

AFGHANISTAN 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion but stipulates followers of religions other than Islam are free to exercise their faith within the limits of the law. Conversion from Islam to another religion is considered apostasy, which is punishable by death, imprisonment, or confiscation of property according to the Sunni Islam's Hanafi school of jurisprudence, which the constitution states shall apply "if there is no provision in the constitution or other laws about a case." Converts from Islam to other religions reported they continued to fear punishment from the government as well as reprisals from family and society. According to the Supreme Court, the Bahai Faith is distinct from Islam and is a form of blasphemy, another capital offense under Hanafi jurisprudence; however, there were no reported prosecutions for apostasy or blasphemy. The law prohibits the production and publishing of works contrary to the principles of Islam or offensive to other religions. The criminal code punishes verbal and physical assaults on a follower of any religion with a prison sentence of six months to one year. According to the Hindu and Sikh communities, their members continued to avoid settling disputes in the courts due to fear of retaliation and instead chose to settle disputes through community councils. Representatives of minority religious groups reported a continued failure by the courts to grant non-Muslims the same rights as Muslims. A small number of Sikhs and Hindus continued to serve in government positions. Shia Muslims held some major government positions; however, Shia leaders continued to state the number of positions did not reflect their demographics. Shia leaders also continued to report the government neglected security in majority-Shia areas.

The Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), an affiliate of ISIS and a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, and the Taliban continued to target and kill members of minority religious communities because of their beliefs or their links to the government. The ISKP accused the country's Shia Muslims of joining militias fighting against the ISKP in Syria and Iraq to justify its attacks. The ISKP also accused the country's Shia of being progovernment and targeted security and military personnel worshipping in Shia mosques. During the year, media reported at least 13 attacks on Shia places of worship or communities, resulting in more than 500 casualties. The UN Assistance Missions to Afghanistan (UNAMA) documented 499 civilian casualties (202 deaths and 297 injured) from 37 attacks against places of worship, religious leaders, and worshippers during the course of

the year. This represented a 32-percent increase in civilian casualties from such attacks, double the number of deaths and three times as many attacks as in 2016. According to UNAMA, the ISKP claimed responsibility for 18 of the incidents and the Taliban for 20. UNAMA's annual report found attacks against Shia places of worship and/or worshippers comprised 83 percent of all civilian casualties from attacks against places of worship, religious leaders, and worshippers. Nearly one-third of the ISKP attacks targeted Shia Muslims, including six attacks directed at Shia places of worship or religious ceremonies. Following Shia community pressure for more protection, the government announced increased security around Shia mosques. The Taliban continued to assassinate or issue death threats against Sunni clerics for preaching messages contrary to its interpretation of Islam; Taliban gunmen killed imams and other religious officials throughout the country. Officials from the President's Office and the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs (MOHRA) estimated the pace of killings by the Taliban had increased and would likely exceed the 150 religious officials killed in 2016. The Taliban continued to warn mullahs not to perform funeral prayers for government security officials and to punish residents in areas under Taliban control according to their interpretation of Islamic law, including beating and stoning of women suspected of adultery or other "moral crimes." Insurgents claiming affiliation with the ISKP reportedly engaged in similar activities, including killing an imam in Sar-e Pul for committing sorcery by offering traditional Afghan talismans to worshippers. Reportedly some mullahs in unregistered mosques continued to preach in support of the Taliban or ISKP in their sermons.

Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, and other non-Muslim minority groups reported continued harassment from some Muslims, although Hindus and Sikhs stated they were able to practice their respective religions in public. Christian groups reported public opinion remained hostile towards converts and to Christian proselytization. Christians and Ahmadi Muslims stated they continued to worship privately to avoid societal discrimination and persecution. Women of several different faiths reported continued harassment from local Muslim religious leaders over their attire. As a result, they said, almost all women, both local and foreign, wore some form of head covering. Observers reported local Muslim religious leaders continued their efforts to limit social activities they considered inconsistent with Islamic doctrine. Both Shia and Sunni leaders condemned some secular festivals and concerts as contrary to Islam. According to minority religious leaders, only a few places of worship remained open for Sikhs and Hindus, who said they continued to emigrate because of discrimination and the lack of employment opportunities. Hindu and Sikh groups also reported interference in their efforts to cremate the remains of their dead in accordance with their customs from

individuals who lived near cremation sites. Shia community leaders reported a continued decline in societal discrimination against the Shia minority by the Sunni majority, although reports of discrimination continued to occur in some localities.

