

GREECE 2013 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, but 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 to other religious groups, such as preferential taxation and an institutionalized link to the government. Members and supporters of the opposition Golden Dawn political party (GD) continued to openly espouse anti-Semitism and racism and were linked to violent attacks against individuals perceived to be immigrants. Because religion and ethnicity were often inextricably linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance. Government leaders publicly condemned some anti-Semitic and racist incidents.

In September, following the fatal stabbing of an anti-fascist musician by a self-proclaimed GD supporter, authorities initiated investigations and took legal action against GD on the grounds that it constituted a criminal organization. In October the parliament lifted the immunity from prosecution of six of GD's lawmakers to face criminal charges, and suspended state funding to the party in December. In January the government amended a law to hire 240 Islamic religious instructors to teach the Quran in Greek public schools in Thrace as an alternative to Greek Orthodox instruction. In August the government passed a law that provides exemptions for unauthorized buildings, including houses of prayer and worship in Thrace, that lack property titles and are not in compliance with zoning regulations thus allowing issuance of permits for renovation and reconstruction. Planning continued for a government-funded mosque in Athens, and on November 14, the government awarded the project to a consortium of construction companies.

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, often resulting in the disparagement of other religions, restrictions on their ability to practice their religious beliefs, and discrimination against their members in a variety of political, economic, and social arenas. 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. There were reports of harassment and

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increasingly violent physical attacks against individuals perceived to be immigrants and refugees, the majority of whom were Muslim.

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, in support of religious freedom and tolerance, also hosted iftars attended by a broad range of government and religious leaders, and attended Holocaust memorial events.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 10.7 million (July 2013 estimate). The Greek government does not keep statistics on religious groups. Private Greek research firms estimate that 95 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 120,000 (approximately 1.1 percent of the total population) residing in Thrace. Additionally, nongovernmental organizations 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 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, atheists, agnostics, 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

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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 and partially finances the maintenance of Orthodox Church buildings. In addition, the government provides a municipal tax exemption, a real estate property transfer tax exemption, and an exemption from taxation when land is regulated through zone/town planning for houses of prayer of religions recognized as public law entities (Greek Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and Judaism). 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. Public schools, however, offer no alternative activity or non-Orthodox religious instruction except for Islamic religious instruction in public schools in Thrace for the recognized Muslim minority, and Catholic religious instruction in public schools on the islands of Tinos and Syros.

Greek law requires all civil servants, including cabinet and parliament members, to take an oath before entering office. Persons not belonging to the Orthodox Church may take an oath in accordance with their own beliefs or on their honor. Witnesses in trials must also take oaths before testifying in court but since 2012 can select between a religious and a secular oath in both civil and criminal cases.

As interpreted, the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne gives the Muslim minority in Thrace the right to maintain mosques and social and charitable organizations called *auqafs*, allows muftis (Islamic jurists) to render religious judicial services in the area of family law, and provides for bilingual education, government salaries for muftis, and the recognition of elements of sharia 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. The government recognizes only government-appointed Muslim clergy. There are no government-appointed Muslim clergy outside of Thrace. 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 may attend after-hours religious classes in mosques. The government gives special consideration to Muslim minority students from Thrace for admission to

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universities and technical institutes, setting aside an annual 0.5 percent quota for admission to universities. The law also reserves 0.5 percent of civil service jobs for Muslims in Thrace.

A law passed in January provides for 240 Islamic religious instructors to teach Islam to the Muslim minority in Greek public schools in Thrace. In lieu of mandatory Greek Orthodox religious courses offered twice a week for two hours in all Greek public schools, Muslim students may take Islamic religious courses.

According to the 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 on 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.

A law passed in August provides exemptions from fines for unauthorized buildings that lack property titles and do not abide by zoning regulations, including all recognized religions' houses of prayer and worship. The law includes specific clauses applicable to mosques in Thrace and writes off 80 percent of fines levied against all permanent residents in Thrace who own property in the region but lack documentation.

The government grants Muslims in Thrace the right to choose sharia law to regulate family and civil 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 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 those that have a clear hierarchy and publicly taught doctrines with

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rites of worship open to the public, are nonprofit in nature, and do not affect public order or morality adversely.

The Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (MOERA) 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, cannot function as religious legal entities. Scientologists and polytheistic Hellenic religious groups function as registered nonprofit civil law organizations. 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 media deemed blasphemous in advance of their public release. The law also allows any prosecutor to order the seizure of publications that offend any 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 total of 15 months of alternate service.

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A September law establishes a real estate corporation under private law in which the state and the Greek Orthodox Church of Athens each hold a 50 percent stake. Under this new law, the management of the real estate assets of the Church passes to the corporation via a 99-year lease. The corporation is administered by a five-member board, including representatives from the finance and education ministries. Revenues are to be split between the Church and state.

Government Practices

A broad set of government measures continued to affect members of minority religious groups. Limitations on the construction and operation of religious buildings and cemeteries particularly affected Muslim groups. Jewish groups were concerned over continued anti-Semitic and racist statements and actions by GD members of parliament (MPs). The government passed legislation that suspends state funding to political parties, including GD, whose members are involved in criminal acts.

Through direct support from the government, the Orthodox Church continued to maintain an exclusive institutionalized link to the MOERA. Several other religious groups reported difficulties dealing with authorities on a variety of administrative matters. Some groups, such as the Jewish community and Jehovah's Witnesses, 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 provided tax exemptions. The Catholic Church continued to seek government recognition of its canon law.

The MOERA issued 14 house-of-prayer permits to "known religions" and did not reject any applications for permits (at year's end three were pending signature). Nevertheless, 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.

On November 10, the Council of State rejected a petition requesting that all religious icons and symbols be removed from courtrooms.

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

Some members of the Thrace Muslim minority continued to lobby for direct election of muftis by the community while retaining 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.

In May the government issued a call for applications to fill 90 of 240 positions for Islamic religious instructors. The three government-appointed muftis of Xanthi, Komotini, and Didymoticho each presided over a five-member, all-Muslim selection committee representing each of the three prefectures of Thrace. In October the government hired 64 Islamic instructors for nine-month contracts and on October 15, issued a second call for applicants to fill the remaining 26 of the 90 positions.

In November the Supreme Court imposed sharia law and rejected civil law provisions in an estate case, apparently based on religion. The Muslim decedent had made a public will and testament in civil court leaving all his property to his wife. The Supreme Court ruled that, based on sharia law, the decedent's sister could claim part of his real estate property, despite two prior court decisions to uphold the civil court will.

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 ability of government courts to provide judicial oversight has been limited, however, by the lack of translation of most sharia law into Greek.

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Construction of a government-funded mosque in Athens approved by the parliament in 2011 did not begin. The government secured 946,000 euros (\$1.3 million) in funding and, following four unsuccessful calls for construction company bidders, accepted on November 14, a bid submitted by a consortium of four construction firms. The Council of State is expected to issue a decision in 2014 on an appeal submitted by local residents for the cancellation of the project. 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 100 informal (unregistered) mosques but traveled to Thrace for official Islamic marriages and funerals. None of the informal mosques in Athens applied for a house-of-prayer permit.

In October, under orders from the office of the public prosecutor following complaints from local residents, police closed five unofficial mosques operated by members of the South Asian community and two Nigerian-run Protestant churches in the Athens district of Aghios Panteleimonas for operating without authorized house of prayer permits.

Under the authority of the secretary general for religions at the MOERA, the government continued to provide 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 and the minister of infrastructure, transportation, and networks underscored the right of Muslims to worship by publicly supporting the construction of the official Athens mosque.

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

Members of several religious groups repeated complaints about the lack of crematory facilities. A 2006 law permitted the establishment of crematory facilities, as did 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.

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On February 15, the Ministry of Education temporarily shut down 12 Muslim minority schools in Thrace, citing low enrollment.

On November 20, a bill was introduced with severe penalties for anyone who “incites violence” against a group or person on account of racism or xenophobia. This included denying the significance of the Holocaust, genocides, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and Nazi-era crimes. Parliament had yet to vote on the bill at year’s end.

The Greek Ombudsman for Human Rights submitted a report to Parliament in September listing 281 incidents of racist violence from January 2012 to April 2013. The incidents resulted in four homicides and 400 injuries, of which 71 were reportedly linked to GD members and 47 appeared to involve members of Greek security forces.

