

ARGENTINA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and laws provide for freedom of religion and the right to profess freely one's faith. The constitution provides the government will grant the Roman Catholic Church preferential legal status, but there is no official state religion. Several religious groups expressed frustration that the government required them to register as both civil associations and religious groups in order to be eligible for tax-exempt status, receive visas for foreign clergy, and hold public activities, noting that the Catholic Church was exempt from this requirement. The government continued its investigation into the 1994 terrorist bombing of the Argentina Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA) community center and a subsequent cover-up, reiterating demands for Iranian cooperation in bringing the suspected perpetrators to justice. Legal action continued against Tucuman Province over the inclusion of religion in the province's public school curriculum. Jewish organizations denounced the anti-Semitic commentary of former television journalist Santiago Cuneo, who was a candidate for governor of Buenos Aires Province. Government officials sponsored and participated in interfaith events throughout the year, including an interfaith iftar, at which then-foreign minister Jorge Faurie emphasized the country's prioritization of coexistence among religions.

On February 25, at least five individuals broke into the house of Grand Rabbi Gabriel Davidovich in Buenos Aires, beating him and causing injuries that resulted in his hospitalization for one week. The Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations (DAIA) reported 834 complaints of anti-Semitism in 2018, the most recent year for which statistics were available, compared with 404 reported complaints in 2017. The most commonly reported anti-Semitic incidents tracked by the report were anti-Semitic slurs posted on websites, and DAIA stated the spike tracked with an increase in news stories about the Jewish community during the year, including an institutional crisis that led to the resignation of DAIA's president. In October protesters opposed to the Catholic Church's stance on abortion attempted to set fire to the Catholic cathedral in La Plata, according to local media. In July religious groups, including the Argentine Episcopal Conference (CEA), Latin American Rabbinical Seminar, Islam for Peace Institute, and the Orthodox Anglican Archbishopric, organized the National Table for Interreligious Coordination (MECIN). In March the Islamic Center of the Argentine Republic (CIRA), AMIA, and the CEA held an event in Buenos Aires to celebrate and recognize the historic February 4 signing in Abu Dhabi of the

“Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” between Grand Imam Ahmed al-Tayyeb of al-Azhar Mosque and Pope Francis.

U.S. embassy officials continued to meet with senior government officials, including within the Secretariat of Worship and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ (MFA) human rights office, and the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, to discuss ways to promote respect for religious minorities and counteract religious discrimination. Embassy outreach efforts included regular meetings with government officials and religious and community leaders to discuss the status of religious freedom, tolerance, and interfaith dialogue; the status of the AMIA case; and ways to counter anti-Semitism. In August the Ambassador gave keynote remarks on countering online hate speech and discrimination based on religion at a conference in Tucuman Province. On July 15, the embassy cohosted with DAIA a commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the terrorist attack on the AMIA Jewish Community Center. Eighteen other diplomatic missions participated in the event, and the Ambassador delivered remarks in remembrance of the victims, calling for justice, and underscoring the role of Hezbollah and Iran in the attack. Embassy officials supported interfaith cooperation and universal respect for freedom of religion through both public statements and social media.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 45.1 million (midyear 2019 estimate). Religious demographic and statistical data from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), research centers, and religious leaders vary. According to a 2019 survey by Conicet, the country’s national research institute, 62.9 percent of the population is Catholic; 15.3 Protestant, including evangelical groups; 18.9 percent no religion, which includes agnostics; 1.4 percent Jehovah’s Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ); 1.2 percent other, including Muslims and Jews; and 0.3 percent unknown. Other sources state Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Lutherans, Methodists, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ together total 3 percent of the population. According to AMIA, there are 220,000 Jews in the country, and the Islamic Center estimates the Muslim population at 800,000 to 1,000,000. Evangelical Christian communities, particularly Pentecostals, are growing, but no reliable statistics are available. There is also a small number of Baha’is, Buddhists, and adherents of indigenous religions in the country; however, no data are available on the size of these groups.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the right to profess, teach, and practice freely one's faith. It declares the support of the federal government for "the Roman Catholic Apostolic faith," but the Supreme Court has ruled that it is not an official or state religion.

