

KUWAIT 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution declares Islam to be the state religion but also declares freedom of belief is “absolute.” It stipulates that the state protects the freedom to practice one’s religion, provided such practice does not conflict with established customs, public policy, or morals. The constitution states that sharia is a main source of legislation and that all individuals are equal before the law, regardless of religion. The law prohibits the defamation of the three Abrahamic faiths (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity), publication or broadcast of material the government deems offensive to religious groups, and practices the government finds inconsistent with Islamic law.

The government prosecuted numerous individuals for remarks deemed religiously offensive, mostly for comments made online, and sentenced some to prison terms. In May, a citizen was sentenced to five years in prison for joining ISIS and plotting to blow up places of worship, including Shia places of worship. In May, local media reported the police seized a taxi for misusing a verse from the Quran by posting it on the side of a vehicle. That same month, several members of parliament (MPs) asked the Ministry of Interior to investigate a video clip of an alleged attack by a State Security officer on a Shia imam at the Imam Hussein Mosque, the largest Shia mosque in the country. In February, the Associated Press (AP) reported that a parliamentary committee stopped deliberations on the proposed abolition of a law allowing honor killings after the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs (MAIA) ruled that the law should be upheld and not overturned.

The government continued to appoint and pay the salaries of Sunni imams and to provide the full basic text for weekly sermons preached at Sunni mosques but did not exercise the same oversight of Shia imams, although it paid the salaries of some Shia imams and mosque staff. Minority religious groups said they were able to worship in private spaces without government interference provided they did not disturb their neighbors or violate laws regarding assembly and restrictions on proselytizing. Most minority religious groups reported a continued lack of facilities for worship and difficulty obtaining permission to construct new ones, as well as problems obtaining sufficient visas for clergy or visiting staff. The government did not accredit any religious schools or permit Shia religious training

in the country. Shia leaders continued to report discrimination in clerical and public sector employment. The Ministry of Education continued to ban or censor materials referring to the Holocaust or Israel.

Individuals continued to face societal pressure against converting from Islam; some citizens who had converted outside the country said their families harassed them as a result. Early in the year, some local observers described a proposed “desert wellness yoga retreat” as an assault on Islam and called for its ban widely on social media. Despite the perception that many Shia were often viewed as being lower on the social scale and marginalized in religious, economic, social, and political terms, Shia community members noted that many Shia families were very successful and wealthy merchants. Antisemitic stereotypes occasionally appeared in the media, as did statements critical of some Islamic views. In one case, a television personality in a YouTube video said that American Jews were politically influential because they were “united, support[ed] one another, and of course own[ed] the media and the money.” Responding to negative reactions to U.S. embassy social media postings extending Hanukkah wishes to the Jewish community, another commentator wrote, “What is this cringe-worthy fear we have toward Jews? Is this who we have become in a country whose heritage prides itself on coexistence? What a pity. What a loss for us.” Columnists for the newspaper al-Qabas decried the current state of the Islamic world, one pointing to the influence of extremist clerics who encouraged violence and hatred of the “other,” and another noting the lack of freedom of religion in Islamic states, stating that “Muslim states are all sectarian, racist, and bigoted.” Hotels, stores, and businesses continued to mark non-Islamic holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali. News media continued to publish information regarding celebrations of religious holidays, such as Christmas.

In October and December, the U.S. Chargé d’Affaires hosted events with representatives from minority faiths, including the Shia, Bohra, Hindu, Baha’i, and Christian communities, to discuss a broad range of religious freedom issues. The group discussed the status of religious freedom in the country, barriers to religious practice caused by the government’s administrative procedures for religious minority groups, and how to promote dialogue among religious minority communities and citizens. During a December roundtable, the Chargé d’Affaires invited registered church leaders to discuss trends in the country regarding religious freedom. In September, embassy officials met with MAIA

representatives to better understand the ministry's efforts in promoting religious tolerance, its relationship with religious minority groups, and the activities of its Center for the Promotion of Moderation. MAIA representatives stated that they urged Kuwaiti society to tolerate those of different religions and highlighted national laws that criminalized religious discrimination. Embassy officials also met often with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Public Authority of Manpower (PAM) representatives and raised administrative challenges several churches faced. During the year, embassy officials met with religious leaders and members from the Sunni, Shia, Bohra, Hindu, Baha'i, and Christian communities to discuss each group's needs.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.1 million (midyear 2022). U.S. government figures also cite the Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI), a local government agency, which reports that the country's total population was 4.5 million in 2022. As of June, PACI reported there were 1.5 million citizens and 3.0 million noncitizens. PACI estimates 76 percent of citizens and noncitizens are Muslims. The national census does not distinguish between Shia and Sunni Muslims. Nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and the media estimate approximately 70 percent of citizens are Sunni Muslims, while the remaining 30 percent are Shia Muslims (including Ahmadi and Ismaili Muslims, whom the government counts as Shia). PACI estimates 16 percent of citizens and noncitizens are Christian and 7 percent of citizens and noncitizens are members of non-Abrahamic faiths. Community leaders indicated there are 288 Christian citizens and a handful of Baha'i citizens. There are no known Jewish citizens, according to PACI.

