

## 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Italy

### Executive Summary

The constitution protects freedom of religion and the right of religious communities to establish their own institutions. It specifies the state and the Roman Catholic Church are independent, with their relations governed by treaties, including a concordat granting the Church a number of specific privileges and benefits, and financial support. Twelve other religious groups have accords granting many of the same benefits in exchange for a degree of government monitoring. Unregistered religious groups operate freely and are eligible for some of the benefits that registered groups receive, but they must apply separately for them. According to the Ministry of the Interior's website, during the year, the government expelled at least 46 persons, mostly due to links with what the ministry stated were violent extremist Islamist groups. Muslim groups, none of which has an accord, again experienced difficulties acquiring permission from local governments to construct mosques and provide dedicated areas appropriate for Islamic burials. Some local governments granted permission to build mosques or temporary prayer centers and to allow or expand plots for Islamic burials, but not enough to meet growing demand. Politicians from several political parties again made statements critical of Islam or antisemitic in nature. On August 28, League Party leader Matteo Salvini said the Quran and Islam were incompatible with civil and democratic rights. On September 9, the Court of Cassation (the country's highest court of appeals) ruled that hanging a crucifix in classrooms was legal. The court also stated that each public school should take into consideration the beliefs of all when deciding whether to hang a crucifix and that all schools should promote coexistence.

There were again reports of antisemitic incidents, including physical assaults, verbal harassment, discrimination, hate speech, and vandalism, as well as expressions of anti-Muslim sentiment and vandalism of Christian churches. Press reported that in March, in Rome, a food delivery person stabbed a Jewish colleague several times, after screaming antisemitic insults. The victim, whose wounds required hospitalization, was the son of a Holocaust concentration camp survivor. In August, a Bangladeshi migrant attacked an Israeli tourist in Pisa with a souvenir statue, yelling "Jews are assassins!" The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Anti-Semitism Observatory of the Jewish Contemporary Documentation Center Foundation (CDEC) recorded 220 antisemitic acts during the year, compared with 230 in 2020 and 251 in 2019. Of the incidents, at least 117 involved hate speech on social media or the internet. Press reported examples of antisemitic graffiti and posters, including depictions of swastikas on walls, antisemitic stereotypes, and praise of neo-Nazi groups in cities such as Rome, Perugia, and Arezzo. Experts monitoring antisemitism said they believed the number of antisemitic incidents was vastly underreported. According to Milena Santerini, the National Coordinator for the Fight Against Anti-Semitism, Facebook had removed only a small percentage of the Facebook posts containing antisemitic material. The independent NGO Vox Diritti reported that during the year, 65 percent of all tweets mentioning Islam (165,297) contained negative messages against Muslims, compared with 59 percent (67,889) in 2020. In September, the Brussels-based NGO Action and Protection League issued the results of its European antisemitism survey, which found that 11 percent of 1,000 respondents ages 18-75 in Italy said they had negative feelings towards Jews.

Representatives from the U.S. embassy and consulates general met with national and local government officials to encourage respect for religious freedom and equal treatment for all faiths throughout the year. They also discussed efforts to integrate new migrants – many of whom were Muslim, Orthodox, or Hindu – and second-generation Muslims living in the country. Embassy officials additionally expressed support for a proposed accord between the government and the country's Muslim communities. U.S. government officials met with religious leaders and civil society representatives to promote interfaith dialogue and awareness, to encourage religious groups to be more effective in interfaith outreach, and to help young faith leaders become more visible and accepted by elderly religious leaders at the grass roots level. In September, embassy officials met with the national coordinator for the fight against antisemitism, the president of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI), and the president of the Rome Jewish community to discuss how to

support their efforts to counter antisemitism. The embassy and consulates continued to utilize social media platforms to acknowledge major Christian, Muslim, and Jewish holidays, as well as to amplify initiatives that promote religious freedom and interfaith dialogue at the grass roots level.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 62.4 million (midyear 2021). A 2020 study by the independent research center The Center for Studies of New Religions (CESNUR) estimates 67 percent of the population is Catholic, 24 percent atheist or agnostic, 5 percent non-Catholic Christian, 4 percent Muslim, and 1 percent followers of other religions. Non-Catholic Christian groups include Eastern Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Assemblies of God, the Methodist and Waldensian Churches, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), the Union of Pentecostal Churches, and several other smaller Protestant groups, including other evangelical Christian groups.

