

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	311
Land:	Algeriet
Kilde:	USDoS - US Department of State
Titel:	Report on International Religious Freedom 2021 – Algeria
Udgivet:	2. juni 2022
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	20. juni 2022

ALGERIA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

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 if they respect public order and regulations. Offending or insulting any religion is a criminal offense. Proselytizing to Muslims by non-Muslims is a crime. Christian leaders expressed concern that the elimination of language providing for freedom of conscience in a new constitution that entered into force at the end of 2020 could lead to greater government persecution of religious minorities and reported changes in their interactions with governmental authorities they attributed to the new constitution. In February, Ahmadiyya Muslim community leaders said there were 50 Ahmadi Muslims who were defendants in the court system, a decline from their October 2020 estimate of 220. In November, authorities charged the president of the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA), Pastor Salah Chalah, and three Christian members of his leadership team with proselytizing on social media, practicing non-Muslim religious rites without authorization, and inciting an unarmed gathering. In August, according to press reports, government authorities abducted Christian convert Soulimane Bouhafs in Tunisia – where he had refugee status – and transferred him to Algeria, where he was detained on charges of being a member of the Movement for the Self-Determination of Kabylie (MAK), an organization the government has designated as terrorist. In April, a court sentenced Said Djabelkheir, a well-known Islamic Sufi scholar, to three years in prison for “offenses to Islam.” Djabelkheir wrote that the sacrifice of sheep predated Islam and denounced child marriage. Several religious groups, including the Ahmadiyya Muslim community and the EPA, said the government again failed to act on their registration applications, pending since 2012. In February, the government announced that mosques that had been closed due to COVID-19 mitigation measures could reopen, but Christian churches would remain closed. According to media reports, authorities continue to arrest, jail, and fine members of the EPA on charges of proselytizing. In April, the EPA reported that the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA) routinely limited its import of Bibles. Twenty EPA churches remained closed, 16 of them sealed off, under a government order from 2017. In February and March, the MRA summoned EPA and Anglican Church officials for questioning. Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist groups said the government did not respond to their requests for foreign religious workers’ visas, resulting in de facto visa refusals.

Some Christian leaders and congregants stated family members abused Muslims who converted to or expressed an interest in Christianity. Individuals engaged in religious practice other than Sunni Islam reported they had experienced threats and intolerance. Media sometimes criticized Ahmadi Islam and Shia Islam as “sects” or “deviations” from Islam or as “foreign.” Ahmadi leaders said news outlets continued to amplify what they consider government misinformation portraying Ahmadis as violent.

The then Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officers frequently met with senior government officials in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Religious Affairs, Justice, and Interior to discuss religious tolerance and the difficulties Ahmadis, Christians, and other religious minority groups faced in registering as associations, importing religious materials, and obtaining visas. Embassy officers focused on pluralism and religious moderation in meetings and programs with religious leaders from both Sunni Muslim and minority religious groups, as well as with other members of the public. The embassy used special events, social media, and speakers programs to emphasize a message of religious tolerance.

On November 15, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed Algeria on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 43.6 million (midyear 2021), more than 99 percent of whom are Sunni Muslims following the Maliki school. Religious groups together constituting less than 1 percent of the population include Christians, Jews, Ahmadi Muslims, Shia Muslims, and a community of Ibadi Muslims who reside principally in the Province of Ghardaia. Religious leaders estimate there are fewer than 200 Jews.

Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, members of the EPA, Lutherans, the Reformed Church, Anglicans, and an estimated 1,000 Egyptian Coptic Christians. Religious leaders’ unofficial estimates of the number of Christians range from 20,000 to 200,000. In 2020, the Christian advocacy nongovernmental organization (NGO) International Christian Concern estimated there were approximately 600,000 Christians. According to government officials and religious leaders, foreign residents make up most of the Christian population. Among the Christian population, the proportion of students and immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa without legal status has also increased in

recent years. Christian leaders say citizens who are Christians predominantly belong to Protestant groups.

Christians reside mostly in Algiers and the Provinces of Kabylie, Bejaia, Tizi Ouzou, Annaba, Ouargla, and Oran.

