

# AFGHANISTAN 2018 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." There were no reports of government prosecutions for blasphemy or apostasy during the year, but converts from Islam to other religions reported they continued to fear punishment from the government as well as reprisals from family and society. The law prohibits the production and publishing of works contrary to the principles of Islam or offensive to other religions. The new penal code, which went into effect in February, includes punishments for verbal and physical assaults on a follower of any religion and punishment for insults or distortions directed towards Islam. Shia leaders continued to state that the government neglected security in majority-Shia areas. The government sought to address security issues in Western Kabul's Shia Hazara Dasht-e Barchi area, a target of major attacks during the year, by announcing plans to increase Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) presence. Media reported the government arrested 26 militants preparing attacks on the Shia community during the community's observance of Ashura in Kabul. 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 the courts' continued failure to grant non-Muslims the same rights as Muslims. A small number of Sikhs and Hindus continued to serve in government positions. The Independent Elections Commission (IEC) granted an extension on July 5 for the registration for a Sikh candidate to run in the October parliamentary elections following the death of the only Sikh candidate in a suicide attack in Jalalabad on July 1. Shia Muslims continued to hold some major government positions; however, Shia leaders said the number of positions still did not reflect their demographics.

The Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), an affiliate of ISIS and a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, again targeted and killed members of minority religious communities, and the Taliban again targeted and killed individuals because of their beliefs or their links to the government. According to the UN

Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), consistent with trends observed in the past two years, many of the suicide and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on civilians targeted Shia Muslims, particularly ethnic Hazaras. During the year, UNAMA recorded 22 attacks targeting places of worship, religious leaders, and worshippers, causing 453 civilian casualties (156 deaths and 297 injured), all attributed to ISKP and other antigovernment elements. The Taliban continued to kill 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. On November 20, a suicide bomber killed more than 50 religious scholars gathered at a Kabul wedding hall to celebrate the Prophet Mohammad's birthday. No group claimed responsibility for the attack. 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 stoning any person suspected of adultery or other "moral crimes." Insurgents claiming affiliation with the ISKP reportedly engaged in similar activities. On February 27, in Tangi Wazir, Nangarhar Province, the ISKP stoned to death a man accused of engaging in extramarital sexual relations (*zina*), and subsequently issued a press statement about the killing. In April the ISKP stoned to death a 60-year-old man accused of raping a woman in Darzab District, Jawzjan Province. According to some religious community leaders, 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, which they said made it necessary for almost all women, both local and foreign, to wear some form of head covering. Observers said local Muslim religious leaders continued their efforts to limit social activities they considered inconsistent with Islamic doctrine. The authoritative body of Islamic scholars, known as the Ulema Council, announced plans to establish a special committee to oversee social reform to address government corruption and "moral corruption" in society that religious clerics deemed incompatible with the teachings of 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 a lack of employment opportunities. Community leaders

reported that 500 to 600 Sikhs and Hindus, representing almost half their numbers, fled to either India or Western countries during the year, particularly in the aftermath of the July 1 bombing in Jalalabad. Hindu and Sikh groups also reported interference with their efforts to cremate the remains of their dead, in accordance with their customs, from individuals who lived near cremation sites. On June 4, the Ulema Council convened approximately 3,000 religious scholars in Kabul to issue a propeace fatwa that also condemned discrimination based on religion.

U.S. embassy officials continued to promote religious tolerance and the protection of religious minorities in meetings with senior government officials. In October the Department of State Special Advisor for Religious Minorities met with government officials and civil society leaders to promote religious tolerance. To enhance the government's capacity to counter violent religious extremism, facilitate creation of a national strategy against such extremism, and create policies to foster religious tolerance, embassy representatives met frequently with the Office of the National Security Council (ONSC). Embassy officials 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 interreligious dialogue, identify means and ways to counter violent religious extremism, and promote tolerance for religious diversity. During the month of Ramadan, the embassy used social media platforms to share information on Islam in America, based on Department of State-created materials that profiled prominent Muslim-Americans and organizations. The embassy also used social media to highlight the National Religious Freedom and International Religious Freedom Days.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 34.9 million (July 2018 estimate). There are no reliable statistics available concerning the percentages of Sunni and Shia Muslims in the country; the government's Central Statistics Office does not track disaggregated population data. According to the Pew Forum, Shia make up approximately 10-15 percent of the population.

