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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Armenia

Executive Summary

The constitution states that everyone has freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. It recognizes the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) as the national church and preserver of national identity but also establishes separation of religious organizations and the state. The law prohibits but does not define proselytism, which may be interpreted as forced conversion. It prohibits “obstruction of the right to exercise freedom of religion” as well as hate speech or inciting violence against an individual or group based on religion; punishments include fines, community service, and imprisonment.

Despite suspending the trial of Yezidi human rights activist Sashik Sultanyan in 2022, the government continued to press charges of “inciting enmity” against him and his arrest warrant remained active. In October, a Yerevan court sentenced a Baptist, Davit Nazaretyan, to two years in prison for avoiding military or alternative service or conscription, despite his repeated requests for alternative civilian service; the court said he failed to prove military service conflicted with his religious beliefs. The government investigator in the case asked the Theology Faculty of Yerevan State University to review Nazaretyan’s religious beliefs, a step that one human rights defender criticized because the Theology Faculty “is mostly of the Armenian Apostolic Church” and, therefore not impartial, she said.

On April 11, responding to the ombudsperson’s 2022 case disputing the constitutionality of the prohibition against National Security Service (NSS) employees being members of religious groups as well as the constitutionality of the absolute ban on military personnel establishing religious organizations, the Constitutional Court ruled those prohibitions to be in accordance with the constitution.

During the 2023 school year, authorities began to gradually remove the course on the history of the AAC from the mandatory school curriculum, instead incorporating the relevant historical content in the broader curriculum on Armenian studies. This was despite the AAC’s objections. Representatives of the Yezidi community welcomed the removal of the course, as they said Yezidi children were indoctrinated into the AAC when the course was mandatory. Government and AAC officials, including AAC leader Catholicos Karekin II and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, made public statements critical of each other concerning the government’s handling of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the AAC’s involvement in politics.

In October and November, unknown individuals vandalized the only Jewish synagogue in Yerevan; at year’s end, the government continued to investigate possible foreign involvement in the incidents. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported several instances of verbal and physical abuse and attacks on public stands displaying their religious materials. On June 2-4, protesters violently disrupted a large regional religious meeting of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Yerevan while police looked on but did not intervene; police subsequently provided increased security for another Jehovah’s Witnesses event and initiated criminal proceedings against the perpetrators of the violence during the June 2-4 event.

According to religious experts, while mainstream media was mostly neutral or less discriminatory towards religious organizations during the year, social media and tabloid press continued to publish pieces that religious groups described as hate speech. According to some Jewish community representatives, antisemitic conspiracy theories spread among domestic fringe groups as well as online in connection with Azerbaijan’s September 19-20 military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh, during which Azerbaijan used Israeli weapons. Some AAC clergy members reportedly continued to

distribute social media videos and gave interviews in which they called religious minority groups “sects” (i.e., cults) and described them as national security threats. According to one targeted evangelical group, while these actions reflected the attitudes of individual clergy members and not the AAC as an institution, the ongoing occurrence of such social media posts and interviews indicated that AAC leadership was turning a blind eye to those actions. Anonymous social media users continued to vilify the evangelical Word of Life Church online.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to promote religious tolerance, respect for religious minorities, and interfaith dialogue during meetings with government officials, including from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly met with the AAC and minority religious groups to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country. In March, the Ambassador met with AAC Catholicos Karekin II to discuss the preservation of religious and cultural sites in Nagorno-Karabakh. Embassy officials continued to discuss with civil society representatives the impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on religious groups and religious sites of significance to Armenian communities and engaged with Yerevan’s Jewish community leaders about the impact of attacks on the Mordachay Navi Synagogue on the community.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.0 million (midyear 2023). According to the 2022 census, approximately 97.5 percent of the population identify as Armenian Apostolic. Other religious groups include Roman Catholics, Armenian Uniate Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and evangelical Christians, including Armenian Evangelical Church adherents, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, charismatic Christians, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. There are also followers of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) and of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East as well as Molokan Christians, Yezidis, Jews, Baha’is, Shia Muslims, Sunni Muslims, and pagans who adhere to a pre-Christian faith. According to members of the Jewish community, there are approximately 800 to 1,000 Jews. According to the census, there are more than 32,000 ethnic Yezidis. Yezidis are concentrated primarily in agricultural areas northwest of Yerevan around Mount Aragats. Armenian Uniate Catholics live primarily in the north. Most Muslims are Shia, including Iranians and temporary residents from the Middle East.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

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

religious enmity. It stipulates national minorities shall have the right to preserve and develop their traditions, religion, language, and culture.

