

# **GREECE 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution states freedom of religious conscience is inviolable and provides for freedom of worship, with some restrictions. It recognizes Greek Orthodoxy as the “prevailing religion.” On July 1, national police arrested and jailed Christos Pappas, the fugitive former deputy leader of Golden Dawn, commonly characterized as a neo-Nazi political party, who had been a fugitive since he was sentenced to 13 years in prison in October 2020. Parliament approved legislation on June 5 banning religious leaders of “known religions” (religious groups with at least one valid permit to operate a place of prayer or worship) from running for mayor or city councilor and candidates from using religious symbols as campaign emblems. On February 17, parliament approved legislation increasing from seven to nine the number of members of the Athens Mosque Managing Committee, adding two additional representatives from Muslim communities in Athens. During the year, a civil court approved the registration of an Old Calendarist Christian group as a religious legal entity. The government issued seven permits for houses of prayer, four of which Muslim groups submitted, including a group of Bektashi (Sufi) Muslims in Evros, Thrace. The remaining permits were granted to a group of evangelical Christians, a group of Pentecostal Christians, and to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church of Athens. The government also approved the construction of a new church for evangelical Christians in the northern town of Porotsani. During the year, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs rejected at least three applications by Muslim groups to establish houses of prayer, including one each in Thessaloniki, Imathia (Central Macedonia Region), and Athens, on various administrative grounds. Government authorities also revoked seven house of prayer permits – two at the request of the specific religious groups that held the permits. In the other cases, the permits were revoked due to a lack of responsiveness, of space for worship, or of a religious leader. On October 26, the Council of State, the country’s highest administrative court, annulled a 2017 ministerial decree allowing the ritual killing of animals during Islamic and Jewish ceremonies without anesthesia, stating the decree contradicted the constitution and European and domestic legislation. On May 13 in Athens, the government opened the first government-funded mosque in Europe. In September, the government announced it would distribute 4.5 million euros (\$5.1 million) to religious groups to counter the COVID-19 pandemic’s negative impact. Throughout the year, Alternate Foreign Minister Miltiadis Varvitsiotis publicly advocated for the return of the Thessaloniki Jewish community’s archives seized by Germany in World War II and subsequently transferred to Moscow. In a December 8 meeting with

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia would return these archives to the Jewish Communities in Greece (KIS). On May 24, parliament approved legislation allowing for a land exchange between the Railway Organization and the municipality of Thessaloniki for the construction of a Holocaust Memorial Museum, an exchange the city of Thessaloniki approved on June 4. On June 23, by a joint initiative of the KIS Central Board and the Ministries of Defense and Culture, a commemorative plaque was placed at “Block 15” of the Haidari concentration camp in western Attica, where Jews, among others, were imprisoned and tortured during the Nazi occupation of Greece. On April 1, the country assumed chairmanship of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).

KIS continued to express concern regarding political cartoons and images in which political controversies were portrayed with the use of Jewish sacred symbols and Holocaust comparisons. On January 18, KIS issued a statement protesting a sketch of the entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp in a political cartoon arguing against an education bill regarding universities. KIS called the cartoon, which appeared in a widely circulated newspaper on January 16, “a hideous and vulgar instrumentalization of the Holocaust for political purposes.” At least three instances of antisemitic graffiti and vandalism were widely reported. In addition to damage in March to a 115-foot mural at the Thessaloniki New Train Station honoring Holocaust victims carried out a few days after the creation of the mural, on August 5, vandals opened a grave and destroyed its headstone in the Jewish cemetery of Ioannina in the western region of Epirus. On September 10, unidentified individuals vandalized a different grave at the same cemetery. On January 10, vandals sprayed red paint on the facade of the cathedral in Heraklion, Crete. In September, the Brussels-Based NGO Action and Protection League issued the results of its European antisemitism survey, which found that 25 percent of 1,000 respondents ages 18-25 in Greece said they had negative feeling toward Jews.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy and consulate general representatives met with Deputy Prime Minister Panagiotis Pikrammenos as well as with officials and representatives of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs and officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including the Minister and the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, and the secretary general for religious affairs and governors to discuss Greece’s chairmanship of the IHRA and other religious freedom issues. These included the ability of minority religious communities to establish houses of worship and the operation of the first public mosque in Athens, government action regarding the planned Holocaust Memorial Museum and Educational Center of

Greece on Human Rights in Thessaloniki, and initiatives promoting interreligious dialogue, including the country's IHRA chairmanship. In outreach to contacts and meetings with government officials and religious leaders, including the head of the Greek Orthodox Church, U.S. government officials expressed concern regarding antisemitic and anti-Muslim acts and rhetoric and attacks on Orthodox churches. On February 3, the Ambassador discussed the planned Holocaust Museum in Thessaloniki with the Deputy Prime Minister. Three individuals working on religious issues in the country took part in digital leadership programs on interfaith dialogue and religious freedom and on countering Holocaust distortion and denial.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.6 million (midyear 2021). According to research polls, 81 to 90 percent of the population identifies as Greek Orthodox, 4 to 15 percent atheist, and 2 percent Muslim.

