

United States Department of State
Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor
[International Religious Freedom Report for 2014](#)
Iraq, Syria, Iran, Egypt, Turkey



Executive Summary

2014 International Religious Freedom Report

Introduction

In Mosul, Iraq and nearby towns, shortly after the takeover of the area by militants of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Christians who had been given the choice to convert, pay a ruinous tax, or die, gathered their families and what few possessions they could carry, and sought all possible means to escape. Their community, having been a part of the rich culture and history of this city for more than a thousand years, was being threatened. Three-year old Christina Khader Ebada boarded a crowded bus with her mother to leave when suddenly one of the fighters guarding the checkpoint tore Christina from her mother's arms. The panicked mother followed him, pleading with him to return the girl. "Shut up," he responded. "If you come close to this little girl you will be slaughtered; we will slaughter you." And she was forced back on the bus, leaving her baby behind, never to know what became of her. Christina and her family were also victims of ISIL's brutal persecution, which has targeted all those, including religious and ethnic minorities, who oppose or do not fit in with ISIL's ideological vision and its categorical and violent opposition to religious freedom.

David Saperstein, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom (IRF) has said, "There is an absolute and unequivocal need to give voice to the religiously oppressed in every land afraid to speak of what they believe in; who face death and live in fear, who worship in underground churches, mosques or temples, who feel so desperate that they flee their homes to avoid killing and persecution simply because they love God in their own way or question the existence of God."

The International Religious Freedom Report, now in its 17th year, attempts to give voice to those oppressed people and to document when and where the universal human right to religious freedom was violated. Congressionally-mandated and comprising almost 200 distinct reports on countries and territories, this report continues to reflect the United States' commitment to, and advancement of, the right of every person to freedom of religion or belief. This year's report details the actions of Non-State Actors, including rebel and terrorist organizations, who committed by far some of the most egregious human rights abuses and caused significant damage to the global status of respect for religious freedom. In some cases, government failure, delay, and inadequacy in combatting these groups and other societal actors had severe consequences for people living under dire religious

freedom conditions. Anti-Semitism continued to be a major problem around the globe with increases in anti-Semitic incidents recorded in many countries. In May 2014 the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) released the results of a survey conducted in 102 countries between July 2013 and February 2014, which sought to measure support for 11 common anti-Semitic stereotypes among national populations. Other concerning trends over the year included increasing use of combatting terrorism and extremism as an excuse for unreasonable religious restrictions.

Government Failure to Protect Against IRF Abuses Committed by Non-State Actors

In the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and throughout Asia, a range of non-state actors including terrorist organizations, have set their sights on destroying religious diversity. Members of religious groups were disproportionately affected, often suffering harsh and hateful treatment of non-state actors. In these regions, religious intolerance and hostility, often combined with political, economic and ethnic grievances, frequently led to violence. Governments stood by, either unwilling or unable to act in response to the resulting death, injuries and displacement.

Stability in **Iraq** declined precipitously this year as the collapse of government security structures in parts of the country prevented leaders from stopping ISIL's territorial offensive and subsequent atrocities. Likewise in **Syria**, the effective control by various non-State groups of portions of the country's territory contributed to a precipitous decline in religious freedom. On both sides of the border, **ISIL** sought to eliminate members of any group it assessed as deviating from ISIL's own violent and destructive interpretation of Islam. It has forcibly displaced hundreds of thousands of people, conducted mass executions, and kidnapped, sold, enslaved, raped and/or forcibly converted thousands of women and children—all on the grounds that these people stand in opposition to ISIL's religious dogma.

Shia militias in Iraq also committed abuses, targeting some Sunnis with abductions, execution-style killings, torture, and threats, as well as destruction of homes and businesses. In some instances, these militias reportedly prevented internally displaced Sunnis from returning home. The Prime Minister has emphasized a zero-tolerance policy for human rights violations and abuses and called for the protection of religious minorities, but the government's capacity to protect civilians from the ongoing conflict was limited.

In Syria, the group **al-Nusra Front** also controlled significant territory, conducting targeted executions of religious leaders including seven Druze clerics in Dara province and Jesuit priest Frans van der Lugt in Homs. **Al-Nusra Front** also kidnapped priests and nuns on multiple occasions, and engaged in bombings and other religiously-motivated attacks.

People living in northern **Nigeria**, the Far North Region of **Cameroon**, and southern **Chad** and **Niger** were subject to terror and destruction as a result of **Boko Haram**'s quest to impose its religious and political beliefs throughout the region. Civil society groups estimated that Boko Haram killed more people in 2014 than the previous five years of the conflict combined. In addition, many of Boko Haram's vicious attacks were targeted against civilians, government officials, and military forces. The group deliberately targeted Christians, as well as Muslims who spoke out against or opposed their radical ideology. As West Africa's most active terror group, Boko Haram claimed responsibility for scores of fatal attacks on churches and mosques, often killing worshipers during religious services or immediately afterward. One of many such incidents occurred on April 14, when Boko Haram kidnapped more than 200 mostly Christian girls from Chibok, Borno State, sold them into slavery, and forcibly converted them to Islam. Conflict in the northeast has displaced some 1.5 million Nigerians inside the country and forced some 200,000 refugees to flee to neighboring countries.

In **Pakistan**, organizations designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations by the U.S. government intimidated religious groups through attacks or threats of attacks. **Lashkar i Jhangvi** claimed responsibility for a January 21 suicide bomber attack on a bus carrying Hazara Shia pilgrims in Balochistan's Mastung District, killing 24 and injuring 40. **Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP)** released a video on February 2 threatening two minority groups in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Kalash and the Ismailis, with death if members refused to convert to the TTP's interpretation of Islam. Additionally, sectarian, violent extremist, and terrorist groups attacked houses of worship, religious gatherings, and religious leaders, causing hundreds of deaths during the year. Police often failed to prevent such attacks and authorities failed to investigate, arrest, and prosecute those responsible for the religiously-motivated attacks.

During the summer of 2014, countries such as **France** and **Germany** witnessed a wave of anti-Israel sentiments that crossed the line into anti-Semitism. The surge in anti-Semitism in Western Europe during 2014 left many pondering the viability of Jewish communities in some countries. Although most anti-Semitic incidents

consisted mainly of hate speech and the desecration of institutions, monuments, and cemeteries, others turned violent. On May 24, Mehdi Nemmouche, a French Muslim national from the northern town of Roubaix who had been radicalized in prison, entered the Jewish Museum of Belgium and shot dead two tourists and a woman. The fourth victim, a museum employee, also succumbed to his wounds. Nemmouche had a camera attached to his chest so he could film his murders, and a white sheet with the name of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) penned in Arabic. He had previously spent 11 months training with ISIL in Syria.

In **Burma**, continued deficiencies in the respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom included societal violence against religious minorities, including Rohingya and other Muslims and Christians, the destruction of religious buildings in areas of conflict, policies prohibiting or impeding Muslim land ownership and property occupation in some areas, and the proposed “Protection of Religious and Race Laws” which, if enacted, could be enforced in a manner that would significantly undermine religious freedom. The anti-Muslim sermons of the 969 monks, other prominent monks, and the Buddhist Committee for Protection of Race and Religion (MaBaTha) were circulated widely via print journals, DVD, and the internet. The sermons denigrated Muslims and sometimes Christians and Hindus, called for a national boycott of all Muslim-owned businesses, and cautioned Buddhists against interaction with Muslims. Journalists and activists received death threats for covering and speaking out against anti-Muslim hate speech and religious-based violence.

Societal Tensions and Discrimination and Governmental Lack of Response

Governments have the obligation to protect the human rights of all their citizens and should promote an environment of tolerance and non-discrimination. In both principle and action, where people are endangered, threatened, or face discrimination, it is the responsibility of governments to safeguard universal human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to life and the freedom of conscience, belief, practice, worship, and to explain and change one’s faith. The right to freedom of religion is found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and in states’ own domestic laws. When governments fail to respect those laws, obligations and standards, whether by deed or inaction, they legitimize and facilitate non-state actors who persecute and discriminate against members of vulnerable religious communities, nurture an environment of intolerance, and weaken the ties that support peaceful and resilient societies.

Though Bashar al-Asad tried to claim the mantle of protector of **Syria**'s religious minorities, he promoted a sectarian narrative to describe the country's ongoing conflict while allowing ISIL and other violent groups to flourish in some areas. This created an untenable situation where religiously motivated attacks targeted Syrians across the political and religious spectrum. In many situations, the lack of regime action to try to stop ISIL's and other groups' advances and attacks on specific religious groups and communities laid bare Asad's cynical political calculations in daring to claim the title "protector" of any of Syria's people.

In **Nigeria**, containing Boko Haram and preventing or quelling religiously motivated violence and discrimination remained a daunting task for the Nigerian government. At state, federal, and local levels the government failed to investigate, prosecute, and punish perpetrators of violence or other abuses of religious freedom. Security forces remain inadequately equipped and trained to combat Boko Haram. Residents reported the military fleeing their posts during or in anticipation of an attack, and some attacks lasted hours without any response to pleas for military intervention.

In June, after a Boko Haram attack in Borno State, reports indicated that soldiers fled and many deserted, saying they were outgunned by Boko Haram. Especially in central regions, where there were long-standing disputes between Christians and Muslims, the government did little to ensure the implementation of recommendations put forth by numerous government-sponsored panels and interfaith dialogues.

In **Pakistan**, the government's general failure to investigate, arrest, or prosecute those responsible for religious freedom abuses promoted an environment of impunity. This environment fostered further intolerance and acts of violence. Government policies also failed to protect members of majority and minority religious groups. In addition, the persistent use of discriminatory legislation, such as blasphemy laws, including the government's failure to address false accusations of blasphemy and laws designed to delegitimize the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, meant that minorities were often afraid to profess freely their religious beliefs. The Supreme Court announced a detailed judgment regarding minorities' rights on June 20, in accordance with which the government created a National Commission for Minorities with representatives of various faith groups. However, other recommendations from the judgment have yet to be implemented, such as establishment of a police task force to protect minorities, revision of school curricula to promote religious and social tolerance, and steps to discourage hate speech in social media.

Burma's constitution states, "Every citizen is equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess and practice religion subject to public order, morality or health and to the other provisions of this Constitution." However, this protection and other antidiscrimination laws do not, by their terms, apply to members of ethnic groups not formally recognized under the law as citizens, such as the Muslim Rohingya in northern Rakhine State. Even where members of other groups are recognized, the promise of non-discrimination is often not enforced. After dozens of Rohingya Muslims were allegedly killed by military, police, and paramilitary security forces in retaliation for the death of a police officer, the government did not grant access to independent forensic experts to examine the scene. This made a credible, independent investigation impossible.

The government continued to subject public events, including religious ceremonies and festivals, to security regulations and other controls. It remained extremely difficult for Muslims and Christians to acquire permission to repair or construct new mosques or churches. The State Sangha Monk Coordination Committee and Ministry of Religious Affairs restricted the political expression and association of members of the monastic community.

In **Sri Lanka**, it was reported that under the governmental regime of former President Rajapaksa, local police and government officials sometimes appeared to be acting in concert with Buddhist nationalist organizations to attack members of religious minorities. On January 12, a Buddhist mob attacked two evangelical churches in the southern town of Hikkaduwa during services, causing thousands of dollars of damage, burning Bibles, breaking windows, and smashing musical instruments. A film of the attack showed police standing idly by while protesters continued their acts of destruction. In addition to church attacks, under the regime of former President Rajapaksa, police continued to use a revoked 2011 government circular to coerce unregistered churches to register or be shut down. On June 15, at least three Muslims were killed and more than 80 people were injured in clashes with the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS, "Forces of Buddhist Power"), a hardline violent ethnic Sinhala Buddhist organization with links to the government, during a rally in Aluthgama and Beruwalla. The BBS held a large rally in the streets of Aluthgama to condemn a reported assault of a Buddhist monk by three Muslim youth. During the rally, BBS leaders led a procession through the streets of Aluthgama chanting anti-Muslim slogans. Some 900 policemen on duty in the vicinity failed to act to stop the resulting violence.

In the eastern **Ukrainian** oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk, **Russian**-backed separatists proclaimed the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. In the areas they control, the separatists have kidnapped, beaten, and threatened Protestants, Catholics, and members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate, as well as participated in anti-Semitic acts.

Religious Freedom Violations, Abuses and Restrictions Involving Governments

In every region during the year, discriminatory laws, repressive policies, marginalization, and discriminatory application of laws had a negative impact on the ability of groups and individuals to practice their faiths.

People cannot enjoy religious freedom unless they have both the right to express their beliefs freely and change their religion without facing persecution, violence, or discrimination. The threat and enforcement of **blasphemy and apostasy laws** during the year had a significant impact on the ability of individuals to exercise freedoms of expression and religion and resulted in deaths and imprisonment.

Individuals accused of violating Pakistan's blasphemy laws continued to face societal harassment, discrimination, and violence. On May 8 in Multan, Punjab, an unidentified gunman shot and killed **Rashid Rehman**, an attorney representing Junaid Hafeez, a university lecturer accused of blasphemy. On November 4, in Kot Radha Kishan, Punjab, a mob of some 1,500 villagers accused a Christian couple of blasphemy and burned them alive in a brick kiln. Media, government, and civil society organizations reported the kiln owner accused the couple of desecrating a Quran after the couple failed to repay a loan, and locked them in a room while announcements from local mosques rallied the crowd. On October 16, the Lahore High Court upheld the death sentence of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman convicted of blasphemy four years ago. Bibi has been on death row since November 2010, after a district court found her guilty of making derogatory remarks about Prophet Mohammed during an argument. Her lawyers submitted an appeal on November 24 to the Supreme Court.

On May 15, a local Sudanese court sentenced **Meriam Yahia Ibrahim Ishag** to 100 lashes and death by hanging for allegedly committing apostasy and adultery by marrying a Christian man, in a case brought against her by her family. Separate charges were pursued against her in a Muslim family affairs court. Ishag said she had been raised as Christian by her mother and identified herself as a Christian. The government released Ishag from custody after a higher court overturned her

original sentence in June following significant international pressure, but prevented her from departing Sudan until a month later.

Raif Badawi, a young Saudi Arabian blogger and activist for reform was charged with apostasy. Eventually, after months of court proceedings, he was convicted of the lesser charge of “insulting Islam,” sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment, and given a penalty of 1000 lashes. What he had done was simply speak his mind about his country, his government, and his religion. Badawi remains a prisoner of conscience, jailed for his beliefs and for speaking his mind.

The 2014 report notes a continuation of many restrictive policies affecting religious freedom including laws criminalizing religious activities and expression, prohibitions on conversion or proselytizing, and stringent registration requirements or discriminatory application of registration requirements for religious organizations.

Executions and arrests in Iran: The government of Iran executed, detained, harassed, and discriminated against members of religious minority groups as well as Muslims professing beliefs at variance with state-approved doctrine on charges of *moharebeh* (enmity against God) and anti-Islamic propaganda. On September 29, authorities executed Mohsen Amir-Aslani for making “innovations in the religion” and “spreading corruption on earth.” Human rights groups reported that charges against him included insulting the prophet Jonah and promoting his own interpretation of the Quran. At the end of 2014, several hundred Baha’is, Christians, Sufi and Sunni Muslims, Yarsanis, and Shia Muslims professing unapproved doctrine were in detention because of activities related to the peaceful practice of their religious beliefs, many arrested during raids on religious gatherings.

Crackdown on state-sanctioned Christian churches in China: The government sentenced Zhang Shaojie, a prominent state-sanctioned Christian pastor, to 12 years in prison on charges connected to his advocacy on behalf of his church community. Local authorities also shuttered many churches under the pastor's jurisdiction as head of the district Protestant organization. Numerous international media sources reported that local authorities ordered the removal of hundreds of Christian crosses from churches in Zhejiang Province throughout the year.

While most incidents involved the removal of crosses and steeples, a handful of prominent churches were demolished, including the Sanjiang Church in the city of Wenzhou that was leveled in April despite efforts by its parishioners to form

human shields to protect it. Zhejiang officials stated that crosses and churches needed to be “demolished” as “illegal structures” that violated local zoning laws. Unofficial “house” church members continued to face harassment and detention. Security officials frequently interrupted outdoor services of the unregistered Shouwang Church in Beijing and detained people attending those services for several days without charge. Reports indicated the average length of these detentions increased from hours to days. Several members of the church's leadership, including Pastor Jin Tingming, remain under periods of extrajudicial detention since leading open air services in 2011.

Restrictions on Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists in China: The Chinese government increasingly cited its concerns over the “three evils” of “separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism” as grounds to enact and enforce repressive restrictions on religious practices of Uighur Muslims. After disagreements arose in response to stricter government controls on religious expression and practice, police shot and killed Uighur Muslims during house raids and protests, according to a human rights organization. In the months following, the Xinjiang government approved a ban on the practice of religion in government buildings and wearing clothes associated with “religious extremism.” Authorities also approved a ban on the wearing of Islamic veils in public in the capital city of Urumqi. In August and September, state newspapers reported hundreds of children were “rescued” and dozens of persons were detained in a sweep of “illegal” religious schools.

Authorities often justified official interference with Tibetan Buddhist monasteries by associating them with separatism and pro-independence activities. On February 28 Authorities detained Tashi Paljor, a monk at Wenpo Monastery in Qamdo (Chamdo) Prefecture of the Tibetan Autonomous Republic, for his alleged possession of politically sensitive writings and recordings by the Dalai Lama. He died after being severely beaten in custody, according to Radio Free Asia.

Restricting free expression on basis of religion in India: Authorities continued to enforce laws designed to protect “religious sentiments” which, according to observers, at times had the effect of limiting free expression related to religion. On September 24, police in Rustampura, Gujarat arrested Mehdi Hasan, a Muslim cleric, on charges of insulting Hindus’ religious sentiments after a member of the Hindu community complained about Hasan’s comments during an interview with a Gujarati newspaper. During the interview, Hasan reportedly labeled those who honored the nine-day Hindu festival Navratri as “demonic.” Hasan remained in judicial custody until serving out his sentence on October 2.

Persecution of Falun Gong in China: Authorities reportedly instructed neighborhood communities to report Falun Gong members to officials and offered monetary rewards to citizens who informed on Falun Gong practitioners. Detained practitioners were reportedly subjected to various methods of physical and psychological coercion in attempts to force them to renounce their beliefs. Reports from overseas Falun Gong-affiliated advocacy groups estimated that thousands of adherents in the country had been sentenced to terms of up to three years in administrative detention. According to the human rights monitoring NGO Dui Hua Foundation, there were 2,201 Falun Gong prisoners as of June 30.

Intensified harassment of unregistered Mennonites in Vietnam: Police, local authorities, and hired men in Binh Duong Province began a campaign of harassment against an unregistered Mennonite group in June, according to their pastors. Church leaders reported government forces throughout the year raided Bible classes, detained and beat congregants, and harassed members of the religious community. Reports also state that hired men prevented the movement of church members, vandalized a Mennonite church, and barred followers from leaving their houses.

In the wake of the **Russian Federation's occupation of Crimea**, religious minorities, in particular members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP), the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, and Muslim Tatars, have been subjected to harassment, intimidation, detentions, and beatings. Russian occupation authorities ordered all religious groups to re-register with the Russian government or face losing their legal status. The occupation authorities also seized control of UOC-KP religious property and raided mosques, confiscated literature they deemed "extremist," and formed a Crimean Tatar organization as a rival to the authentic representative body of the Crimean Tatars in order to supplant the local Muslim leadership.

Some religious leaders, including the region's chief reform Rabbi, were threatened and fled in the initial days of the occupation, while many Catholic Priests and nuns and Turkish Imams were denied residency permits and had to leave.

Combatting Terrorism and Violent Extremism as Justification for Undue Restrictions on Religious Practice

In numerous authoritarian countries around the world, regimes have co-opted the language of counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism as a means to neutralize political opposition seen as emanating from peaceful religious individuals or groups. In such countries, authorities have increasingly sought to

control the content of mosque sermons and those authorized to deliver them as a central tenet of their efforts to counter violent extremism, in part to counter Islamist discourse they perceived as inciting violence, including acts of terrorism.

Many Central Asian governments used the pretext of violent extremism to crack down widely on peaceful religious activities. In **Uzbekistan**, the government enforced its policy to broadly ban Islamic groups it categorized as extremist without any reference to violent activities. Authorities continued to detain members of several of these Islamic groups, and according to their family members, some died while in custody. Abdurakhim Tukhtasinov, a prisoner charged with membership and leadership in the banned religious organization Hizb ut-Tahrir, died in custody in June. Similarly, in **Tajikistan** the government continued to arrest individuals suspected of involvement with banned religious groups labeled extremist by the government, but not specifically on the grounds of violent activities. On August 18, law enforcement officials in Farkhor district announced they had detained five individuals on suspicion they were involved in the banned Salafiya group. The “suspicious behavior” included praying differently at the mosque and ignoring traditional Hanafi Islam rules and procedures.

Positive Developments in 2014

While the IRF report aims to shed light on the world’s most flagrant religious freedom challenges, it also seeks to highlight positive actions taken by some governments to provide greater protections for religious minorities and to ensure the human rights of individuals to worship, practice, learn, teach and believe, or not believe, according to their own conscience. Religious and civil society groups took steps to promote greater respect for religious diversity, and there were examples throughout the year and across the globe of interfaith cooperation and dialogue.

Improved status of largest population of Christians in Middle East and largest religious minority in Egypt: Egyptian Christians (Copts) have long suffered from recurrent acts of violence, for which successive Egyptian governments have generally failed to hold the perpetrators responsible. Successive Egyptian governments have also failed to redress policies that discriminate against Christians, especially the onerous discrimination they have faced in church construction and renovation. Under the interim and al-Sisi governments, there have been encouraging improvements in the status of Christians in Egypt. There have been some convictions of perpetrators of violence against Copts, although impunity from prosecution for such crimes remains a serious problem. The new

Egyptian constitution provides increased human rights protections as compared to the previous constitution, including a stipulation of equality before the law irrespective of religion. It also requires that parliament pass a new law facilitating the construction and renovation of Christian churches, which is without precedent, and provides for the establishment of an anti-discrimination commission to eliminate all forms of discrimination.

Release of Religious Prisoners in Turkmenistan: In October, the government granted amnesty to and released from prison eight of nine Jehovah's Witnesses long incarcerated as a result of their religious convictions, including their principled objection to compulsory military service, after their inclusion in a list of religious prisoners presented by the U.S. Embassy.

Societal Response to anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and forms of intolerance in various countries: After the February 14-15 terrorist attacks in **Denmark** that killed a guard outside a synagogue and a filmmaker at a free speech event, thousands of people of different faiths formed a human ring outside the synagogue in Copenhagen to "send a powerful statement" that "Jews should be able to have their religion in peace." Swedes and Norwegians also formed a human ring around their capitals' main synagogues in an inter-faith show of support. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, along with other national politicians, condemned anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rallies and called for tolerance and understanding of Muslims and foreigners living and working in **Germany**.

Constitutional Chamber ruling part of religion law unconstitutional in Kyrgyzstan: On September 4, a nine-judge panel of Kyrgyzstan's Constitutional Chamber ruled sections of the 2008 Religion Law unconstitutional, which eased registration requirements for religious organizations with fewer than 200 members.

U.S Policy and Programs in Support of Religious Freedom

Freedom of religion is a first of many inalienable rights enshrined in the U.S Constitution and other laws. We believe freedom of religion is a universal right that governments should neither be able to grant nor withhold. The United States strongly believes that protecting freedom of religion promotes mutual respect and pluralism, and is essential to human dignity, robust civil society, and political and economic development. Around the world, we focus on concrete, positive steps to support government and civil society groups in combatting religious intolerance and promoting respect for religious freedom for all.