The law prohibits, but does not define, “soul hunting,” a term describing both proselytism and forced conversion. The law prohibits religious organizations with spiritual centers located outside the country from receiving funding from those foreign centers, but there is no mechanism to enforce this provision. The law also prohibits religious organizations from funding or being funded by political parties. The law prohibits religious organizations from establishing “public organizations,” the legal term for registered nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

By law, a registered religious group may minister to the religious and spiritual needs of its adherents; perform religious liturgies, rites, and ceremonies; establish groups for religious instruction; engage in theological, religious, historical, and cultural studies; train members for the clergy or for scientific and pedagogical purposes; obtain and utilize objects and materials of religious significance; use media; establish ties with religious organizations in other countries; and engage in charity. The law does not require religious groups to register, but they must do so to conduct business in their own name (e.g., to own or rent property and establish bank accounts). The law does not stipulate the rights accorded to unregistered groups.

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

The law prohibits “obstructing the right to exercise freedom of religion” and prescribes punishments for violations, including fines, up to 100 hours of community service, restriction of freedom (i.e., at liberty but under official supervision) for a maximum of one year, and imprisonment ranging from one month to one year. Punishment is more stringent if the violation is committed by officials. The law prohibits hate speech and public calls for violence towards an individual or group on religious grounds through public statements, mass media, or using one’s public position. Punishments for hate speech include fines, up to 150 hours of community service, and imprisonment for up to two years. Punishments for public calls for violence include fines, up to 100 hours of community service, and imprisonment for up to one year.

The Office of the Human Rights Defender (ombudsperson) has a mandate to address violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of religion, committed by officials of state and local governments. The ombudsperson may make recommendations but does not have the power to enforce them.

The law prohibits employees of the NSS from being members of a religious organization, but it does not define “membership.” The law prohibits members of the military and the NSS, as well as prosecutors, diplomats, and public servants, from using their official positions for the benefit of “religious associations” or from preaching in support of them. While the law defines a “religious organization” as an association of citizens established for professing a common faith as well as for fulfilling other religious needs, it provides no definition for “religious associations.” A military service member may not establish a religious organization. If a member of the military is a member of a religious organization, the member does not have the right to preach to other service personnel during their term of military service. The law also prohibits prosecutors, diplomats, and employees of local municipalities from conducting religious activities while performing official duties. The

law has not been interpreted as barring affected individuals from attending worship services or participating in other religious rituals.

The penitentiary code allows penal institutions to invite clergy members to conduct religious ceremonies and use religious objects and literature. Prisoners may request spiritual assistance from the religious group of their choice. A joint Ministry of Defense-AAC agreement allows only AAC clergy to serve as military chaplains.

The law allows the AAC free access to and the right to station representatives in hospitals, orphanages, boarding schools, military units, and places of detention. Other religious groups may have representatives in these locations only with permission from the head of the institution. The law also stipulates the state shall not interfere with the AAC's exclusive right to preach freely and spread its beliefs throughout the entire territory of the country.

The law mandates public education be secular and states, "Religious activity and preaching in public educational institutions is prohibited," with the exception of cases provided for by law. The law grants the AAC the right to organize voluntary extracurricular religious instruction classes in state educational institutions. Other religious groups may provide religious instruction to their members in their own facilities but not within the premises of public educational institutions. Religious institutions may not operate parochial schools but may provide religious instruction at their facilities as an extracurricular activity.

The tax code exempts all property owned or used by the AAC from real estate taxes. The tax code also exempts all religious organizations from value-added tax on gratuitous delivery of goods, gratuitous performance of works and gratuitous provision of services as well as on the provision of services for organizing religious rites and the sale or donation of religious objects to or from religious organizations.

The labor code prohibits employers from collecting and analyzing data on the religious views of employees. The labor code authorizes up to four days of unpaid leave for observing national and religious holidays or remembrance days, regardless of religious affiliation.

The law provides for two types of service for conscientious objectors as an alternative to compulsory two-year military service: alternative (noncombat) military service for 30 months or alternative labor service for 36 months. Evasion of either type of alternative service is a criminal offense. Penalties range from two to 12 years' imprisonment, depending on the circumstances of the case.

