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2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Greece

Executive Summary

The constitution states freedom of religious conscience is inviolable and provides for freedom of worship, with some restrictions. It recognizes Greek Orthodoxy as the “prevailing religion.” On October 7, an appeals court in Athens ruled the Golden Dawn political party, commonly characterized as neo-Nazi, was a criminal organization, finding seven of its 18 party leaders guilty of directing a criminal organization. The court found Golden Dawn members responsible for a series of physical attacks and verbal harassment since 2012 against perceived outsiders, including Muslim asylum seekers and Jews. On February 29, the government issued new curricula to conform to a 2019 Council of State ruling that the school curricula failed to “develop a religious conscience in students” as required by the constitution. Changes and adaptations included the removal of topics not relevant to the Greek Orthodox faith and the introduction of new material. Legislation approved on January 20 removed the requirement that middle and high schools list each student’s religion and nationality, following 2019 rulings by the Data Protection Authority and the Council of State, the country’s highest administrative court. On June 25, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) found the government had violated the European Union Convention on Human Rights because a registry office noted on the birth certificate that the child’s name came from a civil act, not a christening, which violated the right not to disclose religious beliefs. On June 18, the ECtHR determined the government owed a Muslim widow 51,000 euros (\$62,600) for applying “sharia against her late husband’s wish.” During the year, the government authorized the construction of several places of worship, including a mosque, a Jehovah’s Witnesses’ Kingdom Hall, and an Egyptian Coptic Church temple. It also issued 14 new house of prayer or worship permits for several Christian denominations and five permits for Islamic houses of prayer. On November 2, the first government-funded mosque opened in Athens. On June 25, authorities closed an unlicensed mosque operating in Piraeus. A civil court also approved the registration of a Protestant group as a religious legal entity. In April, media reported that the Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church wrote to the Prime Minister, stating his opposition to the government’s announced plans to allow all houses of worship to open their doors for individual prayers in small numbers but not allow services due to COVID-19. The Orthodox Church, as well as other religious groups, followed all government restrictions throughout the year. On January 27, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis attended memorial events marking the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau and became the first Greek premier to visit the former concentration camp. According to Jewish leaders, the government continued to help the Jewish community of Thessaloniki in its efforts to recover its original archives, found by Soviet troops in a castle in Lower Silesia, Germany, following Germany’s defeat and subsequently transferred to Moscow.

On social and other media, individuals continued to directly and indirectly link Jews to conspiracy theories about Jewish global power. In January, the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece (KIS) issued a statement protesting a sketch showing the entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp in a political cartoon arguing against lifting protection of primary residencies from foreclosures after April 30. KIS called the cartoon unacceptable because it trivialized a symbol of horror. The newspaper called the Jewish community’s reaction “justifiable,” stating it had not intended to trivialize or deny the Holocaust. Incidents of vandalism of religious properties continued during the year, with anti-Semitic graffiti spray-painted on the historic synagogues in Trikala and in Larisa, in the central part of the country, at the Jewish cemeteries in metropolitan Athens, Rhodes, and Thessaloniki, as well as at the Holocaust monuments in Thessaloniki, Larisa, and in Drama. Police arrested a suspect for the acts of vandalism of Jewish sites in Larisa and another one for the vandalism that took place in Drama. Vandals damaged an old mosque in Trikala and, on dozens of occasions, Greek Orthodox churches in Thessaloniki, Lesvos, Crete, Samos, Xanthi, and Rodopi.

The U.S. Ambassador, visiting government officials, and other embassy and consulate general representatives met with officials of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, including the Minister and the Secretary General for Religious Affairs, and officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and governors. They continued to discuss the ability of minority religious communities to establish houses of worship and government initiatives affecting both the Muslim minority in Thrace and Muslim immigrants. In meetings with government officials and religious leaders, including the head of the Greek Orthodox Church, U.S. government officials expressed concern about anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim acts and rhetoric and attacks on Orthodox churches. On September 29, the U.S. Secretary of State, Ambassador, Consul General in Thessaloniki, and other embassy officials visited the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki. On July 9, the Ambassador discussed with leaders the implementation of the new Holocaust Memorial

Museum in Thessaloniki. On October 7, the Ambassador met with KIS president David Saltiel to discuss legislation required to build the Holocaust Memorial Museum and the stalled return of the archives from Russia of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.6 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to research polls, 81 to 90 percent of the population identifies as Greek Orthodox, 4 to 15 percent atheist, and 2 percent Muslim.