U.S. embassy officials continued to promote religious tolerance and the protection of religious minorities in meetings with senior government officials. To enhance the government's capacity to counter violent religious extremism and facilitate creation of a national strategy against such extremism, the embassy met frequently with the Office of the National Security Advisor (ONSC). The embassy met regularly with leaders of major religious groups, scholars, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to discuss ways to enhance religious tolerance and interreligious dialogue. The embassy continued to sponsor programs for religious leaders to increase religious dialogue and to identify means and ways to counter violent religious extremism. The Ambassador recorded a video statement for International Religious Freedom Day, which the embassy highlighted on social media and shared with local news outlets.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 34.1 million (July 2017 estimate). There are no reliable statistics available concerning the percentages of Shia and Sunni Muslims in the country; the government's Central Statistics Office does not track disaggregated population data. Shia leaders estimate Shia make up approximately 20-25 percent of the population, while Sunni leaders state the Shia constitute 10 percent.

According to religious community leaders, the Shia population, approximately 90 percent of whom are ethnic Hazaras, is predominantly Jaafari, but it also includes Ismailis. Other religious groups, mainly Hindus, Sikhs, Bahais, and Christians, constitute less than 0.3 percent of the population. Sikh and Hindu leaders estimate there are 245 Sikh and Hindu families totaling 1,300 individuals in the country. The Ahmadi Muslim community estimates it has 600 adherents nationwide. Reliable estimates of the Bahai and Christian communities are not available. There are small numbers of practitioners of other religions, including one Jew.

Hazaras live predominantly in the central and western provinces as well as in Kabul; Ismaili Muslims live mainly in Kabul and in the central and northern provinces. Followers of the Bahai Faith live predominantly in Kabul, with a small community in Kandahar. Ahmadi Muslims largely live in Kabul.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares Islam the official state religion and says no law may contravene the beliefs and provisions of the “sacred religion of Islam.” It further states there shall be no amendment to the constitution’s provisions with respect to adherence to the fundamentals of Islam. According to the constitution, followers of religions other than Islam are “free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of the law.”

There is no definition of apostasy in the criminal code. Apostasy falls under the seven offenses making up the *hudood* as defined by sharia. According to Sunni Hanafi jurisprudence, which the constitution states shall apply “if there is no provision in the constitution or other laws about a case,” beheading is appropriate for male apostates, while life imprisonment is appropriate for female apostates unless they repent. A judge may also impose a lesser penalty, such as short-term imprisonment or lashes, if doubt about the apostasy exists. Under Hanafi jurisprudence, the government may also confiscate the property of apostates or prevent apostates from inheriting property. This guidance applies to individuals who are of sound mind and have reached the age of maturity. Civil law states the age of majority for citizens is 18, except it is 16 for females with regard to marriage. Islamic law defines it as the point at which one shows signs of puberty.

Conversion from Islam to another religion is apostasy according to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence applicable in the courts. If someone converts to another religion from Islam, he or she shall have three days to recant the conversion. If the person does not recant, then he or she shall be subject to the punishment for apostasy. Proselytizing to try to convert individuals from Islam to another religion is also illegal according to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence applicable in the courts and subject to the same punishment.

Blasphemy, which may include anti-Islamic writings or speech, is a capital crime according to the Hanafi school. Accused blasphemers, like apostates, have three days to recant or face death, although there is no clear process for recanting under sharia. Some *hadiths* (sayings or traditions that serve as a source of religious law or guidance) suggest discussion and negotiation with an apostate to encourage the apostate to recant.

According to a 2007 ruling from the General Directorate of Fatwas and Accounts under the Supreme Court, the Bahai Faith is distinct from Islam and is a form of blasphemy. All Muslims who convert to it are considered apostates; Bahai practitioners are labeled infidels.

Licensing and registration of religious groups are not required. Registration as a group (which gives the group the status of a shura or council) or an association conveys official recognition and the benefit of government provision of facilities for seminars and conferences. By law anyone who is 18 years of age or older may establish a social or political organization. Such an entity must have a charter consistent with domestic laws as well as a central office. The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) may dissolve such organizations through a judicial order. Groups recognized as shuras or councils may cooperate with one another on religious issues. Associations may conduct business with the government or the society as a whole. Both groups and associations may register with the MOJ. According to the MOJ database, 2,215 Sunni and Shia organizations performing religious, charitable, and social functions are registered, while the Sikh and Hindu National Shura has one council registered with the MOJ and another with the Ministry of Border and Tribal Affairs because of the council's location.