In October, a law came into effect allowing organizations to invite foreign citizens to perform voluntary work, including missionary work, in the country.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

During the year, authorities maintained charges against Yezidi human rights activist and former president of the Yezidi Center for Human Rights, Sashik Sultanyan, and his 2022 court-ordered arrest warrant remained active. Court proceedings were suspended when he left the country in 2022, reportedly due to threats from police, and he remained out of the country during the year. The government indicted Sultanyan in 2021 for allegedly "inciting national, racial, or religious enmity" by telling a journalist that the government was not doing enough to protect the country's Yezidi minority from discrimination. In responses to multiple Council of Europe bodies criticizing Sultanyan's prosecution, the government stated that he was not a human rights activist.

International human rights organizations called Sultanyan's remarks clear examples of legitimate protected speech and termed the prosecution malicious and a threat to democracy.

As of year's end, the government did not renew its prosecution of Baha'i community member Edward Manasyan, a prominent lawyer, for allegedly facilitating illegal immigration. Members of the Baha'i community said authorities initiated the case because of Manasyan's religious beliefs. The Baha'i community's multiple appeals at the European Court of Human Rights, originally filed in 2021 in connection with the government's criminal prosecution of Manasyan, remained pending at the end of the year.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, at year's end, 101 Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors to military service were working in the alternative civilian labor service program, a number similar to previous years. Alternative civilian service appointments included positions in hospitals, local utility companies, park maintenance services, boarding schools, eldercare facilities, and orphanages.

On November 9, the Norway-based human rights NGO Forum 18 reported that on October 25, Yerevan trial court judge Gagik Poghosyan sentenced Davit Nazaretyan, a member of an unregistered Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Arinj, to two years in prison for avoiding military or alternative service or conscription, despite his repeated requests for alternative civilian service. According to Forum 18, on January 23, the Alternative Service Commission rejected Nazaretyan's appeal for alternative civilian service because "the applicant failed to prove that his duty to perform mandatory military service is in serious conflict with his conscience or deep and real religious belief or other beliefs." Forum 18 said the government investigator in Nazaretyan's case, Arsen Topchyan, asked the Theology Faculty of Yerevan State University, led by AAC Bishop Anushavan Jamkochyan, to review Nazaretyan's religious beliefs, a step the local human rights nongovernmental organization Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF) in Yerevan criticized because the theology taught by the Theology Faculty "is mostly of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Obviously, it can't be impartial." On April 17, the Theology Faculty concluded the case materials on Nazaretyan's religious affiliation were "contradictory." Despite admitting that Nazaretyan regularly attended a Baptist church with his family, the Theological Faculty stated, "We conclude from all this that Nazaretyan's religious worldview is either not clearly formed, or he himself does not clearly know what religious affiliation he has.... The creed of the Baptist Church and the analysis of the presented case materials allow us to state that Nazaretyan's freedom of thought, conscience and religion would not be restricted by military service." According to the pastor of Nazaretyan's Baptist congregation, however, the Church took the position that whether to serve in the military was "a personal decision for each Church member based on their conscience." At year's end, Nazaretyan remained at liberty pending his appeal.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

On March 23, the Ministry of Justice registered the Armenian Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church.

While some religious minority groups reported they did not visit prisons on a regular basis due to a lack of inmate requests, Jehovah's Witnesses reported organizing two baptisms in prisons during the year and bi-weekly visits to one prison to hold Bible studies for their members. The government reported that during the first half of the year, penitentiaries organized a total of 42 religious events in which 644 prisoners participated. At the request of foreign nationals or believers, penitentiary authorities facilitated appropriate religious ceremonies on their national or religious holidays and provided necessary accoutrements for religious rituals. As of November 1, the AAC, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Russian Orthodox Church organized 204, 12, and two visits, respectively, to various penitentiaries.

On April 11, deciding on the case brought by the ombudsperson in 2022 disputing the constitutionality of the prohibition against NSS employees belonging to religious groups, as well as the constitutionality of the absolute ban on military personnel establishing religious organizations, the Constitutional Court ruled those prohibitions to be in accordance with the constitution. The court distinguished “believers” in a religious group from “members,” and reasoned that individuals remained free to hold religious beliefs and to practice them in community with others, but that membership in a religious group carried with it certain obligations to proselytize and advance the interests of the religious group that were incompatible with NSS employment.

Although there was no mechanism for enforcing the legal provision prohibiting funding of religious organizations by spiritual centers located outside the country, several religious organizations said they continued to comply with the ban and restricted their operations because they did not want to violate the law.

