

KUWAIT 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution declares Islam to be the state religion but also declares freedom of belief is “absolute.” It stipulates that the state protects the freedom to practice one’s religion, provided such practice does not conflict with established customs, public policy, or morals. The constitution states that sharia is a main source of legislation and that all individuals are equal before the law, regardless of religion. Defamation of the three Abrahamic faiths (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity), publication or broadcast of material the government deems offensive to religious groups, and practices the government finds inconsistent with Islamic law are prohibited by law. The government prosecuted numerous individuals for remarks deemed religiously offensive, mostly for comments made online, and sentenced some to prison terms. In January, according to press and human rights activists, authorities arrested Mubarak al-Bathali as a part of a 2014 criminal court ruling that convicted him of inciting sectarian strife, insulting a group of society (Shia), and disrupting national unity through his Twitter posts. According to human rights activists and social media accounts, authorities arrested and interrogated religious freedom activist Nasser Dashti in July on charges of blasphemy for public statements he made criticizing religion and praising secularism. The government continued to appoint and pay the salaries of Sunni imams and provide the full basic text for weekly sermons preached at Sunni mosques. The government did not exercise the same oversight of Shia imams. The government paid the salaries of some Shia imams. The Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs (MAIA) opened investigations on three Sunni imams for delivering sermons perceived as politically motivated, insulting to other religious groups, or violating the national unity law. Minority religious groups said they were able to worship in private spaces without government interference provided they did not disturb their neighbors or violate laws regarding assembly and restrictions on proselytizing. Leaders of registered churches reported that government authorities allowed only citizens to sign official documents, even if the citizens were not among the churches’ ordained clergy. If there were no citizen members, the authorities recognized the highest church authority as the official signatory of the church. Most minority religious groups reported a continued lack of facilities for worship and difficulty obtaining permission to construct new facilities. The government did not accredit any religious schools or permit Shia religious training within the country. Shia leaders continued to report discrimination in clerical and public sector employment. The Ministry of Education continued to ban or censor instructional materials referring to the Holocaust or Israel.

Individuals continued to face societal pressure against conversion from Islam; some citizens who converted outside the country said their families harassed them because of their conversion. In January, a television journalist and announcer posted a video on Snapchat announcing that he was converting from Islam to Christianity. Reactions on social media varied, with some users stating the journalist had the right to choose his faith, and others saying he was an apostate risking damnation. In January, a prominent cleric issued a statement condemning the construction an interfaith center in the United Arab Emirates that would include a synagogue, church, and mosque. He also uploaded to YouTube a statement calling Jews “the brothers of apes and pigs, because they are essentially like them.” Hotels, stores, and businesses continued to mark non-Islamic holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali. News media continued to publish information about celebrations of religious holidays such as Christmas. Some Muslim clerics continued to express disapproval on social media of the celebration of non-Islamic holidays and called for more government action to restrict public expression of these holidays.

In November, embassy officials met with MAIA representatives to better understand the ministry’s efforts to promote religious tolerance, its relationship with religious minority groups, and the activities of its Center for the Promotion of Moderation. During the year, embassy officials met with religious leaders and members of the Sunni, Shia, Bohra, Hindu, Baha’i, and Christian communities to discuss the groups’ needs. In May, November, and December, the Ambassador hosted roundtables with representatives from minority faiths, including the Bohra, Hindu, Baha’i, and Christian communities, to discuss a broad range of religious freedom issues. The group discussed the status of religious freedom in the country, the impact of COVID-19 shutdowns on their communities, barriers to religious practice caused by the government’s administrative procedures for religious minority groups, and how to promote dialogue among expatriate religious minority communities and Kuwaiti citizens.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.0 million (midyear 2021). U.S. government figures also cite the Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI), a local government agency, reporting that the country’s total population was 4.6 million for 2021. As of June, PACI reported there were 1.5 million citizens and 3.2 million noncitizens. PACI estimates 75 percent of citizens and noncitizens are Muslims. The national census does not distinguish between Shia

and Sunni Muslims. Nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and media estimate approximately 70 percent of citizens are Sunni Muslims, while the remaining 30 percent are Shia Muslims (including Ahmadi and Ismaili Muslims, whom the government counts as Shia). PACI estimates 18 percent of citizens and noncitizens are Christian and 7 percent of citizens and noncitizens are members of non-Abrahamic faiths. Community leaders indicated there are 288 Christian citizens and a handful of Baha'i citizens. There are no known Jewish citizens, according to PACI.