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. The new constitution, effective December 30, 2020, removed language from the 2016 constitution guaranteeing freedom of conscience. The previous constitution said, “Freedom of conscience and freedom of opinion shall be inviolable. Freedom of worship shall be guaranteed in compliance with the law.” The new constitution’s language reads, “The freedom of opinion is inviolable. The freedom to exercise worship is guaranteed if it is exercised in accordance with the law. The state ensures the protection of places of worship from any political or ideological influence.”

The law does not prohibit religious conversion, including from Islam, but proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims is a criminal offense. The law prescribes a maximum punishment of one million dinars (\$7,200) and five years’ imprisonment for anyone who “incites, constrains, or utilizes means of seduction intending to convert a Muslim to another religion; or by using 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 punishment of three to five years in prison and/or a fine of 50,000 to 100,000 dinars (\$360-\$720) for denigrating the creed or prophets of Islam through writing, drawing, declaration, or any other means. The law also criminalizes insults directed at any other religion, with the same penalties.

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

The constitution establishes a High Islamic Council and states the council 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 shall 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 and correct understanding of the religion. 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 law requires all organizations registered prior to 2012 to reregister. The Ministry of Interior grants association status to religious groups; only registered associations are officially recognized. Unregistered associations have no legal status, and may not own property, open bank accounts, convene gatherings, or raise funds. Members of active, unregistered groups are often subject to criminal prosecution. The ministry registration requirements for national-level associations stipulate the founding members must furnish documents proving their identities, addresses, and other biographic details; provide police and judicial records to prove their good standing in society; demonstrate 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 of Interior to provide a receipt for the application once it has received all required documentation. The ministry has 60 days to respond to applicants following the submission of a completed application. If the ministry does not respond within the 60-day timeframe, the application is automatically approved, and the receipt may be used as proof of registration. If the ministry considers the application incomplete, it does not issue a receipt for the application. The law grants the government full discretion in making registration decisions but allows applicants to appeal a 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 that specific *wilaya*.

The MRA has the responsibility to review registration applications of religious associations, but the Ministry of Interior makes the final decision. The law does not specify additional requirements for religious associations or further specify the MRA's role in the process.

The National Commission for Non-Muslim Worship is charged with facilitating the registration process for all non-Muslim groups according to law. Non-Muslim religious leaders report no contact with the government committee. The MRA chairs the committee, composed of senior representatives of the Ministries of National Defense, Interior, and Foreign Affairs; the Presidency; national police; national gendarmerie; and the governmental National Human Rights Council (CNDH).

The constitution requires a presidential candidate to be Muslim. Under the law, non-Muslims may hold other public offices and work within the government.

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. Membership in the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), a political party banned since 1992, remains illegal. Islamist insurgents, FIS guerrillas, and the government fought a bloody civil war in the 1990s.

The law specifies the manner and conditions under which religious services, Islamic or otherwise, must take place. The law states that religious gatherings, for worship or other purposes, 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. Except for 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-Islamic religious services must take place only in buildings registered with the state for the exclusive purpose of religious practice and be administered by a registered religious association, open to the public, and marked as such on the exterior. A request for permission to observe special non-Islamic 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 event's organizers must be identified and must also 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 endanger public order or harm “national constants,” “good mores,” or “symbols of the revolution.” If unauthorized meetings go forward without approval, police may disperse the participants. Individuals who fail to disperse at the behest of police are subject to arrest and a prison term of two to 12 months under the penal code.

The penal code states only government-authorized imams, whom the state hires and trains, may lead prayers in mosques and penalizes anyone else who preaches in a mosque with a fine of up to 100,000 dinars (\$720) and a prison sentence of one to three years. Any persons, including government-authorized imams, who act “against the noble nature of the mosque” or in a manner “likely to offend public cohesion, as determined by a judge” may be fined as much as 200,000 dinars (\$1,400) or receive a prison sentence of three to five years. The law states that such acts include using the mosque to achieve purely material or personal objectives or with a view to harming persons or groups.

The MRA provides financial support to mosques and pays the salaries of imams and other religious personnel, as well as healthcare 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 employee’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 all printed materials, including religious texts and items, except those intended for personal use. Authorities generally consider “importation” to be approximately 20 or more religious texts or items.