The law prohibits the production, reproduction, printing, and publishing of works and materials contrary to the principles of Islam or offensive to other religions and denominations. It also prohibits publicizing and promoting religions other than Islam and bans articles on any topic the government deems might harm the physical, spiritual, and moral wellbeing of persons, especially children and adolescents. The law instructs National Radio and Television Afghanistan (RTA), a government agency, to provide broadcasting content reflecting the religious beliefs of all ethnic groups in the country. The law also obligates RTA to adjust its programs in light of Islamic principles as well as national and spiritual values.

The criminal code states persons who forcibly stop the conduct of rituals of any religion, those who destroy or damage "permitted places of worship" (a term not defined by the code) where religious rituals are conducted, or those who destroy or damage any sign or symbol of any religion are subject to imprisonment of six months to one year or a fine ranging from 30,000 afghanis (AFN) to 60,000 AFN (\$430 to \$870).

According to the constitution, the "state shall devise and implement a unified educational curriculum based on the provisions of the sacred religion of Islam" and develop courses on religion based on the "Islamic sects" in the country. The

national curriculum includes materials designed separately for Sunni-majority schools and Shia-majority schools, as well as textbooks that emphasize nonviolent Islamic terms and principles. The curriculum includes courses on Islam, but not on other religions. Non-Muslims are not required to study Islam in public schools.

According to the law, all funds contributed to madrassahs by private or international sources must be channeled through the Ministry of Education (MOE).

The civil and penal codes derive their authority from the constitution. The constitution stipulates the courts shall apply constitutional provisions as well as the law in ruling on cases. For instances in which neither the constitution nor the penal or civil code address a specific case, the constitution declares the courts may apply Hanafi Sunni jurisprudence within the limits set by the constitution to attain justice. The constitution also allows courts to apply Shia law in cases involving Shia followers. Non-Muslims may not provide testimony in matters requiring sharia jurisprudence. The constitution makes no mention of separate laws applying to non-Muslims.

A Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman, but the woman must first convert if she is not an adherent of one of the other two Abrahamic faiths – Christianity or Judaism. It is illegal for a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim man.

The criminal code punishes “crimes against religions,” which include verbal and physical assaults on a follower of any religion. It specifies a person who attacks a follower of any religion shall be sentenced to a prison term of six months to one year. The issue of blasphemy is covered under sharia, under which the authorities consider it a capital crime.

The government’s national identity cards indicate an individual’s religion. Individuals are not required to declare belief in Islam to receive citizenship.

The constitution requires the president and vice presidents to be Muslim. Other senior officials (ministers, members of parliament, judges) must swear allegiance and obedience to the principles of Islam as part of their oath of office.

The constitution allows the formation of political parties, provided the program and charter of a party are “not contrary to the principles of the sacred religion of Islam.” The constitution states political parties may not be based on sectarianism.

The law, pursuant to a 2016 presidential decree, mandates an added seat in parliament's lower house be reserved for a member of the Hindu and Sikh community. Four seats in the parliament are also reserved for Ismailis.

According to the MOJ's database, the country is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights based on a 1983 presidential decree, but the parliament has not yet ratified the country's signature.

Government Practices

Summary Paragraph: Converts from Islam to other religions reported they continued to fear punishment from the government as well as reprisals from family and society; however, there were no reported prosecutions for apostasy or blasphemy. According to the Hindu and Sikh communities, their members continued to avoid settling disputes in the courts due to fear of retaliation and instead settled disputes through community councils or mediation. Representatives of minority religious groups reported a continued failure by the courts to grant non-Muslims the same rights as Muslims. A small number of Sikhs and Hindus continued to serve in government positions. On June 25, the president invited Sikh and Hindu leaders to the presidential palace for a dialogue on the importance of these minority religious communities and their long-standing presence and valuable contributions to the country. Although some Shia continued to hold senior positions in the government, Shia leaders continued to assert the proportion of official positions held by Shia did not reflect their estimate of the country's demographics. Sunni members of the Ulema Council continued to assert, however, that Shia remained overrepresented in government based on Sunni estimates of the percentage of Shia in the population. Observers stated that these debates were often about ethnicity as much as religion.

