



2015 Report on International Religious Freedom - Greece

Executive Summary

The constitution states freedom of religious conscience is inviolable and provides for freedom of worship with some restrictions. The constitution recognizes Greek Orthodoxy as the “prevailing religion.” The Greek Orthodox Church, the Jewish community, and the Muslim minority of Thrace have long been recognized as official religious legal entities. A 2014 law for the first time recognized additional religious legal entities beyond these three groups, and established a procedure for other groups to seek legal recognition; three additional groups attained status under this procedure by year’s end. The law also provides other avenues for religious groups to operate legally. The government granted some privileges to the Greek Orthodox Church not granted to other religious groups and maintained some restrictions affecting members of non-Greek Orthodox religious groups. Through a variety of programs, the government promoted interreligious dialogue and Holocaust education, and provided training for Quran teachers in state schools.

Members of minority religious groups, including Jews and Muslims, and immigrants experienced religious discrimination and hate speech. There were incidents of vandalism of cemeteries, religious memorials, and houses of worship, some of which government officials condemned.

The U.S. Ambassador, visiting U.S. officials, and embassy and consulate representatives met regularly with government officials and religious groups to promote religious tolerance, encourage interfaith dialogue, and express concern about anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim rhetoric and actions. The State Department’s Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South/Central Asia met with representatives of the government and members of civil society to discuss religious minority issues.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 10.8 million (July 2015 estimate), of whom 98 percent are Greek Orthodox, 1.3 percent Muslim, and 0.7 percent other religions. A private Greek research firm estimated during the year that 81.4 percent of the population self-identifies as Greek Orthodox and 14.7 percent as atheist.

Muslims constitute a number of distinct communities including, according to the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance, approximately 100,000-120,000 individuals residing in Thrace and descended from the officially recognized Muslim minority established by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. Approximately 300,000 Muslim immigrants and foreign workers are located

mostly in the Attica region and clustered together based on their countries of origin in Southeastern Europe, South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, according to local religious leaders. Other groups that together are estimated by religious groups to constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Old Calendarist Orthodox, agnostics, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, members of polytheistic Hellenic religions, Scientologists, Bahais, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Sikhs, Seventh-day Adventists, and the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishnas).

As of December 31, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated 851,319 migrants and asylum seekers from mainly Muslim majority countries arrived in the country during the year. Most sought to depart the country quickly via the northern border for destinations elsewhere in Europe.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution recognizes Greek Orthodoxy as the "prevailing religion." The constitution states freedom of religious conscience is inviolable and provides for freedom of worship under the protection of the law with some restrictions. Development of religious conscience among citizens is listed as one of the goals of state education. The constitution prohibits proselytizing, and no rite of worship may "disturb public order or offend moral principles." The constitution allows prosecutors to seize publications that offend Christianity and other "known religions." The law prohibits offenses against "religious peace," including blasphemy and religious insult, which are punishable by prison sentences of up to two years. Blasphemy cases can be brought before civil and criminal courts.

The Greek Orthodox Church, the Jewish community, and the Muslim minority of Thrace have long held status as official religious legal entities. The Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, two evangelical Christian groups, and the Ethiopian, Coptic, Armenian, and Assyrian Orthodox Churches were recognized as religious legal entities for the first time under a 2014 law. Other groups can become religious legal entities under civil law if they meet certain requirements after review by a court. The requirements include 300 signatory members who do not adhere to another religious group, a leader who is legally in the country and is otherwise qualified, and adherence to public order. Once a religious group has legal status, it can legally transfer property and administer houses of prayer and worship, private schools, charitable institutions, and other nonprofit entities. The law allows religious communities without status as legal entities to appear before administrative and civil courts as plaintiffs or defendants.

