

GREECE 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom with some restrictions. In practice the government generally respected religious freedom, although it imposed restrictions affecting members of non-Greek Orthodox religious groups. The government granted privileges and legal prerogatives to the Orthodox Church that it did not afford other religious groups, such as preferential taxation and an institutionalized link to the government. Members of Golden Dawn, a political party openly espousing anti-Semitism and racism and linked to violent attacks against individuals perceived to be immigrants, were elected to parliament. Government leaders publicly condemned some anti-Semitic and racist incidents, but observers called on the authorities to do more to counter hate speech and the violent actions of Golden Dawn members. Planning continued for a government-funded mosque in Athens. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. The Greek Orthodox Church exercised significant social, political, and economic influence. Some non-Orthodox citizens complained of being treated with suspicion or being told they were not truly Greek when they revealed their religious affiliations to other Greek citizens. Members of non-Orthodox religious groups reported incidents of societal discrimination. Members of the Muslim minority in Thrace were underrepresented in public sector employment, and no Muslim military personnel advanced to officer ranks. There were reports of harassment and increasingly violent physical attacks against individuals perceived to be immigrants and refugees, many of whom were Muslim. Expressions of anti-Semitism increased after voters elected members of Golden Dawn to parliament.

The U.S. ambassador and the consul general in Thessaloniki met with government and religious leaders on a regular basis to promote religious tolerance, encourage interfaith dialogue, and investigate reports of discrimination. Embassy officials also hosted iftars attended by a broad range of government and religious leaders, and attended Holocaust memorial events.

Section I. Religious Demography

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The National Statistics Service estimates the population at 9.9 million. The government does not keep statistics on religious groups. The U.S. government estimates that 98 percent of the population self-identifies as Greek Orthodox. The Autocephalous Church of Greece has jurisdiction over central Greece, the Peloponnese, and Ionian and Cycladic islands, while Crete and the Aegean islands are under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Thrace, Macedonia, and Epirus are under the spiritual guidance of the Ecumenical Patriarchate but administratively under the Church of Greece.

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne created an officially recognized “Muslim minority,” estimated at 140,000 to 150,000 (approximately 1.3 percent of the total population) residing in Thrace. Additionally, NGOs estimate that between 500,000 and 700,000 Muslims from Albania, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Syria, and North Africa reside in the region of Attica, which encompasses Athens. Other religious groups include Roman Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Old Calendarist Orthodox, Jehovah’s Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Scientologists, Bahais, Hare Krishnas, and members of polytheistic Hellenic religions.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom with some restrictions. The government recognizes the canon law of the Orthodox Church, both within the church and in areas of civil law such as marriage, and supports the church financially. The government extends to the Orthodox Church privileges and legal prerogatives that are not extended routinely to other religious groups. Citizens and registered organizations can sue the government for violations of religious freedom.

The government pays for salaries and religious training of Orthodox clergy, partially finances the maintenance of Orthodox Church buildings, and provides a tax exemption for the Orthodox Church’s property revenues. Orthodox religious instruction in primary and secondary schools, at government expense, is mandatory for all students, although non-Orthodox students may be exempted upon request. However, public schools offer no alternative activity or non-Orthodox religious instruction. Some private schools and mosques offer alternative religious instruction. The law requires that all civil servants take an oath before entering

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office. Persons not belonging to the Orthodox Church may take an oath in accordance with their own beliefs or on their honor.

As interpreted, the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne gives the Muslim minority in Thrace the right to maintain social and charitable organizations called auqafs, allows muftis (Islamic jurists) to render religious judicial services in the area of family law, and provides certain rights that the government must protect, such as bilingual education, government salaries for muftis, operation of mosques and auqafs, and the recognition of elements of Sharia law in family law. The government maintains that Muslims living outside Thrace are not covered by the Treaty of Lausanne and therefore do not have the rights provided by the treaty to Muslims in Thrace. The government recognizes only the government-appointed Muslim clergy in Thrace; there are no government-appointed Muslim clergy elsewhere in the country. Some Muslims on the Dodecanese Islands assert they deserve the recognition and rights provided under the treaty.

In Thrace the government operates secular bilingual schools and two Islamic religious schools. Muslim students in Thrace who wish to study the Quran attend after-hours religious classes in mosques. The government gives special consideration to Muslim minority students from Thrace for admission to universities and technical institutes, setting aside an annual 0.05 percent quota for admission to universities. The law also reserves 0.5 percent of civil service jobs for Muslims in Thrace.