Approximately 140,000 Muslims live in Thrace, according to government sources using 2011 data; they are largely descendants of the officially recognized Muslim minority according to the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. According to a Pew Research Center study released in November 2017, an additional 520,000 Muslims – mostly asylum seekers, refugees, and other migrants from Southeastern Europe, South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa – reside throughout the country, many clustered in communities by their countries of origin or in reception facilities. Government sources estimate half reside in Athens.

Members of other religious communities that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Old Calendarist Orthodox, Catholics (mostly Roman Catholics and smaller numbers of Eastern Rite Catholics), Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, members of polytheistic Hellenic religions, Scientologists, Baha'is, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Sikhs, Seventh-day Adventists, Buddhists, and members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). Independent and media sources estimate Ethiopian Orthodox number 2,500 and Assyrians less than 1,000. According to the Armenian Orthodox Archbishop, interviewed in 2018, approximately 100,000 Armenian Orthodox live in the country.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution recognizes Greek Orthodoxy as the “prevailing religion.” It states freedom of religious conscience is inviolable and provides for freedom of worship under the protection of the law, with some restrictions. The constitution prohibits “proselytizing,” defined by law as “any direct or indirect attempt to intrude on the religious beliefs of a person of a different religious persuasion with the aim of undermining those beliefs through inducement, fraudulent means, or taking advantage of the other person’s inexperience, trust, need, low intellect, or naivete.” The prohibition of proselytism is rarely enforced, entailing brief questioning or detentions, with no new cases reported since 2020. The constitution prohibits worship that “disturbs public order or offends moral principles.” It allows prosecutors to seize publications that “offend Christianity” or other “known religions,” which are defined as groups with at least one valid permit to operate a place of prayer or worship. There is no publicly available list of “known religions,” but the Ministry for Education and Religious Affairs keeps a registry.

The law provides penalties of up to two years in prison for individuals who maliciously attempt to prevent or who intentionally disrupt a religious gathering for worship or a religious service, and for individuals engaging in “insulting action” inside a church or place of worship. A 2019 amendment to the penal code abolishes articles criminalizing malicious blasphemy and religious insults. The constitution enumerates the goals of public education, including “the development of religious conscience among citizens.” Greek Orthodox priests and government-appointed muftis and imams in Thrace receive their salaries from the government.

The constitution states that ministers of all known religions are subject to the same state supervision and obligations to the state as clergy of the Greek Orthodox Church. It states individuals are not exempt from their obligations to the state or from compliance with the law because of their religious convictions.

The Greek Orthodox Church, Jewish community, and Muslim minority of Thrace have long-held status as official, religious, public-law, legal entities. The Catholic Church, Anglican Church, two evangelical Christian groups, and the Ethiopian, Coptic, Armenian Apostolic, and Assyrian Orthodox Churches acquired the status of religious legal entities under a 2014 law. The same law also allows groups seeking recognition to become “religious legal entities” under civil law.

The recognition process requires filing a request with the civil courts, providing documents proving the group has “open rituals and no secret doctrines,” supplying a list of 300 signatory members who do not adhere to other religious groups, demonstrating there is a leader who is legally in the country and is otherwise

qualified, and showing their practices do not pose a threat to public order. Once a civil court recognizes a group, it sends a notification to the Secretariat General for Religions. Under the law, all religious officials of known religions and official religious legal entities, including the Greek Orthodox Church, the muftiates of Thrace, and the Jewish communities, must register in the electronic database maintained by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs.

The law also provides a second method for groups to obtain government recognition: any religious group that has obtained at least one valid permit to operate a place of prayer or worship is considered a “known religion” and acquires legal protection, including a tax exemption for property used for religious purposes. The terms houses or places of prayer or worship are used interchangeably; it is at the discretion of a religious group to determine its term of preference. Membership requirements for house of prayer permits differ from the requirements for religious legal entities. Local urban planning departments in charge of monitoring and enforcing public health and safety regulations certify that facilities designated to operate as places of worship fulfill the necessary standards. Once a house of worship receives the required approvals, the religious group must submit a description of its basic principles and rituals and a biography of the religious minister or leader to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs for final approval. The application for a house of prayer or worship permit requires at least five signatory group members. The leaders of a religious group applying for a house of prayer permit must be Greek citizens, EU nationals, or legal residents of the country and must possess other professional qualifications, including relevant education and experience. A separate permit is required for each physical location.

A religious group qualifying as a religious legal entity may transfer property and administer houses of prayer or worship, private schools, charitable institutions, and other nonprofit entities. Some religious groups have opted to retain their status as civil society nonprofit associations acquired through court recognition prior to the 2014 law. Under this status, religious groups may operate houses of prayer and benefit from real estate property tax exemptions, but they may face administrative and fiscal difficulties in transferring property and in operating private schools, charitable institutions, and other nonprofit entities.

All recognized religious groups are subject to taxation on property used for nonreligious purposes. Property used solely for religious purposes is exempt from taxation, as well as from municipal fees.

The law allows religious communities without status as legal entities to appear before administrative and civil courts as plaintiffs or defendants.

