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2017 Report on International Religious Freedom - Armenia

Executive Summary

The constitution states that everyone has freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. The constitution recognizes the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) as the national church and preserver of national identity, but also establishes separation of “religious organizations” and the state. Religious minority groups stated they were particularly concerned with the potentially negative effect on minority religious groups of a draft law on religious freedom. Representatives of Christian minority religious groups said they continued to worship freely; however, some Christians said they felt obligated to practice their religion discreetly, particularly while serving in the military. Human rights activists continued to express concern about the government’s concurrence with the AAC’s dissemination of teaching in schools that often equated AAC affiliation with national identity. According to minority religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), government statements equating national identity to affiliation with the AAC continued to fuel both governmental and societal discrimination against religious organizations other than the AAC.

Unlike the previous year, the Jehovah’s Witnesses reported no instances of societal physical harassment against its members; there were 10 instances of verbal harassment, down from 17 the previous year. Jehovah’s Witnesses attributed the decrease to prompt police action. According to a Pew Research Center survey published in May, 82 percent of respondents agreed with the statement “It is important to be part of the AAC to truly share the national identity of the country.” According to Christian minority religious groups and NGOs, the media climate continued to improve for minority religious groups compared with previous years, becoming more balanced and accurate; however, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported instances of negative reports in the media.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to promote religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue during meetings with government officials. Embassy officers met with AAC leaders to engage the AAC in supporting the rights of religious minorities to practice their faith without restrictions. The embassy used Facebook and Twitter to send messages in support of religious tolerance. The Ambassador and embassy officials regularly met with minority religious groups to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.1 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2011 census, approximately 92 percent of the population identifies with the AAC. Other religious groups, none representing more than 1 percent of the population, include Roman Catholics, Armenian Uniate (Mekhitarist) Catholics, Orthodox Christians, evangelical Christians, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, charismatic Christians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), members of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East, pagans, Molokan Christians, Yezidis, Jews, Bahais, Shia Muslims, and Sunni Muslims. According to members of the Jewish community, there are between 500 and 1,000 Jews.

Yezidis are concentrated primarily in agricultural areas northwest of Yerevan around Mount Aragats, and Armenian Uniate Catholics live primarily in the north. Most Jews, Mormons, and Orthodox Christians reside in Yerevan, along with a small community of Muslims. Most Muslims are Shia, including Iranians and temporary residents from the Middle East.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right includes the freedom to change one’s religion or beliefs and the freedom to manifest religion or belief in rituals of worship, such as preaching or church ceremonies, either alone or in community with others, in public or in private. The constitution allows restrictions on this right to protect state security, public order, health and morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. The constitution establishes separation of “religious organizations” and the state. It recognizes “the exclusive mission of the Armenian Apostolic Church as a national church in the spiritual life, development of the national culture, and preservation of the national identity of the people of Armenia.” The constitution prohibits the exercise of fundamental rights and freedoms for the purpose of inciting religious hatred. It allows conscientious objectors to military service to perform alternative civilian service.

The law prohibits, but does not define, “soul hunting,” a term describing both proselytism and forced conversion; however, no prosecutions have occurred under this law.

According to the law, a registered religious group has the right to minister to the religious and spiritual needs of its faithful; perform religious liturgies, rites, and ceremonies; establish groups for religious instruction; engage in theological, religious, and historical and cultural studies; train members for the clergy or for scientific and pedagogical purposes; obtain and utilize objects and materials of religious significance;

use communications media; establish ties with religious organizations in other countries; and engage in charity. The law does not require religious groups to register, but in order to conduct business in its own name (e.g., to own property, rent property, establish bank accounts), it must register. The law does not stipulate rights accorded to unregistered groups.

To register as a legal entity, a religious community must present to the Office of the State Registrar an assessment from the Division of Religious Affairs and National Minorities stating its expert opinion whether the community complies with the requirements of the law that it be based on “historically recognized holy scripture;” be “free from materialism and is of a spiritual nature;” have at least 200 adult members; and its doctrine be espoused by a member of the “international modern system” of religious communities. The law does not define “free from materialism” or state which religious communities are considered part of the “international modern system.” The law specifies that this list of registration requirements, to which the Division of Religious Affairs and National Minorities must attest, does not apply to a religious organization based on the faith of one of the groups recognized as national minorities. A decision by the Office of the State Registrar may be appealed through the courts.