According to information from PACI released in June, approximately 65 percent of the expatriate population are Muslim, 25 percent Christian, and 11 percent from non-Abrahamic faiths. Sources in various noncitizen communities state that approximately 5 percent of the expatriate Muslim population are Shia, while Hindus and Buddhist account for most of the non-Abrahamic faith population. Informal estimates by members of different religious groups indicate there are approximately 250,000 Hindus, 100,000 Buddhists, 25,000 Bohra Muslims, 10,000 to 12,000 Sikhs, 7,000 Druze, and 400 Baha'is.

While some geographic areas may have higher concentrations of Sunnis or Shia, the two groups are generally distributed uniformly throughout most of the country. Sources in the Shia community state that approximately 60 percent of the Bidoon (long-time stateless Arab resident) population is Shia.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares Islam to be the religion of the state and the freedom of belief to be “absolute.” It provides for state protection of the freedom to practice all religions, provided such practice is “in accordance with established customs, and does not conflict with public policy or morals.”

The constitution declares sharia to be a main source of legislation and all individuals to be equal before the law regardless of religion. It declares the Amir shall be Muslim (the Amir and ruling family are Sunni) and the state shall safeguard the heritage of Islam.

The law prohibits defamation of the three Abrahamic religions and denigration of Islamic, Jewish, and Christian religious figures acknowledged within accepted Islamic orthodoxy (e.g., prophets mentioned in the Quran, and wives and companions of the Prophet Muhammad), and prescribes a punishment of up to 10 years in prison for each offense. The law bans certain topics from publication and public discussion. These include insulting religion, in particular Islam, and “sorcery.”

A national unity law prohibits “stirring sectarian strife,” promoting the supremacy of one religious group over another, instigating acts of violence based on the supremacy of one group, or promoting hatred or contempt of any group. Violations of this law by individuals are punishable by up to seven years’ imprisonment, a fine of 10,000 to 100,000 dinars (\$32,700 to \$327,000), or both. Repeated crimes carry double penalties. If a group or an organization violates the law, it could have its operating license revoked temporarily or permanently and face fines up to 200,000 dinars (\$654,000). Noncitizens convicted under this law are also subject to deportation.

The law allows citizens to file criminal charges against anyone they believe has defamed any of the three recognized Abrahamic religions or harmed public morals.

The law criminalizes publishing and broadcasting content, including on social media, which the government deems offensive to religious “sects” or groups; provides for fines ranging from 10,000 to 200,000 dinars (\$32,700 to \$654,000) and up to seven years’ imprisonment.

There is no officially published process outlining the steps religious groups must take to register with the government. Government offices do not offer guidance on the registration process. There are no fixed criteria for an application to be approved. To obtain a license to establish an official place of worship and gain benefits from the central government, a religious group must first receive approval for its place of worship from the local municipality. Previously, religious groups reported the municipality would pass the paperwork to MAIA for an “opinion” on the application for a worship space. MAIA would then issue a certificate listing board members for the organization, making the religious group a legal entity, followed by further approvals by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor (MOSA) and the Ministry of Interior. During 2022, MAIA representatives stated that the ministry was no longer responsible for registering churches; authorities have not clarified which government agency is responsible for the registration process for non-Islamic places of worship. Officials from MOSA also stated that the ministry was not responsible for registering non-Islamic places of worship.

The officially registered and licensed Christian churches in the country are the National Evangelical Church of Kuwait (NECK) (Protestant); Roman Catholic; Greek Catholic (Melkite); Coptic Orthodox; Armenian Orthodox; Greek Orthodox; Anglican; and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. There are no officially recognized synagogues, and, according to MAIA, no application has ever been submitted for one. The government does not recognize any non-Abrahamic religions. Nonregistered religious groups include Hindus, Sikhs, Druze, Bohra Muslims, Buddhists, and Baha’is.