As in the previous three years, there were no reports of government prosecutions for blasphemy or apostasy during the year; however, individuals converting from Islam reported they continued to risk annulment of their marriages, rejection by their families and communities, loss of employment, and possibly the death penalty. Bahais continued to be labeled as "infidels," although they were not considered to be converts; as such, they were not charged with either crime. There was no new information available about an individual who had been given a 20-year prison sentence for blasphemy in 2013.

MOHRA remained responsible for managing Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages, revenue collection for religious activities, acquisition of property for religious purposes, issuance of fatwas, educational testing of imams, sermon preparation and distribution for government-supported mosques, and raising public awareness of religious issues. The government again allowed both Sunnis and Shia to go on pilgrimages, with no quota on either group. It charged fees for Hajj participants to cover transportation, food, accommodation, and other expenses. MOHRA also continued to facilitate pilgrimages for Hindus and Sikhs to India, but it did not collect any revenue for or from non-Muslims. Ahmadi Muslims reported they chose not to interact with MOHRA because they feared MOHRA would deem them non-Muslims and forbid them from participating in the Hajj.

MOHRA reported 4,589 mullahs were registered at year's end who worked directly for MOHRA, of approximately 160,000 mullahs in the country. These mullahs continued to receive an average monthly salary of 10,000 AFN (\$140) from the government. Mullahs applying to be prayer leaders in MOHRA-registered mosques continued to have to hold at least a high school diploma, although a bachelor's degree or equivalent verified by the Ministry of Higher Education was preferred. MOHRA reported approximately 5,000 of the estimated 160,000 mosques in the country were registered, including the registration of an additional 700 mosques during the year. According to MOHRA, the ministry lacked the financial resources to create a comprehensive registry of mullahs and mosques in the country.

MOHRA reported it continued to allocate a portion of its budget for the construction of new mosques, although local groups remained the source of most of the funds for the new mosques. Unless the local groups requested financial or other assistance from the ministry, they were not required to inform the ministry about the new construction.

Hindu and Sikh groups reported they remained free to build places of worship and to train other Hindus and Sikhs to become clergy, but per the law punishing conversion, the government continued not to allow them to proselytize. They said their community members continued to avoid pursuing land disputes through the courts due to fear of retaliation, especially if powerful local leaders occupied their property. On June 25, the President Ashraf Ghani convened a meeting with Sikh and Hindu leaders for a dialogue about their situation and to recognize their long-standing presence in and contributions to the country.

Although the government had provided land to use as cremation sites, Sikh leaders stated the distance from any major urban area and the lack of security in the region continued to make the land unusable. Hindus and Sikhs reported continued interference in their efforts to cremate the remains of their dead from individuals who lived near the cremation sites. In response, the government continued to provide police support to protect the Sikh and Hindu communities while they performed their cremation rituals. The government promised to construct modern crematories for the Sikh and Hindu populations.

MOHRA reported there were 4,093 registered madrassahs and “Quran learning centers” throughout the country. There were 152 registered madrassahs in Kabul, with the remaining 3,941 spread throughout the provinces and other cities. While the government registered some madrassahs during the year, it did not report how many. More than 370,000 students were enrolled in the madrassahs during the year, mostly in Kabul, Balkh, Nangarhar, and Herat Provinces, according to the latest available estimate.

The registration process for madrassahs continued to require a school to demonstrate it had suitable buildings, classrooms, accredited teachers, and dorms if students lived on campus. MOHRA continued to register madrassahs co-located with mosques, while the MOE continued to register madrassahs not associated with mosques. In MOHRA-run madrassahs, students received individual instruction, with one imam teaching approximately 50 to 70 children studying at various levels. Only certificates issued by registered madrassahs allowed students to pursue higher education at government universities.

MOHRA could not estimate the number of unregistered madrassahs but stated it estimated registered madrassahs “far outnumbered” unregistered madrassahs. The MOE was authorized to close unregistered madrassahs, but ministry officials again said it remained nearly impossible to close any due to local sensitivities. According to ministry officials, no madrassahs were closed during the year due to the potential for negative societal repercussions. Ministry officials said the government continued its efforts to raise awareness of the benefits of registering madrassahs, including recognition of graduation certificates and financial and material assistance, such as furniture or stationery.

Mosques continued to handle primary-level religious studies. Eighty MOE-registered madrassahs offered two-year degree programs at the secondary level. A total of 1,200 public and 200 private madrassahs were registered with the MOE.

