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2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Algeria

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and, after an amendment enacted in February, for freedom of worship. The constitution declares Islam to be the state religion and prohibits state institutions from behaving in a manner incompatible with Islam. The law grants all individuals the right to practice their religion as long as they respect public order and regulations. Offending or insulting any religion is a criminal offense. Proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims is a crime. Police arrested Ahmadi Muslims for conducting unauthorized religious activities, such as holding prayers and printing religious books. A court sentenced a Christian convert accused of insulting the Prophet Muhammad to three years in prison. In April an appeals court ordered the release of a journalist sentenced in 2015 to three years in prison for insulting the Prophet Muhammad. The government continued to regulate the importation of religious materials. Two Christian organizations said the government delayed four months in authorizing their requests to import Bibles, but viewed the waiting period as an improvement in the delays experienced in past years. Senior government officials issued statements opposing calls by extremist groups for violence in the name of Islam. They also criticized the spread of "extremist" Salafism, Wahhabism, Shia Islam, Ahmadi Islam, and the Bahai Faith. Christians reported continuing delays in obtaining visas for foreign religious workers.

Jund al-Khilafa, a terrorist group affiliated with ISIS, took credit for the October 28 killing of a police officer in Constantine. Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, another terrorist group, took credit for a March 18 attack on a gas plant in Kechba.

There were reports of family members abusing Muslims who converted to or expressed an interest in Christianity. Practitioners of religions other than Sunni Islam, including Christians and Jews, reported they had experienced threats and intolerance and often kept a low profile as a result. In January youth in Biskra distributed leaflets describing Shia Islam as "invading" the country. A private television channel aired interviews with a professor, an imam, and a scholar of Islam about what they described as the dangers of the Ahmadi faith. There were reports of employment discrimination against non-Muslims and one incident of attempted vandalism against a church.

The U.S. Ambassador encouraged the government to promote religious tolerance. Embassy officers in meetings and programs with religious leaders from both majority and minority religious groups, as well as with members of the public, focused on pluralism and religious moderation. The Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor met with several officials from the Ministry of Religious Affairs to stress the importance of religious tolerance and freedom of worship. The embassy sponsored the visit of a Muslim writer and scholar from the United States to engage youth in discussions of religious freedom and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 40 million (July 2016 estimate), more than 99 percent of whom are Sunni Muslim. Groups together constituting less than 1 percent of the population include Christians, Jews, Ahmadi Muslims, Shia Muslims, and a community of Ibadi Muslims residing principally in the province of Ghardaia. Some religious leaders estimate there are fewer than 200 Jews.

The Christian community includes Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, members of the Protestant Church of Algeria, Lutherans, members of the Reformed Church, Anglicans, and an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 Egyptian Coptic Christians. Religious leaders' unofficial estimates of the total number of Christians in the country range from 20,000 to 200,000. Although numbers cannot be confirmed, some church leaders say foreign residents make up the majority of the Christian population. One Christian leader estimates his church has between 20,000 and 40,000 foreign members, compared to fewer than 100 citizen members. The proportion of students and immigrants without legal status from sub-Saharan Africa among the Christian population is also increasing. Christian leaders say citizens who are Christians predominantly belong to Protestant groups. Christians reside mostly in the cities of Algiers, Annaba, and Oran. The Protestant community has an evangelical wing, most of whose members live in the Kabylie region.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares Islam to be the state religion and prohibits state institutions from engaging in behavior incompatible with Islamic values. On February 7, parliament enacted amendments to the constitution, which included adding specific language providing for freedom of worship in accordance with the law. The new constitutional language reflected preexisting provisions in the law pertaining to freedom of worship. Prior to the amendments, the constitution only stated that freedom of conscience and freedom of opinion were inviolable. That language remains in the revised text.

While the law does not prohibit conversions from Islam, proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims is a criminal offense. The law prescribes a maximum punishment of one million dinars (\$9,174) and five years' imprisonment for anyone who "incites, constrains, or utilizes means of seduction tending to convert a Muslim to another religion; or by using to this end establishments of teaching, education, health, social, culture, training...or any financial means." Making, storing, or distributing printed documents or audiovisual materials with the intent of "shaking the faith" of a Muslim is also illegal and subject to the same penalties.

