

# ARMENIA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution states that everyone has freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. It recognizes the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) as the national church and preserver of national identity but also establishes separation of religious organizations and the state. The law prohibits, but does not define, proselytism, which may be interpreted as forced conversion. The trial continued of a prominent Baha'i lawyer, Edward Manasyan, charged in 2017 with organizing illegal immigration; Baha'i community members said they believed the charges were brought because of his religion. The country's highest court of appeal, the Court of Cassation, rejected a Baha'i appeal alleging the government had illegally wiretapped the group and used the information gathered to prosecute Manasyan. Yezidi human rights activist Sashik Sultanyan was indicted on charges of "inciting hatred" based on off-the-record comments he made to a journalist criticizing the treatment of Yezidis in the country that were surreptitiously recorded and posted online by the journalist. Sultanyan's prosecution drew strong criticism from international human rights groups. In February, the government announced it planned to remove a course on the history of the Armenian Church from the mandatory school curriculum as part of a broader educational reform, generating significant public debate. A September Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe resolution on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict cited the "catastrophic impact" of the long-running conflict "on the cultural heritage and property of the region, for which both Armenia and Azerbaijan have a responsibility."

Representatives of some religious minorities, such as the Seventh-day Adventists and several evangelical groups, as well as the Jehovah's Witnesses, reported that public attitudes towards them had generally improved compared with the previous year and reported little or no negative content in the media during the year. Anonymous social media users, however, continued to target the evangelical Word of Life Church with online hate speech and harassment. Some members of the Jewish community and civil society members reported that antisemitism, including negative speech by members of the public and vandalism, increased after Azerbaijan used Israeli-supplied weapons during intensive fighting in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the fall of 2020. During June parliamentary elections, an opposition figure who had never held elected office criticized the Word of Life Church and Jehovah's Witnesses, referring to them as "sects," a term these religious groups did not use to describe themselves and which was generally perceived as pejorative. Human rights groups stated that verbal targeting of

religious minorities, both on and offline, decreased during the year, as the individuals who had previously targeted religious groups largely pivoted to discussing the aftermath of fall 2020 fighting and COVID-19. On February 12, the Holocaust and Genocide Memorial was vandalized for the third time since the 2020 fighting. Representatives of minority religious groups stated that societal and family pressure remained a major deterrent for ethnic Armenians to practice a religion other than the Armenian Apostolic faith.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to promote religious tolerance, respect for religious minorities, and interfaith dialogue during meetings with government officials. Embassy representatives raised with government officials and members of parliament the cases of criminal prosecution of Yezidi and Baha'i leaders and monitored their trials. The Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly consulted with religious groups, including the AAC, evangelical Christians and other Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Yezidis, the Jewish community, Apostolic Assyrians, Pentecostals, and Baha'is, and individual members of the Muslim community, to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country. Embassy officials engaged government officials and civil society representatives to discuss the impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on religious groups and religious sites of significance to Armenian communities.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.0 million (midyear 2021). According to the 2011 census, approximately 92 percent of the population identifies as Armenian Apostolic. Other religious groups include Roman Catholics, Armenian Uniate (Mekhitarist) Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and evangelical Christians, including Armenian Evangelical Church adherents, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, charismatic Christians, and Jehovah's Witnesses. There are also followers of the Church of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East, as well as Molokan Christians, Yezidis, Jews, Baha'is, Shia Muslims, Sunni Muslims, and pagans who are adherents of a pre-Christian faith. According to a poll the International Republican Institute released in February, 87 percent of respondents identified as Armenian Apostolic, 2 percent as Roman Catholic, and 2 percent as Orthodox Christian. According to members of the Jewish community, there are approximately 800 to 1,000 Jews. According to the census, there are more than 35,000 Yezidis, with more recent estimates by Yezidi human rights activists and academics suggesting a figure of 50,000. Yezidis are concentrated primarily in

agricultural areas northwest of Yerevan around Mount Aragats. Armenian Uniate Catholics live primarily in the north. Most Muslims are Shia, including Iranians and temporary residents from the Middle East.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right includes the freedom to change one's religion or beliefs and the freedom to manifest religion or belief in rituals of worship, such as preaching or church ceremonies, either alone or in community with others, in public or in private. The constitution allows restrictions on this right to protect state security, public order, health and morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion and establishes separation of "religious organizations" and the state. It recognizes the "exclusive mission of the Armenian Apostolic Church" as the national church in the "spiritual life, development of the national culture, and preservation of the national identity of the people of Armenia." The constitution prohibits the exercise of fundamental rights and freedoms to incite religious hatred. It stipulates that national minorities shall have the right to preserve and develop their traditions, religion, language, and culture.