According to information from PACI released in June, 63 percent of the expatriate population is Muslim, 26 percent Christian, and 11 percent from non-Abrahamic faiths. Sources in various noncitizen communities state that approximately 5 percent of the expatriate Muslim population is Shia, while Hindus and Buddhist account for the majority of the non-Abrahamic faith population. Informal estimates by members of different faiths indicate there are approximately 250,000 Hindus, 100,000 Buddhists, 25,000 Bohra Muslims, 10,000 to 12,000 Sikhs, 7,000 Druze, and 400 Baha'is.

While some geographic areas have higher concentrations of either Sunnis or Shia, the two groups are distributed uniformly throughout most of the country. Sources in the Shia community state that approximately 60 percent of the Bidoon (long-time stateless Arab resident) population is Shia.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares Islam to be the religion of the state and the freedom of belief to be “absolute.” It provides for state protection of the freedom to practice all religions, provided such practice is “in accordance with established customs, and does not conflict with public policy or morals.”

The constitution declares sharia to be a main source of legislation and all individuals to be equal before the law regardless of religion. It declares the emir shall be Muslim (the emir and ruling family are Sunni) and the state shall safeguard the heritage of Islam.

The law prohibits defamation of the three Abrahamic religions and denigration of Islamic and Judeo-Christian religious figures acknowledged within accepted Islamic orthodoxy (e.g., prophets mentioned in the Quran, and wives and

companions of the Prophet Muhammad), and prescribes a punishment of up to 10 years in prison for each offense.

A national unity law prohibits “stirring sectarian strife,” promoting the supremacy of one religious group, instigating acts of violence based on the supremacy of one group, or promoting hatred or contempt of any group. Violations of this law by individuals are punishable by up to seven years’ imprisonment, a fine of 10,000 to 100,000 dinars (\$33,100-\$331,000), or both. Repeated crimes carry double penalties. If a group or an organization violates the law, it could have its license to operate revoked temporarily or permanently and face fines up to 200,000 dinars (\$662,000). Noncitizens convicted under this law are also subject to deportation.

The law allows citizens to file criminal charges against anyone they believe has defamed any of the three recognized Abrahamic religions or harmed public morals.

The law criminalizes publishing and broadcasting content, including on social media, which the government deems offensive to religious “sects” or groups, providing for fines ranging from 10,000 to 200,000 dinars (\$33,100-\$662,000) and up to seven years’ imprisonment.

There is no officially published process outlining steps religious groups must take to register with the government. Government offices do not offer guidance on the registration process. There are no fixed criteria for an application to be approved. To obtain a license to establish an official place of worship and gain benefits from the central government, a religious group must first receive approval from the local municipality for its place of worship. Previously, religious groups reported the municipality would pass the paperwork to MAIA for an “opinion” on the application for a worship space. MAIA would then issue a certificate that lists board members for the organization, making the religious group a legal entity, followed by further approvals by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor (MOSA) and the Ministry of Interior (MOI). However, MAIA representatives stated during the year that MAIA is not responsible for the registration process for churches, and they did not provide clarification on which government agency is responsible for the registration process for non-Islamic places of worship.

The officially registered and licensed Christian churches in the country are the National Evangelical Church of Kuwait (NECK) (Protestant); Roman Catholic; Greek Catholic (Melkite); Coptic Orthodox; Armenian Orthodox; Greek Orthodox; Anglican; and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. There are no officially recognized synagogues, and according to MAIA, no application has ever

been submitted for one. The government does not recognize any non-Abrahamic religions. Nonregistered religious groups include Hindus, Sikhs, Druze, Bohra Muslims, and Baha'is.

