

# FINLAND 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination “without an acceptable reason” and provides for the right to profess and practice a religion and to decline to be a member of a religious community. The law prohibits breaching the sanctity of religion, which includes blasphemy, offending that which a religious community holds sacred, and disturbing worship or funeral ceremonies. In March the Supreme Court allowed the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), the largest neo-Nazi group in the country, to appeal its countrywide ban. The group remained banned while it made its appeal. The Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) instructed the Finnish Association of Museums to prepare a formal study of the state of Holocaust-era art provenance research in its collections. Parliament repealed the military service exemption which had applied only to Jehovah’s Witnesses. A Finns Party politician publicly compared Muslim asylum seekers to invasive species. Jehovah’s Witnesses said the government continued to refuse most applications from Russian Jehovah’s Witnesses seeking asylum for religious persecution.

Police reported 155 hate crimes involving members of religious groups in 2018, compared with 235 such incidents in the previous year, but did not specify how many were motivated solely by religion. The nondiscrimination ombudsman’s office received 35 complaints of religious discrimination in 2018, compared with 55 in the previous year. The NRM continued to post anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic statements online and demonstrated with the anti-immigrant group Soldiers of Odin. There were several demonstrations by neo-Nazi or nativist groups. In November, on the anniversary of Kristallnacht (the 1938 pogrom against Jews in Germany), a group handed out flyers and waved flags bearing symbols resembling the Nazi swastika at a demonstration in Helsinki, and anti-Semitic stickers were posted around the city. Muslim groups reported a shortage of funds needed to establish houses of worship to match their growing population. A report by the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) said hate crimes and intolerant speech in public discourse, principally against Muslims and asylum seekers (many of whom belong to religious minorities), had increased in recent years. The report also cited frequent use of anti-Semitic rhetoric on the internet and hate speech by extremist groups, especially neo-Nazis. Vandals targeted Jewish property, including the Israeli embassy and a Shia mosque in Helsinki.

U.S. embassy staff met with government ministries to discuss government support for religious freedom and interfaith dialogue, the provenance of Holocaust-era art, and the treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses seeking asylum. Embassy staff discussed with the Jewish and Muslim communities their concerns about the law restricting animal slaughter, government discouragement of male circumcision, and a rise in religiously motivated harassment. They also discussed the state of religious freedom with these communities, other religious minorities, and interfaith networks.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.7 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to Finnish government statistics from December 2018, which count only registered members of registered congregations, approximately 69.8 percent of the population belongs to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELC) and 1.1 percent to the Finnish Orthodox Church, while 0.3 percent (approximately 16,000 individuals) officially belong to Islamic congregations, and 26.3 percent do not identify as belonging to any religious group. The census combines the other minority religious communities, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jews, and members of the Free Church of Finland, which together account for 1.7 percent of the population.

Multiple sources indicate the Muslim population has grown rapidly in recent years because of a significant inflow of immigrants. Muslim religious leaders estimate the number of Muslims rose to 100,000 in 2018, of which approximately 80 percent is Sunni and 20 percent Shia. In 2017, the Pew Research Center estimated 2.7 percent of the population, or approximately 150,000 persons, were Muslim. According to a survey by the MEC, the Muslim population numbered approximately 65,000 in 2016. According to the Islamic Society of Finland, discrepancies among these sources and between them and official government statistics may occur because only a minority of Muslims register with registered Islamic societies. Apart from Tatars, most Muslims are immigrants or descendants of immigrants who arrived in recent decades from Somalia, North Africa, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Balkans, Syria, Turkey, and Iran.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution bars discrimination based on religion “without an acceptable reason.” It stipulates freedom of religion and conscience, including the right to profess and practice a religion, to express one’s convictions, and to be a member or decline to be a member of a religious community. It states no one is under the obligation to participate in the practice of a religion. The law criminalizes the “breach of the sanctity of religion,” which includes “blaspheming against God,” publicly defaming or desecrating to offend something a religious community holds sacred, and disturbing worship or funeral ceremonies. Violators are subject to fines or imprisonment of up to six months. Authorities have rarely applied the law, most recently in 2009. The constitution cites the ELC, the only religious group it mentions, stating that “provisions on the organization and administration [of the ELC] are laid down in the Church Act.”

