

2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Argentina

Executive Summary

The constitution and laws provide for freedom of religion and the right to profess freely one's faith. The constitution grants the Roman Catholic Church preferential legal status, but there is no official state religion.

Representatives of many religious groups, including Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities, reported the government generally supported and respected religious freedom. Several religious groups, however, continued to express frustration that the government required them to register as both civil associations and religious groups to be eligible for benefits that the Catholic Church received without registration. In March, the Argentinian Council for Religious Freedom (CALIR) expressed concern that some local governments requested an additional registration for religious groups at the municipal level. In July, the National Institute against Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Racism (INADI), together with representatives of different religious entities and organizations, created a 2022-23 Working Group for the Prevention of Discrimination based on Religion. On the 28th anniversary of the bombing of the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA) community center, President Alberto Fernandez reaffirmed the government's commitment to achieve justice for the attack and fight antisemitism. In February, Salta provincial police dispersed a group of Muslim women who tried to celebrate World Hijab Day, even though they had municipal permission for the event.

During the year, media, government authorities, and civil society organizations reported individuals in the country experienced incidents of discrimination based on religion in the forms of violence, hate speech, and misinformation. The Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations (DAIA) cited 490 incidents of antisemitism in its annual report for 2021, released in September, or 3 percent less than in 2020. DAIA's report also noted an increase in the number of cases reaching the justice system. There were also threats and antisemitic comments in social media. According to media reports and the Islam for Peace Institute, during the year, members of the Muslim community experienced incidents of religious discrimination. Interreligious groups such as the Interreligious Committee for Peace in Argentina, whose members include Catholic, Protestant, evangelical Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Baha'i, as well as Indigenous religious groups and CALIR, continued work to promote tolerance and increase opportunities for interreligious action on common societal challenges.

U.S. embassy officials met with senior government officials, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship's (MFA) Secretariat of Worship and human rights office, to discuss ways to promote respect for religious minorities and counteract religious discrimination. The Ambassador promoted the importance of religious tolerance with a diverse, high-profile group of religious and nonreligious leaders when he hosted the embassy's first iftar in April. On July 18, the Ambassador, the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, and other embassy officials attended the annual commemoration to mourn the victims of the 1994 terrorist attack on the AMIA. The Ambassador also held multiple meetings with AMIA, DAIA, and other religious groups throughout the year. Embassy officials supported interfaith cooperation and universal respect for freedom of religion through public statements and social media postings as well as in meetings with religious groups.

Section I.

Religious Demography ✓

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 46.2 million (midyear 2022). According to a 2019 survey by the National Scientific and Technological Research Council, the country's national research institute, 62.9 percent of the population are Catholic; 15.3 Protestant, including evangelical Christian groups; 18.9 percent affiliates with no religion, which includes agnostics; 1.4 percent members of Jehovah's Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ); 1.2 percent other, including Muslims and Jews; and 0.3 percent unknown. Other sources state Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, members of Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutherans, Methodists, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ together total 3 percent of the population. According to the Jewish Virtual Library, the country's Jewish population was 175,000 in 2021. The Islamic Center estimates the Muslim population at 800,000 to 1,000,000. Evangelical Christian communities, particularly Pentecostals, are growing, but no reliable statistics are available. There are also small numbers of Eastern Orthodox adherents, Baha'is, Buddhists, followers of traditional African religions, and adherents of Indigenous religions in the country.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom ✓

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the right to profess, teach, and practice freely one's faith. It declares the support of the federal government for "the Roman Catholic Apostolic faith," but the Supreme Court has ruled that it is not an official or state religion.

The government provides the Catholic Church with tax-exempt subsidies, institutional privileges such as school subsidies, significant autonomy for parochial schools, and licensing preferences for radio frequencies. The law does not require the Catholic Church to register with the Secretariat of Worship. Registration is not compulsory for other religious groups, but registered groups receive the same status and fiscal benefits as the Catholic Church, including tax-exempt status, visas for religious officials, and the ability to hold public activities. To register, religious groups must have a place of worship, an organizational charter, and an ordained clergy, among other requirements. To access many of these benefits, religious groups must also register as a civil association through the Public Registry of Commerce.