A religious group with a license to establish a place of worship may hire its own staff, sponsor visitors to the country, open bank accounts, and import texts needed for its congregation. Nonregistered religious groups do not have the same rights as licensed groups and may not purchase property or sponsor workers and must rely on volunteers from within their community for resources. Some registered religious groups have agreed to assist nonregistered groups in these matters.

The law prohibits practices the government deems inconsistent with Islamic law, including anything the government deems to be sorcery or black magic, which under the penal code constitutes “fraud and deception” and carries a maximum penalty of three years’ imprisonment, a fine, or both.

The law does not specifically prohibit proselytizing by non-Muslims, but individuals proselytizing may be prosecuted under laws criminalizing contempt of religion.

The law prohibits eating, drinking, and smoking in public between sunrise and sunset during Ramadan, including for non-Muslims, with a prescribed maximum penalty of up to 100 dinars (\$330), one month’s imprisonment, or both.

It is illegal to possess, import, trade, or manufacture alcohol. Importing alcohol carries a penalty of up to 10 years’ imprisonment; consuming alcohol may result in a fine of up to 1,000 dinars (\$3,300). It is illegal to consume alcohol publicly, which carries a penalty of up to six months’ imprisonment and a fine up to 50 dinars (\$170). It is illegal to import and sell pork products; the penalty ranges from three months to three years’ imprisonment.

Islamic religious instruction is mandatory at all levels for all Muslim students in both public and private schools with one or more Muslim students enrolled, regardless of whether the student is a citizen. Non-Muslim students are not required to attend these classes. The law prohibits organized religious education in public high schools for faiths other than Islam. All Islamic education courses are based on Sunni Islam.

The law states apostates lose certain legal rights, including to inherit property from Muslim relatives or spouses, but it does not specify any criminal penalty. If a

Muslim man married to a Muslim woman converts from Islam, his existing marriage is annulled. If he is married to a non-Muslim woman and converts from Islam, the marriage remains valid. If a Muslim woman married to a Muslim man converts to another Abrahamic faith (Christianity or Judaism), the marriage is not automatically annulled, but the Muslim husband may request an annulment. If a Muslim woman married to a Muslim man converts to a non-Abrahamic faith, the marriage is automatically annulled.

Religious courts administer personal status laws dealing with issues of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. For non-Muslims, courts apply Sunni sharia in matters of personal status and family law. Noncitizens not belonging to the three recognized Abrahamic religions are also subject to sharia if family matters are taken to court. According to the law, sharia governs inheritance for all residents regardless of their religious affiliation if the case is brought to court.

Courts may follow Shia jurisprudence in matters of personal status and family law for Shia Muslims at all levels of the judiciary. The law allows for the creation of separate courts for Shia Muslims for cases pertaining to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. These courts have six judges, none of whom has a formal background in Shia jurisprudence. An independent Shia *waqf* (trust) administers Shia religious endowments. Cases are assigned to either Sunni or Shia judges based on the religious affiliation of the man. If a man is married to a non-Muslim woman, the husband's religious practice is followed. If a couple is from one of the registered churches, the court may consider the settlement offered by the church, although if the dispute is not settled, Sunni sharia is applied.

The law forbids, and the state does not recognize, marriage between Muslim women and non-Muslim men, but Muslim men may marry women of other recognized Abrahamic faiths. The law requires the raising of children of such marriages in their father's faith, and the father's religion governs the settlement of marital disputes. Muslim marriage and divorce cases are heard in Sunni or Shia religious courts, depending on whether the marriage certificate is Sunni or Shia. Both Sunni and Shia marriage certificates need to be authenticated by appropriate notaries. While non-Muslim divorce, inheritance, and child custody cases are heard in Sunni religious courts, Christian couples who are part of a registered church may resolve these cases following their religious customs. Local authorities and courts recognize documents in these cases, provided there is a Kuwaiti signatory from the church's congregation. If the church has no Kuwaiti citizen among its congregation, the authorities will accept a signature from the church's highest authority. With the exception of Hindus and Sikhs of Indian

nationality, who may marry at the Embassy of India, members of non-Abrahamic faiths and nonregistered churches may not marry legally in the country but may have their foreign wedding certificates recognized. Citizens who are members of the Baha'i Faith may marry abroad and petition the court to recognize their marriage.