A religious group with a license to establish a place of worship may hire its own staff, sponsor visitors to the country, open bank accounts, and import texts for its

congregation. Nonregistered religious groups do not have the same rights as licensed groups and may not purchase property or sponsor workers and must rely on volunteers from within their community for resources. Some registered religious groups have agreed to assist nonregistered groups in these matters.

The law prohibits practices the government deems inconsistent with Islamic law, including anything the government deems to be “sorcery” or black magic, which under the penal code constitutes “fraud and deception” and carries a maximum penalty of three years’ imprisonment, a fine, or both.

The law does not specifically prohibit proselytizing by non-Muslims, but individuals proselytizing may be prosecuted under laws criminalizing contempt of religion.

The law prohibits eating, drinking, and smoking in public between sunrise and sunset during Ramadan, including for non-Muslims, with a prescribed maximum penalty of up to 100 dinars (\$330), one month’s imprisonment, or both.

It is illegal to possess, import, trade, or manufacture alcohol. Importing alcohol carries a penalty of up to 10 years’ imprisonment; consuming alcohol may result in a fine of up to 1,000 dinars (\$3,300). It is illegal to consume alcohol publicly, which carries a penalty of up to six months’ imprisonment and a fine up to 50 dinars (\$163). It is illegal to import and sell pork products; the penalty ranges from three months to three years’ imprisonment.

Islamic religious instruction is mandatory at all levels for all Muslim students in both public and private schools with one or more Muslim students enrolled, regardless of whether the student is a citizen. Non-Muslim students are not required to attend these classes. The law prohibits organized religious education in public high schools for faiths other than Islam. All Islamic education courses are based on Sunni Islam.

The law provides that apostates lose certain legal rights, including the right to inherit property from Muslim relatives or spouses, but it does not specify any criminal penalty. If a Muslim man married to a Muslim woman converts from Islam, his existing marriage is annulled. If he is married to a non-Muslim woman and converts from Islam, the marriage remains valid. If a Muslim woman married

to a Muslim man converts to another Abrahamic faith (Christianity or Judaism), the marriage is not automatically annulled, but the Muslim husband may request an annulment. If a Muslim woman married to a Muslim man converts to a non-Abrahamic faith, the marriage is automatically annulled.

Religious courts administer personal status laws dealing with issues of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. Residents not belonging to the three recognized Abrahamic religions are also subject to sharia if family matters are taken to court. According to the law, if the case is brought to court sharia governs inheritance for all residents regardless of their religious affiliation.

Courts may follow Shia jurisprudence in matters of personal status and family law for Shia Muslims at all levels of the judiciary. The law allows for the creation of separate courts for Shia Muslims for cases pertaining to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. These courts have six judges, none of whom has a formal background in Shia jurisprudence. An independent Shia waqf (trust) administers Shia religious endowments. Cases are assigned to either Sunni or Shia judges based on the religious affiliation of the man. If a man is married to a non-Muslim woman, the husband's religious practice is followed. If a couple is from one of the registered churches, the court may consider the settlement offered by the church, although if the dispute is not settled, Sunni sharia is applied.

The law forbids, and the state does not recognize, marriage between Muslim women and non-Muslim men, but Muslim men may marry women of other recognized Abrahamic faiths. The law requires the raising of children of such marriages in their father's faith, and the father's religion governs the settlement of marital disputes. Muslim marriage and divorce cases are heard in Sunni or Shia religious courts, depending on whether the marriage certificate is Sunni or Shia. Both Sunni and Shia marriage certificates need to be authenticated by appropriate notaries. While non-Muslim divorce, inheritance, and child custody cases are heard in Sunni religious courts, Christian couples who are part of a registered church may resolve these cases following their religious customs. Local authorities and courts recognize documents in these cases, provided there is a Kuwaiti signatory from the church's congregation. If the church has no Kuwaiti citizen among its congregation, the authorities will accept a signature from the church's highest authority. With the exception of Hindus and Sikhs of Indian

nationality, who may marry at the Embassy of India, members of non-Abrahamic faiths and nonregistered churches may not marry legally in the country but may have their foreign wedding certificates recognized. Citizens who are members of the Baha'i Faith may marry abroad and petition the court to recognize their marriage.

If a religious group wishes to purchase land, a citizen must be the primary buyer and must submit a request for approval to the local municipal council, which allocates land at its discretion. Citizens, or in a few cases the government, may also rent land to religious groups.

The law prohibits the naturalization of non-Muslims but allows male citizens of any religion to transmit citizenship to their descendants. Female citizens, regardless of religion, are unable to transmit nationality to their children.