Approximately 140,000 Muslims live in Thrace, according to government sources using 2011 data; they are largely descendants of the officially recognized Muslim minority according to the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. According to a Pew Research Center study released in November 2017, an additional 520,000 Muslims – mostly asylum seekers, refugees, and other migrants from Southeastern Europe, South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa – reside throughout the country, clustered in communities by their countries of origin or in reception facilities. Government sources estimate half reside in Athens.

Members of other religious communities that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Old Calendarist Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews, members of polytheistic Hellenic religions, Scientologists, Baha’is, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Sikhs, Seventh-day Adventists, Buddhists, and members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). Independent and media sources estimate Ethiopian Orthodox number 2,500, and Assyrians less than 1,000. According to the Armenian Orthodox Archbishop, interviewed in 2018, approximately 100,000 Armenian Orthodox live in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution recognizes Greek Orthodoxy as the “prevailing religion.” It states freedom of religious conscience is inviolable and provides for freedom of worship under the protection of the law, with some restrictions. The constitution prohibits “proselytizing,” defined by law as “any direct or indirect attempt to intrude on the religious beliefs of a person of a different religious persuasion with the aim of undermining those beliefs through inducement, fraudulent means, or taking advantage of the other person’s inexperience, trust, need, low intellect, or naivete.” The constitution prohibits worship that “disturbs public order or offends moral principles.” It allows prosecutors to seize publications that “offend Christianity” or other “known religions.” The law provides penalties of up to two years in prison for individuals who maliciously attempt to prevent or who intentionally disrupt a religious gathering for worship or a religious service, and for individuals engaging in “insulting action” inside a church or place of worship. A 2019 amendment to the penal code abolishes articles criminalizing malicious blasphemy and religious insults. The constitution enumerates the goals of public education, including “the development of religious conscience among citizens.” Greek Orthodox priests and government-appointed muftis and imams in Thrace receive their salaries from the government.

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

The Greek Orthodox Church, Jewish community, and Muslim minority of Thrace have long-held status as official religious public law legal entities. The Catholic Church, Anglican Church, two evangelical Christian groups, and the Ethiopian, Coptic, Armenian Apostolic, and Assyrian Orthodox Churches acquired the status of religious legal entities under a 2014 law. The same law also allows groups seeking recognition to become “religious legal entities” under civil law.

The recognition process requires filing a request with the civil courts, providing documents proving the group has “open rituals and no secret doctrines,” supplying a list of 300 signatory members who do not adhere to other religious groups, demonstrating there is a leader who is legally in the country and is otherwise qualified, and showing their practices do not pose a threat to public order. Once a civil court recognizes a group, it sends a notification to the Secretariat General for Religions. Under the law, all religious officials of known religions and official religious legal entities, including the Greek Orthodox Church, the muftiates of Thrace, and the Jewish communities, must register in the electronic database maintained by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs.

The law also provides a second method for groups to obtain government recognition: any religious group that has obtained at least one valid permit to operate a place of prayer or worship is considered a “known religion” and thereby acquires legal protection, including a tax exemption for property used for religious purposes. The terms houses or places of prayer or worship are used interchangeably; it is at the discretion of a religious group to determine its term of preference. Membership requirements for house of prayer permits differ from the requirements for religious legal entities. Local urban planning departments in charge of monitoring and enforcing public health and safety regulations certify that facilities designated to operate as places of worship fulfill the necessary standards. Once a house of worship receives planning approvals, a religious group must submit a description of its basic principles and rituals and a biography of the religious minister or leader to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs for final approval. The application for a house of prayer or worship permit requires at least five signatory

members of the group. The leaders of a religious group applying for a house of prayer permit must be Greek citizens, EU nationals, or legal residents of the country, and must possess other professional qualifications, including relevant education and experience. A separate permit is required for each physical location.

A religious group possessing status as a religious legal entity may transfer property and administer houses of prayer or worship, private schools, charitable institutions, and other nonprofit entities. Some religious groups have opted to retain their status as civil society nonprofit associations acquired through court recognition prior to the 2014 law. Under this status, religious groups may operate houses of prayer and benefit from real estate property tax exemptions, but they may face administrative and fiscal difficulties in transferring property and in operating private schools, charitable institutions, and other nonprofit entities.