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne accords the recognized Muslim minority of Thrace the right to administer and maintain mosques and social and charitable organizations. A 1991 law authorizes the government, in consultation with a committee of Muslim leaders, to appoint three muftis in Thrace to 10-year terms of office, which may be extended. The law also allows a regional official to appoint temporary acting muftis until this committee convenes. The law mandates that official muftis in Thrace must request notarized consent from all parties wishing to adjudicate a family matter (marriage, divorce, child custody, alimony, or inheritance) based on sharia, or Islamic law. Decisions issued by the muftis are subject to ratification by first instance courts. Absent notarized consent from all parties, family matters fall under the jurisdiction of civil courts. The law also provides for the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs to assume all operating expenses for the muftiates in Thrace, under the supervision of the Ministry of Finance Directorate General for Fiscal Monitoring.

The law establishes an individual's right to choose his or her burial or cremation location and mandates that death certificates detail this information. In the presence of a notary, individuals may designate the location and method of funeral service under conditions that adhere to public order, hygiene, or moral ethics, as well as designate a person responsible for carrying out funeral preferences.

Home schooling of children is generally not permitted. The law requires all children to attend 11 years of compulsory education in state or private schools, including two years of preschool education (ages four to six), in accordance with the official school curriculum. Religious instruction, mainly Greek Orthodox teaching, is included in the curricula for primary and secondary schools. Primary schools cover grades one to six, while secondary schools include three years of middle school and three years of high school. Non-Orthodox students may be exempted from religious instruction with a parent's or guardian's submission of a document citing religious consciousness grounds, according to regulations issued by decree during the year. Exempted students may attend classes with different subject matter during that time. Under legislation passed in 2020, secondary schools no longer list their students' religion and nationality on transcripts.

The law provides for optional Islamic religious instruction in public schools in Thrace for the recognized Muslim minority and optional Catholic religious instruction in public schools on the islands of Tinos and Syros. The law also

includes provisions to make it easier for schools to hire and retain religious instructors for those optional courses.

By law, any educational facility with fewer than nine students must temporarily suspend operations, with students referred to neighboring schools.

The law allows Muslim students in primary and secondary schools throughout the country to be absent for two days each for Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.

According to the law, parents may send their children to private religious schools. Private Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish schools operate in the country. As per the Lausanne Treaty, the government operates bilingual secular schools in Thrace. Bilingual schools operate in Greek and Turkish, and their number may vary according to the number of registered students, with a minimum of nine per school. There are two Islamic religious schools in Thrace for grades seven to 12. In addition, Muslim students in Thrace wishing to study the Quran may attend after-hours religious classes in mosques with teachers paid by the Turkish Consulate in Komotini. Bilingual schools in Thrace, in addition to other official holidays, also observe Islamic holidays.

The law establishes an annual 0.5 percent quota for admission of students from the recognized Muslim minority in Thrace to universities, technical institutes, and civil service positions. Parliament approved legislation on January 15 designed to modernize the public-sector hiring system. The law requires that 0.5 percent of job openings with an unspecified contract length be allocated to members of the Muslim minority in Thrace. Similarly, 2 percent of students entering the national fire brigade school and academy are required to be from the Muslim minority in Thrace.

The law provides for alternative forms of mandatory service for religious conscientious objectors in lieu of the 12-month mandatory minimum military service for men. Conscientious objectors must serve 15 months of alternative service in state hospitals or municipal and public services. The law, among other provisions, requires the state to cover expenses for the transportation of conscientious objectors; provides an additional five-day parental leave per child for conscientious objectors who are fathers; protects the return of conscientious objectors to their previous employment after civilian service; and defines 33 as the age after which a conscientious objector may buy off the greatest part of civilian service.

According to what is commonly referred to as the “antiracist” law, individuals or legal entities convicted of incitement to violence, discrimination, or hatred based on religion, among other factors, may be sentenced to prison terms of between three months and three years and fined 5,000 to 20,000 euros (\$5,700-\$22,700). Violators convicted of other crimes motivated by religion may be sentenced to an additional six months to three years, with fines doubled. The law criminalizes approval, trivialization, or malicious denial of the Holocaust and “crimes of Nazism” if that behavior leads to incitement of violence or hatred or has a threatening or abusive nature toward groups of individuals. A law, passed by parliament in June, prohibits individuals convicted of several specific felony crimes – including but not explicitly referencing those committed by imprisoned leaders from the Golden Dawn Party – from holding important party positions, such as president, secretary general, legal representative, or member of the administrative committee of a party or a coalition of parties during their sentence. The law prevents any parties led by convicted felons from purchasing advertisements on radio and television during an election campaign.

The law requires all civil servants, including cabinet and parliament members, to take an oath before entering office; individuals are free to take a religious or secular oath in accordance with their beliefs. Parliament approved legislation on June 5 banning religious leaders of known religions, in addition to judges and other public officials, from running for mayor or city counselor. The same law also bans the use of religious symbols as emblems of candidate mayors and city counselors. Through a separate provision in the same law, elected members of city and district councils are required to take a religious oath, in accordance with their faith, in the presence of religious leaders who are officially registered with the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. A civil declaration remains an option for those who do not wish to take a religious oath.