The law gives authorities broad power to ban books that run counter to the constitution, “the Muslim religion and other religions, national sovereignty and unity, the national identity and cultural values of society, national security and defense concerns, public order concerns, and the dignity of the human being and individual and collective rights.” In accordance with a governmental decree, a commission within the MRA reviews importation of the Quran. The decree requires all applications to include a full copy of the text and other detailed information about the applicant and text. The ministry has three to six months to review the text, with the absence of a response after that time constituting a

rejection of the importation application. A separate decree covering religious texts other than the Quran states, “The content of religious books for import, regardless of format, must not undermine the religious unity of society, the national religious reference, public order, good morals, fundamental rights and liberties, or the law.” The importer must submit the text and other information, and the ministry must respond within 30 days. A nonresponse after this period is considered a rejection. Religious texts distributed without authorization may be seized and destroyed.

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

The family code prohibits Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men unless the man converts to Islam, although authorities do not always enforce this provision. The code does not prohibit Muslim men from marrying non-Muslim women. Under the law, children born to a Muslim father are considered Muslim regardless of the mother’s religion. In the event of a divorce, a court determines the custody of any children.

The law requires that couples present a government-issued marriage license before imams may conduct religious marriage ceremonies.

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, or risk closure.

The law states discrimination based on 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 law prohibits all forms of expression that propagate, encourage, or justify discrimination. The government passed a separate hate speech law in 2021, and religious belief or affiliation are not among the categories covered by the law.

The CNDH is responsible for monitoring and evaluating human rights issues, including matters related to religious freedom. The law authorizes the CNDH to conduct investigations of alleged abuses, issue opinions and recommendations, conduct awareness campaigns, and work with other government authorities to

address human rights issues. The CNDH may address religious concerns to appropriate government offices on behalf of individuals or groups it believes are not being treated fairly. The CNDH does not have the authority to enforce its decisions but may refer matters to the relevant administrative or criminal court. It submits an annual report to the President, who appoints the committee's members.

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

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

Government Practices

In February, Ahmadiyya Muslim community leaders said there were 50 Ahmadi Muslims who were defendants in cases in the court system, a decline from their October 2020 estimate of 220. According to Ahmadiyya Muslim leaders, the authorities failed to pursue many of the cases predating 2018, and the cases were dismissed.

In February, a court in Algiers convicted Said Djabelkhir of blasphemy for “offending the precepts of Islam” and sentenced him to three years in prison and a fine of 50,000 dinars (\$360). Djabelkhir is an expert on Sufism and founded the “Circle of Enlightenment for Free Thought,” an association for thinkers and academics who advocate a progressive Islam. Authorities reportedly summoned Djabelkhir to court after a fellow academic filed a complaint that his writings on various Islamic rituals, such as the Hajj and animal sacrifices on Eid al-Fitr, among other critiques, constituted “an attack and mockery of the authentic hadiths of the Sunna [the custom and practice] of the Prophet” and had caused persons psychological harm.

On August 2, Ahmadiyya Muslim community leaders reported that the court tried and convicted two of its community members in Adrar on charges of holding an unauthorized gathering. Their Algiers-based lawyer was unable to attend the court proceedings due to COVID-19-related travel restrictions, and the judge refused the defendants' request to postpone the proceedings. The authorities first imprisoned the two Ahmadis in November 2020, where they remained in pretrial detention until their trial. The court sentenced them to six months' imprisonment and a 50,000 dinar (\$360) fine.

In August, authorities placed Christian convert Soulimane Bouhafs in pretrial detention on terrorism-related charges. According to press reports, plainclothes agents abducted Bouhafs in Tunisia in August and transferred him to Algeria. Bouhafs was a member of the MAK, a political group advocating political autonomy for the Berber region. Authorities designated the MAK a terrorist organization in May. Bouhafs spent two years in prison for insulting the Prophet Muhammad, but the President pardoned him in 2018. Upon his release, Bouhafs fled to Tunisia, where he obtained refugee status from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. He was arrested upon his return to Algeria.

In October, Ahmadi Muslim leaders reported courts had convicted several of its community members on charges of holding unauthorized gatherings and unauthorized fundraising. In Batna, a court sentenced an Ahmadi to one year's imprisonment and a 50,000 dinar (\$360) fine; in Tizi Ouzou, a court sentenced an Ahmadi to two months' imprisonment and a 20,000 dinar (\$140) fine; and in Constantine and Tiaret, the court convicted two other Ahmadis who were awaiting their sentences.