According to the national branch of the Church of Jesus Christ, there are approximately 26,000 adherents in the country. CESNUR also estimates that non-Christian religious groups that together account for less than 10 percent of the population include Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Baha'is, Buddhists, Sikhs, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and Ananda Marga Pracaraka Samgha, an Indian spiritual movement. According to a 2020 study conducted by SWG, an independent research center, 50 percent of the population identifies as Catholic, 25 percent identifies as atheist or agnostic, 17 percent other religious groups and 8 percent unaffiliated.

The UCEI estimates that the Jewish population numbers 28,000. According to the legal counsel of the Italian Federation of Progressive Judaism, the organization has between 500 and 600 members.

According to CESNUR, approximately 1.76 million foreign Muslims and 500,000 Italian Muslims – almost 4 percent of the population – live in the country. According to the Ministry of Interior (MOI) and the National Agency for Statistics (ISTAT), most growth in the Muslim population comes from large numbers of immigrants from Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, the majority of whom live in the north. Muslims with Moroccan and Albanian roots make up the largest established groups, while Tunisia and Bangladesh are increasingly prominent sources of Muslims arriving as seaborne migrants. The MOI reports Muslims in the country are overwhelmingly Sunni.

## Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

### LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution states all citizens are equal before the law regardless of religion and are free to profess their beliefs in any form, individually or with others, and to promote and celebrate rites in public or in private, provided they are not offensive to public morality. According to the constitution, each religious community has the right to establish its own institutions according to its own statutes if these do not conflict with the law. The constitution stipulates the state may not impose special limitations or taxes on the establishment or activities of groups because of their religious nature or aims. The constitution specifies the state and the Catholic Church are independent of each other, and treaties, including a concordat between the government and the Holy See, govern their relations.

The country's penal code contains an unenforced article on blasphemy, classifying public insults against religions or against religious followers as administrative offenses punishable by a fine ranging from 51 to 309 euros (\$58-\$350). The penal code punishes other public offenses to religion, such as offenses against objects used for religious rites or offenses expressed during religious ceremonies, with a fine of up to 5,000 euros (\$5,700) or a prison sentence of up to two years. Those who destroy or violate objects used for religious ceremonies may be punished with up to two years in prison.

The constitution states all religious groups are equally free, and relations between the state and non-Catholic groups, including state support, are governed by agreements ("accords") between them. Relations between the state and the Catholic Church are governed by a concordat between the government and the Holy See. Representatives of a non-Catholic faith requesting an accord must first submit their request to the Office of the Prime Minister. The government and the group's representatives then negotiate a draft agreement, which the Council of Ministers must approve. The Prime Minister then signs and submits the agreement to parliament for final approval. Twelve groups have an accord: The Confederation of Methodist and Waldensian Churches, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Jews, Baptists, Lutherans, Church of Jesus Christ, Orthodox Church of the Constantinople Patriarchate, Italian Apostolic Church, Buddhist Union, Soka Gakkai Buddhists, and Hindus.

