

## AUSTRIA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

### Executive Summary

Historical and modern constitutional and legal documents provide for freedom of religious belief and affiliation and prohibit religious discrimination. The law bans public incitement to hostile acts against religious groups. The law divides recognized religious groups into three categories; 16 groups recognized as religious societies receive the most benefits. Unrecognized groups may practice their religion privately if the practice is lawful and does not offend “common decency.” The government continued to enforce a ban on face coverings. Scientologists and the Unification Church said government-funded organizations advised the public against associating with them. The government tightened controls on ritual slaughter. Muslim and Jewish groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) expressed concerns over anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic sentiment in the Freedom Party (FPOe), the junior partner in the coalition government. Authorities dropped an investigation of an FPOe politician on anti-Semitism charges because the statute of limitations had run; he resumed his position as party chair in Lower Austria. The government collaborated with the Muslim community to combat extremism and with a Jewish NGO on Holocaust awareness training for teachers.

The Islamic Faith Community (IGGIO) reported 540 anti-Muslim incidents, a 75 percent increase over the 309 incidents it recorded in 2017. It attributed the increase in part to its documentation center’s higher public profile. More than half of the incidents occurred online; others included verbal abuse and vandalism. Courts convicted individuals of anti-Islamic rhetoric and anti-Semitic or neo-Nazi activity, generally handing down fines or sentences, some of which they suspended.

Embassy representatives regularly engaged with officials from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Interior on religious freedom, concerns of religious groups, integration of religious minorities, and measures to combat anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim sentiment and encourage interreligious dialogue. The Ambassador met with leaders from the IGGIO, Jewish Community (IKG), Roman Catholic Church, Lutheran Church, and Orthodox Churches to discuss their relations with the government, instances of discrimination, and interreligious dialogue; the embassy met with the youth branches of religious organizations. Embassy officials served on the advisory board of the Mauthausen Memorial Agency, which promoted Holocaust remembrance, spoke on religious freedom at public ceremonies, and

supported programs to combat anti-Semitism and promote religious dialogue and tolerance.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 8.8 million (July 2018 estimate). According to religious groups and December 2017 figures from the government Austrian Integration Fund, Roman Catholics constitute 58 percent of the population and Muslims – predominantly Sunni – 8 percent, while approximately 25 percent is unaffiliated with any religion. Religious groups constituting less than 5 percent each include the Lutheran Church; Swiss Reformed Church (Evangelical Church-Augsburg and Helvetic confessions); Eastern Orthodox Churches (Russian, Greek, Serbian, Romanian, and Bulgarian); Jehovah’s Witnesses; other Christian churches; and Jews and other non-Christian religious groups.

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

### **Legal Framework**

A combination of historical and modern constitutional documents guarantees freedom of “conscience and creed.” The law provides for freedom of religious belief and the rights of all residents to join, participate in, leave, or abstain from association with any religious community. It stipulates, “Duties incumbent on nationals may not be impeded by religious affiliation.”

Several constitutional provisions protect religious freedom. The main pillars are historical laws on fundamental rights and freedoms, including religious freedom, and treaties and conventions such as the European Convention on Human Rights, which form part of the constitution. Antidiscrimination legislation prohibits discrimination on religious grounds. Citizens have the right to sue the government for constitutional violations of religious freedom.

The law prohibits public incitement to hostile acts against a church group, religious society, or other religious group if the incitement is perceivable by “many people,” which an official government commentary on the law and the courts interpret as 30 or more individuals. The prohibition also applies specifically in the case of incitement in print, electronic, or other media available to a broad public. The law also prohibits incitement, insult, or contempt against religious groups, if such action violates human dignity.

The law divides registered religious groups into three officially recognized legal categories (listed in descending order of rights and privileges): religious societies, religious confessional communities, and associations. Each category possesses specific rights, privileges, and legal responsibilities. Members of religious groups not legally recognized may practice their religion at home “insofar as this practice is neither unlawful nor offends common decency.”