The law criminalizes "offending the Prophet Muhammad" or any other prophets. The penal code provides a punishment of three to five years in prison and/or a fine of 50,000 to 100,000 dinars (\$458 to \$916) for denigrating the creed or prophets of Islam through writing, drawing, declaration, or any other means. The law also criminalizes insults to any other religion, with the same penalties.

The law grants all individuals the right to practice their religion as long as they respect public order and regulations.

The constitution establishes a High Islamic Council and states it shall encourage and promote *ijtihad* (the use of independent reasoning as a source of Islamic law for issues not precisely addressed in the Quran) and express opinions on religious questions presented for its review. The president appoints the members of the council and oversees its work. The constitution requires the council to submit regular reports to the president on its activities. A presidential decree further defines the council's mission as taking responsibility for all questions related to Islam, for correcting mistaken perceptions, and for promoting the true fundamentals of the religion and a correct understanding of it. The council may issue fatwas at the request of the president.

The law requires any group, religious or otherwise, to register with the government as an association prior to conducting any activities. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) grants association status to religious groups; only registered associations are officially recognized. MOI's registration requirements for national-level associations stipulate the founding members must furnish documents proving their identities, addresses, and other biographic details; furnish police and judicial records to prove their good standing in society; show they have founding members residing in at least one quarter of the country's provinces to prove the association merits national standing; submit the association's constitution signed by its president; and submit documents indicating the location of its headquarters. The law requires the ministry to provide a receipt for the application once it has received all the required documentation and to give a response to the application within 60 days of submission of the completed application. The law states applicants are de facto approved if the ministry fails to make a

decision within the 60-day limit. The law grants the government full discretion in making registration decisions, but provides applicants an opportunity to appeal a denial to an administrative tribunal.

Registration applications of religious associations must be approved by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA). The law, however, does not specify additional requirements for religious associations or further specify the MRA's role in the process. Religious groups may appeal an MRA denial to an administrative tribunal. For associations seeking to register at the local or provincial level, application requirements are similar, but the association's membership and sphere of activity is strictly limited to the area in which it registers. An association registered at the *wilaya* (provincial) level is confined to a specific *wilaya*.

The National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups, a government entity, is responsible by law for facilitating the registration process for all non-Muslim groups. The MRA presides over the commission, composed of senior representatives of the Ministries of National Defense, Interior, and Foreign Affairs, the presidency, the national police, the national gendarmerie, and the governmental National Consultative Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (CNCPPDH).

The CNCPPDH monitors and evaluates human rights issues, including matters related to religious freedom. The law authorizes the agency to issue opinions and recommendations, to conduct awareness campaigns, and to work with other government authorities to address human rights issues. The agency may address concerns of individuals and groups who believe they are not being treated fairly by the MRA. The CNCPPDH does not have the authority to enforce its decisions. It submits an annual report to the president, who appoints the agency's members.

The law specifies the manner and conditions under which religious services, Muslim or otherwise, may take place. The law states religious demonstrations are subject to regulation and the government may shut down any religious service taking place in private homes or in outdoor settings without official approval. With the exception of daily prayers, which are permissible anywhere, Islamic services may take place only in state-sanctioned mosques. Friday prayers are further limited to certain specified mosques. Non-Muslim religious services must only take place in buildings registered with the state for the exclusive purpose of religious practice, run by a registered religious association, open to the public, and marked as such on the exterior. A request for permission to observe special non-Muslim religious events must be submitted to the relevant *wali* (governor) at least five days before the event, and the event must occur in buildings accessible to the public. Requests must include information on three principal organizers of the event, its purpose, the number of attendees anticipated, a schedule of events, and its planned location. The organizers also must obtain a permit from the *wali*. The *wali* may request the organizers move the location of an event or deny permission for it to take place if he deems it would be a danger to public order or harm "national constants," "good mores," or symbols of the revolution. If unauthorized meetings go forward without approval, participants are subject to dispersal by the police. Failure to disperse at the behest of the police may result in arrest and a prison term of two to twelve months under the penal code.

