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2018 REPORT ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: ALGERIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and worship. The constitution declares Islam to be the state religion and prohibits state institutions from behaving in a manner incompatible with Islam. The law grants all individuals the right to practice their religion as long as they respect public order and regulations. Offending or insulting any religion is a criminal offense. Proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims is a crime. In May authorities charged 26 Ahmadi Muslims in Bejaia with “insulting the precepts of Islam,” “operating an association without approval,” and “collecting money without authorization.” The courts acquitted three of the Ahmadis while sentencing the others to three months in prison. According to media reports, authorities charged five Christians from Bouira Province, three of whom belong to the same family, with “inciting a Muslim to change his religion” and “performing religious worship in an unauthorized place.” On December 25, a judge at the court of Bouira acquitted the five individuals. In March a court in Tiaret convicted and fined two Christian brothers for carrying more than 50 Bibles in their car. Prosecutors said the accused planned to use them for proselytism; the brothers said they were for church use only. The court fined each man 100,000 dinars (\$850). In May another court convicted a church leader and another Christian of proselytizing, sentenced them to three months in prison, and fined them 100,000 dinars. Leaders of the Ahmadi community reported the government conducted investigations of at least 85 Ahmadi Muslims during the year. Charges included operating an unregistered religious association, collecting funds without authorization, and holding prayers in unauthorized locations. There were reports of police confiscating passports and educational diplomas from Ahmadi Muslims, and pressuring employers to put Ahmadi workers on administrative leave. Authorities closed eight churches and a nursery associated with the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA) during the year on charges of operating without authorization, illegally printing evangelical publications, and failing to meet building safety codes. At the end of the year, four churches remained closed. Some Christian groups continued to report facing a range of administrative difficulties in the absence of a written government response to their requests for recognition as associations. The government continued to regulate the importation of all books, including religious materials. Senior government officials continued to oppose calls by extremist groups for violence in the name of Islam. They also continued to criticize the spread of what they characterized as “foreign” religious influences such as Salafism, Wahhabism, Shia Islam, and Ahmadi Islam.

Media outlets reported the killings of three Sunni imams during the year. The government attributed the attacks to extremists who opposed the imams’ moderate teachings. Some Christian leaders and congregants spoke of family members abusing Muslims who converted to or expressed an interest in Christianity. Media reported unknown individuals vandalized two Christian cemeteries, smashing tombstones and ransacking graves. Individuals engaged in religious practice other than Sunni Islam reported they had experienced threats and intolerance, including in the media.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officers frequently encouraged senior government officials in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Religious Affairs, Justice, and Interior to promote religious tolerance and discussed the difficulties Ahmadis, Christians, and other religious minority groups faced in registering as associations, importing religious materials, and obtaining visas. Embassy officers in meetings and programs with religious leaders from both Sunni Muslim and minority religious groups, as well as with other members of the public, focused on pluralism and religious moderation. The embassy used special events, social media, and speakers’ programs to emphasize a message of religious tolerance. In April the embassy hosted a delegation of nine Americans – a university program officer, one imam, six community and religious leaders, and the executive director of a think tank – for a ten-day tour focused on promoting people-to-people religious ties. The Ministry of

Religious Affairs facilitated the delegation's visit to six cities – Algiers, Constantine, Oran, Biskra, Tlemcen, and Maskara – where the delegation met with a range of imams, community leaders, and ministry officials to discuss the role of religion in countering extremist narratives and religious communities in the United States.

SECTION I. RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 41.7 million (July 2018 estimate), more than 99 percent of whom are Muslims following the Maliki school of Sunni Islam. Religious groups together constituting less than 1 percent of the population include Christians, Jews, Ahmadi Muslims, Shia Muslims, and a community of Ibadi Muslims residing principally in the province of Ghardaia. Some religious leaders estimate there are fewer than 200 Jews.

