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2010 Report on International Religious Freedom - Greece

[Covers the period from July 1, 2009, to June 30, 2010]

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The constitution establishes the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ (Greek Orthodox Church) as the prevailing religion, but also provides for the right of all citizens to practice the religion of their choice.

Overall, there was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. However, non-Orthodox groups sometimes faced administrative obstacles or encountered legal restrictions. The constitution and law prohibit proselytizing and stipulate that no rite of worship may disturb public order or offend moral principles. Members of some religious groups reported police harassment of missionaries. No new house of prayer permits, which provide official permission for a religious group to establish and operate a new place of worship, have been issued since 2006.

There were multiple reports in the media of societal abuses of religious freedom and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Some non-Orthodox citizens complained of being treated with suspicion by fellow citizens or told that they were not truly Greek when they revealed their religious affiliation. Anti-Semitic incidents occurred, including an arson attack on a synagogue in Crete. The archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church took positive steps to promote interfaith dialogue with the Anglican Church and other religious denominations.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. diplomatic staff engaged religious groups to help combat religious discrimination and anti-Semitism and to encourage interfaith dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 50,945 square miles and a population of 11.3 million. The government does not keep statistics on religious groups. An estimated 95 percent of the population identifies itself as Greek Orthodox. Church leaders estimated that 30 percent of self-identified Orthodox regularly participate in religious services. The remaining 5 percent includes Muslims, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Old Calendarist Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Scientologists, Baha'is, Hare Krishna devotees, and followers of polytheistic Hellenic religions.

The majority of noncitizen residents and immigrants are not Greek Orthodox. Among migrants Muslims, Roman Catholics, and Protestants are most numerous and reside largely in Athens and Thessaloniki. An officially recognized Muslim minority of 110,000 to 120,000 members resides in Thrace and was composed primarily of ethnic Turkish, Pomak, and Roma communities. The Muslim immigrant community has a population of more than 200,000, primarily from the Middle East, South Asia, and East Africa.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The constitution establishes the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ (Greek Orthodox Church) as the prevailing religion, but also provides for the right of all citizens to practice the religion of their choice. Citizens and registered organizations can sue the government for violations of religious freedom. Some religious groups faced administrative restrictions on forming legally recognized religious organizations and establishing or operating places of worship. The constitution and law prohibit proselytizing.

The Greek Orthodox Church continued to exercise significant political and economic influence. The government recognizes the canon law of the Orthodox Church, both within the church and in areas of civil law such as marriage. Privileges and legal prerogatives granted to the Orthodox Church were not routinely extended to other religious groups. Some Orthodox Church officials instructed their members to shun members of groups that they consider sacrilegious, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, evangelical Christians, and other Protestants.

The government financially supports the Orthodox Church; for example, the government pays for the salaries and religious training of clergy and finances the maintenance of Orthodox Church buildings. In Thrace, the government also pays the salaries and some expenses of the three official Muslim religious leaders (muftis) and provides a salary and allowances to some imams. Nonrecognized Muslim leaders outside Thrace receive no government support nor do other religious groups. Some groups, such as the Jewish community and Jehovah's Witnesses, have requested equal treatment with the Orthodox Church with regard to legal status and financial support from the government.

The Orthodox Church, Jews, and Muslims (as part of the officially recognized Muslim minority in Thrace) are the only religious groups deemed to be "legal entities of public law," able to own, bequeath, and inherit property and appear in court under their own names as recognized religious organizations. Other religious organizations must be registered as "legal entities of private law" and cannot own houses of prayer (approved places of worship) or other property as religious entities. They must create other corporate legal entities (such as nonprofit associations) to own, bequeath, or inherit property, or to appear in court. To be recognized as a religious "legal entity of private law," a religious group must represent a "known religion" or dogma. Court rulings define "known religions" as having publicly taught doctrine with rites of worship open to the public, being nonprofit in nature, not affecting public order or morality adversely, and having a clear hierarchy of religious authorities.

Roman Catholic churches and related religious bodies established prior to 1946 are legally recognized as private entities, but Catholic institutions established after 1946 are not extended the same automatic recognition. Since 1999 the Catholic Church has unsuccessfully sought government recognition of its canon law. Catholic leaders claimed that successive ministers of education and religious affairs have promised legal reforms to address the issue, but that no concrete action has been taken. During the reporting period, Catholic leaders also complained that funds promised by the government to repair the Catholic Cathedral of Athens, damaged in a 1998 earthquake, were still not forthcoming. Church leaders noted that funds for repairing the Greek Orthodox cathedral had already been disbursed.