An individual's religion is not included on passports or national identity documents except for birth and marriage certificates, on which it is mandatory. On birth certificates issued to Muslims, there is no distinction between Sunni and Shia. Members of non-Abrahamic faiths are not able to list their religion on their birth certificate and a dash (-) is denoted in place of their religion.

The government has not recognized political parties, including religiously based parties, or allowed their formation, although no formal law bans political parties. National Assembly candidates must nominate themselves as individuals; however, well-organized, unofficial blocs operate as political groupings inside the National Assembly. Those convicted of insulting the Amir or Islam are banned from running for elected office.

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

Government Practices

In May, a citizen was sentenced to five years in prison for joining ISIS and plotting to blow up places of worship in the country, including Shia places of worship. Media reported he attempted to recruit his family members and urged his followers to pledge allegiance to ISIS.

In April, the Criminal Court sentenced a citizen to two months in jail and fined him 10,000 dinars for insulting God and ridiculing and defaming Islam on Twitter.

In May, local media reported police seized a taxi for misusing a verse from the Quran by posting it on the vehicle.

In May, several MPs called on the Ministry of Interior to investigate a viral video clip of an alleged attack by a State Security officer on a Shia imam at the Imam Hussein Mosque, the largest Shia mosque in the country. The Ministry of Interior issued a statement denying the attack and stated that the imam did not cooperate with a mosque committee tasked to monitor donation collection. The imam was referred to a police station. Some Sunni MPs expressed support for the government's actions. At year's end, there were no further updates available.

In August, the Ministry of Interior announced police arrested an Iranian national for inciting murder and sectarian strife through a video clip posted on social media. In the clip, the man said "Killing a Sunni is the best thing. Not just kill him, cut off his head!" In the same month, the Iranian national was deported.

Although the law does not prohibit apostasy, the government continued its policy of not issuing new official documents for recording a change in religion unless the conversion was from another religion to Islam.

In February, AP reported that the national uproar over a 2021 honor killing resulted in a parliamentary committee considering the abolition of a law that states that any man who killed his wife, daughter, sister, or mother for adultery or an "illicit" sexual act would face a maximum of three years in prison and a token fine. The committee asked MAIA's Fatwa and Legislation Authority to issue a fatwa on the proposed repeal of the law. In January, MAIA stated that the law should be upheld and not overturned, and the committee took no further action. In December, a court sentenced the defendant in the 2021 honor killing case to death by hanging for premeditated murder.

In accordance with MAIA policy, the government continued to vet, appoint, and pay all new Sunni imams to ensure compliance with the government's guidance on moderate and tolerant religious preaching.

The Shia community continued to select its own clerics without government oversight. The government funded Sunni religious institutions, including mosques, and paid the salaries of all Sunni imams. The Shia community generally did not receive funding from the state for religious institutions and mosques. The government paid the salaries of some Shia imams and mosques' staff. Some Shia mosques requested government assistance and received funds to pay for salaries and maintenance of their facilities.

MAIA opened an investigation into a Sunni imam for delivering sermons perceived as being politically motivated, insulting to other religious groups, and violating the national unity law. MAIA continues to operate a hotline to receive reports of extremism.

The government continued to provide the full basic text for Friday sermons preached at Sunni mosques. Imams could add content to the sermons but needed to ensure the text adhered to the laws on political speech and avoided stoking sectarianism. Media sources reported that MAIA continued to caution imams to ensure their sermons were consistent with MAIA guidelines, including refraining from discussing political issues or insulting other religions in their sermons or at any other time. MAIA required Sunni imams to send a recorded audio of their sermons to MAIA for review after the fact. MAIA also relied on reports of worshippers and others who might be dissatisfied if the imam discussed politics or insulted other faiths.

Shia sources and government officials said the government did not officially monitor Shia clerics, who were free to write their own sermons if they did not violate existing laws or instigate sectarianism. If a questionable video appeared on social media or a worshipper reported a cleric, the government investigated. According to officials at MAIA and members of the Shia community, MAIA did not monitor sermons or other activities at husseiniyas (Shia prayer halls for religious commemorations) or at private gatherings. Some sources stated they believed the government unofficially monitored Shia clerics.

In February, MAIA announced it was working with the Ministry of Education to expand its partnership on efforts to protect youth from radicalization and religious extremism. The ministries would provide training courses and discussion panels to promote the principles of moderation and tolerance derived from the

Quran and the Prophet's teachings. To combat extremism and promote religious tolerance, MAIA said that it had organized a lecture on intellectual security and promoting moderation in addition to several Friday sermons on topics such as fighting corruption in Islam, doing "good" to neighbors, the dangers of intoxicants and drugs, and ethics in Islam.

