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USDOS – US Department of State

2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Italy

Executive Summary

The constitution protects freedom of religion and the right of religious communities to establish their own institutions. The constitution specifies the state and the Catholic Church are independent, their relations governed by treaties, including a concordat granting the Church a number of privileges and benefits and financial support. Twelve other groups have accords granting most of the same benefits in exchange for a degree of government monitoring. Religious groups must register to request an accord. Unregistered religious groups operate freely but are not eligible for the same benefits as groups with accords or must apply for them separately. The government did not submit any new accords to parliament for approval despite reports it had negotiated several accords with religious groups in the previous year. The Muslim community, which did not have an accord, continued to experience difficulties in acquiring permission from local governments to construct mosques or keep them open; there were approximately 800 unofficial Muslim places of worship. Politicians from several political parties, including leader of the League (Lega) Party Matteo Salvini, who in June became deputy prime minister and minister of interior, made statements critical of Islam and against the construction of new mosques. As chair of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the country hosted several events promoting religious tolerance.

There were reports of anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim incidents, including harassment, discrimination, hate speech, and vandalism. A Jewish nongovernmental organization (NGO) reported 185 anti-Semitic incidents, most involving hate speech on social media, compared with 130 in 2017. A local Arab NGO reported a 35 percent increase in incidents against Muslims in schools, hospitals, and on public transport in 2017 compared to the previous year. In April a pig's head was left in front of a building in Reggio Emilia Province that Muslims planned to convert into a place of worship. The press reported examples of anti-Semitic graffiti and posters in major cities and elsewhere. Jewish leaders called for greater vigilance against anti-Semitism.

Representatives from the U.S. embassy and consulates general met with national and local government officials to encourage respect for religious freedom and equal treatment for all faiths and discussed the integration of new migrants, many of whom were Muslim, Orthodox, or Hindu, and of second-generation Muslims. Embassy, consulate, and Department of State representatives met with religious leaders and civil society to promote interfaith dialogue and awareness, social inclusion of immigrants, and the empowerment of faith groups through social media and the mobilization of youth leaders among faith groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 62.2 million (July 2018 estimate). According to a 2017 survey by independent research center IPSOS, approximately 74 percent of all residents identify as Roman Catholic. According to government officials, religious groups together accounting for less than 10 percent of the population include other Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Baha'is, and Buddhists. Non-Catholic Christian groups include Eastern Orthodox,

Jehovah's Witnesses, Assemblies of God, the Confederation of Methodist and Waldensian Churches, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), and a number of smaller Protestant groups. The remaining 16 percent report no religious affiliation. According to estimates by the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), an independent research center, of the more than five million resident foreigners, there are almost two million Muslims, 1.7 million Eastern Orthodox Christians, one million Roman Catholics, and 700,000 Protestants. The government and the Jewish community estimate the Jewish population at 30,000.

According to the Ministry of Interior (MOI) and the national agency for statistics, the Muslim population is composed of native-born citizens, immigrants, and resident foreigners, but most of its growth comes from large numbers of immigrants from Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, the majority of whom live in the north. Moroccan and Albanian immigrants are the two largest groups. The MOI reports Muslims are overwhelmingly Sunni.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states all citizens are equal before the law regardless of religion and are free to profess their beliefs in any form, individually or with others, and to promote them and celebrate rites in public or in private, provided they are not offensive to public morality. According to the constitution, each religious community has the right to establish its own institutions according to its own statutes as long as these do not conflict with the law. The constitution stipulates the state may not impose special limitations or taxes on the establishment or activities of groups because of their religious nature or aims. The constitution specifies the state and the Catholic Church are independent of each other, and their relations are governed by treaties, which include a concordat between the government and the Holy See.

The law considers insults against any divinity to be blasphemy, a crime punishable by a fine ranging from 51 to 309 euros (\$58-\$350). The government generally does not enforce the law against blasphemy.

The constitution states all religious groups are equally free and relations between the state and non-Catholic groups are governed by law based on agreements (“accords”) between them. Representatives of a non-Catholic faith requesting an accord must first submit their request to the Office of the Prime Minister. The government and the group's representatives then negotiate a draft agreement, which the Council of Ministers must approve. The prime minister then signs and submits the agreement to parliament for final approval. Once parliament approves the implementing legislation, the accord governs the relationship between the government and the religious group, including state support. Twelve groups have an accord: the Confederation of Methodist and Waldensian Churches, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Jews, Baptists, Lutherans, the Church of Jesus Christ, the Orthodox Church of the Constantinople Patriarchate, the Italian Apostolic Church, the Buddhist Union, Soka Gakkai Buddhists, and Hindus.