All recognized religious groups are subject to taxation on property used for nonreligious purposes. Property used solely for religious purposes is exempt from taxation, as well as from municipal fees, for groups classified as religious legal entities or “known religions.”

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

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne accords the recognized Muslim minority of Thrace the right to maintain mosques and social and charitable organizations (*awqaf*). A 1991 law authorizes the government, in consultation with a committee of Muslim leaders, to appoint three muftis in Thrace to 10-year terms of office, which may be extended. The law also allows a regional official to appoint temporary acting muftis until this committee convenes. The law mandates official muftis in Thrace must request notarized consent from all parties wishing to adjudicate a family matter based on sharia. Absent notarized consent from all parties, family matters fall under the jurisdiction of civil courts. The law also provides for the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs to assume all operating expenses for the muftiates in Thrace, under the supervision of the Ministry of Finance Directorate General for Fiscal Monitoring.

The law establishes an individual’s right to choose his or her burial or cremation location and mandates that death certificates detail this information. In the presence of a notary, individuals may designate the location and method of funeral service under conditions that adhere to public order, hygiene, or moral ethics, as well as designate a person responsible for carrying out funeral preferences.

The law allows halal and kosher slaughtering of animals in slaughterhouses but not in private residences or public areas.

Home schooling of children is not permitted. The law requires all children to attend 11 years of compulsory education in state or private schools, including two years of preschool education, in accordance with the official school curriculum. Religious instruction, mainly Greek Orthodox teachings, is included in the curricula for primary and secondary schools. Primary schools cover grades one to six, while secondary school includes three years of middle school and three years of high school. Students may be exempted from religious instruction with a parent’s or guardian’s submission of a document citing religious consciousness grounds, according to new regulations issued by decree during the year. Exempted students may attend classes with different subject matters during that time. Under legislation passed during the year, secondary schools no longer list their students’ religion and nationality on transcripts.

The law provides for optional Islamic religious instruction in public schools in Thrace for the recognized Muslim minority and optional Catholic religious instruction in public schools on the islands of Tinos and Syros. The law also includes provisions to make it easier for schools to hire and retain religious instructors for those optional courses.

By law, any educational facility with fewer than nine students must temporarily suspend operations, with students referred to neighboring schools.

The law allows Muslim students in primary and secondary schools throughout the country to be absent for two days each for Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.

According to the law, parents may send their children to private religious schools. Private Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish schools operate in the country. As per the Lausanne Treaty, the government operates bilingual secular schools in Thrace. Bilingual schools operate in Greek and Turkish, and their number may vary according to the number of registered students, with a minimum of nine per school. There are two Islamic religious schools in Thrace for grades 7-12. In addition, Muslim students in Thrace wishing to study the Quran may attend after-hours religious classes in mosques.

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

The law provides for alternative forms of mandatory service for religious conscientious objectors in lieu of the nine-month mandatory minimum military service for men. Conscientious objectors must serve 15 months of alternative service in state hospitals or municipal and public services. Amendments in 2019 to a law on conscientious objection provide for greater civilian leadership in assessing conscientious objection petitions; abolishes the Defense

Minister’s ability to suspend the provisions for conscientious objectors during wartime; requires the state to cover expenses for transportation of conscientious objectors; provides an additional five-day parental leave per child for conscientious objectors who are fathers; protects the return of conscientious objectors to their previous employment after civilian service; reduces by two years (from 35 to 33 years) the age after which a conscientious objector may buy off the greatest part of civilian service; and reduces from 40 to 20 days the required time before conscientious objectors are eligible to buy off the remaining time of the service.

According to what is commonly referred to as the “anti-racist” law, individuals or legal entities convicted of incitement to violence, discrimination, or hatred based on religion, among other factors, may be sentenced to prison terms of between three months and three years and fined 5,000 to 20,000 euros (\$6,100-\$24,500). Violators convicted of other crimes motivated by religion may be sentenced to an additional six months to three years, with fines doubled. The law criminalizes approval, trivialization, or malicious denial of the Holocaust and “crimes of Nazism” if that behavior leads to incitement of violence or hatred or has a threatening or abusive nature toward groups of individuals.

The law requires all civil servants, including cabinet and parliament members, to take an oath before entering office; individuals are free to take a religious or secular oath in accordance with their beliefs.