Representatives of registered churches continued to state the government was generally tolerant and respectful of their faiths. Members of non-Abrahamic faiths and unregistered churches continued to state they remained free to practice their religion in private but faced harassment and potential prosecution if they disturbed their neighbors or violated laws regarding assembly and proselytizing. They also continued to say they avoided conflict with authorities by not proselytizing or disparaging the government or other faiths. The government continued to allow such groups to operate in rented villas, private homes, or the facilities of registered churches. Many of these groups stated they did not publicly advertise religious events or gatherings to avoid bringing unwanted attention to their organizations, either from the public or from government authorities.

Leaders of registered churches reported government authorities continued to allow only citizens to sign official documents, even if the citizens were not among the churches' ordained clergy. If there were no citizen members, however, authorities continued to recognize the highest church authority as the official signatory of the church.

Churches reported they were no longer fined by the PAM, as was the case in previous years, for not hiring the required percentage of citizens as employees, since PAM had effectively dropped the requirement.

Members of non-Abrahamic faiths and unregistered churches continued to say they experienced hardship in commemorating major religious or life events. Almost uniformly across these communities, members said they lacked sufficient religious facilities, religious leadership, or clerics for prayers, the blessing of births and marriages, and the conduct of appropriate death rituals. In many cases, members of these religious groups stated they resolved conflicts, such as child separation issues in divorce, marital status, or inheritance, internally within their

communities, rather than take legal action in the courts, where they would be subject to sharia.

The government continued to require religious groups to obtain licenses from their respective municipalities for religious celebrations. Authorities retained the right to withdraw the license of any husseiniya not complying with the municipality's rules. Minority religious communities continued to state they tried to keep a low profile and did not request permission for public celebrations from authorities, since they presumed it would be rejected.

The Ministry of Interior continued to provide added security and protection at religious sites for all recognized non-Sunni religious groups. Muslim and Christian leaders continued to report that the government, citing security concerns, kept in place a ban on outdoor religious observances instituted following a 2015 ISIS bombing of a Shia mosque that killed 27 persons. The government continued to station security forces throughout the year outside some Sunni mosques and all Shia and Christian religious venues during times of worship, to deter attacks. The government also continued to provide security to Shia neighborhoods during Muharram and Ashura observances.

The government continued to require the Shia community to conduct Ashura activities inside closed structures rather than at outdoor locations. The government did not permit public reenactments of the martyrdom of Hussein or public marches in commemoration of Ashura. On August 9, Shia residents publicly commemorated Ashura for the first time since the government lifted COVID-19 restrictions. The Ministry of Interior dispatched an estimated 3,000 security personnel to secure husseiniyas, a procedure begun following the 2015 attack on a Shia mosque.

Activists called on the government to recognize Ashura as an official holiday following a controversial leaked memo in which the country's official news agency required employees to work on Ashura or justify taking leave.

Several Sunni clerics criticized the government on social media and in Friday sermons for securing husseiniyas and allowing Shia to commemorate Ashura. One social media user said that Sunni policeman who were protecting the husseiniyas would go to hell. Courts in May sentenced a Kuwaiti man to five years

in prison for joining ISIS in 2021 and planning to bomb military facilities, two husseiniyas, and shrines in a Shia cemetery in the northeast of the country.

Authorities continued the government's longstanding practice of prohibiting churches from displaying exterior signs, such as a cross or church bell.

The government allowed only shops owned by registered religious organizations to import, display, or sell non-Islamic religious literature. The government did not permit non-Islamic religious publishing companies, although several churches published religious materials solely for their congregations' use. Church leaders continued to report the government permitted registered Christian churches to import religious materials for use by their congregations under the condition that none of the content insulted Islam. Registered churches reported they were able to import religious materials in any language. According to the Ministry of Information, MAIA reviewed books of a religious nature. Members of non-Abrahamic faiths and nonregistered churches continued to state they could import religious materials for their congregations if they brought in the materials as personal items when entering the country and did not try to sell them in public stores. While minority religious communities stated they continued to be selective in the religious materials they imported, and even more selective in giving access to the materials, many members noted this was less of an issue during the year, given that their activities had moved almost entirely online during the pandemic. They said they did not allow the circulation of these materials outside their congregations.

In August, a press report stated the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MOCI) ordered the closure of a shop in Salmiya for selling "accessories bearing Jewish slogans," which is a violation of public order. The Arab Times reported the shop owner could face "legal measures." Authorities said the shop was selling the Israeli flag, which violates government regulations, and that if the shop had only sold the Star of David, there would not have been an issue.