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

### **Government Practices**

On July 1, in Athens, national police arrested and jailed Christos Pappas, the fugitive former deputy leader of the Golden Dawn Party, which a court ruled a criminal organization and found responsible for orchestrated attacks against perceived outsiders, including Muslims and Jews, in 2020. Pappas had been a fugitive since October 2020, when he was sentenced to 13 years in prison in a landmark trial that resulted in lengthy sentences for more than 50 Golden Dawn-

associated defendants. He was convicted of running a criminal organization, murder, assault, and possession of illegal weapons.

On October 7, Domokos Prison's judicial council banned Ilias Kasidiaris, a former leader of Golden Dawn and former member of parliament, from making telephone calls from prison to outsiders. The council ruled that Kasidiaris used the prison's telephone to record speeches designed to incite his supporters to hatred. The council decided Kasidiaris could maintain telephone communication only with individuals formally permitted to visit him in prison, including relatives and lawyers.

On February 19, an appeals court in Thessaloniki reduced the sentence of a medical doctor who in 2014 hung a sign in his office, stating "Jews not wanted" in German. The court had initially sentenced him to a 14-month suspended term but reduced it to nine months based on his behavior afterward.

On October 18, a judicial council decided that Giorgos Patelis, a leading member of Golden Dawn, should be released, pending appeal, after serving just one year of his 10-year sentence because his son was facing mental health problems. Patelis, who was the leader of Golden Dawn's chapter in the Piraeus suburb of Nikaia, was convicted of taking part in a criminal organization and complicity in the killing of antifascist rapper Pavlos Fyssas in 2013. Patelis was sentenced in October 2020. Prosecutors and human rights groups condemned the decision. On November 3, a Supreme Court vice prosecutor revoked the decision, and as of year's end, Patelis remained in prison.

During the year, a civil court approved the registration of an Old Calendarist Christian group as a religious legal entity under the name "Holy Diocese of Talantio and Lokrida."

On April 17, parliament approved legislation extending the term of all managing boards of Jewish communities until June 30. Many terms had expired or were due to expire during the COVID-19 pandemic winter and spring lockdown periods. Jewish community leaders said they appreciated the legislation because it helped the boards continue to operate and conduct transactions.

Groups lacking religious-entity status and without a house of prayer permit that had not applied for a house of worship permit, including Scientologists and ISKCON, continued to function as registered, nonprofit, civil law organizations. The government did not legally recognize weddings conducted by members of

these groups, who, if they wished to be officially recognized as couples, could pursue a civil wedding or civil partnership union.

On May 7, media reported on a local court that ruled, for the first time, that atheism should be listed among the vulnerability criteria when asylum seekers seek international protection. The court ruling came in the case of a Pakistani man who faced a death sentence in his homeland due to his atheism.

Five prayer sessions marking Eid al-Fitr took place on May 13 in Athens at the newly opened, first government-funded mosque in Europe. Commemoration of the event took place outside due to social distancing requirements. The imam, Mohammed Sissi Zaki, led the sessions. Secretary General for Religious Affairs George Kalantzis attended a session, as did representatives of al-Azhar University in Egypt. Because of the COVID-29 pandemic, the government said it could not yet officially inaugurate the mosque; however, the mosque held regular prayer sessions in accordance with social distancing and other measures for the countering of the pandemic, similar to other religious sites. Parliament approved legislation on February 17 that increased the number of members of the Athens Mosque Managing Committee from seven to nine, adding two representatives from the Muslim communities in Athens.

Turkish-speaking members of the Muslim minority in Thrace continued to object to the government's practice of appointing muftis, pressing instead for direct election of muftis by Muslims in Thrace. The government continued to state that the appointments were appropriate because the constitution does not permit the election of judges and that the muftis retain judicial powers on family and inheritance matters as long as all parties sign a notarized consent stating they wish to follow sharia law instead of the civil courts. During the year, government-appointed acting muftis continued to lead all three muftiates in Thrace. Muslim minority members objected to the muftis' appointment, stating that the limited and optional judicial powers of muftis were used by the government as an excuse for ignoring their call for direct election.

In parallel with the three official acting muftis, two unofficial muftis also continued to operate in Thrace, providing religious services to members of the Muslim minority; however, the government did not recognize services conducted by the unofficial muftis. In letters to international organizations, unofficial muftis said they had faced charges for the unauthorized assumption of an official position on several occasions throughout the last decade. While several such cases never reached the courts and others remained pending and were postponed further due to

COVID-19, unofficial muftis reported a climate of longstanding harassment and persecution by the Greek authorities. Government officials stated that even in the few cases in which unofficial muftis were convicted in court, they were only handed suspended prison sentences, with no prison time.

On February 2, according to media, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs rejected a petition filed in 2019 by the Cultural Association of Muslims of Macedonia and Thrace to establish a licensed Muslim house of prayer in Thessaloniki. The ministry cited unmet technical requirements as the reason for the denial. Applicants stated authorities did not allow them to use Ottoman-era mosques in Thessaloniki as alternative prayer sites.

