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USDOS – US Department of State

2017 Report on International Religious Freedom - Kosovo

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion, subject to limitations to ensure public order, health, and safety or to protect the rights of others. The law does not allow religious groups to register as legal entities, creating obstacles for them in conducting their affairs. The parliament considered a draft law that would allow religious groups to register as legal entities so they would be able to conduct business and legal matters with the state and private entities. Parliament approved the law at a first reading on November 29 and expected to hold a final reading in early 2018. Religious groups said municipal authorities often did not provide them with equal rights and benefits, especially with regard to religious property and burial sites. The Pristina Municipality, citing the lack of a construction permit, continued to halt Serbian Orthodox monks from cleaning and making light repairs at the unfinished Church of Christ the Savior after vandals set fire to it in 2016. The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) said former Minister of Culture, Youth, and Sport Kujtim Shala did not fulfill a pledge to issue a permit for the reconstruction of a chapel in the Holy Archangels Monastery in Prizren. His successor, Kujtim Gashi, pledged to address the issue according to the law. Decan/Decani Mayor Rasim Selmanaj refused to implement a 2016 Constitutional Court decision awarding 24 disputed hectares (59 acres) around the Visoki Decani Monastery to the SOC; the judicial system did not hold him to account. The Kosovo Islamic Community (BIK) reported social and employment discrimination against devout Muslims, particularly in the public sector. The government worked with the BIK to combat violent extremism and condemned vandalism of religious places.

Protesters attacked participants in several events hosting Serbian Orthodox pilgrims. In one incident, protesters threw stones and red paint at a bus carrying pilgrims to the SOC church in Gjakove/Djakovica, damaging one window, and spray-painted “murderer” on the church’s outer wall. On several occasions, unidentified vandals damaged SOC religious properties, despite government protection. An ethnic Serb damaged a mosque in Partesh/Partes Municipality; the SOC condemned the incident. Religious organizations met regularly to discuss property rights, legislative priorities, and local community issues.

The Ambassador and U.S. embassy representatives met frequently with government officials to urge religious tolerance, passage of legislation to allow religious institutions to obtain legal status, and full implementation of the law protecting religious sites and

to discuss efforts to resolve religious property disputes. The embassy advocated regularly and at all government levels for full implementation of judicial decisions in favor of minority religious communities. The embassy discouraged public officials, educational institutions, and other entities from engaging in discriminatory hiring practices against pious Muslims or other religious groups. Embassy officials regularly discussed religious tolerance with leaders of all major religious communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.9 million (July 2017 estimate). Census data from 2011 identifies 95.6 percent of the population as Muslim, 2.2 percent as Roman Catholic, and 1.4 percent as Serbian Orthodox. According to the SOC, a boycott of the census by ethnic Serbs resulted in a significant undercounting of SOC members. The SOC estimates there are 120,000 Serbian Orthodox believers in Kosovo, or 6.3 percent. Other religious communities, including the Tarikats and Protestants, also contest the census data. Protestant leaders and those without a religious affiliation state some members of their communities were classified incorrectly as Muslims by census takers. According to the census regulation, census takers did not inquire if citizens are Protestant. The Protestant community estimates 20,000 followers throughout the country, or 1.1 percent of the population. Census categories for “other,” “none,” or “no response” each constitute less than 1 percent.

The majority of the Muslim population belongs to the Hanafi Sunni school, although a number follow Sufi or Shia traditions and are part of the Tarikat school or the Bektashi order. Tarikat leaders state that Bektashis are one of nine Tarikat orders, but the Bektashis self-identify as a separate Islamic order.

Most SOC members reside in the six majority ethnic Serb municipalities in the south of the country or in four northern Serb-majority municipalities. The largest Catholic communities are in Gjakove/Djakovica, Janjeve/Janjevo, Kline/Klina, Pristina, and Prizren. Evangelical Protestant populations are located throughout the country and concentrated in Pristina and Gjakove/Djakovica. There are small numbers of Jews in Prizren and Pristina.