The law prohibits religious discrimination and prescribes a nondiscrimination ombudsman responsible for supervising compliance with the law and investigating individual cases of discrimination and having the power to issue fines in noncriminal cases. The ombudsman advocates on behalf of victims, offers counseling and promotes conciliation, and lobbies for legislation, among other duties and authorities. The ombudsman may also refer cases to the National Non-Discrimination and Equality Tribunal (NDET), which also enforces fines issued by the ombudsman, or assist plaintiffs seeking compensation in court. Individuals alleging discrimination may alternatively pursue legal action through the NDET, which may issue binding decisions that may be appealed to the courts, or through the district court system. Litigants may appeal the decisions of the NDET and the district courts to the higher Administrative Court. Neither the ombudsman nor the NDET has the authority to investigate individual cases of religious discrimination involving employment. Such cases fall under the purview of the Occupational Safety and Health Authority.

Individuals and groups may exist, associate, and practice their religion without registering with the government. To be eligible to apply for government funds, however, religious groups must register with the Patent and Registration Office as a religious community. To register as a religious community, a group must have at least 20 members, the public practice of religion as its purpose, and a set of rules to guide its activities. A registered religious community is a legal entity that may employ persons, purchase property, and make legal claims. A religious group may also acquire legal status by registering as an association with a nonprofit purpose that is not contrary to law or proper behavior. Registered religious groups and nonprofit associations are generally exempt from taxes. According to the MEC, there are approximately 130 registered religious communities, most of which have

multiple congregations. Persons may belong to more than one religious community.

All citizens who belong to either the ELC or Finnish Orthodox Church pay a church tax, collected together with their income tax payments. Congregations collectively decide the church tax amount, now set at between 1 to 2 percent of a member's income. Those who do not want to pay the tax must terminate their ELC or Orthodox congregation membership. Members may terminate their membership by contacting the official congregation or the local government registration office, either electronically or in person. Local parishes have fiscal autonomy to decide how to use funding received from taxes levied on their members.

Registered religious communities other than the ELC and Finnish Orthodox Church are eligible to apply for state funds in lieu of the church tax. In addition to receiving the church tax, the ELC and Finnish Orthodox Church may also apply for state funds. The law states registered religious communities that meet the statutory requirements, including ELC and Orthodox congregations, may apply to receive an annual subsidy from the government budget in proportion to the religious community's percentage of the population.

The law requires the ELC to maintain public cemeteries using its general allocation from state funds and church tax and to account for monies used for this purpose. Other religious communities and nonreligious foundations may maintain their own cemeteries. All registered religious communities may own and manage property and hire staff, including appointing clergy. The law authorizes the ELC and Finnish Orthodox Church to register births, marriages, and deaths for their members in collaboration with the government Population Register Center. State registrars do this for other persons.

Parents may determine their child's religious affiliation if the child is younger than 12 years of age. The parents of a child between the ages of 12 and 17 must pursue specific administrative procedures with their religious community and the local population registration officials to change or terminate religious affiliation.

All public schools provide religious teaching in accordance with students' religion. All students must take courses either in ethics or in religious studies, with the choice left up to the student. Schools must provide religious instruction in religions other than the Lutheran faith if there is a minimum of three pupils representing that faith in the municipal region, the religious community in question

is registered, and the students' families belong to the religious community. Students who do not belong to a religious group or belong to a religious group for which special instruction is not available may study ethics. Students aged 18 or older may choose to study either the religious courses pertaining to their religion or ethics. If a student belongs to more than one religious community, the parents decide in which religious education course the student participates. The national and municipal governments fund private, including religiously based, schools. These schools do not charge tuition and do not practice selective admission based on students' religion.

Religious education focuses on familiarizing students with their own religion, other religions, and general instruction in ethics. Teachers of religion must have state-mandated training for religious instruction. The state appoints them, and they are not required to belong to any religious community. The National Board of Education provides a series of textbooks about Orthodox and Lutheran Christianity, Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam, as well as a textbook on secular ethics.