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

Government Practices

The criminal trial of 69 Golden Dawn members and supporters, including 18 former members of parliament, ended on September 4. On October 7, an appeals court in Athens ruled that Golden Dawn, commonly characterized as neo-Nazi, is a criminal organization and found seven of its 18 party leaders guilty of directing and participating in a criminal organization. On October 14, the court sentenced the seven to 13.5 years each in prison. An additional six defendants, whom the court found guilty of membership in a criminal organization, received prison sentences from five to seven years; the tribunal in total handed down more than 500 years of incarceration to 57 defendants convicted of murder, assault, weapons possession, and either running or participating in a criminal organization. The court found that Golden Dawn members committed a series of physical attacks on and verbal harassment of individuals they perceived to be outsiders, including Muslims and Jews, continuing when the party entered parliament in 2012. According to media, prominent Golden Dawn member Christos Pappas refused to surrender to authorities and remained at large at year’s end. Another party leader, Yannis Lagos, remained out of prison at year’s end because as a member of the European Parliament he was immune from prosecution. At year’s end, Greece’s parliament continued to examine this immunity rule.

On November 2, the first government-funded mosque opened in Athens. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and throughout the spring and autumn lockdowns, government regulations allowed up to nine persons to take part in the early morning prayer. An official opening of the mosque with government participation was postponed, pending the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions.

On February 29, the government’s Institute for Educational Policy issued new curricula for religious education in primary and secondary schools to comply with a 2019 ruling by the Council of State, which ruled the curricula did not “develop a religious conscience in students” in accordance with constitutional requirements. According to the ruling, the class offered to Greek Orthodox students was more of a sociology of religion class, not fulfilling the constitutional requirement for developing a religious conscience in students. Non-Orthodox students could request and be granted a waiver from taking the class.

On August 8, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs issued new regulations clarifying that students could be exempted from religious instruction by citing “religious consciousness” grounds instead of being forced to state “they were not Christian Orthodox believers.” On January 20, the parliament passed legislation stating that secondary-level students’ transcripts should not list their religion or nationality to comply with a 2019 ruling by the Data Protection Authority.

In accordance with the Lausanne Treaty of 1923, the government continued to operate bilingual secular schools in Thrace, a total of 115 primary schools in 2019-20, compared with 128 in 2018-19, as well as two secondary schools, although government operation of bilingual secondary schools – grades 7 to 12 – is not required under the treaty. Turkish-speaking representatives of the Muslim minority said the number of bilingual middle schools – grades 7 to 9 – was insufficient to meet their needs, while stating the government ignored their request to privately establish an additional minority secondary school. The same representatives noted a decreasing trend in the number of primary minority schools – grades 1 to 6 – which the government attributed to the decreasing number of students, particularly in rural areas.

The Christian Charismatic Church applied to a civil court for recognition as a religious legal entity; the Church’s application was approved and it was subsequently registered. Applications from an Old Calendarist group and the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo in Athens, submitted in 2019, remained pending at year’s end.

Groups lacking religious-entity status and without a house of prayer permit, including Scientologists and ISKCON, which had not applied for a house of worship permit, continued to function as registered, nonprofit civil law organizations. The government did not legally recognize weddings conducted by members of these groups, who had the option of civil wedding.

During the year, the government approved 14 permits for houses of prayer, including for two Protestant churches (Baptist and Apostolic Christian), six private mosques in Athens, and six Jehovah’s Witnesses Kingdom Halls – two of them in Karditsa, one in Larisa, one in Imathia, one in Naousa, and one in Lamia. On July 20, the government authorized the construction of a mosque, with a capacity of 214 individuals, in Thrace, in the district of Zoumbouli in Xanthi. During the year, the government approved the construction of a new Jehovah’s Witnesses Kingdom Hall in Mesolongi, in the central part of the country; a building for the Baptist Church of Athens; and a building for the Egyptian Coptic Church. On February 6, the government reissued a permit for a Kingdom Hall in Thessaloniki, which authorities revoked in 2019 on the grounds the facility did not meet fire protection requirements.

On June 25, law enforcement authorities closed an unlicensed private mosque operating in Piraeus. Officials said the association managing the facility never requested a license, unlike approximately 10 other private, licensed Muslim houses of prayer in wider Athens and in the region of Viotia.