A religious group that has obtained at least one valid permit to construct a place of prayer acquires protection under the law. Membership requirements for house of prayer permits differ from the requirements for religious legal entities. The granting of house of prayer permits is subject to approvals from local urban planning departments attesting to the compliance of a proposed house of prayer with local, public health, and safety regulations, with the application requiring at least five signatory members of the group. To obtain a house of prayer permit a group must be classified as a

“known religion.” Court rulings can designate groups as “known religions,” which are defined as those with a clear hierarchy, without hidden doctrines, with rites of worship open to the public, and which do not adversely affect public order or morality. Once a house of worship permit is obtained, planning approvals have to be submitted to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs together with the documents describing the basic principles and rituals of the religious group, and a biography of the religious minister or leader. The leaders of a religious group applying for a house of prayer permit must meet certain nationality or legal residency requirements as well as other professional qualifications. A separate permit is required for each physical place of worship.

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne gives the recognized Muslim minority of Thrace the right to maintain mosques and social and charitable organizations (*awqafs*), allows government-appointed muftis to render religious judicial services in the area of family law, and provides for bilingual education for the Muslim minority. The government, in consultation with a committee of Muslim leaders, appoints three muftis in Thrace to 10-year terms of office, with the possibility of extension. Civil courts in Thrace routinely ratify the family law decisions of the muftis. The muftis also appoint imams to serve in the community’s mosques.

The law requires all civil servants, including cabinet and parliament members, to take an oath before entering office, but individuals are free to take a religious or secular oath in accordance with their own beliefs. Witnesses in trials must also take oaths before testifying in court, but can select between a religious or a secular oath in both civil and criminal cases.

Greek Orthodox religious instruction in primary and secondary schools is included in the public school curriculum; students may be exempted upon request, regardless of religious affiliation. As of January, parents of students registered as Greek Orthodox in school records have been required to say the students were not Greek Orthodox believers in order to receive the exemption. There are no private religious schools, although individual churches may teach optional religious classes on their premises, which students may attend on a voluntary basis. The law does not allow non-Greek Orthodox religious instruction in public schools, except for optional Islamic religious instruction in public schools in Thrace for the recognized Muslim minority, and optional Catholic religious instruction in public schools on the islands of Tinos and Syros.

In Thrace, the government operates secular bilingual schools with some classes taught in Greek and some classes taught in Turkish, and also operates two Islamic religious schools. Muslim students in Thrace who wish to study the Quran may attend after-hours religious classes in mosques. The law provides for Islamic religious instructors to teach Islam to the Muslim minority in Greek-language public schools in Thrace in lieu of mandatory Greek Orthodox religious courses offered twice a week for two hours. The law provides special consideration to students from the recognized Muslim minority for admission to universities and technical institutes, setting aside an annual 0.5 percent quota for admission to universities and civil service positions.

The law provides for alternative forms of mandatory service for religious conscientious objectors in lieu of the nine-month mandatory military service. Conscientious objectors must instead work in state hospitals or municipal and public services for a total of 15 months of alternate service.

As part of the financial reforms required by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund, all religious groups, including the Greek Orthodox Church, are subject to taxation on their property used for nonreligious purposes. Property used solely for religious purposes remains

exempt from taxation and municipal fees for groups classified as “known religions” per 2013 and 2014 changes in the law.

The law prohibits discrimination and criminalizes hate speech on the grounds of religion. Individuals or legal entities convicted of incitement to violence, discrimination, or hatred on the basis of religion, among other factors, may be sentenced to prison terms of between three months and three years, and fined 5,000 to 20,000 euros (\$5,441 to \$21,763). Violators motivated by religion convicted of other crimes may be sentenced to an additional six months to three years, with fines doubled. The law criminalizes approval, trivialization, or malicious denial of the Holocaust and “crimes of Nazism” if that behavior leads to incitement of violence or hatred, or has a threatening or abusive nature towards groups of individuals.