The law provides religious groups with tax-exempt status and the right to recognition as legal entities once they have completed the registration process with the MOI. Legal registration is a prerequisite for any group seeking an accord with the government. A religious group may apply for registration by submitting to a prefect (the local representative of the MOI) an official request that includes the group's statutes; a report on its goals and activities; information on its administrative offices; a three-year budget; certification of its credit status by a bank; and certification of the Italian citizenship or legal residency of its head. To be approved, a group's statutes must not conflict with the law. Once approved, the group must submit to MOI administrative monitoring, including oversight of its budget and internal organization. The MOI may appoint a commissioner to administer the group if it identifies irregularities in its activities. Religious groups that are not registered may still operate legally as cultural associations and obtain tax-exempt status, legal recognition of marriages, access to hospitals and prisons, and other benefits, but those benefits are more easily obtained if a group has an accord with the government. The Catholic Church is the only legally recognized group exempted from MOI monitoring in accordance with the concordat between the government and the Holy See.

An accord grants clergy automatic access to state hospitals, prisons, and military barracks, allows for civil registry of religious marriages, facilitates special religious practices regarding funerals, and exempts students from school attendance on religious holidays. Any religious group without an accord may request these benefits from the MOI on a case-by-case basis. An accord also allows a religious group to receive funds collected by the state through a voluntary 0.8 percent of personal income tax set-aside on taxpayer returns. Taxpayers may specify to which eligible religious group they would like to direct these funds.

National law does not restrict religious face coverings, but some local authorities impose restrictions. Regional laws in Liguria, Veneto, and Lombardy prohibit the wearing of burqas and niqabs in public buildings and institutions, including hospitals.

The concordat with the Holy See provides for the Catholic Church to select teachers, paid by the state, to provide instruction in weekly "hour of religion" courses taught in public schools. The courses are optional, and students who do not wish to attend may study other subjects, or in certain cases, leave school early with parental consent. Church-selected instructors are lay or religious, and the instruction includes material determined by the state and relevant to both Catholics and non-Catholic religious groups. Government funding is available for only these Catholic Church-approved teachers. If a student requests a religion class from a non-Catholic religious group, that group must provide the teacher and cover the cost of instruction; it is not required to seek government approval for the content of the class. Some local laws provide scholarship funding for students to attend private, religiously affiliated schools, usually but not always Catholic, that meet government educational standards.

Schools are categorized as state-owned, state-equivalent, or private. The "state-equivalent" category includes public (municipal, provincial, regional, or owned by another public entity) and some private schools, which may be religiously affiliated. All state-equivalent schools receive government funding if they meet criteria and standards published every year by the Ministry of Education. The funding is released through the ministry's regional offices. Religious entities operate most private schools, and private schools may not issue certificates or diplomas. Private school students must take final annual exams in state-owned or state-equivalent schools.

A 2019 Lombardy regional law prohibits local authorities from dividing burial plots by religious belief, although local authorities have at times made exceptions.

According to law, hate speech, including instances motivated by religious hatred, is punishable by up to four years in prison. This law also applies to denial of genocide or crimes against humanity.

All missionaries and other foreign religious workers from countries that are not European Union members or signatories of the Schengen Agreement must apply for special religious activity visas before arriving in the country. An applicant must attach an invitation letter from his or her religious group to the application.

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

## GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

According to the MOI, during the year, it expelled at least 46 persons, reportedly mostly because of what the ministry stated was their violent extremist opinions and their efforts to radicalize Muslims.

On August 30, press reported that the MOI expelled a Tunisian preacher, Mohammed Bezaraa, for expressing extremist views during his sermons in several Islamic cultural centers in Vicenza. A

member of the local Muslim community said he agreed with Bezaraa's expulsion, stating that some of the Islamic cultural centers in the country had "provided platforms for false imams to spout nonsense without meaning and without any theological basis."

According to leaders of the Islamic Cultural Center of Italy, the government once again did not make significant progress on reaching an accord with the Muslim community, despite dialogue underway with various Islamic religious entities. The MOI continued to recognize only the Islamic Cultural Center of Italy, which administers the Great Mosque of Rome, as a legal religious entity, making it the only Islamic entity eligible to sign an accord with the government. The government continued to recognize other Muslim groups as nonprofit organizations.