Another group, the Educational, Cultural, Philanthropic and Philathletic Association of Greek Muslims in the Prefecture of Imathia, appealed to the Council of State regarding the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs' rejection of the group's petition to establish an authorized Muslim house of prayer. Ministerial services rejected the association's petition, contending that the applicants had requested the licensing of a space far exceeding what would be used for prayer and worship. The ministry responded that it had no authority to license facilities for uses other than prayer and worship. The hearing of the appeal at the Council of State took place on April 13, but no ruling was issued by year's end.

On March 23, the same authorities rejected a petition to establish an authorized Muslim house of prayer filed by a Muslim group in Athens on the grounds that it did not provide certified copies of the passports of the applicants, including the individual who would perform the religious services. The group also failed to submit documentation on the safety of the building, including fire safety and sound insulation.

Government authorities revoked a total of seven house-of-prayer permits; two, involving a Buddhist center and an evangelical Christian house of prayer in Rethymno, Crete, were revoked on June 29 and July 19 respectively, at the request of the groups operating the facilities. According to government authorities, in the other cases, they revoked the permit because the religious groups in charge of the houses of prayer (all Pentecostal Christian) did not respond to government communications, had insufficient space for worship, or lacked a religious leader.

During the year, the government approved seven house-of-prayer permits, four of which were submitted by Muslim religious groups. On February 17 and on July 5, Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs authorities granted house-of-prayer

permits to two separate Sunni Muslim religious groups, in central Athens and the district of Marousi, respectively. On March 19, a religious group of Bektashi (Sufi) Muslims in Evros, Thrace, was granted its first house-of-prayer permit. A Muslim religious group based in the district of Peristeri, western Athens, was authorized on April 16 to operate a house of prayer. The remaining permits were granted to a group of evangelical Christians in Glyfada, Athens, on February 10, a group of Pentecostals in Komotini on March 5, and to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church of Athens on March 17. On March 23, the government also approved plans for the construction of a new church for evangelical Christians in Porotsani.

On June 16, authorities certified the lawful operation of an Old Calendarist Christian church operating in the district of Nea Smyrni in southern Athens. The church was constructed before 1955, at a time when building permits were not required. The certification allowed the church to overcome bureaucratic obstacles, such as not having a building permit, which for years had prevented it from filing petitions for building restoration, repairs, or expansion. Authorities issued another 25 similar certifications involving 13 synagogues throughout the country and 12 Catholic churches.

Turkish-speaking members of the Muslim minority in Thrace continued to object to the government's appointment of members entrusted to oversee endowments, real estate, and charitable funds of the Islamic Community Trust (*waqf*), an Islamic endowment, stating the Muslim minority in Thrace should elect the members in accordance with the Lausanne and other treaties.

Muslim leaders continued to state that a lack of Islamic cemeteries outside Thrace obliged Muslims to transport their dead to Thrace for Islamic burials. Leaders cited cases in which local government bodies refused to establish burial sites designated for Muslims only. Government officials said that by law, local authorities administered cemeteries and that cemeteries could not be established or privately managed by faith-based groups, except for some Islamic cemeteries in Thrace that dated back to the Ottoman era. Muslim leaders outside Thrace also continued to state that municipal cemetery regulations requiring the exhumation of bodies after three years due to a shortage of space contravened Islamic law. At least three sites – on Lesbos Island, in Schisto (in the Athens metropolitan area), and near the land border with Turkey, in Evros – served unofficially as burial grounds for Muslim migrants and asylum seekers.

On October 26, the Council of State ruled that a ministerial decree issued in 2017 allowing the ritual killing of animals during Muslim and Jewish ceremonies

without anesthesia was unlawful and contrary to the constitution and European and domestic legislation. According to the ruling, which came in response to an appeal filed by the Panhellenic Animal Welfare and Environmental Federation, the issuing authority, the Ministry of Development and Foods, “did not try to strike a balance between its obligation to protect the animals... and the religious freedom of practicing Muslims and Jews living in Greece.” The council annulled the decree on grounds that it violated laws regarding the welfare of animals and called on the Ministry of Agricultural Development and Food “to regulate slaughtering in a way that safeguards the protection of animals from hardship but safeguards religious freedoms for practicing Muslims and Jews living in Greece.” The government did not issue a new decree by year’s end. Jewish and Muslim community leaders reported that once the government issued a new decree, they would decide on a legal strategy to challenge it. According to Abdulhalim Dede, founder of the Greek branch of the European Halal Certification Center and member of the World Halal Council, the decision to outlaw ritual slaughter eroded religious freedom, hurt local halal-related businesses, and increased the risk of unauthorized private, in-house animal slaughtering.