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, Baha'is, and Christians, constitute less than 0.3 percent of the population. Sikh and Hindu leaders estimate there are 245 Sikh and Hindu families totaling 700 individuals, down from 1,300

individuals estimated in 2017, mostly in Kabul, with a few communities in Nangarhar, Ghazni, Paktiya, Kunduz, Kandahar, and Helmand Provinces.

The Ahmadi Muslim community estimates it has 450 adherents nationwide, down from 600 in 2017. Reliable estimates of the Baha'i and Christian communities are not available. There are small numbers of practitioners of other religions, including one Jewish person.

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 Baha'i 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." The penal code, enacted in February, outlines provisions that criminalize verbal and physical assaults on religion and protects individuals' right to exercise their beliefs for any religion. An article in the new penal code specifies what constitutes an insult to religion, stating, "A person who intentionally insults a religion or disrupts its rites or destroys its permitted places of worship shall be deemed as a perpetrator of the crime of insulting religions and shall be punished according to provisions of this chapter."

Another article of the penal code states persons who forcibly stop the conduct of rituals of any religion, destroy or damage "permitted places of worship" (a term not defined by the code) where religious rituals are conducted, or destroy or damage any sign or symbol of any religion are subject to imprisonment of three months to one year or a fine ranging from 30,000 afghanis to 60,000 afghanis (\$400 to \$800). In cases where murder or physical injury result from the disturbance of religious rites or ceremonies, the perpetrator will be tried according to crimes of murder and physical injury as defined by law.

The new penal code also specifies that deliberate insults or distortions directed towards Islamic beliefs or laws carry a prison sentence of one to five years.

While the crime of blasphemy of Islam, also known as apostasy, is not specifically provided for under the penal code, it falls under the seven offenses making up the *hudood* as defined by sharia law. According to the penal code, perpetrators of *hudood* will be punished according to Hanafi jurisprudence. 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 the individual repents. 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, although 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, which is applied 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 Islamic 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 Baha’i Faith is distinct from Islam and is a form of blasphemy. All Muslims who convert to it are considered apostates; Baha’is are labeled infidels.

Licensing and registration of religious groups are not required. Registration as a group (which gives the group the status of a council, known as a *shura*) 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. Both groups and associations may register with the Ministry of Justice. The ministry may dissolve such organizations through a judicial order. Groups recognized as *shuras* (councils) may cooperate with one another on religious issues. Associations may conduct business with the government or the society as a whole.

A mass media 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, a government agency, to provide broadcasting content reflecting the religious beliefs of all ethnic groups in the country. The law also obligates the agency to adjust its programs in light of Islamic principles as well as national and spiritual values.

According to the constitution, the “state shall devise and implement a unified educational curriculum based on the provisions of the sacred religion of Islam, national culture as well as academic principles” 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 government's national identity cards indicate an individual's religion, as well as nationality, tribe, and ethnicity. Individuals are not required to declare belief in Islam to receive citizenship.

The constitution requires the president and two 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 additional 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 Ismaili Muslims.

The Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs (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. During the year, MOHRA restructured its bureaucracy to establish an office dedicated to assisting the faith practices of religious minorities, specifically Sikhs and Hindus.

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

### **Government Practices**

Media reported members of the Shia community continued to state the government did not provide them with adequate protection from attacks by nonstate actors. In response to these attacks, in September President Ashraf Ghani announced a plan to divide Kabul into four security zones, creating a security zone in the Dasht-e Barchi area similar to the one that protects embassies and international organizations in central Kabul and increasing the ANDSF presence there.