On May 29, the Senate Extraordinary Committee to Fight Intolerance, Antisemitism, and Hate Crimes launched an investigation into the nature and the root causes of hate speech. The committee said it would recommend legal measures and policies to prevent hate crimes against religious minorities. During a parliamentary hearing, Amnesty International presented the results of a 2020 study of 36,269 tweets, showing that 55 tweets contained hate speech and 2,117 had offensive or discriminatory content against religious minorities.

Regional governments and Muslim religious authorities continued to recognize five mosques, one each in Colle Val d'Elsa (in Tuscany), Milan, and Rome, and two in the Emilia-Romagna Region, in Ravenna and Forli, respectively. In addition, local governments continued to recognize many sites as Islamic places of worship, although Muslim authorities stated these were not considered full-fledged mosques because they lacked minarets or other key architectural features such as domes.

According to weekly magazine *Panorama*, there were also an estimated 800 to 1,200 unofficial, informal places of worship for Muslims in 2019 (the most recent figure), known colloquially as "garage" mosques. According to press reports, authorities allowed most to operate, but they did not officially recognize them as places of worship.

According to media reports, Muslim leaders stated they continued to experience difficulty obtaining permission from local governments to construct mosques. Local officials continued to cite lack of zoning plans allowing for the establishment of places of worship on specific sites as a reason for denying construction permits, rather than anti-Muslim sentiment. Some Muslim leaders, however, stated they believed some local authorities were using all possible legal means to block the construction of new mosques in their regions.

According to media reports, informal mosques, including in warehouses, continued to operate in Milan, and worshippers did not adhere to government mandated COVID-19 restrictions limiting public gatherings. In 2020, the European Court for Human Rights had ruled as admissible the appeal of Abu Hanif Patwery, president of the Bangladesh Cultural and Welfare Association, against the city of Milan for the association's having contracted a company to convert a storage site into a place of worship.

Media reported that on April 15, the city of Pisa authorized the construction of a mosque. The decision followed the July 2020 ruling of the Tuscany Regional Administrative Court to annul city council plans in 2019 that prevented the Pisa Islamic Association from building a mosque on land it had purchased. Pisa city officials had stated at the time that the lot was not large enough for the planned building, while a local imam said the city council had always been hostile to the mosque's construction. In July, the Pisa Islamic Association launched a crowdfunding campaign to build the facility.

On April 20, the city of Fermignano modified its zoning plan to officially recognize the headquarters of the local Islamic Cultural Association as a place of worship. On May 6, Fermignano mayor Emanuele Feduzi stated that the decision "was a sign of civilization; we couldn't disregard the request of the Muslim community. Local authorities were also the first in the province [of Pesaro e Urbino] to grant cemetery spaces to religious minorities during the pandemic, a decision that has been a source of inspiration for several other cities."

On May 6, the city of Florence signed an agreement with the local Muslim community providing two venues to be used as temporary places of worship for five years. Local authorities also requested the religious community specify the location where it intended to build a permanent mosque, after which the city would review the application.

On July 20, the Council of State (the highest administrative court) ruled that a warehouse bought by the Islamic Association Assalam in Cantu in 2014 could not be used as a place of worship because of zoning restrictions that did not allow religious services. The ruling was final, and no further appeal was possible. On June 8, local authorities in Sesto San Giovanni, a municipality in Milan, approved a provision of the zoning plan banning the construction of a mosque proposed by the local Muslim community.

In September, local press reported that the Italian Islamic Confederation had purchased a facility from the city of Turin. According to a confederation representative, the facility would be restructured to host a mosque, to provide community services open to all regardless of religious affiliation, and to include classrooms to be made available to two local universities.