There are 16 recognized religious societies: the Roman Catholic Church; Protestant churches – specifically Lutheran and Presbyterian, called “Augsburg” and “Helvetic” confessions; the IGGIO; Old Catholic Church; IKG; Eastern Orthodox Church (Bulgarian, Greek, Romanian, Russian, and Serbian); The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; New Apostolic Church; Syrian Orthodox Church; Coptic Orthodox Church; Armenian Apostolic Church; Methodist Church of Austria; the Buddhist Community; Jehovah’s Witnesses; Alevi Community in Austria; and Free Christian Churches.

The law grants registered religious societies the right to public practice and independent administration of their internal affairs, to participate in the program requiring mandatory church contributions by church members, and to bring religious workers into the country to act as ministers, missionaries, or teachers. Under the law, religious societies have “public corporation” status, permitting them to engage in a number of public or quasi-public activities, such as government-funded religious instruction in both public and private schools, which the government denies to confessional communities and associations. The government grants all recognized religious societies tax relief in two main ways: donations are not taxable, and the societies receive exemption from property tax for all buildings dedicated to the active practice of religion or administration of such. Additionally, religious societies are exempt from the surveillance charge, payable when state security is required, and the administrative fee levied at the municipal level. Responsibilities of religious societies include a commitment to sponsor social and cultural activities that serve the common good and to ensure their teachings do not violate the law or ethical standards.

Religious groups seeking to achieve religious society status for the first time must apply for recognition with the Office for Religious Affairs in the Federal Chancellery. Religious groups recognized as societies prior to 1998 retained their status. The government grandfathered in 14 of the 16 recognized religious societies under this provision of the law. To gain recognition as a religious society, religious groups not recognized prior to 1998 must have membership

equaling 0.2 percent of the country's population (approximately 17,400 persons) and existed for 20 years, at least 10 of which must have been as an association and five as a confessional community. The government recognizes Jehovah's Witnesses and Alevi Muslims as religious societies under these post-1998 criteria. Groups that do not meet these criteria may still apply for religious society status under an exception for groups that have been active internationally for at least 100 years and active as an association in the country for 10 years. Groups sharing a broad faith with an existing society or confessional community, for example Christianity, may register separately as long as they can demonstrate that they have a different theology.

The law allows religious groups not recognized as societies to seek official status as confessional communities with the Office for Religious Affairs in the Federal Chancellery. The government recognizes nine confessional communities: the Baha'i Faith; Movement for Religious Renewal-Community of Christians; Pentecostal Community of God; Seventh-day Adventists; Hindu Community; Islamic-Shiite Community; Old-Alevi Community in Austria; Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church); and United Pentecostal Community of Austria. The government recognized the latter as a confessional community on April 17.

A recognized confessional community has the juridical standing needed to engage in such activities as purchasing real estate in its own name and contracting for goods and services, but it is not eligible for the financial and educational benefits available to recognized religious societies. Contributions to confessional communities' charitable activities are tax deductible for those who make them, but the communities are not exempt from property taxes.

To gain government recognition as a confessional community, a group must have at least 300 members and submit to the Office for Religious Affairs its statutes describing the goals, rights, and obligations of members, as well as membership regulations, a list of officials, and financing information. A group must also submit a written description of its religious doctrine, which must differ from that of any previously recognized religious society or religious confessional community. The Office for Religious Affairs determines whether the group's basic beliefs are consistent with public security, order, health, and morals, and with the rights and freedoms of citizens. A religious group seeking to obtain confessional community status is subject to a six-month waiting period from the time of application to the chancellery. After this period, groups that have applied automatically receive the status unless the government issues a decree rejecting the application.

Religious groups not qualifying for either religious society or confessional community status may apply to become legal associations, a status applicable to a broad range of civil groups. Some groups organize as associations while waiting for the government to recognize them as confessional communities.

The Church of Scientology and a number of smaller religious groups, such as Sahaja Yoga and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, have association status.

Religious groups registered as associations have the right to function in public, but they may not provide religious instruction in schools or pastoral care in hospitals or prisons.