In accordance with the Lausanne Treaty of 1923, the government reported that it operated a total of 115 bilingual secular primary schools in 2020-21 in Thrace, compared with 123 in 2019-20. Some minority representatives reported lower numbers of 115 (for the period 2019-20) and 103 (for the period 2020-21). Although the government operation of bilingual secondary schools, grades seven to 12, is not required under the treaty, the government operated two. Turkish-speaking representatives of the Muslim minority continued to state that the two bilingual middle schools – grades seven to nine – were insufficient to meet their needs and that the government continued to repeatedly ignore their formally submitted request to privately establish an additional minority secondary school and a private bilingual preschool, the latter covering children ages four to six. The same representatives said the number of primary minority schools – grades one to six – continued to decrease, which the government attributed to the decreasing number of students, particularly in rural areas. As per government statistics, there were 4,103 Muslim students attending primary education schools, 1,531 attending secondary-level minority schools, and 192 students enrolled in the two Islamic religious schools. Government officials also noted that in 2017, both minority secondary schools, in Xanthi and in Komotini (both in the region of East Macedonia and Thrace), expanded with additional classrooms.

The government continued to fund a Chair of Jewish Studies at the Aristotle University in Thessaloniki and Holocaust education training for teachers, but

government-funded educational trips for students, including to the Auschwitz concentration camp, remained suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs continued to promote Holocaust education in schools, based on IHRA recommendations, as well as in cooperation with other countries, such as the United States, Israel, and North Macedonia. The ministry, in cooperation with the Olga Lengyel Institute and the Jewish Museum of Greece, continued providing scholarships to 10 schools annually for implementing Holocaust-related educational projects. Through these scholarships, beneficiary schools covered material needs, including for purchasing laptop computers and video recording equipment.

On April 25, in the context of Greece's chairmanship of IHRA, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, in cooperation with the United States Holocaust Museum and Memorial and Yad Vashem, coorganized a webinar for 100 teachers from Greece, the United States, and Israel on the subject of IHRA recommendations for teaching and learning about the Holocaust. The Secretariat General for Religious Affairs, under the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, distributed a free version in Greek of the book *Five Chimneys* from the Olga Lengyel Institute to schoolteachers attending Holocaust-related educational seminars.

On various occasions, on social and other media, some individuals objected to what they said was the government's allowing or tolerating some religious gatherings, including a processional on October 18 by Pakistani Muslim immigrants in Athens to celebrate the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, while banning processions by Orthodox Christians, citing COVID-19 restrictions. Individuals made similar comments online on August 19, when authorities permitted Shia Muslims to proceed with an Ashura processional in the port city of Piraeus.

Some religious groups and human rights organizations continued to advocate for an equal length of required mandatory alternative service for conscientious objectors and required military service, stating any discrepancy was discriminatory. In June 2020, the Council of State heard an appeal filed by five conscientious objectors challenging a decree by the Ministry of Defense establishing alternative service requirements longer than the military service requirement. A decision remained pending at year's end. During the year, the government increased from nine to 12 months the basic military service

requirement without altering the duration of the alternative service, which remained at 15 months.

Just after his August 31 appointment as Minister of Health, Thanos Plevris apologized for antisemitic comments he made in 2009. This came after several groups, including KIS, called on him to apologize for pro-Nazi views expressed in the past and to condemn Holocaust deniers. Plevris said he made the comments in his capacity as defense counsel for his father, Konstantinos Plevris, a Holocaust denier and leader of neo-Nazism in the country but stated he did not personally believe them. In his apology, Plevris said, “My respect for the victims of the Holocaust of the Jews is absolute. I am sure that my actions as health minister will alleviate even the slightest doubt about my beliefs, and my critics will realize that I harbor no antisemitic feelings.”

In early January, Archbishop of Athens and All Greece Ieronymos said during an interview on OPEN TV that Islam was not a religion, but a political movement. Later in the same month, Ieronymos clarified that he was referring to the “perversion of the Muslim religion itself by extreme fundamentalists, who sow terror and death throughout the Universe,” and not to Islam overall.

According to Jewish leaders, the government continued to help the Jewish community of Thessaloniki in its efforts to recover archives found by Soviet troops in a castle in Lower Silesia, formerly part of Germany, following Germany’s defeat at the end of World War II. On several occasions throughout the year, Alternate Foreign Minister Varvitsiotis publicly urged the return of these archives, now held in Moscow. In his December 8 meeting with Prime Minister Mitsotakis, President Putin announced that Russia would initiate the process for returning these archives to KIS.

The government announced in a September 10 decree that it would distribute a total of 4.5 million euros (\$5.1 million) to the Orthodox Church of Greece; KIS; waqf administrations overseeing licensed mosques in Thrace, Rhodes, and Kos; and to religious groups with the status of a known religion or religious legal entity. The funds would be distributed in lump sums, offered as nontaxable assistance for addressing the pandemic’s negative impact, including reduced income and monetary contributions offered by the faithful to religious leaders and places of worship. The funds, exceeding 1,000 euros (\$1,100) in all cases, would be allocated in proportion to the number of places of worship operated by each group, with a minimum contribution of 1,000 euros per religious group.