During the year **most embassies raised the issue of religious freedom routinely** and at high levels. Ambassadors, chiefs of missions, and embassy staff in all corners of the globe engaged with government officials, religious leaders, and advocacy groups to promote religious freedom and respect for religious diversity. Where there were new and ongoing cases of repression of members of religious minorities, detentions, and governmental and/or societally driven discrimination and violence, the U.S. engaged officials up to the highest levels, calling for peace and respect for the rule of law. In several countries, the U.S. partnered with civil society and faith-based organizations to support religious freedom programs, promote interfaith dialogue, exchange ideas, and work together toward more peaceful and tolerant societies.

Responding to atrocities in Iraq: In August, after ISIL trapped tens of thousands of Yezidis on Iraq's Mt. Sinjar with no food or water, President Obama announced that the U.S. would respond by engaging in military action in the Mt. Sinjar region. He explained that the United States "can act, carefully and responsibly, to prevent a potential act of genocide" against the Yezidis.

The U.S. military conducted seven nightly humanitarian air drops between August 8-13, delivering more than 114,000 meals and 35,000 gallons of water to those displaced on Mt. Sinjar. Targeted airstrikes helped protect the evacuation route as people were escaping. During that week, most civilians were able to evacuate from Mt. Sinjar, preventing the near extermination of this ancient religious group.

The U.S. government increased its engagement with the government of **Burma** on religious freedom issues. During his visit to Burma in November, President Obama spoke out against discrimination against all religious minorities, including Muslim Rohingya. Senior U.S. officials have consistently raised U.S. concerns about religious freedom and called for a path to citizenship for members of the Rohingya population that does not force them to self-identify as members of an ethnic group or nationality to which they do not believe they belong.

In April, an interagency team led by the Department of State's Senior Advisor for Faith Based Community Initiatives engaged with faith-based communities in **Ethiopia**. The interagency team met with leaders from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Muslim community, interfaith organizations, religious charity associations, civil society, and government; to address religious freedom concerns including the ongoing detentions of peaceful Muslims who have protested government interference in religious affairs since 2012.

The Ambassador and other U.S. officials repeatedly expressed to government officials of **Brunei** the United States belief that full implementation of the Sharia Penal Code (SPC), including the severe penalties in the remaining phases, would undermine several of the country's international human rights commitments, including the freedoms of religion and expression. In May, the State Department Spokesperson expressed serious concerns about provisions of the SPC in comments that generated significant media coverage.

In **Pakistan**, the U.S. Special Envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation held meetings to discuss the importance of prioritizing religious freedom and the negative impacts of blasphemy laws on members of minority religious communities. With government officials, religious leaders, academics, and civil society leaders from all religious backgrounds, including for minority Muslim groups and Christian communities, he argued that such restrictions on speech are detrimental to Muslim communities and to the country.

Embassy and consulate staff in **Indonesia** appeared on a number of nationally televised programs to discuss themes related to religious tolerance and diversity. In July, the embassy hosted the three-day Bhinneka Tunggal Ika-E Pluribus Unum Camp and blogging competition for students and youth leaders representing all major religious groups and campus organizations, to promote religious tolerance and pluralism. The event closed with an iftar celebration hosted by the Ambassador for camp attendees, religious leaders, senior government officials, and representatives from NGOs focused on religious freedom issues.

We urged **Chinese** authorities to take steps to reduce tensions, uphold China's international commitments to protect religious freedom and other universal human rights, and reassess counterproductive policies in Xinjiang and other ethnic areas. The United States also strongly supports the preservation of Tibet's unique religious, cultural, and linguistic traditions and the protection of human rights for Tibetans in the People's Republic of China.

U.S. officials sought out Syrian religious groups and leaders in **Syria**, the United States, and throughout the world to promote their communities' full inclusion and respect for their human rights in Syria, both currently and in a future free and democratic state. The Special Envoy for Syria and other high-ranking U.S. officials met with members of the Orthodox Christian, Sunni, Druze, and Shia communities, focusing on providing assistance to vulnerable populations and countering sectarian violence. The United States supported the documentation of violations and abuses committed by all sides of the conflict through the United

Nation's Commission of Inquiry and through direct support to Syrian-led documentation efforts.

In **Nepal**, U.S. embassy representatives addressed concerns regarding the protection of members of religious minorities, caste discrimination, freedom of peaceful assembly for religious groups, and the ban on proselytization. The embassy also provided assistance for preservation and restoration, which improved access to major religious sites. Additionally, an embassy micro-scholarship program for underprivileged youth, including Muslims, promoted religious tolerance.

These illustrative examples demonstrate the U.S. government's commitment to promoting and defending religious freedom around the world. But the creation of a more free and tolerant world cannot be accomplished by any one government or institution. It requires the joint, committed efforts of governments, civil society, and citizens from all cultures and all faiths.

It is our hope that this year's report not only identifies abuses, problems and violations, but also creates motivation for action and accountability. We invite governments, community groups, faith-based and secular organizations, students, activists, human rights defenders, change makers, and every-day citizens to use this report to defend and advance international religious freedom, a universal human right to which we are all entitled. While the violation of religious freedom contributes to instability and economic stagnation, respect for religious freedom paves the way for a more secure, peaceful, and prosperous world.

OVERVIEW AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Why and How the Reports are Prepared

The Department of State submits this report to the Congress in compliance with section 102(b) of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998. U.S. embassies prepare the initial drafts of the reports based on information from government officials, religious leaders, nongovernmental organizations, journalists, human rights monitors, religious groups, academics, and others. U.S. foreign service officers go to great lengths, often under difficult circumstances, to collect the information on which the reports are based.

The Office of International Religious Freedom collaborates in collecting and analyzing information for the country reports, drawing on its own consultations with foreign government officials, religious leaders, nongovernmental and faith-based organizations, representatives from the UN and other international and regional organizations and institutions, journalists, academic experts, community leaders, and Department of State offices. The Department's guiding principle is to ensure that all relevant information is assessed as objectively, thoroughly, and fairly as possible.

The reports can be directly accessed at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm> in a format that allows readers to search the texts and compare reports across regions and themes. Translations of the report are available via www.humanrights.gov. Both the International Religious Freedom Report and the Human Rights Report spotlight examples of abuses and restrictions that typify and illuminate the types of problems frequently reported in each country in 2014. Specific inclusions or omissions should not be interpreted as a signal that a particular case is of greater or lesser importance to the U.S. government, or that a case is the only available example. Rather, our goal is to shed light on the nature, scope, and severity of the violations we report with illustrative examples. Both reports cover the calendar year so that readers can reference the two reports jointly and benefit from year-end data.

How the Reports Are Used

A wide range of U.S. government agencies and offices use the reports to shape policy; conduct diplomacy; and inform assistance, training, and other resource allocations. The Secretary of State also uses the reports to help determine which

countries have engaged in or tolerated “particularly severe violations” of religious freedom in order to designate “Countries of Particular Concern.”

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IRAQ 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The security situation in the country deteriorated sharply during the year and the government lost effective control of significant terrain to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This resulted in increased levels of violence and lawlessness in that territory, as well as a destabilization of security throughout the country. Freedom of belief and practice was severely limited in areas beyond the government's control, where ISIL targeted religious groups it considered heretical in a systematic campaign of atrocities and forced expulsion.

The constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief and practice, and freedom from intellectual, political, and religious coercion. While representatives of various religious communities, including Sunni Muslims, reported that the government did not generally interfere with religious observances and devoted considerable attention to the protection of religious sites and events, many Sunnis considered themselves targeted by the government and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). International human rights groups and Sunni Muslims reported that the ISF tortured, abused, arrested, illegally detained, and harassed Sunni Muslims on the basis of their religious affiliation. Activists also said the government failed to investigate and prosecute ethno-sectarian crimes, including those carried out by Shia militia and Kurdish forces against Sunnis in areas liberated from ISIL. There were also reports that some officials misused their authority, for example, in using sectarian profiling in arrests and detentions or in using religion as a determining factor in employment decisions. The government that was formed in September, however, publicly called for tolerance for all religious communities and implemented reforms to rectify sectarian imbalances and hiring standards in government offices. The government provided security for places of worship including churches, mosques, shrines, and religious pilgrimage sites and routes. Despite efforts to protect religious communities and sites, continued violence affected all religious groups throughout the year.

ISIL sought to exterminate Shia Muslims and religious minorities from seized Iraqi territory under its control. Many of ISIL's atrocities in areas it did not control targeted Shia mosques, funerals, religious shrines, and Shia neighborhoods. Beginning with ISIL's advances into northern Iraq in June, attacks targeting religious and ethnic minority communities intensified. ISIL abuses, which targeted people on the basis of their religious identity, included killings, rape, kidnapping, enslavement, theft, and destruction of religious sites. ISIL's targeting of

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Christians, Sabeen-Mandaeans, and Yezidis also resulted in killings, sexual slavery, forced conversion, ransom demands, property seizures, and forced business closures. Many members of religious minority groups fled from their homes as a result. In June ISIL killed as many as 670 Shia and other non-Sunni prisoners who had been detained in a prison in Mosul. ISIL also imposed strict interpretations of Sunni Islam in areas it controlled, such as Mosul, and targeted dissenters with torture, rape, and execution. In multiple cases throughout the year, ISIL and other armed groups attacked Sunni religious leaders whose ideology differed from that of ISIL.

The deterioration of security conditions was accompanied by numerous instances of societal abuse of religious freedom throughout the year. For example, Shia militias near Samarra reportedly killed previously abducted Sunni men in June according to Amnesty International (AI). Local media reported that Shia militias and Kurdish forces in some instances prevented internally displaced Sunnis from returning to their homes, which in some cases had been looted and burned, in predominantly Sunni Arab towns retaken from ISIL control. There were also credible reports of Shia militia groups intimidating or abusing Sunni and religious minority populations, as well as unknown actors kidnapping or killing members of religious minority groups.

The President, the Secretary of State, other senior Department of State officials, the Ambassador, and embassy and consulate officers promoted religious freedom in speeches, meetings, coordination groups, and assistance programs. Their public statements and meetings condemned ISIL's religious freedom abuses. They urged both the central government and the Kurdistan Regional government to protect members of religious minorities and ensure their inclusion in the political process. Embassy and consulate officials maintained an active dialogue with Shia, Sunni, and religious minority groups, emphasizing tolerance, inclusion, and mutual understanding. The embassy designed and managed programs to address religious minority concerns in economic development, essential and humanitarian services, and capacity development. The U.S. government provided funding to the ongoing international humanitarian effort to assist more than two million Iraqis, many of whom were from religious minority communities, who had been displaced during the year.

Section I. Religious Demography

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The U.S. government estimates the population at 32.6 million (July 2014 estimate). Religious demography statistics vary due to violence, internal migration, and governmental tracking capability. Numbers cited are often estimates from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious community leaders.

According to 2010 government statistics, the most recent statistics available, 97 percent of the population is Muslim. Shia Muslims, predominantly Arabs but including Turkmen, Shabak, Faili (Shia) Kurds, and others, constitute 60 to 65 percent of the population. Arab and Kurdish Sunni Muslims make up 31 to 37 percent of the population, with 18 to 20 percent representing Sunni Kurds, 12 to 16 percent Sunni Arabs, and the remaining 1 to 2 percent Sunni Turkmen.

Approximately 3 percent of the population is composed of Christians, Yezidis, Sabeen-Mandaeans, Bahais, Kakais (sometimes referred to as Ahl-e Haqq), and a very small number of Jews. Shia, although predominantly located in the south and east, are the majority in Baghdad and have communities in most parts of the country. Sunnis form the majority in the west, center, and the north of the country.

Christian leaders estimate there are approximately 400,000-500,000 Christians, a significant decline over the last 10 years from a pre-2002 estimate of 800,000-1.4 million. Approximately two-thirds of Christians are Chaldeans (an eastern rite of the Catholic Church), nearly one-fifth are Assyrians (Church of the East), and the remainder are Syrians (Eastern Orthodox and Catholic), Armenians (Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox), Anglicans, and other Protestants. Evangelical Christians reportedly number approximately 5,000.

Yezidi leaders report that most of the approximately 500,000 Yezidis reside in the north. Estimates of the size of the Sabeen-Mandaean community vary. According to Sabeen-Mandaean leaders, about 1,000-2,000 remain in the country, predominantly in southern Iraq with small pockets in Kurdistan and Baghdad. Bahai leaders report fewer than 2,000 members, spread throughout the country in small groups. According to Kakai activists, their community numbers approximately 100,000, mainly in villages southeast of Kirkuk, in Diyala and Erbil in the north, and in Karbala. Fewer than 10 Jews reportedly reside in Baghdad.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, an estimated 900,000 Iraqis of diverse religious backgrounds remain internally displaced due to sectarian violence between 2006 and 2008. Following ISIL's incursions into Anbar in January and throughout Ninewa and areas of the disputed internal boundaries between June and August, an additional 1.8 million people were

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displaced. Due to the challenges in gaining access to internally displaced persons (IDPs) in areas of conflict, as well as the government's limited capacity in registering IDPs, the exact number of religious minorities among those displaced remains unknown. ISIL's abuses disproportionately affected religious minorities, with between 100,000 and 200,000 Christians, an estimated 300,000 Yezidis, and several thousand Kakais displaced throughout the country. In the wake of this displacement, high concentrations of these minorities now reside in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR).

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution recognizes Islam as the official religion, mandates Islam be considered a source of legislation, and states no law may be enacted contradicting the established provisions of Islam, though it does not differentiate between Sunni and Shia Islam. It also states no law may contradict principles of democracy or the rights and basic freedoms stipulated in the constitution. The constitution guarantees freedom from religious, intellectual, and political coercion.

Apparent contradictions between the constitution and other legal provisions remain. For example, the law prohibits the practice of the Bahai Faith, and a 2001 resolution prohibits the practice of the Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam. Although constitutional provisions on freedom of religion may override these laws, no court challenges have yet invalidated them, and there is no pending legislation to repeal them.

Personal status laws and regulations prevent the conversion of Muslims to other religions and require conversion of minor children to Islam if either parent converts to Islam. In the IKR, there were several cases of Christian single-parent families affected by the conversion policy, which applies to all religious minorities. In some cases, the Christian parent fled with the minor children to avoid conversion of the children to Islam.

National identity cards denote the holder's religion, but do not differentiate between Shia and Sunni Muslims. Passports do not specify religion. Bahais and Kakais may only receive identity cards if they self-identify as Muslims. Without an official identity card, Bahais and Kakais cannot register their marriages, enroll

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their children in public school, acquire passports, or access some government services.

The Council of Iraqi Christian Church Leaders, an independent group formed by church leaders in 2006, consists of representatives from each of the 13 officially recognized churches and requires Christian groups to register. To do so, the group must have a minimum of 500 adherents in the country. Without formal registration, religious groups cannot qualify for government funding or official recognition from the government's endowment for Christian, Yezidi, Sabean-Mandaean, and "other" religions.

The constitution guarantees citizens the right to choose which court (civil or religious) will adjudicate matters of personal status, including marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance, endowments, and other personal matters. The Personal Status Law stipulates that civil courts must consult the religious authority of a non-Muslim party for its opinion under the applicable religious law and apply that opinion in court.

The constitution requires the government to maintain the sanctity of holy shrines and religious sites and guarantee the free practice of rituals. The penal code criminalizes disrupting or impeding religious ceremonies and desecrating religious buildings.

The law specifies that constitutional guarantees providing for reinstatement of citizenship do not apply to Jews who emigrated and gave up their citizenship under a 1950 law.

Of the 328 seats in the Council of Representatives, the law reserves eight seats for members of minority groups: five for Christian candidates from Baghdad, Ninewa, Kirkuk, Erbil, and Dahuk; one for a Yezidi; one for a Sabean-Mandaean; and one for a Shabak. In the 2014 national parliamentary elections, six minority candidates won parliamentary seats outside of the quota allocation, bringing total minority representation to 14 seats. The Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament reserves 11 seats for minorities: five for Christians, five for Turkmen, and one for Armenians.

The constitution states that followers of all religions are free to practice religious rites and manage religious endowments (waqf), endowment affairs, and religious institutions. The government maintains three waqfs: the Sunni; the Shia; and the Christian, Yezidi, Sabean-Mandaean, and "other." Operating under the authority

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of the prime minister's office, the endowments disburse government funding to maintain and protect religious facilities.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) also maintains three waqfs: the Sunni, the Christian, and the Yezidi endowments. The KRG Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs operates the endowments, which pay the salaries of clergy and fund the construction and maintenance of religious sites. To receive assistance, religious groups are required to register with the ministry. While funding is available for registered Christian groups, some churches choose not to register and, therefore, fund themselves. The KRG also provides funding to some religious groups without endowments. For example, monthly government stipends fund temple maintenance and cultural activities for the Sabean-Mandaean community in the IKR.

The government provides support for Muslims desiring to perform the Hajj, organizing travel routes and immunization documents for entry into Saudi Arabia. The government also provides funding to Sunni and Shia waqfs, which accept Hajj applications from the public and submit them to the supreme council for the Hajj. The council, attached to the prime minister's office, organizes a lottery process that selects pilgrims for official Hajj visas.

The constitution provides that the federal Supreme Court is made up of judges, experts in Islamic jurisprudence, and legal scholars. The constitution leaves the method of regulating the number and selection of judges to legislation that requires a two-thirds majority in the Council of Representatives. The federal Supreme Court's composition continues to be governed by a law that does not require that Islamic jurisprudence experts be included on the court. The federal Supreme Court is presently comprised of nine members, representing a cross-section of ethnicities and religions.

The government requires Islamic religious instruction in public schools, but non-Muslim students are not required to participate. In most areas of the country, primary and secondary school curricula include three classes per week of Islamic education, including study of the Quran, as a graduation requirement for Muslim students. During the year, the Ministry of Education (MOE) approved the inclusion of Syriac and Christian religious education in the curricula of 152 public schools in Baghdad, Ninewa, and Kirkuk. Private religious schools operate in the country, but must obtain a license from the director general of private and public schools and pay annual fees.

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Many Christians who speak the Syriac language consider the right to use and teach it to their children a question of religious freedom. The constitution establishes Arabic and Kurdish as official state languages but guarantees the right to educate minority children in their own languages, and makes Turkmen and Syriac official languages in “the administrative units in which they constitute density populations.” The MOE includes an office for Kurdish and other language education, which aims to ensure that minority communities are taught in their native languages.

The KRG MOE funds Syriac-language public schools (elementary and high school) in its territory, and the curriculum does not contain religion or Quranic studies.

Government Practices

Because religion, politics, and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. There were reports the central government engaged in killings, kidnappings, arrests, detentions, restrictions, and discrimination based on religious affiliation. Misuse of official authority based on sectarian identity continued to be a concern. There were relatively fewer reports of official abuse and discrimination based on religious affiliation in the IKR, but similar reports based on ethnic affiliation. Official investigations of abuses by government forces, illegal armed groups, and terrorist organizations were infrequent, and the outcomes of investigations that did occur were often unpublished, unknown, or incomplete. The government also publicly called for tolerance for all religious communities and developed a committee that implemented reforms to rectify sectarian imbalances in the ministries and implement fair hiring standards, and issued and began implementing an executive order to enforce legal rights related to detainees, a key concern of Sunnis. Religious and ethnic minorities residing within the territory of the disputed internal boundaries in north-central Iraq blamed the central government and the KRG for the lack of security in the area. This sharpened following ISIL’s incursion into Mosul in June when the ISF retreated and when KRG forces withdrew from Sinjar and parts of the Ninewa Plain in early August.

There were some reports that Iraqi police or the ISF either killed Sunni detainees or failed to prevent deadly attacks on Sunni detainees by Shia militias. These reports increased in the wake of ISIL’s advances into northern Iraq in June.

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Conflict between the ISF and ISIL in other locations also led to fighting along sectarian lines. In one example, on March 25, media reported that the ISF, accompanied by Shia militias, entered Buhruz, Diyala Province, to challenge an ISIL force for control of the predominantly Sunni town. ISF soldiers reportedly watched while Shia militia members rounded up and killed a group of Sunni men, including teenagers and elderly persons. Three Sunni mosques were reportedly burned during the confrontation, along with shops and homes of Sunni residents.

Yezidi and Christian political and civil society leaders stated that Kurdish Peshmerga and Asayish forces harassed and committed abuses against their communities in the portion of Ninewa Province controlled by the KRG or contested between the central government and the KRG. Both activists and members of the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament stated that KRG security officials held some Yezidis in arbitrary detention both before and after ISIL occupied the Sinjar district of Ninewa.

Sunni Muslim groups stated there was an ongoing campaign of revenge by the Shia majority in retribution for the Sunnis' favored status and abuses of Shia during the Saddam Hussein regime. Complaints included reports of discrimination in public sector employment due to de-Baathification. This process was originally intended to target loyalists of the former regime. According to Sunnis and local NGOs, however, the Accountability and Justice Law (de-Baathification law) has been implemented selectively and used to render many Sunnis ineligible for government employment. According to sources in Basrah, Sunnis were, in limited cases, passed over for official positions solely on the basis of their religious affiliation. Unrest over Sunni political disenfranchisement and unresolved grievances continued from 2013, with violent clashes between the ISF, police, and anti-government protesters in Anbar Province in January.

Sunnis also reported that central government security forces targeted them for harassment, illegal searches, arbitrary arrest and detention, and torture and abuse. International and local NGOs cited the government's use of the anti-terrorism law as a pretense for detaining Sunni men – and their female relatives – for extended periods of time without access to a lawyer or due process. Human Rights Watch (HRW) and AI reported evidence of torture and ill-treatment of Sunni detainees, as well as deaths in custody of Sunni men detained under the anti-terrorism law. In one case cited, the body of a man who died in custody showed bruises, open wounds, and burns consistent with the application of electricity.

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Human rights NGOs and Yezidi leaders stated KRG authorities discriminated against some groups of Yezidi, Christian and Kakai IDPs in providing humanitarian assistance in the IKR. There were also reports that KRG authorities prevented individuals whom they deemed security threats from entering the IKR. While Kurdish authorities generally admitted ethnic and religious minority IDPs, entry for male Arabs, particularly Sunnis, was more difficult than for others. As Kurdish forces regained territory from ISIL, media reports and government officials noted the Peshmerga were preventing Sunni Arabs from returning to their homes in some areas of reclaimed territory. Kakai IDPs in Erbil also reported pressure from provincial authorities to move from a primarily Christian suburb to IDP camps. In September a provincial official reportedly threatened to move Kakai IDPs to a camp by force if they did not go voluntarily.

Members of religious minority groups, community activists, and media related that many non-Muslims chose to reside in the IKR and areas under KRG control because they considered these areas to offer greater security, tolerance, and protection for minority rights. Some Christians in the Disputed Internal Boundaries Areas reported that false claims of land ownership by local officials blocked Christians from building on land that the Christians said was their property. According to a human rights NGO, one such dispute near Shaqlawa prevented the construction of dwellings for primarily Christian IDPs. A Yezidi activist stated that local Kurdish officials in the village of Ain Sifne in the Shaykhan district of Ninewa continued to pressure local Yezidis to swap their land for larger amounts of poorer quality land elsewhere, in an effort to “Kurdify” the area.

The Iraqi cabinet, the Council of Ministers (COM), had one Christian minister while the KRG’s COM had no minority ministers. Members of minority religious groups were underrepresented in government appointments, public sector jobs, and elected positions outside of the Council of Representatives. Members of minority religious groups held senior positions in the national parliament and central government, as well as in the KRG, although they were proportionally underrepresented in the unelected government workforce, particularly at the provincial and local levels. Minority group leaders said this underrepresentation limited minority groups’ access to government-provided economic opportunities.

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Non-Muslims throughout the country, including Christians, Yezidis, and Sabean-Mandaeans, stated they were being politically isolated by the Muslim majority because of religious differences.

In the IKR, some evangelical Christian groups chose not to register with the government-run endowments, despite requirements to do so to operate legally. They reported they preferred to avoid increased government scrutiny of their internal operations, and to avoid KRG regulations for registration that indirectly constrained proselytization.

