pending. Government officials from the Syriza Party and some of the opposition parties represented in parliament, such as the Democratic Alignment and the River, publicly stated that existing blasphemy legislation should be abolished.

The government continued to state that Muslims who were not part of the recognized minority created by the Treaty of Lausanne were not covered by that treaty and therefore did not have the rights related to it, such as right to bilingual education, special quotas for university entry and jobs in the public sector, the use of sharia in family matters, and optional Islamic religious classes in public schools.

Courts received and agreed to examine applications filed by four religious groups seeking recognition as religious legal entities: Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, German-speaking Protestants, Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, and Old Calendarists in the region of Oropos and Fyli, in greater Athens. A court granted recognition to the first group; court decisions for the remainder were pending at year’s end except for German-speaking Protestants, who decided to withdraw their request.

Religious groups that did not have religious entity status and had never received house of prayer permits, including Scientologists, ISKON, and polytheistic Hellenic groups, were only able to function as registered nonprofit civil law organizations. The government did not legally recognize weddings conducted by those religious groups.

The Greek Orthodox Church received direct support from the government, including payment of salaries, religious training for clergy, and funding for religious instruction in schools. It maintained an institutionalized link to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, which continued to partially fund retirement pensions of Orthodox monks and monitor vocational training for Orthodox clergy.

Members of the Thrace Muslim minority continued to press for direct election of muftis. The government responded the practice of government appointment was appropriate because the muftis had judicial powers and the government appointed all judges. Academics and activists said the ability of courts in Thrace to provide judicial oversight of muftis' decisions was limited by the lack of translation of sharia into Greek and lack of familiarity with sharia in general. They also continued to criticize the appointment by the government, rather than election of members of the Muslim minority in Thrace entrusted with the administration of the *awqafs*.

Muslim leaders criticized the lack of Muslim cemeteries outside of Thrace, stating this obliged Muslims to transport their dead to Thrace for Islamic burials. Additionally, Muslim leaders said municipal cemetery regulations requiring exhumation of bodies after three years because of shortage of space contravened Islamic religious law. The government operated at least three unofficial cemeteries for the burial of Muslim migrant and asylum seekers, in Lesvos, Schisto (in Athens), and Evros. On April 8, the Holy Synod of the Greek Orthodox Church agreed, at the request of the government, to grant 20,000 square meters (215,000 square feet) inside an existing cemetery at Schisto for the burial of Muslims.

On January 15, the media reported that three municipalities, Athens, Thessaloniki, and Patras, initiated the process to establish crematories by searching for suitable land and seeking approval of the necessary municipal committees. The city of Patras was reported to have identified a suitable plot of land and was in the process of requesting the issuance of a presidential decree to deter appeals by precertifying the land transfer as constitutional. As of year's end, there were no crematories in the country.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that police in Athens and in provincial towns attempted to intimidate and discourage preaching or distributing and displaying information and religious material in public, citing prohibition of proselytism by the constitution.

The Orthodox Church's Holy Synod criticized the government for failing to issue a denunciation and not taking action after 26 individuals entered the Thessaloniki cathedral of the Greek Orthodox Church and interrupted services on July 3. The government subsequently issued a statement condemning the incident.

The Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs assigned three Islamic experts to offer religious services in camps hosting Muslim refugees and migrants in the region of central and eastern Macedonia. The three experts included an imam from Xanthi, the director of one of the two Islamic religious schools in Thrace, and a scholastic expert in Islamic law and studies. On June 6, the Ministry of Interior and Administrative Reconstruction issued a directive to the managers of reception facilities hosting migrants and refugees, instructing them to alter food distribution times – and the type of food served – to allow Muslims to observe the Ramadan fast.

Muslim leaders continued to criticize the absence of a mosque in Athens, the financing of which the government approved in 2014. On July 13, the Council of State overruled an appeal submitted by local residents of Votanikos, where the Athens official mosque is to be built, requesting the tendering process for the mosque be ruled unconstitutional due to environmental protection considerations. On August 4, parliament approved by a wide majority an amendment to regulate technical issues and accelerate the construction of the mosque. The amendment provided for the division of the plot from other land, the construction of new buildings, and the creation of parking

spaces and other facilities. On October 10, the Ministry of Infrastructure, Transport, and Networks signed a contract with a consortium of four companies for the building of the mosque. The construction is slated to be completed by the end of 2017. On November 3, riot police ended an occupation by a group of protestors at the Votanikos site after the mayor of Athens asked for the central government's intervention. GD praised the occupiers.