In January, during an interview with daily newspaper *Liberte*, Catholic Archbishop of Algiers Paul Desfarges said he was worried about the removal of the article on freedom of conscience from the constitution, a decision that "greatly grieved and saddened" him, and he said that he could not understand it. He added that he believed the article, along with one on freedom of religion, would "again find its rightful place one day." The day after the interview, the MRA sent the Catholic Church a letter that said the reporter's question had misled the Archbishop, and that the conscience clause "provision does not exist in the 2016 constitution nor does it in the previous ones," adding that the Archbishop had misunderstood the constitution's translation from Arabic. Other religious leaders also expressed concern about the removal of this language from the constitution.

On March 22, an Oran court upheld the five-year prison sentence and fine of 100,000 dinars (\$720) of Hamid Soudad, convicted in 2018 of "denigrating the dogma or precepts of Islam" for reposting a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad on his Facebook account. Soudad's lawyer, Farid Khemisti, attributed the severity of the sentence to Soudad's conversion to Christianity.

In April, an Algiers court sentenced Said Djabelkheir, a well-known Islamic Sufi scholar, to three years in prison for "offenses to Islam." Djabelkheir wrote that the sacrifice of sheep predated Islam and denounced child marriage. Djabelkheir told

the newspaper *Le Soir d'Algerie* that he was surprised by the severity of his sentence and that he planned to file an appeal.

In April, authorities sentenced Hirak political protest activist Walid Kechida to three years in prison for insulting President Abdelmadjid Tebboune and “offending the precepts of Islam.” Authorities arrested Kechida in 2020 after drawing attention by sharing memes that depicted the Prophet on the internet.

NGOs and Ahmadi Muslim religious leaders said the group remained unregistered because the Ministry of Interior never provided the Ahmadi community with a receipt acknowledging a completed registration application that the community submitted to the government in 2012 to reregister the group as the law required. In September, the Ministry of Interior said it had never received a registration application from the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, and Ahmadi leaders reported they were preparing to file another application.

In September, Ahmadi Muslim leaders said they sent a letter requesting to meet with President Tebboune about their registration problems but had not received a response.

In September, the Ahmadi community again reported administrative difficulties and harassment since the community was unregistered and therefore unable to meet legally and collect donations. Members of the community stated that after their initial attempt in 2012, the community again tried to reregister with the MRA and Ministry of Interior as a Muslim group in 2016 and in 2020, but the government refused to accept those applications because it regarded Ahmadis as non-Muslims. The government said in 2019 it would approve the community’s registration as non-Muslims, but the Ahmadis stated they would not accept registration as non-Muslims.

The EPA, the United Methodist Church (UMC), and the Seventh-day Adventist Church said they still had not received responses from the Ministry of Interior to their 2012 and subsequent applications to reregister. According to a pastor associated with the EPA, the Church resubmitted its 2014 registration application in 2015 and 2016, but despite several follow-ups with the government, the Ministry of Interior never accepted its application. None of the churches received receipts for their registration attempts. In March, the EPA said the MRA had told it that the Ministry of Interior was responsible for registration-related decisions and that the MRA could not get involved with the EPA’s registration issue.

In April, EPA leaders reported the Church had sent four letters to President Tebboune requesting to meet with the MRA to address their registration problem. At year's end, they said they had not received a response.

Some religious groups stated they functioned as registered 60 days after having submitted their application, even though they had not received a Ministry of Interior confirmation. Such groups stated, however, that service providers such as utilities and banks refused to provide services without proof of registration. As a result, these groups faced the same administrative obstacles as unregistered associations. They also had limited standing to pursue legal complaints and could not engage in charitable activities, which required bank accounts.

Numerous Christian leaders stated they had no contact with the National Commission for Non-Muslim Worship, despite its legal mandate to work with them on registration. A Christian NGO and Christian publication stated that the government disproportionately targeted Protestant groups for unfavorable treatment. Some Christian leaders in the country attributed this to the emphasis of some Protestant groups on proselytizing and conversion, as well as to the EPA's primarily Algerian composition.

The MRA said it did not view Ibadis as a minority group and considered the Ibadi religious school a part of the country's Muslim community. Muslim scholars stated Ibadis could pray in Sunni mosques, and Sunnis could pray in Ibadi mosques.