By law the government, in consultation with a committee of Muslim leaders, appoints all three muftis in Thrace to 10-year terms of office with the possibility of extension. The muftis make judicial decisions in family law issues based on Sharia. Courts in Thrace routinely ratify the decisions of the muftis, who have judicial powers in domestic matters. The muftis also appoint imams to serve in the community's mosques.

The government grants Muslims in Thrace the right to choose Sharia law to regulate family and civic issues such as marriage, divorce, custody of children, and inheritance, but they also may choose civil marriages and civil courts. Muslims married by government-appointed muftis are subject to Sharia family law, but may appeal to the courts for a hearing under civil law.

The Orthodox Church, the Jewish community, and Muslims in Thrace are the only religious groups the government recognizes as “legal entities of public law,” entitled to own, bequeath, and inherit property and appear in court under their own

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names. Other religious groups must be registered as “legal entities of private law” and cannot own houses of prayer (approved places of worship) or other property as religious entities. These religious groups must create other corporate legal entities, such as nonprofit associations, to own, bequeath, or inherit property, or to appear in court. To be recognized as a religious “legal entity of private law,” a religious group must represent a “known religion” or dogma. Court rulings define “known religions” as having publicly taught doctrines with rites of worship open to the public, being nonprofit in nature, not affecting public order or morality adversely, and having a clear hierarchy.

The Ministry of Education, Lifelong Learning, and Religious Affairs indirectly recognizes groups as “known religions” through issuance of house-of-prayer permits. To obtain a permit, a religious group’s leader and 50 adult members of the group who live in the area where the house of prayer will be located must submit an application that includes a description of the basic principles and rituals of the group, as well as approval from the local urban planning department attesting that the proposed house of prayer meets local regulations. A separate permit is required for each physical place of worship. A religious group that has obtained at least one valid permit is considered a “known religion” and acquires protection under the law. Religious groups recognized as “known religions” include Catholics, Pentecostals, Bahais, Methodists, Mormons, evangelical Protestants, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Catholic churches and related religious bodies established prior to 1946 are recognized as legal entities of private law, but Catholic institutions established after 1946 are not extended the same automatic recognition.

Religious groups that have never received house-of-prayer permits, including Scientologists, Hare Krishnas, and polytheistic Hellenic groups, face legal and administrative burdens because they cannot function as religious legal entities. Scientologists and polytheistic Hellenic religious groups function as registered nonprofit civil law organizations. Without the recognition afforded by house-of-prayer permits, the government does not legally recognize weddings conducted by religious leaders of those groups.

The constitution prohibits proselytizing and stipulates that no rite of worship may “disturb public order or offend moral principles.”

The law prohibits offenses against “religious peace,” including blasphemy and religious insult. Blasphemy cases can be brought before civil and criminal courts, and in some cases civil courts issue orders to prevent the presentation of art or

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media deemed blasphemous in advance of their public release. The law also allows any prosecutor to order the seizure of publications that offend Christianity or any other religion.

In lieu of mandatory military service, the law provides for alternative forms of mandatory service for religious and ideological conscientious objectors. Conscientious objectors must work in state hospitals or municipal and public services for a period two times the length, minus one month, of the required military service (17 months).

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Epiphany, Clean Monday (the start of Lent), Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Easter Monday, Holy Spirit Day, the Assumption of Mary, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom; however, the government imposed some restrictions that affected members of minority religious groups.

Through its direct support from the government, the Orthodox Church maintained an exclusive institutionalized link to the Ministry of Education, Lifelong Learning, and Religious Affairs. Several other religious groups reported difficulties dealing with authorities on a variety of administrative matters. Some groups, such as the Jewish community, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Bahais, requested treatment equal to that of the Orthodox Church with regard to legal status and financial support from the government. Leaders of non-Orthodox religious groups argued that taxes on their organizations were discriminatory because the government subsidized Orthodox Church activities and did not tax its property revenues. The Catholic Church continued to seek government recognition of its canon law.

The Ministry of Education, Lifelong Learning, and Religious Affairs issued 14 house-of-prayer permits to "known religions" and did not reject any applications for permits. However, leaders of some religious groups stated that the system of house-of-prayer permits administratively constrained freedom of religion. They noted that under the existing legal framework, unregistered religious groups were illegal and therefore subject to government prosecution, although there were no reports of prosecutions.

Members of the Muslim minority in Thrace continued to be underrepresented in public sector employment and in state-owned industries and corporations. At

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year's end, three members of the Muslim minority from Thrace held seats in the 300-seat parliament. In Xanthi and Komotini, Muslims held seats on the prefectural and town councils and served as local mayors.