On February 26, the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs issued a permit to establish a Muslim house of prayer in the city of Thiva. This was the first permit granted to a Muslim house of prayer operating outside of the greater Athens region, excluding Thrace. The ministry also issued 10 additional house of prayer permits. These were granted to a Buddhist group in the Chalkidiki region, a Coptic Orthodox group in Athens, a Protestant group in Athens, a Pentecostal group in Veria, and to Jehovah's Witnesses in two separate locations in Attica, in the islands of Corfu and Cephalonia, as well as in Trikala and Drama. The ministry additionally approved the construction of five new houses of worship: four of them were granted to Jehovah's Witnesses in Thessaloniki, Karditsa, Aliveri and Maroussi in Athens and one for an Old Calendarist Orthodox church in Kryoneri, in greater Athens.

On May 10, the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs revoked, for the first time ever, a house of prayer permit of the "Church of Christian Faith." The ministry cited a pending judicial investigation and complaints filed against the house's religious leader for conducting marriages of convenience and weddings of minors without the consent or prior knowledge of their parents.

Some religious groups reiterated complaints from previous years that the house of prayer permit process constrained freedom of religion.

On February 7, the daily newspaper *Kathimerini* reported the Greek Orthodox Church was unable to sell or utilize 123 real estate property assets it owned in the Athens, Vouliagmeni, Piraeus, and Thessaloniki regions. According to the report, the authorities had previously initiated procedures to expropriate these assets without concluding the process or providing any compensation. The disposition of the assets had been pending for years while the Orthodox Church was unable to sell or use them. A portion of these properties was considered by the state to be forestry lands in need of protection; as of the end of the year, the Greek Orthodox Church was in the process of challenging the government's stance.

The government continued to provide public space free of charge to groups of Muslims whose members requested places of worship during Ramadan and for other religious occasions. On July 7, *Eleftheria* news reported Muslim migrant residents prayed in a public square in Larisa. The report stated some local inhabitants expressed discontent with the use of a public square for open-air prayer. Officials from the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs contacted the Larisa municipality, which verified that it had approved a request filed by local Muslims for the use of the square. The ministry advised the municipality to grant use of interior rather than open-air facilities in response to similar requests in the future.

On March 30, the media reported on a new circular by the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs restricting the presence of outside visitors in school classes for the remainder of the school year. Speeches and presentations by outside visitors to school audiences had to take place strictly after hours, and only following authorization from school principals and teachers and the

written consent of parents. Some Greek Orthodox Church leaders interpreted the policy as a government effort to restrict access of priests to schools for purposes other than teaching formal religion classes.

In September the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs sent new guidelines to school principals and staff for the teaching of religion class in schools. According to the guidelines, religious education should not be based solely on the official textbook – which primarily covers Greek Orthodox doctrine – and teachers were urged to discuss and initiate projects dealing with other religions. The government stated students needed to become more familiar with other religions present in the country and the world. Greek Orthodox Church leaders objected and reacted publicly to this change, stating the government was disrespectful to the constitution and to the faith of the majority of the country's citizens.

The government provided funding to the Muslim minority in Thrace to select and pay salaries of teachers of Islam in state schools and the salaries of the three official muftis and some imams. The government funded Catholic religious training and teachers' salaries in state schools on the islands of Syros and Tinos, and also provided funding for awareness raising activities and trips for non-Jewish students to Holocaust remembrance events, and for Holocaust education training for teachers.

Some leaders of the recognized Muslim minority continued to criticize the absence of bilingual kindergartens in Thrace. Greek government authorities stated that Greek-language kindergartens helped students to better integrate into the larger society.

On April 19, President Prokopis Pavlopoulos signed a decree establishing a special division of Muslim Studies within the Department of Theology at the School of Theology of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, beginning in the 2016-17 academic year. Metropolitan of Thessaloniki Anthimos publicly objected to the establishment in Thessaloniki rather than in Thrace, where the recognized Muslim minority resides. Anthimos argued that Islam and Christianity could not coexist in the same school and warned that clashes might result if students of the two disciplines accidentally or purposefully insulted each other.

On July 13, GHM, Minority Rights Group Greece, and the Humanist Union of Greece again stated courts did not always enforce the right of witnesses to take an alternate secular oath, noting even Supreme Court prosecutors failed to apply this legal provision.

Some religious groups and human rights organizations continued to state the discrepancy between the length of mandatory alternate service for conscientious objectors (15 months) and for those serving in the military (nine months) was discriminatory. On September 15, the ECHR ruled the country the article of the European Convention on Human Rights providing for the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in the case of a conscientious objector brought by the son of a Jehovah's Witness who stated he was influenced by his mother's religious beliefs in forming his own pacifist views. A government committee had rejected the objector's application for alternative service in 2013 and the Council of State had upheld the committee's decision. The ECHR ruled the process lacked procedural impartiality, independence, and the equal representation required by domestic law; stipulating the government award 5,000 euros (\$5,269) to be paid to the conscientious objector.