The government provides the Catholic Church with tax-exempt subsidies, institutional privileges such as school subsidies, significant autonomy for parochial schools, and licensing preferences for radio frequencies. The law does not require the Catholic Church to register with the Secretariat of Worship in the MFA. Registration is not compulsory for other religious groups, but registered groups receive the same status and fiscal benefits as the Catholic Church, including tax-exempt status, visas for religious officials, and the ability to hold public activities. To register, religious groups must have a place of worship, an organizational charter, and an ordained clergy, among other requirements. To access many of these benefits, religious groups must also register as a civil association through the General Inspectorate of Justice.

Registration is not required for private religious services, such as those held in homes, but is sometimes necessary to conduct activities in public spaces pursuant to local regulations. City authorities may require groups to obtain permits to use public parks for events, and they may require religious groups to be registered with the Secretariat of Worship to receive a permit. Once registered, an organization must report to the secretariat any significant changes or decisions made regarding its leadership, governing structure, size of membership, and the address of its headquarters.

The mandatory curriculum in public schools is secular by law. Students may request elective courses of instruction in the religion of their choice in public schools, which may be conducted in the school or at a religious institution. Many Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious groups operate private schools, which receive financial support contingent on registration with the government.

Foreign officials of registered religious groups may apply for a specific visa category to enter the country. The validity period of the visa varies depending on the purpose of the travel. Foreign missionaries of registered religious groups must apply to the Secretariat of Worship, which in turn notifies immigration authorities to request the issuance of appropriate documents.

The board of the National Institute against Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Racism (INADI), a government agency under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, includes representatives of the major religious groups. INADI investigates suspected and reported incidents of discrimination based on religion. INADI is not authorized to enforce recommendations or findings, but its reports may be used as evidence in civil court. The agency also supports victims of religious discrimination and promotes proactive measures to prevent discrimination. INADI produces and distributes publications to promote religious tolerance.

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

Government Practices

At year's end, the trial of former president and current Vice President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner remained pending, following her 2017 indictment for concealment in relation to a 2013 memorandum of understanding she signed with Iran. Prosecutors stated that then-president Fernandez de Kirchner and several high-ranking officials sought to cover up Iranian involvement in the 1994 AMIA bombing that killed 85 persons. AMIA, DAIA, and organizations representing the victims' families continued to call for justice and a full accounting of the circumstances surrounding the bombing and any attempts at a cover-up, stating that the truth remained unclear.

In an unrelated case, a court acquitted former president Carlos Menem in February of charges he had sought to derail investigations into the AMIA bombing while president, citing lack of evidence. AMIA and DAIA issued a joint communique stating they respected the verdict. An NGO representing many of the victims' families, Memoria Activa (Active Memory), criticized the decision, stating the Menem government knew the attack would happen and did nothing to avoid it.

Judicial inquiries continued into the 2015 death of Alberto Nisman, the lead federal prosecutor investigating the AMIA bombing. On December 26, the newly appointed Minister of Security, Sabina Frederic, announced her intent to review a 2017 analysis by the National Gendarmerie that stated two assailants killed Nisman. The analysis contradicted expert Federal Police testimony made in 2017 that suggested Nisman had committed suicide. Investigators accused Frederic of using the power of the executive branch to meddle in judicial matters, while

Nisman's mother, Sara Garfunkel, requested the judiciary's assistance in preventing the review.

In September at the UN General Assembly, then-president Mauricio Macri called for increased international pressure to compel Iran to cooperate in the investigation of the AMIA attack, as well as that of the 1992 terrorist bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires.