According to government authorities, the government continued to monitor financial assistance to madrassahs by requiring registered madrassahs to route private or international donations through the MOE. The authorities said the MOE seldom imposed a ban on a madrassah for failing to comply with this requirement. They also said the continuing tendency of donors to make cash donations directly to the madrassahs made it difficult for the government to track funds coming from private sources or abroad. Despite this, the government's efforts to solicit donations from other Muslim countries and from private individuals continued. The MOE reportedly continued to require the accreditation of independent madrassahs and disclosure of their funding sources.

The MOE's Department of Islamic Education continued to provide a standardized curriculum for registered madrassahs. This curriculum required 60 percent of the subjects taught in madrassahs to be religious in nature, while the other 40 percent consisted of mathematics, history, geography, and Dari literature.

A government-sponsored school for Sikh children continued to operate in Kabul. It received proportionate funding from the government to cover staff salaries, books, and maintenance. The MOE also provided the curriculum for the Sikh school, except for religious studies. The community appointed a teacher for religious studies, while the MOE paid the teacher's salary.

A privately funded Sikh school continued to operate in Jalalabad with funding from the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan. Sikh children continued to attend private international schools; Hindu children often attended Sikh schools.

Ahmadi Muslims reported they sent their children to public schools but kept their children's religious affiliation secret. There were no Christian schools in the country.

Legal sources said the courts continued to rely on statutory law in both civil and criminal cases. Members of minority religious groups continued to report instances, however, when the courts used Hanafi jurisprudence, even when such law conflicted with the country's international human rights commitments.

The president continued to take advice on Islamic legal matters from the Ulema Council, a group of senior Sunni and Shia scholars, imams, and Muslim jurists. The council met with the president every two months, discussing topics such as support for the Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces and peace negotiations with insurgent groups. The Ulema Council also continued to provide

advice on the formulation of new legislation and the implementation of existing law to the parliament and ministries.

Ulema Council members continued to receive financial support from the state, although it officially remained independent from the government. The council also provided advice to some provincial governments, although, according to scholars and NGOs, most legal decision making in villages and rural areas continued to be based on local interpretations of Islamic law and tradition. President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah made numerous speeches during the year supporting religious tolerance.

Minority religious groups reported the courts still did not apply the protections provided to those groups by the law and the courts denied non-Muslims the access to the courts or other legal redress as Muslims, even when the non-Muslims were legally entitled to those same rights. According to media reports and representatives from non-Muslim religious minorities, some members of these communities were told they did not have equal rights because they were “Indians,” not Afghans, even when they were citizens of the country. Members of minority religious communities reported the state, including the courts, treated all citizens as if they were Muslims, and some basic citizenship rights of non-Muslims remained uncodified. They said the result was non-Muslims continued to risk being tried according to Hanafi jurisprudence.

Sikhs and Hindus continued to report their community members avoided taking civil cases to court because they believed they were unprotected by dispute resolution mechanisms such as the Special Land and Property Court. Instead, their members continued to settle disputes within their communities.

Leaders of both Hindu and Sikh communities continued to report discrimination, including long delays to resolve cases in the judicial system. The illegal appropriation of Sikh properties remained the most common judicial problem.

There continued to be a small number of Sikhs and Hindus serving in government positions, including one at the municipal level, one at the Chamber of Commerce and Industries, and one as a presidentially appointed member of the upper house of parliament.

Although Shia Muslims held senior positions in government, they continued to state the number of their appointments to government administrative bodies was not proportionate to the percentage of Shia they estimated to compose the

country's population. Sunni members of the Ulema Council continued to assert, however, that Shia remained overrepresented in government based on Sunni estimates of the percentage of Shia in the population. Other non-Shia observers said the issue of employment of Shia was more related to their largely Hazara ethnicity than religion.

Although four Ismaili Muslims remained members of parliament, Ismaili community leaders continued to report concerns about what they called the exclusion of Ismailis from other positions of political authority.

The government continued to support the efforts of judicial, constitutional, and human rights commissions composed of members of different Islamic religious groups (Sunni and Shia) to promote Muslim intrafaith reconciliation. The Ministry of Women's Affairs and MOHRA continued working toward their stated goal of gaining nationwide acceptance of the practice of allowing women to attend mosques. The Moderation Center of Afghanistan, a government-funded NGO, continued to promote what the government viewed as a moderate interpretation of Islam. Educational exchanges organized by the center continued to send Shia and Sunni clerics to Kuwait for training, and then appoint them to positions as teachers in various provinces to train other clerics. The center distributed 5,000 books addressing Islamic subjects, extremism, and the current conflict in the country. The Ulema Council, the Islamic Brotherhood Council, and MOHRA also continued their work on intrafaith reconciliation.