The Central Board of Jewish Communities (KIS) expressed concern about anti-Semitic attitudes among GD party members, including inside the parliament. On March 19, activists monitoring anti-Semitic rhetoric and Holocaust trivialization criticized on social media Minister for Interior and Administrative Reconstruction Panayotis Kouroumplis as well as New Democracy Spokesperson Giorgos Koumoutsakos for statements they made on March 18 comparing conditions in the unofficial refugee and migrant camp of Idomeni to the Nazi concentration camp of Dachau.

In May GD MP Christos Pappas stated Israel constituted “the eternal enemy of Greece and Orthodoxy” during a hearing of parliament’s Standing Committee on National Defense and Foreign Affairs. KIS condemned this statement.

On September 15, Deputy Education Minister Theodosios Pelegrinis stated in a parliamentary speech, “the Jewish people appropriated the Holocaust in order to earn the sympathy of the civilized world and be justified.” The president of KIS condemned the speech. Political parties of the opposition, such as New Democracy, PASOK, and the River, also denounced the speech.

The GD official website and weekly paper continued publishing references to conspiracy theories involving international Zionism and alleged plans for the country’s “Islamization,” while opposing the construction of an official mosque in Athens and the operation of private Muslim houses of prayer. For example, on October 24 the website posted a video of GD leader Nikos Michaloliakos’ commenting “it is an insult to Greek history and civilization to build a mosque in the shadow of the Acropolis.” On October 2, the website posted an article blaming the “Jewish lobby of the United States” for “dismantling the Hellenic state.”

On May 9, KIS wrote to the Greek Tourism National Organization to protest its website’s reference to the custom of burning an effigy of Judas (practiced during the Easter season) as “folkloristic,” stating it perpetuated anti-Semitic feelings. Jewish groups stated they saw the practice as encouraging the belief that the Jews killed Jesus, long a source of anti-Semitism. KIS requested its removal and the GTNO complied. KIS noted the Holy Synod of the Greek Orthodox Church had an explicit and long-standing demand for the abolition of this custom.

On January 27, President Pavlopoulos inaugurated a memorial to the Greek Righteous Among the Nations at the main Athens synagogue, to honor non-Jews who risked their lives during World War II to save Jews. On the same day, for the first time in history according to KIS, parliament held a special plenary session to honor Greek Jews who died in the Holocaust and those who survived as well as non-Jewish Greeks who protected Jews. A Greek Jewish delegation, including Holocaust survivors, and representatives of all parliamentary parties except GD attended the session. Speaker of Parliament Nikos Voutsis announced parliament would participate in sponsoring the creation of a memorial space in Auschwitz for the Greek Jews who perished there.

Most parties represented in parliament issued statements on Holocaust Remembrance Day, paying homage to the thousands of Greek Jews who fell victim to the Nazis and condemning anti-Semitism, Nazism, and Holocaust denial. A series of commemorative events took place in many cities around the country with the presence of government officials throughout the year, such as the minister of education, regional governors, city mayors, MPs, and a former prime minister.

On February 2, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced the publication of a volume entitled “The Greek Righteous Among the Nations.” The work – published in collaboration with the Foundation

for the Memory of the Martyrs and Heroes of the Holocaust Yad Vashem – was the final installment in a trilogy dedicated to the history of Greek Jewish communities, their destruction in the Holocaust, and the rescue of dozens of Greek Jews by Greek Christians.

On February 2, the media reported on the availability of a new mobile application allowing users to discover Thessaloniki's Sephardic Jewish heritage. The application was made available with the collaboration of foreign embassies and various other entities.

On March 4 and 5 in Kavala, the History and Ethnology School of the Democritus University of Thrace, in cooperation with the local Union of Philologists, organized a Holocaust education training seminar for 40 teachers.

On April 20, the speaker of parliament unveiled a monument inside the parliament building dedicated to Greek Jewish MPs who were Holocaust victims.

In June the Secretariat General for Religious Affairs funded an annual commemorative trip to Auschwitz for 84 students from 19 schools throughout the country.

In March Athens Mayor Giorgos Kaminis signed a declaration against anti-Semitism, joining 60 other European mayors participating in an American Jewish Committee initiative to combat anti-Semitism.