The penal code states only government-authorized imams, whom the state hires and trains, may lead prayer in mosques and penalizes anyone other than a government-authorized imam who preaches in a mosque with fines of up to 100,000 dinars (\$916) and prison sentences of one to three years. Fines as high as 200,000 dinars (\$1,834) and prison sentences of three to five years are stipulated for any person, including government-authorized imams, who acts "against the noble nature of the mosque" or in a manner "likely to offend public cohesion." The law states such acts include exploiting the mosque to achieve purely material or personal objectives or with a view to harming people or groups.

By law, the MRA provides financial support to mosques and pays the salaries of imams and religious personnel, as well as health care and retirement benefits. The law also provides for the payment of salaries and benefits to non-Muslim religious leaders who are citizens. The Ministry of Labor regulates the amount of an individual imam's or mosque personnel's pay, and likewise sets the salaries of citizen non-Muslim religious leaders based on their position within their individual churches.

The Ministries of Religious Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Interior, and Commerce must approve the importation of non-Islamic religious writings, except those intended for personal use.

The law states the government must approve any modification of structures intended for non-Muslim collective worship.

Under the law, children born to a Muslim father are considered Muslim regardless of the mother's religion.

The Ministries of National Education and Religious Affairs require, regulate, and fund the study of Islam in public schools. Religious education focuses on Islamic studies but includes information on Christianity and Judaism and is mandatory at the primary and secondary school levels. The Ministry of National Education requires private schools to adhere to curricula in line with national standards, particularly regarding the teaching of Islam and the use of Arabic as the primary language of instruction, or risk being closed.

The law states that discrimination on the basis of religion is prohibited and guarantees state protection for non-Muslims and for the “toleration and respect of different religions.” It does not prescribe penalties for religious discrimination.

The constitution prohibits non-Muslims from running for the presidency. Non-Muslims may hold other public offices and work within the government.

The family code prohibits Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men unless the man converts to Islam. The code does not prohibit Muslim men from marrying Christian or Jewish women.

By law, individuals who have converted from Islam to another religion are ineligible to receive an inheritance via succession.

The law prohibits religious associations from receiving funding from political parties or foreign entities. The constitution prohibits the establishment of political parties based on religion.

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

Government Practices

Police arrested at least 83 Ahmadi Muslims in connection with the practice of their religion. A court sentenced a Christian convert arrested for insulting the Prophet Muhammad on Facebook to a three-year prison sentence. An appeals court ordered the release of a journalist previously sentenced to prison for insulting the Prophet Muhammad. Some Christian groups continued to report facing a range of administrative difficulties in the absence of a written government response to their requests for recognition as associations. In October the MRA issued two permits to import Bibles and other Christian religious materials. The government issued the import authorization in four months, compared with an 18-month wait for the previous request made in 2014. MRA officials, including the minister, continued to state publicly the government’s willingness to accommodate minority faiths who wished to practice in the country by opening places of worship. Christian leaders stated the lack of government responsiveness to visa applications continued to pose complications for religious workers.

On June 13, police arrested nine Ahmadi Muslims in Blida and charged them with operating an unauthorized religious organization, illegally collecting contributions, and printing books. On October 2, police arrested 18 members of the Ahmadi Muslim community in the *wilaya* of Skikda for conducting Friday prayers outside of an authorized place of worship. In November the media reported that 17 Ahmadi Muslims in Skikda were given suspended sentences of between one and six months in prison, while three others were acquitted. The media reported the arrest and subsequent release on provisional liberty of six Ahmadis in the *wilaya* of Ain Temouchent in November. The press also reported the arrest of six Ahmadis in the *wilaya* of M’sila on November 26 on charges of “harming national security” and holding unauthorized prayer services. At year’s end, it was unknown whether they were released. Press reports stated four Ahmadi Muslims were arrested for the unauthorized practice of religion and proselytization on December 19 in the *wilaya* of Relizane. Authorities continued to detain them at year’s end. On December 12, press outlets reported the arrest and subsequent release on provisional liberty of 40 Ahmadis in the *wilaya* of Setif. The status of charges against them was unknown at year’s end. In December Minister of Religious Affairs Mohamed Aissa stated the Ahmadi Islamic “sect” no longer existed in the country and that an effort must be made to bring youth who had been influenced by Ahmadi doctrine back to “our national religious beliefs.” Ministry officials said the Ahmadi community, along with other religious groups they described as “sects” such as the Bahai Faith, were not considered legitimate religious groups and would likely not receive permission to operate legally.