The government allows conscientious objectors to choose alternative civilian service instead of compulsory military service. In February parliament repealed the exemption from conscription for Jehovah's Witnesses, meaning that members of the organization need to perform military or alternative civilian service or face imprisonment. Conscientious objectors who refuse both military and alternative civilian service may be sentenced to prison terms of up to 173 days, one-half of the 347 days of alternative civilian service. Regular military service ranges between 165 and 347 days.

The law requires that animals be stunned prior to slaughter or be stunned and killed simultaneously in cases of religious practice.

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

### **Government Practices**

In March the Supreme Court granted the NRM the right to appeal to the Supreme Court the 2018 Turku Court of Appeals ruling which upheld the 2017 nationwide ban of the organization for distributing anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim materials and engaging in hate speech. The NRM continued to demonstrate in public despite the Supreme Court's order that it refrain from all activities while the appeal remained pending. In May the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) opened a criminal

investigation into NRM members for allegedly violating the ban on activities by publishing anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim articles on their website.

In August the National Police Board, which supervises police operations across the country, stated it had received multiple questions from members of parliament (MPs) suggesting the redirection of resources from the investigation of hate speech and hate crimes would be beneficial. Among the critics was Finns Party leader Jussi Halla-aho, who said during the Finns Party's summer summit in August that police personnel were needed for "real criminal investigations" and not to "stalk people on social media."

At year's end, parliament had not voted on an amendment to the Church Act, which governs the practices of the ELC. Parliament took up the bill in September 2018 after the General Synod of the ELC approved it but did not enact the bill during that year. The amended Church Act has the stated intent of clarifying and facilitating administration, enhancing church autonomy, and facilitating internal decision making in the ELC. The amended act would devolve back to the Church certain responsibilities that previously required parliamentary approval.

In June the MEC instructed the Finnish Association of Museums to prepare a formal study of the state of Holocaust-era art provenance research in their collections. According to the MEC, the move was intended to address the lack of Holocaust-era art provenance research in order to better meet the requirements for the implementation of the Terezin Declaration. At year's end, the study was ongoing, and only the Finnish National Gallery had publicly listed works of art with significant provenance gaps acquired during 1939-1945. Holocaust-era art provenance research is also scheduled as a topic at the country's National Art Museum Conference to be held in 2020.

In February an independent investigation by the National Archives concluded "it was very likely" Finnish volunteers in the Waffen SS participated in killing Jews, other civilians, and prisoners of war during World War II. State Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office Paula Lehtomaki said it was necessary "to investigate the questions that emerge and conduct complementary research on difficult historical events.... We share the responsibility for ensuring that such atrocities will never be repeated." The prime minister's office funded the investigation in 2018 in response to a request from the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

In September Mikko Karna, a Center Party MP, advocated legislation prohibiting nonmedical male circumcision during parliamentary talks on the criminalization of

female circumcision. Karna cited guidelines published by the Finnish Medical Association, which discouraged the procedure. He argued that all cases of cosmetic or religious male circumcision should be criminalized, citing medical research showing the percentage of routine procedures that unintentionally inflict serious harm on patients.

Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (MSAH) guidelines discouraged circumcision of males and continued to withhold public health-care funding for such procedures. In its guidelines, which were recommendations rather than requirements per prior Supreme Court rulings, the ministry stated only licensed physicians should perform nonmedical circumcision of boys, a child's guardians should be informed of the risks and irreversibility of the procedure, and it should not be carried out on boys old enough to understand the procedure without their consent. Members of the Muslim and Jewish communities continued to express disagreement with the guidelines. The ombudsman for children in the Ministry of Justice did not renew her 2018 request to the MSAH asking it to establish legally binding regulations on nonmedical circumcision.

After the government of Prime Minister Juha Sipilä resigned in March, parliament dismissed without a vote a proposed animal welfare law it had been debating since 2018. The bill would have required prior stunning of animals before slaughter in all cases, eliminating the existing exemption allowing simultaneous stunning and killing in cases of religious slaughter. By year's end, the new parliament had not taken the bill up again. Jewish community leaders also criticized the restrictions in the existing law, which they said hindered their community's ability to slaughter animals in a religiously approved manner and caused them to import kosher meat at higher prices.

NGOs working with migrants, including the Finnish Refugee Advice Centre and Amnesty, continued to raise concerns about the ability of religious minorities housed in migrant reception centers to worship without harassment by other migrants held within the same center.