Religion and ethnicity are often linked. The majority of ethnic Albanians are Muslim, while some are Catholic and Protestant; almost all ethnic Serbs belong to the SOC. The majority of ethnic Ashkalis, Bosniaks, Egyptians, Goranis, Roma, and Turks are also Muslim, while most ethnic Montenegrins and some Roma belong to the SOC. Almost all ethnic Croats belong to the Catholic Church.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religion for all residents, including the right to change, express, or not express religious belief; to practice or abstain from practicing religion; and to join or refuse to join a religious community. These rights are subject to limitations for reasons of public safety and order or for the protection of the health or rights of others. The constitution provides for the separation of religious communities from public institutions, including the right of religious groups to regulate independently their own organizations, activities, and ceremonies, and the right to establish religious schools and charity institutions. It guarantees equal rights for all religious communities, stipulates the country is secular and neutral with regard to religion, declares the state shall ensure the protection and preservation of the country's religious heritage, and prohibits discrimination based on religion. The constitution stipulates the law may limit freedom of expression to prevent provocation of violence and hostility on grounds of race, nationality, ethnicity, or religion. It allows courts to ban organizations or activities that encourage racial, national, ethnic, or religious hatred.

The constitution stipulates communities traditionally present in the country, including religious communities, shall have specific rights, including maintaining, developing, and preserving their religion; using their own language; establishing and managing their own private schools with financial assistance from the state; and having access to public media. Additional rights include establishing and using their own media, maintaining unhindered peaceful contacts with persons outside the country with whom they share a religious identity, and having equitable access to public employment. The constitution guarantees 20 of 120 seats in the national assembly to ethnic minority communities. It also stipulates that the adoption, amendment, or repeal of all laws pertaining to religious freedom and cultural heritage require approval by a majority of the deputies representing minority communities, as well as by a majority of all the deputies.

The constitution provides for the Ombudsperson's Institution, which is responsible for monitoring religious freedom among other human rights and recommending actions to correct violations. It stipulates the state shall take all necessary measures to protect individuals who may be subject to threats, hostility, discrimination, or violence because of their religious identity.

The law does not provide a legal mechanism or specific guidance for religious groups to obtain legal status through registration or other means. The law does not require groups to register; however, without legal status, religious groups may not own property, open bank accounts, employ staff, access the courts, or perform other administrative tasks in their own name.

The law stipulates there is no official religion, but it lists five “traditional” religious communities: the BIK, SOC, Catholic Church, Hebrew (Jewish) community, and evangelical (Protestant) Church. The law provides extra protections and benefits to these five groups, such as reduced taxes and relief from water tariffs. According to the law, religious buildings belonging to these five communities, but not their administrative offices, are eligible for waivers of water utility fees. Religious institutions must apply with the public water provider to obtain the waiver.

The law provides safeguards for religious and cultural Special Protection Zones (SPZs), based on religious and cultural significance, by restricting nearby activities that could damage the surrounding historical, cultural, or natural environment. According to the law, the Implementation and Monitoring Council (IMC) arbitrates disputes between the government and the SOC concerning SPZs and other matters related to protecting the SOC's religious and cultural heritage. The IMC is a special body that stems from the Comprehensive Plan for Kosovo and the SPZ law. It became operational in 2010. Its mandate includes safeguarding SOC heritage as included in the law on Velika Hoca/Hoce e Madhe village and the law on Prizren's historic center. The IMC includes the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning (MESP) (as cochair); the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sport (MCYS); the SOC; the Special Representative of the European Union (as cochair); and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Municipalities hold titles to all public cemeteries, including those for religious communities, and by law must maintain them.

According to the law, “public education institutions shall refrain from teaching religion or other activities that propagate a specific religion.”