The ONSC's work on addressing religiously motivated violent extremism continued. The ONSC continued to sponsor provincial-level conferences on religiously motivated violent extremism to collect data for use in its effort to develop a strategy to counter violent extremism. The ONSC also continued to coordinate the efforts of relevant government institutions and NGOs to formulate the strategy through an interministerial working group.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

According to journalists, local observers, and UNAMA, attacks by the ISKP, the Taliban, and other insurgent groups targeted specific religious and ethnoreligious groups, including the Hazara Shia. Media reported the ISKP said its attacks on the country's Shia population were justified because Shia fighters had joined militias fighting the ISKP in Syria and Iraq. According to media reports, the ISKP also accused the country's Shia of being progovernment and targeted security and military personnel worshipping in mosques. According to UNAMA's Annual

Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, the combined use of suicide improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and non-suicide IEDs by “Anti-Government Elements” accounted for 4,151 civilian casualties (1,229 deaths and 2,922 injured), constituting 40 percent of all civilian casualties during the year.

UNAMA documented 499 civilian casualties (202 deaths and 297 injured) from 37 attacks, overwhelmingly committed by “Anti-Government Elements” against places of worship, religious leaders, and worshippers during the year. These included targeted killings, abductions, and intimidation and represented a 32-percent increase in civilian casualties from such attacks, double the number of deaths and three times as many attacks as in 2016. According to UNAMA, the ISKP claimed responsibility for 18 of the incidents and 412 of the 499 casualties; the Taliban claimed 20 attacks, up from seven attacks in 2016.

UNAMA’s annual report found attacks against Shia places of worship and/or worshippers constituted 83 percent of all civilian casualties from attacks against places of worship, religious leaders, and worshippers. Nearly one-third of the ISKP attacks targeted Shia Muslims, including six attacks directed at Shia places of worship.

Attacks on Shia mosques for which the ISKP claimed responsibility included: a June 15 suicide bomb attack on a Shia mosque in western Kabul that killed five persons; an August 1 attack by two suicide bombers on a Shia mosque in Herat that killed 29 worshippers and injured 64; an August 25 attack by gunmen and a suicide bomber on a Shia mosque in western Kabul that killed 40 and wounded 100; and an October 20 ISKP suicide bombing in which the attacker lobbed a grenade into the women’s section and detonated his suicide vest in the second row of worshippers at a Shia mosque in Kabul that killed 57 persons and injured another 55.

Attacks on Shia mosques for which no group claimed responsibility included a January 1 bomb attack on a Shia mosque in Herat that wounded six worshippers, and a June 6 blast outside the Great Mosque of Herat, a Shia mosque opened in 1446, which killed eight individuals and wounded 10.

On September 29, a suicide bomber killed seven persons and wounded 37 in a Kabul Shia mosque two days before Ashura.

The media reported complaints by members of the Shia community concerning a continued lack of protection from the government. In response to these attacks, the

Ministry of Interior announced increased security around Shia mosques and authorized the arming of Shia civilians, under the authority of the police, to provide extra security for Ashura. During the Ashura processions, however, there were no violent incidents reported – a sharp contrast from recent years.

According to media reports, antigovernment forces also targeted Sunni mosques. On June 10, Taliban gunmen entered a Sunni mosque in the Gardez district of Paktiya Province and killed three worshippers. On August 11, gunmen killed three worshippers in a Takhar Province Sunni mosque. Rival factions, not linked to the Taliban or the ISKP, were reportedly vying to lead prayers, which led to the shootings.

ISKP attacks targeting Shia continued to extend outside of mosques. On September 28, three individuals were killed, including two policemen, and 16 were injured in a blast at a cinema in the Chendawol area of Kabul with a significant Shia population, according to a local media report. A Ministry of Interior spokesman said the blast was triggered by a magnetic bomb attached to a police vehicle. ISIS media said the attack was directed against a Shia assembly hall in the area. On December 21, ISKP detonated a remote controlled IED outside a library in a predominantly Shia neighborhood, killing four and injuring 10. On December 28, a suspected ISKP suicide bomber attacked the Afghan Voice news agency and a Shia cultural center in Kabul, killing more than 40 persons and injuring at least 80.