The government continued to claim that auqafs in Thrace owed interest on their tax debt, totaling approximately one million euros (\$1.3 million). The government wrote off the principal, but members of the Muslim minority lobbied for the interest to be written off as well.

The muftis in Xanthi and Komotini began serving in 1991 and 1985, respectively. During the year the government extended their terms indefinitely. Some members of the Thrace Muslim minority continued to lobby for direct election of muftis by the community without proscribing their judicial powers. The government maintained it had the right to appoint muftis because the government appointed all judges, and the muftis performed judicial Sharia functions. Some Thrace Muslims accepted the authority of the government-appointed muftis, while others chose two unofficial muftis to serve their communities. The government did not recognize these two muftis, who did not have civil authority. Some Muslims also pressed for direct election of official imams.

The National Human Rights Committee (an autonomous government advisory body), human rights organizations, and some media commentaries argued that the government should limit the powers of the muftis in Thrace to religious duties only. These observers stated that by recognizing and allowing the use of Sharia law, the government restricted the civil rights of some citizens, especially women, in child custody, divorce, and inheritance cases. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern regarding impediments faced by Muslim women in Thrace under Sharia. Sharia law for the most part was not translated into Greek, limiting the ability of government courts to provide judicial oversight.

Construction of a government-funded mosque in Athens approved by the parliament in 2011 did not begin, although the government took steps to create an architectural model and secure permits and funds. Muslim leaders in Athens criticized the absence of a government-funded mosque and the lack of recognized Muslim clergy in the city. Muslims in Athens worshipped in approximately 120 informal (unregistered) mosques operating in legal cultural halls, but traveled to Thrace for official Islamic marriages and funerals. None of the informal mosques in Athens applied for a house-of-prayer permit.

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Under the authority of the secretary general for religions at the Ministry of Education, Lifelong Learning, and Religious Affairs, the government provided space free of charge to some groups of Muslims in Athens whose members had requested places of worship for Ramadan and other religious occasions. The secretary general publicly underscored the right of Muslims to worship.

Some Muslim leaders expressed concern about the lack of an Islamic cemetery in Athens, stating that municipal cemetery regulations requiring exhumation of bodies after three years contravened Islamic religious law. Muslims in Athens and other cities traveled to Thrace for Islamic burial of deceased relatives or had the remains repatriated.

Members of several religious groups complained about the lack of crematory facilities. A 2006 law permits the establishment of crematory facilities, as does a 2011 presidential decree, but the government did not implement the decree due to objections by some Greek Orthodox Church officials to cremation and because of a perceived general lack of demand for cremation services.

In May voters elected members of Golden Dawn, an openly anti-Semitic and xenophobic political party, to the national parliament for the first time, with almost 7 percent of the vote. Party leader Nikos Michaloliakos publicly and repeatedly denied the Holocaust and often gave Nazi salutes at public events. During an October plenary session of parliament, a member of Golden Dawn read passages from the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion.” In October the parliament voted to lift the immunity of three Golden Dawn members of parliament so that they could be investigated for criminal offenses. Law enforcement authorities suspected the party spokesperson of involvement in a 2007 armed robbery, and suspected two other members of property damage during September attacks against immigrants.

The government publicly condemned some anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim incidents, such as vandalism and destruction of religious monuments. However, observers such as the European Jewish Congress and the Anti-Defamation League called on the authorities to do more to counter Golden Dawn’s anti-Semitic rhetoric and violent actions. Human Rights Watch and other groups alleged the police took little action to curb violent Golden Dawn activities.

The government invoked the law against blasphemy in two cases. In September the cyber-crime police arrested a 27-year-old man and charged him with blasphemy and insulting religion for setting up a Facebook page using a name that played on the name of a legendary Mount Athos monk. No trial date had been set

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at year's end. In November the Metropolitan of Piraeus filed a blasphemy complaint against the director and actors of the theatrical play "Corpus Christi," which portrayed Jesus and the Apostles as gay men. An Athens prosecutor pressed charges, but no trial date was set. The theater cancelled performances of the play a few days after its October premiere due to violent protests by some Greek Orthodox priests and Golden Dawn supporters. Several Golden Dawn members of parliament blocked the entrance of the theater and clashed with police on opening night. Police charged one member of parliament with intervening in the arrest of a protestor.

Some religious groups stated that the discrepancy between the length of mandatory service for conscientious objectors and for those in the military forces was discriminatory.

The General Secretariat of Youth, in collaboration with the General Secretariat of Religious Affairs and the Jewish Museum of Greece, organized seminars in the fall for primary and secondary school teachers on teaching students about the Holocaust in order to address and prevent racism and violence.