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Summary paragraph: The government took steps to counter radicalization and violent extremism related to religion. In February the Special Prosecution Office (SPRK) filed an indictment at the Basic Court of Pristina against Shefqet Krasniqi, the former head imam of the Grand Mosque in Pristina, for inciting terrorism. Parliament considered a government-recommended bill that would allow religious groups to register and acquire legal status so they would be able to conduct business. Parliament approved the law at a first reading on November 29; it expected to hold a second reading in early 2018. Some school officials applied a mandatory administrative instruction prohibiting students from wearing religious garb on school property. According to some religious communities, the government continued to respond to societal violence and vandalism against several religious minority communities. Religious minorities, particularly Protestants, however, said municipalities failed to act on requests to build churches and cemeteries and to assist them with zoning issues. Several long-standing disputes over ownership of religious property remained unresolved. The police unit for the Protection of Religious and Cultural Heritage continued to provide countrywide security to religious and cultural sites; however, theft and vandalism continued at some SOC sites. The government continued to provide some funding to Islamic education in BIK madrassahs; it did not fund religious education for any other religious group. Most ethnic Serbs attending Serbian-language public schools elected to enroll in Serbian Orthodox religious classes. The Serbian government funded salaries of all teachers in Serbian-language schools, including religious instructors, and the Kosovo government supplemented the salaries of some teachers and staff in these schools. The BIK

reported incidents of employment discrimination against devout Muslims, especially in the education sector, citing the March dismissal of a public school teacher in Prizren who refused to remove her headscarf at work. Muslim community leaders reported discriminatory practices in government hiring; stating applicants for civil service jobs were sometimes rejected based on religious belief. The government continued its Interfaith Kosovo program, and officials and representatives from all of the principal religious communities attended the consecration of the Catholic St. Theresa Cathedral in Pristina.

On February 27, the SPRK filed an indictment at the Basic Court of Pristina against Shefqet Krasniqi, the former head imam of the Grand Mosque in Pristina. The SPRK charged Krasniqi with inciting terrorism and propagating national, racial, and religious intolerance. According to the statement issued by the SPRK, Krasniqi used his sermons and social media to urge individuals to travel to conflict zones in Syria and Iraq and to commit acts of terror. Krasniqi was originally arrested in 2014 and was dismissed from the Grand Mosque in 2015. Despite his dismissal from the Grand Mosque, Krasniqi continued to preach his messages on television, radio, and social media.

In December the Pristina Basic Court heard testimony in the trial of four imams, two charged with committing terrorist acts and two charged with “inciting national, racial, religious, or ethnic hatred.” Media observers expected a ruling in 2018.

Religious leaders continued to advocate adoption of a draft law that would provide a legal mechanism through which religious groups could gain legal status. This would allow them to conduct business and legal matters with the state and private entities. The Bektashi community also requested such a law state it is a community constituting part of the historical heritage and cultural and social life of the country. Although representatives of many religious groups said they had found alternative methods to conduct some of their business affairs, most reported difficulties in registering property and vehicles, opening bank accounts, and paying taxes on employee salaries. Some religious communities opened bank accounts that were not in their communities’ names, and the Kosovo Protestant Evangelical Church received a tax accounting number from the government in order to pay taxes as if it were a business. Some communities said it was difficult to undertake basic financial tasks and they were taxed as for-profit businesses.

Some school officials continued to apply a mandatory administrative instruction previously issued by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology that prohibits primary and secondary students from wearing religious garb on school property. According to the BIK and other Muslim community leaders, public schools occasionally sent home students who insisted on wearing headscarves while attending classes. Members of the BIK reported some public schools forced girls to remove headscarves in order to study in these schools. The Ombudsperson Institution did not receive any reports of a school barring students wearing religious garb, such as headscarves, from attending classes.

In December the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) paid back rent to the SOC for the ACA's long-standing use of an SOC-owned building and parking lot in Pristina. This ended a six-year stalemate in which the ACA had refused to implement a prime ministerial decision mandating payment.

Religious groups again said government authorities did not take steps to ensure municipalities treated religious organizations equally on property issues, in particular with regard to churches and cemeteries. Although the law specifies that municipalities hold title to cemeteries and are responsible for their upkeep, in practice, some municipalities allowed religious groups to take de facto possession of public cemeteries.