On February 14, then Prime Minister Abdelaziz Djerad reopened mosques, Catholic and Anglican churches, and other public places that the government had closed for a second time in November 2020 as part of its COVID-19 mitigation strategy. On February 28, after the EPA asked the MRA if the reopening applied to other churches, the MRA told EPA leaders that it did not have the authority to authorize churches to reopen, calling the EPA's request a "political issue." In March, the MRA told EPA president Pastor Salah Chalah the MRA was not able to authorize its churches to reopen. In March, the EPA reported that local officials denied the Church's request to resume in-person worship in Oran. When the Church questioned the decision, local authorities showed them a signed authorization to seal the churches – which they threatened to do if the Church did not stop asking for permission to reopen. Despite the restrictions, some EPA churches opted to hold Easter services on April 4. The authorities did not react to the decision, and some churches besides Catholic and Anglican ones continued to hold in-person worship services. In April, Chalah reported that the EPA-affiliated

Protestant Church of the Full Gospel in Tizi Ouzou, which Human Rights Watch described as the largest Protestant church in the country, remained closed. Police closed the church in October 2019.

According to Catholic Church officials, the government changed the procedure in January for applying for authorization to conduct non-Islamic religious events. In previous years, the Church submitted its written requests to the local police station, which then stamped the request with a receipt to show the request was registered and approved. Beginning in January, the Church said police stations stopped issuing the receipts. Church leaders also said the police began frequenting one church to inquire about its activities, even though Church officials provided written notification of those activities to the local police.

Some Christian citizens said they continued to use homes or businesses as “house churches” due to government delays in issuing the necessary legal authorizations. Other Christian groups, particularly in the country’s primarily Berber Kabylie region, reportedly held worship services discreetly.

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

According to media reports, authorities continued to arrest, jail, and fine Christians on charges of proselytizing by non-Muslims, which prompted churches to restrict some activities, such as the distribution of religious literature and holding events in local community centers that Muslims might attend.

On June 30, a court in Ain Defla charged Christian convert Foudhil Bahloul with distributing Bibles, printing religious brochures to distribute to Muslims, and “agitating the faith of Muslims.” Bahloul had been in detention since his initial arrest in April for allegedly receiving donations illegally. At that time, police did not question him about the June 30 charges but reportedly questioned him about his religion and decision to convert from Islam. They also searched his house and confiscated religious materials and his identification documents. On July 7, the court sentenced Bahloul to six months’ imprisonment for illegally accepting donations and for proselytizing. On December 7, the court of appeal in Ain Defla sentenced Bahloul to a six-month suspended prison term and a fine of 100,000 dinars (\$720).

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.

In April, EPA leaders reported that the MRA routinely limited the number of Bibles it approved for importation. For example, in late 2020, the Biblical Society, which imported religious texts for all Christian denominations, requested to import 300 Bibles, and the MRA approved 30. The EPA told the MRA there were more than 100,000 Christians in the country and that they therefore needed more than 30 Bibles. The MRA responded by asking for a list of the names and exact number of Christians living in each community, village, and city. The EPA declined to provide this information, and the MRA increased the approved number of Bibles by an additional 5 percent, i.e., by one or two Bibles. The EPA said the import fees cost more than the Bibles themselves but that it would continue to import Bibles only through official channels to avoid legal problems.

On June 6, a judge sentenced Christian Pastor Rachid Seighir to a one-year suspended sentence and a 200,000-dinar (\$1,400) fine for “shaking the faith of Muslims” with Christian literature at his bookstore. On June 2, the authorities ordered the sealing of Seighir’s Oratoire City Church in Oran. Bookstore salesman Nouh Hamimi also received a one-year suspended sentence and a fine of 200,000 dinars (\$1,400) in the same case.

On November 16, authorities charged EPA President Chalah and three Christian members of his leadership team with proselytizing on social media, practicing non-Muslim religious rites without authorization, and inciting an unarmed gathering. Authorities postponed their trial to 2022.

MRA officials again said the government did not regularly prescreen and approve sermons before imams delivered them during Friday prayers. They also stated the government sometimes provided preapproved sermon topics for Friday prayers to address the public’s concerns following major events or to encourage civic participation through activities such as voting in elections. The MRA said it did not punish imams who did not discuss the suggested sermon topics.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and limited resources, it was unclear if the government continued monitoring sermons delivered in mosques. According to MRA officials, in the past, if a ministry inspector suspected an imam’s sermon was inappropriate, particularly if it supported violent extremism, 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 relieve an imam of duty if he was summoned multiple times. The government also monitored activities in mosques for possible security-related offenses, such as recruitment by extremist groups, and prohibited the use of mosques as public meeting places outside of regular prayer hours.