Registration is not required for private religious services, such as those held in homes, but it is sometimes necessary to conduct activities in public spaces pursuant to local regulations. City authorities may require groups to obtain permits to use public parks for events, and they may require religious groups to be registered with the Secretariat of Worship to receive a permit. Once registered, an organization must report to the secretariat any significant changes or decisions made regarding its leadership, governing structure, size of membership, and the address of its headquarters.

The mandatory curriculum in public schools is secular by law. Students may request elective courses of instruction in the religion of their choice in public schools, which may be conducted in the school or at a religious institution. Many Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious groups operate private schools, which receive financial support contingent on registration with the government.

Foreign officials of registered religious groups may apply for a specific visa category to enter the country. The validity period of the visa varies depending on the purpose of the travel. Foreign missionaries of registered religious groups must apply to the Secretariat of Worship, which verifies

the religious group is registered, authorized and active. The secretariat in turn requests immigration authorities to issue appropriate documents.

The law prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, nationality, ideology, politics, sex, economic or social condition, or physical characteristics, and it requires those found guilty of discriminatory acts to pay damages or serve jail time. Discrimination may also be an aggravating factor in other crimes, leading to increased penalties. The board of INADI, a government agency under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, includes representatives of the major religious groups. INADI investigates suspected and reported incidents of discrimination based on religion. INADI is not authorized to enforce recommendations or findings, but its reports may be used as evidence in civil court. The agency also supports victims of religious discrimination and promotes proactive measures to prevent discrimination. INADI produces and distributes publications to promote religious tolerance.

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

Government Practices

Representatives of many religious groups, including Muslim, Christian, and Jewish, said they believed the government generally respected and supported religious freedom. Nonetheless, representatives of several religious groups continued to state that a government requirement for religious groups to register first with the MFA and then with the Ministry of Interior as a civil association was redundant, noting the Catholic Church faced no such requirement. The groups said these legal processes were prerequisites for seeking tax-exempt status, visas for foreign clergy, and permission to hold public activities. Religious group representatives reiterated their interest in having a unique registration process, separate from that for civil associations. In March, CALIR published a statement expressing concern that some local governments were requesting an additional registration for religious groups at the municipal level. For example, the province of San Luis has its own provincial register, which is voluntary, but the Catholic Church does not participate, even voluntarily.

According to the MFA's National Director of the Registration of Religious Groups, there were approximately 6,000 active religious institutions in the country. Officials estimated that including subsidiaries of the main religious institutions, there were 28,000 religious groups and facilities in the country.

Representatives of some religious groups continued to criticize a 2020 Public Registry of Commerce resolution requiring all civil associations, including religious groups, to have gender parity on their administrative and oversight bodies. Several religious groups continued to state this requirement was unconstitutional and violated religious freedom. They also said the government still had not implemented the resolution and they knew of no religious organizations penalized for failing to comply with it.

In February, the INADI director of policies against discrimination stated that INADI was committed to "work for the officialization" of African-derived religions and the "promotion of the rights of all those who practice any creed." She added that the country's recognition of the religions will help end discrimination against religious practices derived from religions of African descent.

According to Jewish community leaders, there was no progress in bringing the accused perpetrators of the 1994 AMIA bombing to justice. On July 18, the 28th anniversary of the AMIA bombing, AMIA President Amos Linetzky urged others to "continue the tradition of making our voices heard together" and "to demand justice and punishment for those guilty and responsible for the attack." On July 15, President Fernandez, Foreign Minister Santiago Cafiero, and Secretary of Worship Guillermo Oliveri hosted AMIA leaders at the presidential residence to discuss the pursuit of justice. According to the official statement, Fernandez reaffirmed the government's commitment to achieve justice for the attacks and fight antisemitism.

In January, the MFA denounced the presence of Iranian Vice President for Economic Affairs Mohsen Rezai at the Nicaraguan presidential inauguration because Rezai was a suspect in the AMIA bombing. The MFA statement called on the Iranian government to cooperate fully with Argentine judicial authorities and to allow the suspects to be tried by a competent court.