Eighteen members of GD, whose members are openly anti-Semitic and xenophobic, served in the national parliament. Party leader Nikos Michaloliakos publicly and repeatedly denied the Holocaust, often gave Nazi salutes at public events, and played a Greek version of “The Horst Wessel Song,” the official anthem of the Nazi party, over loudspeakers at a rally on July 24. Other GD members made statements, including in parliament, denying the Holocaust, asserting that a Jewish lobby was conspiring against Greece, and criticizing Greek citizens of Jewish heritage.

In June a major Jewish organization expressed concern over the appointment of the new health minister, due to his reported history of troubling remarks about Jews and his public promotion of an anti-Semitic book; the minister denied publicly that he was anti-Semitic.

On September 3, a judge dismissed a lawsuit brought by members of GD against Revolutionary Workers’ Party (EEK) Secretary General Savvas Michael-Matsas for “libelous defamation,” “incitement of violence and civil discord,” and “disturbing the peace,” for comments Michael-Matsas reportedly had made in 2009 critical of GD. Some right-wing blogs had targeted Michael-Matsas with anti-Semitic threats.

Following a September 17 murder committed by a GD member, the government launched criminal investigations into GD and its activities. In October, police arrested six GD MPs, including GD leader Michaloliakos, on charges of forming

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and operating a criminal organization. The GD leader and two of the MPs were detained pending trial, while the others were released pending trial, with restrictions. By the end of 2013, police had arrested at least 46 GD members, including two other GD MPs, on criminal charges, which included bribery, money laundering, and illegal gun possession. Following a request by an investigative magistrate, the parliament decided in October to lift immunity from prosecution from six GD MPs to face a myriad of criminal charges, two of whom were among the six GD MPs previously arrested. The government passed an amendment to suspend state funding to political parties whose members are involved in criminal acts. 235 of 300 MPs voted in favor of the amendment.

On December 9, authorities submitted new evidence related to GD actions to examining magistrates investigating the case against party members. The counter-terrorism squad confiscated computers belonging to GD MPs Ilias Kasidiaris, Giorgos Germanis, Yiannis Lagos, and Nikos Michaloliakos. Authorities found videos of new members swearing an induction oath to the organization, performing Nazi salutes, and stating, “I am Golden Dawn because we are rebels. Let’s kill the Jew hiding in all of us.” Other footage showed GD leader Michaloliakos stating, “They say that we are the evil fascists and nationalists. The truth is that they are right.”

Two 2012 cases in which the government invoked the law against blasphemy remained open with no trial date set at year’s end. In September 2012, the cyber-crime police had 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. In November 2012 the Metropolitan of Piraeus had filed a blasphemy complaint against the director and actors of the theatrical play “Corpus Christi,” which portrayed Jesus and the Apostles as gay men.

In February and May members of the Bible Baptist Church of Thessaloniki and Zakynthos island said that members of the church had been harassed by Thessaloniki police officers. They stated that the officers arbitrarily had detained them in police stations for documentation checks, had accused them of proselytizing, and had mocked and verbally abused them with threats and intimidation. Police stated that they had responded to noise complaints from nearby business owners.

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Some religious groups stated the discrepancy between the length of mandatory service for conscientious objectors and for those in the military was discriminatory. On October 4, the European Bureau for Conscientious Objection (EBCO) presented its annual report in Athens instead of the European Parliament in Brussels due to what EBCO said were “rising concerns about the unacceptable treatment of conscientious objectors in Greece which continues to be in violation of international human rights standards and the political guidelines of the European Union.” EBCO documented three cases in which the government had arrested and prosecuted conscientious objectors for not completing mandatory military service, despite previously serving prison time, paying fines, or exceeding the age limit for service. EBCO criticized the imposition of administrative fines of 6,000 euros (\$8,264) and the use of military courts in these trials.

The government publicly condemned some anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim incidents.

In commemoration of the UN International Holocaust Remembrance Day January 27, the local government and the Jewish community of Thessaloniki held a remembrance event at the Holocaust monument in Eleftherias Square in Thessaloniki. Thessaloniki Mayor Boutaris reaffirmed his 2012 announcement that the city will convert the square into a memorial park honoring the diverse history of Thessaloniki.