In June, stories on social media circulated that the MOCI had closed gold shops for selling crosses. In response, the director of the Precious Metals Department at MOCI stated that the sale of crosses, a religious symbol for Christians, was permitted since they are brought legally into the country and are examined by

MOCI. The director stated that it had issued a violation against a store for selling Buddha statues, since they do not represent an Abrahamic faith.

On June 5, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the Indian ambassador to protest statements made by a ruling party official in India perceived as denigrating the Prophet Muhammed. The ministry stated the official note presented to the ambassador expressed the government's "categorical rejection and condemnation" of the statements issued by the official against the Prophet, Islam, and Muslims. It demanded a public apology by the "perpetrator for such extreme and vile statements."

On September 6, the government joined representatives of the other five Gulf Cooperation Council countries in issuing a statement that demanded the streaming service Netflix remove "offensive content," citing unspecified material that "violates Islamic and societal values and principles." Al-Jazeera stated the move appeared to be in response to "Netflix airing content that includes LBGTQ [lesbian, bisexual, gay, transexual, and queer] characters, as well as other material deemed 'immoral.'"

Municipalities handled building permits and land issues for religious groups. The government stated it received no applications for the construction of places of worship from non-Islamic religious groups during the year. The government reported it did not receive additional requests for registrations of new groups during the year.

Christian churches continued to report that government authorities did not respond to their petitions for expanding existing places of worship or for increasing the number of staff the churches could sponsor. The Greek Catholic Church indicated that it had requested additional land near its location in 2020 to accommodate more worshippers but had not received a response by year's end. Some churches stated they stopped submitting such requests because the government did not respond.

Shia community members reported a continued lack of facilities for worship and difficulties obtaining permission to construct new facilities caused by the government's delay in approving repairs to existing mosques or constructing new ones. MAIA reported there were 1,759 mosques in the country, including 24

mosques opened during the year. MAIA reported there were 2,034 imams registered with the ministry. According to 2018 government statistics, of the 1,601 mosques existing that year, 1,550 were Sunni and 51 Shia. A member of the Shia community said that no new Shia mosques opened during the year. There were 20 to 30 husseiniyas registered with the Ministry of Interior, and thousands of smaller Shia gatherings took place in private homes.

The government instructed MAIA, the Ministry of Interior, the Kuwait City municipality, and other agencies to find solutions to end the use of unregistered mosques. MAIA continued to operate under a mandate from the Council of Ministers to demolish unregistered mosques, stating that some of those mosques served as extremist platforms. Authorities did not report whether there were new unlicensed mosques opened during the year or whether any unlicensed mosques were closed during the year.

According to the NGO Minority Rights Group International (MRGI) and members of the Shia community, Shia Muslims were not allowed to organize religious courses in public high schools or establish religious training centers, in keeping with the law that mandated all Islamic education courses use the Sunni interpretation of Islam.

The Ministry of Education continued to ban or censor instructional materials, including fiction and nonfiction books and textbooks, that referenced the Holocaust or Israel.

The ministry permitted public schools to teach and celebrate only Islamic holidays. Members of non-Islamic faiths largely said the government did not interfere with religious instruction inside private homes and on church compounds.

According to church leaders, although most churches provided faith-based instruction for children, the government did not accredit church-based schools. Accreditation for church-based schools would enable students to receive religious education while fulfilling government requirements and allow graduates to move on to higher education. NECK repeatedly requested accreditation for its church-based school for many years, most recently in 2017, but authorities still did not provide a response. After years of unsuccessful attempts, NECK decided to no

longer seek accreditation with the authorities for its school. The Armenian Church and the Bohra Muslim community continued to operate accredited community schools in lieu of seeking accreditation as religious schools. Other groups continued to report that they conducted religious studies in their places of worship.

Local sources stated that there continued to be insufficient training facilities to staff courts with qualified judges. Shia leaders continued to report that a lack of Shia imams limited their ability to staff Shia courts, causing a backlog of personal status and family cases. To address the backlog and shortage of staff, an ad hoc Shia jurisprudence council the government created many years ago under the marital issues court continued to function.

The government continued its practice of not responding to requests to establish Shia religious training institutions. Shia Muslims were obliged to seek religious training and education abroad. According to the NGO Freedom House, the government did not permit the training of Shia clerics in the country. According to members of the Shia community, the College of Sharia and Islamic Studies at Kuwait University, the only institution in the country that trains imams, provided some background on Shia jurisprudence in some of its courses but did not have Shia professors on its faculty.