According to media, on September 1, the Council of State overruled a 2020 ruling by the Veneto Regional Administrative Court that had invalidated the Monfalcone Municipality's decision to block the conversion of a supermarket into a mosque. The municipality had concluded that the building was inappropriate for religious services because the building, located in a seismically vulnerable area, was structurally unsound, and the Council of State agreed with the regional court. A local Muslim association had purchased the facility in 2017 and requested authorization to convert it into a mosque in 2019; however, the city stated that the property had been condemned and the requirements for construction had not been met.

Local governments continued to rent out public land at discounted rates to non-Muslim religious groups, usually Catholic, for constructing places of worship. Government funding also helped preserve and maintain historic places of worship, which were almost all Catholic. In September, Vicenza municipal authorities transferred a municipal facility to a Catholic parish for its use for nine years, with an annual rent of 120 euros (\$140).

Approximately 60 local governments maintained dedicated burial spaces for Muslims. Muslim associations reported there were insufficient spaces to meet the needs of Muslim communities in Lombardy, Lazio, and other regions. The associations said that during the COVID-19 lockdown in place from March through May of 2020, the bodies of several Muslims could not be moved to their countries of origin, placing additional stress on the limited dedicated Islamic burial spaces in Italian cemeteries.

In March, despite a regional provision in Lombardy forbidding the separation of burial plots according to religious belief, municipal authorities dedicated burial plots to the local Muslim community in Desio.

On May 18, the president of the Madni Dar Ul-Islam Muslim cultural association requested local authorities in Brescia to authorize the construction of an Islamic burial space.

In September, the Lombardy Regional Administrative Court overturned a decision by the city of Magenta that denied a Muslim association's request for space to establish an Islamic cemetery. Despite the ruling, local authorities did not provide dedicated spaces to the local Muslim community by year's end. On September 12, a group of Islamic cultural associations urgently requested additional dedicated burial areas for Muslims in Monza.

On September 9, the Court of Cassation ruled that the constitution neither prohibits nor requires the hanging of a crucifix in classrooms. The court had censured a school principal in Terni who had ordered the hanging of a crucifix in a public school classroom in 2008 and 2009 as requested by the assembly of students. The court ruled, "The school community should evaluate and autonomously decide to hang [a crucifix], respecting the beliefs of all, hanging other religious symbols [when requested] and pursuing reasonable arrangements to promote the coexistence of diversities."

Politicians from several parties, including the League and Brothers of Italy, and from representatives of Casa Pound, a political association widely considered to be far-right, again made statements critical of Islam. During a rally in the town of Pinerolo on August 28, League Party leader Salvini stated, "The literal implementation of the Quran is incompatible with our democratic society. Also the Bible? No, we, as Christians and Catholics, we ended with stakes and the Inquisition some centuries ago." He concluded, "The Quran and Islam are incompatible with our civil and democratic rights."

On February 18, a Turin prosecutor opened an investigation of municipal councilor Monica Amore of the Five Star Movement for possible defamation motivated by racial hatred. Amore had published a cartoon depicting a collage of newspapers of the Gedi media conglomerate and the drawings of two Jews with caricatured noses, kippahs, and the Star of David on social media. On March 30, the Jewish community withdrew the complaint after receiving a letter of apology from Amore and other parliamentarians of the Five Star Movement.

On January 27, Holocaust Remembrance Day, President Sergio Mattarella hosted a ceremony to commemorate the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp and stressed "the need to remember as a duty of civilization and as a foundation of the constitution."

In a January 27 Facebook post, Milan mayor Beppe Sala wrote, "Being a community means remaining vigilant against a common enemy that threatens our society. We will never turn our back in front of hate."

On September 30, Prime Minister Mario Draghi and Senator-for-Life and Holocaust survivor Liliana Segre visited the Holocaust Memorial in Milan. Draghi thanked Segre “in the name of the Italian government and all Italians for her commitment in defense of truth and humanity.” He stated, “Remembering isn’t a passive act,” but rather “a commitment for the present. We must act on the deep roots of racism and antisemitism and fight their violent manifestation and stem every form of Holocaust denial.” Segre remarked, “Indifference leads to violence because indifference is already violence.”