The Christian community includes Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, members of the EPA, Lutherans, the Reformed Church, Anglicans, and an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 Egyptian Coptic Christians. Religious leaders' unofficial estimates of the number of Christians range from 20,000 to 200,000. According to government officials, foreign residents make up the majority of the Christian population. The proportion of students and immigrants without legal status from sub-Saharan Africa among the Christian population has also increased in recent years. Christian leaders say citizens who are Christians predominantly belong to Protestant groups.

Christians reside mostly in the cities of Algiers, Bejaia, Tizi Ouzou, Annaba, and Oran, and the Kabylie region east of the capital.

SECTION II. STATUS OF GOVERNMENT RESPECT FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Legal Framework

The constitution declares Islam to be the state religion and prohibits state institutions from engaging in behavior incompatible with Islamic values. The constitution provides for freedom of worship in accordance with the law and states freedom of conscience and freedom of opinion are inviolable.

The law does not prohibit conversion from Islam, but proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims is a criminal offense. The law prescribes a maximum punishment of one million dinars (\$8,500) and five years' imprisonment for anyone who "incites, constrains, or utilizes means of seduction intending to convert a Muslim to another religion; or by using to this end establishments of teaching, education, health, social, culture, training ... or any financial means." Making, storing, or distributing printed documents or audiovisual materials with the intent of "shaking the faith" of a Muslim is also illegal and subject to the same penalties.

The law criminalizes "offending the Prophet Muhammad" or any other prophets. The penal code provides a punishment of three to five years in prison and/or a fine of 50,000 to 100,000 dinars (\$420 to \$850) for denigrating the creed or prophets of Islam through writing, drawing, declaration, or any other means. The law also criminalizes insults directed at any other religion, with the same penalties.

The law grants all individuals the right to practice their religion as long as they respect public order and regulations.

The constitution establishes a High Islamic Council and states the council shall encourage and promote *ijtihad* (the use of independent reasoning as a source of Islamic law for issues not precisely addressed in the Quran) and express opinions on religious questions presented for its review. The president appoints the members of the council and oversees its work. The constitution requires the council to submit regular reports to the president on its activities. A presidential decree further defines the council's mission as taking responsibility for all questions

related to Islam, for correcting mistaken perceptions, and for promoting the true fundamentals of the religion and a correct understanding of it. The council may issue fatwas at the request of the president.

The law requires any group, religious or otherwise, to register with the government as an association prior to conducting any activities. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) grants association status to religious groups; only registered associations are officially recognized. The MOI's registration requirements for national-level associations stipulate the founding members must furnish documents proving their identities, addresses, and other biographic details; furnish police and judicial records to prove their good standing in society; show they have founding members residing in at least one quarter of the country's provinces to prove the association merits national standing; submit the association's constitution signed by its president; and submit documents indicating the location of its headquarters. The law requires the ministry to provide a receipt for the application once it has received all the required documentation and to give a response within 60 days of submission of the completed application. The law states applicants are *de facto* approved if the ministry fails to make a decision within the 60-day limit. The law grants the government full discretion in making registration decisions, but provides applicants an opportunity to appeal a denial to an administrative tribunal. For associations seeking to register at the local or provincial level, application requirements are similar, but the association's membership and sphere of activity is strictly limited to the area in which it registers. An association registered at the *wilaya* (provincial) level is confined to that specific *wilaya*.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA) must approve registration applications of religious associations. The law, however, does not specify additional requirements for religious associations or further specify the MRA's role in the process. Religious groups may appeal an MRA denial to an administrative tribunal.

The National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups, a government entity, is responsible by law for facilitating the registration process for all non-Muslim groups. The MRA presides over the commission, composed of senior representatives of the Ministries of National Defense, Interior, and Foreign Affairs, the presidency, national police, national gendarmerie, and the governmental National Human Rights Committee (CNDH). Representatives from Catholic and Protestant churches have not met or communicated with this Commission and believe it rarely meets.

The CNDH monitors and evaluates human rights issues, including matters related to religious freedom. The law authorizes the agency to conduct investigations of alleged abuses, issue opinions and recommendations, conduct awareness campaigns, and work with other government authorities to address human rights issues. The agency may address concerns of individuals and groups that believe they are not being treated fairly by the MRA. The CNDH does not have the authority to enforce its decisions but may refer matters to the relevant administrative or criminal court. It submits an annual report to the president, who appoints the agency's members.