On April 3, authorities revoked a house of prayer permit granted to a Protestant group at the latter’s request. The group cited the lower number of followers as the reason for its decision.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to report some doctors in public hospitals did not understand or respect their refusal to receive blood transfusions. They said in one case, medical doctors defied the objection of a pregnant woman and gave her a blood transfusion against her will. In another case, a local public hospital refused to accept a patient for a surgical operation when he stated he could not receive a blood transfusion. He was transferred to a central hospital in Thessaloniki where he successfully underwent the surgery without a transfusion.

Some members of the Muslim minority in Thrace continued to object to the government’s practice of appointing muftis, pressing instead for direct election of muftis by the Muslim minority. The government continued to state that government appointment was appropriate because the constitution does not permit the election of judges, and the muftis retained judicial powers on family and inheritance matters as long as all parties sign a notarized consent stating they wish to follow sharia instead of the civil courts. During the year, all three muftiates in Thrace continued to be led by government-appointed acting muftis.

On February 26, an appeals court upheld a 2017 ruling sentencing Mufti Ahmet Mete, an unofficial mufti not recognized by the government, to four months in prison for usurping government authority by attending a religious ceremony and ordering the official mufti to leave so he could lead it. The court reduced the sentence, already suspended, from seven months to four months, ruling Mete would only serve the sentence if he committed a crime during the period of suspension. The same court acquitted a follower of the unofficial mufti, an imam convicted and sentenced to seven months in prison in the same case of the unofficial mufti.

Some members of the Muslim minority in Thrace continued to object to the government appointment of members entrusted to oversee endowments, real estate, and charitable funds of the Islamic Community Trust or awqaaf, stating the Muslim minority in Thrace should elect these members.

As a result of government-ordered closures related to the COVID-19 pandemic and in the absence of an official mosque in Athens for the most part of the year, central and local government authorities did not provide space for Muslims during Ramadan. COVID-19 restrictions applied to public gatherings, including religious ones, during the spring and winter lockdowns, which were in effect through the end of the year.

In April, media reported that the Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church wrote to the Prime Minister, stating his opposition to the government’s announced plans to allow all houses of worship to open their doors for individual prayers in small numbers but not allow services due to COVID-19. The Orthodox Church, as well as other religious groups, followed all government restrictions throughout the year.

Muslim leaders continued to criticize the lack of Islamic cemeteries outside Thrace, stating this obliged Muslims to transport their dead to Thrace for Islamic burials. They also continued to state that municipal cemetery regulations requiring exhumation of bodies after three years due to a shortage of space contravened Islamic law. At least three sites – on Lesbos Island, in Schisto, and near the land border with Turkey in Evros – served unofficially as burial grounds for Muslim migrants and asylum seekers.

The government continued to fund Holocaust education training for teachers but temporarily suspended government-funded educational trips, including to the Auschwitz concentration camp, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On October 26-27 and November 2-3, a group of 35 schoolteachers from Greece and North Macedonia digitally participated in the fourth of a series of seminars on “the Holocaust as a starting point: comparing and sharing.” The seminar involved lectures on the Holocaust in Europe, the deportation of Jews in the Bulgarian-occupied territories, the Nazi vision of the world, and the aftermath of the Holocaust, as well as workshops on education and methodology. Coorganizers of the seminar included the Memorial de la Shoah, the General Secretariat for Religious Affairs of the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, and the Holocaust Memorial Center for the Jews of North Macedonia.

On January 27, Prime Minister Mitsotakis attended memorial events marking the 75th anniversary since the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. He became the first Greek premier to visit the site, stating he did so to honor the memory of all Greek Jews who perished there.

On January 9, during a visit by the Prime Minister to Washington, the Ministry of Defense and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) signed an agreement allowing researchers to examine records of Nazi atrocities in Greece between 1940 and 1945. The Ministry of Culture also cooperated with the USHMM on a joint effort to retrieve personal items belonging to Jewish refugees from the 1946 *Athina* shipwreck off Astypalea Island for inclusion in the USHMM’s permanent exhibition.

On June 22, the main opposition party SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) produced a television advertisement entitled “How much does Moses cost?” The advertisement criticized government funding to mass media outlets during the pandemic, calling it “manna from heaven,” inspired by the biblical story of Moses. KIS issued a statement asking, “How was it possible for a party determined to fight against anti-Semitism to reproduce anti-Semitic stereotypes, linking Moses with money falling down from the sky?” KIS also expressed disappointment that, despite many other protests, including by the Journalists’ Union of Athens Daily Newspapers, SYRIZA did not withdraw its televised message. KIS said SYRIZA’s “only reaction was to characterize the spot as ‘satiric.’”