Many religious organizations, including the Catholic Church and the Christian Alliance of Evangelical Churches (ACIERA), criticized the law permitting abortions, and a growing number of medical professionals – especially in rural areas – refused to perform abortions on religious and ethical grounds.

On February 1, Salta provincial police dispersed a group of Muslim women in front of the Salta provincial legislature as they attempted to celebrate World Hijab Day and raise awareness of discrimination against Muslim women. Aisha Cristal Amella, leader of the event, said police prevented them from remaining in the public space even though they had obtained municipal authorization.

In June, Catholic bishops in Rio Negro Province questioned the president of the provincial Superior Court, Sergio Barotto, for asking about the religious beliefs of nine persons who applied for the position of public defender. According to press reports, Barotto stated that religion could make it difficult for a judge to exercise “judicial independence,” which the bishops said showed Barotto’s discrimination against candidates holding religious beliefs.

On June 2, INADI and the Islam for Peace Institute signed a cooperation agreement to raise awareness, prevent discriminatory acts, and to design and promote campaigns aimed at expanding social and cultural pluralism. INADI officials stated they would provide training on Islamic culture, myths, stereotypes, and ways to prevent the stigmatization of Islam and associated anti-Muslim sentiment. The agreement included joint public campaigns and training for government employees, but content was still under development at the end of the year.

On July 4, INADI created a 2022-23 Working Group for the Prevention of Discrimination based on Religion, together with representatives of different religious entities and organizations. By October, the group held two meetings to exchange experiences and develop institutional lines of action for the promotion of the rights of persons belonging to religious communities. The working group’s stated aim was to deepen a plural, diverse, and inclusive coexistence and to coordinate joint actions for social, territorial, and communicational intervention to prevent discrimination on religious grounds. On November 25, the working group published a joint statement to commemorate the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Freedom Day.

Catholic Church representatives continued to discuss measures to reduce their use of federal funding following a 2018 agreement between the government and the Argentine Episcopal Conference (CEA), representing the Catholic Church, that delineated a formal, mutually agreed plan to gradually reduce the state’s direct financial support to the church.

Secretary of Worship Guillermo Oliveri, Human Rights Secretary Horacio Pietragalla, and other government representatives again participated in religious freedom conferences, interreligious dialogues, Catholic services, and Rosh Hashanah observances, as well as other religious activities, including those held by Protestant and Orthodox churches. Activities included celebrations of Religious Freedom Day, meetings with the Argentinian Islamic Center, international religious authorities such as the Orthodox Apostolic Catholic Church of Antioch, and events with youth to promote interreligious dialogue.

On May 19, the MFA hosted an event with young representatives of different religions to share experiences, traditions, and their communities’ best practices for interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Participants included young Muslim leaders from the Alba Intercultural Center in Buenos Aires, the Catholic Laudato Si and Focolare Movements, the Argentine Methodist Church, the Focolare Movement, the Buddhist organization Soka Gakkai, the Evangelical Service of Diakonia, and Ikumeni youth from different Christian denominations.

On August 25, the MFA hosted a commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the UN Conference on the Human Environment that was held in Stockholm, Sweden. During the event, called “Stockholm+50,” religious leaders and youth gathered to address the impact of faith on climate change and sustainability. The event was promoted by the Regional Ecumenical Center for Consultation and Service, together with the UNDP, and supported by the Secretariat of Worship, the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, and the Swedish Embassy. Dialogue focused on how faith communities can build trusting relationships; strengthen cooperation and solidarity; support systemic actions needed for equitable, inclusive, and resilient recovery from the pandemic; and how religious perspectives redefine conceptions and measures of progress and well-being. The religious leaders stated that the dimension of ethics, values and faith were key to achieving a new, sustainable, and inclusive model of development.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom ✓

During the year, media outlets and other organizations reported incidents of antisemitism and other discriminatory acts based on religious affiliation. On September 15, DAIA published its annual report for 2021, citing 490 incidents of antisemitism. The number of overall incidents decreased by three percent compared with 2020, while DAIA reported an increase in the number of cases reaching the justice system. Of the reported incidents, 76 percent took place on web sites and social media.