The law prohibits, but does not define, "soul hunting," a term describing both proselytism and forced conversion. The law prohibits religious organizations with spiritual centers located outside the country from receiving funding from those foreign centers, but there is no mechanism to enforce the law. The law also prohibits religious organizations from funding or being funded by political parties.

The law does not categorize or regulate the residence status of foreign religious volunteers.

By law, a registered religious group may minister to the religious and spiritual needs of its faithful; perform religious liturgies, rites, and ceremonies; establish groups for religious instruction; engage in theological, religious, historical, and cultural studies; train members for the clergy or for scientific and pedagogical purposes; obtain and utilize objects and materials of religious significance; use media; establish ties with religious organizations in other countries; and engage in charity. The law does not require religious groups to register, but they must do so to conduct business in their own name (e.g., to own property, rent property, and

establish bank accounts). The law does not stipulate rights accorded to unregistered groups.

To register as a legal entity, a religious community must present to the Office of the State Registrar an assessment from the Office of the Prime Minister's Division of Religious Affairs and National Minorities stating its expert opinion on whether the community complies with the requirements of the law that it be based on "historically recognized holy scripture." It also must be "free from materialism and [be] of a spiritual nature," have at least 200 adult members, and follow a doctrine espoused by a member of the "international modern system" of religious communities. The law does not define "free from materialism" or state which religious communities are part of the "international modern system." The law specifies that this list of registration requirements, to which the Division of Religious Affairs and National Minorities must attest, does not apply to a religious organization based on the faith of one of the groups recognized as national minorities, including Assyrians, Kurds, Russians, and Yezidis, among others. A religious community may appeal a decision by the Office of the State Registrar through the courts.

The criminal code prohibits "obstruction of the right to exercise freedom of religion" and prescribes punishment ranging from fines of up to 200,000 drams (\$410) to detention for up to two months.

The Office of the Human Rights Defender (ombudsperson) has a mandate to address violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of religion, committed by officials of state and local governments. The ombudsperson may make recommendations but does not have the power to enforce them.

The law prohibits employees of the National Security Service (NSS) from being members of a religious organization, but does not define the meaning of "membership" in a religious organization. The law prohibits members of the police, military, and the NSS, as well as prosecutors, diplomats, and public servants, from using their official positions for the benefit of "religious associations" or from preaching in support of them. While the law defines a "religious organization" as an association of citizens established for professing a common faith as well as for fulfilling other religious needs, it provides no definition for "religious associations." A military service member may not establish a religious association. If a member of the military is a member of a religious association, the member does not have the right to preach to other service

personnel during military service. The law also prohibits police, prosecutors, diplomats, and community servants (employees of local municipalities) from conducting religious activities while performing official duties. The law has not been interpreted as barring affected individuals from attending worship services or participating in other religious rituals.

The penitentiary code allows penal institutions to invite clergy members to conduct religious ceremonies and use religious objects and literature. Prisoners may request spiritual assistance from the religious group of their choice. A joint Ministry of Defense-AAC agreement allows only AAC clergy to serve as military chaplains.

The law allows the AAC free access to, and the right to station representatives in, hospitals, orphanages, boarding schools, military units, and places of detention, while other religious groups may have representatives in these locations only with permission from the head of the institution. The law also stipulates the state shall not interfere with the AAC's exclusive right to preach freely and spread its beliefs throughout the entire territory of the country.

The law mandates public education be secular and states, "Religious activity and preaching in public educational institutions is prohibited," with the exception of cases provided for by law. A course on the history of the Armenian Church (HAC), which extends beyond the teaching of history to include AAC values and practices, remains a part of the recommended school curriculum for 2021-22 and 2022-23. If a public or private school chooses to include the course, it becomes mandatory for all students in grades five to 11, with no opt-out provision for students or their parents.

The AAC has the right to participate in the development of the syllabi and textbooks for the HAC course and to define the qualifications of the teachers. While the Church may nominate candidates to teach the course, HAC teachers are state employees. The law grants the AAC the right to organize voluntary extracurricular religious instruction classes in state educational institutions. Other religious groups may provide religious instruction to their members in their own facilities but not within the premises of state educational institutions.

The labor code prohibits employers from collecting and analyzing data on the religious views of employees. The labor code authorizes up to four days of unpaid leave for observing national and religious holidays or remembrance days, regardless of religious affiliation.