On June 14, the National Assembly adopted a law stipulating that organizations could invite foreigners to perform voluntary work in the country. The law came into force on October 13 and according to a minority religious group, its effect was not clear by the end of the year. According to experts, the previous absence of legal provisions regulating the invitation and stay of foreign religious or any other volunteers affected several religious minority groups, whose foreign volunteers had to leave the country after 180 days and then return to renew their tourist status.

The case of a Baha’i family from Europe appealing the decision of the Passport and Visas Department of the police to deny their residency status remained ongoing before the Administrative Court at year’s end. According to the Baha’i community, authorities refused to provide residency status to the family after the NSS opposed the residency application, reportedly without providing any legal grounds. The community said the department’s denial was connected to the family’s religious affiliation. In 2021, the family appealed to the court.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses Office of Public Information stated in its annual religious freedom report that local officials in some communities continued to deny permission for the group to build kingdom halls. The organization continued to pay what it described as discriminatory property taxes on these underdeveloped lands.

Despite repeated public criticism from the AAC, the Ministry of Education began the gradual removal of the AAC history course from the mandatory school curriculum, effective at the start of the 2023 school year, with plans to finalize the transition throughout the country by the end of the 2025/2026 academic year. The removal applied to the curriculum taught to fifth and seventh graders nationwide, except for in the Tavush region, where the removal applied to all grades in all schools. Education officials included the relevant content within the Armenian studies curriculum.

Representatives of the Yezidi community welcomed the gradual removal of the history course on the AAC, as they said Yezidi children were indoctrinated into the AAC when the course was mandatory. According to one community representative, while there was not enough formal research into the issue of Yezidis converting to other faiths, there was anecdotal evidence that the Yezidi community was gradually losing the religious component of its identity with many converting to other faiths, thus effectively losing their ethnic identity as well. Insufficient numbers of trained religious leaders in the country as well as lack of information about the Yezidi religion within its community contributed to the conversion phenomenon. The representative said the government did not make enough of an effort to provide Yezidi children with an education that would give them sufficient knowledge to maintain their religious identity.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

The NGO Center for Religion and Law reported one incident in which government officials scrutinized the religious views of a former follower of the World of Life Church when considering him for promotion in a government body. According to the NGO, although the scrutiny may not

have been part of a systemic government approach, it reflected a problem of individual bias still present among some public officials towards religious minority groups.

During the year, AAC officials continued to participate in civic discourse without restrictions. According to media reports, the relationship between the government and the AAC continued to be “confrontational” and marked by negative public rhetoric on both sides. Church officials made statements in the media that reflected AAC discontent over the government’s handling of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as well as the government’s decision to remove the AAC history course from public schools. Catholicos Karekin II continued to call for Prime Minister Pashinyan’s resignation. According to media reports, on May 19, Pashinyan said, “Nothing prevents [the AAC] from creating a party and carrying out political activities within the framework of that party, which will be more honest, and they will be on the same level both before the voters and with other political competitors. But the church cannot be higher than the state.” Following Azerbaijan’s military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh on September 19-20 and the exodus of nearly all ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh, the Episcopal Council of the AAC issued a statement on October 3 criticizing the Armenian government’s handling of the situation.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On the night of October 3-4, unknown individuals vandalized the Mordechay Navi Synagogue, the only Jewish synagogue in Yerevan, by spraying ketchup on the facade of the building and breaking the windows. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement condemning the act and stating there was no place for intolerance in the country. On October 5, the Jewish Home in Yerevan (an informal network of Jews from Russia, most of whom arrived in the country after Russia’s attack on Ukraine) issued a statement on social media condemning what it called a “provocation designed to pit Jews and Armenians against each other in the interests of the enemies of Armenia.” The statement continued, “Our community has not encountered any manifestations of national or religious intolerance on the part of the Armenian society over the year and a half of its existence. This makes us think that this action is more anti-Armenian than anti-Jewish in nature. A dirty information war has been launched against Armenia, and in this confrontation, we are on the side of our Armenian friends, whose hospitality and understanding allowed us to find a new home and create a strong Jewish community in Yerevan.”