On July 7, the authorities sealed three additional EPA affiliated churches in Oran: the Oratoire City Church in Oran, the House of Hope Church in Ain Turk, and an EPA church in al-Ayaida. In 2020, courts had upheld a 2017 government order to close the City Church in Oran.

At year’s end, there were a total of 20 EPA churches that the government had closed, including 16 that the government had physically sealed off. The government said the churches it closed were operating without government authorization, illegally printing evangelical publications, and failed to meet building safety codes.

The UMC continued to own and maintain Methodist properties throughout the country, despite the absence of an in-country bishop. The government denied the previous bishop’s residency renewal in 2008. Until 2019, the UMC maintained a power of attorney to manage the properties’ legal affairs, although the foreign-based Methodist bishop overseeing the UMC in the country reported that Algerian embassies abroad had regularly delayed the approval process to obtain the power of attorney. In 2021, the UMC continued its attempts to establish another power of attorney since the previous one expired in 2019.

Christian leaders said courts were sometimes biased against non-Muslims in family law cases, such as divorce or custody proceedings.

According to religious community leaders, some local administrations did not always verify religions before conducting marriage ceremonies. As such, some couples were able to marry despite the family code prohibition against Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men.

EPA leaders reported public and private institutions fired some of its members due to their Christian faith and that in the public sector, the government frequently withheld promotions from non-Muslims.

Religious and civil society leaders again reported that the Jewish community faced unofficial, religion-based obstacles to government employment and administrative difficulties when working with government bureaucracy. The MRA said it had not received requests to reopen the synagogues that closed during the period of the country's war for independence.

Church groups continued to say the government did not respond in a timely fashion to their requests for visas for foreign religious workers and visiting scholars and speakers, resulting in de facto visa refusals. Catholic leaders continued to say their greatest issue with the government was the long and unpredictable wait times for religious workers' visas.

Catholic and Protestant groups continued to state the delays significantly hindered religious practice. One religious leader said the lack of visa issuances was a major impediment to maintaining contact with the Church's international organization. Higher-level intervention with officials responsible for visa issuance by senior MRA and Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials at the request of religious groups sometimes resulted in the issuance of long-term visas, according to those groups.

In February, Catholic Church leaders reported that COVID-19-related entry requirements further exacerbated existing visa issues related to the Church's foreign clergy. In January, for example, a Nigerian priest bound for a parish in Oran received his visa, but the government subsequently denied his entry request.

In February, the government denied the Anglican canon's residency permit and visa renewals. The MRA told him that he was not eligible to renew his visa and had to submit a new application. The MRA also said the Cairo-based Anglican bishop must submit a letter reappointing the canon to his position. The government approved the canon's visa in May but by year's end had not approved a visa for his successor.

In April, the foreign-based Methodist bishop overseeing the UMC in the country stated that the UMC "gave up" on requesting clergy visas for its pastors. He said that UMC-affiliated clergy were regularly denied tourist visas. The last official UMC visit to the country took place in 2013.

During a May 5 speech to the Algerian Muslim Ulemas (scholars) Association, Bouabdellah Ghlamallah, former Minister of Religious Affairs and head of the High Islamic Council, stated, "Algerians can only be Muslim." Ghlamallah said

“The seeds sown by France are still germinating,” and he told Muslim scholars to “eradicate these residues.”

In October, local media reported that Algerian Radio management fired Mourad Boukerzaza, the director of the Cirta radio station in Constantine, as well as several other employees, because the station broadcast a Christian-themed song, “Oh Jesus, Life in the Tomb,” by Christian Lebanese singer Fayrouz. Algerian Radio disputed the reports as “fake news” and told state-run Algerie Presse Service (APS) that it fired the director in late September for “malfunctions and errors.”

Government-owned radio stations continued to broadcast Christmas and Easter services in French and Arabic. The country’s state-run dedicated religious television and radio channels broadcast messages against religious extremism and integrated messages of religious moderation into mainstream media. After Friday prayers, state broadcasters aired religious programs countering extremism. Some examples included *Au Coeur de Islam* (At the Heart of Islam) on Radio Channel 3 and *Dans le Sens de l’Islam* (Understanding the Meaning of Islam) on national television.