The city of Rome continued its support of collaboration and understanding among the Jewish community, the Waldensian Evangelical Church, Eastern Orthodox communities, the Islamic Cultural Center of Italy, the Italian Hindu Union, and the Italian Buddhist Maitreya Foundation through the Tavolo Interreligioso (interreligious table) interfaith network. In-person cultural events and presentations in public schools to increase awareness of religious diversity significantly dropped compared with previous years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 22, the Tavolo Interreligioso, promoted by municipal authorities, organized an online event dedicated to funeral ceremonies during the pandemic. On February 1, the Tavolo celebrated World Interfaith Harmony Week, which the UN General Assembly designated as an annual event in 2010.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

### Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

During the year, the CDEC recorded 200 incidents of antisemitism, compared with 224 incidents in 2020 and 251 in 2019. Of these, at least 117 involved hate speech on social media or the internet.

Reports of antisemitic incidents published on CDEC’s website included discrimination, verbal harassment, particularly at soccer matches and other sporting events, online hate speech, and derogatory graffiti. Internet and social media hate speech and bullying were the most common forms of antisemitic incidents according to the CDEC, which continued to operate an antisemitism hotline for victims of, and witnesses to, antisemitic incidents. According to Milena Santerini, the National Coordinator for the Fight Against Anti-Semitism, the number of antisemitic incidents was vastly underreported. Santerini also reported that Facebook had removed only a small percentage of posts containing antisemitic material.

The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe reported that 158 cases of grave desecration and 47 attacks on places of worship occurred in the country in 2020, compared with 152 and 42 cases, respectively, in 2019. The national police’s Observatory on Security against Acts of Discrimination (OSCAD) reported 448 crimes of discrimination in 2019, the most recent available data, of which 92 were based on religious affiliation and 216 on ethnicity, compared with 360 crimes of discrimination in 2018. OSCAD defined crimes of discrimination as crimes motivated by ideological, cultural, religious, or ethnic prejudices.

In September, the Brussels-based NGO Action and Protection League issued the results of its European antisemitism survey based on data from December 2019-January 2020. According to the survey, 11 percent of 1,000 respondents ages 18-75 in Italy said they had negative feelings towards Jews. Thirteen percent said they would be “totally uncomfortable” or “uncomfortable” with having Jewish neighbors. The survey cited stereotypical statements about Jews and asked respondents the degree to which they agreed or disagreed. The proportion who responded “strongly agree” or “tend to agree” with the following statements were: “the interests of Jews in this country are very different from the interests of the rest of the population” (20 percent); “there is a secret Jewish network that influences political and economic affairs in the world” (16 percent); “Jews have too much influence in this country” (13 percent); “Jews will never be able to fully integrate into this society” (15 percent); “Jews are more inclined than most to use shady practices to achieve their goals” (9 percent); “many of the atrocities of the Holocaust were often exaggerated by the Jews later” (7 percent); “Jews are also to blame for the persecutions against them” (9 percent); “Jews exploit Holocaust victimhood for their own purposes” (12 percent).

The private research center STATISTA reported that an estimated 15.6 percent of the population believed the Holocaust never happened. In its *Italy 2020 Report*, the private Eurispes Institute of Political, Economic, and Social Studies reported nearly 16 percent of respondents believed the Holocaust was a myth, while 16 percent of respondents said the number of Holocaust victims had been “exaggerated.” Of those sampled, 47.5 percent considered recent acts of antisemitism in the country to be a “dangerous resurgence of the phenomenon,” while 37.2 percent viewed the recent acts as “bravado carried out for provocation” or as a “joke.”

Press reported that on March 21 in Rome, a food delivery person stabbed a Jewish colleague several times after screaming, “Damn Jews, I [expletive] hate you.” The victim, whose wounds required hospitalization, was the son of a Holocaust concentration camp survivor. On April 7, authorities

arrested the suspected assailant and recovered the knife used in the attack.