Representatives of several religious groups stated that a government requirement that religious groups register first with the Ministry of Worship and then with the Ministry of Interior as a civil association was redundant, stating that the Catholic Church faced no such requirement. The groups said these legal processes were required to request tax-exempt status, apply for visas for foreign clergy, and hold public activities. Religious group representatives said religious groups deserved a unique process, separate from that for civil associations.

According to the plaintiffs, there was no progress in the 2018 case filed by a group of parents in Tucuman Province opposing the inclusion of religion in the province's public school curriculum. The parents cited a 2017 Supreme Court decision that incorporation of religious education in public schools in Salta Province was unconstitutional. In August local media reported on a new case of religious teaching in a school in Formosa Province in which the school director invited a group of nuns to speak to a class during school hours without permission from the regional ministry of education or from the parents of the children. Parents said the nuns proselytized by teaching the children to pray and distributing rosaries and pamphlets. Formosa's education minister later stated the school's director made an error and could face disciplinary action.

Numerous religious and prolife groups, including evangelical Christian churches, expressed concern over the case of a doctor arrested for refusing to perform an abortion. In October a court in Rio Negro Province gave Leandro Rodriguez a suspended sentence of one year and two months for misconduct and prohibited him from practicing medicine for two years and four months, after he did not perform a legally permitted abortion for a woman who had been raped. In 2017 Rodriguez treated a woman suffering from severe pain and an infection after taking misoprostol, an abortion-inducing drug in her fifth month of pregnancy. Rodriguez treated the infection and halted the abortion. Three months later, the woman delivered the baby and offered it for adoption. Rodriguez's legal team said he had halted the abortion on medical grounds and the patient had agreed to continue the pregnancy and give the baby for adoption; however, some religious groups,

including local evangelical churches, said the case set a precedent against abortion-related conscientious objection.

At the end of its term in December, the Macri administration sent a new draft religious freedom bill to congress for its consideration. First proposed in 2017, the draft bill would have eliminated the requirement that non-Catholic religious groups register with the government to receive the same benefits accorded to the Catholic Church. An earlier draft of the bill allowed for conscientious objection on the basis of religion, but drafters did not include that provision in the new bill. Separately, the outgoing congress approved a draft bill in November that would declare November 25 the National Day of Religious Freedom and Conscience. The bill continued under senate review through year's end.

Catholic Church representatives continued to discuss measures to reduce their use of federal funding following the December 2018 agreement between the government and the CEA, representing the Catholic Church, which delineated a formal, mutually agreed plan to reduce the state's direct financial support to the Church. CEA leaders reported progress on the matter during plenary sessions held in November. Under the agreement, government funding primarily allocated for the salaries of bishops and stipends for seminarians decreased from 130 million pesos (\$2.2 million) in 2018 to 126 million pesos (\$2.1 million) during the year.

Throughout the year, Jewish organizations denounced the anti-Semitic commentary of former television journalist Cuneo, who was a candidate for governor of Buenos Aires Province in elections held in October. Among other incidents cited by the organizations, in a July 2 televised interview Cuneo promoted conspiracy theories about a purported Jewish plot to take over Patagonia. He also repeated claims, first made in 2018, that then-president Macri had staffed the national intelligence agency with Mossad agents.

Many Jewish groups said they continued to view relations with the Macri administration as positive and productive. They said collaboration was positive, particularly in light of what they characterized as the administration's commitment to resolve the Nisman killing and to pursue justice in its investigations of the 1994 AMIA attack and the 1992 terrorist bombing of the Israeli embassy.

Secretary of Worship Alfredo Miguel Abriani, the human rights secretary, the Buenos Aires director general for religious affairs, and other government representatives continued to host and attend religious freedom conferences, interreligious dialogues, rabbinical ordinations, Catholic services, and Rosh

Hashanah, Eid al-Adha, and Eid al-Fitr celebrations, as well as other religious activities, including those held by Protestant and Orthodox churches.