On July 31, police in Setif arrested Slimane Bouhafs, a Christian convert, for posting statements deemed offensive to the Prophet Muhammad on his Facebook page. A court sentenced him on August 7 to five years in prison and a fine of 100,000 dinars (\$916). On September 6 his sentence was reduced to three years in prison. Bouhafs had reportedly posted altered verses from the Quran that satirized the Prophet Muhammad’s life. In July a court sentenced Christian convert Samir Chamek, to five years in prison for Facebook posts he made in 2015 that the court found were offensive to the Prophet Muhammad. Christian media reported the Facebook post compared the Prophet Muhammad to Hitler and accused him of terrorism.

On June 14, the national gendarmerie published a press release saying it had “dismantled an international criminal network of blasphemers and anti-Muslim proselytizers on the internet.” News reports referenced the press release when they reported the arrests of Rachid Fodil and Daif Hichem in M’Sila Province for content on their Facebook page that the government said attacked the precepts of Islam and denigrated the Prophet Muhammad. Media reported in December Fodil was sentenced to five years in prison and a 20,000 dinar (\$183) fine and Hichem to three years in prison and a 20,000 dinar (\$183) fine.

Christian leaders reported two Protestants were arrested in Bejaia for transporting unauthorized religious literature. Additional details were unavailable.

In April an appeals court overturned the conviction of journalist Mohamed Chergui, who had been sentenced in 2015 to three years imprisonment and a fine of 200,000 dinars (\$1,834) for insulting the Prophet Muhammad following charges filed by the newspaper which had employed him. Authorities promptly released Chergui, who had authored an article in mid-2014 about European research on “Quranic expressions,” which had prompted the newspaper to fire him and pursue a legal complaint.

Some appeals of criminal convictions remained unresolved for several years after the defendant’s conviction. An appeal hearing continued to be delayed for Abdelkrim Siaghi, a Christian convert sentenced to five years in prison in 2011 for offending the Prophet Muhammad.

While the government continued to maintain the right to prescreen and approve sermons before imams delivered them during Friday prayers, MRA officials said they rarely did so. The MRA said it sometimes provided preapproved sermon topics for Friday prayers to address the public’s concerns following major events, such as after a highly publicized child kidnapping, or when trying to raise awareness, such as on World AIDS Day.

According to information provided by MRA officials, if a ministry inspector suspected an imam’s sermon was inappropriate, the inspector had the authority to summon the imam to a “scientific council” composed of Islamic law scholars and other imams who assessed the sermon’s correctness. The government could decide to relieve an imam of duty if he was summoned multiple times. The government also monitored activities in mosques for possible security-related offenses and prohibited the use of mosques as public meeting places outside of regular prayer hours.

The government continued to enforce the ban on proselytizing by non-Muslim groups. Several Christian representatives stated continued government observance of the ordinance against proselytizing by non-Muslims prompted churches to restrict some activities not related to proselytizing, such as the distribution of religious literature and holding of events in the local community that Muslims might attend.

Christian leaders said authorities in March threatened two house churches in the Kabylie region with closure. The churches remained open as of the end of the year. There were no reported cases of government prosecution of Christian citizens belonging to unregistered religious groups, who continued to meet in unofficial “house churches,” which were often homes or businesses of church members. Christian leaders said the authorities generally did not prosecute practitioners as long as house churches respected public order. Some of these groups met openly, while others held worship services more discreetly. These groups were most frequently reported in the Kabylie region. MRA officials said they privately urged such groups to come forward and operate in the open, saying the country tolerated religious minorities.

Christian leaders reported being able to visit Christians, most of whom were migrants, in prison.