On August 31, a Bangladeshi migrant attacked an Israeli tourist in Pisa, beating him in the face with a souvenir statue, yelling "Jews are assassins!" Media widely covered the case, and at year's end according to the MOI, the assailant remained in the country.

In its periodic review of social media posts, Vox Diritti reported 5.2 percent of all monitored tweets (797,326) contained antisemitic messages during the year, compared with 8 percent of all tweets monitored in 2020 (104,347). Many antisemitic tweets came from accounts based in Rome, Milan, and Florence. The NGO said spikes in tweet traffic correlated with the national celebration of the Liberation from the Fascist regime and a series of attacks against synagogues in Germany.

Press later reported that on June 7, police announced an investigation of the Roman Aryan Order, which investigators and the judge presiding over the case considered to be a far-right criminal association using Nazi symbols. Twelve members of the association in Cagliari, Cosenza, Frosinone, Latina, L'Aquila, Milan, Rome, and Sassari were accused of ethnically and religiously motivated hate crimes, based on their publication of numerous racist and discriminatory posts on social media.

According to media, on July 2, police arrested four self-characterized neo-Nazis in Milan on suspicion of having established a criminal association to commit hate crimes and violence based on the ethnicities and religions of the victims. They had reportedly been planning an attack on a Muslim activist.

On September 16, police in Turin announced an operation to dismantle an association of four persons under investigation for incitement to commit crimes and discriminate on the grounds of race, ethnicity, and religion. Investigators had found posts on social media containing antisemitic insults and promoting hate against foreigners.

On January 27, UCEI President Noemi Di Segni said, "Fascism is a poison orchard for the whole Italian society of which the bitterness and latency have not yet been understood. We still do not have any knowledge of truth and extent." She added, "Knowing the roots of this Italian evil is necessary to understand those who today repeat mottos and wear its symbols. Crimes and offenses against Italy, not only to its Jews then and today, constitute threats too often underestimated and dismissed."

According to the most recent Pew Research Center study published in October 2019, 55 percent of Italians had negative opinions of Muslims and 15 percent had negative opinions of Jews. Negative opinions of Muslims were prevalent among the least educated (57 percent) and elderly (66 percent).

Vox Diritti reported that during the year, 65 percent of all tweets mentioning Islam (165,297) contained negative messages against Muslims, compared with 59 percent (67,889) in 2020. Most anti-Muslim tweets originated in northern regions.

According to press reports, on January 10, a highly organized group of individuals interrupted the online Zoom launch of a book about the Holocaust, shouting antisemitic epithets, including "Jews, we'll burn you in ovens, the Nazis are back, we will burn you all, you must all die." The virtual action, which also included portraits of Hitler and swastikas, occurred during the presentation of a book entitled, *"The Generation of the Desert"* by Lia Tagliacozzo, a Jewish author born to Holocaust survivors.

In February, press reported that following Holocaust survivor Liliana Segre's attempts to encourage other older adults to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, several antisemitic comments appeared in social media. On October 15, during an anti-COVID-19 vaccination rally in Bologna, a self-described far-left organizer, Gian Marco Capitani, took the stage and stated that Segre "brings shame to her history ... She should disappear." National press widely interpreted the words as antisemitic. Numerous "no-vax" rallies featured demonstrators wearing Stars of David, equating the "persecution" they faced from the government to the persecution the Jews suffered under the Nazis. Capitani later said he regretted his use of the word "disappear," given Segre's history. Capitani said his comment that Segre brought shame to her history was in reference to Segre's personal story as a Holocaust survivor and his view that she had a special responsibility to fight persecution because of her background.

On October 26, police announced an investigation into incidents in eight cities and the identification of an adult and seven minors suspected of having interrupted three online commemorations of Holocaust Remembrance Day, livestreamed on Zoom. Authorities accused the individuals of cybercrimes, violence, and hate crimes for having disrupted the occasion, insulted Jews, and lauded Benito Mussolini.