According to Jewish leaders, the government continued to help the Jewish community of Thessaloniki in its efforts to recover its original archives, found by Soviet troops in a castle in Lower Silesia, Germany, following Germany’s defeat, and subsequently transferred to Moscow.

The government continued to provide direct support to the Greek Orthodox Church, including funding the salaries of clergy, estimated at 200 million euros (\$245.4 million) annually, the religious and vocational training of clergy, and religious instruction in schools. The government provided the support in accordance with a series of legal agreements with past governments and as compensation for religious property expropriated by the state, according to Greek Orthodox and government officials. The government also provided direct support to the three muftiates in Thrace, including salaries for the three official muftis and for teachers contracted to teach the optional class on Islam in local public schools. The government paid the salaries of the imam of the new Athens public mosque and the salaries of Catholic teachers at the state schools of Tinos and Syros islands.

On June 25, the ECtHR found that the government violated the EU Convention on Human Rights because a registry office noted on a birth certificate that the child’s name came from a civil act, not a christening, which violated the right not to disclose religious beliefs.

On June 18, the ECtHR determined the amount of compensation the government owed to a Muslim widow to whom the courts had applied sharia against her late husband’s wish. The court ordered 51,000 euros (\$62,600) in damages for the applicant. The ruling stemmed from a case filed in 2017 regarding a widow’s right to inherit her husband’s estate. According to media, prior to his death in 2008, her husband drew up a will with a notary, in accordance with civil law, leaving his estate to his wife. The husband left his sisters out of the will, which they contested, stating that because their late brother was Muslim, his inheritance should be adjudicated in an Islamic court and that under Islamic law, they would have received three-fourths of the estate. A lower court agreed with the widow, but on appeal, the Supreme Court ruled the will was invalid based on 100-year-old treaties between Greece and Turkey. Her lawyer said the woman’s husband had decided how he wanted his inheritance to be passed on, and his client was discriminated against on religious grounds. Although the ECtHR ruled in favor of the widow in 2018, it left the decision on compensation until later.

On January 20, Prime Minister Mitsotakis met with the Metropolitan of Orthodox Armenians of Greece, Kegham Khatcherian. According to Orthodox Armenian community representatives in Greece, Mitsotakis was the first Prime Minister to officially receive a prelate of the Armenian community in 125 years.

Some religious groups and human rights organizations continued to call the discrepancy between the length of mandatory alternative service for conscientious objectors (15 months) and the length of mandatory minimum military service (nine months) a discriminatory policy.

Government officials publicly denounced the vandalism of Jewish sites, including of the Holocaust memorials in Thessaloniki, Larisa, and Drama, the synagogues in Trikala and Larisa, and the Jewish cemetery in the greater Athens area. On December 4, the Foreign Ministry denounced the desecration of the Holocaust Memorial in Larisa, calling it an “abhorrent act” that is “counter to Greek culture and the values of the Greek society.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Statistics by the Racist Violence Recording Network (RVRN) for 2019, the most recent year available, showed 51 cases in which immigrants or refugees were targeted for their religion, among other grounds, compared with 74 cases in 2018. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as solely or primarily based on religious identity. During the year, RVRN, a network of nongovernmental organizations, recorded two incidents in which the targets were sacred or symbolic for the Jewish community, compared with nine in 2019. Both involved the desecration of Holocaust memorials, one in the city of Thessaloniki and the other in the city of Trikala. A third incident involved the desecration of an Islamic cemetery in Alexandroupoli, in the northeastern part of the country. Police arrested two suspects separately for the vandalism in Larissa and in Drama.

In its 2019 report, RVRN included information communicated to the network by police regarding incidents reported to law enforcement authorities that potentially involved religious motives. Based on this information, police received 36 reports of violence based on religion, compared with 28 in 2018, but did not provide details on specific cases.

According to a European Union Agency for Human Rights report released in September, there were 10 reported cases of anti-Semitism in 2019, the same number as in 2018. According to agency, cases included anti-Semitic hate speech, vandalism of Jewish sites, and trivialization of the Holocaust, with the government starting prosecution of nine of the 10 cases.