While the government did not release detailed reports on asylum applicants categorized by religion, immigration officials and representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses stated the number of Jehovah's Witnesses from Russia applying for asylum on the grounds of religious persecution remained high. Jehovah's Witness representatives said the government denied most of the asylum claims, stating that only Church officials and not regular members were under threat of persecution in

Russia. Immigration officials said membership in the Church did not in and of itself guarantee asylum.

According to a senior military officer, the military maintained a zero-tolerance policy regarding hate speech and hate crimes, including religiously motivated incidents. Unit commanders initiated investigations of reported incidents. If the commander judged the infraction to be minor, he or she administered a formal reprimand or other punishment. For more serious offenses, the commander reported the investigation up the chain of command, and military authorities might refer the case to civilian courts. The officer also said that the military accommodated, per regulation, religious dietary needs and fasting requirements, and afforded religious leave and prayer time to all personnel.

Police reported 63 cases of refusal to perform compulsory military or civilian service, but very few of these cases involved Jehovah's Witnesses according to representatives of the Jehovah's Witness organization. Police did not indicate how many refusals were religiously motivated.

In September Ombudsman for Nondiscrimination Kirsi Pimia recommended public swimming pools permit Muslim women to wear burkinis. Pimia said there were cases of burkini-wearing women being turned away from public swimming pools. She added that banning burkinis could amount to discrimination based on religion and gender.

In August Finns Party leader Halla-aho stated during a parliamentary group meeting the party did not intend to let authorities press charges against Finns Party MP Juha Maenpaa for ethnic agitation or disturbance of religious peace. During a June session of parliament, Maenpaa equated asylum seekers from Muslim majority countries with alien or invasive species. In August police started a preliminary investigation into Maenpaa's remarks. In September Center Party Speaker of Parliament Matti Vanhanen stated it was inappropriate for an MP to comment on a legal case in advance if there were a possibility parliament would judge the case. According to the constitution, if the prosecutor sought to prosecute Maenpaa, a five-sixths majority of parliament would have to agree to revoke his parliamentary immunity.

In August media reported a recently elected MP, Hussein al-Tae of the Social Democratic Party, had in 2014 and possibly as late as 2016, made anti-Semitic comments online, including comparing Israel to ISIS. According to *The Jerusalem Post* newspaper, parliament reversed its decision to suspend al-Tae after he



apologized for his remarks. The newspaper quoted an official with the Simon Wiesenthal Center as stating al-Tae was “obviously an anti-Semite” and wondering how he could be a member in good standing of any social democratic party. By year’s end, neither the Social Democratic Party nor parliament had taken any disciplinary action against al-Tae.

The government allocated 114 million euros (\$128.09 million) to the ELC and 2.54 million euros (\$2.85 million) to the Finnish Orthodox Church. The MEC allotted a total of 524,000 euros (\$589,000) to all other registered religious organizations. All the allocations were unchanged from 2018. The MEC additionally made a one-time grant to the Jewish Community of Helsinki of 300,000 euros (\$337,000) for security of the Helsinki Synagogue and community center.

The MEC awarded a total of 80,000 euros (\$89,900) to promote interfaith dialogue, the same amount as in 2018. The same two organizations as in the previous year split the funding: the National Forum for Cooperation of Religions (CORE Forum), which is composed of representatives from the largest religious denominations, and Fokus, an interfaith and intercultural organization.

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

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

In 2018, the latest period for which data were available, police reported 155 hate crimes against members of religious groups, including crimes involving assault, threats and harassment, discrimination, and vandalism, compared with 235 such incidents in 2017. There were 53 incidents involving Muslims, 52 involving Christians, including three involving Jehovah’s Witnesses, 21 involving Jews, and 29 involving others or unknown religious groups. Police did not, however, cite any details of the incidents or release information on how many were motivated solely by religion.

A CORE Forum survey published in March of hate crimes between 2014 and 2018 reported 18 percent of incidents were religiously motivated. The most common targets of these crimes were members of the Jewish and Muslim communities.