In May the MFA organized an interfaith iftar; both then-foreign minister Faurie and then-secretary of worship Abriani delivered remarks underscoring the importance of tolerance and coexistence, as well as the government's commitment to promoting religious freedom.

On August 21, the City of Buenos Aires organized a lunch to promote interfaith collaboration. Approximately 50 religious leaders attended. Buenos Aires Chief of Government Horacio Rodriguez Larreta pledged to continue "generating spaces for engagement and exchange" and affirmed his desire to create a city that would be ever-increasingly open and inclusive.

On September 15, the City of Buenos Aires organized an interreligious festival to promote dialogue. More than 70 faith communities participated with stands showcasing their respective identities and activities.

In September INADI reported it organized a youth parliament with local students. Playing the role of legislators, the students debated the topics of conscientious objection, mandatory religious education, and religious discrimination. By a vote of 69 to one, with one abstention, they approved a law on "freedom of religion without discrimination," promoting religious diversity in education, health, and the workplace.

In May DAIA held a Holocaust memorial ceremony at the Kirchner Cultural Center in downtown Buenos Aires. Then-minister of culture, science, and technology Alejandro Finocchiaro delivered remarks alongside Jewish community leaders and a Holocaust survivor, underscoring the value of life and of "rebellion," adding, "glory and eternal memory for all who resisted in the Warsaw Ghetto and around the world." Then-president Macri did not attend the ceremony but recorded a video for it after touring the building earlier in the day.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On February 25, at least five individuals broke into the house of Grand Rabbi Gabriel Davidovich in Buenos Aires, robbing him and beating him so severely that

he remained hospitalized for one week with injuries including four broken ribs. According to local media, the attackers said, “We know you are AMIA’s rabbi.” Between March and July, police detained six suspects, members of a gang believed to have robbed numerous residences in the area. The six individuals did not face trial by year’s end.

DAIA reported 834 complaints of anti-Semitism in 2018, the most recent year for which statistics were available, compared with 404 reported complaints in 2017, a 107 percent increase. The report noted that 30 percent of the incidents occurred in May 2018, when DAIA faced a very public institutional crisis that led to the resignation of its president. The most commonly reported anti-Semitic incidents tracked by the report were anti-Semitic slurs posted on websites and social media, which made up 88 percent of the reported acts. Included among these were xenophobic and nationalistic commentaries, as well as the propagation of conspiracy theories and references to Jewish individuals as avaricious or exploitative. Other recorded acts included graffiti, verbal slurs, and the desecration of Jewish cemeteries.

Between April and June, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) conducted a survey to update the understanding of attitudes and opinions toward Jews in 18 countries around the world. In November the ADL released the results of the survey for each country, detailing the scope of anti-Semitic views among the country’s residents. The survey cited 11 stereotypical statements about Jews and asked respondents whether they agreed with them. The proportion agreeing that various statements were “probably true” was as follows: 57 percent that Jews are more loyal to Israel than to Argentina; 53 percent that Jews have too much power in the business world; 60 percent that Jews talk too much about the Holocaust; 36 percent that Jews do not care what happens to anyone but their own kind; 28 percent that Jews think they are better than others; and 35 percent that other persons hate Jews because of the way they behave. According to the survey, 30 percent of the population harbored anti-Semitic views – compared with 24 percent in 2015 – which it stated represented the percentage of persons who agreed that the majority of the 11 statements were “probably true.”

On October 13, protesters associated with the 34th National Women’s Meeting and others attempted to set fire to the Catholic cathedral in La Plata, according to local media. Some protesters also threw stones at police and churchgoers. According to local media, the cathedral suffered minor damage because of the protest. Some protesters carried signs accusing the church of covering up sexual abuse. On April 29, hundreds of individuals delivered a new abortion bill to congress. On May 28,

abortion activists led peaceful protests outside the congress, proposing the new abortion bill go before the legislature. In 2018 the senate rejected the previous abortion bill.