The combination of corruption, attacks against non-Muslim businesses, uneven application of the rule of law, and nepotism in hiring practices throughout the country by members of the majority Muslim population had a detrimental economic effect on non-Muslim communities and contributed to their emigration. The deputy chairman of the Council of Sabean-Mandaeans in Dhi Qar Province, for example, attributed his group's increased emigration rate to the lack of security and limited economic opportunity. Advocacy groups and representatives of religious minority communities said the failure of the ISF, including the Kurdish Peshmerga, to ensure protection for minority communities against ISIL in Mosul and across the Ninewa Plain also led to the departure of Christians and other religious minority communities from northern Iraq during the year.

Government policy continued to recognize Christians' right to observe Easter and Christmas without interference. The government also provided increased protection to Christian churches during these holidays. Local Bahais were able to celebrate the festivals of Naw-Ruz and the Festival of Ridvan without interference or intimidation. Provincial governments have also designated religious holidays in their localities; for example, in 2013, the Maysan provincial council recognized a Sabean-Mandaean holiday as an official holiday. The Maysan provincial council also provided physical protection for the Sabean-Mandaean community during times of worship, formally excused the group from Shia Muslim dress codes during times of mourning, and granted land for places of worship.

An advocacy group reported that the Ministry of Antiquities initiated an investigation into the destruction of the home of the founder of the Bahai Faith and the government sent a notice halting construction work on the site. Discussions between the government and the various groups involved in the possible reconstruction of the site were ongoing at year's end.

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Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

The security situation deteriorated sharply during the year due to ISIL's takeover of Iraqi territory and accompanying abuses, including targeting victims on the basis of their religious identity. Iraqis of all faiths faced increasing levels of violence, abductions, and intimidation. Religious pilgrims and pilgrimage sites were also targets for attack. ISIL employed suicide bombs and coordinated attacks with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs). In areas under its control ISIL targeted minority religious and ethnic communities, committing killings and mass executions; and engaging in rape, kidnapping, and detention, including mass abductions and enslavement of women and girls from minority religious groups. ISIL also engaged in harassment, intimidation, robbery, and the destruction of personal property and religious sites.

ISIL pursued a campaign of violence against Iraqis of all faiths, but against religious minorities in particular. For example, in August ISIL seized the predominantly Yezidi village of Kocho and attempted to forcibly convert the community to Islam. After several days of attempted conversion, ISIL separated Yezidi males from women and children and executed at least 100 men within the span of a few hours. The remaining women and children were taken hostage by ISIL and forced into sexual slavery and servitude.

In areas not under ISIL control, the majority of suicide bomb and VBIED attacks targeted Shia Muslims. ISIL forces took credit for most of these attacks via social media postings. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), approximately two VBIEDs were detonated each day in Baghdad, with the number of incidents increasing as ISIL forces moved closer to Baghdad in September and October. Coordinated bomb attacks regularly targeted Shia markets, mosques, and funeral processions, as well as Shia shrines.

ISIL published open threats via leaflets, social media, and press outlets of its intent to kill Shia "wherever they were found" on the basis of being "infidels." For example, on June 11, ISIL took control of Camp Speicher in Tikrit and summarily executed nearly 1,700 unarmed Shia male air force cadets. ISIL produced YouTube videos of the executions and subsequent decapitations boasting of its attacks against the "Shia infidels." Attacks on Shia shrines and in predominately Shia neighborhoods during religious holidays were common. Several attacks on May 22 targeted Shia pilgrims at the shrine of Imam Musa Kadhim in Baghdad's Kadhimiyah neighborhood, killing at least 33 civilians and wounding 86. A mortar

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attack on June 30 at the Askariya Shrine in Samarra (one of the most important Shia religious sites in Iraq) killed six people and damaged the shrine.

Approximately 33 people were killed in three attacks in Baghdad on October 13 as Shia Muslims celebrated Eid al-Ghadir. The attacks, two of which involved suicide car bombs, occurred in or near the predominantly Shia districts of Kadhimiyah and Sadr City, according to police.

In areas it controlled, ISIL sought out non-Sunnis and subjected them to intimidation, kidnappings, and executions. According to multiple reports from international NGOs and the local press, ISIL fighters typically questioned members of a group to determine if they were Sunni, and then killed or abducted the non-Sunni members. In one incident, ISIL forces breached Mosul's Badush prison June 12 and killed as many as 670 Shia and other non-Sunni prisoners, according to international human rights groups. UNAMI personnel interviewed six survivors of the attack, who described how ISIL had separated Sunni and Shia detainees, and then executed only the Shia prisoners. In July during ISIL's siege of the principally Shia Turkmen town of Amerli, some residents died of starvation and a lack of medical supplies.

According to UNAMI, in June ISIL killed at least 13 Sunni Muslim clerics in Mosul who had encouraged their followers to reject ISIL's ideology. Between June and October, ISIL fighters killed 40 Sunni clerics, including scholars, muftis, and preachers, according to the Fallujah Preachers Association.

In areas of Ninewa Province, ISIL committed numerous atrocities against religious minorities in a systematic campaign to drive out and potentially eradicate entire religious communities from their historic homelands. According to a September UNAMI report, ISIL carried out numerous massacres against Yezidi civilians in the Sinjar district of Ninewa, killing at least 500 individuals in August and dumping their corpses in mass graves. Yezidi activists reported more than 4,000 Yezidis, mostly women and girls, remained in ISIL captivity. According to numerous credible reports, including ISIL's own videos, ISIL forces sexually assaulted many of these captives. In an ISIL publication, the group claimed it had conducted this "large-scale enslavement" of Yezidi women and children because of the Yezidis' religious beliefs.

ISIL frequently kidnapped religious minorities for ransom. For example, in June the group kidnapped dozens of Yezidis near the Syrian border and then demanded their families pay a ransom to prevent their execution, according to HRW. In

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another case, ISIL kidnapped several dozen Christian men, women, and children from the Ninewa Plain town of Qaraqosh on August 24. Following the failure of the community's religious leaders to pay a ransom, the kidnapping victims' whereabouts remained unknown.

Killings, forced conversion, threats of violence, and intimidation resulted in the departure of many minorities from ISIL-controlled areas, resulting in additional hardship for religious minorities. Several thousand Kakais were displaced, most of whom remained IDPs in Erbil and Khabat in Erbil Province. Similarly, after its June 10 assault on the Mosul, ISIL issued an ultimatum to Christian residents the week of July 14 to convert to Islam, pay a protection tax, or face execution July 19. Most Christians who had remained in the city after ISIL's initial offensive – approximately 400 families – departed the city by July 20, adding to the nearly 50,000 Christians who had already fled the city and surrounding region. In Nasriya in southern Iraq, flyers were reportedly circulated to approximately 300 Mandaens demanding their conversion or exile.

In Mosul, ISIL forces threatened residents who did not convert with death and punished those who failed to adhere to the group's strict interpretation of sharia.

ISIL forces attacked mosques and other holy sites, rendering many of them unusable, and looted and destroyed religious and cultural artifacts. According to HRW, ISIL destroyed seven Shia places of worship in Tal Afar after taking over control of the predominantly Shia Turkmen city in late June. In Mosul, ISIL destroyed shrines important to Christians and Muslims, including the tomb of Jonah. According to the Assyrian International News Agency, by late July, ISIL had occupied or destroyed 45 Christian institutions in Mosul and the surrounding area, including the headquarters of the Syrian Catholic Diocese, the Church of Our Lady of the Annunciation, and the archbishop's Palace Chapel. Kakai community activists reported that, on August 28, ISIL destroyed two ancient Kakai shrines on the Ninewa Plain. According to a Sabeen-Mandaean rights organization, ISIL also threatened to destroy a Mandaean temple in Naisriya.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Violence by sectarian and illegally armed groups occurred in many parts of the country. Although no reliable statistics on religiously motivated violence were available, acts committed against religious groups included killings, IED and

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VBIED attacks, suicide bombings, kidnapping, robbery, harassment, and intimidation.

Shia in Sunni-dominated neighborhoods, Sunnis in Shia-dominated neighborhoods, and members of minority religious groups in both Sunni- and Shia-dominated neighborhoods and regions were reportedly harassed or intimidated. Religious demographic shifts underway due to the ongoing conflict with ISIL were of significant concern, according to local NGOs and religious leaders.

Sunni Muslims continued to state there was an ongoing campaign of retribution by the Shia majority for the Sunnis' favored status and abuses of Shia under the Saddam Hussein regime. Sunni Muslims also reported discrimination based on a public perception that the Sunni population sympathized with former regime and terrorist elements, including ISIL. For example, according to UNAMI, on February 25, Dhi Qar police arrested four individuals suspected of distributing sectarian flyers demanding that Sunnis leave the area within a month or be killed.

As conflict with ISIL intensified, media and human rights organizations reported that Shia militias and some volunteers in the Popular Mobilization Committees (PMCs) increasingly targeted Sunnis with abductions, execution-style killings, and torture, as well as destruction of homes and businesses. According to AI, Shia militias reportedly kidnapped more than 170 Sunni men in and around Samarra, a predominantly Sunni city, from June to September, then killed dozens of the abducted men. The whereabouts of the rest of the men remained unknown. AI reported that more than 30 Sunni men were abducted and killed in Samarra June 6 as a reprisal for the men's suspected connection with ISIL fighters, who had advanced into the city on June 5. HRW reported in October that killings and abductions by Shia militias had increased throughout the year in Baghdad, Diyala, and Babil provinces.

According to HRW, Shia militias looted and destroyed Sunni homes and businesses in the town of Yengija in late September and early October, about 50 miles south of Kirkuk. Sunni residents of villages within a 10-mile radius of Yengija reported to HRW that Sunni homes in their villages had also been destroyed by Shia militias. After Shia militias burned two Sunni homes during the Iraqi offensive to retake the town of Bayji in Salah ad Din Province, an Iraqi general told the press the militias would be pulled back from the front lines there. Media, human rights groups, and government officials reported that Shia militias

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prevented displaced Sunni Arabs from returning home to areas over which the militias exerted control.

Some militia leaders acknowledged abuses by their members. According to news reports, on October 31 a militia group announced the expulsion of 49 members accused of “using the name of the Islamic resistance...to carry out their crimes.” The statement contained no details, saying only that the expulsion occurred “in the wake of increasing kidnappings and blackmail.” The Shia religious establishment also expressed concern about reported abuses. A senior representative of the *Marja'iyah* religious authority, Sheikh Abdul Mehdi al-Karbala'e, in his November 28 sermon referred to “individual deeds of bad actors.” While the government supported the establishment of volunteer PMCs in response to ISIL's incursions, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi repeatedly called for these groups to place themselves under the command and control of the Iraqi security forces.

In the southern part of the country the security situation deteriorated following ISIL advances in Mosul in June and the subsequent redeployment of Iraqi army units from the southern provinces to fight ISIL. Minorities faced increasing hostility and some groups, such as Sabeen-Mandaeans, engaged in less public religious rites. The Sunni Endowment confirmed UNAMI findings that the Sunni minority in the south had been subjected to assassinations, kidnappings, and threats. For example, four Sunnis, including a prominent tribal sheikh, were kidnapped during the first week of October in Basrah. Two were later released after interrogation and payment of a ransom, while the others remained in an unknown location. The assistant dean of Shatt al-Arab University and a Sunni physician were also kidnapped in southern Iraq in September; their whereabouts remained unknown.

Christian, Yezidi, Sabeen-Mandaean, and Shabak leaders reported their communities continued to be targets of violence and harassment. For example, some individuals exerted pressure on minority group members to cede certain land rights unless they conformed to a stricter observance of Islamic precepts. This included demanding the closure of liquor stores and nightclubs and, at times, subjecting shopkeepers to violence for noncompliance. Although these efforts affected all citizens, non-Muslims said they were especially vulnerable to this pressure and violence because of their minority status.

Groups targeting Christians and Sabeen-Mandaeans reportedly combined kidnappings or killings with criminal activities for profit. For example, unknown

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assailants reportedly killed a Sabeen-Mandaean resident of Baghdad in February after he refused to pay a ransom, and killed a Sabeen-Mandaean business owner south of Baghdad in June. Two Sabeen-Madaeans were kidnapped and held for ransom in Maysan and Baghdad in August, but neither individual was returned to his family despite the payment of ransoms. Christian groups reported that militias and armed groups confiscated homes abandoned by community members who had fled the country following the sectarian violence of 2006-2008. Settlement was often reached when owners of the properties were forced to sell at prices below market value.

Given the deterioration in the overall security situation and repeated attacks on religious pilgrims, the ISF deployed police and army personnel to protect religious pilgrimage routes and sites, as well as places of worship, during religious holidays. There were no terrorist attacks, for example, during the Ashura commemorations November 4 in Karbala or Najaf. Even with added protection, many worshippers reportedly did not attend religious services or participate in religious events because of the threat of violence. Yezidis cancelled many religious ceremonies, including their annual *Jama*, or gathering, which includes a pilgrimage to the tomb of Sheikh Adi Ibn Musafir, due to ongoing security concerns following repeated threats from ISIL.

Sunni and Shia religious leaders, pilgrims, and religious congregants at shrines, places of worship, and private homes suffered fatal attacks and injuries throughout the year. For example, an attack on July 3 killed four Shia worshipers and wounded 15 people when a suicide bomber detonated explosives at the entrance of a Shia shrine in western Baghdad.

There were reports that non-Muslim minorities felt obliged to adhere to certain Islamic practices, such as wearing the hijab or fasting during Ramadan. According to representatives of Christian NGOs, some Muslims threatened women and girls, regardless of their religious affiliation, for refusing to wear the hijab, for dressing in Western-style clothing, or for not adhering to strict interpretations of Islamic norms governing public behavior. There were also cases, particularly in the southern part of the country, in which Muslim women were threatened by their family or community members for not wearing the hijab and told to dress more conservatively. Numerous women, including Christians, reported opting to wear the hijab after being harassed.

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While non-Muslim students were not required to participate in religious instruction in public schools, some non-Muslim students reported they felt pressured to do so by teachers and classmates. There were also reports that some non-Muslim students felt obliged to participate because they could not leave the classroom during religious instruction. Christian and Yezidi leaders reported continued discrimination in education and the lack of minority input into issues such as school curricula and language of instruction. Schools did not universally adopt the new MOE curriculum that incorporated lessons of religious tolerance.

The Alliance for Iraqi Minorities and UNAMI organized a conference in March with representatives of several ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural minority communities aimed at raising awareness of the rights of minorities, the protections needed for these communities, and actions to include and empower these groups in the government. In April the University of Salah ad Din organized a three-day civil peace conference in Erbil. The dean of the Faculty of Islamic Studies at the University of Salah ad Din told the media that the conference stressed the need for tolerance among followers of all religions and ethnic groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

At the highest levels, U.S. government officials promoted religious freedom in speeches, meetings, coordination groups, and assistance programs. In remarks on August 7, while authorizing humanitarian airdrops and targeted airstrikes to help the thousands of Iraqi civilians trapped on Mount Sinjar in northern Iraq, the President described ISIL's treatment of religious minorities including Christians and Yezidis as "barbaric." In September the President denounced ISIL's treatment of minority communities, saying ISIL had threatened the Yezidi community with genocide. On September 10, the President identified humanitarian assistance to civilians displaced by ISIL as a key element of the U.S. strategy to degrade and defeat ISIL. These civilians included Sunni and Shia Muslims, as well as tens of thousands of Christians and other religious minorities. At the United Nations General Assembly on September 24, the President called on political, civic, and religious leaders – including those in Iraq – to take concrete steps to address the danger posed by religiously motivated fanatics and to reject sectarianism.

The Secretary of State, during his September 10 visit to Baghdad, urged the new government to protect members of religious minorities and integrate them into the government. He stated that the United States remained committed to working with

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the new government as long as it was committed to diversity, inclusivity, and protecting minorities in Iraq. The Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights and the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor also condemned ISIL's persecution of religious minorities and extensive abuses of religious freedom.

The Ambassador and the Consuls General in Erbil and in Basrah worked with minority religious groups, representatives of the international community, and government officials to address their concerns, particularly regarding security and protection. Embassy and consulate officials maintained an active dialogue with leaders of religious communities, advocates from minority-focused civil society groups, and minority representatives in the government.

As the humanitarian crisis deepened during the year, U.S. officials in Baghdad and Erbil met regularly with NGOs and UN officials coordinating international assistance to IDPs to address problems identified by religious minority groups with overall aid distribution.

U.S. officials met often with religious leaders, clergy, and wafq leaders to demonstrate U.S. interest and support. The embassy and consulates also worked closely with the Ministries of Education, Human Rights, Labor and Social Affairs, other relevant ministries, as well as with the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities, members of parliament, and parliamentary committees to emphasize the importance of the protection and full inclusion of religious minorities.

The U.S. government developed, financed, and managed projects to support religious and ethnic minority communities, including assistance to IDPs of all communities. The embassy funded projects supporting religious minority communities through economic empowerment and entrepreneurship initiatives, especially for women. These projects focused on both immediate and longer-term needs of communities, including economic development, essential and humanitarian services, and capacity development. In addition, in response to the immense humanitarian crisis in the country, which disproportionately affected minority communities in northern Iraq, the United States pledged an additional \$12.8 million in June to support international aid efforts, bringing total U.S. government humanitarian spending for Iraq to \$202 million for the fiscal year.

SYRIA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

Religious freedom continued to decline. Although the constitution formally expresses government respect for and freedom to exercise all religions, significant limitations and restrictions were imposed in practice. With the worsening conflict, the government did not control significant terrain within the country, rendering it incapable of governing those portions of the country. Government regime repression increased against Sunni Muslims, whose religious status the government viewed as a proxy for political opposition to the government. Regime forces and allied Shia militias targeted Sunnis and religious minority groups with killings, torture, arrests, and attacks on Sunni and religious minority neighborhoods and religious sites. For example, Lebanese Hizbollah killed 200 civilians in February near Rasm an-Nafl, and the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas brigade, a domestic Shia militia allied with the government, killed 26 Sunni civilians near Aleppo in February. Regime forces and their Shia militia allies arrested Sunni clerics and destroyed Sunni mosques.

Extremists groups targeted Shia, Alawites, and religious minorities with killings, kidnapping, torture, and arrests in the areas of the country under their control. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) publicly executed Western hostages, referring to them as “dogs of Rome” and “crusaders,” and stoned to death and beheaded men, women, and children on charges of blasphemy, heresy, and apostasy. ISIL established court and policing systems in areas it controlled and handed down strict punishments based on its interpretation of sharia. ISIL lashed men for not following its proscriptions about religious observance. ISIL required Christians to convert, flee, pay a special tax, or face execution in territory it controls, and systematically destroyed churches, Shia shrines, and other religious sites. The al-Nusra Front (al-Nusra) killed a Dutch priest in Homs in April and seven Druze clerics and eight other Druze in August. Al-Nusra abducted members of religious minority groups, including a Catholic priest and 20 other Christians in Quenyeh Village in October.

There were reports of tensions among religious groups, exacerbated by government actions, cultural rivalries, and sectarian rhetoric and violence. As the death toll of the conflict increased (the United Nations reported at least 200,000 conflict-related deaths by year’s end) and the regime took more violent action, reports of sectarian killings, Sunni reprisals, and violence against minority groups continued. Previous religiously heterogeneous neighborhoods in cities, as well as towns and villages,

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continued the trend of becoming increasingly monocultural as religious groups relocated, seeking greater security and safety by living with their coreligionists.

The U.S. Embassy in Damascus suspended operations in February 2012. The U.S. government, however, maintained relationships with Syrian religious groups and civil society representatives in the United States, Syria, and throughout the region. The President and the Secretary of State voiced the expectation that Syria's government should, at present and in the future, respect and protect the rights of all citizens regardless of religious beliefs. Senior officials reiterated this point throughout the year. The U.S. Special Envoy for Syria and other U.S. officials met with Christians, Sunnis, Shia, Alawites, Ismailis, Druze, and Yezidis to discuss assistance to vulnerable populations and ways to counter sectarian violence. U.S. humanitarian, non-lethal assistance to Syrians, including religious groups, throughout the region totaled approximately \$3.3 billion during the year.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at approximately 17.9 million (July 2014 estimate). Sunni Muslims are estimated to constitute 74 percent of the population and are present throughout the country. The Sunni population includes ethnic Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, Chechens, and some Turkomans. Other Muslim groups, including Alawites, Ismailis, and Shia, together constitute 13 percent. Druze account for 3 percent of the population. Christian groups constituted 10 percent of the population before the civil war, although the Christian population may have been reduced to less than 8 percent as Christians continue to flee the country. Before the war there were small Jewish populations in Aleppo and Damascus, although there is no reliable information to confirm their continued residency or current size. Media and NGO reports and a social media page purportedly administered by Syrian Jews stated there were fewer than 20 Jews left in the country. There was also a Yezidi population of approximately 80,000 before the war, but media reports indicate that it has grown due to Iraqi Yezidis fleeing across the border into Syria. All population figures and demographic percentages are estimates that contain a considerable degree of uncertainty due to the ongoing civil war and resulting large-scale population displacement.

Most Christians belong to the autonomous Orthodox churches, the Eastern Catholic (or Uniate) churches (in full communion with the Roman Catholic pope), or the Assyrian Church of the East and other affiliated independent Nestorian churches.

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Most Christians live in and around Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Latakia, or in the Hasakah governorate in the northeast section of the country. While the country hosted hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Christian refugees before the conflict, the majority of the Iraqi Christian population has since moved to neighboring countries or returned to Iraq. The majority of Alawites live in the mountainous areas of the coastal Latakia governorate, but they also have a significant presence in the cities of Latakia, Tartous, Homs, and Damascus. Many Druze live in the Jabal al-Arab (Jabal al-Druze) region in the southern governorate of Suweida, where they constitute the majority of the local population. Yezidis are found primarily in the northeast and in Aleppo. The highest concentration of Ismailis is in the city of Salamiyeh in the Hama governorate.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The 2012 constitution states that the government respects all religions and provides freedom to exercise of all religions. It also provides legal mechanisms to target religious groups the government deems “extremist.” The constitution grants freedom of faith and religious practice provided that religious rites “do not disturb the public order.” The constitution states, “the civil status of the religious communities is protected and respected,” and “the citizens are equal in rights and duties, without discrimination as to religion or confession.” Citizens have the right to sue the government when they believe it has violated their rights.

Membership in any organization considered “Salafist,” a designation generally denoting Sunni fundamentalism, is illegal. The government and the State Security Court have not defined the exact parameters of what constitutes “Salafist” activity or explained why it is illegal. According to the law, affiliation with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is punishable by death.

There is no official state religion, although the constitution requires the president be Muslim and stipulates that Islamic jurisprudence is a principal source of legislation. The government selects for religious leadership positions those Muslims who commit to preserving the secular nature of the state and avoid criticism of the government, as is the case with the country’s current grand mufti.

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The government restricts proselytizing and conversion. The government prohibits the conversion of Muslims to other religions, since this is deemed contrary to sharia. The government does not permit conversion from Islam to Christianity, but does recognize Christian converts to Islam. The penal code prohibits “causing tension between religious communities.”

All religious groups must register with the government, which monitors fundraising and requires permits for all religious and nonreligious group meetings except for regularly scheduled worship. The registration process can be complicated and lengthy, but the government usually allows groups to operate informally while awaiting approval. Recognized religious groups and clergy – including all government-recognized Muslim, Jewish, and Christian groups – receive free utilities and are exempt from real estate taxes on religious buildings and personal property taxes on their official vehicles.

For issues of personal status, the government requires citizens to be affiliated nominally with Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. Religious affiliation is documented on the birth certificate and is required on legal documentation when marrying or traveling for a religious pilgrimage and on many other official forms. The government does not require the designation of religion on passports or national identity cards.

A Muslim woman may not legally marry a Christian man, but a Christian woman may legally marry a Muslim man. If a Christian woman marries a Muslim man, she is not allowed to be buried in a Muslim cemetery unless she converts to Islam. If a person wishes to convert from Christianity to Islam, the law states that the presiding Muslim cleric must inform the prospective convert’s diocese.