The law specifies the manner and conditions under which religious services, Muslim or otherwise, may take place. The law states religious demonstrations are subject to regulation and the government may shut down any religious service, taking place in private homes or in outdoor settings without official approval. With the exception of daily prayers, which are permissible anywhere, Islamic services may take place only in state-sanctioned mosques. Friday prayers are further limited to certain specified mosques. Non-Islamic religious services must take place only in buildings registered with the state for the exclusive purpose of religious practice, run by a registered religious association, open to the public, and marked as such on the exterior. A request for permission to observe special non-Muslim religious events must be submitted to the relevant *wali* (governor) at least five days before the event, and the event must occur in buildings accessible to the public. Requests must include information on three principal organizers of the event, its purpose, the number of attendees anticipated, a schedule of events, and its planned location. The organizers also must obtain a permit from the *wali*. The *wali* may request the organizers to move the location of an event or deny permission for it to take place if he deems it would be a danger to public order or harm "national constants," "good mores," or symbols of the revolution. If unauthorized meetings go forward without approval, participants are subject to dispersal by the police. Failure to disperse at the behest of the police may result in arrest and a prison term of two to 12 months under the penal code.

The penal code states only government-authorized imams, whom the state hires and trains, may lead prayers in mosques and penalizes anyone else who preaches in a mosque with a fine of up to 100,000 dinars (\$850) and a prison sentence of one to three years. Fines as high as 200,000 dinars (\$1,700) and prison sentences of three to

five years are stipulated for any person, including government-authorized imams, who acts “against the noble nature of the mosque” or in a manner “likely to offend public cohesion.” The law states such acts include exploiting the mosque to achieve purely material or personal objectives or with a view to harming persons or groups.

By law, the MRA provides financial support to mosques and pays the salaries of imams and other religious personnel, as well as for health care and retirement benefits. The law also provides for the payment of salaries and benefits to non-Muslim religious leaders who are citizens. The Ministry of Labor regulates the amount of an individual imam’s or mosque employee’s pay, and likewise sets the salaries of citizen non-Muslim religious leaders based on their position within their individual churches.

The Ministries of Religious Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Interior, and Commerce must approve the importation of all religious texts, except those intended for personal use.

A 2017 decree established a commission within the MRA to review importation of the Quran. Authorities generally consider “importation” to be approximately 20 or more religious texts or items. This decree requires all applications to include a full copy of the text and other detailed information. The ministry is given three to six months to review the text, with the absence of a response after that time constituting a rejection of the importation application. A separate 2017 decree covering religious texts other than the Quran states, “The content of religious books for import, regardless of format, must not undermine the religious unity of society, the national religious reference, public order, good morals, fundamental rights and liberties, or the law.” The importer must submit the text and other information, and the ministry must respond within 30 days. A nonresponse after this period is considered a rejection. Religious texts distributed without authorization may be seized and destroyed.

The law states the government must approve any modification of structures intended for non-Islamic collective worship.

Under the law, children born to a Muslim father are considered Muslim regardless of the mother’s religion.

The Ministries of National Education and Religious Affairs require, regulate, and fund the study of Islam in public schools. Religious education focuses on Islamic studies but includes information on Christianity and Judaism and is mandatory at the primary and secondary school levels. The Ministry of National Education requires private schools to adhere to curricula in line with national standards, particularly regarding the teaching of Islam, or risk being closed.

The law states discrimination based on religion is prohibited and guarantees state protection for non-Muslims and for the “toleration and respect of different religions.” It does not prescribe penalties for religious discrimination.

The constitution prohibits non-Muslims from running for the presidency. Non-Muslims may hold other public offices and work within the government.

The government does not register religious affiliations of the citizenry and does not print religious affiliations on documents such as national identification cards.

The family code prohibits Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men unless the man converts to Islam. The code does not prohibit Muslim men from marrying non-Muslim women.