President Ghani also announced plans for the Kabul Municipality and Capital Zone Development Authority to implement development projects in the area, including road construction. Representatives from the predominantly Shia Hazara community, however, said these were insufficient, symbolic measures from the government. The Ministry of Interior again increased security around Shia mosques and authorized the arming of Shia civilians, under police authority, to provide extra security for Ashura. There were no reports of violence during Ashura processions – a sharp contrast from recent years. On September 18, media reported the government had prevented attacks by arresting 26 ISKP militants in Kabul suspected of planning attacks on Ashura.

As in the previous four 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. Baha'is continued to be labeled as “infidels,” although they were not considered converts; as such, they were not charged with either crime.

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 that of the approximately 120,000 mullahs in the country, 6,000 registered mullahs were working directly for MOHRA at year's end, an increase from 4,589 in 2017. Government officials said the ministry was able to hire additional clerics under the year's budget due to the implementation of new procedures and a new payroll system. These mullahs continued to receive an average monthly salary of 12,000 afghanis (\$160) from the government. For highly educated mullahs of central mosques delivering special Friday sermons or *khatibs*, MOHRA provided a salary of 14,000 afghanis (\$190). 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 66,000 of the estimated 160,000 mosques in the country were registered. 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 again reported they remained free to build places of worship and to train other Hindus and Sikhs to become clergy, but per the law against conversion of Muslims, the government continued not to allow them to proselytize. Hindu and Sikh community members said they continued to avoid pursuing land disputes through the courts due to fear of retaliation, especially if powerful local leaders occupied their property.

Although the government 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. Sikh and Hindu community leaders said President Ghani reaffirmed this promise in an August 2017 meeting, but as of the end of the year, the government had not taken action. Despite these challenges, community leaders acknowledged new efforts by MOHRA to provide free water, electricity, and repair services for a few Sikh and Hindu temples, as well as facilitate visas for religious trips to India.

MOHRA reported there were 4,500 registered madrassahs and “Quran learning centers” throughout the country, up from 4,093 in 2017. The government reported that approximately 50,000 mosques were registered with the ministry. The government registered some additional madrassahs during the year but did not report how many. More than 300,000 students were enrolled in 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 dormitories if students lived on campus. MOHRA continued to register madrassahs collocated 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 was likely unregistered madrassahs “far outnumbered” registered 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, some madrassahs were closed in conflict areas during the year, but not out of concern for potential 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. Government officials said they were concerned about their inability to supervise unregistered madrassahs that could institute violent extremist curriculum intolerant of religious minorities and become recruitment centers for antigovernment groups.

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

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; however, 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 included messages in support of religious tolerance in speeches invoking national unity and in meetings with minority religious groups. For example, on September 19, media reported that President Ghani had stated the ongoing war was against the “national unity and religious freedom” of the country. President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah also held meetings with Ulema Council members on promoting intrafaith tolerance and “moderate practices” of Islam.

Minority religious groups reported the courts continued not to apply the protections provided to those groups by 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, such as Sikhs and Hindus, 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 state they faced discrimination in the judicial system, including long delays in resolving cases, particularly regarding the continued appropriation of Sikh properties. Hindu and Sikh community leaders said they had pending court cases of land seized by municipal authorities and warlords from four years ago. Whenever community advocates reproached the court, government officials said their cases remained under review.

Although some Shia continued to hold senior positions in the government such as Second Vice President Sarwar Danesh, High Peace Council Chairman Karim Khalili, and then Second Chief Executive Deputy Mohammad Mohaqeq, Shia leaders continued to state 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 state, however, that Shia remained overrepresented in government based on Sunni estimates of the percentage of Shia in the population. Observers said these debates were often about the predominantly Hazara ethnicity of the majority of the country’s Shia rather than about religion.