The government continued to provide direct support to the Greek Orthodox Church, including funding clergy salaries, estimated at 200 million euros (\$226.76 million) annually, the religious and vocational training of clergy, and religious instruction in schools. The government provided the support in accordance with a series of legal agreements with past governments and as compensation for religious property expropriated by the state, according to Greek Orthodox and government officials. The government also provided direct support to the three muftiates in Thrace, including salaries for the three official muftis and for teachers contracted to teach an optional class on Islam in local public schools. The government also paid the salary of the imam of the new Athens public mosque and the salaries of Catholic teachers at the state schools of Tinos and Syros islands.

Government officials publicly denounced the vandalism of Jewish sites, including a mural in Thessaloniki commemorating the Holocaust vandalized in March. In a statement issued on March 18, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the damage while expressing its “abhorrence of any actions that insult the memory of the victims of Nazi barbarity” and underscoring “the importance of rejecting racism, hatred and fanaticism, and the need to defend moral values.”

On May 24, parliament approved legislation allowing for an exchange of land between the Railway Organization and the Municipality of Thessaloniki to pave the way for the construction of a Holocaust Memorial Museum. The board of the city of Thessaloniki approved the exchange on June 4.

On June 23, through a joint initiative by KIS and the Ministries of Defense and Culture, a commemorative plaque was placed at “Block 15” of the Haidari concentration camp in western Attica, where Jews, in addition to prisoners of war and communists, were incarcerated and tortured during the Nazi occupation of Greece. The plaque reads, “Thousands of Greek Jews from Athens, Arta, Thessaloniki, Corfu, Kos, Leros, Patras, Preveza, and Rhodes were imprisoned and tortured here until their deportation to Auschwitz and the other Nazi extermination camps in 1944. Some of them took their dying breath here.”

On October 14, Minister of Infrastructure and Transport Costas Karamanlis unveiled a reconstructed monument to the Jews whom the Nazis sent to slave labor on the railway network of the Lianokladi-Karya area in the central region of the country. The new monument, rebuilt by the Hellenic Railways Organization in cooperation with KIS, was located at a prominent place at the Lianokladi station dock. The original monument – erected in 1988 – was probably destroyed during the renovation of the Lianokladi railway station, according to KIS. In his remarks,

Karamanlis stated, “It is our duty to honor the memory of our Jewish compatriots. And of course, in our daily lives, it is our duty not to allow any national, religious, racial or other identity to divide us. Everyone proudly bears their identity, but we always respect each other. And all together, we create for the present and the future of our country.”

On January 27, Minister for Education and Religious Affairs Niki Kerameus issued a statement to mark Holocaust Remembrance Day. Referring to the importance of remembering the Holocaust, including through education, she said, “Armed with our knowledge, we ensure the historical memory and the thorough study and teaching of these events, so that no crack is ever left open again, which will [would] allow the revival of fascism, Nazism, antisemitism, intolerance.”

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs posted a tweet on the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Day (Yom Hashoah): “We join everyone marking Yom HaShoah to remember the millions of lives lost in the Holocaust. We honor the victims by keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive and by continuing to learn and educate younger generations so that humanity never again experiences such atrocities,”

Greece assumed the IHRA chairmanship on April 1. In a November interview with Greek diaspora newspaper *The National Herald*, IHRA Chair Ambassador Chris Lazaris said the central theme of the country’s chairmanship was “teaching and learning about the Holocaust: education for a world without genocide ever again,” supplemented by the theme of “Combating Holocaust Denial and Distortion on the Internet.”

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

According to statistics issued by the Racist Violence Recording Network (RVRN) on acts of discrimination and violence in 2020, the most recent available, 74 of the 107 incidents recorded targeted migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers on the grounds of ethnicity, religion, or skin color, compared with 51 cases of the 100 incidents recorded in 2019. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as solely or primarily based on religious identity.

In the same report, RVRN reported that police received 31 reports of accusations of violence sparked by religion, compared with 36 in 2019.

In September, the Brussels-Based NGO Action and Protection League issued the results of its European antisemitism survey based on data from December 2019-January 2020. According to the survey, 25 percent of 1,000 respondents ages 18-25 in Greece said they had negative feeling toward Jews. Thirty-six percent said they would be “totally uncomfortable” or “uncomfortable” with having Jewish neighbors. The survey cited stereotypical statements regarding Jews and asked respondents the degree to which they agreed or disagreed. The proportion who responded “strongly agree” or “tend to agree” with the following statements were: “the interests of Jews in this country are very different from the interests of the rest of the population” (45 percent); “there is a secret Jewish network that influences political and economic affairs in the world” (58 percent); “Jews have too much influence in this country” (40 percent); “Jews will never be able to fully integrate into this society” (36 percent); “Jews are more inclined than most to use shady practices to achieve their goals” (44 percent); “many of the atrocities of the Holocaust were often exaggerated by the Jews later” (33 percent); “Jews are also to blame for the persecutions against them” (37 percent); “Jews exploit Holocaust victimhood for their own purposes” (46 percent).

In October, the Piraeus First Instance Court sentenced a man to five years in prison for attacking a group of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Aspropyrgos, Attica. The court ruled that the crime was motivated by hate. The man was convicted of issuing threats and insults and committing bodily harm.