The criminal code prohibits “obstruction of the right to exercise freedom of religion” and prescribes punishment ranging from fines of up to 200,000 drams (\$410) or detention of up to two months.

The Human Rights Defender’s office (Ombudsman’s office) has a mandate to address human rights violations and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of religion, committed by officials of the state and local governments.

The law prohibits an employee of the police, National Security Service, service for mandatory enforcement of court rulings, penitentiary service, or rescue service from being a member of a religious organization, but the law does not define the meaning of “membership” in a religious organization. The law prohibits members of the police, military, and National Security Service, as well as prosecutors, diplomats, and other national, community, and civil servants from using their official position for the benefit of “religious associations” or from preaching in support of them. The law also prohibits police, prosecutors, and other state and civil servants from conducting other religious activities while performing official duties. While the law defines a “religious organization” as an association of citizens established for professing a common faith as well as for fulfilling other religious needs, it provides no definition for “religious associations.” According to a new law regarding military service adopted on November 15, a military service member is not permitted to establish a religious association. If a member of the military is a member of a religious association, the member does not have the right to preach to other service personnel during the military service.

The law allows the AAC free access to, and the right to station representatives in, hospitals, orphanages, boarding schools, military units, and places of detention, while other religious groups may have representatives in these locations only with permission

from the head of the institution. The law also stipulates the state will not interfere with the AAC’s exclusive right to preach freely and spread its beliefs throughout the entire territory of the country.

The law mandates public education be secular, and states “religious activity and preaching in public educational institutions is prohibited, with the exception of cases provided by law.” Courses called the History of the Armenian Church (HAC) are a mandatory part of the national curriculum in public and private schools in grades five through 11.

The AAC has the right to participate in the development of the syllabi and textbooks for these courses and to define the qualifications of their teachers. The Church may nominate candidates to teach the courses, although the teachers are state employees. All students are required to enroll in these classes; there is no opt-out provision. The law grants the AAC the right to organize voluntary extracurricular religious instruction classes in state educational institutions. Other religious groups may provide religious instruction to their members in their own facilities, but not within the premises of state educational institutions.

The labor code prohibits employers from collecting and analyzing data on religious views of employees.

The law provides for two types of service for conscientious objectors as an alternative to compulsory, two-year military service: alternative (noncombat) military service for 30 months, or alternative labor service for 36 months. Evasion of alternative service remains a criminal offense. Penalties range from two months’ detention to eight years’ imprisonment depending on the circumstances of the case.

The law does not recognize groups organized on the basis of religion as political parties.

The criminal code prohibits incitement of religious hatred through violence, public statements, or the mass media and prescribes punishments ranging from fines of 200,000 to 500,000 drams (\$410 to \$1,000) or prison terms of between two and six years.

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

Government Practices

Summary paragraph: Religious minority groups said they were concerned about the potential erosion of their rights through a legislative initiative on religious freedom proposed by the government and sent to the European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission) for review in November. Representatives of religious minorities said if the law passed as drafted, it would adversely impact freedom of

religion for minority religious groups in the country. Human rights activists continued to express concern about the government's concurrence with the AAC's dissemination of teaching in schools that often equated AAC affiliation with national identity. According to minority religious groups and NGOs, government speech equating national identity to affiliation with the AAC continued to fuel discrimination against minority religious groups. NGOs and some religious groups also said the focus in school textbooks on the Bible and AAC traditions and language, such as “we the Armenians are Christian people,” and “thanks to the AAC, Christianity has become the inseparable part of the national identity of the Armenian people” showed government preference for the AAC. They also said other religious groups were sometimes characterized in disparaging or inaccurate ways. During the year religious minority groups did not report abuses during the military service of their religious community members, unlike in previous years. One group reported a “positive attitude” toward members of the evangelical Christian faith in the army, including from AAC chaplains. Minority Christian groups reported they had the freedom to worship provided they did so privately and discreetly on their own premises and in their community – keeping their activities low-profile and exercising self-censorship.

On June 1, the Ministry of Justice proposed a package of laws, called the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, to amend legislation on religious freedom. The ministry did not conduct prior consultations with religious organizations or the governmental Division of Religious Affairs and National Minorities before proposing the legislation. Numerous members of religious minority groups and civil society organizations stated there were positive developments in the proposed legislation, including the removal of unclear registration requirements and the mention of “soul-hunting.” They expressed particular concern, however, about the apparent intention of the government to remove the AAC from being covered by the draft law. They also expressed concerns the draft law stipulated religious unions may receive funding from abroad and may not finance their spiritual centers and political parties located outside of the territory of the Republic of Armenia. Proposed government monitoring of religious groups and unclear articles in the draft pertaining to NGOs were other concerns.