A small number of Sikhs and Hindus continued to serve in government positions, including one at the municipal level, one at the Chamber of Commerce and Industries, one as a presidentially appointed member of the upper house of parliament, and one as an elected member in the lower house. After the only Sikh candidate, Awtar Singh Khalsa, for lower house parliament elections was killed in

a July 1 suicide attack in Jalalabad, Nangarhar Province, the IEC granted an extension on July 5 for the registration for a Sikh candidate to run in parliamentary elections in October.

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 Ulema Council, the Islamic Brotherhood Council, and MOHRA also continued their work on intrafaith reconciliation. Ministry officials and NGOs promoting religious tolerance, however, said it was difficult to continue their programs due to funding and capacity constraints.

On June 4, the Ulema Council convened approximately 3,000 religious scholars at the Loya Jirga tent in Kabul to issue a propeace fatwa. Although the religious scholars said the effort was more of a symbolic attempt to challenge the religious legitimacy of "holy war" invoked by violent extremist groups, including the Taliban and ISKP, they said the fatwa included principles of religious tolerance. The scholars stated, "Divisions among Muslims based on language, tribe, or sect are against Islam" and that "those who cause such division should be punished." This included all forms of intra-Muslim violence, including through suicide attacks.

The ONSC continued its work on addressing religiously motivated violent extremism, which included policies to foster religious tolerance. 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. Government officials said the strategy had reached the final stages of review during the year.

### **Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors**

According to journalists, local observers, and UNAMA, attacks by the ISKP and other insurgent groups continued to target specific religious and ethnoreligious groups, including the Hazara Shia. UNAMA's 2018 report on civilian deaths documented attacks targeting places of worship, religious leaders, and worshippers, recording 22 attacks causing 453 civilian casualties (156 deaths and 297 injured). UNAMA attributed all attacks to antigovernment elements; the ISKP committed the vast majority of attacks. Suicide attacks were the main cause of casualties, killing 136 civilians and injuring 266, representing a 118 per cent increase in casualties compared with 2017. In addition to suicide attacks, UNAMA documented 35 civilian casualties (15 deaths and 20 injured) from targeted killings of religious leaders and worshippers.

UNAMA continued to report high levels of ISKP-directed, sectarian-motivated violence targeting the Shia Muslim, mostly ethnic Hazara, population. During the year, it documented 19 incidents of sectarian-motivated violence against Shia Muslims resulting in 747 civilian casualties (223 deaths and 524 injured), a 34 percent increase in civilian casualties from such attacks compared with 2017.

The ISKP claimed responsibility for the September 6 twin-suicide attack on a sports club in Western Kabul that killed close to 150 individuals, the vast majority of them members of the Shia Hazara community.

Attacks on Shia mosques for which the ISKP claimed responsibility included a March 21 suicide attack on a Shia shrine in Kabul during a Nowruz celebration, killing 31 and wounding 65, and an August 3 suicide bomb attack on a Shia mosque in Gardez, Paktiya Province, killing 33 persons and injuring 94 during Friday prayers.

According to media reports, antigovernment forces also targeted Sunni mosques. On May 6, an IED exploded in the Sunni Yaqubi Mosque in the Khost provincial center used as a voter registration center for the October parliamentary elections, killing at least 19 civilians, and injuring 32 others. No group claimed responsibility for the attack; religious scholars noted the Taliban appeared to avoid attacks against Sunni mosques or refrain from claiming responsibility for them.

ISKP attacks targeting Shia continued to extend outside of mosques. On April 22, a suicide attacker self-detonated outside of a national identity card (*tazkira*) distribution center in Kabul, killing 60 civilians and injuring 138 others, mostly women and children. The predominantly Shia Hazara area in Kabul, Dasht-e Barchi, witnessed several suicide attacks targeting mosques, schools, and

government offices, killing and injuring a large number of civilians. The ISKP claimed responsibility for the majority of these attacks, which deliberately targeted the Shia community. For example, on August 15, a suicide attack targeted students at an educational center in the Dasht-e Barchi area, killing more than 50 and injuring an estimated 70 individuals, mostly students. An attack on a gym in the same area on September 5 killed more than 25 civilians and injured approximately 100.