According to the law, any group of more than two persons pursuing a nonprofit goal qualifies to organize as an association. Groups may apply to the Ministry of Interior to gain such status. To become an association, a group must submit a written statement citing its common, nonprofit goal and commitment to function as a nonprofit organization. Associations have juridical standing and many of the same rights as confessional communities, including the right to own real estate and to contract for goods and services. Unlike confessional communities, associations may not offer pastoral care in hospitals or prisons or receive tax-deductible contributions.

The law governing relations between the government and the IGGIO and Alevi Muslim groups stipulates that funding for the day-to-day operations of mosques must be derived from domestic sources, Islamic teachings and practices must not violate federal law, and Islamic institutions should “take a positive stance” toward the state and society. The law provides an explicit legal definition of, and legal protection for, Islamic practices, such as circumcision and preparation of food in conformity with religious rules, and states Muslims may raise children and youth in accordance with Islamic traditions. Muslim groups with at least 300 members and a theology not distinct from a pre-existing Islamic religious society or confessional community are considered cultural communities and fall under the umbrella of the pre-existing, legally recognized Islamic religious society or confessional community. This includes the IGGIO and the Alevi Community in Austria, which are both religious societies, or the Islamic-Shiite Community and the Old-Alevi Faith Community in Austria, both of which have confessional community status. The law allows for Islamic theological university studies, which the University of Vienna offers.

Separate laws govern relations between the government and each of the other 14 state-recognized religious societies. The laws have similar intent but vary in some details, given they were enacted at different times over a span of approximately 140 years.

The law bans full-face coverings in public places as a “violation of Austrian values,” with exceptions made only for artistic, cultural, or traditional events, in sports, or for health or professional reasons. Failure to comply with the law is an administrative violation. The law prescribes a 150-euro (\$170) fine but does not entitle police to remove the face covering.

The government funds, on a proportional basis, religious instruction for any of the 16 officially recognized religious societies by clergy or instructors provided by those groups for children in public schools and government-accredited private schools. The government does not offer such funding to other religious groups. A minimum of three children is required to form a class. Attendance in religion classes is mandatory for all students unless they formally withdraw at the beginning of the school year; students under the age of 14 require parental permission to withdraw from religion classes. The government funds the instruction, and religious groups provide the instructors. Religious instruction takes place either in the school or at sites organized by religious groups. Some schools offer ethics classes for students not attending religious instruction. Religious education and ethics classes include the tenets of different religious groups as comparative religious education.

The curriculum for both public and private schools includes compulsory antibias and tolerance education, including religious tolerance, as part of civics education across various subjects, including history and German-language instruction.

Holocaust education is part of history instruction and appears in other subjects such as civics.

The Equal Rights Agency, an independent agency falling under the jurisdiction of the women’s ministry, oversees discrimination cases on various grounds, including religion. The agency provides legal counseling and mediation services, and it assists with bringing cases before the Equal Treatment Commission, another independent government agency. In cases where it finds discrimination, the commission makes a recommendation for corrective action. In a case of noncompliance with the recommendation, the case goes to court. The commission

may issue expert reports for plaintiffs to present before the court. Only a court may order corrective action and compensation.

The law bans neo-Nazi activity and prohibits public denial, belittlement, approval, or justification “of the National Socialist genocide” or other Nazi crimes against humanity in print, broadcast, or other media.

Foreign religious workers of groups recognized as confessional communities or associations must apply for a general immigrant visa that is not employment or family based, and is subject to a quota. The government requires a visa for visitors from non-visa waiver countries or individuals who would stay beyond 90 days, including religious workers of confessional communities or associations. Foreign religious workers belonging to religious societies do not require visas for either shorter visits or stays beyond 90 days. Religious workers from Schengen or European Union-member countries are exempt from all visa requirements.

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

## Government Practices

According to the 2018 report on the country by the international NGO Freedom House, many minority religious groups stated the legal division of religious groups into three categories impeded their claims for recognition and “demoted them to second- or third-class status.”