By law, individuals who have converted from Islam to another religion are ineligible to receive an inheritance via succession.

The law prohibits religious associations from receiving funding from political parties or foreign entities. The constitution prohibits the establishment of political parties based on religion.

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

Government Practices

In May authorities prosecuted 26 Ahmadi Muslims in Bejaia for insulting the precepts of Islam, operating an association without approval, and collecting money without authorization. Their case went to trial in June. The

court acquitted three persons, sentenced a married couple in absentia to six months in prison, and sentenced the remaining individuals to three months in prison.

The government continued to enforce the ban on proselytizing by non-Muslim groups. According to media reports, authorities arrested, jailed, and fined several Christians on charges of proselytizing by non-Muslims, which prompted churches to restrict some activities not related to proselytizing, such as the distribution of religious literature and holding of events in the local community Muslims might attend. According to media reports, authorities charged five Christians from Bouira Province, three of whom belong to the same family, with “inciting a Muslim to change his religion” and “performing religious worship in an unauthorized place.” On December 25, a judge at the court of Bouira acquitted the five individuals.

In March a court in Tiaret convicted two Christian brothers on proselytism charges for carrying more than 50 Bibles in their car. Prosecutors said the accused planned to use the Bibles for proselytism, while the brothers said they were for church use only. The court upheld the proselytism charges and fined each man 100,000 dinars (\$850).

In May a court convicted a church leader and another Christian of proselytizing for transporting Bibles. The court fined each individual 100,000 dinars (\$850) and sentenced each to three months in prison.

In July a court in Dar El-Beyda dropped all charges against Idir Hamdad, a man arrested in April 2016 at the Algiers airport for carrying a Bible and several religious artifacts including crucifixes, scarves, and keyrings. The court originally sentenced Hamdad in absentia in September 2017 to six months in prison and fined him 20,000 dinars (\$170) on charges of importing unlicensed goods. On May 3, following his lawyer’s appeal, the court overturned the prison sentence but upheld the fine. On July 9, the prosecutor appealed, asking for a harsher sentence, but the court dropped all charges against Hamdad. In its verdict, the court found that Hamdad was prosecuted “simply because he converted to Christianity, and what he was carrying was only gifts.”

Throughout the year, the government conducted investigations of at least 85 Ahmadi Muslims, according to leaders of the Ahmadi community. Charges included operating an unregistered religious association, collecting funds without authorization, and holding prayers in unauthorized locations. There were reports of police confiscating passports and educational diplomas from the Ahmadis, and pressuring employers to put Ahmadi workers on administrative leave. Some of those investigated during the year were placed in pretrial detention, put on trial, and given prison sentences of up to six months. Others appealed charges and court decisions, were placed under house arrest, or were freed after pretrial detention or serving a prison sentence. As of December no Ahmadi Muslims were in prison.

Between November 2017 and December 2018, according to the president of the EPA, the government closed eight churches and a nursery associated with the EPA for operating without government authorization, illegally printing evangelical publications, and failing to meet building safety codes. In June authorities reopened three churches in Oran, Ain Turk, and El Ayaida they had closed between November 2017 and February 2018. As of the end of the year, three churches affiliated with the EPA in Bejaia and one non-EPA church in Tizi Ouzo remain closed. Media reported that on December 4, in Oran, the provincial government cancelled the closure of a Christian bookshop associated with the nursery. The bookshop owner, Pastor Rachid Seighir, was not compensated for the losses incurred since authorities ordered the shop’s closure in November 2017.

The UN Human Rights Committee in July adopted a report including the following language: “the Committee remains concerned by reports of closures of churches and evangelical institutions and various restrictions on worship by Ahmadi persons. It also expresses concern regarding allegations of attacks, acts of intimidation and arrests targeting persons who do not fast during Ramadan...”

A lawyer for the Ahmadi community said judges and prosecutors on several occasions questioned Ahmadi defendants in court about their religious beliefs and theological differences with Sunni Islam. Members of the Ahmadi community said government officials tried to persuade them to recant their beliefs while they were in custody.