Leaders of non-Orthodox religious groups claimed that taxes on their organizations were discriminatory because the government subsidizes Orthodox Church activities and Orthodox religious instruction in public schools, and provides a preferential tax rate for income received from Orthodox Church-owned properties. Members of many religious groups stated that the government should tax and subsidize all religious entities on the same basis.

The constitution prohibits proselytizing and stipulates that no rite of worship may "disturb public order or offend moral principles." During the year officials of missionary faiths expressed concern that antiproselytizing laws remained in effect. In a September 2009 report, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance also expressed concern that proselytizing remained a criminal offense. The government responded that antiproselytizing laws had "long since fallen into disuse" and that only proselytizing that was coercive or disturbed public order was illegal.

The law punishes "whoever intentionally incites others to actions that could provoke discrimination, hatred, or violence against persons or groups of persons on the basis of their race or ethnic origin or expresses ideas insulting to persons or to groups of persons because of their race or ethnic origin." The law allows any prosecutor to order the seizure of publications that offend Christianity or any other religion. The government did not enforce these laws during the year.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Epiphany, Clean Monday, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Holy Spirit Day, the Assumption of Mary, and Christmas.

The country has mandatory military service of nine months for male citizens between the ages of 18 and 45. The law provides for alternative forms of mandatory service for religious and ideological conscientious objectors. Conscientious objectors may, in lieu of mandatory military service, work in state hospitals or municipal and public services for a period two times the length, minus one month, of the required military service (17 months). Some religious groups claimed that the increased length of mandatory service required of conscientious objectors was discriminatory.

Mandatory military service is three months for "repatriated" male citizens (those of Greek ethnic background who emigrated from the former communist bloc) and five months of alternative service for repatriated conscientious objectors. A January 2010 Supreme Court decision allowed citizen reservists who had already completed military service to receive conscientious objector status.

Orthodox religious instruction in public primary and secondary schools, at government expense, is mandatory for all students. Non-Orthodox students may exempt themselves. However, public schools offer no alternative activity or non-Orthodox religious instruction for these children. Many private schools offer alternative religious instruction to their students.

The Ministry of Education and Religion indirectly recognizes groups as "known religions" by issuing house of prayer permits to them. A separate permit is required for each physical place of worship, but a religious group with at least one valid permit is considered a known religion and is protected under freedom of religion laws. Some religious groups, such as Catholics, Pentecostals, Baha'is, Methodists, Mormons, evangelicals, and Jehovah's Witnesses, are recognized as reflecting known religions. Other groups, such as Scientologists, Hare Krishna devotees, and polytheistic Hellenic religious groups, have applied for but not received house of prayer permits. The Ministry of Education and Religion has not issued new house of prayer permits or recognized any new religious groups since 2006.

In March 2008 the government announced the additional requirement that applicants receive approval from the local urban planning department, attesting that a place of worship meets city planning regulations and "safe congregation" requirements, in order to receive house of prayer permits. However, urban planning departments were not

issued any guidance on how to make this assessment. Members of some religious groups complained that the government's policy was a bureaucratic obstacle that effectively prevented them from opening any new places of worship. During the reporting period, Baha'is reported at least one house of prayer permit pending with the government, and the Jehovah's Witnesses reported at least 12 applications pending, some dating to 2005.

Some religious groups face additional legal and administrative burdens because they cannot function as religious legal entities. Scientologists and members of ancient polytheistic Hellenic religious groups practice their faiths as registered nonprofit civil law organizations, but without house of prayer permits. Without the recognition afforded by such permits, weddings officiated by religious leaders are not legally recognized. The Baha'is and members of other religious groups have expressed a desire to operate within a legal framework as fully recognized religions enjoying equal rights with the Orthodox Church, rather than as private associations.

As interpreted, the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne gives the Muslim minority in Thrace the right to maintain social and charitable organizations called *auqaf*, allows muftis to render religious judicial services (under Islamic law, *Shari'a*) in the area of family law, and provides the right to Turkish-language education. In Thrace the government operated secular bilingual schools and two Islamic religious schools (termed "ecclesiastical high schools" by the government). The government gives special consideration to Muslim minority students from Thrace for admission to technical institutes and universities, setting aside 0.5 percent of the total number of places for them annually.