The law provides for two types of service for conscientious objectors as an alternative to compulsory, two-year military service: alternative (noncombat) military service for 30 months or alternative labor service for 36 months. Evasion of alternative service is a criminal offense. Penalties range from two months' detention to eight years' imprisonment, depending on the circumstances of the case.

The criminal code prohibits incitement of religious hatred by calling for violence through public statements, mass media, or using one's public position and prescribes punishments ranging from fines of 200,000 to 500,000 drams (\$410-\$1,000) to prison terms of between two and six years.

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

### **Government Practices**

The trial continued of Edward Manasyan, a lawyer and prominent member of the Baha'i community, who was charged in 2017 with facilitating illegal immigration by advising Iranians wishing to settle in the country. Members of the Baha'i community said authorities initiated the case because of Manasyan's religious beliefs. On March 26, the Court of Cassation, the highest court of appeals in the country, rejected the community's appeal of a lower court's 2020 decisions rejecting appeals by the community alleging the NSS had illegally wiretapped its secretary and its office and used the information gathered to charge Manasyan. On September 25, the Baha'i community filed an appeal with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) on behalf of the secretary of the community. The community filed two additional appeals with the ECHR, one on behalf of the chairman of the community and another as a religious organization, on October 5. At year's end, Manasyan's trial, presided over by Judge Arman Hovhannisyan in Yerevan's First Instance court, was continuing.

On July 29, Yezidi human rights activist Sashik Sultanyan was indicted on charges of "inciting hatred," punishable by three to six years' imprisonment, for comments he made to a journalist (that he said were supposed to be "off the record") criticizing the treatment of Yezidis in the country that the journalist surreptitiously recorded and then published. On May 26, a group of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including Transparency International, published a joint letter stating the case set a precedent that would "hinder any public discussion of problems related to discrimination or human rights of minorities by anyone,

including members of national or ethnic minority communities.” Human Rights Watch issued a statement calling the prosecution malicious and the criminal indictment spurious. On August 6, the ombudsperson issued a statement saying that his office shared these concerns and that, even if some of Sultanyan’s criticisms were inaccurate, he should not be held criminally liable. The first hearing in the case took place on November 24 in Yerevan’s First Instance Court, presided over by Judge Karen Farkhoyan. At year’s end, Sultanyan’s trial was ongoing.

Almost all public and private schools continued to teach the HAC course throughout the country in grades five through 11. However, on February 4, as part of a larger education reform effort, the government approved new state standards for public education that would remove the HAC course from the mandatory curriculum, inserting the history of the AAC into a broader curriculum on Armenian studies. The new standards were undergoing pilot studies in Tavush Region during the academic year. The Ministry of Education stated it planned to implement the revised standards in full beginning in 2023 after training teachers and revising the existing educational materials.

The government’s decision to eliminate the HAC course generated significant public debate. While many individuals, including parents, teachers, and AAC clergy, said the course helped to develop a value system based on Armenian identity, others said schools should remain secular and moral values could be developed outside the HAC course. Various civil society actors, who had long criticized the HAC course as religious indoctrination, welcomed the decision.

On April 28, following reports that there would be a decrease of approximately 75 percent in the academic hours allocated for the HAC course as a result of the education reforms approved in February, the AAC issued a statement expressing strong disagreement both with the decision to alter HAC course instruction and the educational reform in general. The statement said, “Considering the anti-national policy of excluding the subject ‘History of the Armenian Church’ from the curriculum of the required subjects implemented by the authorities, the Subgroup on Educational Issues of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin will make every effort to prevent this destructive approach and to achieve the fulfillment of its historical, moral and legal imperative to serve the vital interests of our people.”

According to official information from the Ministry of Justice, to satisfy the spiritual needs of detainees and convicts, AAC clergymen regularly visited penitentiaries, organized baptisms, offered liturgies, and celebrated holidays with

them. The ministry did not indicate whether clergy of other religious groups were able to provide spiritual services to detainees or convicts.

Although the law prohibiting membership in a religious group remained in effect for employees of the NSS (the government eliminated such restrictions for police and members of penitentiary and rescue services in 2020 in advance of a Constitutional Court ruling that the prohibition was unconstitutional), government officials did not report any dismissals of NSS staff during the year for membership in, or association with, a religious group. According to one religious minority group, most of its members did not seek public employment despite the 2020 liberalization, due to an ingrained fear that they might eventually have to give up their faith if they worked in the public sector.