On November 20, parliament enacted a law providing for financial support for the costs of preschools to the provinces, which included an obligation for provincial governments to ban headscarves for children in preschools.

The government continued to implement the ban on the wearing of full-face coverings in public that went into effect in October 2017. According to data from the interior ministry, authorities filed charges in 96 cases during the year: 62 in Vienna, 11 in Lower Austria, eight in Upper Austria, five in Styria, four in Tyrol, three in Salzburg and one each in Carinthia, Vorarlberg, and Burgenland. Because authorities did not file charges when persons paid fines immediately, there were an unspecified number of additional cases in which police enforced the law. A woman fined in October 2017 for covering her face while bicycling told the press she would appeal to the Administrative Court; however, by year’s end, there were no official reports of legal challenges to the ban.

Citing the ban on face coverings as well as the prohibition on foreign funding of mosques, the 2018 Freedom House report lowered its rating of the country from four to three on a scale of four in the category of freedom to practice and express religious faith or nonbelief.

In October the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) rejected a plea by a woman challenging her 2011 conviction by a Vienna court, later upheld on appeal, for blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad in 2009. The ECHR found that insulting the Prophet Muhammad “goes beyond the permissible limits of an objective debate” and “could stir up prejudice and put at risk religious peace.” The ECHR stated the Austrian courts had “carefully balanced her right to freedom of expression with the right of others to have their religious feelings protected.”

The government continued to deny funding for pastoral care the IGGIO provided to Muslims in prison. Only the Roman Catholic Church received government funding for pastoral care in prisons pursuant to the law covering relations between the government and the Catholic Church.

On November 22, the government coalition parties introduced a bill stipulating a ban of headscarves for children, 10 and under, in elementary schools. The bill was referred for discussion to the parliamentary education committee and at year’s end was still pending debate. The IGGIO called the proposed ban a “symbolic” and “diversionary tactic” that would open the door to a general ban on headscarves in public.

Some Scientologists and representatives of the Unification Church continued to state the Federal Office of Sect Issues and other government-associated entities fostered societal discrimination against religious groups not registered as religious societies or confessional communities. The office offered advice to persons with questions about groups that it considered “sects” and “cults,” including the Scientologists and members of the Unification Church. The office was nominally independent but government-funded, and the minister for women, family and youth both appointed and oversaw its head.

A counseling center in Vienna managed by the Society Against Sect and Cult Dangers, an NGO that described itself as an organization working against harm caused by “destructive cults” such as Scientology, continued to distribute information to schools and the general public and provide counseling for former members of such groups. According to the website of the society’s founder, Friedrich Griess, the society received funding from the government of Lower

Austria. The society reportedly also received support from the city of Vienna. Several other provinces funded family and youth counseling offices that provided information on “sects and cults,” which members of some minority religious groups, such as Scientologists or the Unification Church, stated were negatively biased.

In June the government completed an investigation of several mosques of the Arab Cultural Community over allegations the mosques preached extremist teachings and concluded the allegations were unfounded. Mosques of the Arab Cultural Community had been operating outside the auspices of the IGGIO, despite a 2015 law requiring they incorporate under the IGGIO as an umbrella organization. The government allowed the mosques to continue operations under the IGGIO.

In July the governor of Lower Austria rejected proposals by the provincial councilor for animal protection to reduce kosher and halal slaughtering in the province to an “as-needed” basis. The councilor had sought a list of the Jews and Muslims in the province to determine the amount of halal and kosher meat required to meet demand. The Jewish and Islamic communities had previously voiced concerns about the proposal and said they would not provide any lists of their members. The governor stressed that the government would not require any registrations of persons intending to buy kosher or halal meat.

In August FPOe deputy party leader Johann Gudenus announced the government would draft a law specifically targeting “political Islam” as an illegal political activity and an “abuse of religion.”