Individuals are subject to their respective religious groups’ laws concerning marriage and divorce. The personal status law on divorce for Muslims is based on sharia, and government appoints religious judges. In the case of interreligious disputes, sharia takes precedence. A divorced woman is not entitled to alimony in some cases, such as if she foregoes her right to alimony to persuade her husband to agree to the divorce. Additionally, under the law, a divorced mother loses the right to guardianship and physical custody of her sons when they reach the age of 13 and of her daughters at age 15, when guardianship transfers to the paternal side of the family.

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The government's interpretation of sharia is the basis of inheritance law for all citizens except Christians. Accordingly, courts usually grant Muslim women half of the inheritance share of male heirs. In all communities male heirs must provide financial support to female relatives who inherit less. When a Christian woman marries a Muslim, she is not entitled to an inheritance from her husband.

The government generally does not prohibit links between its citizens and coreligionists in other countries or between its citizens and the international religious hierarchies that govern some religious groups. It prohibits, however, contact between the Jewish community and Jews in Israel.

Public schools are officially government-run and nonsectarian, although in practice the Christian and Druze communities operate some public schools. There is mandatory religious instruction in public schools for all students, with regime-approved teachers and curricula. Religious instruction is provided for Islam and Christianity only, and courses are divided into separate classes for Muslim and Christian students. Members of religious minority groups can choose to attend public schools with Muslim or Christian instruction, or attend private schools that follow either secular or religious curricula. Groups participating in Islamic courses include only Sunnis, Shia, Alawites, Ismailis, Yezidis, and Druze. Although Arabic is the official language in public schools, the government permits the teaching of Armenian, Hebrew, Syriac (Aramaic), and Chaldean in some schools on the premise that they are "liturgical languages."

Government Practices

The government regime and allied militias, Lebanese Hizballah, and Shia militias made up of foreign fighters engaged in violence and discrimination against most religious minority groups and Sunnis. The regime targeted Sunnis disproportionately, largely viewing religious affiliation as a proxy for political beliefs, and assuming most Sunnis supported the opposition to its rule. The regime and its Shia militia allies killed, arrested, and physically abused members of targeted religious minority groups as well as Sunnis, and intentionally destroyed their property. The UN estimated by year's end that more than 200,000 individuals had been killed since the start of the conflict in the country. Sources reported that regime-affiliated militias seized the homes of Sunnis who had fled, with the explicit intention of permanently displacing these individuals and changing the religious demography of these areas by populating the area with Shia and Alawite residents.

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Media and academic experts said the government portrayed the armed resistance in sectarian terms, maintaining opposition protesters and fighters were associated with “extreme Islamist factions” and terrorists seeking to eliminate the country’s religious minority groups and its secular approach to governance. For instance, in a news conference in September, Bashar al-Jaafari, the Syrian Ambassador to the UN, accused the opposition of being comprised of terrorists and claimed that government forces are “fighting terror on behalf of the whole world.”

Government-appointed religious officials called on citizens to engage in “jihad” in support of the regime. According to the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI), the rise in government-supported minority militias (*shabiha*) and the positioning of militias within their respective supportive communities fostered hostilities along sectarian lines.

There were credible reports the regime killed individuals because of their religious affiliation and targeted towns and neighborhoods in various parts of the country for siege, mortar shelling, and aerial bombardment on the basis of the religious affiliation of residents. For example, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reported in August the presence of multiple pro-regime Shia militias fighting on behalf of the government in Aleppo early in the year, including Lebanese Hizballah and the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas brigade. A civilian in the southern Aleppo countryside reported that fighters from Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas killed 26 men February 22 after abducting them from a cultural center building, accusing them of being terrorists and “Yazid sons,” lining them against a wall, and opening fire. The SNHR also reported witness testimony from a June 21 incident in Rasm An-Nafl Village in Aleppo where the regime bombed residents, killing 192 civilians, including 27 children and 21 women in one day. In February the UK newspaper *The Guardian* reported that Shia and Sunni factions in Aleppo engaged in heavy fighting that resulted in the death of several hundred civilians.

Campaigns of violence specifically targeted on the basis of faith contributed to the widespread displacement of civilians that numbered 7.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and more than 3.2 million refugees by year’s end, according to the UN. Actual figures may have been higher.

The government regime undertook judicial prosecution primarily against individuals perceived as constituting a political threat to its survival, including its secular identity. Human rights groups reported that many of the accused were targeted for being followers of a particular preacher or mosque rather than participants in extremist groups, although several antigovernment groups of

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various religious makeups, some exhibiting violent extremist behavior, had emerged since the start of the conflict. The government rarely furnished public documentation on the number arrested; however, human rights organizations and civil society groups reported the government had detained tens of thousands of citizens since the unrest began. Reportedly, almost none of the detained were afforded due process.

According to the Syrian American Council, there were at least 16 documented deaths of Sunni clerics and religious figures while in regime custody, bringing the reported total to at least 64 Sunni religious clerics killed since the start of the conflict. Activists said the actual figure is likely much higher.

Violence or repression against Sunni opposition groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, was common practice. Until 2012, the sentence for membership in the Muslim Brotherhood was typically commuted to 12 years in prison. During the year, however, sentencing ranged from lengthy imprisonment to the death penalty. Additionally, according to civil society activists, the government often engaged in extrajudicial detentions and killed such individuals rather than prosecuting them in court.

The government continued to imprison, and on some occasions summarily execute, individuals it deemed to be associated with opposition radio and television programming, including religious programming that did not meet government criteria.

The government engaged in forcible religious re-education programs. For example, media reported in February that the governor of Homs Province announced nearly 200 men, evacuated from Homs City during a cease-fire in the besieged city, were being held by Syrian security services and would receive religion classes to “modify their incorrect interpretation of Islam.” Their fate remained unknown at year’s end.

The SNHR reported that the regime deliberately targeted places of worship, including churches and mosques, and also converted them to bases to launch shelling into surrounding areas. The SNHR stated that regime forces targeted at least 244 places of worship throughout the year.

On February 13, regime forces targeted the St. Paul Church in Daraya outside of Damascus, severely damaging the building. Also in February the regime shelled

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one of the oldest Christian sites of worship in the world, the Church of Saints Constantine and Helen in Yabroud, whose structure dates back to the first millennium.

During the first two weeks in June the regime severely damaged dozens of Sunni mosques in Aleppo, including the more than 200-year-old Haroon Dada Mosque, as well as the Subhan and Firdous Mosques. According to the SNHR, regime forces bombed the Othman bin Affan Mosque in Aleppo and the town mosque in Madyara in February and March, respectively. In some cases, the regime reportedly targeted mosques claiming that they served as rallying points for protesters. Regime forces converted the Mahrada Monastery in Hama Province to a small military base, using it to shell neighboring areas and to store military vehicles and heavy artillery.

In May regime security forces shelled and significantly damaged the historic Eliyahu Hanabi Synagogue (also known as the Jobar Synagogue) in Damascus. The synagogue had been a center for Jewish worship and devotion for more than 400 years and was reportedly the repository of thousands of religious and historical artifacts.

The government continued to monitor and limit the activities of all religious groups and to discourage proselytizing. While there is no law prohibiting proselytizing, the government discouraged it and occasionally expelled or prosecuted missionaries for “posing a threat to the relations among religious groups.”

The government permitted the use of religious language in public, including banners bearing religious slogans at prominent public landmarks during religious holidays. The display of nativity scenes and other symbols associated with Christmas was common.

The government allowed foreign Christian faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to operate in the country under the auspices of the Catholic or Orthodox Churches and without officially registering. Many of these NGOs worked directly to provide humanitarian assistance in cooperation with the various churches in the country.

Recognized religious minority groups, with the exception of Jews, were represented among the senior officer corps of the Syrian military. While the law

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does not permit conscientious objection to military service, historically both Christian and Muslim religious leaders have been exempted, although Muslim religious leaders were required to pay a levy for exemption.

The regime openly threatened Sunnis, warning against increased communications with foreign coreligionists, defining such communication as opposition political or military activity. The government monitored and controlled sermons and often closed mosques between prayers. At the same time the government continued its support for radio and television programming related to the practice and study of Islam that it deemed appropriate.

The government allowed foreign Christian faith-based NGOs to operate under the auspices of one of the historically established churches without officially registering. It required foreign Islamic NGOs, however, to register and receive approval from the Ministry of Religious Endowments to operate. Security forces regularly questioned these organizations on their sources of income and monitored their expenditures. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor continued to prohibit religious leaders from serving as directors on the boards of Islamic charities, maintaining the previous year's departure from traditional practice under which clerics headed most Islamic charities in the country.

There were limits placed on the distribution of religious media. Despite having no specific law against the production and distribution of religious literature or other types of media, the government reportedly used provisions in the penal code to prohibit "causing tension between religious communities" to restrict distribution of religious materials by groups it deemed a threat.

The regime continued to condemn sectarian strife, for example during public speeches by prominent government-affiliated figures such as Grand Mufti Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun, while attributing opposition violence to religious extremists and terrorists. Opposition figures continued to say the authorities systematically used sectarian fear as a strategy to counter antigovernment demonstrations and justify government attacks on civilian and residential areas.

Religion was a factor in determining some career advancement. The minority Alawite group, of which President Asad and his family are members, continued to hold an elevated political status disproportionate to its numbers, particularly in the military and other security services.

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The media continued to disseminate anti-Semitic material through government radio and television programming, news articles, cartoons, and other mass media. Government-appointed Grand Mufti Sheikh Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun continued to evoke sectarian rhetoric and disparage “Zionist control” of holy sites in Jerusalem in his public remarks. The regime also regularly cited a “Zionist conspiracy” as responsible for the conflict and violence the country is currently experiencing.

In March, following the highly publicized release of the 12 nuns taken captive from Maloula, regime media described the nuns as “traitors to the nation.”

Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

Terrorist groups, including ISIL and al-Nusra, perpetrated killings, arrests, torture, kidnappings, and the intentional destruction of property against most religious groups in the country. ISIL publicly executed five western hostages, using the terms “dogs of Rome” and “crusaders” as purported justification. The group also beheaded women and men it had accused of blasphemy and apostasy.

A religious freedom advocacy organization reported that in February unidentified opposition forces attacked the primarily Alawite village of Maan, killing 40 people. Media widely reported that on April 7, al-Nusra shot and killed Dutch Jesuit priest Frans van der Lugt in Homs governorate. According to media reports, in August al-Nusra killed seven Druze clerics and eight other residents in the predominantly Druze town of Deir Dama, near Suweida City in Dara Province. In August ISIL killed seven members of an Ismaili family in Salamiyeh, Hama Province, according to media and human rights reports. In November ISIL beheaded an Ismaili after accusing him of apostasy, and in December it beheaded at least five men it accused of blasphemy.

ISIL transported to a village in northeast Syria more than 25 Iraqi Yezidi men it had captured in Iraq, and forced them to convert to Islam, pay a \$50,000 ransom, or be killed. According to reports from Yezidi advocacy groups, ISIL beat and tortured the men while in custody, insulting and cursing the Yezidi religion. ISIL released a small number of them after their families paid a ransom for them, but ISIL reportedly killed the rest after they refused to convert to Islam.

According to media accounts and ISIL’s own videos, on August 27, ISIL physically abused and killed an estimated 160 Syrian army soldiers captured at

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Tabqa military base and the surrounding area. During the episode, ISIL systematically insulted the Alawite faith, dehumanizing the captives as “Nusairi herds” (a derogatory term in Arabic to describe members of the Alawite faith). ISIL beat the men, stripped them, and marched them barefoot over 60 miles to an area near Raqqa City. ISIL subsequently beheaded them and displayed their decapitated heads on fence posts in the city’s main square. In a video, ISIL said this treatment was justified because Alawites were “enemies of God.”

Anti-regime and foreign fighters committed targeted killings of individuals, sometimes as part of efforts to promote sectarian violence. The COI, activists, and media reported in February ISIL issued an ultimatum that Christians in Raqqa convert to Islam, pay a protection tax, or face execution. Media reports documented large numbers of Christians fleeing Raqqa in response to this announcement. Former residents of Raqqa estimated there were no more than 30 Christians left in Raqqa City, paying an unknown amount in protection taxes (*jizya*), and without access to public places of worship. ISIL converted all churches in Raqqa into mosques and forbade public worship of any other faith. One former resident of Raqqa reported that ISIL required Christian families to pay 60,000 Syrian pounds (\$335) in *jizya* per family per year. ISIL reportedly seized the abandoned homes of Christians in Raqqa who fled following ISIL’s public ultimatum in February.

An offensive led by al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham against the Armenian Christian town of Kassab in March reportedly forced nearly 2,500 civilians to flee. Media reported that on June 1, ISIL confiscated houses and land belonging to Christian families in the area of Ein al-Issa in Raqqa Province and forced residents to leave the area. ISIL attacked Shia mosques and shrines in Raqqa, destroying the Uwais Al-Qami Mosque and desecrating seventh century tombs in late May, which former residents said prompted the mass flight of Shia residents. Other Shia residents of Raqqa converted “to survive,” according to a COI report.

Extremist opposition groups engaged in kidnapping targeted against religious minorities. Syrian Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim and Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi, kidnapped in April 2013, remained unaccounted for at year’s end. In March al-Nusra freed the twelve nuns that it had taken captive during fighting over the town of Maloula in December 2013. In October al-Nusra fighters abducted a Catholic priest and 20 other Christians in the village of Qunyah. Several days later, they were released unharmed. The whereabouts and condition of three other Christian men kidnapped in the Khabour region of

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Hasakah Province by armed individuals believed to be affiliated with ISIL remained unknown.

The whereabouts and condition of Jesuit priest Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, kidnapped by ISIL in July 2013 in Raqqa, remained unknown.

Al-Nusra claimed responsibility for numerous bombings, including suicide attacks, across the country, in many cases stating that such attacks were reactions to the regime's "massacres of Sunnis."

Yezidis, the UN, the Iraqi government, and others reported that ISIL captured thousands of Yezidi women and girls in Iraq. Yezidi activists and civil society groups reported more than 4,000 remained in ISIL captivity at year's end, and that many of these had been trafficked to Syria and were sold or distributed to ISIL fighters there as "spoils of war." Escaped captives reported ISIL held hundreds of Yezidi women and children in Raqqa, and sexually assaulted many of them, which ISIL also reported in its own videos. An ISIL publication said it conducted this "large-scale enslavement" of Yezidi women and children because of the Yezidis' religious beliefs.

In addition to killing members of religious groups during armed attacks, terrorist groups and other armed groups ran ad hoc courts throughout the northern areas based on varying interpretations of Islamic law that authorized the public execution and torture of minorities, particularly Alawites, accused of working with the regime. Armed groups, including those linked to al-Nusra, established sharia councils in Aleppo Province and elsewhere, replacing both regime-affiliated courts and opposition courts upholding the current Syrian penal code.

In areas under its control, ISIL established a police force and system of courts that administered justice in accordance with its extreme interpretation of Islamic religious law. ISIL police forces, known as Hisbah, administered summary punishment for violations of a strict morality code. Men and women faced public beatings for smoking, possessing alcohol, listening to music, having tattoos, conducting business during prayer times, not attending Friday prayers, and not fasting during Ramadan. Others were punished for accompanying "improperly dressed" female relatives. ISIL also established the al-Khanssaa all-female police force, comprised of mostly non-Syrian foreign women in Raqqa, that enforced ISIL-prescribed moral regulations, sometimes violently, among women.

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ISIL engaged in a campaign to attack and destroy minority religious sites in the areas it held. For example, in March ISIL bombed and destroyed an important Shia shrine in Raqqa, the Mosque of Ammar bin Yassir and Oweis al-Qarni. In September ISIL destroyed an Armenian church in Deir el Zour.

ISIL altered school curricula to use schools as a platform for indoctrination according to its interpretation of religious principles and for the propagation of its ideological priorities. For example, ISIL used Al Bouhtri School in Al-Bab as a training facility for boys under age 18, and the Sharea youth camp near Tabqa trained over 350 boys between five and 16 years of age for “jihad.” ISIL also banned several basic academic subjects, such as chemistry, Christian religious education, and non-ISIL Islamic education.

The New York Times reported on November 13 that ISIL commander Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi called on Muslims throughout the Middle East to rise up against “the agents of the Jews and crusaders, their slaves, tails, and dogs.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some prominent societal and religious leaders and armed local militias contributed negatively to sectarian tensions and religious freedom. There were also bombings for which neither side in the conflict took responsibility. For example, an October bombing outside of a school in a primarily Alawite neighborhood in Homs killed 41 children.

There were reports of tensions among religious groups, exacerbated by government actions, cultural rivalries, and sectarian rhetoric and violence. As the death toll of the conflict increased and the regime took more violent action, reports of sectarian killings, Sunni reprisals, and violence against minority groups continued to increase.

Accusations that the regime favored the Alawite population continued, culminating in opposition attacks, reportedly by extremist elements, on Alawite populations. Alawites increasingly feared sectarian cleansing would follow a fall of the regime. Homs remained a “city of cantonments,” with security walls dividing Alawite neighborhoods from the rest of the city.

Religious groups continued to self-segregate into sectarian-based neighborhoods or towns. Damascus residents reported Alawites based in Rif Damascus moved away

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from previously mixed neighborhoods to relocate to provinces or neighborhoods heavily populated by Alawites. In other areas of the country, however, Sunnis internally displaced by regime-perpetrated violence reportedly relocated to traditional Alawite strongholds along the coast, believing they would be safer from regime-driven sectarian violence.

In May media reported conflict between Shia militia fighters from Iran and Iraq and Alawite factions near the Sayyideh Zainab neighborhood in Damascus over religious differences.

Some Christians reported societal tolerance for Christians dwindled as the influence of extremist groups increased, triggering the flight of many Christians from the country as refugees or into Kurdish and regime-controlled areas. For example, media reported tens of thousands of Christians left Aleppo since the start of the conflict, with many departing following reports of ISIL's treatment of Christians in Raqqa and in Mosul, Iraq in June and July. Media reports indicated that at least 20,000 Christians had relocated to Armenia since the start of the conflict, with several thousand also relocating to Turkey. Christian refugees in Turkey reported to media outlets they lost property and personal possessions to extortion by criminal gangs and extremist groups.

Alawite and Shia youth reported being threatened in schools and universities by Sunni colleagues due to their religious affiliations and perceived support for the regime. One Christian civil society organization reported instances in the northwestern part of the country of Christians being excluded in the distribution of humanitarian aid because of perceived support for the regime due to their religious affiliation. Antigovernment protests occasionally carried specific anti-Alawite messages.

Social conventions and religious proscriptions made conversion relatively rare, especially Muslim-to-Christian conversion, which was not legal. Societal pressure forced converts to relocate within the country or leave the country to practice their new religion openly, according to reports by advocacy groups.

Some societal and religious leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom, actively countering sectarian narratives, encouraging peaceful relations among religious groups, and calling on all parties to the conflict to respect human rights. For example, in October an Episcopal bishop in Homs convened a local reconciliation meeting that brought together 40 local religious and community

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leaders from various Sunni, Alawite, and Christian communities. The Syrian Opposition Coalition condemned actions against religious minorities, both by the regime and by extremist and terrorist groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy in Damascus suspended operations in February 2012. The U.S. government nevertheless continued existing relationships and developed new relationships with Syrian religious groups and leaders. The President and the Secretary of State urged the government to respect the universal rights of its citizens, including the right to religious freedom. The President in September stated his position that the only solution to the Syrian crisis was a political one that “responds to the legitimate aspirations of all Syrian citizens, regardless of ethnicity or creed.” This includes Sunni and Shia Muslims who are at grave risk, as well as tens of thousands of Christians and other religious minorities. The Secretary of State in January affirmed the expectation that Syria be a country that “respects its citizens and that protects the rights of every group, every sect, every faith...where all people are represented without discrimination...” The Secretary and other senior U.S. officials reiterated this point at other times during the year.

U.S. officials sought out religious groups and leaders in Syria, the United States, and throughout the world. The Special Envoy for Syria and other high-ranking U.S. officials met with members of the Orthodox Christian, Sunni, Druze, and Shia communities, focusing on providing assistance to vulnerable populations and countering sectarian violence. The Special Envoy and other officials participated in dialogues, roundtables, and working groups focused on countering sectarianism and retributive violence. U.S. government officials pressed the political opposition to expand and include representatives from all religious and ethnic backgrounds in order to better reflect the diversity of the country’s population. The United States supported the documentation of violations committed by all sides of the conflict through the COI and through direct support to Syrian-led documentation efforts.

U.S. humanitarian and non-lethal assistance to vulnerable Syrian populations, including religious groups, was approximately \$3.3 billion during the year.

IRAN 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states that Ja'afari Shia Islam is the official state religion and that all laws and regulations must be based on "Islamic criteria" and official interpretation of sharia. It also stipulates that the five major Sunni schools be "accorded full respect," enjoy official status in matters of religious education and certain personal affairs, and that, in regions where followers of one of the five Sunni schools constitute the majority, local regulations conform with that school within certain bounds. The constitution states, "within the limits of the law," Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities with protected ability to worship freely and to form religious societies, although proselytizing is prohibited. The government executed and jailed members of religious minority groups on charges of *moharebeh* (enmity against God) and anti-Islamic propaganda. The government discriminated against all religious minority groups in employment, education, and housing. Government rhetoric and actions created a threatening atmosphere for all non-Shia religious groups, most notably for Bahais. Government-controlled broadcast and print media continued negative campaigns against religious minorities.

Non-Muslims faced substantial societal discrimination, aided by official support. Some media outlets continued their campaign against non-Muslim religious minorities, and political and religious leaders made defamatory statements against them. There were reported problems for Bahais at different levels of society throughout the country. Non-Bahais were often pressured to refuse employment to Bahais and to dismiss Bahais from their private sector jobs. There were reports of Shia clerics and prayer leaders denouncing Sufism and the activities of Sufis in the country in both sermons and public statements.

On July 28, the Secretary of State redesignated Iran as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) and renewed the existing restrictions on certain imports from and exports to the country. The United States has no diplomatic relations with the country. The Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor addressed abuses and restrictions against Bahai, Christian, Jewish, and other religious minority communities in the country. Senior U.S. government officials publicly called for the release of prisoners held on religious grounds. The U.S. government supported religious minority groups in the country through its actions in the UN, including through votes to extend the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran and for resolutions expressing concern over

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the country's human rights practices, including the continued persecution of religious minorities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 80.8 million (July 2014 estimate). Muslims constitute 99 percent of the population; 90 percent are Shia and 9 percent Sunni (mostly Turkmen, Arabs, Baluchis, and Kurds living in the northeast, southwest, southeast, and northwest, respectively). There are no official statistics available on the size of the Sufi Muslim population; however, some reports estimate that several million Iranians practice Sufism.

Groups constituting the remaining 1 percent of the population include Bahais, Christians, Jews, Sabean-Mandaeans, Zoroastrians, and Yarsanis. The three largest non-Muslim minorities are Bahais, Christians, and Yarsanis. Bahais number approximately 300,000 and are heavily concentrated in Tehran and Semnan. According to UN data, 300,000 Christians live in the country, although some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) estimate there may be as many as 370,000. The Statistical Center of Iran reports there are 117,700. The majority of Christians are ethnic Armenians concentrated in Tehran and Isfahan. Unofficial estimates of the Assyrian Christian population range between 10,000 and 20,000. There are also Protestant denominations, including evangelical groups. Christian groups outside the country estimate the size of the Protestant community to be less than 10,000, although many Protestants reportedly practice in secret. Yarsanis, mainly located in Luristan and Gurani-speaking areas of southern Kurdistan, have often been classified by the government as Shia Muslims practicing Sufism. Yarsanis, however, identify Yarsan as a distinct faith (known in Iraq as Kaka'i). There is no official count of Yarsanis, but one NGO and some leaders in the Yarsani faith estimate there are up to one million. There are from 5,000 to 10,000 Sabean-Mandaeans. The Statistical Center of Iran estimated in 2011 that there were approximately 25,300 Zoroastrians, who are primarily ethnic Persians; however, Zoroastrian groups report 60,000 members. Similarly, Iranian census statistics in 2012 reported there were fewer than 9,000 Jews, while media estimate there are as many as 25,000.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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The constitution declares the “official religion is Islam and the doctrine followed is that of Ja’afari Shiism.” It states all laws and regulations must be based on undefined “Islamic criteria” and official interpretation of sharia.