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

Despite the ban against it, the NRM continued to operate a website and make statements promoting discrimination or violence against Jews and Muslims and participated in demonstrations, according to press reports. The website contained articles denying the Holocaust, stating that Jewish leaders treat “white people as Muslim terrorists,” and labeling Muslim women and children of ISIS fighters as even more dangerous than their husbands and fathers. According to authorities, the NRM also established a closer relationship with the nativist Soldiers of Odin, and members of both groups often participated in each other’s demonstrations. Superintendent of the National Police Board Timo Kilpelainen told the media the increased cooperation could be due to the ongoing judicial process surrounding NRM’s ban. At the start of the judicial process, the Soldiers of Odin had offered their support to the NRM. According to media reports, the NRM also created two additional associations, Finnish Aid and Unity of the People, so its members could become integrated with those groups should the ban become permanent.

On November 9, a self-styled national socialist group called Towards Freedom! organized a demonstration in Helsinki. According to Tommi Kotonen, a Jyväskylä University researcher, NRM activists were likely behind the group. The demonstration coincided with the anniversary of the Kristallnacht pogrom against Jews in Nazi Germany in 1938. Protesters at the demonstration handed out fliers and waved flags bearing symbols resembling the Nazi swastika. According to a report on the website of national broadcaster Yle, police were investigating whether NRM had violated its ban by operating under the Towards Freedom! name. During the evening, according to the same report, unknown individuals placed yellow Star of David stickers with the word “Jude” (“Jew”) at sites around the city, including near a synagogue and the Israeli embassy.

According to media reports, in August the anti-immigrant Nationalist Alliance organized a memorial march in Turku, which included participation by the NRM, to commemorate the victims of a 2017 stabbing by a Moroccan asylum seeker. Approximately 250 persons joined the march. Finns Party MP Vilhelm Junnila spoke at the event, calling on the city to commemorate the victims by illuminating the Kirjastosilta Bridge in the colors of the national flag every August 18. Approximately 500 persons participated in a counterdemonstration titled “Turku Without Nazis.”

Muslim groups, such as the Islamic Congregation of Finland, continued to seek adequate houses of worship to match their growing population, but said they were hindered by insufficient funds to purchase property, given that most Muslims did not belong to congregations registered with the government. Except for a handful

of purpose-built mosques, most mosques were in converted commercial spaces. In August Yle reported the Mikkeli Islamic Cultural Association, an unregistered group with approximately 30 members, was in the process of establishing a mosque in the town of Mikkeli, but authorities prohibited it from using the building it selected until the town issued a different building permit and the group had made required fire safety improvements. The building was under renovation at year's end.

The nondiscrimination ombudsman's office reported receiving 35 complaints of religious discrimination in 2018 – 4 percent of total discrimination complaints – compared with 55 complaints in 2017. In one instance the report cited, a district court fined a shop owner, ruling the owner had discriminated against woman wearing a *niqab* by refusing her service.

In September ECRI published a report on racism and intolerance in the country that stated hate crimes had increased in recent years, especially against Muslims and refugees (many of whom are Muslim). It added that intolerant speech in public discourse was increasing and principally directed against the Muslim community and asylum seekers (many of whom belong to religious minorities). It stated some members of the Finns Party made anti-Muslim statements in public. According to the report, anti-Semitic rhetoric on the internet was “commonplace” and certain extremist groups, especially neo-Nazis such as the national branch of the NRM, “engage[d] in the systematic use of hate speech.” It also stated Nazi swastikas had become more visible in public spaces. The report called on the government to set up a comprehensive data collection system for hate crimes and hate speech.

In May the European Commission carried out a study in each EU member state on perceptions of discrimination and published the results in September. According to the findings, 29 percent of respondents believed discrimination on the basis of religion or belief was widespread in Finland, while 67 percent said it was rare; 75 percent would be comfortable with having a person of a different religion than the majority of the population occupy the highest elected political position in the country. In addition, 86 percent said they would be comfortable working closely with a Christian, and 81 percent said they would be with an atheist, 82 percent with a Jew, 80 percent with a Buddhist, and 76 percent with a Muslim. Asked how they would feel if their child were in a “love relationship” with an individual belonging to various groups, 90 percent said they would be comfortable if the partner were Christian, 83 percent if atheist, 81 percent if Jewish, 77 percent if Buddhist, and 66 percent if Muslim.