In April Slimane Bouhafs, a Christian convert, was released after spending 18 months in prison for posting statements in 2016 on his Facebook page deemed insulting to the Prophet Muhammad. In July 2017, authorities commuted his sentence as part of a presidential amnesty. A court originally sentenced Bouhafs to five years in prison plus a 100,000 dinar (\$850) fine; authorities later reduced that sentence to three years.

In May a court in Tiaret upheld a verdict against Nouredine Belabbes and another Christian, who previously had been found guilty of proselytizing and fined 100,000 dinars (\$850) and legal expenses after their arrest in 2015 for transporting Bibles. Authorities originally sentenced Belabbes and his colleague in 2017 to two years in prison and a 50,000 dinar (\$420) fine, but after a March appeal, the judge overturned the prison sentences and instead gave them suspended prison sentences of three months each and doubled the fines. Belabbes stated that he would not appeal the judgment.

MRA officials said the government did not regularly prescreen and approve sermons before imams delivered them during Friday prayers. They also stated the government sometimes provided preapproved sermon topics for Friday prayers to address the public's concerns following major events, such as a cholera outbreak in August and a June corruption scandal, or to encourage civic participation through activities such as voting in elections. The MRA said it did not punish imams who failed to discuss the suggested sermon topics.

The government monitored the sermons delivered in mosques. According to MRA officials, if a ministry inspector suspected an imam's sermon was inappropriate, particularly if it supported violent extremism, the inspector had the authority to summon the imam to a "scientific council" composed of Islamic law scholars and other imams who assessed the sermon's correctness. The government could decide to relieve an imam of duty if he was summoned multiple times. The government also monitored activities in mosques for possible security-related offenses, such as recruitment by extremist groups, and prohibited the use of mosques as public meeting places outside of regular prayer hours.

According to the MOI, although religious associations were de facto registered if the ministry did not reject their applications within 60 days of submission, the 60-day clock did not begin until the ministry considered the application complete and had issued a receipt to that effect. Nongovernmental organizations and religious leaders said the MOI routinely failed to provide them with a receipt proving they had submitted a completed registration application. Ahmadis reported their request to meet with Minister of Religious Affairs Mohamed Aissa or another senior ministry official to discuss their registration concerns had not received a government response.

The Ahmadi community reported administrative difficulties and harassment since they are not a registered association and are unable to meet and collect donations. Members of the Ahmadi community said they tried to register with the MRA and Ministry of Interior (MOI) as a Muslim group but the government rejected their applications because it regards Ahmadis as non-Muslims. The government said it would approve the community's registration as non-Muslims, but the Ahmadis refused to file as anything but Muslims.

In accordance with the 2012 Associations Law that all organizations needed to reregister with the government, several religious groups registered under the previous law continued to try to reregister with the government. The EPA and the Seventh-day Adventist Church submitted paperwork to renew their registrations in 2014 but as of year's end had still not received a response from the MOI.

Some religious groups stated they functioned as registered 60 days after having submitted their application, even though they had not received an MOI confirmation. Such groups stated, however, that service providers, such as utilities and banks, refused to provide services without proof of registration. As a result, these groups faced the same administrative obstacles as unregistered associations and also had limited standing to pursue legal complaints and could not engage in charitable activities, which required bank accounts.

Most Christian leaders stated they had no contact with the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups, despite its legal mandate to work with them on registration, since its establishment in 2006. Other MRA officials, however, met regularly with Christian leaders to hear their views, including complaints about the registration process. Christian leaders stated some Protestant groups continued to avoid applying for recognition and instead operated discreetly because they lacked confidence in the registration process.

Some Christian citizens said they continued to use homes or businesses as "house churches" due to government delays in issuing the necessary legal authorizations. Other Christian groups, particularly in the Kabylie region, reportedly held worship services more discreetly. There were no reports of the government shutting down house churches during the year.

According to the MRA, the government continued to allow government employees to wear religious clothing including the hijab, crosses, and the *niqab*. Authorities continued to instruct some female government employees,

such as security force members, not to wear head and face coverings they said could complicate the performance of their official duties.