The constitution states that the five major Sunni schools of Islam are also to be “accorded full respect” and enjoy official status in matters of religious education and certain personal affairs, including marriage, divorce, and inheritance. The constitution states that, in regions where followers of one of the five Sunni schools constitute the majority, local regulations are to be in accordance with that school, within certain bounds. The constitution states that “within the limits of the law,” Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities with protection to worship freely and to form religious societies, although proselytizing by them is prohibited. Although the Sabeen-Mandaeans do not consider themselves Christians, the government regards them as Christians and thus includes them among the three recognized religious minorities. The government does not recognize any other non-Islamic religion, and adherents of these other religious groups, such as the Bahais, do not have the freedom to practice their beliefs.

The structure of government reinforces the preeminence of Shia Islam. Islamic scholars select the supreme leader. The guardian council of six Shia clerics appointed by the supreme leader and six Shia legal scholars nominated by the judiciary reviews all laws for conformity with sharia, all candidates for the body that selects the supreme leader, and all candidates for elective office.

The constitution does not provide for the rights of Muslim citizens to choose, change, or renounce their religious beliefs. The government considers a child born to a Muslim father to be a Muslim and deems conversion from Islam to be apostasy, which is punishable by death.

Non-Muslims may not engage in public religious expression, persuasion, or conversion of Muslims. Such activities are considered proselytizing and are punishable by death.

The penal code stipulates the death sentence for “*sabb al-nabi*,” insulting or cursing Islamic prophets.

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Ershad) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) closely monitor religious activity, while

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churches fall under the oversight of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The government closely monitors and regulates Christian religious practice. All churchgoers must register with the authorities, who prevent Muslim converts to Christianity from entering Armenian or Assyrian churches, according to UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran Ahmed Shaheed. The government also requires Bahais to register with the police.

Non-Muslims may not be elected to a representative body or hold senior government or military positions, with the exception of five of the 290 Majlis (parliament) seats that are reserved by the constitution for religious minorities. There are two seats for Armenian Christians, one for Assyrian Christians, one for Jews, and one for Zoroastrians. Sunnis do not have reserved seats in the Majlis but are permitted to serve in the body. The government does not limit voting rights on account of religion, although only Shia Muslims are eligible to be president.

Non-Muslims may not serve in the judiciary, security services, or as public school principals. Officials screen applicants for public sector employment for their adherence to and knowledge of Islam, although members of religious minorities, with the exception of Bahais, may serve in the lower ranks of government. Government workers who do not observe Islamic principles and rules are subject to penalties. Bahais are barred from government employment and from all leadership positions in the military.

The constitution states the army must be Islamic, in the sense that it must be committed to Islamic ideals and must recruit individuals who are committed to the objectives of the Islamic Revolution. No members of religious minority groups are exempt from military service by law. The law forbids non-Muslims from holding positions of authority over Muslims in the armed forces. Members of constitutionally protected religious minorities with a college education may serve as officers during their mandatory military service but may not be career military officers.

The law authorizes collection of blood money as restitution to families for the death of Muslims and protected minorities. According to law, Bahai blood can be spilled with impunity, and Bahai families are not entitled to restitution.

The government allows recognized religious minority groups to open schools. The Ministry of Education imposes certain curriculum requirements and supervises these schools. With few exceptions, the directors of such private schools must be

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Muslim. Members of recognized religious minority groups are not required to attend these schools. The ministry must approve all textbooks used in coursework, including religious texts. Members of recognized religious minority groups may provide religious instruction in non-Persian languages, but authorities must approve their texts. This requirement sometimes imposes significant translation expenses on minority communities.

The government denies Bahai students access to higher education. A government order states Bahais “must be expelled from universities” and Bahai children “should be enrolled in schools which have a strong and imposing [Shia Islamic] religious ideology.” The government states Bahais are permitted to enroll in schools only if they do not identify themselves as such. To register for the university entrance examination, the government requires Bahai students to identify themselves as a religion other than Bahai. This means in practice that many Bahais do not enroll in state-run universities because a tenet of the Bahai faith is not to deny one’s faith. The Ministry of Justice requires universities to exclude Bahais or expel them if their religious affiliation becomes known. University applicants are required to pass an examination in Islamic, Christian, or Jewish theology.

Sunni religious leaders report bans on Sunni religious literature and on Sunni teachings in public schools. Sunnis may not build new schools or mosques.

Bahais are not allowed to participate in the governmental social pension system. Bahais cannot receive compensation for injury or crimes and cannot inherit property. The government does not recognize Bahai marriages and divorces but allows a civil attestation of marriage to serve as a marriage certificate.

The government carefully monitors the religious statements and views of senior Shia religious leaders. The supreme leader oversees the extrajudicial special clerical courts established to investigate offenses and crimes committed by clerics. These courts are not provided for in the constitution and sometimes sentence clerics for deviating from sanctioned religious doctrine.

The government maintains a legal interpretation of Islam that forces citizens of all faiths to follow strict rules, justified on the basis of religion, that effectively deprive women of many rights granted to men. The government enforces gender segregation throughout the country without regard to religious affiliation. Women of all religious groups are expected to adhere to “Islamic dress” in public; this

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includes covering their hair and fully covering the body in loose clothing. Although enforcement of rules for such conservative dress eases at times, the government periodically punishes “un-Islamic dress.”

Government Practices

Government rhetoric and actions created a threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-Shia, particularly for Bahais, but also for Sunni Muslims, including Sufis; Christians, especially evangelicals; Jews; Yarsanis; and Shia groups that did not share the government’s religious views. The government executed at least 24 individuals on charges of *moharebeh* according to credible NGO reports. All non-Shia religious minorities suffered varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, especially in employment, education, and housing. Government-controlled broadcast and print media continued negative campaigns against religious minorities, particularly Bahais.

The government convicted and executed dissidents, political reformers, and peaceful protesters on charges of *moharebeh* and anti-Islamic propaganda. The government executed at least 24 individuals on charges of *moharebeh*, according to NGO reports. Amnesty International reported the families of Ahwazi minority community members Ali Chebieshat and Sayed Khaled Mousawi were notified June 12 that Chebieshat and Mousawi had been executed in secret on *moharebeh* charges, following abuse and due process violations, including alleged torture. On September 29, authorities executed Mohsen Amir-Aslani for making “innovations in the religion” and “spreading corruption on earth.” Some human rights groups reported that Amir-Aslani’s execution was tied to charges of insulting the prophet Jonah and of promoting his own interpretation of the Quran. The judiciary said the charges were for rape and not tied to Amir-Aslani’s religious beliefs.

On November 24, the Supreme Court upheld the death sentence of blogger Soheil Arabi for the charge of “insulting the Prophet Muhammed” on Facebook, according to human rights organizations. The IRGC had arrested Arabi in November 2013, and after appealing an earlier ruling, he was found guilty in August. Separately, in February the Supreme Court upheld the death sentence of Ruhollah Tavana for insulting the Prophet Muhammad.

Christian pastor and dual U.S.-Iranian national Saeed Abedini, detained since September 2012, was sentenced in January 2013 to eight years in prison on charges

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related to his religious beliefs. He reportedly remained in Rajai Shahr Prison at year's end.

Shia religious leaders who did not fully support government policies or the supreme leader's views also faced intimidation and arrest. Prison conditions remained poor for dissident Shia cleric Ayatollah Hossein Kazemeini Boroujerdi, who was serving an 11-year sentence on unspecified charges in Evin Prison, where officials reportedly continued to torture him and deny him access to medication for several health problems, according to human rights activists. In October prison officials reportedly moved him into solitary confinement.

According to an August 26 Amnesty International report, authorities at Evin Prison threatened Mohammad Ali Taheri with death and subjected him to psychological torture during the year. Taheri, founder of the spiritual doctrine "Interuniversalism," has been held in solitary confinement since 2011 in Evin's Ward 2A and was convicted in October 2011 on charges of "insulting Islamic sanctities."

There were no reports of executions of Bahais during the year. The government frequently prevented Bahais from leaving the country, harassed and persecuted them, and generally disregarded their property rights.

The UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran reported in October that as of June at least 300 minority religious practitioners were imprisoned, including three active members of the Yarsani faith.

Numerous Christians remained imprisoned at year's end. Prison authorities reportedly withheld proper medical care from many prisoners, including some Christians, according to human rights groups. On April 17, a prison guard reportedly broke Christian convert Farshid Fathi's foot by stomping on it during a cell inspection in Evin Prison. Authorities reportedly then prevented Fathi from visiting a hospital for three days. Christians, particularly evangelicals, continued to experience disproportionate levels of arrests and high levels of harassment and surveillance. The status of many of these cases was not known at year's end. Authorities released some Christians almost immediately upon detention, but held others in secret locations without access to attorneys. The United Nations Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran reported in October that authorities held at least 49 Protestant Christians in custody, many for involvement in informal house churches.

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At year's end at least 100 Bahais were in detention, according to Bahai organizations. In many cases the government charged them with violating the Islamic penal code prohibiting activities against the state and spreading falsehoods. The government often charged Bahais with "propaganda against the system" or crimes related to threatening national security. Often the charges were not dropped upon the prisoner's release, and those with charges still pending against them reportedly feared rearrest. Government officials reportedly offered Bahais release from prison and relief from mistreatment in exchange for recanting their religious affiliation and making a declaration adopting Islam.

There were reports of arrests and harassment of Sunnis. The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI) cited activist reports that authorities in Ahvaz arrested 20 Arab-Iranians February 26 for converting from Shia Islam to Sunni Islam, arresting them in a house raid without a warrant and then detaining them in an MOIS office. Mohammad Kayvan Karimi, Amjad Salehi, and Omid Payvand were sentenced to death May 4 on charges of "enmity against God through spreading propaganda against the system." According to Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), the three were active in preaching Sunni Islam.

Seven Bahai leaders (Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Behrouz Tavakkoli, Saeid Rezaie, Vahid Tizfahm, and Mahvash Sabet) remained in detention at year's end, serving sentences of up to 20 years. They were charged in 2011 with "espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities, and propaganda against the Islamic Republic." The government did not allow any of the seven access to their attorney, Abdolfattah Soltani, who himself was sentenced to 18 years in prison in 2012 for "spreading propaganda against the system," "setting up an illegal opposition group," and "gathering and colluding with intent to harm national security." The government also banned Soltani from practicing law for an additional 20 years. On April 10, ICHRI reported that Soltani was in critical condition because authorities had denied him needed medical care. He remained in Evin Prison at year's end.

Authorities in Shiraz arrested four Bahais on August 5, according to Bahai groups. Vahid Dana, Saeid Abedi, and Bahiyyeh Moeinipour were arrested at their homes, and Adib Haqpazhuh was arrested at his workplace. No information about their whereabouts or status was available at year's end.

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Police targeted Christians with home raids, sometimes confiscating personal property in such raids, including religious materials. On September 27, plainclothes agents raided Christian actor Shahram Ghaedi's home, according to Iranian Christian news agency Mohabat News. The agents arrested Ghaedi and two other Christian converts, Heshmat Shafiei and Emad Haghi, and transferred them to the security ward of Dastgerd Prison in Isfahan. The agents reportedly searched Ghaedi's house and confiscated some of his belongings, including books and a computer.

The government raided Bahai homes and businesses and confiscated private and commercial property, as well as religious materials. MOIS agents raided a business in Tehran August 11 and confiscated goods and products as well as employees' computers and other electronic devices, according to Bahai groups. The agents arrested five Bahais: business owners Aladdin Khanjani (son of imprisoned Bahai leader Jamaloddin Khanjan) and Babak Mobasher, and employees Naser Arshi-Moghaddam, Ataollah Ashrafi, and Rouhollah Monzavi. A sixth employee who was not Bahai was released that afternoon.

The government continued to hold many Bahai properties it seized following the 1979 revolution, including cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, and administrative centers. The government generally prevented Bahais from burying their dead in accordance with their religious tradition, and many of their cemeteries have been destroyed. HRANA reported that Iranian authorities buried two Bahai women in October in the city of West Azerbaijan in a manner not in accord with Bahai tradition and without notifying the women's families. The UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran reported in October IRGC officials demolished a Bahai cemetery in Shiraz in May despite appeals from the surrounding community and from human rights groups. An IRGC commander in Shiraz justified the destruction of the cemetery by saying the Bahai Faith was a "foul, unclean, and rootless sect" and that Bahais had "no rightful place" in Iranian society, according to the International Policy Digest.

There were reports of authorities placing restrictions on Bahai businesses or forcing them to close, asking managers of private companies to dismiss Bahai employees, and denying applications for new or renewed business and trade licenses. According to HRANA the government shut down more than 50 Bahai-run businesses October 26 in Bandar Abbas, Kerman, Rafsanjan, and Jiroft because the businesses had been closed in observance of Bahai holidays.

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Although the government maintained publicly that Bahais were free to attend university if they did not identify themselves as Bahai, public and private universities continued to deny admittance and expel Bahai students, thus preventing Bahais from obtaining higher education. According to an April 10 HRANA report, authorities expelled Mazyar Malaki from Birjand University after he refused to sign a statement that he would not participate in Bahai activities.

The government continued to imprison and detain members of the Bahai Institute for Higher Education. ICHRI reported that on September 10, three Bahais serving prison sentences for teaching at the Bahai Institute for Higher Education, Faran Hessami, Kamran Rahimian, and Kayvan Rahimian, were refused early release and furlough to visit their young children unless they recanted their faith and pledged not to teach at the university.

The government's continuing seizure of Bahai personal property and its denial of access to education and employment eroded the Bahai community's economic base and threatened its survival. Members of the Bahai community reported Bahai children in public schools faced attempts by their teachers and administrators to convert them to Islam.

Human rights groups reported several instances of due process violations by authorities against members of the Sunni community. According to HRANA, authorities arrested Saeed Haydari, a recent Sunni convert from Shia Islam, on July 24 at his home in Khuzestan, reportedly for reasons related to his religious activities and his conversion to Sunni Islam.

Muslim converts to Christianity faced harassment, arrest, and jailing. Many arrests took place during police raids on religious gatherings, during which the government confiscated religious property. Iranian officials reportedly raided a house church in Tehran August 12 and arrested Christian converts Mehdi Vaziri and Amir Kian. Both were believed to be held at the Ghezel-Hesar Prison at year's end.

On August 12, Reporters Without Borders reported that plainclothes agents raided the offices of five television stations affiliated with dissident Shia cleric Ayatollah Sadegh Shirazi and arrested several employees, including Hamed Taghipour and Masoud Behnam. The raids followed an August 3 MOIS communique accusing the stations of "provoking sectarian tension within Islam" and "insulting the holy figures of Islam."

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The government enforced the prohibition on proselytizing by closely monitoring the activities of evangelical Christians, barring all non-members from entering church premises, closing churches, and arresting Christian converts. Authorities pressed evangelical church leaders to sign pledges that they would not evangelize Muslims or allow Muslims to attend church services. Meetings for evangelical services remained restricted to Sundays. Christian advocacy groups confirmed that through church closures and other pressure, the government had eliminated in recent years all but a handful of Persian-language church services, restricting them to the Armenian and Assyrian languages. Pastors of forcibly closed Persian-language churches reported pressure from the government to leave the country, and the government prevented ordination of new ministers. Members of evangelical congregations were required to carry membership cards, photocopies of which had to be provided to the authorities. Security officials posted outside congregation centers subjected worshippers to identity checks. Christians of all denominations reported the presence of security cameras outside their churches to confirm that no non-Christians participated in services.

Official reports and the media characterized Christian house churches as “illegal networks” and “Zionist propaganda institutions.” Arrested members of house churches were often accused of being supported by enemy countries. On October 19, courts sentenced house church leader Behnam Irani and fellow Church of Iran leaders Abdolreza Ali-Haghejad and Reza Rabbani to six years in prison on charges of “action against national security” and “creating a network to overthrow the system,” according to Middle East Concern and other human rights groups.

The government allowed recognized religious minority groups to establish community centers and certain self-financed cultural, social, athletic, or charitable associations. The government, however, prohibited the Bahai community from officially assembling or maintaining administrative institutions and actively closed such institutions as part of this policy.

Jews were free to travel out of the country, and the government generally did not enforce legal restrictions against travel to Israel by Jews, although it enforced this prohibition against other citizens.

The government carefully monitored the statements and views of senior Shia religious leaders. The supreme leader oversaw the extrajudicial Special Clerical

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Courts established to investigate offenses and crimes committed by clerics. These courts are not provided for in the constitution

Assyrian Christians reported their community was permitted to write its own textbooks which, following government authorization and approval of the content, were printed at the government's expense and distributed to the Assyrian community. The government reportedly allowed Hebrew instruction but limited the distribution of Hebrew texts, particularly nonreligious texts, making it difficult to teach the language. Although the government did not require Jewish students to attend Saturday classes, it reportedly required Jewish schools to remain open on Saturdays, in violation of Jewish religious law, to conform to the schedule of other schools.

With some significant exceptions, there was little government restriction of, or interference with, Jewish religious practice. Government officials, however, continued to sanction and employ anti-Semitic propaganda in official statements, media outlets, publications, and books.

There were reports of government officials making anti-Semitic statements. During a March 21 speech marking Nowruz, the Persian New Year, Supreme Leader Khamenei described the Holocaust as “an event whose reality is uncertain.” From September 29 through October 1, the government sponsored a second instance of the “New Horizon” conference in Tehran, which it billed as focusing on a range of topics including “similarities (between) Nazism and Zionism.” The government hosted the first such conference in 2012. On May 6, members of parliament initiated a vote to censure Foreign Minister Zarif for his refusal to deny the Holocaust. Seventy-five members of the 290-member assembly questioned Zarif on a range of issues, including his stance on what they termed “illegitimate” Israel and the “lie of the Holocaust.” Zarif defended his previous statements calling the Holocaust a “horrifying tragedy” and the parliament eventually voted against censuring him.

There were also reports of government-affiliated religious figures directing inflammatory rhetoric towards Jews. A cleric at Tehran University stated on state television that Jews used sorcery to spy on behalf of Israel.

Authorities also harassed and repressed members of the Sabeian-Mandaean and Yarsani religious communities in ways similar to their harassment of other religious minority groups, including denial of building permits for places of

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worship and denial of access to higher education and government employment unless they declared themselves to be Muslim on their application forms.

Yarsani community representatives reported that in April Hekmat Safari, a Yarsani serving in the Iranian military, committed suicide at the military base in Bijar because of harassment for his faith.

There were reports of arrests and harassment of Sunni clerics and congregants. Many Sunnis reported discrimination; however, it was difficult to distinguish whether the cause of discrimination was religious or ethnic, since most Sunnis are also members of ethnic minority groups. Sunnis cited the absence of a Sunni mosque in Tehran despite the presence of more than one million Sunnis in the city as a prominent example. Sunni leaders reported bans on Sunni religious literature and teachings in public schools, even in predominantly Sunni areas. Sunnis also noted the underrepresentation of Sunnis in government-appointed positions in the provinces where they formed a majority, such as Kurdistan and Khuzestan, as well as their inability to obtain senior government positions. Residents of provinces with large Sunni populations, including Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Sistan-Baluchistan, reported repression by the judiciary and security services, discrimination, lack of basic government services, and inadequate funding for infrastructure projects.

Security officials continued to raid prayer sites belonging to Sunnis. On October 5, security forces prevented Sunni Muslims from entering prayer sites in several parts of Tehran on the occasion of Eid al-Adha, according to human rights organizations.

Intelligence and security services continued their harassment and intimidation of prominent Sufi leaders and their raids on Sufi businesses. Government restrictions on Sufi groups and *husseiniya* (houses of worship) continued. On February 20, security forces raided a Sufi printing business in Ahvaz and arrested two employees and confiscated printed materials, according to Sufi news website Majzooban Noor. On March 10, jailed members of the Gonabadi Sufi order conducted a hunger strike to protest their being denied proper health care, according to media reports.

According to Reporters Without Borders, a group of detained contributors to Majzooban Noor began a hunger strike on August 31 in protest against their conditions in Evin and Nezam prisons. Reza Entesari, Hamidreza Moradi, Mostafa

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Abdi, Kasra Nouri, and Afshin Karampour were joined by their jailed lawyers Amir Islami, Farshid Yadollahi, Mostafa Daneshjo, and Omid Behrouzi in the hunger strike, and several of the detainees reported medical complications due to denied treatment.

The government reportedly used the clerical courts to prosecute certain clerics for expressing controversial political ideas and participating in nonreligious activities, including journalism. A blog that identified itself as affiliated with dissident Shia cleric Ayatollah Abdul-Hamid Masoumi Tehrani reported that he was summoned to the Clerical Court in Tehran in June, where he was interrogated and then released. According to a June 5 report by Majzooban Noor, a special clerical court sentenced Abbas Salehian, a Sufi, to six months' imprisonment for "committing a forbidden act by promoting the Gonabadi Sufi order faith." The report noted that Salehian was not a clergy member. On July 11, Majzooban Noor reported that a special clerical court removed Shia Muslim cleric Mohammad Nouri from his religious duties for "joining the Sufis while in clerical costume." Nouri said agents of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security had interrogated and repeatedly threatened him.

The government restricted published religious material. Government officials frequently confiscated Bibles and pressured publishing houses printing Bibles or unsanctioned non-Muslim materials to cease operations.

The government failed to investigate crimes committed against members of religious minority groups and against their property, including religious sites and graveyards. For example, on October 14 an investigating magistrate for the Bandar Abbas Revolutionary Court told the family of Ataollah Rezvani, a Bahai killed in 2013, that he would be forced to close the investigation in the absence of further evidence. Rezvani's family reported that the investigating judge had discounted religiously motivated murder as the cause of death, although a relative believed that Rezvani was targeted because he was Bahai. A local imam had reportedly spoken against the Bahai community in his sermons on several occasions, including several days before Rezvani's death.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reported problems for Bahais at different levels of society. Bahais experienced continued personal harassment, and there were reported cases of Bahai children being harassed in school and subjected to Islamic indoctrination.

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Teachers reportedly asked Bahai and other non-Shia children about their families' religious practices, such as whether their parents prayed the traditional Islamic *namaaz* at home. There were reports of non-Bahais dismissing or refusing employment to Bahais, sometimes in response to government pressure.

In April Ayatollah Abdol-Hamid Masoumi-Tehrani, a prominent dissident Shia cleric, announced he had donated to Bahai representatives an illuminated work of calligraphy of a section of the writings of the prophet-founder of the Bahai Faith. Ayatollah Tehrani said he presented this gift to the Bahais of the world because the Bahais of Iran “have suffered in manifold ways as a result of blind religious prejudice.”

In November the Friday prayer leader in Rafsanjan reportedly declared in a speech that, according to religious fatwas, Bahais were “unclean” and it was forbidden to conduct business with them.

There were reports of Shia clerics and prayer leaders denouncing Sufism and the activities of Sufis in both sermons and public statements. According to a December 22 report by Majzooban Noor, a Shia group in Karaj sponsored a series of speeches against Sufism and put up related posters in front of the city's Sufi congregation hall. According to the report, authorities intervened and removed the posters in an effort to reduce tensions.

In May a Muslim cleric in the city of Islam-Abade-Gharb publicly declared that members of the Yarsani community were devil worshippers, thus “impure” and “un-Islamic.” Yarsani community members reported harassment targeted against Yarsani men because their long moustaches identified them as Yarsani.