The ISKP also claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing outside the tent of a June 4 Ulema Council conference, where close to 3,000 religious scholars gathered to issue a fatwa condemning intra-Muslim violence, killing 14 and injuring at least 20.

On November 20, a suicide bombing at a wedding hall in Kabul killed at least 50 individuals and injured dozens more. According to a government official, the attack was one of more deadly attacks in Kabul during the year, targeting a gathering of religious scholars. No group claimed responsibility for the attack. The Taliban continued to kill and threaten religious leaders with death for preaching messages contrary to the Taliban's interpretation of Islam or its political agenda. On May 26, the Taliban killed a prominent religious scholar in Bati Kot District, Nangarhar Province, whom it accused of spying for the government. On June 5, local authorities said the Taliban killed a prominent religious scholar in Kandahar City.

In several cases, the responsibility for attacks on religious officials was unclear. In these cases, although no individual or group claimed responsibility for the attacks, local authorities suspected the ISKP and less frequently, the Taliban were responsible. On April 29, an IED explosion near a Sunni mosque killed five civilians in Jalalabad City, Nangarhar Province. On June 6, armed men opened fire in a Sunni mosque during prayers, killing four civilians and injuring five others in Mandozai District, Khost Province. No group claimed responsibility for the attack. On November 24 in Kabul, two unidentified gunmen on a motorcycle killed Mawlawi Abdul Basir Haqqani, the head of Kabul's Ulema Council. Authorities detained two individuals.

On June 8, an IED killed religious scholars supportive of the government in Mehtarlam City, Laghman Province, killing three civilians and injuring 12 others. On June 23, unidentified gunmen killed a Shia religious scholar in Herat. On July 14, unidentified gunmen killed a progovernment imam in Farah City, Farah Province.

There continued to be reports of the Taliban and 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. On February 12, the Taliban stoned a man to death on charges of engaging in extramarital sex (*zina*) in the province of Sar-e Pul. On March 18, the Taliban punished an 18-year-old male by cutting off his right hand and left leg on charges of robbery in Obe District, Herat Province.

On February 27, in Tangi Wazir, Nangarhar Province, the ISKP stoned to death a man accused of engaging in extramarital sexual relations. The ISKP released a press statement stating the married man was stoned to death because he had illegal extramarital sexual relations. In April the ISKP stoned to death a 60-year-old man accused of raping a woman in Darzab District, Jawzjan Province.

There were reports of continued Taliban warnings to mullahs not to perform funeral prayers for government security officials. As a result, according to MOHRA officials, imams continued to state they feared performing funeral rites for ANDSF and other government employees. In July government officials confirmed media reports that officially registered imams in Samkani District, Pakhtiya Province, refused to perform funeral rites for ANDSF members to avoid being targeted by antigovernment elements in the area. Local communities pointed out that inaction by Islamic clerics affected security force morale. MOHRA also reported difficulty in staffing registered mosques in insecure areas because of Taliban threats.

According to some religious community leaders, some mullahs in unregistered mosques continued to preach in support of the Taliban or ISKP in their sermons.

There were continued reports of the Taliban and ISKP taking over schools in areas under their control and imposing their own curricula.

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

Since religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was often difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. 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 cases of harassment, including verbal abuse,

than Sikhs, which they ascribed to their lack of a distinctive male headdress. Both groups attributed fewer cases of harassment of members of their communities to the decline in the Sikh and Hindu populations in the country.

Although in past years media reported cases of local religious leaders forcing young men to fast during Ramadan, there were no cases reported during the year.

Women of several different faiths, including Islam, continued to report 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 districts of urban areas, including in Kabul, in contrast to other more secure, government-controlled areas where women said they felt comfortable without burqas. 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 continued to report verbal abuse on the street and 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 persecution. Ahmadis maintained a place of worship but kept it unmarked, without minarets or other adornments identifying it as an Ahmadi Muslim community mosque. Overall, Ahmadis reported the need to increasingly conceal their identity to avoid unwanted attention in public, or to depart the country permanently.