According to reports by press and community members, to encourage qualified nationals to apply for positions as mosque imams and muezzins, MAIA continued to use less stringent testing criteria implemented in 2020, with the aim of raising the number of citizens working in these positions. Observers saw this as part of an ongoing and longstanding effort by the government to reduce its reliance on foreign workers and to provide economic opportunities to its own nationals.

The Ministry of Education issued a circular in December to private schools that required their teachers sign a pledge to “abide by the teachings of Islam, the traditions of the Kuwaiti Muslim community, and public morals.” The pledge also required private schools to give teachers a training program on Islamic traditions and teachings before they started work.

Shia remained underrepresented at all levels of government: following parliamentary elections in September, nine of 50 elected members of the

National Assembly; one of 16 cabinet members; one of six Amiri Diwan advisors; and disproportionately fewer senior officers in the military and police force were Shia. Shia community leaders continued to say there was a “glass ceiling” in promotions and associated difficulties in obtaining government jobs. Shia leaders said it was particularly difficult for Shia to ascend to leadership positions in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education, the Public Prosecutor’s Office, and the Ministry of Justice. Shia also rarely held leadership positions in the security forces. Some Shia leaders said discrimination continued to prevent Shia from obtaining training for clerical positions and leadership positions in public sector organizations, including the police force and the military/security apparatus. According to the NGO MRGI, some Shia faced discrimination and obstacles when applying for senior leadership positions in the public sector.

The Ministry of Interior, in coordination with PAM, issued visas for clergy and other staff to work at licensed places of worship. The government continued to impose quotas on the number of clergy and staff of licensed religious groups entering the country but sometimes granted additional slots upon request. Church leaders stated that within the past year, the Ministry of Interior had granted significantly fewer visas for clergy and other staff, which affected their daily operations, especially for registered churches with multiple congregations and thousands of worshippers. The government continued to require foreign leaders of unregistered religious groups to enter the country as nonreligious workers.

Only Muslims and Christians are permitted to pray and possess religious literature while detained. Authorities allowed Muslim imams and Christian clergy access to prisoners and detainees for religious observance, but unrecognized religions did not have this privilege.

With the end of COVID-19 restrictions, media coverage once again included news on events and celebrations, such as Christmas services and church inauguration anniversaries held by various Christian denominations in the country and attended by high-level government officials.

In April, Indian media reported that the government banned the Tamil language movie *Beast* because of the film’s reported stereotypes of Muslims as terrorists.

In the campaign for the September 29 parliamentary elections, a number of candidates signed a “values document” declaring their commitment to implementing sharia in the country. The statement, drafted by Islamic activist Abdul Rahman al-Nassar and preacher Othman al-Khamis, rejected the mixing of genders in public settings, called for modest dress at universities, and urged halting practices of “idolatry,” bodybuilding, and gambling. A former minister described the statement as a “purely ISIS document.” Another critic said it was aimed at creating “religious and ethical hegemony” in the country. After the elections, a scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington told AP that 17 members of the 50-member parliament had signed the “values document.”

In the September National Assembly election, the Islamic Constitutional Movement, affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, won five seats, the same number as it held in the previous parliamentary session.

On January 16, following pressure from Islamist MPs and clerics, the Minister of Defense postponed the army's first training course for women until MAIA looked into “the religious rulings, laws, and conditions that must be considered and followed.” This followed the Minister’s decision in late 2021 to allow women to join the military in combat roles. The Minister decided to postpone the course after several prominent clerics met with him to dissuade him from facilitating the entry of women into the military and argued that the issue must be reviewed by jurisprudential authorities. The Minister noted in the meeting that sharia is the primary source of legislation in the country. On January 25, the Ministry of Defense published six conditions that needed to be met, according to MAIA: a woman can only join the military with the consent of her husband or guardian; all servicewomen will be required to wear a hijab; they will serve only in medical and nursing positions or in technical and support roles; they will not take part in field exercises and will not be permitted to carry a gun; and they will be recruited based on available positions.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Societal pressure continued against conversion from Islam, according to minority religious leaders and citizens. Leaders and members of religious communities said they did not convert Muslims in the country. Some citizens who converted outside the country said their families harassed them due to their conversion.

In February, according to an AP report, when a yoga instructor advertised a “desert wellness yoga retreat,” some local observers said it was an “assault” on Islam and called for the retreat to be banned on social media. In a separate incident, AP reported that “clerics” cited blasphemy and called for arrests when organizers announced a different women’s retreat called “The Divine Feminine.”

The NGO MRGI reported Shia were often perceived as being lower on the social scale and marginalized in religious, economic, social, and political terms. However, some Shia community members noted that many Shia were members of very successful and wealthy merchant families.