The government did not grant any permits for the importation of Christian religious texts during the year, and at least one request remained pending from 2017. Representatives of the EPA stated they had been waiting more than a year for a new import authorization; the last such authorization was in October 2016. Non-Islamic religious texts, music, and video media continued to be available on the informal market, and stores and vendors in the capital sold Bibles in several languages, including Arabic, French, and Tamazight. The government enforced its prohibition on dissemination of any literature portraying violence as a legitimate precept of Islam.

Christian leaders said courts were sometimes biased against non-Muslims in family law cases, such as divorce or custody proceedings.

According to religious community leaders, the government did not always enforce the family code prohibition against Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men.

In August a local Muslim man applied to a court in Tebessa to marry a Belgian Christian woman. The court rejected his request because the woman “is Christian and does not embrace Islam.”

Sources stated that Christian leaders were able to visit Christians in prison, regardless of the nature of their imprisonment.

Church groups reported the government did not respond in a timely fashion to their requests for visas for religious workers and visiting scholars and speakers, resulting in an increase in de facto visa refusals. One Christian leader said the government did not grant or refused 50 percent of visas requested for Catholic Church workers. As of the end of the year, three members of the Catholic Church had been waiting a year for visas. Catholic and Protestant groups continued to identify the delays as a significant hindrance to religious practice. One religious leader identified lack of visa issuances as a major impediment to maintaining contact with the church’s international organization. Higher-level intervention with officials responsible for visa issuance by senior MRA and Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials at the request of religious groups sometimes resulted in the issuance of long-term visas, according to those groups.

The government, along with local private contributors, continued to fund mosque construction. The government and public and private companies also funded the preservation of some churches, particularly those of historical importance. The province of Oran, for example, continued to work in partnership with local donors on an extensive renovation of Notre Dame de Santa Cruz as part of its cultural patrimony.

Government-owned radio stations continued to broadcast Christmas and Easter services in French, although many Christians said they would prefer services be broadcast in Arabic or Tamazight. The country’s efforts to stem religious extremism include dedicated state-run religious TV and radio channels and messages of moderation integrated into mainstream media.

Both private and state-run media produced reports throughout the year examining what they said were foreign ties and dangers of religious groups such as Shia Muslims, Ahmadi Muslims, and Salafists.

Government officials continued to invite leading Christian and Jewish citizens to events celebrating national occasions. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika invited Christian and Jewish community representatives to the November 1 parade to commemorate the beginning of the revolution, according them the same status as Muslim, cultural, and national figures.

Senior government officials continued to publicly condemn acts of violence committed in the name of Islam by nonstate actors and urged all members of society to reject extremist behavior.

Government officials regularly made statements about the need for tolerance of non-Islamic religious groups. In May imams, representatives from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and municipal officials participated in an interfaith event at a Catholic church in Algiers on the significance of the Virgin Mary in Islam and Christianity. The same group attended an exhibition on the 99 names of Allah at a Catholic church during Ramadan.

In December a cardinal of the Catholic Church beatified 19 Catholics killed during Algeria's civil war at a ceremony in Oran. Algerian authorities facilitated the beatification process by providing transportation, security, and visas to members of the Catholic Church who attended the ceremony.

SECTION III. STATUS OF SOCIETAL RESPECT FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

In January unknown individuals hoping to regain control of mosques they reportedly considered too liberal physically killed two imams in the cities of Skikda and Tadjena, respectively. The attacks took place during weekly committee meetings to manage the mosques' space and affairs. After the attacks, Minister of Religious Affairs Mohamed Aissa filed a complaint and started an investigation of those who attacked the imams. As of the end of the year, the government had not released updates or results of the investigation to the public.

In June Minister of Religious Affairs Mohamed Aissa said, "It is no secret that radicals are constantly trying to seize the mosques of the republic and influence the mosques' messages. These individuals managed to infiltrate groups that seemed pacifist. They are the cause of the death of two imams; they hurt and insulted dozens of others who did not share their ideologies." In July Aissa froze the weekly mosque management committee meetings because he reportedly felt extremist individuals would try to direct the mosques via these committee meetings. He said these events were reminiscent of the 1990s when the now-banned Islamic Salvation Front forcibly seized control of mosques to spread its extremist ideology.