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) reviewed the draft package of laws following an official request from human rights advocate Arman Tatoyan. The ODIHR opinion issued on September 29 noted the draft legislation contained some major improvements in terms of compliance with international human rights standards, including adoption of some of the key recommendations made in previous ODIHR-Venice Commission joint opinions on Armenian legislation pertaining to freedom of religion or belief. ODIHR stated, however, that further amendments were needed to ensure the draft's full compliance with international standards and OSCE “human dimension” commitments. Key ODIHR recommendations included an explicit statement that the AAC must fall under the jurisdiction of the draft law; the replacement of “state security” with the term “public safety” to remove potential limitations on the freedom to manifest thought, conscience, and religion or belief; removal of the obligation for religious organizations to maintain records of their members; and the removal of the prohibition on foreign funding for religious organizations.

On November 30, following the ODIHR review, the Ministry of Justice presented to the religious community an updated draft of the legislative package. According to religious freedom experts and many members of the religious community, even though the updated package specifically included AAC as a subject of the law, in some respects the revised version was more problematic than the previous draft because it was clearly aimed at controlling religious organizations and limiting freedom of religion. According to the preliminary assessment by the Center for Religion and Law, a local NGO, the revised draft included many provisions stricken from previous drafts by the Venice Commission and ODIHR. The updated draft Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations included more than a dozen grounds (many of them vague and open for interpretation) for banning expression of freedom of religion, including if such expression undermined state security, weakened the country's defense capacity, preached religious fanaticism, engaged in other illegal or immoral acts, was carried out for mercenary purposes, or occurred in the vicinity of educational facilities. The draft also banned foreign funding, included mandatory public reporting requirements and increased government supervision, with the possibility of suspending the organization for failure to comply with such reporting requirements, and numerous other provisions that critics said were excessive and restrictive. According to representatives of evangelical churches, such provisions could be selectively applied to target “unwanted” minority religious groups. The government sent the draft to the Venice Commission for an assessment in November.

Some human rights activists, religious minorities, and atheists continued to express concern over the government's inclusion of the AAC in many areas of public life, and the public education system in particular, as well as its granting permission to the AAC to disseminate materials in schools with material equating AAC affiliation with the national identity.

Yezidi community representatives continued to report their dissatisfaction with the mandatory HAC course, terming it “religious indoctrination.” In December 2016, the Sinjar Yezidi National Union NGO addressed an open letter to Prime Minister Karen Karapetyan voicing concern that the state violated the freedom of religion of Yezidi children by carrying out Christian indoctrination and conversion of the non-Christian population through the HAC course as a mandatory school subject. The Ministry of Education and Science stated, however, it did not receive any complaints against the teaching of the HAC course.

Several non-AAC religious groups said they did not object to the inclusion of the HAC course in public schools. For instance, representatives from the Word of Life Church said, “The 1,700-year activity of the Armenian Church is an integral part of the history of the Armenian people, so we have no objection to the teaching of the Armenian Church history in schools. At the same time, it is important that neutral and respectful attitudes toward other denominations be maintained, and pupils of different church affiliations not be subjected to preaching.” Others, however, including NGOs, other religious organizations, atheists, and nonpracticing members of the AAC publicly voiced concerns. There were reports of AAC clergy teaching the course in some schools and

requiring visits to AAC churches as part of the course, without providing opportunities for discussion of other faiths or for students to visit non-AAC religious sites. According to the government, there were no AAC clergy members teaching the course during the 2016-17 academic year, only lay teachers; however, media reports stated that some AAC clergy continued to teach the HAC course. Reportedly teachers of Armenian language, literature, and history courses also organized visits to AAC religious sites. According to media reports, AAC clergy also visited state-funded kindergartens, including during celebrations of religious holidays, and organized visits of kindergarten classes to AAC churches.