The government maintains that Muslims living outside of Thrace are not covered by the Treaty of Lausanne and, therefore, do not enjoy those rights provided by the Treaty. Some Muslims on the Dodecanese islands claimed that they deserved the recognition and rights provided under the Treaty of Lausanne.

The government recognized *Shari'a* as the law regulating family and civic issues for Muslims who reside in Thrace. First instance courts in Thrace routinely ratified the decisions of the muftis, who have judicial powers in civil and domestic matters. The National Human Rights Committee (an autonomous body that advises the government on human rights) and other human rights organizations stated that the government should limit the powers of the muftis to religious duties only and not recognize *Shari'a*, since it can restrict the civil rights of some citizens, especially women. In past reporting periods, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern regarding the impediments that Muslim women in Thrace faced under *Shari'a*. In 2006 the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Special Rapporteur for Religion or Belief reported that they were informed of cases of both early marriages and marriages by proxy.

In February 2009 two Muslim women in Thrace successfully challenged mufti decisions based on Islamic law in the courts. In Komotini a Muslim woman appealed a decision by the local mufti to give custody of two of her four children to her husband, reportedly an alcoholic suffering from psychological problems. A court overturned the mufti's decision and gave the woman custody of all four children. In Xanthi a woman filed a lawsuit against the local mufti, who had awarded her former husband custody of their child despite a signed private agreement allowing her to retain custody. A court overturned the mufti's decision and awarded custody to the woman.

The muftis in Thrace make judicial decisions based on Islamic law, the majority of which has not been translated into Greek. This severely limits the courts' ability to provide judicial oversight. Several projects to translate Islamic law from Arabic or Turkish into Greek and English have been delayed.

The law requires all civil servants to take a religious oath before entering office. Persons not belonging to the Orthodox Church may take an oath in accordance with their own beliefs. In October 2009, 34 members of parliament refused to take a religious oath during swearing-in ceremonies and were allowed to take a secular oath.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. However, the government limits the ability of some religious groups to register or obtain legal recognition as religions. The government has not issued any new house of prayer permits since 2006. Without these permits, religious groups are not recognized as religions and are unable to own and manage property and other assets or establish and operate a new place of worship. In September 2009 the deputy ombudsman for human rights stated that government delays in issuing house of prayer permits were violations of previous Supreme Court and European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) rulings.

The Jehovah's Witnesses had 12 pending house of prayer permit applications, some dating from 2005. The Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs stated in early 2010 that it would reform the existing legal framework and review all house of prayer permit applications under a new religions law. The ministry had not introduced new legislation by the end of the reporting period.

The Church of Scientology applied for a house of prayer permit in 2008, but had received no response from the Ministry of Education and Religion at the end of the reporting period. In 2000 the ministry denied the Scientologists a permit on the grounds that Scientology "is not a religion." The Church of Scientology is currently registered as a nonprofit organization.

Polytheistic Hellenic religious groups have multiple pending applications for house of prayer permits and have previously protested delays to the ombudsman. In 2006 the Ministry of Education and Religion responded to one of the groups, stating that it would "delay its formal response due to the seriousness and peculiarity of the matter." The ministry provided no further response during the reporting period.

Leaders of some religious groups wanted the government to abolish entirely the system of house of prayer permits and pass a new law on religions. They noted the current process administratively hinders freedom of religion, and that under the current legal framework, police have the authority to take unregistered religious organizations to court. During the reporting period, there were no reports of police prosecuting unregistered religious organizations in this manner.

Jehovah's Witnesses claimed that the Athens Registrar's Office (an authority under the Ministry of Interior) stopped officially recognizing and issuing marriage certificates for some religious marriages in 2008. The problem was resolved in early 2010 by a decision of the minister of education and religion.

Several religious groups reported difficulties in dealing with the authorities on a variety of administrative matters. Certain legal privileges granted to the Orthodox Church are not extended routinely to other recognized religious groups. Orthodox officials have an exclusive institutionalized link between the church hierarchy and the Ministry of Education and Religion to handle administrative matters, including personnel and salaries. Religious groups also complained that the Orthodox Church enjoys tax and fee exemptions not extended to other religious groups.