If a religious group wishes to purchase land, a citizen must be the primary buyer and must submit a request for approval to the local municipal council, which allocates land at its discretion. Citizens, or in a few cases the government, may also rent land to religious groups.

The law prohibits the naturalization of non-Muslims but allows male citizens of any religion to transmit citizenship to their descendants. Female citizens, regardless of religion, are unable to transmit nationality to their children.

An individual's religion is not included on passports or national identity documents except for birth and marriage certificates, on which it is mandatory. On birth certificates issued to Muslims, there is no distinction between Sunni and Shia. Members of non-Abrahamic faiths are not able to list their religion on their birth certificate and a dash (-) is denoted in place of their religion.

The government has not recognized political parties, including religiously based parties, or allow their formation, although no formal law bans political parties. National Assembly candidates must nominate themselves as individuals; however, well-organized, unofficial blocs operate as political groupings inside the National Assembly. Those convicted of insulting the emir and Islam are banned from running for elected office.

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

Government Practices

In January, press and human rights activists reported that authorities arrested Mubarak al-Bathali as a part of a 2014 Criminal Court decision that convicted him of inciting sectarian strife, insulting a group of society (Shia), and disrupting national unity through his Twitter posts. In 2014, the government sentenced al-Bathali to three years in prison, which was the first decision of its kind since the passage of the 2012 National Unity Law. However, according to local observers, it was unclear whether al-Bathali served any prison time or completed this sentence. According to press and human rights activists, authorities arrested al-Bathali in

2021 in connection to the 2014 case, but the press and activists did not address why authorities waited seven years to arrest him or if he was rearrested on related charges. Authorities did not issue any statement on al-Bathali's arrest.

According to human rights activists and social media accounts, authorities arrested and interrogated religious freedom activist Nasser Dashti in July on charges of blasphemy for public statements he made criticizing religion and praising secularism. Authorities released Dashti a day after his arrest and acquitted him of all charges in a December 27 hearing, although the ruling was subject to challenge in the Court of Appeals. Some social media users thanked the Ministry of Interior for arresting Dashti and said insulting religion is a crime.

In November, authorities arrested a British woman for having a tattoo displaying a Quranic verse and violating religious sanctity. Local media stated a citizen reported her to the police. Authorities released her after she posted bail and signed a statement that she would remove her tattoo.

On December 7, authorities summoned Shia cleric Hussein al-Maatouk, who had been living in exile in Iran, for questioning as part of an ongoing investigation of a Shia mosque endowment accused of laundering money for Hizballah. After the interrogation, they released him that same day.

Although the law does not prohibit apostasy, the government continued its policy of not issuing new official documents for recording a change in religion unless the conversion was from another religion to Islam.

In accordance with MAIA policy, the government continued to vet, appoint, and pay all new Sunni imams to ensure compliance with the government's guidance on moderate and tolerant religious preaching.

The Shia community continued to select its own clerics without government oversight. The government funded Sunni religious institutions, including mosques, and paid the salaries of all Sunni imams. The Shia community generally did not receive funding from the state for religious institutions and mosques. The government paid the salaries of some Shia imams. Some Shia mosques requested government assistance and received funds to pay for salaries and maintenance of their facilities.

MAIA opened investigations into three Sunni imams for delivering sermons perceived as being politically motivated, insulting to other religious groups, or violating the national unity law.

The government continued to provide the full basic text for weekly sermons preached at Sunni mosques. Imams could add content to the sermons but needed to ensure the text adhered to the laws on political speech and avoided stoking sectarianism. Media sources reported MAIA continued to caution imams to ensure their sermons were consistent with MAIA guidelines, including refraining from discussing political issues or insulting other religions in their sermons or at any other time. MAIA required Sunni imams to send a recorded audio of their sermons to MAIA for review after the fact. MAIA also relied on reports of worshippers and others who might be dissatisfied if the imam discussed politics or insulted other faiths.