According to the Islam for Peace Institute Observatory, which tracks discrimination against members of the country’s Muslim community, Muslims faced discrimination when they attempted to register complaints with local police or government and were afraid of losing their jobs or of facing other forms of retaliation.

According to press reports, on February 23, the Muslim community in Salta denounced an act of discrimination that occurred during an assembly at the Islamic Center. Members of the Muslim community said a local businessman argued with one of the community members over a parking spot and insulted him, telling him to “go to his country,” that “they were doing nothing good there,” and that they were “terrorists.”

On March 2, a six-year-old Muslim boy from Neuquen Province returned from his first day in school with the word “terrorist” written in red on his name tag. The boy’s mother said a private therapeutic companion assisting another student had committed the act; the companion later resigned. The mother, together with the Islam for Peace Institute, filed a complaint with INADI for discriminatory acts against her son.

On April 2, unknown persons vandalized the Annunciation Cathedral of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate in Palermo, Buenos Aires, leaving inscriptions on its facade equating Russian President Putin with Stalin and accusing him of genocide. On May 6, INADI received the complaint and expressed its solidarity with the Russian Orthodox Church and all its parishioners “in the face of the aggravating events that occurred last Sunday that violate peaceful coexistence and the principles of religious freedom that characterize our country.”

Interreligious groups such as the Interreligious Committee for Peace in Argentina, whose members included Catholic, Protestant, evangelical Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Baha’i, as well as Indigenous religious groups and CALIR, continued to work on increasing opportunities for interreligious action on common societal challenges. CALIR issued statements expressing concern from religious institutions related to the provincial and municipal registration of religious groups and organized and sponsored local conferences, including a seminar on religious freedom in Argentina and the world in October.

Section IV.

U.S. ✓

U.S. embassy officials met with government representatives, including from the MFA's Secretariat of Worship and human rights office, to discuss ways to promote respect for religious minorities and interfaith cooperation. In meetings with government officials, the Ambassador and other embassy officials discussed tolerance and understanding among the country's many religious groups, the country's interfaith movement, and measures to counteract religious discrimination.

In July, the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism visited the country. The Ambassador and the Special Envoy attended the Latin American Forum on Combating Antisemitism and held meetings with Jewish community leaders and organizations. The Special Envoy also met with the Minister of Education, officials from the MFA, and other administration leaders. The Special Envoy publicly stated she was "touched by the commitment of Argentine leaders to work on education against antisemitism and Holocaust remembrance" and she said that "if every country took things as seriously as Argentina does, we would be in a better place."

On April 21, the Ambassador hosted an iftar to engage with the Muslim community and to promote interfaith dialogue and understanding. Among the attendees were representatives from the Islamic Center and other Islamic organizations, representatives from other religions including the Catholic Church and the Jewish faith, government officials, and representatives from other embassies.

On July 18, the Ambassador, the Special Envoy, and other embassy officials attended the annual commemoration to mourn the victims of the 1994 terrorist attack on AMIA. The embassy and AMIA also collaborated in September for a commemoration event for victims of the 9/11 attacks in the United States, and the Ambassador delivered remarks alongside AMIA president Linetzky. The Ambassador said, "The United States and Argentina are partners in fighting terrorism in our countries and the world. As democracies we work together, not only governments but also civil society, against extremism and for a more just, tolerant, and peaceful world."

The Ambassador also visited various religious communities throughout the country. On August 26, the Ambassador visited the town of Moises Ville, the first Jewish settlement in the country, founded in 1889 and located in the province of Santa Fe. This was the first official visit by a U.S. Ambassador to the community, where he met leaders and local members. On October 14, the Ambassador continued outreach in Mendoza Province, where he met Jewish community leaders and discussed methods and resources to combat antisemitism.

Throughout the year, embassy officials met with representatives of DAIA, AMIA, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the CEA, the Church of Jesus Christ, ACIERA, the Islamic Center of Argentina, the Islam for Peace Institute, and the Simon Wiesenthal Center to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country and ways in which the embassy could support communities of all faiths. The embassy also promoted respect for religious diversity on social media by extending greetings on various religious holidays.