In October unknown individuals stabbed an imam in a mosque before dawn prayer near the city of Laghouat. Mosque attendees found the imam and called emergency services, which declared the imam dead. At year's end, the government was conducting an investigation to find the individuals responsible.

Media reported a group of young people desecrated more than 31 Christian graves in the British Military La Reunion War Cemetery in Oued Ghir, Bejaia in September, smashing tombstones and ransacking the graves. A few weeks earlier, unknown individuals vandalized another Christian cemetery in Ain M'lila. Authorities stated they believed Islamic extremists were responsible for the vandalism but no news of those responsible had been released by year's end.

Christian leaders said when Christian converts died family members sometimes buried them according to Islamic rites, and their churches had no standing to intervene on their behalf. Christian groups reported some villages continued not to permit Christians to be buried alongside Muslims.

Several Christian leaders reported instances in which citizens who converted, or who expressed interest in learning more about Christianity, were assaulted by family members, or otherwise pressured to recant their conversions.

Some Christian converts reported they and others in their communities continued to keep a low profile due to concern for their personal safety and the potential for legal, familial, career, and social problems. Other converts practiced their new religion openly, according to members of the Christian community.

Media outlets reported in August hundreds of imams had lodged complaints in recent years after suffering violent attacks. MRA officials said extremists who opposed the imams' moderate teachings carried out the attacks, while others were related to interpersonal disputes. The government said it would take additional steps to protect imams such as stationing security forces near mosques to deter future attacks and providing more support for local authorities to investigate and prosecute such cases.

The media criticized religious communities it portrayed as "sects" or "deviations" from Islam or as "foreign," such as Ahmadi Muslims and Shia Muslims. Some who openly engaged in any religious practice other than Sunni Islam reported that family, neighbors, or others criticized their religious practice, harassed them to convert, and occasionally insinuated they could be in danger because of their choice.

Christian leaders continued to state they had good relations with Muslims in their communities, with only isolated incidents of vandalism or harassment.

SECTION IV. U.S. GOVERNMENT POLICY AND ENGAGEMENT

The Ambassador and other embassy officers met with government officials from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Interior, Justice, and Religious Affairs to discuss the difficulties Ahmadi and Shia Muslims, Christian, and other minority religious groups faced in registering as associations, importing religious materials, and obtaining visas.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers met throughout the year with government-affiliated and independent religious leaders and with representatives of Muslim and Christian communities to discuss interreligious dialogue and tolerance, and in the case of religious minorities, their rights, and status.

The embassy discussed the practice of religion, its intersection with politics, religious tolerance, and the religious and political roles of women with religious and political leaders, as well as with the Muslim Scholars Association and High Islamic Council. Visiting officials from the U.S. Department of State regularly raised religious freedom issues in meetings with civil society and government officials.

The Ambassador and other embassy staff hosted several dinners and receptions featuring discussions emphasizing the theme of religious tolerance. The embassy regularly posted social media content promoting religious freedom, including examples of religious pluralism in the United States. Embassy staff and embassy-sponsored U.S. speakers addressed the themes of pluralism and religious tolerance in discussions with civil society, youth, and organizations representing a cross-section of citizens.

In April the embassy facilitated the first part of a bilateral exchange program focusing on religion. The embassy hosted a delegation of nine Americans – a university program officer, one imam, six community and religious leaders, and the executive director of a think tank – for a ten-day tour focused on promoting people-to-people religious ties. The Ministry of Religious Affairs facilitated the delegation's visit to six cities – Algiers, Constantine, Oran, Biskra, Tlemcen, and Maskara – where the delegation met with a range of imams, community leaders, and ministry officials to discuss the role of religion in countering extremist narratives and religious communities in the United States. The second portion of the exchange program is scheduled to take place in 2019 and involve imams visiting the United States to learn about religion and share their experiences.