Protestants said most municipalities had not granted land for cemeteries nor addressed most of their requests to build churches on land the community owned. The Gllgovc/Glogovac Municipality granted land to the Protestant community for a cemetery and a church, and the community was working with the municipality to implement the decision.

Pristina's city council created the country's first dedicated cemetery for members of the Kosovo Protestant Evangelical Church (KPEC) on April 24. The vote affirmed the council's initial February 15 decision permitting the cemetery, which the MESP had sought to block on procedural grounds. The municipal assembly's agreement includes the provision of trees and fencing on six hectares (15 acres) of public land adjacent to the city's Jewish cemetery. Prior to this decision, the city's several thousand KPEC members were buried in the municipal cemetery. Although a public entity, the BIK unofficially controlled the municipal cemetery. The BIK did not allow Christian crosses on graves, charged a fee to non-Muslims for burial services, and in some cases blocked Christian funeral rites. Pristina's Catholic and Orthodox Christian communities continued to use separate public cemeteries.

Existing Jewish cemeteries were reportedly in disrepair. Members of the Jewish community said they lacked the resources to maintain their cemeteries and local authorities did not maintain these public sites as required by law. The Serbian Orthodox cemetery in Pristina was reportedly also in disrepair and not maintained by municipal authorities. The SOC cited member displacement from the area as a reason for its inability to care adequately for the cemetery. In both cases, the Municipality of Pristina denied these cemeteries were in disrepair.

Although the Municipal Assembly of Pristina agreed in November 2016 to issue a building permit to the Messiah Evangelical Church for a house of worship on land the church had purchased, the MESP had not issued a final permit by year's end. Municipal authorities had denied a permit to the church for more than a decade.

By the end of the year, the government still had not created the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities, which was supposed to decide on the reconstruction of a mosque in Mitrovica/Mitrovice North. BIK leadership continued to advocate for the reconstruction of the mosque, which Serb forces destroyed in 1999.

On July 25, the Pristina Municipal Assembly reaffirmed the validity of a 2012 permit for the construction of a “grand mosque” in the city. The decision overturned a 2015 stay on the permit following citizen complaints that the plans did not match the Dardania neighborhood’s existing aesthetic as required by local regulations. In the July meeting, the assembly described the 2015 decision as an invalid reading of local statute. The mosque would be the largest in the Balkans, according to plans.

In 2016 the Pristina Municipality approved a request by the Beit Israel nongovernmental organization (NGO) to provide assistance in constructing a synagogue. By October 20, however, the municipality had not provided the assistance, and Beit Israel criticized it for not following through on its approval.

A 2016 MCYS permit denial for the reconstruction of St. Nicholas Church in the Holy Archangels Monastery in Prizren remained in place, although MCYS Minister Kujtim Gashi pledged to address the issue according to the law. The monastery’s only church was destroyed in 1999, and the St. Nicholas Church was destroyed at the end of the 16th century. According to some IMC members, former MCYS Minister Kujtim Shala’s refusal to issue the permit for reconstruction prompted the SOC to stop participating in the IMC. Although the IMC’s charter calls for meetings every two months concerning safeguarding religious and cultural sites, the group did not formally meet during the year. Due to the lack of a permit, municipal inspectors ordered the SOC to halt construction on several occasions in 2016. The SOC stated the institute’s denial of the permit came after a legal deadline, after which the municipality should have allowed the construction to proceed automatically. Notwithstanding the application, the SOC had full discretion to manage its property based on Annex V of the Ahtisaari Plan for Kosovo, which covers religious and cultural heritage issues.

The Pristina Municipality, citing the lack of a construction permit, continued to prevent Serbian Orthodox monks from cleaning and making light repairs at the unfinished St. Saviors Church after vandals set fire to it in 2016. Pristina officials continued to question SOC ownership of the property and to claim a construction permit was necessary to undertake any work inside the church, including painting over graffiti.