Christian representatives reported public opinion remained hostile toward converts to Christianity and to the idea of Christian proselytization. They 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 four mandirs (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, Paktiya, and other provinces, the Hindu community had presented a list of its places of worship to MOHRA in 2016 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 were still unresolved at year's end.

Community leaders said they perceived the large number of butchers selling beef near a Sikh temple in Kabul as a deliberate insult because neighbors were aware that Sikhs and Hindus do not eat beef for religious reasons. Sikh and Hindu leaders also reported neighboring residents tended to place household trash in their temples of worship. Although they filed official complaints to police, neither local authorities nor local imams took action to remedy the situation.

The government attempted to honor the Sikh and Hindu community following the July 1 suicide attack that killed several members of their community in Jalalabad by renaming the location of the attack as Daramsal, after the Sikh parliamentary candidate who died in the bombing. Community leaders, however, said the government's decision brought more unwanted attention and harassment to Hindus and Sikhs in the area.

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 one school in Kabul remained operational. Sikh and Hindu representatives, however, said these schools were still underequipped to teach students.

Sikh leaders continued to state the main cause of Hindu and Sikh emigration was a lack of employment opportunities; they said one factor impeding their access to employment was illiteracy. Sikh leaders said many families in Kabul lived at community temples (gurdwaras and mandirs) because they could not afford permanent housing. Both communities stated emigration would continue to increase as economic conditions worsened and security concerns increased. Community leaders estimated between 500 to 600 Sikhs and Hindus had fled the country during the year to either India or Western countries.

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 involving employment opportunities. There were also instances, however, where Sunnis and Shia joined in prayer or to donate blood in the aftermath of terrorist attacks. Shia clerics and NGOs reported instances of Sunni religious leaders openly condemning attacks against the Shia community and attending the funeral processions of Shia victims.

Media published reports of both Shia and Sunni leaders condemning particular secular events as contrary to Islam; however, there were no prominent reports of joint condemnations.

Kabul's lone synagogue remained occupied by the last remaining Jew in the country, and a nearby Jewish cemetery was still utilized as an unofficial dump. The lone Jew said he was able to perform all his religious rituals. He said in the past Jews from international military forces and foreign embassies attended the synagogue but could no longer do so due to security concerns and threats.

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

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.

According to media reports, the Ulema Council sought an expanded role in public life; on August 4, it announced plans to establish a special committee to oversee social reform to address government corruption and "moral corruption" deemed incompatible with the teachings of Islam. Media reported that President Ghani and the public welcomed the council's initiative to cooperate with the government in tackling government corruption. Media outlets however, conveyed public concerns that the council's social reform plans infringed on freedoms and rights provided under the country's constitution, referring to the country's past history of religious social repression under the Taliban regime. According to religious community representatives, however, the council did not implement these plans during the year. Early in the year, a video clip went viral on social media of a prominent mullah of a registered madrassah in Kabul, praising the Taliban and strongly criticizing the government for permitting the continued presence of international forces in the country.

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, 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. The Ambassador met with leaders of the Sikh and Hindu communities to understand their relationship with the government and ability to practice their faith. In October the Department of State Special Advisor for Religious Minorities visited the country and promoted religious tolerance in discussions with senior government officials, civil society, and members of the international community.

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, which could encourage intolerance towards the country's religious minorities. 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 and enhancing its relevance to promoting respect for religious diversity.

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. During the month of Ramadan, embassy social media platforms shared information on Islam in America based on Department of State-created materials that profiled prominent Muslim-Americans and organizations.

The embassy hosted roundtables with researchers and religious scholars, including MOHRA representatives, 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, which included policies to foster intrafaith tolerance.

The embassy highlighted National Religious Freedom Day on July 16 and International Religious Freedom Day on October 27 through Twitter and Facebook posts, which featured a video on the lives of American Muslims exemplifying exemplified religious tolerance in the United States.