On social and other media, individuals continued to directly and indirectly link Jews to conspiracy theories about Jewish global power. On April 11, during an interview with a Russian journalist, Gavriel, a nonrecognized monk residing on Mount Athos, said Jews and Masons would try to control the world’s population through a vaccine against the COVID-19 virus and a microchip implanted into humans. On May 11, the Racist Crimes Watch filed a complaint with the police’s antiracism department regarding these statements, citing anti-Semitism and spreading of “fake news.” No arrests were made by year’s end.

On November 10, the daily newspaper *Makeleio*, whose publisher, Stefanos Chios, was convicted in October of anti-Semitic defamation, warned its readers that Pfizer’s Greek Jewish CEO, Albert Bourla, would “stick the needle” into them and stated the pharmaceutical company’s prospective COVID-19 vaccine was “poison.” The front-page article included a photograph of Bourla, a veterinarian, next to Nazi war criminal and physician Josef Mengele. KIS leadership condemned the newspaper, expressing “outrage and repulsion” over the article for perpetuating “hatred and bigotry against the Jews,” and called on authorities to intervene. The Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs condemned the newspaper, characterizing the article as the “most vile anti-Semitism reminiscent of the Middle Ages.” In November, Racist Crimes Watch filed a complaint with police against the newspaper.

On January 29, KIS reiterated concern about political cartoons and images using Jewish sacred symbols and Holocaust comparisons. KIS issued a statement protesting a January 27 sketch in the *Newspaper of the Editors* showing the entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp in a political cartoon that argued against lifting protection of primary residencies from foreclosures after April 30. KIS called the cartoon unacceptable because it trivialized a symbol of horror. The newspaper called the Jewish Community’s reaction “justifiable,” stating it had not intended to trivialize or deny the Holocaust.

The Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs reported a reduction in the number of violent incidents against religious sites in 2019, the most recent year for which data was available, compared with those of the previous year. In 2019 there were 524 incidents, compared with 590 in 2018. The majority of incidents targeted Christian sites (514); five were against Jewish and five against Islamic sites.

On October 16, unidentified individuals spray-painted the Holocaust monument in Thessaloniki with the phrase “with Jews you lose,” an act which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs quickly denounced. The Hellenic Solution Party also issued a condemnatory statement. According to an October 19 statement by KIS, the vandalism was preceded days earlier by the destruction of four tombs in the Jewish cemetery of Rhodes and a spray-painted slogan on the wall of the Jewish cemetery in Thessaloniki, reading “Death to Israel.”

Media reported that on October 5, unidentified persons spray-painted anti-Semitic slogans, including “Juden Raus” (“Jews out”), on the exterior walls of the Athens Jewish cemetery in Nikaia. KIS denounced the incident and said the municipality of Athens acted promptly to erase the slogans and clean the walls. Government spokesperson Stelios Petsas issued a statement denouncing the act, noting law enforcement authorities would do everything possible to identify and arrest those accountable. Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias and Minister of Education and Religious Affairs Niki Kerameus made similar remarks. By year’s end, the government had not arrested any suspects.

On August 13, a memorial to fallen Greek Air Force personnel in Athens was defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti reading “Satanic Jews Out!” interspersed with Christian symbols. Yaakov Hagoel, vice chairman of the World Zionist Organization, said, “Unfortunately, the bigotry and incitement against the Jewish people has also reached the memorial sites of the Greek Air Force, falsely pointing the finger and blaming the Jews.”

On December 3, unidentified individuals defaced the synagogue and the Holocaust memorial in Larisa with the sign of cross spray-painted in graffiti with the words “Jesus Christ Wins.” The act was denounced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Secretary General for Religious Affairs, and the local Metropolitan. On December 5, police identified and arrested a suspect on charges of property damage and breaking the anti-racist law.

On December 30, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the desecration of a Holocaust memorial and a memorial plaque at a tobacco warehouse in the northern city of Drama, stating they were “heinous acts that are an affront to the memory of the victims of Nazi brutality and to Greek culture.” The Jewish Community of Thessaloniki also condemned the incident, stating it “brutally insulted the memory of the 1,200 [Greek] Jews who were exterminated in the Treblinka camp, as well as the very few survivors who returned to their homeland after the end of World War II.” The city of Drama promptly repaired the damage.

On July 13, media reported that unknown perpetrators threw stones at the entrance of a 16th-century mosque no longer used for worship, in Trikala, shattering the windows of the entrance door.