Decan/Decani municipal officials continued to refuse to implement a 2016 Constitutional Court decision confirming the Supreme Court’s 2012 ruling that more than 24 hectares (59 acres) of land should be returned to the SOC’s Visoki Decani Monastery. The ruling legally ended the SOC’s dispute with a defunct state-owned enterprise from the Yugoslav era and the municipality of Decan/Decani. The Constitutional Court’s decision rejected the 2015 finding of the Supreme Court’s Appellate Panel that had sought to return jurisdiction of the case to the Basic Court in Decan/Decani. The Mayor of Decan/Decani, Rasim Selmanaj, continued throughout the

year to refer to the decision as unacceptable. The judicial system did not hold him or other municipal officials to account for failing to implement the Constitutional Court decision. The Kosovo Cadastral Agency agreed to hear an appeal of the case, which legal experts said was illegal since the Constitutional Court had already issued a ruling. Italian Kosovo Force troops continued to provide fixed security at the monastery.

On June 30, the Kosovo Privatization Agency's Board of Directors removed two properties belonging to Visoki Decani Monastery from its list of former state-owned enterprises slated for privatization. The decision was in keeping with the Constitutional Court's ruling confirming the monastery's ownership of the property.

In November the Appeals Court of Pristina upheld a lower court decision to dismiss the University of Pristina's 2012 request to annul a 1991 land donation by the Serbian government to the SOC, which would have enabled demolition of Christ the Savior Church on the university's campus. The court ruled only on procedure, not on the merits of the complaint. The university filed another lawsuit soon after the Appeals Court ruling.

An appeal by the Municipality of Pristina of the Basic Court's 2015 ruling that the Catholic Church owned property adjacent to the Mother Teresa Cathedral remained pending at year's end.

The SOC expressed concern that the MCYS did not consult with it on a draft law on cultural heritage that it said could annul the SOC's legally guaranteed autonomy and preclude it from independently deciding upon the restoration and renovation of its buildings. At year's end, the MCYS had not finished drafting the law. In August the MCYS had issued an administrative instruction that the SOC believed could compromise property rights protected in Annex V of the Ahtisaari Plan.

During the year, the MCYS completed development of the new cultural heritage strategy for 2017-27. The SOC said the strategy strengthened the statutory basis for cooperation between the government and the SOC.

The police unit for specialized protection of cultural and religious heritage sites continued to provide countrywide security to religious and cultural sites, providing 24-hour security at 24 sites around the country. Despite this protection, theft and vandalism continued at SOC sites, primarily outside the SPZ, where police did not provide special protection. The Ministry of Culture said it requested increased support from local governments on protection of religious heritage sites. According to the SOC and the Protestant community, however, local governments sometimes failed to implement laws or court verdicts protecting the rights of religious groups.

The central government continued to provide some funding to Islamic education in BIK madrassahs in Pristina, Prizren, and Gjilan/Gnjilane. Some members of other religious groups and secular representatives said they were concerned because the government did not provide funding for religious education to any other religious group.

The government worked with the BIK and civil society groups to combat violent extremism. As part of the government’s strategy, the BIK held sessions in its madrassahs and Islamic studies facilities that urged students not to fall prey to extremism.

Ethnic Serbs, Gorani, Croatians, and some Roma attended Serbian-language public schools that followed a curriculum designed by the Serbian government, based on municipal education laws and in coordination with the education ministry. Restrictions on religious education did not apply to these public schools. Most ethnic Serbs elected to enroll in Serbian Orthodox religious classes instead of civic education. The Serbian government funded the salaries of all teachers in Serbian-language schools, including religious instructors. The Kosovo government supplemented the salaries of some teachers and staff in Serbian-language schools.

The media reported pressure from the Turkish government to close schools associated with Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, but the government refused to do so. Citing a lack of evidence, the government refused an October request by the Turkish government to extradite a Gulenist follower on charges related to the attempted 2016 coup in Turkey.

The Water Regulatory Agency continued to waive water utility fees for religious buildings belonging to the five “traditional” religious communities, in accordance with the law. As in past years, the agency failed to grant a waiver to the Protestant community, with no explanation.