Government Practices

Some government measures continued to affect the activities and practices of minority religious groups. The government provided tax exemptions and some funding for activities related to the three groups historically recognized as official religious legal entities under long standing law. Other groups recognized as religious legal entities and known religions received tax exemptions, and sometimes assistance in other areas. Some religious groups said that ministerial decisions in September and October easing capital control provisions for the Greek Orthodox Church Archdiocese and metropolitanates and the Catholic Church were discriminatory. The government promoted interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance in education and via multilateral engagement.

Two Old Calendarist Orthodox Christian groups and one Pentecostal group acquired status as religious legal entities through the courts during the year. Courts rejected an application submitted by a polytheistic Hellenic group on the grounds that the official name used by the group (“Hellenic National Religion”) was not descriptive of the group’s identity and could be mistaken as representing an official religious affiliation of the Greek nation.

During the year, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs issued seven house of prayer permits. At the end of year, one permit was at the final stage awaiting ministerial signature, with an estimated 30 additional applications pending processing. Some religious groups reiterated complaints from previous years that the house of prayer permit process administratively constrained freedom of religion.

Religious groups that did not have legal status and had never received house of prayer permits, including Scientologists, Hare Krishnas, and polytheistic Hellenic groups, were only able to function as registered nonprofit civil law organizations. The government did not legally recognize weddings conducted by those religious groups.

The government continued to provide public space free of charge to some groups of Muslims whose members requested places of worship during Ramadan and for other religious occasions.

A real estate corporation established by law in which the state and the Greek Orthodox Church of Athens each held a 50 percent stake managed the real estate assets of the Church via a 99-year lease and split revenues between the Church and state. The corporation was administered by a five-member board, including representatives from the finance and education ministries.

Muslim leaders continued to criticize the absence of a mosque that the government planned to finance in Athens, noting that Athens was the last EU capital without an official mosque. The government licensed two Islamic houses of prayer during the year. Muslim leaders also criticized the lack of Muslim cemeteries outside of Thrace, stating that this obliged Muslims to travel to Thrace for Islamic burials. Additionally, Muslim leaders said municipal cemetery regulations requiring exhumation of bodies after three years due to lack of available land contravened Islamic religious law. On October 6, the Council of State considered an appeal submitted by 111 citizens requesting the tendering process for the construction of a government-financed mosque in Athens be ruled unconstitutional due to environmental protection and separation of powers considerations. The court's decision remained pending.

The Orthodox Church received direct support from the government, including payment of salaries, religious training for clergy, and funding for religious instruction in schools. It maintained an institutionalized link to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, which continued to set provisions for retirement of Orthodox monks and monitor vocational training for Orthodox clergy. The government provided funding for the Muslim minority in Thrace to support teachers of Islam in state schools and the salaries of the three official muftis and some imams. The government funded awareness raising activities and training trips for non-Jewish students to Holocaust remembrance events as well as the training of school teachers on Holocaust education.

On January 23, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs issued a circular that effectively added an additional administrative requirement for the exemption of Greek Orthodox students from religious classes in schools, stating the requirement was in accord with a 2012 court decision issued in Chania, Crete. In order to obtain an exemption, parents (or adult students on their own behalf) needed to attest the student was not a Greek Orthodox believer, subject to review by the school's administration. In August the national Data Protection Authority (DPA) referred the ministerial circular to its plenary session for review. According to the DPA, parents (for students) or adult students should be able to request exemption from religious instruction without any further explanation. The decision of the DPA plenary session remained pending.

Members of the Thrace Muslim minority continued to press for direct election of muftis and imams. In response, the government stated the practice of government appointment was appropriate because the muftis had judicial powers and the government appointed all judges. Observers said the ability of courts in Thrace to provide judicial oversight of muftis' decisions was limited by lack of translation of most of sharia into Greek and lack of familiarity with sharia in general. Some leaders of the recognized Muslim minority criticized the absence of bilingual kindergartens in Thrace. They also continued to criticize the appointment, rather than election, of members of the Muslim minority in Thrace entrusted with the administration of the *awqafs*.