Shia sources and government authorities said the government did not officially monitor Shia clerics, who were free to write their own sermons if they did not violate existing laws or instigate sectarianism. If a questionable video appeared on social media or a worshipper reported a cleric, the government investigated. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were fewer religious gatherings during the year. As in 2020, but unlike years prior, Shia representatives and government officials reported no incidents of suspected violations. According to officials at MAIA and members of the Shia community, MAIA did not monitor sermons or other activities at *husseiniyas* (Shia prayer halls for religious commemorations) or at private gatherings. Some sources stated they believed the government unofficially monitored Shia clerics.

Due to the pandemic, MAIA again organized several online courses for Sunni imams during the year to make their messages more effective in promoting tolerance and countering radicalization. In November, the Director of the Center for the Promotion of Moderation, Abdullah al-Shuraika, said that the center received a few reports of cases of extremism during the year through the hotline the center launched in 2020 for receiving such reports. The center also continued its efforts to promote tolerance and moderation via television, radio, and online media, as well as to rehabilitate prison inmates who were convicted in terror and extremism cases. The center organized courses for all MAIA staff to enhance the ministry's capacity to promote moderation and tolerance and to counter radical messaging and violent extremism narratives. In November, the Undersecretary of MAIA issued a decision to create a counseling team headed by the Director of the Center for the Promotion of Moderation that would conduct a dialogue with those

affected by extremist ideology. He said the team would be in place for three months beginning November 1.

On April 12, the news website Middle East Monitor cited a report in *Al-Rai* newspaper that the Funeral Department of the Kuwait Municipality rejected requests by the Hindu and Buddhist communities to cremate bodies of their deceased in the city. The director of the office said, “Whoever wants to cremate corpses, he should take them to his country and burn them there.” The report said the government banned cremations in the early 1980s, in line with Islamic teaching.

Representatives of registered churches continued to state the government was generally tolerant and respectful of their faiths. Members of non-Abrahamic faiths and unregistered churches continued to state they remained free to practice their religion in private but faced harassment and potential prosecution if they disturbed their neighbors or violated laws regarding assembly and proselytizing. They also continued to say they avoided conflict with authorities by not proselytizing or disparaging the government or other faiths. The government continued to allow such groups to operate in rented villas, private homes, or the facilities of registered churches. Many of these groups said they did not publicly advertise religious events or gatherings to avoid bringing unwanted attention to their organizations, both from the public and from government authorities.

Leaders of registered churches reported government authorities continued to allow only citizens to sign official documents, even if the citizens were not among the churches’ ordained clergy. However, if there were no citizen members, the authorities continued to recognize the highest church authority as the official signatory of the church.

The Public Authority for Manpower (PAM) continued to impose fines on churches that did not hire the required percentage of citizens as employees, a threshold that remained unclear to many churches. Some churches stated they paid more than 7,000 dinars (\$23,200) in fines for their failure to comply with this policy.

Members of non-Abrahamic faiths and unregistered churches continued to say they experienced hardship in commemorating major religious or life events. Almost uniformly across these communities, members said they lacked sufficient religious facilities and religious leaders or clerics to lead prayers, bless births and marriages, and conduct appropriate death rituals. In many cases, members of these religious groups stated they resolved conflicts, such as child separation issues in divorce,

marital status, or inheritance, internally within their communities rather than take legal action in the courts where they would be subject to sharia.

The government continued to require religious groups to obtain licenses from their respective municipalities for religious celebrations. Authorities retained the right to withdraw the license of any husseiniya not complying with the municipality's rules. Minority religious communities continued to state they tried to keep a low profile and did not request permission for public celebrations from authorities, which they presumed would be rejected if they applied for it.

The MOI continued to provide added security and protection at religious sites for all recognized non-Sunni religious groups. Muslim and Christian leaders continued to report that the government, citing security concerns, kept in place the ban on outdoor religious observances instituted following an ISIS bombing of a Shia mosque in 2015 that killed 27 persons. The government continued to station security forces outside some Sunni mosques and all Shia and Christian religious venues during times of worship throughout the year as a deterrent to attacks. The government also continued to provide security to Shia neighborhoods during Muharram and Ashura.