On January 22, the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs issued a circular urging regional primary and secondary school directorates and principals to dedicate two hours of their school program to Holocaust-related activities on January 27, in commemoration of Holocaust Remembrance Day. In response, Thessaloniki Mayor Yiannis Boutaris called on schools to add more hours of Holocaust education into their curricula. Boutaris publicly stated the term Holocaust is wrongfully used to describe different tragedies such as mass killings of unarmed populations during the Nazi occupation and argued the misuse of the term Holocaust was aimed at lessening the importance of the Holocaust.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were incidents of anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic discrimination and hate speech, including against immigrants. There were reports of vandalism against religious property, including for the first time in recent history, Greek Orthodox churches

On February 19, the Racist Violence Recording Network, an umbrella organization established by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the National Commission for Human Rights, reported that in 22 of the 75 incidents recorded against refugees and immigrants in 2015, the victims stated their religion was among the reasons they were targeted. In 2014, the same network reported victims cited religion in 17 of 46 recorded incidents.

On March 28, unknown perpetrators attempted to detonate a homemade bomb comprised of a gas canister and a car tire approximately 150 feet from the residence of the mufti of Didimoticho in

Evros. There were no reports of damages. Police launched an investigation but made no arrests by year's end. The perpetrators' motives were unclear.

On August 8, unknown individuals threw eight Molotov cocktails at the Petrakis Monastery in central Athens, which shelters the Holy Synod. Two parked cars inside the monastery's yard were damaged. Police initiated an investigation but made no arrests at year's end. The attack was condemned by government officials.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported incidents of societal discrimination when preaching or distributing informational and religious material in Athens and in other cities, including being subjected to physical violence, verbal attacks, harassment, and intimidation by laypersons and Greek Orthodox priests. In January a young Jehovah's Witness in Galatsi, Athens was distributing religious material door-to-door when a resident exited his apartment and began punching and kicking him. On March 12, in Andros Island, two male Jehovah's Witnesses were distributing religious literature door-to-door when they visited a local priest's residence. The priest reportedly released his dog and attacked the two Jehovah Witnesses with a metal shovel and issued a death threat. The two men reported the attack to the local police station, but the police did not file charges or make arrests. On January 15, the media reported a Greek Orthodox priest in Konistres had placed posters on columns along a street depicting Jehovah's Witnesses as heretics and unpatriotic. The media also reported the same priest tried to prevent Jehovah's Witnesses from distributing religious materials by standing next to them and hindering local residents from approaching them.

Before the country's northern border was closed in February, an estimated 171,284 migrants and refugees, mostly Muslims, arrived in the country from the beginning of the year through November 20. Approximately 110,000 of them left for other nations in Europe.

Academics, activists, and journalists stated the Greek Orthodox Church exercised significant social, political, and economic influence. Members of non-Orthodox religious groups reported incidents of societal discrimination, including being told they were "heretics" or "not truly Greek."

On January 14, the Holy Synod of the Greek Orthodox Church issued a statement expressing disagreement with a government initiative to draft legislation allowing individuals to predetermine their form and location of burial, including cremation. The statement noted "it is not dignified for a person to be cremated" and "there are no particular differences between cremation and the procedures for recycling trash." The Holy Synod urged the local authorities "to look after their overcrowded and neglected cemeteries first, before rushing to spend money on purchasing plots of land and the necessary equipment in order to establish cremation centers."

There were instances of metropolitan bishops of the Greek Orthodox Church making anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic statements in public letters and on social media while others stated Catholicism was heresy. On March 3, media reported the Greek Orthodox bishop of Kalavryta objected publicly to the transfer of Muslim migrants and refugees to Kalavryta, stating "they do not match [Greek] ethics and customs." He added that "... we do not like their culture! We do not accept their religion! ... Let us not receive any migrants in the Peloponnese. Let's keep ourselves and our population pureblooded!" On June 15, Bishop of Piraeus Seraphim wrote on his website "the attachment of the Orthodox Church leaders to the global system equals....surrender to the American-Zionist world power system."

On January 8, KIS publicly reacted to the use of a drawing of the Western Wall of Jerusalem in a cartoon posted on the Facebook account of “Paratiritirio” (Observatory) to mock the government’s decision to erect a monument dedicated to left-wing activists executed during the country’s civil war.

In February the anti-Semitic organization “Unaligned Meander Nationalists” claimed responsibility for several incidents of desecration of Jewish monuments and cemeteries throughout the country which had taken place in previous years, and posted pictures on the internet of individuals performing the Nazi salute in the city of Patras in front of swastikas and slogans such as “Juden Raus” (German for “Jews out”).

In March local media reported newly discovered video footage from 2014 showing a religious figure from the Muslim minority in Xanthi, Thrace stating, “Curse Israel! For these are the ones turned into soap by the Germans. But Hitler was right when he said, now you will be angry with me but one day I will be proved right about the Jews. Now our curse goes upon them and our prayers upon our brothers.” KIS denounced the statements.