The government continued to maintain that Muslims who were not part of the recognized minority created by the Treaty of Lausanne were not covered by that treaty and therefore did not have the rights provided under it.

Some religious groups and human rights organizations stated the discrepancy between the length of mandatory alternate service for conscientious objectors (15 months) and for those serving in the military (nine months) was discriminatory.

On September 30, human rights activists, including members of the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) Greek Helsinki Monitor and the Humanist Union of Greece reiterated their position that courts did not always enforce the right to take an alternate, secular oath.

The Central Board of Jewish Communities (KIS) expressed concern about anti-Semitic attitudes among representatives of a number of political parties, including the defense minister appointed in January, and about political cartoons and images in mainstream media drawing parallels between financial negotiations with Greece's creditors and the Holocaust. On September 23, the deputy minister of infrastructure, transport, and networks resigned on the same day of his appointment following media controversy over anti-Semitic remarks previously expressed on his social media accounts.

On January 12, the secretary general for religious affairs issued a press release explaining in detail "the legal status and the taxation of the Greek Jewish communities and institutions" in response to anti-Semitic views expressed in the Greek parliament, the media, and social media, portraying Greek Jews as avoiding taxation.

The mayor of the city of Kavala postponed for three weeks the unveiling of a monument honoring the memory of Kavala Jews who perished in the Holocaust, citing "aesthetic reasons," saying she had not been shown the commemorative plaque to be used. The KIS stated local authorities objected to the Star of David on the monument. The main governing party, opposition parties in parliament, the secretary general for religious affairs, and Jewish groups criticized the mayor's decision. The mayor subsequently stated she made errors in the way the matter had been handled, and the unveiling was held June 7, with no changes to the monument.

The trial of 69 far-right Golden Dawn (GD) party members and supporters, including 18 of its current and former MPs, for criminal offenses including running a criminal enterprise, began April 20 and was ongoing at year's end. The party's weekly paper continued publishing anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic comments.

In June media reported a Thessaloniki court tried an alleged GD supporter in connection with vandalism of the local Jewish cemetery in 2010, finding him guilty of gun possession and sentencing him to eight months in prison, suspended for three years. A second perpetrator was sentenced to 15 months in prison without the right to appeal. Two minor accomplices were referred to juvenile court.

Following the imposition of nationwide capital controls on June 28, the Ministry of Finance issued a decision on September 28 allowing for larger amounts of cash withdrawals for the Archdiocese of Athens and the metropolitanates of the Greek Orthodox Church. The decision was revised on October 26, to include the same exemptions for the Catholic Church. Leaders of other religious groups stated these exemptions were discriminatory against their own charitable functions.

On October 18-20, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized an international conference on religious and cultural pluralism and peaceful coexistence in the Middle East, bringing together a broad range of domestic and international political and religious leaders, as well as academics and civil society representatives. The Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs co-sponsored a training program for the "continuous education of theologians and Islamic teachers in Thrace on issues of religion, religious diversity, and intercultural religious education" implemented by the

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. The program provided 460 hours of training to 66 Christian theologians, 84 Quran teachers, and 21 trainers from three universities. The Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs also supported an international scientific congress, in Kavala October 10-11, attended by Christian theologians and Islamic teachers on “intercultural religious education and Islamic studies; challenges and perspectives in Greece and in Europe.”

The Aristotle University of Thessaloniki re-established a chair in Jewish Studies at the university’s School of Philosophy and the Department of Philology, offering two courses for the 2015-2016 academic term. The decision followed a 2014 agreement between the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki and the university.

On April 28, the National Commission for Human Rights and the Center for Intercultural Research and Pedagogical Intervention of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens distributed a handbook for teachers on combatting intolerance and discrimination toward Muslims.

In January the foreign ministry issued a statement on Holocaust Remembrance Day, paying homage to the thousands of Greek Jews killed by the Nazis, and condemning anti-Semitism, Nazism activities, and Holocaust denial.