The law provides religious groups with tax-exempt status and the right to recognition as legal entities, as long as they have completed a registration process with the MOI. Legal registration is a prerequisite for any group seeking an accord with the government. A religious group may apply for registration by submitting to a prefect, the local representative of the MOI, a request including the group's statutes; a report on its goals and activities; information on its administrative offices; a three-year budget; certification of its credit status by a bank; and certification of the Italian citizenship or legal residency of its head. To be approved, a group's statutes must not conflict with the law. If approved, the group must submit to MOI monitoring, including of their budgets and

internal organization. The MOI may appoint a commissioner to administer the group if it identifies irregularities in its activities. Religious groups that are not registered may still operate legally as NGOs and obtain tax-exempt status, legal recognition of marriages, access to hospitals and prisons, and other benefits, but having an accord with the government facilitates the process. The Catholic Church is the only legally recognized group exempted from MOI monitoring, in accordance with the concordat between the government and the Holy See.

An accord grants clergy automatic access to state hospitals, prisons, and military barracks; allows for civil registry of religious marriages; facilitates special religious practices regarding funerals; and exempts students from school attendance on religious holidays. Any religious group without an accord may request these benefits from the MOI on a case-by-case basis. An accord also allows a religious group to receive funds collected by the state through a voluntary 0.8 percent set-aside on taxpayer returns. Taxpayers may specify to which eligible religious group they would like to direct these funds. The government set aside 1.23 billion euros (\$1.41 billion) via this mechanism during the year, of which more than 81 percent went to the Catholic Church.

Veneto regional legislation prohibits the use of burqas and *niqabs* in public institutions such as hospitals.

The concordat provides for the Catholic Church to select teachers, paid by the state, to provide instruction in weekly “hour of religion” courses taught in public schools. The courses are optional, and students who do not wish to attend may study other subjects or, in certain cases, leave school early with parental consent. Church-selected instructors are lay or religious, and the instruction includes material determined by the state and relevant to non-Catholic religious groups. Government funding is available only for these Catholic Church-approved teachers. If a student requests a religion class from a non-Catholic religious group, that group must provide the teacher and cover the cost of instruction; it is not required to seek government approval for the content of the class. Some local laws provide scholarship funding for students to attend private, religiously affiliated schools, usually but not always Catholic, that meet government educational standards.

According to law, hate speech, including instances motivated by religious hatred, are punishable by up to four years in prison. The law applies to denial of genocide or crimes against humanity.

All missionaries and other foreign religious workers from countries that are not European Union members or signatories to the Schengen Agreement must apply for special religious activity visas before arriving in the country.

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

Government Practices

Although in 2017 the government had reportedly negotiated draft agreements governing its relations with the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Romanian Orthodox Church, and Episcopal Church, it continued its negotiations with those groups during the year and again did not submit any agreements to parliament for approval.

According to leaders of the Rome Islamic Cultural Center, the government did not make significant progress on an accord in its dialogue with Muslim religious communities. The MOI legally recognized as a religious entity only the Cultural Islamic Center of Italy, which ran the Great Mosque of Rome. The government recognized other Muslim Islamic groups only as nonprofit organizations.

Muslims continued to encounter difficulties acquiring permission from local governments to construct mosques. There were five mosques regional governments and Muslim religious authorities both recognized, one each in Ravenna, Rome, Colle Val d'Elsa in Tuscany, Milan, and Forli in Emilia-Romagna. In addition, there were many sites recognized as places of worship by local governments but not considered fully-fledged mosques by Muslim authorities because they lacked minarets or other key architectural features. There were more than 800 unofficial, informal places of worship for Muslims, known colloquially as “garage” mosques. Authorities tolerated most of these but did not officially recognize them as places of worship.

On March 12, the Latium regional court ordered the closure of a garage mosque in Rome on the grounds that the venue was only authorized to host a workshop. The Muslim community that worshipped in the garage mosque initiated talks with local authorities to identify a viable alternative. At year's end authorities had not identified such a venue.

On July 15, the local Muslim community in Empoli, Tuscany inaugurated a new place of worship with a capacity of 250 worshippers. While local government authorities had issued a permit for use of the venue as a place of worship, both they and Muslim religious authorities stated it did not meet all requirements of a proper mosque, such as having a minaret.

Local officials, who were entitled to introduce rules on planning applicable to places of worship, continued to cite a lack of zoning plans allowing for the establishment of places of worship on specific sites as a reason for denying construction permits. Although municipalities could and did withhold construction permits for other religious groups, Muslim leaders – for example, Rosario Paquini Shaykh, Deputy Chairman of the Islamic Center of Milan and Lombardy – said the shortage of formal places of worship was most acute for Muslims.