On October 4, a trial court ruled in favor of restoring the rights of an evangelical Christian schoolteacher in Sevan in a court case brought on her behalf by the Center for Religion and Law, an NGO. The school principal fired the teacher in January, after what the NGO said was years of pressure and persecution due to her disagreements with the principal; according to the NGO, the principal used her religious affiliation as one of the reasons for her dismissal. The NGO said that in 2020, the principal invited a city AAC priest to a pedagogical council session during which there was a discussion of the teacher's religious views and the priest described evangelical Christian churches as destructive sects, spies, and a "threat to national security more dangerous than the coronavirus." The trial court declared the teacher's dismissal invalid, restored the teacher to her position, and ordered the school to pay back wages.

Although there was no mechanism for enforcing the legal provision prohibiting funding of religious organizations by spiritual centers located outside the country, several religious organizations said they complied with the ban and restricted their operations because they did not want to violate the law.

According to experts, the absence of legal provisions regulating the invitation and stay of foreign religious volunteers affected several religious minority groups, whose foreign volunteers had to leave the country after 180 days and then return to renew their tourist status. Such travel was particularly difficult under restrictions related to COVID-19.

There were reports of unsubstantiated rejection of religion-based asylum claims during the year. According to individuals familiar with asylum procedures, religious background was not a major factor in the rejection of asylum claims in



initial asylum procedures. However, the same sources stated the government's national security assessment of cases continued to be a major factor in rejections at the stage of judicial review, and negative security assessments were reportedly more likely where non-Christians were concerned.

As of October, 124 Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors to military service were working in the alternative civilian labor service program, a number similar to previous years, and 302 had finished their service in the program. The alternative service appointments included positions in various hospitals, local utility companies, park maintenance services, boarding schools, eldercare facilities, and orphanages. According to government sources, Jehovah's Witnesses were the only individuals participating in these civilian labor programs, and none chose to serve in alternative military service.

On May 19, the government announced an amnesty for those who failed to undertake military or alternative service or had not taken advantage of a government program allowing men who had not undertaken military service before age 27 to pay a fine to the Ministry of Defense (MOD) in order to avoid criminal prosecution. The program allowed men who fled the country to avoid military service to return. Jehovah's Witnesses, however, stated that there was no mechanism to pay the fine to another agency if a person had a religious objection to contributing funds to the MOD. The amnesty allowed at least one Jehovah's Witness who had refused to pay the fine to the MOD for reasons of faith to avoid criminal prosecution.

Human rights groups assessed there was a public deterioration in relations between the AAC and the government during the year. In December 2020, Catholicos Garegin II, the head of the AAC, called on Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to resign. On June 12, at an election campaign rally, the Prime Minister stated that corrupt AAC clergy were discrediting the Church. In response, the press service of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin (the governing body of the AAC) stated that Pashinyan "continues making unfounded accusations against the Armenian Apostolic Church during his election campaign," adding that "the attitude of current government toward the Church and national and spiritual values is well-known to our people."

On November 17, parliament approved changes to the law on holidays and memorial days, removing January 5 (Christmas Eve) and 7 (Remembrance Day of the Dead) from the list of public holidays, despite an AAC appeal to parliament to retain them. January 6, AAC Christmas, remained an official holiday. The

Ministry of Economy, which proposed the legislation, stated that the reduction in public holidays during the New Year's/Christmas period from eight to four days would reduce the negative effect on the economy.

There were no reported sessions during the year of the official working group on government-AAC relations, a group established in 2019.

The government invited AAC priests to perform religious rites at the funerals of individuals who died during the fall 2020 conflict, even if they were not members of the AAC. While most religious minority groups affected said they did not see this practice as problematic, one religious minority group noted it would have appreciated being asked first. The group stated some families were bewildered by the AAC priest's presence but did not speak up to identify their loved one's faith; the group said families may have worried such a statement could affect the government's decision to provide funerals and grave sites.

In a resolution on "Humanitarian consequences of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan/Nagorno-Karabakh conflict" adopted on September 27, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe stated that "the long running conflict has had a catastrophic impact on the cultural heritage and property of the region, for which both Armenia and Azerbaijan have a responsibility." The assembly condemned the damage and destruction for which it said Armenia was responsible in the areas previously controlled by Armenia-supported separatists, which became again under Azerbaijani control, "and in particular the almost total destruction and looting of Aghdam, Fuzuli, and other areas over the last 30 years, as well as the transfer of cultural heritage."