Critics of the HAC course said it “constituted church indoctrination disguised as history.” NGOs and other religious groups cited the focus on the Bible and AAC traditions and language such as “we the Armenians are Christian people,” and “thanks to the AAC, Christianity has become the inseparable part of the national identity of the Armenian people” in fifth and sixth grade textbooks. They also said the HAC course sometimes characterized other religious groups in disparaging or inaccurate ways. For example, while describing Islam, the textbook includes the following, “Getting acquainted with the Bible, as well as the Jewish and Christian religions, Muhammad declared himself a prophet and beginning in 610, started to preach in the manner he understood and established a new religion.” NGOs also noted the eighth grade textbook presented the activities of Catholic missionaries in a negative light, including quotes such as “Catholic propaganda created especially horrible devastation in the Armenian communities in Europe.” NGO critics said the ninth grade book presented evangelical movements as a threat to the AAC, accusing other religious groups of “soul-hunting,” while the eleventh grade textbook states, “Armenians are Christian by faith and Apostolic by belief.”

On January 24, in a Facebook press conference with Radio Free Europe, Minister of Education Levon Mkrtchyan was asked about AAC preaching in schools and the requirement in the HAC course that graduates of high schools, including Yezidis and other non-Christians, participate in AAC national religious holidays and understand their meaning. In response, the minister quoted the article of the law stating the AAC had an exclusive right to preach on the territory of the country and minorities could preach within their own communities. The minister also said, “We are people living under the auspices of the AAC.” In a different video aired on May 29, the minister said those Yezidi community representatives whom he had met did not voice concerns about the HAC course, but rather, about the preservation of their language. The minister added he was prepared to incorporate information on Yezidis and Kurds in the schools where there are minorities “but for the entire Armenia, naturally not.”

On November 1, *Epress.am*, an independent online outlet focused on human rights reporting, published a story stating a professor of Armenian Language and Literature at the Russian-Armenian (Slavonic) State University had told her students she would conduct an exam at an AAC church and therefore all female students must cover their hair during the exam. Another student was removed from her class for saying he was an atheist.

Based on a Ministry of Education pilot program launched in 2012, school administrations had the option to include an additional course, entitled History of the AAC/Christian Education, in their curriculum for grades two through four. Once a school chose this option, the course became mandatory for students in those grades. During the year, 76 schools followed this option.

Human rights activists expressed concern about the impact of government statements and policies, including changes to the constitution in 2016, further linking the AAC with the state and potentially marginalizing religious minorities. For instance, Eduard Sharmazanov, the vice speaker of parliament from the ruling Republican Party of Armenia, said in response to criticism of the AAC by a former official, “the only right investment in Armenia is to build a church ... it's a good thing, what should the investors do? Should we let the cults build churches instead? Yes, the Apostolic Church is our only holy church, and, in fact, we need to increase the hours of Armenian Church History taught at schools, in addition, it should be taught both at the university level and in our own lives.” Responding to a journalist’s question about soldiers being forced to pray in the army, Sharmazanov responded, “They are not forced. That’s the right thing to do, and it should be done, that’s not a violation of rights. This is not prostitution or erotica. It is true that soldiers pray in the army, we ought to start doing the same in the parliament, and we must have our spiritual awakening everywhere.” In his remarks Sharmazanov also said, “Nation and church are united, as Armenian and Christian are synonymous,” and in reference to the AAC, he said, “This is our state Church.” On December 8, at the celebrations of the 20th anniversary of the army’s chaplaincy program, Minister of Defense Vigen Sargsyan said, “The Church cannot be separate either from the state or the army. This is prescribed in our constitution, legislation, and most importantly, in the heart of every Armenian.”

Several minority religious groups reported their members preferred not to publicize their religious affiliation while in military service, although conscripts continued to be encouraged to declare their religion when beginning their service. There were no reports by religious minority groups of abuses during the military service of their community members connected to their faith; one group reported a positive attitude towards evangelical Christians in the army, including from AAC chaplains. According to the government, no religious groups other than the AAC presented requests to visit a military unit. The chaplaincy program, a joint Ministry of Defense-AAC initiative, continued to allow only AAC clergy to serve in the program.

On October 12, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses had been unjustly convicted for refusing to perform alternative service under military supervision and determined the government must provide conscientious objectors with “an alternative military service of a genuinely civilian nature.” The Jehovah’s Witnesses were in 2011 to two and half years in prison and released in 2013. The government implemented an alternative civilian service not controlled by the military later that year.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported 161 of their members completed alternative civilian service for conscientious objection by the end of the year, up from 17 members in 2016. As of December, 105 Jehovah’s Witnesses were working in the alternative civilian service program. Members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses said the state committee responsible for coordinating and reviewing the applications for alternative service continued to be cooperative, and the program worked well. According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the directors of alternative civilian service locations had expressed their satisfaction with the program.