On June 6, Milan Mayor Giuseppe Sala presented a plan on religious infrastructure proposing the regularization of four existing Muslim places of worship that lacked legal status and the allocation of an additional 18 sites to non-Catholic religious groups. The city was to assign three of these to evangelical churches, and two to Coptic Orthodox churches. In addition, the city was to assign six sites to the Catholic Church to establish churches in newly built neighborhoods. Information as to the implementation of the plan was unavailable at year's end.

Local politicians from conservative parties, including Jacopo Alberti, a Lombardy Regional Councilor of the League Party, expressed concerns over Muslim community proposals to build new mosques. On September 11, League members of the Lombardy Regional Council and other center-right parties passed a motion urging the regional government to conduct a census of Islamic places of worship, install camcorders in them, and monitor the texts used and sermons delivered therein. The same regional council members joined with members of the Five Star Movement, a political party, to pass a resolution calling on the regional government to adopt a law prohibiting the regularization of existing unauthorized places of worship. Neither resolution was binding on the Lombardy government.

On October 8, the Regional Administrative Court of Lombardy accepted an appeal by the Muslim community of Varese of a denial of a permit to build a mosque in Sesto Calende. The regional court issued a ruling that did not overturn the denial but requested the Constitutional Court to re-examine the constitutionality of a 2015 amendment to a local law that did not impose any deadline on local authorities to decide where religious communities might open a place of worship. According to the Lombardy court, the lack of a deadline might violate “the right of freedom of religion” guaranteed by the constitution. At year's end the Supreme Court had not decided whether to hear the case on the constitutionality of the local law.

On March 10, the Regional Administrative Court of Lombardy annulled the 2017 decision of the City Council of Sesto San Giovanni, near Milan, blocking the construction of an Islamic cultural center and mosque on the grounds that the center did not comply with all the requirements agreed to by the city council and the Muslim community. In April local authorities appealed the regional court's ruling to the Council of State (Italy's highest administrative court), which conducted a preliminary review of the case on August 1 but postponed a final ruling until 2019. At year's end the construction of the cultural center and mosque remained suspended pending resolution of the case.

In October, according to press reports, League leaders denied the Bergamo Muslim Association permission to purchase a chapel in Bergamo at auction, despite theirs being the highest offer. The group outbid the Romanian Orthodox Church, which had been using the building for religious services. Lombardy President and League official Attilio Fontana said the Lombardy Region would exercise its right of first refusal and acquire the chapel instead. Fontana said there would be no appeal. League leader Salvini said in a statement, “Centuries of history risk disappearing if Islamization, which up until now has been underestimated, gains the upper hand.”

On August 27, the Regional Administrative Court of Lombardy upheld the September 2017 order of the Mayor of Cantù, Edgardo Arosio, (League Party), barring worship in a warehouse bought by a Muslim association, Assalam, in 2017. According to the ruling, the association had stated that it would only carry out cultural activities in the facility, but the court verified unauthorized religious activities had taken place.

On July 31, Bologna Mayor Virginio Merola issued a decree granting a Muslim association the right to use a piece of land, on which it had already established an Islamic cultural center, for 99 years. Leading League politicians, such as League head Salvini, opposed the decision. On social media, Salvini called the mayor's decision “crazy.”

A request for authorization to construct a new mosque the Muslim community in Pisa submitted to the local administration in December 2017 remained pending with Pisa authorities at year's end. The Muslim community submitted the request after the city's former mayor refused to hold a referendum on the matter.

Pursuant to a December 2017 agreement between the local Muslim community and the City of Florence, Florence University, and the Catholic Church on the construction of a new mosque in Sesto Fiorentino, the Catholic Church sold a piece of land to the Muslim association to establish a mosque next to a new center for religious activities that the diocese would build. At year's end, however, the local Muslim community had not built the mosque and was operating in a temporary place of worship.

The mosque the Muslim community of Thiene had been building since receiving a building permit in 2015 from the Veneto regional government remained unfinished, reportedly because of insufficient funds.

At year's end the city of Mestre had not authorized the Muslim community to open a new mosque there as the city pledged to do after the municipal government, citing a lack of permits, closed down a garage mosque in April 2017.

Local governments continued to rent out public land at discounted rates to religious groups, usually Catholic, for constructing places of worship. Government funding also helped preserve and maintain historic places of worship, which were almost all Catholic.