On November 15, unknown persons set fire to the exterior of the Mordechay Navi Synagogue. No one was hurt during the arson attack and the inside of the synagogue did not sustain damage. Investigators opened a criminal case on charges of damage to property and destruction or damage of cultural property in order to incite racial, national, ethnic or religious enmity. They said the preliminary investigation revealed that the perpetrator of the crime was a foreign citizen who left the country immediately after the attack and that the perpetrator videotaped and uploaded the attack on an Azerbaijani Telegram account. Investigators transferred the investigation to the NSS. Jewish community members said they did not view the arson attack as a manifestation of societal antisemitism but as part of a larger provocation aimed against the country. On November 18, in a statement about the attack, the Foreign Ministry spokesperson said disrespect and vandalism of any religious institution was “impermissible” and that “cases of intolerance or its incitement are unacceptable.” She also emphasized that the government rejected any attempt to manipulate the situation “for political, propaganda, or other intentions,” and confirmed that antisemitism and intolerance “have no place in Armenia.” Maria Karapetyan, a member of parliament from the ruling Civil Contract party, visited the synagogue on November 19 to demonstrate support for the rabbi and condemn the arson. In a Facebook post, she emphasized the government’s zero-tolerance policy towards harassment and violence against any individual, community, or institution within its jurisdiction.

During the year, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported several instances of verbal and physical abuse against members and attacks on public stands displaying their religious materials. On March 23, in

Gyumri, Shirak Province, an individual approached three Jehovah's Witnesses during their outreach activities and started shouting at them, demanding that they make the sign of the cross. The man punched one of the Witnesses, then kicked and broke a display cart with Bible-based literature. The same individual approached and verbally assaulted other Jehovah's Witnesses at the same location on at least two other occasions. The victims filed police reports and police responded by holding a mediation meeting with those involved. Jehovah's Witnesses sources said that following the meeting, the individual did not repeat his attacks against the group.

On June 2-4, according to Jehovah's Witnesses, during a large regional religious meeting at the Nairi Children's and Youth Sports Stadium in Yerevan, a mob of protesters tried to disrupt the program by shouting, banging sticks, and playing loud religious music and prayers through a loudspeaker pointed toward the audience. The group also threw stones, firecrackers, food, and other items at the speaker, attendees, and equipment. Despite these disruptions, the Jehovah's Witnesses were able to continue with their meeting; no physical clashes between the Jehovah's Witnesses and the protesters occurred. Although police arrived at the scene, they did not intervene to maintain the peace. On June 7, Jehovah's Witnesses representatives met with police and raised their concerns about the lack of police intervention. On June 9-11, the group held an event at the same location that proceeded without incident, with an increased police presence to discourage further disruptions. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, on June 9, police initiated criminal proceedings against the perpetrators of the violence during the June 2-4 event. The investigation remained ongoing at the end of the year.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that an AAC priest, Zareh Ashuryan, regularly harassed their members in Yerevan and Ararat town. The priest verbally assaulted them regarding their refusal to bear arms in the conflict with Azerbaijan. Ashuryan recorded videos of the confrontations without the victims' permission and later posted them on his YouTube channel along with negative commentary. In these posts, Ashuryan advocated prohibiting the Jehovah's Witnesses' outreach ministry. He also gave interviews to local media outlets where, according to Jehovah's Witnesses, the priest engaged in hate speech against them and demanded the government investigate and ban their activities. Other minority religious groups reported similar harassment by the priest.

According to religious experts, while mainstream media was mostly neutral or less discriminatory towards religious organizations, social media and tabloid press continued to publish pieces that religious groups described as hate speech.

Some AAC clergy members reportedly continued to distribute social media videos and gave interviews in which they called religious minority groups "sects" (i.e., cults) and described them as threats to national security. According to one evangelical group, while these actions reflected the attitudes of individual clergy, the ongoing occurrence of such social media posts and interviews indicated that AAC leadership was turning a blind eye to those actions.

Between June and August, the opposition-affiliated newspaper *Golos Armenii* published three articles in what the Jewish community described as an orchestrated effort to spread hateful and antisemitic narratives. The articles, which the NGO Jewish Community of Armenia suspected were written under fake names, criticized the NGO for conducting educational programs on antisemitism, questioned its work facilitating emigration of Jewish Armenians who wished to settle in Israel, and accused the head of the NGO of working for Israeli intelligence services. One of the articles included a photograph of the Mordechai Navi Synagogue.