Several religious groups that had been registered under the previous associations law prior to 2012 continued to try to reregister with the government. In November the MOI told the Protestant Church of Algeria, which had submitted a registration application in 2013, it considered that application incomplete. The Church submitted supplemental documentation in December. It was awaiting an MOI response at year’s end.

The Seventh-day Adventist and Reformed Churches were uncertain as to the status of registration applications they had pending with the government at year’s end.

According to the MOI, although religious associations were de facto registered if the ministry did not reject their application within 60 days of its submission, the 60-day clock did not begin until the ministry considered the application complete and had issued a receipt to that effect. NGOs and religious leaders said the MOI routinely failed to provide them with a receipt proving they had submitted a completed registration application.

Some religious groups viewed themselves as de facto registered after 60 days. Religious groups stated that even if they considered themselves de facto registered under the 60-day rule, service providers, such as utilities and banks, insisted on proof of registration. As a result, without official papers affirming their status, these groups still faced the same administrative constraints as unregistered associations.

MRA officials stated the delay in approvals had arisen because the government had hoped to issue a refinement of the law, specifically to address religious associations. The MRA stated it had never rejected a registration application for a religious group.

Members of Christian religious groups waiting for a ministry response to their applications reported there continued to be no government interference with their holding religious services, but said they continued to face administrative and bureaucratic difficulties because of their lack of documented registered status. They reported problems including a lack of standing to pursue legal complaints, an inability to open bank accounts or establish related charitable activities, and difficulty managing church billing accounts without documented standing as an association. Most Christian leaders stated they had had no contact with the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups, despite its legal mandate to work with them on registration, since its establishment in

2006. Christian leaders stated some Protestant groups continued to avoid applying for recognition and instead operated discreetly because they lacked confidence in the registration process.

MRA officials said Muslim associations remained equally burdened under the registration process because the opening of every new mosque required the formation of an association under the law. Government officials stated the law was designed to apply the same constraints on non-Muslims as on Muslims, including ensuring the compliance of religious rites with the law and respect for public order, morality, and the rights and basic freedoms of others.

According to some Christian leaders, individuals and groups who believed the MRA was not treating them fairly rarely addressed their concerns to the CNCPPDH, which was viewed as having limited authority. The MRA said it instructed employees of the agencies making up the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups to fairly enforce the ordinance which prohibited religious discrimination, and it prohibited its employees from manipulating application of the law based on the employees' own beliefs.

According to the MRA, the government continued to allow government employees to wear religious clothing including the hijab, crosses, and the niqab. Authorities continued to instruct some female government employees, such as security forces, not to wear head and face coverings that could complicate the performance of their official duties.

In October the government granted two permits, after a four month delay, for the importation of Christian religious texts to one authorized organization, which had sole standing to import Bibles on behalf of all Christian entities in the country. Christian leaders said they viewed the waiting period as an improvement over the 18-month delay in approving the previous request made in 2014. Non-Islamic religious texts, music, and video media continued to be available on the informal market, and stores and vendors in the capital sold Bibles in several languages, including Arabic, French, and Tamazight. The government enforced its prohibition on dissemination of any literature portraying violence as a legitimate precept of Islam.

The government, along with private contributions from local Muslims, continued to fund mosque construction. The government and public and private companies also funded the preservation of some churches, particularly those of historical importance. The province of Oran, for example, continued to work in partnership with local donors on an extensive renovation of Notre-Dame de Santa Cruz as part of its cultural patrimony.

MRA officials restated the government's willingness to respond to a request to open a synagogue, while saying Jewish religious authorities did not believe there was a large enough Jewish community to require a synagogue. A ministry official said the ministry would be equally willing to open any other religious place of worship at the request of a minority population, but had received no such requests.

Christian leaders said when Christian converts died family members sometimes buried them according to Muslim rites, and the church had no standing to intervene on their behalf. Christian groups reported some villages continued not to permit Christians to be buried alongside Muslims. The government stated people whose lifestyle gave the impression they were non-Muslims were buried in Muslim cemeteries on the basis of their family's testimonies. A ministry official stated that, where burial grounds were private, the cases were outside of the government's domain.