Some non-Orthodox citizens claimed that they faced limits on potential career advancement in the military, police, firefighting force, and other civil service jobs due to their religious beliefs.

Representatives of some religious groups reported bureaucratic difficulty applying for and finding information on religious worker visas, especially for short-term missionaries. These groups sometimes brought missionaries into the country on tourist visas. Other organizations successfully applied for and received religious worker visas and residency permits.

The Orthodox Church claimed that Jehovah's Witnesses cannot use the word "Christian"

on their house of prayer permits. A legal case over this issue has been pending before the Supreme Administrative Court since 2005.

In 2006 the Supreme Administrative Court dismissed on technical grounds an appeal by Jehovah's Witnesses over property taxation of their headquarters. When the area was rezoned, Orthodox Church properties were exempt from rezoning fees; the Jehovah's Witnesses claimed that, as a "recognized religion," they should also be exempt. The case was pending in court during the reporting period.

The president of the General Federation of Greek Workers, a union, was attacked on the street in 2006. The assailant was arrested and claimed that he was "forced" by Jehovah's Witnesses to perform the attack. Four members of the Jehovah's Witnesses were tried in court as "moral accomplices." In March 2010 the court acquitted the four of all charges.

Christian religious symbols, including crucifixes and icons, are displayed in public offices, school and university classrooms, and courts. In 2009 three lawyers from Thessaloniki petitioned the administrative court of Thessaloniki to remove all religious symbols from courtrooms. The petition was rejected by the administrative courts in January 2010, but the lawyers appealed to the Supreme Court. The Orthodox Church stated that it opposed the removal of religious symbols and decided to intervene legally at the Supreme Court.

In June 2010 the ECHR ruled against the country for violating religious freedom in its court procedures. The country's courts require all participants to take an Orthodox Christian oath on a Bible; individuals may opt for another oath or a nonreligious declaration but only if they reveal their religion in court. The ECHR ruled that this obligation to reveal one's religious convictions in a courtroom violated religious freedom.

Members of the Muslim minority in Thrace were underrepresented in public sector employment and in state-owned industries and corporations. Few Muslim military personnel have advanced to officer ranks. In 2008 the government passed legislation establishing a program to assign 0.5 percent of civil service jobs to Muslims. Two members of the Muslim minority from Thrace held seats in parliament. In Xanthi and Komotini, Muslims held seats on the prefectural and town councils and served as local mayors. Municipalities in Thrace hired Muslims as public liaisons in citizen service centers and provided Turkish lessons for other civil servants.

Differences remained between some members of the Muslim minority community and the government over the process of selecting muftis and imams. Under existing law the government, in consultation with a committee of Muslim leaders, appoints all three muftis in Thrace to 10-year terms of office with the possibility of extension. The current muftis in Xanthi and Komotini have been serving since 1991 and 1985, respectively; both are due to retire in 2011. The government maintained that it reserved the right to appoint muftis since they receive a state salary and perform judicial Shari'a functions as well as religious duties. Some members of the Muslim minority objected that the government was not bound by the recommendations of the selection committee.

While some members of the Muslim minority accepted the authority of the government-appointed muftis, others elected two unofficial muftis to serve their communities, stating that the government of a non-Islamic country had no right to appoint muftis. These two muftis are not recognized by the government and do not have the civil authority to perform weddings and divorces or make rulings on family legal matters such as inheritance rights. Government courts previously prosecuted the unofficial muftis for usurping the functions of the official, appointed muftis. In July 2006 the ECHR ruled that these prosecutions violated the rights of the elected mufti of Xanthi. Some members of the Muslim minority continued to lobby the government to allow the direct election of muftis.

The government continued to implement a January 2007 initiative to hire and pay state salaries to 240 imams. The government hired 183 imams in January 2009. In March 2009 the imams under the authority of the muftis of Xanthi and Didymoticho began receiving

state salaries. The mufti of Komotini refused to sign his imams' contracts, claiming that the five-member imam selection committee was dominated by non-Muslim government officials. The mufti insisted on more authority in the selection process and that two Muslim theologians be added to the committee. A total of 25 imams sued the mufti of Komotini during the year for refusing to sign their contracts and for nonpayment of wages.