On October 11, during public hearings at the National Assembly, Avetik Ishkhanyan of the NGO Helsinki Committee asked Minister of Defense Sargsyan about atheists and non-AAC followers who were “forced to pray in the army.” The minister replied he was unaware of any case in which a soldier was forced to pray or be baptized. The minister said he would punish those who violated the law, while stating, “I consider an absolute the value that the Armenian Apostolic Church creates in our general system of values.”

Jehovah’s Witnesses said they continued to face difficulties in building places of worship because of interference of local officials throughout the country. According to Witnesses, representatives from mayors’ offices openly stated on numerous occasions they would not permit Jehovah’s Witnesses to build a place of worship in their town or city. In particular, Jehovah’s Witnesses encountered difficulty obtaining approval of the required architectural planning studies and in obtaining building and occupancy permits. At year’s end, Witnesses had three pending cases before the ECHR disputing the prohibition by the Yerevan City Municipality on building places of worship on land owned by the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Jehovah’s Witnesses representatives said they continued to pursue legal avenues for the protection of their rights and tried to maintain a dialogue with the government. They reported they continued to receive police protection while engaging in their public ministry both in Yerevan and in the regions and discerned a continued improved attitude on the part of government authorities toward their members.

According to various religious groups and NGOs advocating for religious tolerance, government rhetoric equating national identity to affiliation with the AAC continued to fuel discrimination against religious organizations other than the AAC. In a June 8 interview published in the *Religions.am* portal of religious news maintained by the NGO Collaboration for Democracy, the pastor of the Rhema Pentecostal Church, Karen Khachatryan, discussed the reasons behind what he said was the marginalization of religious organizations other than the AAC and their absence from public discourse. According to Khachatryan, the churches of the evangelical family remained outside the public eye due to a number of factors, including the role of the AAC, the biased attitude of the state, and unprofessional media. Other minority Christian groups reported they had the freedom to worship provided they did so discreetly and limited their activities to their own premises and community. They said attempting to expand beyond those premises or attempting to expand their existing membership through proselytizing

could potentially lead to harassment or discrimination in school or the workplace. For this reason, the groups said, they kept their activities low-profile and exercised self-censorship.

The minister of foreign affairs initiated a conference on November 22 in Yerevan entitled, “Preventing and Countering Hate Crimes against Christians and Members of other Religious Groups – Perspectives from the OSCE and Beyond,” hosted by OSCE/ODIHR with the purpose of addressing persecution of Christians in the OSCE and elsewhere. The minister noted that Armenia was the “first country to adopt Christianity as a national state religion.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Jehovah’s Witnesses did not report instances of physical harassment toward their members, unlike the previous year; however, they reported 10 cases of verbal harassment while engaging in their public ministry. In some cases, individuals overturned literature carts, causing minor damage. Following what the Jehovah’s Witnesses said were prompt responses from police officers on duty in the area, the unidentified offenders did not interfere with the group’s activity again.

A 2017 Pew Research Center survey released in May found 82 percent of respondents agreed with the statement, “It is important to be part of the Armenian Apostolic Church in order to truly share the national identity of the country” and 84 percent expressed the view that “their culture is superior to others.” Most respondents said they belonged to the AAC.

Many minority Christian groups and NGOs reported a trend over the past several years toward positive or neutral coverage of minority religious groups in many online and print media outlets, mostly private. According to a minority Christian group, however, most broadcast media outlets, including public television, avoided coverage of minority religious groups and their activities, while some media outlets and blogs continued to label minority religious groups as “sects” that threatened national security. According to media sources, many of the self-defined “experts” and authors of such materials were pro-Russia, and they increased their negative rhetoric following the forced closure of the Jehovah’s Witnesses organization in Russia in July. These “experts” said the West funded various “sects” that pursued political goals and aimed to destabilize the country. According to local NGOs, the rhetoric was consistent with general hatemongering against the West by these individuals and was aimed at discrediting universal values and human rights, including freedom of conscience and belief. One of the main “experts” was Alexander Amaryan, who was listed as an expert of the Institute of Public Diplomacy, an educational facility funded by the Russian government and affiliated with the Collective Security Treaty Organization Academy in Armenia.