In June the government sponsored the visit by a group of 50 Moroccan theologians and imams to more than 50 Muslim congregations in the Piedmont Region to discuss religious education and ways for Muslim immigrants to interact with, and integrate into, local society while preserving Muslim values. The Moroccan Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Turin-based Italian Islamic Confederation trained the visiting clerics, in cooperation with the MOI and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The visit concluded with a Quran recitation contest in Turin.

Politicians from several political parties, including the League, Brothers of Italy, and CasaPound, again made statements critical of Islam. On February 7, League leader Salvini said, “The problem with Islam is that it is a law, not a religion, and is incompatible with our values, rights, and freedoms.” On February 8, Giorgia Meloni, president of the Brothers of Italy Party, concurred with Salvini, adding on social media, “We can’t deny there is a process of Islamization going on in Europe. Islam is incompatible with our values, civilization, and culture.” Al Jazeera reported that during the campaign for the March parliamentary election Salvini said, “Islam is incompatible with the constitution.” The news service cited Mohamed Ben Mohamed, Imam of al-Huda in Centocelle, one of the largest unrecognized mosques in Rome, as stating, “During the election campaign, Salvini said he would close mosques and not allow any new ones to open....There’s no regulation for places of worship, the law remains vague, and every municipality interprets it its own way.”

As chair of the OSCE during the year, the country hosted several events promoting religious and ethnic tolerance. In January it hosted a conference on combating anti-Semitism that brought together representatives from government, civil society, and religious communities from across Europe. Conference participants agreed to strengthen their efforts to combat anti-Semitism throughout the continent through government-led public information campaigns, interfaith dialogue, and greater security measures for Jewish communities. To commemorate the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp on Holocaust Remembrance Day, January 27, President Sergio Mattarella hosted a ceremony in which he stressed the need to remain vigilant against the return of “the ghosts of the past.” On January 18 and 19, Minister of Education Valeria Fedeli accompanied a group of 100 students to visit Auschwitz in cooperation with the Union of Italian Jewish communities (UCEI).

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Contrary to previous years, the government did not issue statistics on religiously motivated incidents. The Anti-Semitism Observatory of the Jewish Contemporary Documentation Center Foundation (CDEC), an NGO, recorded 185 incidents of anti-Semitism, compared with 130 in 2017. Reports of anti-Semitic incidents published on CDEC’s website included discrimination, verbal harassment, particularly at soccer matches and other sporting events, online hate speech, and derogatory graffiti. Internet hate speech and bullying were the most common forms of anti-Semitic incidents, according to CDEC, which continued to operate an anti-Semitism hotline for victims of, and witnesses to, anti-Semitic incidents. The NGO Communities of the Arab World in Italy reported a 35 percent increase in incidents against Muslims in schools, hospitals, and on public transport in 2017, the most recent year for which data were available, compared to the previous year, but it did not provide details on the total number or types of incidents.

Noemi Di Segni, President of UCEI, urged authorities “to pay attention to all forms of radicalization of anti-Semitism.” During a meeting to mark the 80th anniversary of the Fascist-era “racial” laws, Ruth Dureghello, President of Rome’s Jewish community, stated, “anti-Semitism is resurfacing and should be combated with all means.”

In September Yassine Lafram, who was elected President of the Union of Islamic Organizations and Communities in Italy in July, told Al Jazeera that “On social media, messages, Facebook pages, and groups are increasingly aggressive against migration and Islamic culture,” and expressed concern that “words may turn into the actions of a few people.”

In December the European Union’s Agency for Fundamental Rights (EU-FRA) released its second survey of Jewish experiences and perceptions of anti-Semitism. EU-FRA targeted Jewish populations through community organizations, Jewish media, and social networks; 682 individuals who identified themselves as Jewish residents of Italy responded to the online survey. Nineteen percent said they had witnessed other Jews being physically attacked, insulted, or harassed in the previous 12 months, and 25 percent reported being harassed over the same period. Seventeen percent of respondents said they had felt discriminated against because of their religion or belief; 81 percent thought anti-Semitism had increased over the previous five years.

On April 20, in Veggia di Casalgrande in the Province of Reggio Emilia, unknown persons left a pig’s head in front of the entrance to a facility the Islamic Cultural Association of Sassuolo had purchased for the purpose of establishing a place of worship. Commenting on the plan to establish a place of worship there, the local Catholic priest said that a mosque “would attract more Muslims,” and result in social tensions. He added, “Islamic culture is deeply intertwined with religion, it is not like ours. Let’s build flats for the poor instead.”