On dozens of occasions, unidentified vandals defaced Christian Orthodox churches and chapels around the country, including in Thessaloniki, Lesvos, Crete, Samos, Xanthi, and Rodopi. In all cases, the perpetrators avoided arrest. On February 3, in Crete, unknown individuals damaged the icons of a small chapel, spreading and rubbing human waste and writing slogans on the walls such as “Eat [expletive], Zeus’s treat.”

Social media users criticized the government for not banning the Islamic call to prayer while other COVID-19 restrictions were in place. Government officials and media reports attributed this reaction to the ignorance of social media users about Islam and their misinterpretation of the call to prayer with the actual prayer, leading them to state that the government allowed mosques to operate at the expense of other houses of prayer.

In February, the Pew Research Center published findings on attitudes toward democratic principles, such as regular elections, free speech, and free civil society, as well as religious freedom, in 34 countries, based on interviews it conducted in its *Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey*. According to the findings, 83 percent of Greek respondents considered religious freedom to be “very important,” ranking it among the highest of their priorities for democratic principles among the nine tested.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador, visiting officials, and embassy and consulate general representatives discussed religious freedom issues with officials and representatives of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs and officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including Deputy Minister Konstantinos Vlassis and Civil Governor for Mount Athos Athanasios Martinos. They discussed the ability of minority religious communities to exercise their rights to religious freedom, government initiatives affecting both the Muslim minority in Thrace and Muslim immigrants, progress regarding the opening of the first public mosque in Athens, the enforcement of counter-proselytism legislation by law enforcement, and government initiatives promoting interreligious dialogue.

In meetings with government officials and religious leaders, including the head of the Greek Orthodox Church, U.S. officials expressed concerns regarding anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim acts and rhetoric and attacks on Orthodox churches. U.S. officials also denounced vandalism of religious sites, including the desecration of the Jewish cemetery in the greater Athens area.

The Ambassador worked with the Prime Minister’s Office and, respectively, with the Ministers of Defense and Culture for two projects with the USHMM; the first involved an agreement allowing USHMM-affiliated researchers to examine records of Nazi atrocities in Greece between 1940 and 1945, and the second involved the retrieval of personal items belonging to Jewish refugees from the 1946 *Athina* shipwreck off Astypalea Island for inclusion in the museum’s permanent exhibition.

On September 29, the Secretary of State visited the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki, accompanied by the Ambassador and Consul General. During his visit, the Secretary tweeted, “In recognition of Yom Kippur, I am honored to pay my respects at the Thessaloniki Jewish Museum, which commemorates the city’s once-vibrant Jewish community. The U.S. remains committed to fighting anti-Semitism and promoting religious tolerance and freedom.” On July 9, the Ambassador discussed developments needed to start construction of the Holocaust Museum in Thessaloniki with David Saltiel, KIS president, and Yiannis Boutaris, president of the board of directors of the planned Holocaust Memorial Museum & Educational Center of Greece on Human Rights. On October 7, the Ambassador and the president of KIS met to discuss progress regarding required legislation for the construction of the Holocaust Museum in Thessaloniki, delayed due to technical reasons, and the stalled return from Russia of the archives of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki.

Embassy officials, including the Ambassador and the Consul General in Thessaloniki, also visited the Jewish Museum of Greece in Athens and met with religious leaders, including the Archbishop and other representatives of the Greek Orthodox Church, as well as members of the Catholic, Muslim, Baha’i, and Jehovah’s Witnesses communities to promote interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance, and diversity. Through these meetings, the embassy monitored the ability of minority religious groups to freely practice their religion and the extent of societal discrimination against both indigenous religious minorities and newly arrived minority religious group migrants.

On July 27-28, the Consul General in Thessaloniki visited four monasteries on the monastic peninsula of Mount Athos and expressed U.S. government support for religious freedom. The Consul General met with the Metropolitans of Larisa and Tyrnavos, Xanthi, and Alexandroupoli, with the Mufti of Xanthi, as well as with academics and theologians, to discuss the status of religious freedom in the northern part of the country and concerns of religious communities. On October 19-21, a senior embassy official and the Consul General in Thessaloniki met with various metropolitans in a trip through Thrace, as well as with official muftis and representatives from the local Muslim minority, reinforcing U.S. government support for religious freedom.

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