According to diplomats, civil society representatives, and journalists who visited the territories, while under the control of Armenia-supported separatists, hundreds of sites, including most mosques, shrines, and cemeteries used by the region's ethnic Azerbaijani communities – approximately 400,000 people – were looted, vandalized, desecrated, and/or destroyed while under Armenian control.

An international photojournalist, Reza Deghati, known professionally as "REZA," documented the systematic destruction of dozens of Azerbaijani cemeteries in Fuzuli, Aghdam, Zangelan, Kelbajar, and Jebrayil. Graves were desecrated; in some instances, holes were dug out to rob graves, while other sites showed evidence of the destruction and exhumation by heavy construction equipment. The methodical vandalism of headstones left few individual graves untouched. Many graves had the carefully hewn faces of the deceased (carved into gravestones)

destroyed by hammers or similar objects. Additionally, the remains from Azerbaijani graves were exhumed and gold teeth removed, leaving skulls and bones strewn across Azerbaijani cemeteries or in some cases completely removed. According to Deghati, Armenian graves remained virtually undisturbed.

According to civil society representatives, the United Nations Development Program, and the Azerbaijani government, extensive mining of the territories returned to Azerbaijan made it impossible to access a vast majority of hundreds of religious sites in towns and villages, and the extent of any damage to these sites might remain unknown for years. Examples of known damage to significant religious sites include the 19th-century Haji Alakbar Mosque in Fuzuli District, which was destroyed, and the Juma Mosque in Aghdam, which was vandalized with Armenian-language graffiti and whose *mehrab* (the niche in the wall that indicates the direction of Mecca) was riddled with bullet holes. Cemeteries throughout Aghdam were desecrated, looted, and/or destroyed, including the sacred and historic 18th-century tombs of Imarat Garvand Cemetery, the city's "Martyrs' Alley." Western diplomats visiting Martyrs' Alley reported seeing holes where bodies were once interred and that only one broken headstone remained in the cemetery. Because religion and ethnicity are closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

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

Some religious minorities, such as Seventh-day Adventists and several evangelical Christian groups, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses, reported that public attitudes toward them had generally improved compared with the previous year and said there was little or no negative media coverage concerning them. While NGOs said there were fewer antisemitic social media posts than in the previous year, there were some antisemitic references in posts criticizing a Jewish, U.S. citizen businessperson.

The evangelical Word of Life Church, which members of the prior government accused of having a role in organizing the 2018 revolution, however, was the object of ongoing hate speech and vilification by anonymous social media accounts opened specifically to target them, according to Church leaders. The hate speech – including accusations of links with Azerbaijan and vilification for supporting anti-Covid-19 vaccination efforts – was posted on platforms such as Telegram, YouTube, and Facebook. Unknown individuals also created a Facebook account falsely attributed to the Church's leader, Senior Pastor Artur Simonyan, that espoused offensive views. The Church reported the hate speech and the falsified

account to the relevant social media companies, but the companies said they did not find evidence that their standards had been violated. Simonyan said he had requested an official verified badge for his Facebook account – an emblem Facebook adds to pages to verify that they are authentic – to prevent the creation of more accounts falsely attributed to him but that the company had told him that his social media traffic was not sufficient to warrant a badge.

On February 18, the NSS terminated a criminal investigation it had launched in 2018 – on charges of incitement of religious hatred – into the creation of a Facebook page that falsely presented itself as associated both with the Word of Life Church and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s Civil Contract party. The NSS concluded the case lacked the elements of a crime.

Members of the Jewish community reported a rise in antisemitism since the onset of intensive fighting with Azerbaijan in the fall of 2020, an increase that the Jewish community and public media largely attributed to Azerbaijani use of Israeli-produced weapons. Jewish community members stated that antisemitic slurs were again posted on social media platforms, in some cases together with cartoons depicting Jews in an offensive manner. The use of offensive slurs was particularly prevalent in posts on Facebook by an anonymous, antigovernment individuals targeting the Jewish leader of an international foundation. Members of the Jewish community also reported antisemitic comments directed at them on public transport.