On July 4, the president of the urban transportation workers union in Thessaloniki made statements about “God [mistakenly] creating Jews” and about “Hitler, who did not finish the job.” The local bus owners association and the local workers’ union, Anatropi, publicly condemned the statements. In August a public prosecutor in Thessaloniki ordered a preliminary investigation into whether the union president committed the crime of publicly instigating racist violence.

According to a foreign newspaper, an asylum seeker held at a reception and registration center in Lesvos reported Christian aid workers tried to convert some of the Muslim refugees to Christianity. He said aid workers distributed citations of the Gospel in Arabic and conversion forms to the refugees, who considered the distribution “insensitive.” The newspaper reported the aid workers’ employer, an NGO, disapproved of the conversion efforts and removed the individuals from their positions.

Some Orthodox leaders attended religious ceremonies of other religious groups. On April 16, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Catholic Pope Francis visited migrants in Lesvos. Greek Orthodox and Catholic priests gathered at some private schools to bless the beginning of the school year.

Authorities reported acts of vandalism against Jewish sites and Greek Orthodox churches throughout the country. The media reported that on September 12, vandals defaced the exterior walls of the historic synagogue of Ioannina with swastikas. KIS condemned the attack. On September 14, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also condemned the attack, describing it as a “hideous act” and stated “this barbaric action offends the memory of Greek Jews and all our fellow citizens who were the victims of fascism.” On June 28, the media reported Athens police initiated an investigation into a June 10 vandalism incident at the Athens Holocaust Memorial in which unknown perpetrators wrote a word believed to be interpreted as “roasting.” Two incidents of vandalism on Greek Orthodox churches were recorded in June and in July in Crete. Unknown perpetrators vandalized 13 icons and the altar, also writing anti-Christian epithets. In the second incident, vandals defaced the altar and all icons in the church.

On February 23 and March 5, the media reported unknown individuals placed pigs heads on fences of army camps intended to host migrants and refugees, mostly originating from Muslim countries. The reports stated that the perpetrators aimed to discourage the settlement of Muslims in these areas.

On December 15, the German Parliament approved a 10 million euro (\$10.5 million) grant for the construction of a Holocaust Museum and Educational Center in Thessaloniki. The Niarchos Foundation, an international philanthropic organization, matched this grant with an additional 10 million euros. According to Thessaloniki Mayor Boutaris and Jewish Community President David Saltiel, construction of the center will cost 20 million euros (\$21.1 million) and is expected to open at the end of 2019.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador, visiting officials, and embassy and consulate representatives met with officials and representatives from the Ministry of Education Research and Religions including the Minister for Education and the Secretary General for Religious Affairs. They also met with religious leaders including the Archbishop and other representatives of the Greek Orthodox Church, as well as members of the Muslim, Jewish, Yezidi, Bahai, and Jehovah's Witnesses communities to promote interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance, and diversity, and to express concern about anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim acts and rhetoric. Through these meetings, the embassy monitored the ability of religious minority groups to freely practice their religion and the extent of societal discrimination against both indigenous religious minorities and newly-arrived migrants from religious minorities.

The U.S. Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs attended the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church on June 25-26 in Kolymbari, Crete, where he met with senior Church leadership, including Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and discussed religious freedom issues.

Embassy and consulate representatives engaged regularly with civil society representatives and religious groups in several outreach programs. From May 7-22, the embassy held a minority outreach incentive program which included the head of NGO "Lighthouse of the World," the director of the Program for the Education of Muslim Children in Thrace, and the president of the Xanthi Association of Pomaks. The program involved discussion of youth education on diversity and religious pluralism. Also in May, the embassy sponsored the visit to the United States of two NGO staff members for a program focusing on acceptance of religious and ethnic differences. Participants met with organizations promoting cross-cultural dialogue and fighting discrimination. On June 14 and 15, the embassy supported a workshop in Athens, "Building Resilience in Humanitarian Staff," where Greek Orthodox and Muslim first responders to migrants discussed intercultural communication regarding religious beliefs and religious lifestyles.

The Ambassador and embassy representatives met with members of the Jewish community and attended Holocaust memorial events to emphasize the components of religious freedom and bolster societal religious tolerance. On February 10, the Consulate General in Thessaloniki hosted the 10th annual David Tiano Lecture commemorating a Greek Jewish employee of the consulate who was killed in the Holocaust. A curator from the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki spoke about Tiano's life

and emphasized the theme of religious freedom. The consul general gave remarks on the theme of combating religious hatred and encouraging religious tolerance.