On October 22, demonstrators in Isfahan protested a string of at least eight acid attacks against women, with many demonstrators claiming the women were targeted because their headscarves or other clothing did not conform to perceived Islamic norms. Authorities condemned the attacks but denied any such linkage.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Iran has been a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act since 1999 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The U.S. Secretary of State redesignated Iran July 28 as a CPC and extended certain trade sanctions.

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The United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran, and therefore has limited opportunity to raise concerns directly with the government over its religious freedom abuses and restrictions.

The U.S. government used various avenues to call on Iran to respect religious freedom and condemn abuses. These include public statements and reports, support for relevant UN and NGO efforts, diplomatic initiatives, and sanctions. Senior U.S. government officials publicly called for the release of prisoners held on grounds related to their religious beliefs, including dual U.S.-Iranian national Saeed Abedini. On numerous occasions U.S. government officials, including the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, addressed the situations of Bahais and Christians in the context of religious freedom for members of all religious groups in the country.

The United States voted at the UN Human Rights Council to extend the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran. The United States also voted in November and December in UN fora in favor of resolutions expressing concern over Iran's human rights practices, including the continued persecution of religious minorities. The United States submitted recommendations in October, including recommendations related to religious freedom, through the mechanism of the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review of Iran's human rights situation.

TURKEY 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution defines the country as a secular state, provides for freedom of religion, conscience, religious belief, conviction, expression, and worship, and prohibits discrimination based on religious grounds. Religious matters are coordinated and governed by the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) whose mandate is to promote Sunni Islam. Elected officials engaged in anti-Semitic rhetoric. In July, when protests over the conflict in Gaza were occurring, several senior government officials made anti-Semitic statements. For example, on July 19, then-Prime Minister Erdogan stated, “Those who condemn Hitler – day and night – have surpassed Hitler in barbarism.” The government continued to discriminate against Alevi Muslims, including by refusing to recognize their places of worship or exempt their children from compulsory Sunni Islamic instruction. The right to conscientious objection to military service was not protected. Trials continued for the May killing of an Alevi by a policeman and the 2011 death of an Armenian-Turkish soldier at the hands of another soldier. The government continued to prosecute individuals for “openly disrespecting” Islamic beliefs, although convictions in such cases resulted in suspended sentences. The government continued to limit the rights of non-Muslim minorities, especially those it did not recognize as being covered by the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. Despite expressions of support from high-level government officials, there was no progress regarding the reopening of Halki Seminary. The government continued to train Sunni Muslim clerics, while restricting other religious groups from training clerics inside the country. It continued to fund the construction of Sunni mosques while restricting land use of other religious groups, although it did return parcels of land to the Syriac Orthodox community.

There was a sharp increase in anti-Semitic protests and anti-Semitic statements in mass and social media during the conflict in Gaza in July, accompanied by violence against Israeli diplomatic properties and threats of violence against the country’s Jews. The Jewish community expressed growing concern and unease over these incidents. Members of a Catholic congregation in Istanbul were threatened by reputed Sunni radicals and church property was vandalized. A Ja’fari imam was threatened in Istanbul, and the mosque where he preached was vandalized and burned.

U.S. government officials at the highest level engaged with government leaders to address religious freedom issues. The President discussed with President Erdogan

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the importance of combating anti-Semitism. The Vice President and the Secretary of State called again for the reopening of the Greek Orthodox seminary on Halki. The Ambassador, visiting U.S. officials, and embassy officers stressed the need to lift restrictions on religious groups and raised issues of property restitution and specific cases of religious discrimination. Embassy and consulate representatives regularly met with members of religious communities to promote dialogue and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 81.6 million (July 2014 estimate). According to Turkish government estimates, 99 percent of the population is Muslim, the majority of which is Hanafi Sunni. Representatives of other religious groups state the actual percentage of Muslims is lower.

Academics estimate there are 15 million to 20 million Alevis. Alevi foundation leaders report higher numbers, estimating 20 million to 25 million Alevis in the country. The Shia Ja'fari community estimates its number at three million.

Other religious groups, mostly concentrated in Istanbul and other large cities, together constitute less than 1 percent of the population. While exact figures are not available, these groups include approximately 90,000 Armenian Orthodox Christians (of which an estimated 60,000 are citizens and an estimated 30,000 are undocumented immigrants from Armenia); 25,000 Roman Catholics (including a large number of recent immigrants from Africa and the Philippines); 18,000 Jews; 20,000 Syrian Orthodox Christians (also known as Syriacs or Suriyanis); 15,000 Russian Orthodox Christians (mostly recent immigrants from Russia who hold residence permits); 10,000 Bahais; 22,000 Yezidis (17,000 of whom are refugees who arrived in 2014); 5,000 Jehovah's Witnesses; 7,000 members of Protestant denominations; 3,000 Chaldean Christians; and up to 2,000 Greek Orthodox Christians. There also are small, undetermined numbers of Bulgarian Orthodox, Nestorian, Georgian Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Anglican, and Maronite Christians. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) estimated its membership at approximately 300 individuals. Estimates of the number of atheists vary, but most recent published surveys suggest approximately 2 percent of the population is atheist.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

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Legal/Framework

The constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of conscience, religious belief, conviction, expression, and worship. The constitution prohibits discrimination on religious grounds and prohibits anyone from exploiting or abusing “religion or religious feelings, or things held sacred by religion.”

The Turkish state coordinates and governs religious matters through the Diyanet, which was established in 1924 and was added to the constitution in 1961. The Diyanet’s mandate is to promote the belief, practices, and moral principles of Sunni Islam, educate the public about religious issues, and administer places of worship. Operating under the prime minister’s office and with a president appointed by the prime minister, the Diyanet has five main departments: the high councils for religious affairs, education, services, publications, and public relations.

Although registration with the government is not mandatory for religious groups, unregistered religious groups cannot request legal recognition for places of worship. Holding religious services at a location not recognized as a place of worship is illegal and may be punished with fines or closure of the venue. All organizations, including religious groups, can register as associations or foundations. Religious groups must associate themselves with a charitable or cultural cause in order to register as either type of entity. Religious community foundations are the only religious groups permitted to own real estate.

Associations by definition must be nonprofit and may receive financial support only in the form of donations. A foundation may earn income through companies and rent-earning properties. Associations have fewer legal rights than foundations at the local level. The process for establishing a foundation is lengthier and more expensive than that for establishing an association.

The General Directorate of Foundations (GDF) regulates the activities and affiliated property of all charitable foundations and assesses whether they are operating within the stated objectives of their organizational statute. There are several categories of foundations, including religious community foundations.

To register as a foundation, a group of persons or a legal entity must agree to dedicate private property to public use. The foundation then applies for a notarized certificate of representation, which specifies the foundation’s objective and its

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rights. A foundation becomes a legal entity when its registration is announced in the Official Gazette; it then is registered in the records of the civil court with jurisdiction for that location. When a court approves the registration, a foundation is registered in the central register of the GDF, at which point it is considered fully constituted. A foundation of any category may be closed only by court order. If a foundation becomes inactive, the government can petition the courts to find the foundation no longer operational and transfer all assets to the state.

The Assembly of Foundations, under the General Directorate of Foundations, determines on an annual basis the minimum capital requirement for creating a foundation. Membership in the foundation cannot be limited to a single ethnic or religious group; technically, a foundation to support a specific religion is not possible under the law.

To register as an association, a group must submit a registration application to the provincial governor's office and may immediately begin operating while awaiting confirmation from the governor's office that its bylaws are constitutional. In addition to its bylaws, a group must submit permission from the Ministry of the Interior if a foreign association or nonprofit organization is listed as a founding member as well as copies of residence permits of foreigners if they are founding members of the group. If the governorate finds the bylaws unlawful or unconstitutional, the association is asked to change the bylaws to meet the legal requirements, and association officials can be fined or punished by law. Associations can be closed by court order and are bound by the civil code not to discriminate on the grounds of religion, ethnicity, or race. An association's bylaws may not restrict membership based on religion.

The penal code prohibits imams, priests, rabbis, and other religious leaders from "reproaching or vilifying" the government or the laws of the state while performing their duties. Violations are punishable by prison terms of one month to one year, or three months to two years if the crime involves inciting others to disobey the law. There are legal restrictions against insulting a recognized religion, interfering with a religious group's services, or defacing its property. Insulting a recognized religion is punishable by six months to one year in prison; interfering with a religious group's services is punishable by one to three years in prison; defacing religious property is punishable by three months to one year in prison; and destroying or demolishing religious property is punishable by one to four years in prison.

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The constitution establishes compulsory religious and moral instruction in public primary and secondary schools, with content determined by the Ministry of National Education's Department of Religious Instruction. Christians and Jews, as members of recognized non-Muslim religious groups, are legally allowed an exemption from religious instruction. No exemptions are allowed for atheists, agnostics, Alevis, or other Islamic groups, Bahais, or Yezidis.

The law requires 12 years of compulsory education, including elementary, intermediate, and secondary school. Religion classes are compulsory with two hours per week for students in grades four through eight and one hour per week for students in grades nine through 12. Students who are part of a recognized minority need to apply for an exemption. Islamic religious courses may also be taken as electives for two hours per week in middle school during regular school hours. Students may choose to attend *imam-hatip* (Muslim preacher preparatory) schools starting in middle school.

A 2013 decision by the Constitutional Court reinterpreted *laiklik* (Turkish secularism) in ruling that the Primary Education Law allows the government to provide Islamic religious instruction in the classroom. The court held that the principle of secularism "has not excluded the institutional relationship between the state and the Islamic religion." The ruling also states that the preferential treatment of Islam in public schools is not discriminatory, because nothing in the law prohibits the Ministry of Education from providing religion lessons for members of non-Muslim religious groups, and because the 1923 Lausanne Treaty provides minority religions satisfactory protections.

National identity cards contain a space for religious identification, although the constitution stipulates that no one can be compelled to reveal his or her religious belief. The national identity cards provide for the following religious identities: Muslim, Greek Orthodox, Christian, Jew, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, No Religion, or Other. The applicant may also elect to leave the space blank. Bahai, Alevi Muslim, and Yezidi, among other groups with known populations in the country, are not listed as options.

Military service is obligatory and there is no provision for conscientious objection. Those who oppose mandatory military service on religious grounds may face charges in military and civilian courts and are subject to prison sentences ranging from two months to two years.

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Government Practices

Senior government officials made strongly anti-Semitic remarks, especially during the conflict in Gaza. Trials for the killing of several minority group members continued. The government continued to limit the rights of non-Muslim minorities, especially those it did not recognize as being covered by the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. The government continued to train Sunni Muslim clerics, while restricting other religious groups from training clergy, and continued to fund the construction of Sunni mosques while restricting land use of other religious groups, although it did return parcels of land to the Syriac Orthodox community. The government continued not to recognize Alevi houses of worship (*cemevis*) and Alevis continued to experience difficulty obtaining exemptions from mandatory religion classes.

A policeman was indicted for first-degree murder in November after initially being charged with involuntary manslaughter for the May shooting of Ugur Kurt, an Alevi who was attending a funeral outside a *cemevi*. Kurt was reportedly killed by a bullet fired while police were confronting protestors in Istanbul's Okmeydani neighborhood, which contains a large concentration of Alevis. At the end of the year, the defendant's option to appeal the transfer of the charge to murder remained open. A second death occurred in May when Ayhan Yilmaz succumbed to injuries sustained during the Okmeydani protests, but no one was charged in his death, which the authorities deemed to be caused by a handmade bomb.

The trial continued of 13 individuals charged with conspiracy to commit a large-scale assault against the Izmit Protestant Church and to assassinate its pastor in 2013. Police had confiscated weapons and found evidence of prolonged, careful planning for an attack. At year's end, one suspect remained in custody; the other 12 had been released on bail.

In May the Military Court of Appeals sustained an appeal of the verdict by the Diyarbakir Military Court regarding the 2011 death of Armenian-Turkish soldier Sevag Balikci, in which another soldier had been convicted on the lesser charge of involuntary manslaughter. In 2013, the Diyarbakir court had not found Balikci to be the victim of intentional homicide or a hate crime and sentenced the defendant to 53 months imprisonment with credit for time served in pre-trial detention, leaving him approximately three years to continue serving in prison. The Diyarbakir court's finding did not satisfy the victim's family. The ruling by the appeals court sent the case back to the Diyarbakir Military Court, which took no

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further action before the year's end. The defendant remained in jail pending further judicial action.

In July during the conflict in Gaza, then-Prime Minister Erdogan and several senior government officials made public anti-Semitic statements. Elected officials made generalized statements against Jews.

A series of protests targeted the Israeli Consulate General in Istanbul and the Israeli Embassy in Ankara on July 18. The following day, then-Prime Minister Erdogan stated the Israelis had “surpassed Hitler in barbarism.” Members of parliament from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) joined protestors waving Turkish and Palestinian flags, who damaged the Israeli ambassador's residence in Ankara with stones. Samil Tayyar, an AKP member of parliament, posted an online message to Jews saying “let your race be finished off, and may Hitler never be too far away.” Ankara Mayor Melih Gokcek reportedly stated, “We do not want an embassy of murderers in Turkey.”

Later on July 19, a senior advisor to then-Prime Minister Erdogan called on the Turkish people to “be prudent about the Jewish population in Turkey,” and said, “It is the Government of Israel, not the Israeli people, and certainly not the Jewish Community in Turkey, who are Turkish citizens, that we criticize.” In a September 22 interview, President Erdogan said, “Our criticism is not directed to the Jews. It is only and solely directed at the Israeli administration and its policies, and no one should distort this.”

After an Israeli incursion into Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem in late November, Edirne Governor Dursun Ali Sahin said, “While those bandit-like people are massacring Muslims, we are building their synagogues here.” He said that a synagogue in Edirne under renovation by the government would be reopened as “only a museum.” The Jewish community released a statement saying Israeli policies did not give any official the right to target Jews of Turkey. Deputy Prime Minister Arinc said the government “did not plan to remove the worship function” from the synagogue. Governor Sahin later retracted his comments and called the chief rabbi to apologize.

Local authorities continued to work with community leaders and synagogue officials to respond to the protests and to protect Jewish places of worship.

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The trial of Canan Arin for “openly disrespecting the religious belief of a group,” which involved a reported insult to the Prophet Mohammad, continued to be suspended for the duration of the year. Arin had been charged in 2011 after a speech she made at a conference about child marriages, but the court suspended the proceedings in 2013, provided the crime was not repeated for three years. The case against Arin will be dismissed in 2016 as long as Arin is not charged before then with a similar crime.

Internationally-known concert pianist Fazil Say’s 2013 conviction and sentence of 10 months in prison for “openly disrespecting the religious belief of a group,” which involved posting lines attributed to poet Omar Khayyam on a social media site, continued to be suspended. Say’s sentence was suspended for five years, meaning he will not be sent to prison unless he is convicted of another offense within that period.

In January the government brought charges of “disrespecting religious beliefs of a group” against 40 individuals associated with the satiric online collaborative site *Eksi Sozluk* for posts that reportedly insulted Islam. In May the court found two of the defendants guilty, and imposed suspended prison sentences of 10 and seven months, respectively. One defendant was exonerated and the cases against the 37 others were suspended for three years, provided they do not commit the same crime within that time.

The government continued to interpret the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which refers broadly to “non-Muslim minorities,” as granting special legal minority status exclusively to three recognized groups: Armenian Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians. The government did not recognize the leadership or administrative structures of these groups (e.g., the patriarchates and chief rabbinate) as legal entities, leaving them unable to buy or hold title to property or to press claims in court. The three groups, along with other minority religious communities, organized independent foundations with separate governing boards in order to hold and control individual religious properties.

The government also continued not to recognize the Ecumenical Patriarchate as the leader of the world’s 300 million Orthodox Christians, consistent with its stance that there was no legal obligation to do so. The government’s position remained that the ecumenical patriarch was not “ecumenical,” but only the religious leader of the country’s Greek Orthodox minority population. The government continued to

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permit only Turkish citizens to vote in the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Holy Synod or be elected patriarch.

The Armenian Apostolic Patriarchate and the Ecumenical Patriarchate continued to seek legal recognition. Their communities operated as conglomerations of individual religious foundations. Because the patriarchates did not have legal personality, associated foundations controlled by individual boards held all the property of the religious communities, and the patriarchates had no legal authority to direct the use of any assets or otherwise govern their communities.

In February the Council of State, the country's top administrative court, heard arguments in a lawsuit between two segments of the Armenian religious community about the possibility of electing a new patriarch of Armenians in the country, or of electing a co-patriarch, due to the permanent incapacity of the current patriarch who was elected for life in 1998 but has not exercised his functions for many years. Both sides in the case had appealed to the interior ministry, which sets the rules for patriarchal elections. The interior ministry supported neither position, but endorsed the selection of a "deputy patriarch." The court ruled it did not have the authority to instruct a religious community how to conduct its affairs, leaving in place the creation of the deputy patriarch position. Opponents of this solution and some human rights observers said the interior ministry's actions constituted government interference in the affairs of a religious minority.

The Istanbul governorate continued to maintain that leaders of the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, and Jewish communities must be Turkish citizens, although coreligionists from outside the country had assumed informal leadership positions of these groups in some cases. The government continued its practice of granting Turkish citizenship to a number of Greek Orthodox metropolitans under the terms of a 2011 stopgap solution to widen the pool of candidates to become the next patriarch.

The government continued to consider Alevism a heterodox Muslim sect and did not financially support religious worship for Alevis. Alevi leaders said the government failed to meet their demands for religious reforms and complained of discrimination and violence. Sufi and other religious-social orders (*tarikats*) and lodges (*cemaats*), banned officially since 1925, remained active and widespread as the government did not enforce the ban.

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The state continued to provide training for Sunni Muslim clerics while restricting other religious groups from training clerics inside the country, for example through requirements imposed by the Higher Education Board. The Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox Patriarchates were unable to train their clerics in monastic seminaries within the country. The Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate continued to seek to reopen the Halki seminary on the island of Heybeli, closed in 1971 in response to a law that required all private colleges for religious training to be affiliated with a state-run university and to meet government requirements that do not permit the operation of a seminary within a monastic community. Several high-level government officials expressed support for reopening Halki seminary; however, by year's end no progress had been made.

In September the Ministry of Education lifted the ban on headscarves for middle and high school students. The government had previously lifted the ban on headscarves for civil servants, but the ban remained in force for judges, police, and the military.

Many prosecutors and police reportedly continued to regard certain public religious speech and religious activism with suspicion, such as proselytism by Protestant evangelicals and Mormons. Both groups reported significant government interference, including surveillance and arbitrary police action. Anti-missionary rhetoric remained in required school textbooks, and police occasionally reported students who met with Christian missionaries to university authorities or the students' families.

In June the press reported that parliament's computers were blocking all of the websites of the country's Protestant churches. The parliament system classified the website of the Diyarbakir Church as pornography. The pastor of the Diyarbakir Church said that "paranoia" pervaded the country about missionary activities, in particular conversions from Islam to Christianity. Government officials reportedly lifted the block following complaints.

Many state buildings, including universities, maintained *mesjids* (small mosques) in which Muslims could pray. The government continued to deny Alevis the right to establish similar places of worship in government buildings, and government buildings did not contain places of worship for non-Muslims.

The government continued to donate land for the construction of mosques and continued funding their construction through the Diyanet or municipalities.

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Municipalities continued to pay the utility bills for mosques located within their boundaries. These benefits remained uniquely available to Sunni Muslim mosques, with other religious institutions paying their own utility bills. The Diyanet Foundation, a quasi-governmental entity, continued to own many of the mosques around the country.

Christian religious groups reported difficulties opening, maintaining, and operating houses of worship. Although a 2003 amendment to the law allowed cultural associations as well as foundations to establish legal places of worship, authorities have approved only one new Christian church as a legal place of worship since the founding of the republic in 1923.

The majority of Protestants met in unregistered locations for worship services. The government reportedly recognized only 15 Protestant churches as official places of worship throughout the country, including several chapels run by foreign diplomatic missions. Protestant groups reportedly used approximately 40 rented buildings and more than 100 residences for unregistered worship services. Several Protestant churches reported difficulties obtaining permission to modify rented space and to use public space for community activities in a manner similar to other civil groups.

Many local officials continued to impose zoning standards on churches, such as minimum space requirements, that they did not impose on mosques. Local officials required Protestant groups to purchase 27,000 square feet of land (approximately 0.6 acres) to construct churches, even for small congregations. Officials did not apply this requirement to Sunni Muslims, who were permitted to build *mesjids* in malls, airports, and other spaces.

The Syrian Orthodox community continued to seek to build a second church in Istanbul to accommodate its growing population. The community had one church in Istanbul to serve an estimated local population of 17,000 to 20,000. In 2011, President Gul and Prime Minister Erdogan publicly endorsed a second church. While Muslim communities received government funding for construction of places of worship, the Syrian Orthodox community did not request such funding. Instead, the community requested that the municipality provide free land for the construction of a place of worship. In January the Regional Board for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage ruled against the project to build the second church proposed by the Syriac Church Foundation on land offered by the

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municipality. The Syriac Church Foundation amended the project proposal and was awaiting a decision at year's end.

Although Alevi groups were able to build new *cemevis*, the government continued to deny requests by Alevis to recognize *cemevis* as places of worship and did not provide financial support from the Diyanet. Alevi leaders reported there were approximately 2,500 to 3,000 Alevi *cemevis* in the country, an insufficient number to meet their needs. At year's end, Alevis continued to operate the Cankaya Cemevi Building Association while awaiting a final verdict by the country's highest court, the General Assembly of the Court of Cassation, on an appeal of a lower court's decision to dismiss a request to shut it down. This second appeal was made by the provincial directorate in charge of associations of the Ankara governor's office, which had filed the complaint against the building association for refusing to remove a description from its charter referring to *cemevis* as houses of worship.

Alevis continued to petition the courts to have *cemevis* legally recognized as places of worship. A case dating from 2011 concerning the right of Alevis to designate *cemevis* as places of worship remained pending in the Supreme Court of Appeals after the prosecutor appealed a lower court's ruling that affirmed the group's right to do so. The lower court had held that *cemevis* had been known as places of worship for Alevis for hundreds of years, and a charter referring to *cemevis* as places of worship was not in contravention of the constitution or prohibited by law.

The government continued to allow religious minority foundations to apply for the return of, or compensation for, properties seized by the government in previous decades. During the year, the government returned 25 properties to religious community foundations, declined 170 applications for lack of evidence or because they were found to be duplicative, while 970 applications remained pending. Since 2011, the GDF has received 1,560 applications for the return of properties seized from the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Jewish, Syrian Orthodox, Bulgarian Orthodox, Georgian Orthodox, Chaldean, and Armenian Protestant communities. Religious institutions and communities that did not have legally recognized foundations, such as the Roman Catholics and Anglicans who have tried but not succeeded in establishing such foundations, were not able to seek compensation for seized properties.

In January the Surp Pirgic Armenian Hospital Foundation, which has links to the Armenian Apostolic Church, obtained title to more than 42,000 square meters

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(452,000 square feet) of land in Istanbul that was promised to the foundation in 2012. In late 2013, the GDFs formally approved the return of the land.

In February the government returned disputed parcels of land totaling more than 240,000 square meters (2.58 million square feet) to the Mor Gabriel Syriac Orthodox Monastery. According to the media and several religious groups, the restitution took place at the insistence of then-Prime Minister Erdogan and with the approval of the GDF. Additional parcels totaling more than 300,000 square meters (3.23 million square feet) remained in dispute at the end of the year. A case remained pending at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) to determine ownership of some of the parcels that remained in dispute. The land dispute had begun in 2008, when the Undersecretariat of the Treasury, the Department of Forestry, and nearby villages initiated a series of court cases against the monastery for the land.

The government continued to permit annual and other commemorative religious worship services at religiously significant sites previously converted to state museums, such as the Sumela Monastery near Trabzon, Akdamar Church near Van, St. Peter's Church in Antakya, St. Nicholas' Church near Demre, and the House of the Virgin Mary near Selcuk. Some municipal and minority religious group leaders called for these sites to be opened to worship without restrictions, and for other sites to be considered for religious services as well.