Senior government officials continued to publicly condemn acts of violence committed in the name of Islam and urged all members of society to reject extremist behavior.

The government and public and private companies funded the preservation of some Catholic 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 the Catholic chapel at Notre Dame de Santa Cruz and its large statue of the Virgin Mary as part of its cultural patrimony. Catholic Church leaders in Oran reported a good relationship with the authorities and ongoing interfaith dialogue with Muslims there.

According to the government, the MRA contributed to the renovation and restoration of non-Islamic places of worship, specifically Notre Dame d’Afrique in Algiers, the Saint-Augustin Basilica in Annaba, and the Santa Cruz Chapel in Oran. The MRA also said it organized an initiative, in partnership with the Ministry of Interior and local neighborhoods, to clean up Christian cemeteries as part of an ongoing effort to maintain historical and cultural landmarks

According to the government, the authorities regularly invite accredited religious representatives to attend the national holiday ceremonies.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some Christian converts said they and others in their communities continued to keep a low profile due to concern for their personal safety and the potential for legal, familial, career, and social problems. Other converts practiced their new religion openly, according to members of the Christian community. In January, Catholic officials reported that because of what they believed was growing intolerance of Christians, the Archdiocese of Algiers was unable to find a person willing to engrave a cross on the tombstone in Algiers of Archbishop Henri Teissier, who died in Oran in December 2020.

Several Christian leaders said some Muslims who converted or who expressed interest in learning more about Christianity were assaulted by family members or otherwise pressured to recant their conversions.

According to religious leaders, some individuals who openly engaged in any religious practice other than Sunni Islam reported that family, neighbors, or others criticized their religious practice, pressured them to convert back to Islam, and occasionally insinuated they could be in danger because of their choice.

Media criticized religious communities they portrayed as “sects” or “deviations” from Islam or as “foreign,” such as Ahmadi Muslims and Shia Muslims. Ahmadi leaders said news outlets continued to amplify what they considered government misinformation portraying Ahmadis as violent.

EPA leaders continued to say when Christian converts died, family members sometimes buried them according to Islamic rites, and their churches had no standing to intervene on their behalf. Christian groups reported some villages, for example in the Kabylie region, continued to prohibit Christians from being buried alongside Muslims. In these cases, Christians opted to be buried under Islamic rites so their remains could stay near those of their families.

Some Christian leaders stated they had good relations with Muslims in their communities, with only isolated incidents of vandalism or harassment. Christian and Muslim leaders hosted each other during the year. The Notre Dame de Santa Cruz, site of a fort and Catholic chapel, and the Pierre Claverie Center, a Catholic church and community center, in Oran hosted frequent nonreligious community events and reported Muslims frequently participated alongside Christians.

Protestant leaders said other faiths privately expressed support, and the EPA again reported excellent interfaith dialogue within the religious community. The EPA reported some local authorities expressed regret for church closures but stated they were duty bound to follow government directives, regardless of their personal opinions.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with representatives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Interior, Justice, and Religious Affairs to discuss the difficulties Ahmadi and Shia Muslims, Christian, and other minority religious groups faced in registering as associations, importing religious materials, and obtaining visas. They also discussed church closures, registration concerns related to minority religious groups, the impact of constitutional changes, and jailed activists. In April, embassy officials requested to meet with the National Commission for Non-Muslim Worship to discuss the inability of some religious groups to register, but they did not receive a response.

The then Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officers met during the year with government-affiliated and independent religious leaders and with representatives of Muslim and Christian communities, including the Catholic and Anglican Churches, the EPA, and the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, to discuss interreligious dialogue and tolerance and, in the case of religious minorities, their rights and legal status.

Embassy officials discussed the practice of religion, its intersection with politics, religious tolerance, and the religious roles of women with religious and political leaders, as well as with the Muslim Scholars Association and the High Islamic Council. The embassy used special events, social media, and speakers’ programs to emphasize a message of religious tolerance. Specifically, the embassy used its cultural engagements to emphasize tolerance and its social media engagements to promote the benefits of diversity and inclusion, and it held iftars during Ramadan with members of the country’s different religious communities.

On November 15, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed Algeria on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.