During the reporting period, the government wrote off the \$8.5 million (6.5 million euro) tax debt of auqaf (religious foundations) in Thrace, in accordance with a 2007 law. However, the government continued to claim that auqaf owed interest on the tax, totaling approximately \$1.3 million (1 million euro). Members of the Muslim minority protested the government's stance and lobbied for the interest to be written off as well.

The Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association (WTMUGA), a nongovernmental organization (NGO), reported that some Muslims experienced delays in receiving permits from the Ministry of Education and Religion for renovating village mosques and minarets.

The government recognizes Islamic law as the law regulating family and civic issues of the Muslim minority in Thrace. Muslims married by a government-appointed mufti are subject to Islamic family law but may appeal to the courts for a hearing under secular law. Human rights NGOs characterized Islamic law as discriminatory against women, especially in child custody, divorce, and inheritance cases.

The Muslim communities in Athens and other major cities are demographically distinct from the officially recognized Muslim minority in Thrace and have an estimated population of 200,000, primarily migrants from the Middle East, South Asia, and East Africa. During the reporting period, Muslim leaders in Athens stated that their biggest complaints included the continued absence of an official mosque or recognized Muslim clergy.

In 2006 parliament passed legislation providing for the establishment of a mosque, in central Athens, on Ministry of Defense land occupied by naval facilities. In April 2010 the government announced that it planned to relocate the naval facilities and construct a mosque with a capacity of 500 worshippers. The mosque would be managed by a seven-member committee composed of five government officials and two representatives of the Muslim community. Muslim organizations lauded the announcement but stated that the size of the mosque was insufficient for Athens' Muslim community. Construction of the mosque had not started during the reporting period.

Due to the lack of official mosques or clerics, Muslims living in Athens or other areas outside of Thrace had to travel to Thrace or go abroad in order to have official Islamic marriages or funerals. Those who could not afford the expense of travel participated in unrecognized religious rites.

In the absence of an official mosque, Muslims throughout the country operated hundreds of unofficial mosques and prayer rooms. The Islamic Cultural Center of Moschato, Athens, opened in 2006 and continued to operate as an unofficial mosque without a house of prayer permit. Some unofficial prayer rooms were ethnic-specific, serving the needs of particular Muslim migrant communities. These unofficial mosques did not apply for house of prayer permits because members expected the applications would be rejected or held in limbo for years.

Muslims also complained about the continued lack of an Islamic cemetery in Athens, stating municipal cemetery regulations required the exhumation of bodies after three years, and that this exhumation was a violation of Islamic religious law. In 2005 the Orthodox Church announced that it would set aside three hectares in Schisto for an Islamic cemetery. In May 2009, in response to a parliamentary inquiry, several government ministries provided conflicting accounts of the cemetery's status. The Ministry of Interior stated the Athens City Planning Office was reviewing the land for suitability as a cemetery, but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the land was not

suitable, and alternative options were being reviewed. The government did not authorize the construction of a Muslim cemetery during the reporting period.

In June 2010 the local Committee of Municipalities of Thessaloniki unanimously approved the establishment of a Muslim cemetery and announced that it would begin work to identify an appropriate location.

Members of several religious organizations complained about the lack of crematory facilities in the country.

In May 2010 government ministers signed a 2006 law allowing cremation, but announced that further health and safety regulations were required before construction of a crematorium could begin. According to the law, only municipalities may operate cremation facilities.

The intra-Orthodox doctrinal dispute between Esphigmenou monastery, in the monastic territory of Mount Athos, and the Ecumenical Patriarchate continued. Esphigmenou is an Old Calendarist monastic order that ceased recognizing the authority of the patriarchate in 1972. A 2003 Supreme Court ruling ordered the eviction of the monks but it was never implemented. The monks appealed the ruling, but in 2005 the Council of State decreed that it had no jurisdiction to issue a ruling. Some Old Calendarist monks continued to occupy the monastery without legal access to the assets of the monastery. A new Esphigmenou monastic order, officially recognized by the patriarchate, criticized the continued presence of the Old Calendarist monks at Esphigmenou as illegal.

An article concerning the Falun Gong (Falun Dafa) appeared in a local newspaper alleging Greek government involvement with the cancellation of the Shen Yun performing arts show at the Athens Music Hall, which the theater managers denied. Falun Gong sources claimed that the government was reacting to pressure from the Chinese government, which has banned the Falun Gong spiritual movement. The allegations were not substantiated, and the Shen Yun performing arts show was able to hold its performance at another venue.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Religious organizations reported multiple incidents of police harassing and detaining missionaries.