For the first time, the Municipality and the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki held a series of events in March commemorating the 70th anniversary of the beginning of the deportation of the Jews of Thessaloniki to concentration camps. Prime Minister Antonis Samaras spoke at the commemoration, condemning the rise of neo-fascist forces and stating that his government was prepared to use all means, including legislation, to combat racism and anti-Semitism.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Because religion and ethnicity were often inextricably linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance.

The Greek Orthodox Church exercised significant social, political, and economic influence. Some non-Orthodox citizens complained they had been treated with

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suspicion or had been told they were not truly Greek when they had 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 Orthodox Church officials and members of minority religious groups. Orthodox leaders also attended ceremonies hosted by members of other religious groups.

The Central Board of Jewish Communities (KIS) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) continued to express concern over the presence of the GD party in parliament, characterizing it as a neo-Nazi, anti-Semitic party that used a swastika-inspired emblem, employed a Nazi salute and a Nazi anthem, referenced *Mein Kampf*, and denied the Holocaust.

In response to incidents by GD, the Archbishop of Athens Ieronymos reminded worshippers that the Church does not accept discrimination.

In January, following a visit by an American Jewish Committee delegation, GD members stated that the government leadership would “once again express its total subjugation to the whims of the ‘chosen’ people.”

In February GD member Ioannis Lagos questioned Holocaust commemoration day and challenged the teaching in schools of “texts read which praise the Jews and at the same time portray them as heroes.”

In February the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece expressed strong objection to a controversial Greek singer and stand-up comedian's use of the Star of David intertwined with a swastika on advertisements in Athens for his show, which was interpreted by observers as a sign of disrespect towards Jews and the Holocaust.

In March the Hellenic Football Federation voted unanimously to ban a well known Greek soccer player for life from playing on the Greek national soccer team after he made a Nazi salute during a game.

On May 22, author Konstantinos Plevris dropped defamation charges he had brought against representatives of the local Jewish community, as well as two

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representatives of the Greek Helsinki Monitor, who were witnesses for the prosecution in trials in which Plevris faced charges of inciting racial hatred for his book, *The Jew – The Whole Truth*. The defendants had publicly criticized the judges who had vacated Plevris' conviction.

GD members on motorcycles chanted racist slogans in Muslim villages on several occasions. In May the Muslim Association of Greece received two anonymous threatening letters. The anti-racist unit of the Ministry of Public Order and Citizen Protection collected the letters, but was unable to identify the perpetrator.

There were reports of harassment and increasingly violent physical attacks against individuals perceived to be immigrants and refugees, the majority of whom were Muslim. The Racist Violence Recording Network documented 349 attacks from October 2011 to September 2013, but the total number was believed to be higher because migrants without legal status often feared reporting such incidents. In one attack, perpetrators broke into an imam's house in Athens. In several cases the victims or witnesses reported that they recognized the GD insignia on the attackers' clothing.

Metropolitan of Siatista (Western Macedonia) Pavlos issued a statement on September 25, after the murder of popular hip-hop singer Pavlos Fyssas by a GD member, raising questions regarding the government's failure to limit the activities of GD members. On October 7, Metropolitan Pavlos addressed the Police Association of Thessaloniki, and emphasized Europe's and Greece's experiences with Nazism and said that, "We cannot be Greek and Nazi at the same time...and therefore, we cannot be friends with the ideology that only created victims in Europe."

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Ambassador and other U.S. officials met with senior government officials, including the secretary general for religious affairs, municipal leaders, and MPs, 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 GD. Officers from the embassy and the Thessaloniki consulate general met regularly with representatives of religious groups to discuss religious freedom and interfaith dialogue, visited religious sites throughout the country, investigated reports of societal discrimination, and regularly traveled to Thrace to discuss religious freedom with members of the Muslim minority, the only officially

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government-recognized minority group. U.S. officials, in support of religious freedom and tolerance, also hosted iftars attended by a broad range of government, civil society, NGO, and religious leaders, attended Holocaust memorial events, and supported efforts by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to obtain access to official archives in the country.

The embassy introduced a central government official from the MOERA, a local Muslim politician from Thrace, and a Muslim NGO leader to American counterparts through separate exchange programs to promote further understanding of religious laws and practices in the United States and to facilitate exchanges of ideas.