The government continued to require the Shia community to conduct Ashura activities inside closed structures rather than at outdoor locations. The government did not permit public reenactments of the martyrdom of Hussein or public marches in commemoration of Ashura. In August, the government imposed additional COVID-19-related health restrictions on Shia pilgrims returning from Iraq after participating in a religious commemoration there following Ashura. The government required the travelers to quarantine in facilities at their own expense for seven days and to undergo home quarantine for an additional seven days.

Authorities continued the government's longstanding practice of prohibiting churches from displaying exterior signs, such as a cross or church bell.

The government allowed only shops owned by registered religious organizations to import, display, or sell non-Islamic religious literature. The government did not permit non-Islamic religious publishing companies, although several churches published religious materials solely for their congregations' use. Church leaders continued to report the government permitted registered Christian churches to import religious materials for use by their congregations under the condition that none of the content insulted Islam. Registered churches reported they were able to import religious materials in any language. According to the Ministry of

Information, the MAIA reviewed books of a religious nature. Members of non-Abrahamic faiths and nonregistered churches continued to state they could import religious materials for their congregations if they brought in the materials as personal items when entering the country and did not try to sell them in public stores. While minority religious communities said they continued to be selective in the religious materials they imported, and even more selective in giving access to the materials, many noted this was less of an issue during the year, given their activities had moved almost entirely online due to COVID-19. They said they did not allow the circulation of these materials outside their congregations.

Municipalities handled building permits and land issues for religious groups. The government said it received no applications for construction of new churches from religious groups during the year. The government said it did not receive additional requests for registrations of new groups during the year.

Christian churches continued to report that government authorities did not respond to their petitions for expanding existing places of worship or increasing the number of staff the churches could sponsor. The Greek Catholic Church indicated that it had requested additional land near its location in 2020 to accommodate more worshippers but had not received a response by year's end. Some churches said they stopped submitting such requests because the government did not respond.

Shia community members reported a continued lack of facilities for worship and difficulties obtaining permission to construct new facilities caused by the government's delay in approving repairs to existing mosques or constructing new ones. MAIA reported there were 1,735 mosques in the country, including 46 mosques opened during the year. According to 2018 government statistics, of the 1,601 mosques existing that year, 1550 were Sunni and 51 Shia. According to Shia representatives, over the past two years, the government authorized licenses for seven mosques to be built. A source from the Shia community said that while there were three Shia mosques under construction, no new Shia mosques opened during the year. There were 20-30 husseiniyas registered with the MOI, and thousands of smaller Shia gatherings took place in private homes.

Again citing security concerns, authorities stated they continued to act against unlicensed mosques. The government tasked MAIA, MOI, Kuwait City municipality, and other agencies with finding solutions to end the use of such unregistered mosques. During the year, the government continued to close makeshift mosques for operating without proper licenses. MAIA continued to operate under a mandate from the Council of Ministers to demolish unregistered

mosques, stating that some of those mosques served as extremist platforms. The demolition of these mosques continued during the year. Authorities said new unlicensed mosques continued to open. MAIA sources stated the ministry attempted to bring some underground mosques under its supervision by appointing and vetting imams, monitoring sermons, and licensing them.

According to the NGO Minority Rights Group International (MRGI), Shia Muslims are not allowed to organize religious courses in public high schools or establish religious training centers, in keeping with the law that mandated all Islamic education courses use the Sunni interpretation of Islam.

The Ministry of Education continued to ban or censor instructional materials, including fiction and nonfiction books and textbooks, that referenced the Holocaust or Israel. The ministry permitted public schools to teach and celebrate only Islamic holidays. Members of non-Islamic faiths largely said the government did not interfere with religious instruction inside private homes and on church compounds.