In December the government appealed a ruling by the ECHR which found that the government's compulsory religion courses in public schools violated educational freedoms. The ECHR was responding to a complaint by Alevis who argued that the courses promoted Sunni Islam, which was contrary to their religious convictions. Prime Minister Davutoglu said the courses were a necessary tool to combat Islamic "radicalization." The National Education Convention in December recommended increasing the compulsory religion course to two hours per week at all levels and starting the course from grade one.

Non-Sunni Muslims said they faced difficulty obtaining exemptions from compulsory religious instruction in primary and secondary schools, particularly if their identification cards listed their religion as "Muslim." Members of other minority religious groups, including Protestants, also said they had difficulty obtaining exemptions. The government said that the compulsory instruction covered the range of world religions, but religious groups, especially Alevis and members of the Syrian Orthodox community, stated that the courses largely

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reflected Hanafi Sunni Islamic doctrine and contained negative and incorrect information about other religious groups. While the government allowed non-Muslims to select other electives to fulfill their required coursework for graduation, non-Sunni Muslims reported they often were only allowed to choose from electives concerning different aspects of Sunni Islam.

In October the minister of education announced that students who attended non-Muslim minority community schools would be permitted to take elective courses in their religion, although courses had not started at the end of the year.

Alevis reported the government did not include any of their distinct doctrines or beliefs in the compulsory religious education curriculum for Muslim students and that school officials regularly denied Alevis the right, as ruled by the ECHR in 2007, to be exempted from it. Although authorities added material on Alevism to the religious course curriculum after the ECHR decision, many Alevis stated this material was inadequate and, in some cases, incorrect. Alevi leaders reported teachers sometimes physically mistreated children attempting to opt out of classes or singled them out for mistreatment by other students. Alevis had many unresolved discrimination cases against the Ministry of Education pending in national courts at the end of the year.

The Syriac community opened a preschool in Istanbul, after a 2013 ruling by the Ankara 13th Administrative Appeals Court held that the Syriac community should be recognized as a “Lausanne minority” and allowed to open schools to serve its community, with some instruction permissible in the native neo-Aramaic language of the community. By year’s end, the Ministry of Education had not issued a ruling on the 2013 petition by the Syriac community to open a primary school in Mardin. One GDF-approved Greek school, closed in 1964 and re-opened in 2011, continued to operate on the island of Gokceada (known as Imvros in Greek).

The government continued to permit the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish religious community foundations to operate schools under the supervision of the education ministry, and also allowed children of their non-citizen coreligionists, including children of undocumented Armenian migrants and Armenian refugees from Syria, to enroll in them. However, because these children were legally classified as “visitors,” they were ineligible to receive a diploma from those schools. The curricula of these schools included information unique to the cultures of the three groups and could be taught in the minority groups’ languages. The government did not permit other religious groups to operate schools.

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Because non-ethnic Turks could not receive degrees from licensed religious community schools, many Armenian immigrant parents remained reluctant to enroll their children in them and opted instead for unlicensed “basement” schools organized on the same model as schools in Armenia and whose degrees were accepted upon transfer back to Armenia. The government tolerated, but did not approve, these schools.

The government limited the number of students admitted to public schools, assigning tens of thousands of students to state-run religious schools, known as *imam hatip* schools. Enrollment in the *imam hatip* schools reached almost a million students from just 63,000 over the past 12 years. Minister of Education Nabi Avci said the increase was a result of a demand from religiously conservative families who had been marginalized before the AKP came to power. Critics, including secular-minded parents, expressed concern that the government was favoring religion over secularism in education policy. Some parents expressed concern that the secular schools attended by their children would be transformed into *imam hatip* schools. In August the Yesil Bahar Secondary School in Kadikoy in Istanbul was among hundreds of secular schools converted to religious ones. Parents staged protests, and the conversion was reversed.

The Diyanet regulated the operation of 85,412 registered mosques and employed 121,845 personnel as civil servants at the end of 2013, the last date for which data was available. The government did not employ religious leaders, instructors, or other staff for other religious groups.

In December the ECHR found discrimination on the basis of religion in the system for granting exemptions from payment of electricity bills for places of worship. The case before the ECHR involved Istanbul’s Yenibosna Cultural Center, which was run by the Cem Foundation and housed a *cemevi* and funeral home. In 2006, the Cem Foundation’s request for an electricity bill exemption was declined based on an opinion by the Diyanet that Alevism was not a religion. Since then, the center had accumulated nearly \$300,000 worth of electric bills. The court found the Cem Foundation had sustained “a difference in treatment without any objective or reasonable justification” because, like recognized places of worship, *cemevis* were “places intended for the practice of religious rituals.” The ECHR did not assess a penalty but gave the government and the Cem Foundation six months to propose an estimate for damages. Prime Minister Davutoglu said the decision would not affect the government, which would “continue to follow (its) own path.”

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Although the ECHR during the year again ruled against the government for failure to establish conscientious objector status for those with religious and philosophical objections to military service, no reforms were introduced to recognize the right of conscientious objection or to prevent the criminal prosecution of conscientious objectors for refusal to perform military service.

According to officials of the Jehovah's Witnesses, members faced prosecution and fines for their refusal to serve in the country's military forces. In June an ECHR ruling ordered the government to pay damages to Baris Gormez and three other Jehovah's Witnesses (Caglar Buldu, Ersin Olgun and Nevzat Umdu) for having subjected them to inhuman and degrading treatment and violating their freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. The men had been prosecuted and convicted in 2012 for refusing to perform military service following their application as conscientious objectors, although sentences had not been handed down. The case remained before the Military Court of Appeals at the end of the year, after the prosecutor appealed a lower court's decision to acquit Gormez.

Some non-Muslims stated that listing their religious affiliation on national identity cards exposed them to discrimination and harassment. Members of many religious groups complained that by not including a religious identity or listing an identity other than Muslim on applications for employment, they or coreligionists were precluded from obtaining government jobs and discriminated against in the private sector.

The government forced some religious workers to leave the country when their residence permits, which were not linked to their religious work, were not renewed. Some individuals had lived in the country for years. In previous years, government officials stated that a religious worker residence permit existed, but could not explain how one could be obtained.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Jewish community leaders expressed concern over a sharp increase in anti-Semitic protests and media postings during the conflict in Gaza. Christians, Jews, and non-Sunni Muslims faced threats of violence and vandalism of property. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

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In June reputed Sunni radicals entered St. Stephanos Catholic Church in the Yesilkoy neighborhood of Istanbul during a baptism ceremony and threatened members of the church congregation. As the intruders were being escorted out of the church, one reportedly brandished a knife and threatened to stab a member of the congregation. In May vandals stole audio equipment and set a fire in a chapel of the same church, which is also used by the Syriac Orthodox community. No one was injured, but church property was destroyed. Police stationed a police car outside the church for several weeks following the incident.

In July a group of individuals, reported by sources to be Sunni radicals, threatened the imam of the Ja'fari Muhammediye Mosque in Istanbul. A week later, the mosque was vandalized and set on fire. The imam stated he had received many threats over the previous week, and the assailants had demanded that prayers not be held at the mosque. Police investigated the matter and concluded that the fire was set by thieves. The Ja'fari community disputed the police findings.

In December the office and bookstore of a Protestant church in Kadikoy, Istanbul were vandalized and thousands of Bibles were burned. Police initially said the incident was a random act of vandalism but began investigating the matter when they discovered a suspect had made repeated visits to the site. At year's end, the investigation was ongoing.

Jewish leaders expressed growing concern and unease in the Jewish community after the series of protests and attacks on the Israeli Embassy and ambassador's residence in Ankara and Consulate General in Istanbul in July during the conflict in Gaza. These attacks, as well as threats against Jews, led to Israel briefly recalling some of its diplomats and dependents. Following anti-Semitic statements by media outlets, the chief rabbi and the Jewish community lay board issued a press release condemning the anti-Semitic statements. According to Gonzo Insight, a local research group which analyzes internet content, between July 17 and 18 there was a significant spike in comments by Turkish users supporting the Nazi genocide of the Jews (the Holocaust).

In July pop star Yildiz Tilbe posted a series of anti-Semitic messages online, including "May God bless Hitler." Members of Turkey's Jewish community pressed for legal action against Tilbe and issued a statement calling her posts offensive and demanding an apology.

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On September 16, the Istanbul branch of the Human Rights Association petitioned the Ministries of Justice and Interior to investigate “rising anti-Semitism” in the country.

Nesim Guvenis, deputy chairman of the Association of Turkish Jews in Israel, stated on October 21, that harsh statements from the Turkish government had triggered anti-Semitism and led to the migration of hundreds of Jewish youths to the United States and Europe. A variety of newspapers, commercials, and television shows continued to carry anti-Semitic messages, and anti-Semitic literature was common in bookstores.

In the *Yeni Akit* newspaper, one writer warned that if the country’s Jews did not condemn Israel, they could be subjected to pogroms such as that faced by the nation’s Greek community in 1955. A pro-government news outlet posted a declaration online by Bulent Yildirim of the Humanitarian Relief Foundation saying if the nation’s Jewish community did not put an end to Israeli actions, “very bad things will happen.”

Various Islamic groups continued to advocate transforming some former Orthodox churches into mosques, especially after the Hagia Sophia of Trabzon, a 12th century Byzantine church which had been operating as a museum for the past 50 years, was converted into a mosque in 2013.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The President, Vice President, Secretary of State, and Ambassador engaged with government officials throughout the year to address religious freedom issues and stress the importance the United States places on religious tolerance.

In September the President discussed with President Erdogan the importance of combating of anti-Semitism. The Vice President and the Secretary of State continued to call for the reopening of the Greek Orthodox seminary in Halki in meetings with government officials in Washington. The Ambassador, in private meetings with government officials and publicly through local media, reiterated the U.S. position on these issues. The Department of State publicly condemned anti-Semitic statements, calling them “offensive and wrong” and said they “hurt Turkey’s international standing.”

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The Ambassador, visiting U.S. officials, and embassy officers urged the government to implement reforms aimed at lifting restrictions on religious groups and also raised property restitution and specific cases of religious discrimination. Embassy officials issued public statements drawing attention to religious discrimination. U.S. consulate general officials met with government counterparts to discuss barriers encountered by U.S. citizens attempting to obtain visas as religious workers and to clarify the process by which religious worker visas or residence permits were granted.

The Ambassador, embassy, and consulate general representatives maintained close relations with “traditional” and recently established religious groups, meeting frequently with them – individually and collectively – to discuss religious freedom concerns and promote interreligious dialogue. Embassy and consulate general personnel hosted or attended events during Ramadan and Jewish and Christian holidays, and on Holocaust Remembrance Day.

EGYPT 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The 2014 constitution describes freedom of belief as “absolute” and provides adherents of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism the right to practice their religion freely and to build houses of worship. However, the government does not recognize conversion from Islam to any other religion. The constitution specifies Islam as the state religion and the principles of sharia as the primary source of legislation. It also provides for the establishment of an anti-discrimination commission and requires parliament to pass a new law facilitating the construction and renovation of Christian churches. The government prosecuted individuals for “defaming religion” under the penal code, and individuals accused of blasphemy often faced social intolerance and, in some cases, violence. Police and security officials reportedly failed to respond in cases of kidnapping and extortion of Christians in Upper Egypt. The June 30 Fact-Finding Committee, which was established by presidential decree in 2013 to investigate the post-June 2013 violence, released in November the executive summary of its report and ascribed responsibility for the attacks on churches to members of the Muslim Brotherhood. President Sisi met with the leaders of the country’s major Christian groups to discuss their concerns. Accountability for previous sectarian crimes was uneven, and government officials and community leaders continued to sponsor reconciliation sessions – extrajudicial resolutions of sectarian conflict – which human rights advocates and some Christian groups regarded as largely unfair. In an effort to prevent speech in mosques promoting sectarianism or inciting violence, the government enacted a new law mandating stricter penalties for imams preaching in mosques without a license, and published weekly instructions for imams regarding the acceptable content of their sermons. The law granted officials of the Ministry of Islamic Endowments (Ministry of Awqaf) arrest authority over those who violated it. The government used anti-Shia rhetoric and anti-Semitic commentary, which appeared in public and private media.

Sectarian violence throughout the country declined during the year. Christians in Upper Egypt, however, were targeted for kidnapping and extortion disproportionately. Building and re-building churches in the absence of anticipated legislation was sometimes met with societal resistance, occasionally turning violent. Discrimination against atheists continued; those who appeared on television talk shows were vilified by the hosts and faced societal rejection, including attacks and lawsuits.

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The U.S. President, Secretary of State, Charge d'Affaires, and other senior officials emphasized the government's responsibility to protect the rights of all citizens, regardless of religion; all raised concerns about restrictions on religious freedom and discrimination with senior government officials and directly with the public. The President reaffirmed in January the commitment of the United States to work for the protection of Christians and other people of faith in Egypt. The Secretary of State met in June with government officials and civil society leaders in Cairo and emphasized the U.S. commitment to religious freedom. The U.S. government sponsored exchange programs to promote tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 86.9 million (July 2014 estimate). Approximately 90 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim and approximately 10 percent is Christian. The majority of Christians belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church. Other Christian communities together constitute less than 2 percent of the population and include the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic (Armenian, Chaldean, Greek, Melkite, Roman, and Syrian), Maronite, Orthodox (Greek and Syrian), Anglican/Episcopalian, and Protestant churches, which range in size from several thousand to hundreds of thousands. The Protestant community includes Presbyterians, Baptists, Brethren, Open Brethren, Seventh-day Adventists, Revival of Holiness (Nahdat al-Qadaasa), Faith (Al-Eyman), Church of God, Christian Model Church (Al-Mithaal Al-Masihi), Apostolic, Grace (An-Ni'ma), Pentecostal, Apostolic Grace, Church of Christ, Gospel Missionary (Al-Kiraaaza bil Ingil), and the Message Church of Holland (Ar-Risaala). Christians reside throughout the country, although the percentage of Christians is higher in Upper Egypt and in some sections of Cairo and Alexandria.

Shia Muslims constitute less than 1 percent of the population. Some press accounts estimated the number of atheists to be as high as four million, although other accounts placed their number in the low thousands. There are also small groups of Quranists and Ahmadi Muslims.

Accurate numbers for the Jewish community are difficult to determine, but it is believed to number no more than 40 persons. There are 1,000 to 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses and about 2,000 Bahais.

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There are many foreign resident adherents of various religious groups, including Roman Catholics, Protestants, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The 2014 constitution, ratified by referendum in January, distinguishes between freedom of belief and freedom to practice religion, as did the constitutions of 2012 and 1971. It specifies Islam as the state religion and the principles of sharia as the primary source of legislation. The constitution describes the freedom of belief as absolute; however, it limits the freedom to practice religious rituals to adherents of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, to which it refers as the “divine religions.” Likewise, the constitution provides the right to establish houses of worship only to those three groups. The constitution mandates that the new parliament must issue a law during its first legislative term to facilitate the construction and renovation of Christian churches, which is expected to reduce existing barriers to church construction. The government announced parliamentary elections would commence in March 2015. The constitution states that Al-Azhar, the religious university in the country, is “the main reference in theology and Islamic Affairs.”

Under the penal code, denigrating religions, promoting extremist thoughts with the aim of inciting strife, demeaning any of the “divine religions,” and harming national unity carry penalties ranging from six months’ to five years’ imprisonment.

The new constitution stipulates equality before the law irrespective of one’s religion. It also stipulates that discrimination and incitement of hatred is a crime punishable by law. It mandates the state eliminate all forms of discrimination through an independent commission to be created by law once the new parliament is seated.

According to law, the president must issue a decree authorizing the construction of new churches, while the local Office of the District Authority must approve renovations and repairs. A Ministry of Interior (MOI) decree issued in the 1930s and still generally followed specifies 10 conditions the government must consider before authorizing construction, including that a church may be no closer than 100 meters (340 feet) from an existing mosque and that Christian communities in

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Muslim-majority neighborhoods obtain local approval before applying to the president for authorization to build a church. Christian advocacy groups expressed hope the constitutionally mandated law facilitating church construction and renovation would expand the ability of Christians to establish churches, as compared to previous regulations. According to the law, the Ministry of Awqaf approves permits to build mosques, but a study published by a local human rights NGO states that many mosques are built without acquiring permits.

Only Islam, Christianity, or Judaism may be indicated in the religion field on national identity cards. Although religious conversion is not prohibited by law, the government does not recognize conversion from Islam in practice, and Muslim-born citizens who leave Islam for another religion may not change the religion field on their identity cards.

The constitution stipulates that the canonical laws of Jews and Christians form the basis of legislation governing their personal status, religious affairs, and selection of spiritual leaders. In marital affairs, however, the law stipulates that spouses must be members of the same denomination within a religion for courts to apply these canonical laws. In cases where one spouse is Muslim and the other a member of a different religious denomination, the courts apply sharia. All citizens remain subject to sharia in matters of inheritance and adoption.

The government recognizes only the marriages of Christians, Jews, and Muslims. In keeping with sharia, non-Muslim men must convert to Islam to marry Muslim women, although non-Muslim women need not convert to marry Muslim men. A non-Muslim woman who converts to Islam must divorce her husband if he is not Muslim and is unwilling to convert. Custody of children is then awarded to the mother.

The minor children of Muslim converts to Christianity, and in some cases adult children who were minors when their parents converted, automatically remain classified as Muslims.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) bans the hijab in primary schools, but allows it in preparatory and secondary schools upon written request from a girl's parent.

In public schools Muslim students are required to take courses on "principles of Islam" and Christian students are required to take courses on "principles of Christianity" in all grades. Students who are neither Muslim nor Christian must

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choose one or the other course; they may not opt out or change from one to the other.

Ministries may obtain court orders to ban or confiscate books and works of art. The cabinet may ban works it deems offensive to public morals, detrimental to religion, or likely to cause a breach of the peace. The Islamic Research Center of Al-Azhar has the legal authority to censor and confiscate any publications dealing with the Quran and the authoritative Islamic traditions (*Hadith*), and to confiscate publications, tapes, speeches, and artistic materials deemed inconsistent with Islamic law.

The Ministry of Awqaf is required to license all mosques; however, many operate without licenses. The government has the authority to appoint and monitor the imams who lead prayers in licensed mosques and pays their salaries. In June former interim President Adly Mansour issued legislation regulating sermons and religious lessons in mosques in an effort to eliminate the use of speech in mosque sermons that promotes sectarianism or incites violence. The new law provides for harsher penalties for preaching without a license, including a prison term of up to one year and/or a fine of up to 50,000 Egyptian pounds (EGP) (\$6,993) for preaching or giving religious lessons without a license from Awqaf or Al-Azhar. The penalty is doubled for repeat offenders. On October 19, the Ministry of Justice granted judicial authority to 100 Awqaf inspectors to arrest imams violating this law. A 2013 decree prevents unlicensed imams from preaching in any mosque, prohibits holding Friday prayers in mosques smaller than 80 square meters, bans unlicensed mosques from holding Friday prayer services, and requires Friday sermons to follow government guidelines.

Christian, Muslim, and Jewish denominations can request official recognition from the government, which gives the denomination the right to be governed by its canonical laws, practice religious rituals, and establish houses of worship. To obtain official recognition, a religious group must submit a request to the MOI's Religious Affairs Department. The department then determines whether the group poses a threat to national unity or social peace. As part of this determination, the department consults leading religious institutions, including the Coptic Orthodox Church and Al-Azhar. The registration is then referred to the president for decision. If a religious group fails to obtain official registration and continues to hold meetings, its members potentially face detention and prosecution for harming social cohesion or denigrating religions.

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The law does not recognize the Bahai Faith or its religious laws and bans Bahai institutions and community activities. Bahais do not have recourse to civil law for personal status matters. Since the state does not recognize Bahai marriage, married Bahais are denied the legal rights of married couples, including those pertaining to inheritance, divorce, and sponsoring a foreign spouse's permanent residence. According to sources in the Bahai community, the government does not actively attempt to prevent private worship by Bahais.

President Sisi in June issued legislation regulating elections for the House of Representatives (HOR), which contains 540 elected seats and 27 appointed seats. The HOR law mandates a minimum of 24 Christians must be elected through party lists in the first parliamentary elections after the constitution's ratification, an increase over the previous parliament, which included 13 Christians. Christians may also compete for independent seats and be appointed to others. The current constitution, like previous ones, grants the president the authority to appoint 5 percent of the seats and, historically, presidents have used this power to appoint some Christians.

The penal code criminalizes discrimination based on religion. There were no known cases of enforcement during the year. The penal code defines discrimination as "any action, or lack of action, that leads to discrimination between people or against a sect due to gender, origin, language, religion, or belief."

The National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) is charged with strengthening protections, raising awareness, and ensuring the observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom. It is also charged with monitoring enforcement and application of international agreements pertaining to human rights. The council's mandate includes investigating reports of alleged violations of religious freedom.

Government Practices

The government failed to prevent, investigate, or prosecute crimes targeting members of religious minority groups, which fostered a climate of impunity. The government failed to protect Christians targeted by kidnappings and extortion, and there were reports that security and police officials sometimes failed to respond to these crimes, especially in Upper Egypt. The government continued to prosecute individuals for denigrating religions. There were incidents of police abuse of

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Christians and atheists. The government renewed an investigation into a potential defamation of Islam charge against Muhammad Hegazy, a convert from Islam to Christianity. The government continued to harass Shia and prohibit conversion from Islam. Some government bodies continued to vilify Shia and atheists. The government failed to condemn some anti-Semitic speech.

According to a local human rights organization, police beat and arrested Christian residents of Gabal El-Teir village, township of Samalot, Minya Governorate, and raided Christian-owned houses September 15, after local Christians demonstrated at the Gabal El-Teir police station over the alleged kidnapping of a Coptic woman for forcible conversion to Islam. The protests became violent, with multiple reports of demonstrators throwing rocks at police and police firing gunshots into the air. The confrontation left three policemen injured and the windows of two police vehicles smashed, according to the MOI. According to the same human rights organization, the raids on Christian-owned houses were carried out by central security forces and riot police at midnight, after the dispersal of the protest. The group said the officers destroyed items in villagers' homes and arrested at least 65 Copts for assaulting security forces. Witnesses stated that detainees were beaten during their arrest, with some tied up and dragged through the streets of the village. The human rights organization described the response by security forces as "amounting to collective punishment of the village's Christians." Most of the detainees were released shortly after, although 12 remained in detention until September 23, when they were released on EGP 5,000 (\$699) bail, according to local media. The incidents prompted the NCHR to promise investigations into the violations, after it received numerous complaints about police actions. Minister of Interior Mohamed Ibrahim met with a delegation of Coptic Orthodox clergy from Minya September 23, during which he announced the MOI would compensate the families for their financial losses. At year's end, the MOI had not disbursed any compensation.

Coptic Orthodox Church leaders said the kidnappings and extortion of Christians increased following the August 2013 attacks on churches and police stations, as the security situation deteriorated nationwide. In his testimony to the June 30 Fact-Finding Committee formed by former interim president Adly Mansour in 2013 to investigate the post-June 2013 violence, Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros identified kidnapping as among the most significant problems facing Christians. Since 2011, in many population centers Christians and Muslims alike were victimized. In Upper Egypt, however, Christians were disproportionately targets of these crimes, and to a lesser degree in the Cairo area and in the north.

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According to media reports, interviews with Coptic victims' attorneys and Coptic clergy, Christians in the Minya, Qena, Assiut, and North Sinai Governorates were specifically targeted for kidnappings for ransom. Three kidnappings took place in June in North Sinai. The family of one of the victims, businessman Gamal Shenouda, paid EGP 300,000 (\$41,958) in ransom to the kidnappers, according to a local civil society organization. In Naga Hammadi, Qena, the captors of Malak Zaghoul, a merchant, returned him on July 7, five days after he was kidnapped, after his family paid a ransom of an undisclosed amount. In comments to the press in July, a Coptic Orthodox religious leader complained of the frequency of kidnappings in Naga Hammadi and blamed security agencies for their inability to protect Copts. He stated that the number of abduction cases exceeded 70 in the city in the past three years. A report published in November by the June 30 Fact-Finding Committee, citing MOI data, stated the total number of kidnapped Christians since 2011 to be 140, 96 of whom returned.