The BIK reported incidents of employment discrimination against devout Muslims, particularly in the education sector.

On July 29, nationalist party Vetevendosje (VV) mayoral candidate Fisnik Korenica posted on Facebook that Israel would soon be “vanished from the earth” in response to incidents in Jerusalem. After receiving domestic and international criticism, including from President Hashim Thaci, Prime Ministerial Advisor Halil Matoshi, and VV President Visar Ymeri, he deleted the post and apologized.

Despite a decision by the president announced in November 2016 to prohibit the sale and distribution of anti-Semitic books, by the end of the year the government had taken no administrative action to implement the decision.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs cancelled the 2017 International Interfaith Conference in favor of a larger event in 2018 to coincide with the 10-year anniversary of the country's independence. The most recent Interfaith Conference was in 2016.

On September 5, high-level government officials and representatives from the principal religious communities attended the consecration of St. Theresa Catholic Cathedral in Pristina. President Thaci called the cathedral a symbol of religious tolerance.

In an example of government engagement with religious groups, in January the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) donated bedding for the Serbian Orthodox Church to distribute to local families in need. The KSF promised such support, regardless of the beneficiaries' religion and ethnicity, would continue. In March the NGO Beit Israel, in partnership with the KSF and Public Enterprise Hortikultura, cleaned the graves at the Jewish cemetery in Pristina.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were instances of religious-based violence, interference with religious pilgrimages, hate speech, and vandalism. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

On January 6 (Orthodox Christmas Eve), approximately a dozen VV activists protested the visit of 50 displaced ethnic Serb pilgrims to the Serbian Orthodox church in Gjakove/Djakovica, alleging war criminals were among the group. Protesters threw stones and red paint at the visitors' bus, damaging one window, and spray-painted “murderer” on the church's outer wall. Police dispersed protesters and arrested seven for disobeying police orders and vandalism. The police later released all seven. The pilgrims took part in services and safely departed. Gjakove/Djakovica Mayor Mimoza Kusari-Lila issued a public statement calling for freedom of movement, the right to protest publicly, and for justice for victims of war crimes rather than violence. Minister of Communities and Returns Dalibor Jevtic likewise condemned the violence. VV representatives said the pilgrimage was a provocation and called for justice for the families of war victims.

In June at least 100 Muslims gathered near the site of the proposed mosque in Mitrovica/Mitrovice to celebrate Eid al-Fitr, including Mitrovica/Mitrovice South Mayor Agim Bahtiri. Some ethnic Serb representatives stated they saw the event as incitement by ethnic Albanians, while the BIK described it as nonpolitical. On August 4, approximately 20 mostly ethnic Albanian individuals gathered again at the mosque site for Friday prayers. Police denied a permit request prior to the gathering, citing the potential for clashes between ethnic Serb and ethnic Albanians. The gathering proceeded without a permit. Police monitored the gathering and reported no incidents. A similar gathering took place on August 18.

The media reported representatives of Shia communities in the country gathered on March 18 to separate the Shia Tarikats from the BIK. The latter objected to including the Tarikats as a sixth religious entity in the draft law on religious freedom, stating the BIK was the country's only Islamic community representative. The Tarikats community said it would act based on its law, statute, and tradition of peaceful and authentic interpretation of Islam.

The SOC criticized the media for contributing to a climate of intolerance. The BIK said the media generally portrayed Muslims in a negative light.

The national police reported 44 incidents targeting religious sites of incidents involving property damage, theft, and graffiti during the year. These targeted the Islamic community (21), Serbian Orthodox Church (20), and Roman Catholic Church (3) sites.

On January 18, 15-20 members of “Demokracia Studentore” (Students’ Democracy, a group affiliated with VV), displayed pictures of alleged war crimes committed by the Serbian military next to the unfinished Christ the Savior Serbian Orthodox Church in Pristina. Police prevented them from hanging the photographs on the church's wall. The protesters said the church would function as “a museum of war crimes committed by Serbian criminals.”