According to representatives of religious minorities, there were fewer instances of groups targeting religious minorities for political purposes during campaigning for parliamentary elections in June than in prior elections. Religious minority activists stated that during the campaign, an opposition figure who had never held elected office and whom a representative of a civil society group characterized as increasingly irrelevant, stated that religious organizations took an active part in overturning the government in 2018 and would play a key role in the elections. He singled out Word of Life as particularly active. He also stated that “pastors tell the congregations whom to vote for, and they all do,” and that “even Jehovah’s Witnesses interfere in the political process,” adding that minority religious groups were funded from abroad. He referred to both the Word of Life and Jehovah’s Witnesses as “sects,” a term these religious groups did not use to describe themselves and which was generally perceived as pejorative.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some religious groups increased their online presence, generating both positive and negative reactions in online comments.

Religious minority leaders stated that since the beginning of 2020, there had been less verbal targeting of religious minorities, both on and offline, as the individuals who had previously targeted them largely pivoted to discussing the aftermath of the 2020 fall fighting and the COVID-19 pandemic.

In December 2020, the International Republican Institute released a nationwide poll examining public opinion on topics including human rights and hate speech, with a specific focus on social media. The poll was conducted in August 2020. According to the poll, 6 percent of the respondents agreed that freedom of thought, conscience, and religion was always violated (the question did not specify by whom), while another 45 percent said the violation occurred during a specific period; 33 percent said it occurred before the 2018 revolution, 6 percent said after April 2018, and 6 percent said during the 2020 state of emergency decreed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The same poll found that 55 percent of respondents believed that the rights of religious minorities were either very protected or somewhat protected in the country, and 18 percent believed that religious minorities were not at all protected or somewhat not protected, with the rest refusing to answer. There was a difference in the perception of protection between members of the AAC (74 percent said they were protected) and members of other religious groups (58 percent said they were protected). Of those surveyed, 77 percent indicated that they had not seen cases of insulting, threatening, or hostile behavior toward a person based on his or her religion or belief. According to 35 percent of those surveyed, religious minorities were often or sometimes targeted by hate speech, while 53 percent said that religious minorities were never or rarely targeted. Forty-one percent believed religious minorities needed special protections from hate speech.

A minority religious group again reported societal and family pressure as the most significant deterrent to its members' freely practicing their belief.

Both the Hebrew- and Armenian-language sides of Yerevan's Holocaust and Genocide Memorial were defaced on February 12, for the third time in five months. In contrast to similar incidents in 2020, government officials criticized the act, restored the monument, and arrested a suspect. Then Yerevan mayor Hayk Marutyan issued a statement saying, "The desecration of any monument is completely unacceptable, especially memorials related to minorities living in our city." Then Parliamentary Vice Speaker Alen Simonyan also condemned the act, calling it a "crime against universal values" and saying that "those who committed this crime should be held to account." Former Prosperous Armenia Party member Naira Zohrabyan, a member of the Armenia-Israel friendship group, said that

“regardless of our attitude – and it is definitely negative – towards Israeli arms sales and overt military and political support to Azerbaijan ... [the] memorial cannot be desecrated,” adding, “I bow before the memory of the innocent victims of the Holocaust.”

According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, as in the previous year and contrary to years prior to 2020, there were no incidents of verbal harassment toward the group’s members. The group halted all public activities in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

On July 6, the Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF), a local NGO, held its Annual Media Award Ceremony for the best coverage of issues related to the freedom of religion or belief, awarding nine winners for their coverage of tolerance, peaceful coexistence, and diversity in the country. According to human rights NGOs, EPF’s religious tolerance and nondiscrimination initiative, which began in 2015, had had a positive impact on media coverage of religious issues in the country.

One Shia mosque, located in Yerevan, served all Islamic groups.

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

The Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to advocate religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue during meetings with government officials, including from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, members of parliament, and political party representatives. Embassy officials engaged government officials from the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport and the Office of the Human Rights Defender to discuss the impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on religious groups and religious sites of significance to Armenian communities. Embassy officials raised with government officials the cases of criminal prosecution of Yezidi and Baha’i leaders and monitored their trials.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly consulted the AAC, as well as minority religious groups, including evangelical Christians and other Protestants; Jehovah’s Witnesses; the Church of Jesus Christ; Yezidis; the Jewish community; Apostolic Assyrians; Pentecostals; and Baha’is, as well as individual Muslims, to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country. On social media, the embassy posted messages by the President and Secretary of State of the United States highlighting the importance of religious freedom and tolerance. Embassy officials also discussed religious freedom with human rights NGOs, including addressing religious discrimination faced by minority religious groups and the

impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on religious groups and religious sites that were significant to Armenian communities. Embassy officers participated as members of the EPF Annual Media Award jury and spoke on the importance of religious freedom in the ceremony to support coverage of religious tolerance in the media.