There were unconfirmed reports of administrative penalties imposed on police leaders in July for negligence in deterring the recurrent kidnappings in Naga Hammadi. Church leaders raised the issue with President Sisi in an August meeting. The president said the state would pay additional attention to the problems of Christians, according to the presidency's public statement following the meeting.

In a March report, a local human rights organization documented eight cases of extortion and 12 cases of robbery and kidnapping involving Copts in Shamia village, from which the perpetrators obtained more than EGP 1.5 million (\$210,000) in ransom payments during the period September 2013 to January 2014. The organization reported that security forces raided the village in February, arrested some of the criminal gang members, and confiscated stolen items. By the end of the year, security had been restored to the village and the kidnappings and extortion stopped, according to the local organization.

Human rights activists and Christian leaders stated police and security forces often failed to respond to the kidnapping and extortion of Christians in Upper Egypt, including targeting of landowners. They said that in some areas of Upper Egypt perpetrators forced Christians to pay "protection money." Police reportedly told families of Christian kidnap victims to "pay the ransom and keep quiet." One Christian leader said that the extortions were divesting Christians of their wealth and dignity.

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In September attackers reportedly shot and killed a Coptic dentist in Assuit for refusing to pay protection money. In comments to the press, his family said thugs had been threatening to kill him for over a year if he did not pay protection money. They also said he filed several complaints against the individuals, but the police were unresponsive.

There were reports of increasing land thefts from Christians, especially in Upper Egypt.

On October 25, Ahmed Harqan, an atheist, stated that police detained, beat, and interrogated him and his wife after they fled to a police station in Alexandria for protection from a mob threatening them with violence. Five days earlier, Harqan had discussed his atheist beliefs on a widely-viewed television talk show. According to Harqan, the police questioned them about their religious convictions and called them apostates. On October 26, the public prosecutor ordered the investigation of a defamation of religion complaint filed against Harqan by a group of lawyers for statements he made during the talk show. According to local media, Lieutenant Colonel Ibrahim El-Naggar, head of El-Dekheila investigations, denied police beat Harqan, stating the police protected him and his wife until the couple was referred to prosecution for interrogation.

Alexandria Security Directorate Chief General Amin Ezz El-Din said in a phone interview in March that a special task force would be formed to arrest Alexandria-based atheists who declared their atheism on social media. No news of the formation of such a unit had emerged by year's end.

In June Bishoy Armia Boulous, a convert from Islam to Christianity previously known as Mohamed Hegazy, was sentenced to five years in prison following his December 2013 arrest for "illegally filming demonstrations to stir international public opinion against Egypt." Boulous appealed the lower court's ruling, and the appellate court ordered Boulous' release on July 20, pending a decision on appeal. However, police immediately rearrested Boulous on accusations of blasphemy, and according to a prominent international human rights organization report, reopened a 2009 case of "denigrating Islam." Authorities subsequently held Boulous in pretrial detention. According to a December 11 report by Human Rights Without Frontiers International, Boulous' attorney stated his client was being held illegally, and on December 1 was transferred to a prison cell in Minya reserved for prisoners facing the death penalty. Boulous' lawyer reported police tortured Boulous and subjected him to other mistreatment while in custody. At the end of the year, no

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charges had been filed against Boulous on the blasphemy case. On December 28, the appellate court accepted Boulous' appeal of his sentence on the illegal filming charge and reduced it to one year. Boulous was previously known for suing the MOI in 2007 for his unsuccessful attempt to change his legal religious identity from Muslim to Christian, testing the constitutional right of freedom of religion. The administrative court ruled in favor of the MOI.

The trial of 31 suspects for the June 2013 killing of four Shia citizens in the village of Zawyat Abu Muslam in Giza began on December 21. The prosecution charged the suspects with the murder of the four individuals and the attempted murder of 13 others. A mob of thousands of angry villagers had killed 66-year-old Hassan Shehata, a prominent Shia figure, and three others, after weeks of denigration of the Shia by Salafist preachers.

In October the public prosecutor referred 48 suspects to trial for sectarian violence in Al Dabaiya village in Luxor in July 2013 that left one Muslim and four Christians dead. Among the 48 defendants, 19 were charged with murder, seven with incitement to violence, and the rest with arson and vandalism. All the defendants were Muslim, except for three who were charged with the murder of the Muslim victim. The trial was ongoing at year's end.

Several suspects detained for the killings of five Christians – including two children – and a young Muslim man outside St. Mary's Church in Al-Warraq, Giza, in October 2013 had not been referred to trial at year's end. In November 2013, the public prosecutor banned publishing information on the case. According to the church's leaders and witnesses, there were no security forces in the vicinity of the church at the time of the attack.

Government prosecutors investigated criminal complaints filed by citizens against individuals whose statements or actions were alleged to be blasphemous, denigrating of religion, or insulting to the Prophet Muhammad or other religious figures. Some of these cases went to trial, resulting in the convictions of at least six people during the year, a decrease from 2013 when nine persons were convicted on similar charges. Most of these cases were filed against individuals in Upper Egypt, according to a local human rights organization.

Shia activist Amr Abdullah was sentenced February 26 to five years in prison with labor on charges of denigrating Islam. Abdullah was arrested during Ashura commemorations in November 2013 outside Cairo's Al Hussein Mosque.

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Abdullah's arrest followed an altercation between him and a group of Salafists. A local human rights group reported the prosecution referred Abdullah to trial based on his statement under questioning that he was a Shia. The court ruled that Abdullah defamed Islam and promoted convictions contrary to majority views. Abdullah appealed the sentence, but the Cairo Court of Appeals rejected his appeal on April 29. The Ministry of Awqaf again instructed imams to prohibit Shia commemorations of Ashura in mosques in 2014. The government closed shrines in the vicinity of Al-Hussein Mosque on November 3, the day of Ashura, and for several days after. Salafist leaders had also asked the government to stop Shia commemorations inside Al-Hussein Mosque.

The West Armant Misdemeanors Court sentenced Kerolos Shawky, a Christian, on June 24 to six years in prison for "liking" a Facebook page that contained commentary perceived as denigrating Islam. Shawky was sentenced to three years in prison for defaming Islam and another three years for fomenting sectarian strife. Prior to his trial the court had released him on bail. On May 28, villagers reportedly distributed leaflets calling for vengeance against Shawky and on May 29, a mob attacked his house, hurling stones and attempting to set fire to it. Police arrested Shawky and six of the assailants, who were subsequently released. Hours before Shawky's first hearing on June 2, villagers threw Molotov cocktails at four Christian-owned shops close to Shawky's village. Shawky appealed the sentence, but on September 27, the Armant Misdemeanor Appellate Court upheld his sentence in absentia after he did not appear for his trial date. There were no further arrests or legal action taken in response to the attacks against Shawky or any of the properties.

On December 27, prosecutors in South Cairo referred journalist Fatima Naoot to trial for denigrating Islam by mocking the Islamic sacrifice ritual conducted by Muslims during Eid El-Adha. Naoot had posted on October 1 a tweet describing the ritual of sacrificing cows or sheep as a "massacre." Her trial was scheduled to begin in January 2015.

The Luxor Misdemeanor Appellate Court on June 15 sentenced Damiana Abdel Nour, a Christian elementary school teacher, to six months in prison, overturning a lower court's sentence fining her EGP 100,000 (\$13,986) for denigrating Islam in 2013. The public prosecutor had appealed the lower court's sentence, demanding her imprisonment. The parents of three of Abdel Nour's students had filed a complaint accusing her of denigrating Islam and evangelizing among her students during a class on religious life in ancient Egypt. She was reportedly cleared by

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two independent investigations conducted by the school council and local office of the MOE. Abdel Nour did not attend the final verdict session and remained a fugitive at year's end.

The Beba Misdemeanors Appellate Court on June 5 rejected Karam Saber's appeal of a five-year prison sentence for "insulting the deity and defaming religions" based on his 2011 collection of short stories entitled, *Where is God?* That appeal followed a March retrial by the Beba Partial Court of Beni Suef, which also confirmed the original sentence. Two days earlier the administrative court rejected another suit filed by Saber, citing lack of jurisdiction, demanding the annulment of his trial based on the unconstitutionality of an article in the penal code in light of the 2014 constitution. During his first trial the prosecutor consulted a church in Beni Suef and Al-Azhar for their opinion of the book. Both institutions denounced the book, saying it contradicted the "divine religions" and damaged Egyptian societal values.

In June the MOE demoted Ayman Ramzy, a public school librarian, transferred him to a new school, and barred him from contact with students or teachers after he spoke about his atheistic beliefs during an April appearance on a television program. Parents of students had demanded he be reprimanded after his appearance on the show. The ministry filed complaints against him with the administrative prosecution and officially notified the public prosecutor of the ministry's internal investigations of him. The administrative prosecution referred him to trial on December 17 and his first trial session was scheduled for January 2015. According to the media, the administrative prosecution charged him with promoting atheist ideas at his place of work and publicly through the media "in violation of society's values, negatively affecting communal peace."

On April 30, Salafist televangelist Sheikh Ahmed Abdullah, also known as Sheikh Abu Islam, appealed a three-year prison sentence received in 2013 for denigrating Christianity on a television program. The court reduced his sentence to six months' imprisonment.

Several Muslim converts to Christianity filed lawsuits before the administrative judiciary, requesting the Civil Records Authority, part of the MOI, amend their civil records under the Civil Affairs Law, which provides for an official change in religious status upon the presentation of evidentiary documents from a specialized entity, in this case the church or Al-Azhar. Resolution of the cases was pending a ruling by the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) on the constitutionality of the

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article in the law. A lawsuit filed in 2008 alleges the article contradicts the constitution, which stipulates that the principles of Islamic sharia are the main source of legislation. The lawsuit asserts sharia explicitly prohibits conversion from Islam.

On December 29, the Alexandria Administrative Court issued a decision to ban permanently the Abu Hassira festival, an annual pilgrimage by non-Egyptian Jews to the shrine of 19th century scholar Rabbi Yaakov Abu Hassira. The court justified its decision by stating the festival was a “violation of public order and morals” and “incompatible with the solemnity and purity of religious sites.” The court additionally revoked the site’s designation as an antiquity by the Ministry of Antiquities. It also rejected an Israeli request submitted to UNESCO to transfer Abu Hassira’s remains to Israel. The court’s decision is subject to appeal. Prior to 2012, the government allowed the pilgrimage, overriding a similar decision in 2001 by the Alexandria Supreme Administrative Court. Since 2012, however, the government has cancelled the festival citing security concerns.

The NCHR stated it is working on updating the curriculum in public schools to remove all material inconsistent with human rights and equality.

Christians continued to face difficulty in building churches, repairing them, or constructing buildings adjacent to existing churches. According to the media, clashes broke out August 2 between the Christians and Muslims of North Ezbet Yacoub village in the township of Samalot, Minya, when rumors circulated that Copts were planning to convert a house under construction into a church without a permit, and Muslim residents attacked the house. In the aftermath of the clashes, police stopped the construction of another church in the area for approximately one month, according to local clergy. During a meeting with Pope Tawadros in August, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed el-Tayeb reportedly stated that Copts were free to build churches, “while taking into consideration the national security dimension.” However, certain media outlets subsequently quoted an official statement by Al-Azhar denying el-Tayeb had made that statement.

Investigations into the attack on St. Mark’s Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo in April 2013, during the funeral of six Christian victims of sectarian violence, continued at year’s end. As of the end of the year, the public prosecutor had charged 21 suspects with rioting, possession of bladed weapons and firearms, and jeopardizing national unity and communal peace.

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The government continued to sponsor “reconciliation sessions” after sectarian attacks and intercommunal violence, instead of prosecuting the perpetrators of the crimes. Such reconciliation sessions generally precluded recourse to the judicial system for restitution as, in most cases, the parties agreed to drop all formal charges and lawsuits. Christians viewed the decisions emanating from these sessions as largely unfair, according to NGOs. According to a source in the Coptic Orthodox Church, the church accepted reconciliation sessions in some cases as an immediate measure to stop bloodshed and de-escalate tensions, but did not approve of these sessions as a substitute for the rule of law. The June 30 Fact-Finding Committee called on state authorities to cease their use. These extrajudicial sessions were usually attended by governorate or MOI officials, with Christian and Muslim clergy representing the conflicting parties. Results from these sessions could include some compensation for the aggrieved party and a penalty clause for the breaching of its terms.

In June senior police officials held a reconciliation session between the Coptic Harby family and the Muslim El Samadiya family in Cairo. During a dispute between the two families in February, a member of the Samadiya family was killed. Authorities arrested 13 Christians and charged them with murder, attempted murder, possession of unlicensed firearms, terrorizing citizens, and disrupting communal peace. The reconciliation session was attended by representatives of the families; Major General Yehia El Eraqy; the deputy head of the Cairo Security Directorate; the head of North Cairo investigations; the head of the El Matariya police station; and several local sheikhs. Elders in the area invited Christian clergy, who refused to attend the session, according to a member of the defense team of the Christian family. The settlement from the reconciliation session allowed the continuation of the lawsuit against the Christian family, and compelled the Harby family to move out of the neighborhood, present five empty shrouds to the El-Samadiya (a sign of peacemaking), slaughter five calves, donate 100 camels, and provide 340 square meters of land to build a mosque and one million EGP (\$140,000) for construction expenses. According to a member of the defense team for the Harby family, the family agreed to take part in the reconciliation session to avoid any measures of revenge for the killing of the Samadiya family member, and to allow the uninvolved members of the family to return of the area, where the family owns property and businesses.

The executive summary of the June 30 Fact-Finding Committee report ascribed responsibility for the attacks on Christians, their private property, and churches to the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters. The executive summary reported

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attacks took place in 21 governorates, where 52 churches were torched completely or partially, 12 other churches and facilities looted, and 402 Christian-owned properties attacked. The report also documented 29 killings of a sectarian nature that occurred during the period June 2013 – June 2014. The report stated there were cases of kidnapping and forced disappearances, mostly for ransom. The committee recommended issuance of a law to facilitate the rebuilding of churches, in keeping with the 2014 constitution. The committee urged reconsideration of the use of the customary reconciliation system to resolve instances of sectarian violence, and advocated additional measures to prevent discrimination in hiring and end hate speech. The committee also called on the judiciary to conclude promptly lawsuits involving sectarian violations, and for security agencies to confront the increase in kidnappings in some areas.

While the constitution prohibits the formation of political parties on the basis of religion, religiously-inspired parties, predominantly those favoring Salafist Islamic ideology, continued to operate. On November 26, the Cairo Court for Urgent Matters dismissed a lawsuit that sought to ban a number of religiously-inspired parties from participating in the forthcoming parliamentary elections, citing lack of jurisdiction.

Anti-Semitic sentiments routinely appeared in both government-owned and private media, and the government made few public attempts to distinguish between anti-Semitism and opposition to Israeli policies and practices. For example, on April 28, a Minya court described Islamists sentenced to death for the killing of a police officer as “demons” who followed Jewish scripture. The court also described the men as “enemies of the nation” who used mosques to promote the teachings of “their holy book, the Talmud.” In August 2013 in Minya, the court had sentenced 37 defendants in the case to death and 492 others to life imprisonment on charges of breaking into and burning down a police station, burning police vehicles, stealing weapons, murdering a police officer and attempting to murder another.

Government and official Islamic institutions used anti-Shia rhetoric. In a September statement, Awqaf Minister Mohamed Mokhtar Gomaa likened Shia followers to the Muslim Brotherhood, which the government designated as a terrorist organization in December 2013, because “they find it permissible to lie to achieve their goals.” In a televised interview on September 22, Sheikh Sabry Ebada, Undersecretary of Awqaf, said Shia work to spread a spirit of animosity and hatred in the country. In January the government denied entry to 61 Canadian Shia Muslim pilgrims to visit Shia holy sites, without giving justification,

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according to press reports. However, there were reports the government stopped Salafist groups from holding conferences engaging in incitement against Shia.

Members of the Bahai community are able to obtain identity cards with a “dash” in the religion field, but their marriages are not recognized or listed on their identity cards. Since 2011, Christians who convert to Islam and then back to Christianity may amend their national identification cards to reflect their chosen faith, according to an MOI decree pursuant to a court order.

Discrimination in government and private hiring remained widespread. While reliable statistics regarding rates of discrimination were unavailable, the report of the June 30 Fact-Finding Committee called on the government to stop discrimination against Christians in hiring. Christians continued to be underrepresented relative to their population in senior government positions. The cabinet under former Prime Minister Hazem El-Beblawi, who was in power from July 2013 to February 2014, included three Christian ministers out of a total of 36. The two subsequent cabinets of Prime Minister Ibrahim Mehlab also included three Christians, while Hesham Kandil’s cabinet, in power from August 2012 to July 2013, had one Christian representative. There were no Christians among the country’s 26 governors.

The government discriminated against religious minorities in public sector hiring and staff appointments to public universities. There were no Christians serving as presidents of the country’s 17 public universities and few Christians occupying dean or vice dean positions in the country’s public university system, according to academic sources. Only Muslims could study at Al-Azhar University, a publicly funded institution with approximately half a million students. Additionally, the government barred non-Muslims from employment in public university training programs for Arabic language teachers because the curriculum involves study of the Quran. The government compensated Muslim clergy but not Christian clergy.

Following the attacks on churches after the dispersal of the sit-ins of Rabaa Al Adawiya and Al Nahda Squares in Cairo in August 2013, the government announced the army would rebuild destroyed churches at its expense. Bishop Bimen of the Coptic Orthodox Church and head of the church committee in charge of the rebuilding process, commented in the media July 2 that 90 percent of the first stage of restoration was complete, and the armed forces had restored 10 churches and 29 facilities, including schools. He added that restored churches reopened in Minya, Fayoum, Beni Suef, and Sohag. In 2013, the Coptic Orthodox

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Church had estimated the cost of restoring the damaged churches and schools nationwide at 188 million EGP (\$26.3 million).

There were mass arrests following the August 2013 attacks on churches, police stations, and other facilities in Minya, but few prosecutions. Eleven defendants were sentenced to life imprisonment in June on several charges, including attacking three churches in Suez. Ten of the defendants were tried in absentia. According to local media, on December 18, the Assiut Criminal Court sentenced 41 alleged Muslim Brotherhood supporters to sentences ranging from one to 15 years in prison for attacking several facilities, including five churches. Two were sentenced to 15 years and three to 10 years. The defendants were found guilty of illegal gathering, vandalism of public and private property, attacking citizens, and resisting authorities. The court also obligated them to pay for damages caused to public property.

While neither the constitution nor the civil or penal codes prohibit proselytizing, the government imposed legal penalties on activities related to proselytizing by non-Muslims. The government generally tolerated foreign religious workers on the condition they did not undertake efforts to proselytize Muslims. Sources stated non-Muslim minorities and foreign religious workers generally refrained from proselytizing to avoid risking legal penalties and extralegal repercussions from authorities and local Islamists.

President Sisi hosted Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II and leaders of other Christian denominations August 7 at the presidential palace. According to the media, the Christian leaders discussed their concerns, including the kidnapping of Christians, the restoration of churches destroyed or damaged in August 2013, the constitutional mandate that parliament pass a law regulating church construction and renovation, and assistance for Christians and other minorities fleeing violence in Iraq.

The government allowed members of unrecognized churches, such as Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, to worship privately in small numbers. According to Jehovah's Witnesses community leaders, they were not allowed to gather for worship services in groups of more than 30 people.

The government banned the importation and sale of Shia and Jehovah Witnesses literature.

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Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Lethal sectarian attacks decreased during the year, according to Christian leaders and activists. On March 28, five people died, including a journalist, in Alf Maskan, Cairo, in clashes after Friday prayers between supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and security forces and local residents. Mary George, a Christian woman who was driving near the clashes, was among the victims. According to her lawyer and eyewitness reports, George was attacked by a group of Muslim Brotherhood supporters when they saw a crucifix hanging in her car. George's lawyer said the demonstrators then pulled her by the hair into the street, where they beat her. According to a forensics report, George and the other four victims were killed by gunshot. Other accounts of the incident indicated demonstrators pulled George out of her car after she was shot, that she was stabbed multiple times, and a patch of hair had been pulled from her head. According to local media, demonstrators, local residents, and police exchanged fire in the area where the deaths took place. After her death, the demonstrators burned George's car. Thirteen suspects, still detained at year's end, were arrested for the murder of the day's victims.

In October a coalition of left-wing parties in the European parliament withdrew its nomination of political activist and blogger Alaa Abdel Fattah for the annual Sakharov Prize because of anti-Semitic statements brought to its attention, including tweets in which Abdel Fattah called for the killings of "a critical number of Israelis" and stated "Dear Zionists, please don't ever talk to me, I'm a violent person who advocated the killing of all Zionists including civilians."

Talk show hosts occasionally approved of the killing of Jewish civilians or failed to distinguish between Jews and supporters of Israel in broadcasts aired during the conflict in Gaza. Private Salafist media sometimes included anti-Semitic programming that glorified or denied the Holocaust, including in interviews with academics and clerics. There were reports of imams using anti-Semitic rhetoric in their sermons, including allegations of blood libel.

On May 11, Coptic Pope Tawadros II described Jehovah's Witnesses as a "Zionist movement" in a televised interview. Following media reporting about Jehovah's Witnesses in the 1950s describing them as Zionists, the Ministry of Social Solidarity banned the group in 1960. The ban remained in effect despite multiple attempts by the Witnesses to have it lifted.

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Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Officials at all levels of the U.S. government, including the President, Secretary of State, Charge d’Affaires, and other Department of State and embassy officials, raised religious freedom concerns with the government. These included cases in which the government failed to hold the perpetrators of sectarian violence accountable. Officials also raised the ongoing discrimination Christians faced in building and maintaining church properties; official discrimination against Bahais; harassment of citizens whose religious views differed from the majority; restrictions on recognizing new religious groups; and the government’s prohibition of conversion for Muslim citizens.

In September the President met with a delegation of Christian religious leaders from the Middle East, including Coptic Orthodox Bishop Angaelos. The President emphasized the United States recognizes the importance of the historic role of Christian communities and of protecting Christians and other religious minorities in the region. In his statement on the celebration of Coptic Christmas in January, the President reaffirmed the commitment of the United States to work for the protection of Christians and other people of faith in Egypt. During his speech at the National Prayer Breakfast in February, the President emphasized no society can truly succeed unless it guarantees the rights of all its peoples, including religious minorities, and mentioned Egypt’s Coptic Christians as an example.

The Charge d’Affaires made public statements supporting religious freedom, interfaith understanding, and efforts toward harmony and equality among members of all religious groups. In two September meetings with the grand mufti of Dar Al-Iftaa and the grand imam of Al-Azhar, he emphasized the importance of religious tolerance. In an October meeting with a senior Coptic Orthodox bishop, the Charge reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to encouraging the government to improve the state of religious freedom in Egypt.

Embassy officers met regularly with officials in the Office of Human Rights at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss religious freedom issues. The embassy also regularly discussed religious freedom matters with other government officials, governors, and members of the NCHR.

Embassy officials maintained an active dialogue with leaders of the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Bahai communities, human rights groups, and other activists. They also discussed religious freedom matters with a range of

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individuals, including academics, business leaders, and citizens outside the capital area. Embassy officials actively challenged anti-Semitic articles in the media through discussions with editors-in-chief and journalists.

The embassy supported the development of Arabic-language and English-language educational materials encouraging tolerance, diversity, and understanding of others. The embassy supported programs to promote tolerance among young religious leaders, interfaith understanding, and civic and political participation by marginalized youth. Embassy officials worked with the Supreme Council of Antiquities to support the conservation of cultural antiquities, including Islamic, Christian, and Jewish historical sites.