On January 15, police in the northern city of Drama arrested the perpetrator of an act of vandalism carried out in December 2020 at a local Jewish monument.

At least three instances of antisemitic graffiti and vandalism were widely reported. In addition to damage to a portion of a 115-foot mural at the Thessaloniki New Train Station honoring Holocaust victims a few days after the mural was created, vandals on August 5 opened a grave and destroyed its headstone in the Jewish cemetery of Ioannina in Epirus. KIS issued a statement condemning this “shameful act.” In a March 18 statement, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed its “abhorrence of any actions that insult the memory of the victims of Nazi barbarity.” “We once again underscore the importance of rejecting racism, hatred and fanaticism, and the need to defend our moral values,” the statement concluded. According to media reports, local artists and social activists worked together to restore the mural. On September 10, a different grave was vandalized at the same cemetery. Similar incidents at the same cemetery occurred in previous years.

On January 10, unidentified vandals sprayed red paint on the facade of the Orthodox Christian cathedral in Heraklion, Crete, according to media reports. Police launched investigations in all cases but made no arrests.

On April 1, KIS addressed a letter to the mayor of Xanthi, writing that unknown individuals had removed a commemorative plaque, placed in 2001 outside a tobacco warehouse to mark the location where local Jews began their transfer to concentration camps in World War II. KIS underscored the importance of collective memory in a city that lost 99 percent of its Jewish population.

KIS continued to express concern regarding political cartoons and images in which political controversies were illustrated with Jewish sacred symbols or comparisons to the Holocaust. On January 18, KIS issued a statement protesting a sketch that showed the entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp in a political cartoon opposing an education bill on universities. KIS called the cartoon, which appeared in the newspaper *Efimerida ton Syntakton* on January 16, “a hideous and vulgar instrumentalization of the Holocaust for political purposes.”

On March 9, KIS issued a statement denouncing columnist Elena Akrita for comparing life in an Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II to life in contemporary Greece, drawing parallels between attacks against protesters opposed to pandemic restrictions and the Holocaust. KIS, in a statement, noted that “Greek Jews ... will never stop denouncing any attempt to denigrate and instrumentalize the Holocaust, which leads to the oblivion and distortion of history.”

According to a report published on January 13 by the Ministry of Education and Religion, there were 404 cases of vandalism/theft/desecrations against religious sites in the country in 2020, with most (374) targeting the Orthodox Church, seven the Catholic Church, four the True Orthodox Christians (Old Calendarists), 10 categorized as antisemitic, and nine targeting Islamic sites. This number represented a decrease from 524 incidents reported in 2019.

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

The Ambassador and embassy and consulate general representatives discussed the country’s chairmanship of the IHRA and religious freedom issues with Deputy Prime Minister Pikrammenos, as well as with officials and representatives of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias and Deputy Minister Andreas

Katsaniotis, Civil Governor for Mount Athos Athanasios Martinos, and Secretary General for Religious Affairs George Kalantzis. The U.S. officials discussed the ability of minority religious communities to exercise their rights to religious freedom, government initiatives affecting the Muslim minority in Thrace and Muslim immigrants, the operation of the first public mosque in Athens, government action regarding the planned Holocaust Memorial Museum and Educational Center of Greece on Human Rights in Thessaloniki, initiatives promoting interreligious dialogue, and possible joint action, including in the context of the country's IHRA chairmanship. Embassy officials also worked with the Prime Minister's Office and with the Minister of Culture on a project involving the retrieval of personal items belonging to Jewish refugees from the 1946 *Athina* shipwreck off Astypalea Island that were to be displayed in the museum's permanent exhibition.

In outreach and meetings with government officials, U.S. government officials raised concerns regarding antisemitic and anti-Muslim acts and rhetoric in the country. U.S. officials also denounced vandalism of religious sites, including the desecration of graves in the Jewish cemetery of Ioannina.

On February 3, the Ambassador discussed with Deputy Prime Minister Pikrammenos developments regarding construction of the Holocaust Museum in Thessaloniki.

In outreach and meetings with leaders of religious groups, including the Greek Orthodox Church, U.S. government officials expressed concerns regarding antisemitic and anti-Muslim acts and rhetoric in the country.

Senior embassy officials and the Consul General in Thessaloniki met with religious leaders, including metropolitans from the Greek Orthodox Church, official muftis in Thrace, representatives from a religious group of Bektashi (Sufi) Muslims in Evros, and members of the Catholic, Baha'i, and Jehovah's Witnesses communities to promote interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance, and respect for diversity. The embassy monitored the ability of minority religious groups to freely practice their religion and the extent of societal discrimination, including physical violence and verbal harassment against both members of indigenous minority religious groups and members of newly arrived minority religious groups.

Three individuals working on religious issues in the country took part in digital U.S. government exchange programs on interfaith dialogue and religious freedom and on countering Holocaust distortion and denial.

The embassy and consulate promoted religious tolerance and the right of religious freedom on social media, emphasizing regularly that religious freedom is a U.S. government priority. In November, following his meeting with a metropolitan, the Ambassador tweeted the U.S. government's commitment to protecting religious freedom.