In October the Council of Europe, Aristotle University, and the municipality of Thessaloniki jointly sponsored conferences on the Holocaust and on "Cultures and Religions in Dialogue" in Thessaloniki.

Government-funded restoration of the Catholic Cathedral of Athens, damaged in a 1998 earthquake, continued.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The Greek Orthodox Church exercised significant social, political, and economic influence. Some non-Orthodox citizens complained that other members of society treated them with suspicion or told them that they were not truly Greek when they revealed their religious affiliations. Members of non-Orthodox religious groups, particularly missionary-based groups, reported incidents of societal discrimination, including warnings by some Orthodox bishops and priests to their parishioners not to visit the leaders or members of religious groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, evangelical Christians, and other Protestants. However, leaders of many non-Orthodox religious groups reported cordial private contacts between

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Orthodox Church officials and members of minority religious groups. Orthodox leaders also attended ceremonies hosted by members of other religious groups.

Arsonists attacked several places of worship, including informal mosques in downtown Athens and Jehovah's Witnesses' houses of worship in Thessaloniki, Igoumenitsa, and Serres. Police opened investigations in each case, but did not identify the perpetrators.

There were numerous reports of anti-Muslim incidents. In March vandals painted graffiti stating "The best Turk is the dead Turk" on the walls of a Bektashi (Islamic Sufi order) tomb in Xanthi. Golden Dawn party members on motorcycles chanted racist slogans in Muslim villages on several occasions.

There were reports of harassment and increasingly violent physical attacks against individuals perceived to be immigrants and refugees, many of whom were Muslim. The Racist Violence Recording Network documented attacks against 190 victims from October 2011 to December 2012, but the total number was believed to be higher because migrants without legal status often feared reporting such incidents. Two cases involved women wearing the hijab. In some cases the victims or witnesses reported that they recognized Golden Dawn insignia on the attackers' clothing. Because religion and ethnicity were often inextricably linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance.

Expressions of anti-Semitism increased after Golden Dawn members entered parliament. The party's official newspaper attacked the teaching of the Holocaust in schools and, on the occasion of a visit by the executive director of the American Jewish Committee, stated that the Jewish lobby and Zionism conspired against Greek wealth. The July issue of the newspaper *Eleftheri Ora*, associated with the Golden Dawn party, included copies of a booklet on the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" with an introduction by Father Eustathios Kollas, honorary president of the Greek Orthodox Priests Association. The Greek Orthodox Priests Association took no official position on Golden Dawn. Some members of the clergy condemned violent attacks against immigrants, while others expressed open support for Golden Dawn.

In April unknown perpetrators drew swastikas on the door of the Jewish cemetery in Ioannina, and vandals painted Stars of David on all banks in Chalkida. In September vandals defaced the wall of the Jewish cemetery in Drama with swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans. In October vandals painted swastikas on all six sides of the Holocaust monument in Rhodes. Following the incident, the

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government issued a statement condemning the desecration, as well as all acts of intolerance and anti-Semitism. Police opened investigations in each case, but did not identify the perpetrators.

The Court of Athens postponed until May 2013 the trial of journalists and Jewish community representatives sued in 2007 by author Kostas Plevris for defamation. The activists had publicly criticized the judges who vacated Plevris' conviction for inciting hatred and racial violence with his book *The Jew – The Whole Truth*.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The ambassador and other U.S. officials met with senior government officials, including the secretary general for religions, municipal leaders, and members of parliament, to promote religious tolerance and diversity, and to urge the government to speak out more strongly against the anti-Semitic and racist rhetoric and violent actions of Golden Dawn. Officers from the embassy and the consulate general in Thessaloniki met regularly with representatives of religious groups to discuss religious freedom and interfaith dialogue, visited religious sites throughout the country, and investigated reports of societal discrimination. U.S. diplomats regularly traveled to Thrace to discuss religious freedom with members of the Muslim minority. U.S. officials also hosted iftars attended by a broad range of government and religious leaders, and attended Holocaust memorial events.

The ambassador and Thessaloniki consul general attended Holocaust memorial events, and the embassy continued to support efforts by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to obtain access to official archives in the country. The embassy supported Jewish community efforts to engage Aristotle University, a public institution built on the site of an expropriated Jewish cemetery in Thessaloniki, on projects to memorialize the site's Jewish heritage.

The embassy used an exchange program to introduce two Islamic studies scholars, a local politician, and Muslim community leaders to American counterparts.

In March the U.S. special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism and the U.S. special representative to Muslim communities met with government officials and civil society representatives to promote tolerance, emphasize the importance of combating bigotry, and encourage protection of cultural and religious heritage sites.