According to some Jewish community representatives, antisemitic conspiracy theories spread among domestic fringe groups as well as among Russia-affiliated bloggers in connection with Azerbaijan's September 19-20 military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh, during which Azerbaijan used Israeli weapons, and the subsequent exodus of the ethnic Armenian population. These portrayed the "loss" of Nagorno-Karabakh as part of a larger global Turkish/Jewish conspiracy and claimed a prominent Jewish U.S. citizen businessperson was anti-Armenian. The community representatives also said the Israeli government's open support for and supply of military weapons to Azerbaijan, paired with the reputedly fake narratives spread by Azerbaijani sources alleging a high level of antisemitism in Armenia, led to a certain level of anxiety among the members of the

Jewish community. Despite these developments, members of the community, including those who had arrived from Russia in the previous two years, did not report any antisemitism in their everyday lives and reported only positive experiences.

There were instances of public criticism of the AAC's army chaplaincy program. In one example, in an online August 10 letter to the Defense Minister, an individual argued for the dissolution of the program, saying it infringed on the rights of those servicemen, e.g., Yezidis, Molokans, Assyrians, and others, who did not belong to the AAC, and that it also violated the secular nature of the country.

According to leaders of the evangelical Word of Life Church, the church continued to be the object of ongoing hate speech and vilification by anonymous social media accounts as well as individual AAC clergy members. The alleged hate speech – including accusations of church links with Azerbaijan – appeared on various social media platforms, such as Telegram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook. AAC cleric Tovmas Arakelyan, who had a presence across various social media platforms, including more than 65,000 followers on Instagram, maintained a specific section on his Instagram account called “sects” where he regularly posted messages against registered religious minority organizations, often naming the Word of Life Church. On September 10, he posted an entry accusing Word of Life preachers of catering to “the Turkish agenda.” He wrote that the ruling Civil Contract party “has become the most dangerous sect in the history of Armenia. And continues its death march. I thought ‘Word of Life’ couldn’t humiliate any further. No, they keep surprising.”

During the year, members of the country’s evangelical Iranian community continued to report instances of harassment that they believed were orchestrated by Iran’s state security services. Adherents cited incidents of unknown Iranian individuals questioning them about other church members’ conversions to Christianity and dates of arrival in the country. Church leaders reported persistent harassment and threats to themselves and family members via telephone calls and texts, as well as sporadic threats made in person. One evangelical pastor said that despite his group’s reporting such incidents to police, authorities took no visible steps to respond.

The EPF organized its seventh annual Media Award competition to promote freedom of religion or belief through strengthening the professional capacities of the media. The EPF considered 55 submissions from 34 authors covering reports from 2022-23, judging the degree to which they promoted unbiased and balanced media coverage on subjects related to tolerant and peaceful coexistence, with the goal of fostering a more tolerant and respectful attitude among wider segments of society towards ethnic and religious minorities. According to the EPF, the increased number of applicants in each successive award cycle showed a higher interest in the issue and better-quality reporting. On June 6, the EPF, with the support of the Netherlands embassy, held an awards ceremony, honoring, among others, Emilio Chriccio for his article, “Jewish Renaissance in Armenia Amid Exodus from Russia,” published on *CivilNet*; Lilit Hovhannisyan for “Yezidi Woman in Labor: From USSR to Nowadays,” published by *Ararat InfoTun*; and Satenik Hayrapetyan for “Sometimes, They Say Bad Things Too: The Indians Arrive for a Better Life, but What Do They Find?” published on *Factor TV*. In addition, *Xirat Media* received a special prize for its persistent efforts in raising awareness of issues within the Yezidi community.

A single Shia mosque, located in Yerevan, was the only religious center available for all Muslim groups.

On June 8, “Chaybushka” Molokan Heritage House-Museum, which showcases the history, cultural values, and lifestyle of Molokan Christians, opened in the village of Fioletovo, Lori Province. The EU and Germany provided financial support. Representatives from the EU Delegation to Armenia, the development NGO GIZ Armenia, the governor’s office, and the Molokan community attended.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to advocate religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue during meetings with government officials, including officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They discussed with officials the government's efforts to investigate and address the instances of vandalism on the Mordechay Navi Synagogue.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly discussed the state of religious freedom in the country with the AAC as well as minority religious groups, including evangelical Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ, the Armenian Catholic Church, Yezidis, the Jewish community, Apostolic Assyrians, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Baha'is, and Muslims. In March, the Ambassador met with AAC Catholicos Karekin II to discuss the importance of preserving cultural and religious heritage sites in Nagorno-Karabakh. Embassy officials engaged with Yerevan's Jewish community leaders on the impact of the Mordachay Navi Synagogue attacks upon the community. Embassy officials also discussed religious freedom with human rights NGOs, including addressing religious discrimination faced by members of minority religious groups and the impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on religious groups and religious sites that were significant to Armenian communities.