In February nine gravestones in a Jewish cemetery were vandalized by unidentified individuals in San Luis City. The cemetery's security cameras were vandalized and broken shortly before the incident. The attackers climbed the wall, destroyed marble headstones, bronze plates, and other objects. On September 29, individuals destroyed a large section of the wall at La Tablada, the country's largest Jewish cemetery, located near Buenos Aires. They also damaged several tombs and stole bronze plaques. Then-secretary for human rights Claudio Avruj denounced the vandalism; he expressed his sadness and indignation, stating the events took place just hours before the beginning of Rosh Hashanah.

According to local media, individuals broke into the Saint Thomas Aquinas Institute in San Luis, San Luis Province, in early October, leaving behind anti-Catholic graffiti, including "Murderous Church," "Pedophile Priests," and "God Does Not Exist." School authorities reported the individuals destroyed images and paintings of the Virgin Mary, as well as student artwork.

Interreligious groups such as the Interreligious Committee for Peace in Argentina, whose members included Catholic, Protestant, evangelical Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Baha'i, and indigenous religious groups, and the Argentine Council for Religious Freedom continued to work on increasing opportunities for interreligious action on common societal challenges. The committee published frequent newspaper articles and held events to include a prayer for Syria and an annual blanket drive for families in need.

In July several religious groups organized MECIN at the senate in Buenos Aires. Participating groups included the Argentine Episcopal Conference, Latin American Rabbinical Seminar, Islam for Peace Institute, and Orthodox Anglican Archbishopric. MECIN representatives said they would seek to strengthen the country's social fabric through dialogue.

In March CIRA, AMIA, and the CEA held an event in Buenos Aires to celebrate and recognize the historic February 4 signing in Abu Dhabi of the "Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together" between Grand Imam Ahmed al-Tayyeb of al-Azhar Mosque and Pope Francis. The declaration, an updated version of a similar document signed in 2005 by then-archbishop Jorge Bergoglio and his peers in the interreligious community, affirmed the commitment

of all involved not to permit religious conflicts from other parts of the world to affect the fraternity among religious communities in the country.

In June the Institute for Interfaith Dialogue organized an iftar during Ramadan, hosting members of the Muslim community and the Jewish Bet El congregation. Religious and community leaders including the president of the Episcopal Conference of Argentina, the president of AMIA, and the City of Buenos Aires' director for religious affairs attended.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with government representatives, including within the Secretariat of Worship, the MFA's human rights office, and the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, to discuss ways to promote respect for religious minorities and interfaith cooperation. In meetings with government officials, the Ambassador and other embassy officials discussed tolerance, the country's interfaith movement, and measures to counteract religious discrimination. In meetings with the Secretariat of Worship, embassy officials emphasized the importance of religious freedom and interfaith dialogue and discussed the status of the AMIA case and ways to counter anti-Semitism.

Embassy outreach included regular meetings with religious and community leaders, including members of interreligious organizations. In these meetings, embassy officials discussed the status of religious freedom and interfaith dialogue, as well as the conditions; the status of the AMIA case; and ways to counter anti-Semitism and promote religious tolerance. Embassy officials met with religious groups and NGOs focused on social work and community service, including Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, and evangelical Christian leaders, and discussed promoting respect for religious diversity as well as faith-based responses to poverty, drug addiction, domestic violence, homelessness, and malnutrition.

On July 15, the embassy cohosted with DAIA a commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the terrorist attack on the AMIA Jewish Community Center. The event was held at the Ambassador's residence, and 18 fellow diplomatic missions participated in the event. The Ambassador delivered remarks in remembrance of the victims, calling for justice and underscoring the role of Hezbollah and Iran in the attack.

Embassy officials regularly attended conferences, observances, and commemorations organized by religious groups and NGOs, including DAIA,

AMIA, Latin American Jewish Congress, and the CEA. Embassy officials supported interfaith cooperation and universal respect for freedom of religion through both public statements and social media, including conveying condolences on the 25th anniversary of the AMIA bombing.