In September 2009 police in Kavala detained two Mormon missionaries, accusing them of proselytizing. In June 2009 a group of approximately 10 police in Thessaloniki intimidated and detained a group of four Mormon missionaries. In both cases the missionaries were released within two hours.

During the summer of 2009, police in Kalamata accused the leader of an evangelical group of proselytizing and detained him for two hours.

In June 2008 a member of an evangelical church was detained briefly and subsequently charged with one count of proselytism for distributing Bible materials. A first instance court dismissed the charge.

In January 2008 police arrested and detained two Mormon missionaries for two days on charges of proselytizing. The missionaries were subsequently tried and acquitted of all charges.

There were no other reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In May 2010 the Municipality of Athens and the Athens Jewish community unveiled the Athens Holocaust Monument. The minister of state attended and gave a commemorative speech.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were multiple reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The Greek Orthodox Church exercised significant social, political, and economic influence. Some non-Orthodox citizens complained of being treated with suspicion or told that they were not truly Greek when they revealed their religious affiliation.

Followers of non-Orthodox faiths, particularly missionary faiths, reported incidents of societal discrimination, including warnings by Orthodox bishops and priests to their parishioners not to visit the leaders or members of these faiths.

In May 2009 Orthodox Archbishop Ieronymos II hosted Anglican leaders to discuss the importance of interfaith dialogue, societal challenges, and cooperation on charity issues.

Leaders of many non-Orthodox religious groups reported that while the Orthodox Church seldom engaged in official contact with other religious groups, cordial private contacts between Orthodox Church officials and members of minority religious groups had increased in frequency. Orthodox leaders attended ceremonies hosted by other religions, such as the Jewish community's Holocaust Memorial Day and events during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

Mormon missionaries in Athens reported multiple incidents of verbal confrontation and physical violence from Orthodox priests. In February 2009 an Orthodox priest harassed and physically accosted Mormon missionaries. In May 2009 two missionaries reported being shoved by a priest. In October 2009 an Orthodox priest destroyed a poster board being used by Mormon missionaries. Police intervened in none of these cases.

In April 2010 the office of a lawyer who had petitioned the government to remove religious symbols from courtrooms was vandalized.

In September 2009 an arson attack took place against the Toxotes mosque in Thrace, and the fire damaged interior carpets and part of the roof. Government officials condemned the attack and installed new security cameras afterward. WTMUGA reported this was the third time the mosque had been attacked since 2004, each time prior to national elections.

WTMUGA also reported that the Sunni Mosque in Xanthi was vandalized with graffiti in December 2009; in February 2010 tombstones in the Muslim cemetery of Komotini were painted with inflammatory slogans. No government condemnation of these incidents or police arrests of suspects were reported.

Some members of the Alevite (Alevi) community in Thrace, who follow a religion comprising Shi'a and Sufi elements of Islam and number approximately 3,000 adherents, claimed religious harassment from the Sunni majority in their villages. These individuals reported that Sunni community leaders had taken control of Alevite houses of worship, denying them access to perform maintenance and traditional rites. WTMUGA claimed that there were no such incidents of societal discrimination or abuse.

In May 2009 approximately 1,000 Muslim immigrants demonstrated in Athens, protesting an incident in which a police officer allegedly damaged a copy of the Qur'an while performing an identity check. The crowd scuffled with riot police, who responded with tear gas. Several days later, an unofficial prayer room in Athens was set on fire by

suspected right-wing arsonists.

Vandalism of Jewish monuments and properties continued to occur. In June 2010, days after the Israeli interception of the Gaza flotilla, a student was arrested in the act of spraying anti-Semitic graffiti on a Jewish tombstone in Komotini. The student claimed that his action was in solidarity with the flotilla and Palestinians. The Jewish cemetery in Thessaloniki was vandalized in May 2010; three suspects were arrested several hours after the incident. The Jewish cemetery of Ioannina was vandalized three times in 2009.

In January 2010 the Etz-Hayyim synagogue of Chania, Crete, suffered two arson attacks. A total of 1,800 books and religious items, and the synagogue's roof, were destroyed. The ministers of education and justice condemned the attacks, and in a positive development, local media commentators unanimously condemned the attacks and anti-Semitism in general. The police initially arrested four suspects, subsequently releasing three. The investigation was ongoing during the reporting period and a trial date had not been set. The government provided funds to the Jewish community for reconstruction of the synagogue.