According to church leaders, although most churches provided faith-based instruction for children, none of them had government-accredited, church-based schools. Accreditation for church-based schools would enable students to receive religious education while fulfilling government requirements and allow graduates to move on to higher education. NECK repeatedly requested accreditation for its church-based school for many years, most recently in 2017, but authorities still did not provide a response. After years of unsuccessful attempts, NECK decided to no longer seek accreditation with the authorities for its school. The Armenian Church and the Bohra Muslim community continued to operate accredited community schools in lieu of seeking accreditation as religious schools. Other groups continued to report they conducted religious studies in their places of worship.

Local sources suggested that the passage of the Shia Personal Status Law in 2019 increased the need for Shia religious training facilities to help staff the courts with qualified judges. Shia leaders continued to report that the lack of Shia imams limited their ability to staff Shia courts, causing a backlog of personal status and family cases. To address the backlog and shortage of staff, an ad hoc Shia jurisprudence council the government created many years ago under the marital issues court continued to function.

The government continued its practice of not responding to requests to establish Shia religious training institutions. Shia Muslims had to seek religious training and

education abroad. According to the NGO Freedom House, the government did not permit training of Shia clerics in the country. According to members of the Shia community, the College of Sharia and Islamic Studies at Kuwait University, the only institution in the country that trains imams, provided some Shia jurisprudence courses but did not permit Shia professors on its faculty.

According to reports by press and community members, MAIA continued to use less stringent testing criteria for mosque imams and muezzins that it implemented in 2020 to encourage qualified nationals to apply, with the aim of raising the number of citizens working in these positions. Observers saw this as part of an ongoing and longstanding effort by the government to reduce reliance on foreign workers and to provide economic opportunities to its own nationals.

Shia remained underrepresented at all levels of government: six of 50 elected members in parliament, one of 16 cabinet members, one of six Amiri Diwan advisors, and disproportionately fewer senior officers in the military and police force. Shia community leaders continued to say there was a “glass ceiling” in promotions and difficulties in obtaining government jobs. Shia leaders said it was particularly difficult for Shia to ascend to leadership positions in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education, the Public Prosecutor’s Office, and the Ministry of Justice. Shia also rarely held leadership positions in the security forces. Some Shia leaders said discrimination continued to prevent Shia from obtaining training for clerical positions and leadership positions in public sector organizations, including the police force and the military/security apparatus. According to the NGO MRGI, some Shia faced discrimination and obstacles when applying for senior leadership positions in the public sector.

The Ministry of Interior, in coordination with PAM, issued visas for clergy and other staff to work at licensed places of worship. The government continued to impose quotas on the number of clergy and staff of licensed religious groups entering the country but sometimes granted additional slots upon request. The government continued to require foreign leaders of unregistered religious groups to enter the country as nonreligious workers.

According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), during Israeli-Palestinian violence in March, MAIA published a sermon for use by the country’s Sunni imams for Friday prayers on May 14 that declared, “Oh God, it is incumbent upon you to deal with the usurper Jews, and to take revenge upon the criminal Zionists, and to return al-Aqsa [Mosque complex] the wounded to the possession of the Muslims.” The ADL said that the official Friday sermon the following week stated

that al-Aqsa should be “freed from the claws of the attacker Jews and cleansed from the filth of the usurper Zionists” who hide truths and “assert fabricated claims” about “their alleged temple.” It declared it “an obligation” for Muslims to stop this “sabotage” and “to end the plots of scheming, deceit, and aggression.”

On March 3, citing press reports, the news website *Middle East Monitor* stated that the Ministry of Commerce and Industry said it refused to register a trademark with Masonic symbols. According to the website, the newspaper *Al-Anbar* reported that the official overseeing the issuance of trademarks in the ministry said, “Trademarks which... violate public morals, offend the ethical code, offend the Islamic religion or any other religion, or undermine national unity, are not permitted to be registered.”

Media coverage included news on events and celebrations held by various Christian denominations in the country, such as Christmas services and church inauguration anniversaries attended by high-level government officials, although in practice, the COVID-19 pandemic limited such events.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Societal pressure continued against conversion from Islam, according to minority religious leaders and citizens. Leaders and members of religious communities said they did not convert Muslims in the country. Some citizens who converted outside the country said their families harassed them due to their conversion.