Christians reported they continued to encounter refusals or delays when seeking government authorization to give Biblical names to their children, but said a second request following a refusal typically led to approval. The MRA stated similar delays sometimes occurred with other names which were uncommon locally, and attributed delays in approving Biblical names to overzealous local officials, who were unfamiliar with the proposed names and required additional time to seek higher-level approval.

The government did not always enforce the family code prohibition against Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men.

Government owned radio stations continued to broadcast Christmas and Easter services in French, although many Christians said they would prefer services to be broadcast in Arabic or Tamazight.

In May a member of parliament affiliated with the Green Alliance, a coalition of three Islamist political parties that represented a segment of the parliamentary opposition, criticized the government for granting a visa to an Israeli journalist accompanying the French prime minister on an April visit to Algeria. An Arabic language newspaper stated that, in the member of parliament's view, the government was normalizing relations with "Zionists who make France a door to infiltrate" the country.

Government officials continued to invite leading Christian citizens to events celebrating national occasions, such as the November 1 commemoration of the revolution, according them the same status as Muslim, cultural, and national figures.

MRA representatives, in particular the minister, continued to make public statements warning against the spread of “extremist” Salafism, Wahhabism, Shia Islam, Ahmadi Islam, and the Bahai Faith. For example, in a radio interview in October, Minister Aissa stated, “We are living through a [religious] sectarian invasion.” In June he said “Neither Ahmadism, Shiism, Wahhabism, nor other sects are the products of Algerians.”

Senior government officials publicly condemned acts of violence committed in the name of Islam by nonstate actors, and urged all members of society to reject extremist behavior. At an April 19 seminar, Minister Aissa called on imams to “indefatigably fight” extremist doctrines, which he characterized as “contrary to the values and principles of Algeria.” In response to terrorist attacks in other countries during the year, including in the United States, Mali, France, Libya, and Turkey, the government issued statements calling the attacks “criminal acts” for taking innocent human lives in contradiction to the tenets of Islam.

Government officials regularly made statements about the need for tolerance of non-Islamic religious groups. In remarks at an international conference on Sufism on May 18, the Inspector General of the Ministry of Religious Affairs praised Sufism for providing “a radiant image of the Muslim religion based on tolerance, open-mindedness, and the illumination and acceptance of the other.” On December 28, Minister of Religious Affairs Aissa said, “We do not criticize Christians who celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, may God’s peace be upon him. It is their culture.” In November, a member of the Council of the Nation, the upper house of parliament, spoke at a conference on tolerance in Beirut on behalf of the Council, saying, “Integrated into the society and solidified at the legal, political, cultural, and religious levels, [Algeria’s Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation] seeks to eliminate all forms of conflict, fanaticism, and discrimination and to establish peace, security, stability, and coexistence.” During Ramadan, the government continued to dedicate numerous media programs to promoting interfaith tolerance, a message the government instructed imams to amplify in their sermons.

Church groups continued to report government delays in responding to the visa applications of religious workers; they said the government often provided no response rather than a documented refusal. Both Catholic and Protestant groups continued to identify the delays as a significant hindrance to religious practice. One religious leader identified lack of visa issuances as a major impediment to maintaining contact with the church’s international organization. The government typically continued to grant short-stay tourist visas and some cultural work visas, rather than the requested long-term work visas; religious leaders reported recipients of these visas were concerned about their legal status when working with churches while on tourist visas. Higher-level intervention with the officials responsible for visa issuance by senior MRA and Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials at the request of religious groups often resulted in the issuance of long-term visas, according to religious groups.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, a U.S. government-designated terrorist organization, continued to operate in the country, stating the government was an “apostate regime.” The group claimed credit for a March 18 attack on a gas plant in Kechba. The Jund al-Khilafa group, which has sworn allegiance to ISIS and also is a U.S. government-designated terrorist organization, claimed responsibility for killing a police officer in the city of Constantine in October and continued to call for violence against those who disagreed with its interpretation of Islam.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Several Christian leaders reported instances where citizens who converted, or who expressed interest in learning more about Christianity, were assaulted by family members, or otherwise pressured to recant their conversion.