Attacks continued against Shia villages and civilian properties. On January 6, unidentified gunmen stopped a bus carrying Shia coal miners in Baghlan Province and killed at least nine passengers. On August 6, gunmen linked to the Taliban and the ISKP killed at least 50 civilians, including women and children, in a Shia village in Sar-e Pul Province.

The Taliban continued to assassinate and threaten religious leaders with death for preaching messages contrary to the Taliban's interpretation of Islam or its political agenda. On March 22, suspected Taliban gunmen assassinated an imam and former provincial council member in Laghman Province. On May 7, a cleric and media adviser to the Kandahar government was shot and killed, reportedly for calling the Taliban jihad "illegitimate." On May 9, the Parwan Provincial Ulema chief, who had been publicly critical of the Taliban, was killed by an IED, along with six children studying at his school; the Taliban claimed responsibility. On May 22, suspected Taliban gunmen shot and killed the deputy head of the Logar Ulema council while he was walking to his mosque, and on May 28, suspected

Taliban gunmen shot and killed a provincial Ulema council member in Paktika Province. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the assassinations of the deputy director of Islamic education in Kapisa Province on July 1 and of a progovernment cleric in Nangarhar Province on July 15. During the year, UNAMA documented 26 incidents of killings targeting religious scholars and leaders, compared with eight in 2016.

In addition to the targeting of religious worshippers and leaders, from January 1, 2016, to November 7, 2017, UNAMA documented 25 terrorist attacks targeting individuals deemed to be military targets while they were inside places of worship. Most of those targeted in places of worship were civilians suspected of supporting the government, including tribal elders, judicial officials, civilian government workers, and teachers worshipping inside a mosque. According to UNAMA, on November 27, the Taliban shot and killed the imam of a mosque in Nangarhar Province, accusing him of supporting the government. On July 23, the ISKP killed a local imam in Sar-e Pul Province for committing “sorcery.” The imam had been offering traditional Afghan talismans to worshippers.

In several cases, it was not certain who was responsible for the attacks on religious officials. For example, on March 17, the chief of Hajj and Religious Affairs in Nangarhar Province survived a suicide bombing in which his brother was killed. In September unknown assailants riding motorcycles killed the head of the provincial ulema in the Hesa Awal Kohistan District area of Kapisa Province. On October 12, unidentified gunmen on motorcycles killed an imam outside his mosque in Nangarhar Province.

There were reports of continued Taliban warnings to mullahs not to perform funeral prayers for government security officials. As a result, according to the director of madrassahs at MOHRA, imams continued to state they feared performing funeral rites for Afghan National Security Forces and other government employees. MOHRA also reported difficulty in staffing registered mosques in insecure areas because of Taliban threats.

There continued to be reports of the Taliban and the ISKP monitoring the social habits of local populations in areas under their control and imposing punishments on residents according to their respective interpretations of Islamic law. There were continued reports of the Taliban and the ISKP taking over schools in areas under their control and imposing their own curricula.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, and other non-Muslim minorities reported continued harassment from Muslims, although Hindus and Sikhs stated they continued to be able to publicly practice their religions. Members of the Hindu community continued to report they faced fewer incidents of harassment than Sikhs, which they ascribed to their lack of a distinctive male headdress. Since religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was often difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

There were several media reports of local religious leaders forcing young men to fast during Ramadan. In one instance, a mullah who worked for Balkh Province's Prevention of Vice Commission shaved the head of a young man to shame him for not fasting.

Women of several different faiths, including Islam, reported harassment from local Muslim religious leaders over their attire. As a result, the women said, they continued to wear burqas in public in rural areas and in some urban areas, including Kabul. Almost all women reported wearing some form of head covering. Some women said they did so by personal choice, but many said they did so due to societal pressure and a desire to avoid harassment and increase their security in public. MOHRA and the National Ulema Council both continued to state there was no official pressure on women regarding their attire.

Ahmadi Muslims reported harassment when neighbors or coworkers learned of their faith. They said they also faced accusations of being "spies" for communicating with other Ahmadi Muslim community congregations abroad. They said they did not proselytize due to fear of being persecuted. Ahmadis maintained a place of worship but kept it unmarked, without minarets or other adornments identifying it as an Ahmadi Muslim community mosque.