As in previous years, press reported examples of antisemitic and anti-Christian vandalism, including depictions on walls of swastikas, antisemitic stereotypes, and praise for neo-Nazi groups. These appeared in Rome, Milan, Busto Arsizio, and other cities. On September 12, local press reported the

presence of graffiti equating the Star of David with swastikas on multiple buildings in Pisa. In May, members of the Lazio soccer club displayed an antisemitic banner in response to news that rival soccer club Roma had hired a Jewish Brazilian as its new team manager. On June 24, authorities found graffiti stating “Lazio football supporter Stolperstein” in Rome. A Stolperstein, or stumbling stone, is a concrete cube bearing a brass plate inscribed with the name and date of birth and death of each victim of Nazi extermination or persecution.

On December 19, in a church in the town of Fiumicino, unidentified individuals vandalized a Nativity scene. They threw statues of a shepherd and a donkey on the ground and mutilated them, cutting off the shepherd’s hands and one of the donkey’s ears. Local media reported that it was not the first time the church had been targeted; previously vandals stole a statue of the baby Jesus. On December 28, authorities in the town of Montemurlo called police after unknown persons hung 10 Christmas tree ornaments with Hitler’s face on them on a Christmas decoration outside the town council’s office. The mayor of Montemurlo called the incident “an extremely serious episode that offends the values on which the Italian Republic was born, as well as our democracy.”

In January, the Catholic Church marked the 32nd annual Day of Jewish and Christian Dialogue with a focus on the first verse of the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes.

## Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Officials from the embassy and consulates general met with representatives of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, the MOI, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the national coordinator for the fight against antisemitism, and local government officials in Rome, Naples, Milan, Florence, and Venice. Discussions centered on the establishment of new places of worship requested by religious groups, relations between the government and Muslim religious communities, the prospect for an accord between the government and Muslim communities, and antisemitic incidents. During these meetings, embassy officials and government counterparts also discussed the integration of asylum seekers and migrants, many of whom were Muslim, Orthodox (including Romanian, Russian, and Bulgarian Orthodox), or Hindu.

Officials from the embassy and consulates general, as well as visiting Department of State officials, met with members of the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities to stress the importance of interfaith dialogue and to share U.S. best practices regarding education, the integration of second-generation Muslims, and social media networking to promote respect for religious diversity.


On May 4, during a livestreamed embassy virtual program that drew more than 2,500 viewers, U.S. speakers discussed the connection between blues and jazz and traditional Islamic music. Additionally, the Charge d’Affaires gave opening remarks about the importance of respecting religious beliefs, highlighting values of diversity and cultural exchange and stating how Muslim Americans have enriched the United States since its founding.

On June 22, the Charge d’Affaires hosted an informal discussion with representatives of Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, and Protestant communities on the challenges faced by each community, including societal discrimination, antisemitism, anti-Muslim sentiment, government restrictions on religious practices, and forms of collaboration to advance religious freedom and interfaith dialogue. In November, the Charge d’Affaires hosted representatives of Jewish and Muslim organizations to promote interfaith dialogue and engagement, activities that had stalled in recent years due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Embassy and consulate general officials continued to meet with representatives of civil society groups, including Catholic Church-affiliated Caritas and Sant’Egidio, as well as with Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish leaders in cities throughout the country. U.S. officials urged the social inclusion of immigrants, many of whom are Muslim, as well as dialogue among various religious groups, and monitored the ability of groups to practice their religion freely.

The embassy and consulates continued to utilize social media platforms to acknowledge major Christian, Muslim, and Jewish holidays, as well as to amplify initiatives that promote religious freedom and interfaith dialogue at the local level. They also retweeted Department of State statements and tweets on the International Religious Freedom Act and related topics.

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Annual report on religious  
freedom (covering 2021)

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