Some Muslim citizens who converted to Christianity reported they and others in their communities continued to keep a low profile due to their concern for their personal safety and the potential for legal, familial, career, and social problems. Other Muslim citizens who converted to Christianity continued to practice their new religion openly, however, according to members of the Christian community.

Christian leaders continued to report cases in which Muslim parents successfully pressured their Muslim children to divorce their Christian spouses.

Some Christian parents reported their children were reprimanded in school for openness about their religion.

The media criticized religious communities it portrayed as “sects” or “deviations” from Islam or as “foreign,” such as Ahmadis, Shia, Ismailis, and Bahais. In October a privately owned TV channel with national coverage aired a

program asserting the Ahmadiyya “sect” was more dangerous than criminal gangs. Among those who openly practiced any religion other than Sunni Islam, many reported that family, neighbors, or members of the general population criticized their choice to practice such a religion, harassed them to convert, and occasionally, insinuated they could be in danger because of their choice.

There were reports that some non-Muslims concealed their religious affiliation in the workplace for fear of losing their jobs.

In January following media reports that foreign embassies were under investigation for spreading Shia Islam, youth in Biskra organized a public awareness campaign warning against the spread of the Shia faith. They reportedly distributed leaflets which described Shia Islam as “invading” the country.

Both private and state run media produced reports throughout the year examining the supposed foreign ties and dangers of religious groups such as Shia, Ahmadis, and Salafists. For example, following the arrests of Ahmadi Muslims in Skikda in October, the private *Ennahar* television channel aired a program that featured interviews with a professor, an imam, and a scholar of Islam about what they described as the dangers of the Ahmadi faith. The program did not feature opposing viewpoints defending the Ahmadis.

Jewish citizens said they continued to try to keep their religious identity private, while otherwise engaging with society. After an Israeli journalist was granted a visa to visit Algeria in May, an Arabic-language newspaper wrote that the journalist had a “strong, Jewish-sounding name,” and an online news outlet referred to the journalist as an “Israeli Jew,” adding that the government-issued visa allowed him to “strut in the streets of Algiers to meet whoever he wants.”

Some Muslims continued to show an interest in Catholic places of worship, including visiting them for prayer; Catholics reported the interest was because Catholic religious figures, such as the Virgin Mary, were mentioned in the Quran. In some areas of major cities, observers reported shops sold Christmas trees and decorations.

One church reported local youths attempted to trespass onto its grounds to commit vandalism; the church said local security forces were supportive and subsequently boosted security around the site. Other Christian leaders said they had good relations with Muslims in the country, but reported that residents in the churches’ neighborhoods, including children, sometimes threw objects or shouted insults at church staff on days when services were held.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officers met with government officials from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Interior, and Religious Affairs to discuss the difficulties Christian and other religious minority groups faced in registering as associations, in importing religious materials, and in obtaining visas. Embassy officers also addressed the government’s stance toward minority Muslim communities.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers met throughout the year with government-affiliated and independent religious leaders, and representatives of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities to discuss interreligious dialogue and tolerance, and in the case of religious minorities, their rights and status.

The embassy sponsored the visit of a U.S. citizen Muslim writer and scholar to Algiers and Oran to engage youth in discussions of religious freedom and tolerance.

The embassy discussed the practice of religion, its intersection with politics, and the religious and political roles of women with Islamist political parties and Islamic political figures, as well as with the Muslim Scholars Association. The embassy sponsored visits of several Muslim scholars, a representative of a Sufi order, and members of Islamist political parties to the United States and to U.S. government-funded international conferences on countering violent extremism and promoting religious moderation and tolerance. During a September visit, the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor met with several officials from the Ministry of Religious Affairs to stress the importance of religious tolerance and freedom of worship.

During Ramadan, the Ambassador and embassy staff filmed messages in support of religious pluralism in the country and shared examples of pluralism and religious tolerance on social media. The Ambassador and other embassy staff hosted several iftars, which featured discussions emphasizing the theme of religious tolerance. Embassy staff and embassy-sponsored U.S. speakers also addressed these themes in discussions with youth.