On February 14, a group of 20 ethnic Albanians chanted anti-Serb slogans and sprayed anti-Serb graffiti in an ethnic Serb area of Gjilan/Gnjilane, including on the Serbian Orthodox church and a Serbian-language school's outer walls. Graffiti included “Kill Serbs,” a swastika, and “UCK – Kosovo Liberation Army,” which is associated with ethnic Albanian nationalism.

On April 11, Students’ Democracy denounced “clandestine works” it alleged were conducted at Christ the Savior Church on the University of Pristina grounds. The group said a “politicized Serb group with the support of some priests” was “inciting hatred against Albanians through the religious building of the Orthodox church.” The group threatened to protest unless the responsible institutions acted to prevent access to and construction in the church. A Pristina municipality spokesperson said the municipality had banned all construction activities because of inadequate documentation.

On April 15, police arrested an ethnic Serb for attacking a mosque in Llabjan village, Novo Brdo Municipality. Ethnic Serb leaders condemned the attack.

On August 1, mosque opponents sprayed graffiti attacking President Hashim Thaci, Mayor Shpend Ahmeti, and the Grand Mufti Naim Ternava on Pristina University's compound. Slogans included “there will be no Turkish mosque in Dardania,” and “death to (Grand Mufti) Naim Ternava and Hashim the Turk.” On August 2, additional graffiti appeared on two other mosques in Pristina, both restored through Turkish funding. The BIK condemned the graffiti as hate speech and called on students to avoid violence or expressions of intolerance. Police arrested one suspect and investigated others.

Leaders of different religious groups reported generally good relations with one another and participated in numerous interfaith discussions on property rights, legislative priorities, and local community issues. The OSCE continued to coordinate some activities among religious groups, including meetings with municipal mayors, to discuss issues such as access to graveyards and permits to build religious buildings.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy representatives met frequently with government officials, including the president, prime minister, and speaker and other members of parliament to urge passage of legislation that would allow religious institutions to function without impediments and to support full implementation of the law on SPZs. Embassy officials urged increased dialogue between ethnic Albanian members of the government and civil society with SOC members. The embassy urged government officials to resolve the land dispute involving St. Nicolas Chapel in the Holy Archangels Monastery in Prizren and the government's lack of rent payments owed to the SOC for the ACA's use of the property in Pristina. The embassy advocated at all levels for the implementation of the 2016 Constitutional Court decision in favor of Visoki Decani Monastery, urging the government and the judiciary to hold local officials to account. The embassy discussed the property issues of other religious groups with government officials on numerous occasions and urged officials to settle the issues based on law.

Embassy officials regularly discussed religious tolerance with leaders of all major religious groups. The embassy hosted an interreligious iftar in Prizren, discussing the importance of countering violent extremism, resolving SOC property disputes, providing cemetery space for all communities, and raising the importance of religious freedom in the country, including the draft law on religious freedom. Embassy officials met with BIK imams to discuss efforts to promote tolerance and counter violent extremism and discussed draft laws on religious freedom and cultural heritage with religious leaders. Embassy officials met with religious leaders on multiple occasions to discuss their human rights and legal concerns. The embassy often posted messages on social media in support of religious freedom. Responding to violence by VV activists against Serbian Orthodox pilgrims in January, the Ambassador tweeted that violence had no place in protests.

A visiting State Department official met in March with leaders of KPEC, BIK, SOC, the Union of Kosovo Tarikats, and the bishop of the Kosovo Catholic Church, as well as with members of the Bektashi and Jewish communities, to discuss the challenges they faced and their concerns regarding religious freedom. The official also met with members of parliament regarding the draft religious freedom law and with the mayor of Gjakove/Djakovica and deputy mayor of Pristina on treatment of religious groups, including cemetery space and building permits for houses of worship. The official also met with Islamic studies faculty members and NGOs to discuss religious freedom in education and in the country.

On October 12, the Ambassador visited the newly consecrated St. Theresa Cathedral in Pristina. In his remarks, the Ambassador reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to protecting religious freedom in the country.

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