In January the European Commission published a Special Eurobarometer survey of perceptions of anti-Semitism in December 2018 in each EU member state. According to the survey, 76 percent of residents believed anti-Semitism was not a problem in Finland, and 49 percent believed it had stayed the same over the previous five years. The percentage who believed that anti-Semitism was a problem in nine different categories was as follows: Holocaust denial, 19 percent; on the internet, 25 percent; anti-Semitic graffiti or vandalism, 12 percent; expression of hostility or threats against Jews in public places, 15 percent; desecration of Jewish cemeteries, 13 percent; physical attacks against Jews, 12 percent; anti-Semitism in schools and universities, 9 percent; anti-Semitism in political life, 12 percent; and anti-Semitism in the media, 14 percent.

The website *Magneettimedia* continued to post anti-Semitic content. In August it published an article stating that “not Islamic but Zionist terrorism” was behind the 2017 Turku “terrorist attack,” and that, “Israel and its associated Zionists have set their sights on the confrontation between the Christian world and the Islamic world.” Major companies and consumer brands in the country continued to boycott the chain of department stores owned by the former owner of *Magneettimedia*, Juha Karkkainen, due to his anti-Semitic views; no new companies or brands announced they would join the boycott.

Yle and other media reported that in March unknown persons spray-painted anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim expletives on the outside wall of a Shia mosque, one of the largest in the country, in the eastern Helsinki district of Mellunmaki on two consecutive mornings. The chair of the Resalat Islamic Society said such vandalism occurred sporadically and that the websites of the society were sometimes hacked. He added that staff at the society had received death threats. Helsinki police were investigating the case at year’s end.

According to the Israeli embassy, in July security camera footage showed an individual kicking in the embassy’s reinforced glass front door and gesturing at the Israeli flag in a derogatory manner, including with Nazi salutes. The entrance of the building housing the embassy also was defaced with stickers glorifying Adolf Hitler. The Israeli Ambassador characterized the incident as part of an escalation of acts of vandalism targeting Jewish property over a period of more than one year. Prior incidents included anti-Semitic graffiti targeting both the embassy and the Jewish community center in Helsinki. The Israeli Ambassador expressed frustration over the lack of an effective police or government response to the attacks.

In May a man approached Petri Sarvamaa, a European Parliament MP campaigning for reelection, on the street, called him a derogatory slur for a Jewish person, and threatened him.

Representatives of religious groups attended ceremonies hosted in their counterparts' houses of worship. Finn Church Aid (FCA), associated with the ELC, again hosted an interreligious iftar, bringing together representatives from the major religious denominations in the capital region, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and municipal governments.

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

Embassy staff met with officials from the Ministries of Justice, Interior, and Foreign Affairs to discuss religious intolerance, the promotion of interfaith dialogue, the treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses in asylum adjudication, and regulations covering kosher slaughter of animals. The embassy encouraged government officials to take steps to ensure that, pursuant to the Terezin Declaration, Holocaust survivors and their heirs received just compensation for assets seized by Nazi Germany, including by improving art provenance research in museums in the country.

Embassy staff met with Christian, Jewish, and Muslim clergy and lay activists from these communities, the Finnish Ecumenical Council, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other minority religious groups to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country. Embassy staff and members of the Jewish and Muslim communities discussed these communities' shared concerns about the impact of the government guidelines discouraging male circumcision, religiously motivated crimes, proposed legislation that would prohibit forms of religious animal slaughter, and continued issues with establishing a sufficient number of mosques for the Muslim population. Embassy staff also discussed anti-Muslim discrimination with representatives from different Muslim congregations and met regularly with NGOs such as Core Forum and FCA. Embassy staff discussed with Jehovah's Witness community representatives changes to the military service exemption and the high rate of denial of asylum applications for religious persecution by Jehovah's Witnesses from Russia.

The embassy observed the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Violence Based on Religion or Belief through a Twitter message, and retweeting the Secretary of State's press statement, "International Commitment to Protect

Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief.” The embassy also recognized the work of interfaith organizations in promoting religious tolerance by hosting an iftar and hosting a CORE Forum board meeting at the embassy. A senior embassy official delivered remarks promoting interfaith cooperation at both events.

Embassy staff met with prominent activists in the country’s Uighur community to discuss, among other topics, China’s harassment of Uighur activists within Finland and elsewhere.