At a January 27 memorial event in Larisa, Thessaly, organized by the local government and the Jewish community to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, local officials made statements condemning anti-Semitism.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Discrimination and hate speech, including both anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic statements, were directed at members of minority religions and immigrants. Government officials condemned some of these incidents. There were incidents of vandalism of Jewish cemeteries and memorials and attacks on Muslim houses of worship. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

Observers stated the Greek Orthodox Church exercised significant social, political, and economic influence. Members of some non-Orthodox religious groups reported incidents of societal discrimination, including being told they were not truly Greek when they revealed their religious affiliations. Some Orthodox leaders attended religious ceremonies of other religious groups.

In October the archbishop of Athens and All Greece, objecting to a government proposal to facilitate exemptions from religious education classes, told media the Greek constitution stated education should be national, Christian, and Greek Orthodox.

On May 6, the Racist Violence Recording Network, an umbrella organization established in 2011 by the UNHCR and the National Commission for Human Rights, with the participation of more than 35 NGOs, reported that in 2014 approximately 20 victims in 17 recorded incidents cited religion as among the reasons for their targeting.

On February 8, pro-government daily newspaper *Avgi* published a caricature depicting the German minister of finance in a Nazi uniform making allusions to the Holocaust. The Jewish Community in Athens condemned the cartoon.

Some metropolitan bishops of the Greek Orthodox Church made anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic statements in letters and social media. One of them blamed the “Zionist lobby” for the “Islamization of Greece.”

According to a media report, in December the Greek Orthodox bishop of Piraeus was quoted as saying the “international Zionist monster” was behind a new law that granted same-sex couples rights in line with EU requirements.

In December the far-right newspaper *Eleftheri Ora* organized a book fair that included anti-Semitic material such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

In January the metropolitan of Dimitriada and Almyros strongly condemned anti-Semitism as incompatible with the Orthodox Christian faith and stated members of the clergy who instigated hatred were “anti-Christian.”

On June 11, unknown perpetrators desecrated a plaque in a downtown Athens playground commemorating the 13,000 Greek children who were deported and exterminated in Nazi concentration camps. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the act. On June 21, two weeks after its unveiling, unknown perpetrators threw paint on a Holocaust monument in Kavala. The municipality restored it immediately and the local mayor condemned the incident. The self-proclaimed neo-Nazi group Combat 18 Hellas claimed responsibility for spraying graffiti containing anti-Semitic messages and swastikas over the entrance to the Jewish cemetery in Nikaia, Athens on October 21. In a statement claiming responsibility, Combat 18 Hellas said it had “made artistic renovations” to the cemetery and had “left the graves for the next time.” The KIS denounced the vandalism.

On October 9, unknown perpetrators vandalized a mosque in Komotini, Thrace region, spraying the words “Turks out” with black graffiti on its door.

In most of these incidents of vandalism police launched investigations but had made no arrests by year’s end.

At a liturgy attended September 9 by Greek Orthodox leaders, the Catholic bishop in Syros spoke about the peaceful coexistence of Catholic and Orthodox residents in the city.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador, visiting officials, and embassy and consulate representatives met regularly with senior government officials, members of parliament, and municipal and religious leaders to promote interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance and diversity, and to express concern about anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim acts and rhetoric. Embassy and consulate representatives engaged regularly with civil society representatives and religious groups, including minority religious

communities such as the recognized Muslim minority of Thrace, to monitor their ability to freely practice their religion and to investigate reports of societal discrimination.

In October the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South/Central Asia visited Athens and met with representatives of the government and members of civil society to discuss religious minority issues.

The Ambassador and embassy representatives met with members of the Jewish community and attended Holocaust memorial events. The embassy sponsored the participation of a professor of political science, whose specialties include the Holocaust in the country, at Aristotle University in Thessaloniki in a program on religious pluralism in the United States. The professor will be teaching courses for the newly created Jewish Studies Chair at Aristotle University.