There were instances of negative media coverage on the Jehovah’s Witnesses throughout the year. An article in *Zhoghovurd*, titled “Jehovah’s Witnesses have increased” said many Jehovah’s Witnesses were living in Tavush Province bordering

Azerbaijan, which is “a threat to our national security given the fighting with Azerbaijan because Jehovah’s Witnesses refuse to take arms.” The paper stated Jehovah’s Witnesses are legally banned in Azerbaijan and Russia, while in Armenia the number of Jehovah’s Witnesses is growing.

On November 16, the official website of the Ararat Diocese of the AAC republished an editorial from its official print biweekly *Shoghakn Araratyan* entitled “When it’s demanded to tolerate everything,” in which the author compared religious and sexual minorities with viruses. “Absolute truth becomes irrelevant; under the names of ‘divine texts’ Buddhist, Krishna cult ideas are spread, and our society, illiterate in the sphere of religion, devours with pleasure those beautifully packed formulations. European standards require from us not to notice that the suggested path leads to the spiritual ruination of suicide attempts, human sacrifices, participation in sermons with shouting and screaming... professing treacherous ideas.”

The AAC also received negative media coverage in some opposition and independent print and online media outlets, as well as in social media.

On October 16, *Epress.am* published an interview with two women who said that during job interviews with a prominent private candy company, they were questioned about their religious views, including when they had last visited a church and whether they were atheists or members of “cults.”

On October 27, International Religious Freedom Day, the Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF), a local NGO, held the closing ceremony of its three-year program aimed at promoting religious tolerance and nondiscrimination. As part of the event, EPF held an awards ceremony for the best coverage of issues related to the freedom of religion or belief. The EPF received 32 written articles, 14 videos, and 12 caricatures as submissions for the awards. Throughout the program, the EPF trained hundreds of journalists on religious tolerance with its partner NGO. According to human rights NGOs and religious minority representatives, the program positively impacted media coverage of religious issues.

Construction continued on Quba Mere Diwane Temple, which the media called the world’s largest Yezidi temple. Located in the small village of Aknalich, the Yezidi community said it would become the spiritual center for the country’s Yezidis. In an international meeting in November, Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian said, “Historically being situated on the crossroads of different civilizations, Armenia has cultivated deeply rooted traditions of coexistence and respect towards other cultures and religions. That is why Armenia preserves a rich cultural heritage that includes, among others, a Hellenistic era temple, some of the oldest churches in the world, a medieval Jewish cemetery, and an 18th century mosque and soon will host the world’s largest Yezidi temple.”

During a September 8 meeting among Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, Sheikh ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, Chairman of the Caucasian Muslims Board, and Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians, the three religious leaders signed a joint statement urging peace in the region.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to promote religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue during meetings with government officials. Embassy officials met with a representative of the Ministry of Defense to discuss religious tolerance in the army and the legal restrictions on members of religious groups joining the military. The Ambassador regularly met with representatives of the government, political parties, social groups, and religious minorities to discuss problems of discrimination faced by religious minorities; to foster a dialogue between the government and the religious groups; and to explore cooperative solutions to those problems. The Ambassador raised with the Ombudsman’s Office and other government officials concerns of the religious community with the proposed legislation on religious freedom. In October the Ambassador made two speeches at the schools for the Republican Party of Armenia and the opposition bloc Bright Armenia where, among other human rights issues, he brought up the importance of nondiscrimination in regard to religion and belief.

The Ambassador held frank and productive meetings with leaders of the AAC and engaged them in supporting the rights of religious minorities to practice their faiths without restrictions. Embassy officials attended conferences on the issue of religious tolerance; visited a Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian village; attended a religious celebration of the Jewish community and the celebration of the bicentennial anniversary of the birth of Bahauallah, the founder of the Bahai Faith; and held regular meetings with representatives of religious and ethnic/religious minorities, including evangelical Christians and other Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, Yezidis, Apostolic Assyrians, and Bahais. In these meetings, embassy officials and religious group representatives discussed the state of religious freedom in the country, including minority religious group concerns. Embassy officials attended the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-hosted OSCE workshop on discrimination against Christians. They also met with civil society groups to discuss concerns about the HAC courses taught in public schools.

Embassy officials participated in the EPF Annual Media Award jury and the ceremony to support religious tolerance in the media. The embassy used social media, including Twitter and Facebook, to send messages supporting religious diversity and tolerance.

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