Expressions of anti-Semitism continued to occur, particularly in the extremist press. The mainstream press and public sometimes mixed negative comments about Jews with criticism of the Israeli government, especially in the aftermath of the May 2010 Gaza flotilla incident, in which dozens of the country's citizens were temporarily detained by the Israeli Defense Forces.

In April 2010 the Jewish community, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, and the country's Helsinki Monitor protested that a cartoon in newspaper *Ta Nea* did not respect the memory of the Holocaust. The cartoon's author apologized to the Jewish community.

In 2007 the Helsinki Monitor and the Central Board of Jewish Communities brought charges against newspaper *Eleftheros Kosmos* and former Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) political party candidate Kostas Plevris for racism and anti-Semitism. In 2007 Plevris was convicted of inciting hatred and racial violence with his book *The Jew – The Whole Truth*. He was acquitted by an appeals court in March 2009. A public prosecutor subsequently filed a "cassation in favor of the law" with the Supreme Court against the decision, seeking to ensure it would not be used as a precedent in the future. The Supreme Court rejected the cassation in April 2010.

In January 2010 a court in Athens convicted Ioannis Charalambopoulos, editor of magazine *Apollonio Fos*, to seven months in prison, suspended for three years, for distributing anti-Semitic leaflets during the Plevris trial in 2007.

The Jewish community reported that few of the publicly owned Jewish cemeteries in the country were properly maintained, stating that grass was not cut, fences were not repaired, and plants were not watered. Members of the Muslim minority also reported that some of their cemeteries were not maintained. Maintenance is required by law.

The Jewish community continued to protest anti-Semitic passages in the Greek Orthodox Church's Holy Week liturgy. The Jewish community reported that it continued to discuss with the church removal of the passages.

During the reporting period, the Jewish community of Thessaloniki and the government continued discussions on compensation for the community's cemetery, expropriated after its destruction during the Holocaust. Aristotle University, a public institution, was built on top of the expropriated cemetery soon after World War II. In July 2009 a Ministry of Finance experts' committee, which included a member of the Jewish community, proposed a compensation solution. Official approval for the compensation plan remained pending at the Ministry of Finance.

International Jewish NGOs expressed concern that subway construction in the vicinity of the Thessaloniki Jewish cemetery could disturb human remains. The government

continued dialogue with the Thessaloniki Jewish community to address these concerns.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The ambassador and other U.S. officials discussed religious freedom with senior government officials, religious leaders, municipal leaders, members of parliament, and members of other diplomatic missions. Officers from the embassy and the consulate general in Thessaloniki met regularly with representatives of religious groups and investigated reports of societal discrimination. U.S. diplomats regularly traveled to Thrace to discuss religious freedom issues with members of the Muslim minority.

During the reporting period, the ambassador raised religious freedom issues with the minister of education and religion and senior officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Embassy officers attended Holocaust commemorative events in Athens and Thessaloniki, and the ambassador attended the inauguration of the Athens Holocaust Monument. U.S. diplomats and the State Department Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues met with ministry of finance officials to urge cooperation with the Jewish community on a compensation solution for the Thessaloniki Jewish cemetery. The U.S. government encouraged the Jewish community in its efforts to engage Aristotle University, the public institution built on the site of the cemetery, on future projects to memorialize the Jewish heritage of the site. The ambassador met with Jewish community leaders at the synagogue in Ioannina and visited the cemetery which had been vandalized in 2009.

Embassy officers met regularly with Islamic NGOs as well as faith-based charity groups assisting refugees and victims of trafficking in persons. The embassy and consulate general invited representatives from a wide variety of faiths to the annual July Fourth reception.

In September 2009 the ambassador and the consul general in Thessaloniki hosted separate iftars (an evening meal during Ramadan) for religious leaders, government officials, and members of the diplomatic community to commemorate the Islamic holy month of Ramadan and to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. embassy actively followed legal issues relating to religious workers' visas and the legal status and taxation of religious organizations.

U.S. officials promoted and supported initiatives related to religious freedom and used the International Visitor Program to introduce Muslim community leaders to the United States and their American counterparts.

The ambassador and other U.S. officials regularly visited religious sites and conducted religious freedom outreach throughout the country.