In January, Mohammed al-Momen, a television journalist and announcer, posted a video on Snapchat announcing that he was converting from Islam to Christianity. Reactions on social media varied, with some users stating al-Momen had the right to choose his faith, others offering prayers for his return to Islam, others expressing concern about his mental state, and some saying he was an apostate risking damnation.

In February, singer Ibtisam Hamid, professionally known as Basma al-Kuwaiti but a noncitizen, posted a video to Instagram and Twitter in which she criticized Islam and stated that she had converted to Judaism. She stated that the country’s royal family “rejects normalization [with Israel], freedom of religion, and freedom of opinion.” Media reports stated she no longer lived in the country. In an Israeli television interview, Hamid said she had received death threats after announcing her decision. It was unclear where Hamid resided as of year’s end or where she was at the time of her social media posts.

The NGO MRGI reported Shia were often perceived as being lower on the social scale and marginalized in religious, economic, social, and political terms.

Hotels, stores, and other businesses continued to mark non-Islamic holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali. During the Christmas season, Christmas trees and lights appeared in stores, malls, and homes.

News media continued to print information about religious holiday celebrations, including material on the religious significance of Christmas.

According to press and social media, antisemitic rhetoric generally originated from self-proclaimed Islamists or opinion writers. There were reported cases of clerics and others making statements that perpetuated negative stereotypes of Jews. Columnists often conflated Israeli government actions or views with those of Jews more broadly.

In January, prominent cleric Othman al-Khamis issued a statement condemning the construction of an interfaith center, the Abrahamic Family House, in the United Arab Emirates that would include a synagogue, church, and mosque. Al-Khamis also uploaded to YouTube a video in which he called Jews “the brothers of apes and pigs, because they are essentially like them.”

Some Muslim clerics continued to express disapproval via social media of the celebration of non-Islamic holidays and called for more government action to restrict public expression of these holidays. In December, officials at the country’s largest and best-known shopping center removed a Christmas tree display after receiving complaints that the display contradicted Islamic traditions.

The UAE research and consulting firm PSB took a June poll of youth between the ages of 17 and 24 in 17 Arab states and reported 34 percent of Kuwaiti respondents said their religion was the most important factor in their personal identity, which matched the regionwide result. Other choices offered by the poll as possible responses included family/tribe, nationality, Arabic heritage, political beliefs, language, and gender.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In November, embassy officials met with MAIA representatives to better understand the ministry’s efforts to promote religious tolerance, its relationship

with religious minority groups, and the activities of its Center for the Promotion of Moderation. MAIA representatives stated that the sermons Sunni imams provide and that are reviewed by the ministry emphasize the importance of religious tolerance in Islam. Embassy officials also met often with PAM representatives and raised the issue of fines for registered churches.

During the year, embassy officials met with religious leaders and members from the Sunni, Shia, Bohra, Hindu, Baha'i, and Christian communities to discuss the groups' needs. For registered churches, these needs continued to include more space for worship, more transparency in the registration process for new churches, and permission to obtain religious school accreditation.

In May, November, and December, the Ambassador hosted roundtables with representatives from minority faiths, including the Bohra, Hindu, Baha'i, and Christian communities, to discuss a broad range of religious freedom issues. The group discussed the status of religious freedom in the country, the effect of COVID-19 shutdowns on their communities, barriers to religious practice caused by the government's administrative procedures for religious minority groups, and how to promote dialogue among religious minority communities and citizens. During the December roundtable, the Ambassador invited registered church leaders to discuss trends in the country regarding religious freedom.

The Ambassador met with Archimandrite Boutros Gharib of the Melkite Greek Catholic (Greek Orthodox) Church and members of his congregation in October to discuss the situation of religious minority groups in the country.

The embassy posted Hannukah greetings on its social media platforms on November 28 for the first time in its history of using social media and generated more than half a million impressions on Twitter. Senior embassy officials continued to attend religious gatherings throughout the year, including Ashura, Easter, Christmas, and Baha'i events. At these events, including the religious freedom roundtables hosted by the Ambassador, embassy officials discussed issues related to religious tolerance and emphasized the U.S. government commitment to religious freedom.