According to press and social media, antisemitic rhetoric generally originated from self-proclaimed Islamists or opinion writers. There were reported cases of clerics and others making statements that perpetuated negative stereotypes of Jews. Columnists often conflated Israeli government actions or statements with those of Jews more broadly.

In August, television personality and author Tareq al-Suwaidan posted a video to YouTube urging Muslims in the United States to become politically active and support boycotts of the “Zionist entity.” Al-Suwaidan said that although “Jews constitute only 3 percent” of the U.S. population, they are politically influential because they are “united, support one another and, of course, own the media and the money.”

On January 17, in an article in the Netherlands-based website, Fanack.com, Kuwaiti writer Nejoud al-Yagout wrote a response to reactions on social media to the U.S. Ambassador’s 2021 tweet extending Hanukkah wishes to the Jewish community. In her posting, she said, “Some commentators trolled the Ambassador, and anyone who responded to the message in a spirit of love was verbally abused. ... The commentators used the message not only to accuse the ambassador of having an agenda but to attack Jews as a whole. What is this cringe-worthy fear we have toward Jews? We cannot use the excuse that we don’t celebrate the festivities of other religions, because many Kuwaitis love to celebrate Christmas, and a few celebrate Diwali with Hindus.”

Suad Fahd al-Mo’ajel and Ahmad al-Sarraf, columnists for the newspaper al-Qabas, wrote critically about the current state of the Islamic world, pointing

respectively to the influence of extremist clerics who encourage violence and hatred of the “other,” and to the lack of freedom of religion in Islamic states, stating that “Muslim states are all sectarian, racist, and bigoted.”

In a January opinion piece in the newspaper al-Rai, columnist Sultan al-Khalaf wrote that “the Zionist entity” [Israel] manipulated the Holocaust to gain the sympathy of the world, “despite the fact that tens of millions of non-Jewish civilians fell in that devastating war.” Al-Khalaf stated that this effort has failed, since “it is no secret that the exposure of the Zionist entity to the peoples of the world as a racist entity that practices crimes against humanity in occupied Palestine is [a] factor in the increase in hatred of the Jews.”

Hotels, stores, and other businesses continued to mark non-Islamic holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali. During the Christmas season, Christmas trees and lights appeared in stores, malls, and homes. News media continued to print information about religious holiday celebrations, including material on the religious significance of Christmas.

Some Muslim clerics continued to express disapproval via social media of the celebration of non-Islamic holidays and called for more government action to restrict public expression of these holidays. In December, officials at the country’s largest and best-known shopping center removed a central Christmas tree display after receiving complaints that the display contradicted Islamic traditions. Christmas music and other Christmas trees remained in the shopping center. Many stores in the same mall continued selling Christmas decorations, including Christmas trees and stands, skirts, and ornaments.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In October and December, the U.S. Chargé d’Affaires hosted events with representatives from minority faiths, including the Shia, Bohra, Hindu, Baha’i, and Christian communities, to discuss a broad range of religious freedom issues. The group discussed the status of religious freedom in the country, barriers to religious practice caused by the government’s administrative procedures for religious minority groups, and how to promote dialogue among religious minority communities and citizens. During a December roundtable, the Chargé d’Affaires invited registered church leaders to discuss trends in the country regarding

religious freedom. In March, Special Advisor on International Disability Rights Sara Minkara visited the Grand Mosque and met with MAIA's Mosque Department to learn about services provided to persons with disabilities.

In September, embassy officials met with MAIA representatives to better understand the ministry's efforts to promote religious tolerance, its relationship with religious minority groups, and the activities of its Center for the Promotion of Moderation. MAIA representatives stated that the ministry urges society to tolerate others of different religions and highlighted the country's laws that criminalize religious discrimination. MAIA representatives said that the ministry provided positions to Shia and stated they would often meet with the Shia community at their husseiniyas. Embassy officials also met often with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and PAM representatives and raised administrative problems the churches faced.

During the year, embassy officials met with religious leaders and members from the Sunni, Shia, Bohra, Hindu, Baha'i, and Christian communities to discuss each group's needs. For registered churches, these needs continued to include more space for worship, more transparency in the registration process for new churches, and permission to obtain religious school accreditation.

Senior embassy officials continued to attend religious gatherings throughout the year, including Ashura, Easter, Christmas, and Baha'i events. At these events, including the interfaith reception hosted by the Chargé d'Affaires, embassy officials discussed issues related to religious tolerance and emphasized the U.S. government's commitment to religious freedom.