Christian representatives reported public opinion remained hostile toward converts to Christianity and to the idea of Christian proselytization. The representatives said Christians continued to worship alone or in small congregations in private homes due to fear of societal discrimination and persecution. There continued to be no public Christian churches.

According to minority religious leaders, the decreasing numbers of Sikhs, Hindus, and other religious minorities had only a few places of worship. According to the Sikh and Hindu Council, which advocates with the government on behalf of the Sikh and Hindu communities, there were 12 gurdwaras (Sikh temples) and 2

mandus (Hindu temples) remaining in the country, compared with a combined total of 64 in the past. Buddhist foreigners remained free to worship in Hindu temples. Following past seizures of their places of worship by residents of Kandahar, Ghazni, Paktya, and other provinces, the Hindu community had presented the list of its places of worship to MOHRA in an effort to stop further seizures and to reclaim the land and buildings previously lost. Members of the Hindu and Sikh communities said these problems remained unresolved at year's end.

According to the leader of the Sikh community, a new mosque next to a Sikh temple deliberately aimed its loudspeakers at the temple to harass non-Muslim worshippers.

According to members of the Sikh and Hindu communities, they continued to refuse to send their children to public schools due to harassment from other students, although there were only a few private school options available to them due to the decreasing sizes of the two communities and their members' declining economic circumstances. The Sikh and Hindu Council reported one school in Nangarhar and two schools in Kabul remained operational.

Sikh leaders reported the main cause of Hindu and Sikh emigration remained a lack of employment opportunities; they said one factor impeding their access to employment was illiteracy. Both communities stated emigration would continue to increase as economic conditions worsened and security concerns increased.

Observers reported societal discrimination against the Shia minority by the Sunni majority continued to decline, although there were reports of discrimination in some localities, especially in regard to employment opportunities. There were also instances, however, where Sunnis and Shia came together for prayer or to donate blood in the aftermath of terrorist attacks.

Both Shia and Sunni leaders condemned particular secular events as contrary to Islam. In July Shia religious leaders in Bamyan declared a local two-day festival celebrating traditional Afghan music as being against Islamic values, forbidding participation or attendance. Both Sunni and Shia religious scholars in mid-August condemned the planned performance of a female Afghan pop singer to celebrate Independence Day as being against Islamic values. The concert's venue was changed to a lower-profile location.

Kabul's lone synagogue remained inactive, and a nearby Jewish cemetery was utilized as an unofficial dump.

Worship facilities for noncitizens of various faiths continued to be located at coalition military facilities and at embassies in Kabul.

The media continued to report efforts by local Muslim religious leaders to limit social activities they considered inconsistent with Islamic doctrine, such as education for females or female participation in sports.

There were reports many mullahs, especially those in unregistered mosques, continued to support the Taliban or ISKP in their sermons.

NGOs reported Muslim residents remained suspicious of development assistance projects, which they often viewed as surreptitious efforts to advance Christianity or engage in proselytization.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In meetings with members of the president's staff, the ONSC, MOHRA and the Ulema Council, U.S. embassy officials continued to promote religious tolerance and the need to enhance the government's capacity to counter violent religious extremism. Senior embassy officials met with government officials to emphasize the need to protect religious minorities.

Embassy officials met with both government and religious officials to discuss the issue of ensuring madrassahs did not offer a curriculum encouraging religiously motivated violent extremism. The embassy continued to coordinate with the ONSC, as well as other governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders, to assist the ONSC in creating a national strategy to combat violent extremism.

Embassy officials held regular meetings with leaders of major religious groups, imams, scholars, and NGOs to discuss ways to enhance religious tolerance and interreligious dialogue.

Embassy officials hosted iftars with government, civil society, and religious leaders during Ramadan to promote religious dialogue and tolerance. The embassy also posted social media content during Ramadan by members of the Muslim community in the United States underscoring respect for religious diversity. The embassy sponsored visits by religious leaders to the United States and other countries to broaden religious dialogue.

The embassy hosted roundtables with researchers and religious scholars, including from the Moderation Center and MOHRA, to discuss the sources and means to counter violent religious extremism. The embassy also facilitated and funded the coordination of research efforts on violent religious extremism.

The Ambassador recorded a video statement for International Religious Freedom Day on October 27, which the embassy highlighted on social media and shared with local news outlets. On social media, the embassy also highlighted remarks from senior U.S. and Afghan government officials urging religious tolerance.