On January 25, the National Soccer Federation fined Rome soccer club Lazio 50,000 euros (\$57,300) for an October 2017 incident in which far-right Lazio fans placed anti-Semitic stickers depicting Anne Frank wearing the jersey of city rivals AS Roma in Rome’s Olympic Stadium. The federation did not impose the additional penalty, which the prosecutor had requested, of barring Lazio fans from attending two team games.

In October the press reported the Kempinski Hotel in Venice suspended an employee for anti-Semitic comments made on Facebook, and a hotel in Pavia suspended an employee over the summer for anti-Semitic comments he made in an email exchange with customers.

Amnesty International reported that, of 787 instances of hate speech on social media during the three weeks of the 2018 national electoral campaign in February and March, approximately 11 percent contained anti-Islamic messages.

The press reported examples of anti-Semitic graffiti and posters, including depictions of swastikas on walls, anti-Semitic stereotypes, and praise of neo-Nazi groups in cities such as Rome, Milan, and Pisa. On September 12, authorities found swastikas and other anti-Semitic graffiti, including insults against Jews, at the entrance of a theater in Pisa. On September 6, police found a graffito reading, “Jews should burn,” in front of a school in the outskirts of San Benedetto del Tronto. On February 28, five slogans were discovered on walls in Cesiomaggiore, in the province of Belluno. One of them read, “Jews, we will reopen the ovens. Free Palestine.”

According to representatives of the Jewish community, some Jewish residents believed many of the new Muslim arrivals from Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East faced hardships integrating into Italian society and were susceptible to anti-Semitic propaganda, especially in the outskirts of

big cities, where they said some far-right groups were already spreading such messages.

On June 12, unknown individuals left a graffito reading, “this is a Jewish shop” on the shutters of a shop owned by a Jewish family in San Maurizio Canavese, near Turin. In addition, a car was set on fire near the vandalized shop. Authorities said they believed the two incidents were connected. On January 25, authorities in Florence found a flagstone commemorating victims of the Holocaust overturned and damaged. On December 10, authorities in Rome discovered 20 commemorative cobblestones had been stolen from a street in front of a house where Jewish deportees had lived during World War II. Police had not identified any suspects at year’s end. Other cases of vandalism included the theft of commemorative stones or plaques dedicated to victims of the Holocaust.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Representatives from the U.S. embassy and consulates general met with representatives of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, the Ministry of Interior, and local government officials in Rome, Sicily, Naples, Milan, Turin, Bologna, Florence, Modena, Reggio Emilia, and Pisa to discuss the establishment of new places of worship as requested by religious groups, relations between the government and Muslim religious communities, anti-Semitic incidents, and assistance in tracing the contents of the Jewish communal library of Rome, which the Nazis looted in 1943. During these meetings, embassy and government officials also discussed integration of asylum seekers and migrants, many of whom were Muslim, Orthodox, or Hindu.

The U.S. embassy and consulates general and visiting Department of State officials met with the Muslim and Jewish communities to stress the importance of interfaith dialogue and to share U.S. best practices regarding education, integration of second generation Muslims, and social media networking.

U.S. embassy and consulates general officials continued to meet with representatives of civil society groups, including Caritas, Sant’Egidio, and Anolf, as well as Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish leaders in cities throughout the country. The U.S. officials urged the social inclusion of immigrants, many of whom were Muslim, and dialogue among various religious groups, and monitored groups’ ability to practice their religion freely.

In June the embassy organized a series of meetings for U.S. NGO Welcoming America and U.S. local government officials, who engaged with national and local authorities and ethnic and religious leaders and gave presentations on their activities aimed at engaging local governments, businesses, and civil society groups to support immigrants and refugees of various ethnic backgrounds and religious faiths and promote participation in the development of their communities.

In January the embassy invited a U.S. policy expert to discuss inclusive educational policies in the United States for persons with different religious backgrounds and the role of schools and communities in fostering integration.

Embassy officials met with the president of UCEI and Rome Jewish community leaders to discuss how to support their efforts to counter anti-Semitism among far-right groups and civil society.

In September the embassy sponsored the participation of a Muslim trainee lawyer in criminal law and immigration law in a program in the United States on American Pluralism – Politics, Policy, Economics. In September the embassy invited a community activist responsible for interreligious

dialogue and youth affairs from a provincial Islamic federation to participate in a program in the United States on empowering youth leaders from the Near East and North Africa.

On June 3, the embassy hosted an iftar inviting Muslim communities, including the leaders of the largest religious confederations, young activists, and members of other organizations working on integration programs. Participants engaged in a discussion of religious freedom in the country.

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