Also in August, a decree by the Ministry of Social Affairs provided for stricter controls against illegal ritual slaughtering. The decree included stricter monitoring of farmers who sold sheep to private persons, a practice which primarily affected Muslims. Muslim groups stated the existing provisions to prevent illegal slaughter were sufficient, and criticized the decree as a populist measure.

The government continued to apply a policy of banning headwear in official identification documents, with an exception for religious purposes as long as the face was sufficiently visible to allow for identification of the wearer.

On December 11, parliament adopted an amendment to existing law banning certain symbols, including the symbols of ISIS and al-Qaida-affiliated groups. The amendment, scheduled to enter into force in March 2019, expanded the ban to include symbols of other groups the government considered extremist, including

the Muslim Brotherhood. Interior Minister Herbert Kickl said the law was a clear sign of the country's zero tolerance policy towards extremist groups, including those professing religious extremism.

The international NGO Anti-Defamation League conducted teacher-training seminars on Holocaust awareness with Austrian schools, reaching approximately 100 teachers. In addition, provincial school councils and the education ministry invited Holocaust survivors to talk to school classes about National Socialism and the Holocaust.

The counseling office for extremism prevention of the Ministry of Women, Family and Youth cooperated with the IGGIO to conduct training courses for imams on community work and prevention of extremism, including promoting religious tolerance.

Education Minister Heinz Fassmann, as well as Catholic, Lutheran, and Jewish representatives, attended an IGGIO-hosted iftar in May to express support for the Muslim community.

In February Lower Austrian FPOe politician Udo Landbauer resigned as his party's top candidate in the Lower Austrian elections and from all party functions following revelations of anti-Semitic lyrics mocking the Holocaust in a 1997 songbook of the fraternity Germania zu Wiener Neustadt, of which Landbauer was chairman. He remained a candidate, but lower down on the party's list. In November Landbauer returned to the Lower Austrian FPOe as its acting chairman and acting floor leader in the provincial legislature. The Viennese weekly *Falter* reported that Herwig Gotschober, FPOe District Councilor in Vienna-Leopoldstadt and press officer to Transport Minister Norbert Hofer, was chairman of another fraternity, Bruna Sudetia, that also used a songbook containing anti-Semitic lyrics. Following public controversy over the Germania zu Wiener Neustadt songbook, the FPOe formed a commission of historians in 2017 to examine the party's history and its past connections to National Socialism, including an analysis of its past party platforms. The party said the commission would include experts from Israel and the United States. At year's end the party had not released any details on the composition of the commission or its work.

Jewish and Muslim community members and NGOs expressed concern over the participation of the FPOe in the coalition government with the People's Party (OeVP). For example, IKG Vienna President Oskar Deutsch continued to describe the FPOe as an anti-Semitic party and expressed concern about its attempts to

appeal to Jewish voters by rebranding itself as anti-Muslim. In a November FPOe Facebook video on the introduction of photos on social security identification cards, the party alluded to Muslims abusing social services by portraying the persons on the card as “Ali” and “Mustafa,” wearing a fez and displaying a mustache. Vice Chancellor and FPOe Chairman Strache publicly distanced the party from the video, saying it was “exaggerated,” “provocative,” and “unnecessary.” He said the charge that foreigners were primarily responsible for abusing social services was overblown. At the annual ceremony commemorating the liberation of the concentration camp Mauthausen in May, Deutsch referred to charges of 23 anti-Semitic or neo-Nazi incidents among FPOe rank and file since the party became a junior partner in the coalition government in December 2017. In January the FPOe ran a campaign with posters entitled “Muhammad – Rank 3 of Baby Names in Vienna – Any More Questions?” The NGO Mauthausen Committee, a group commemorating victims of Nazi concentration camps, concluded FPOe’s campaign represented anti-Muslim racism, since it engendered fear of Muslims.

In December 2017, the coalition government announced a program, “Together. For our Austria,” that pledged to engage, including internationally, to prevent the persecution of religious minorities and combat ideological and religious extremism. The program included a suggestion to include new provisions in the criminal statute to combat violence motivated by religious fundamentalism. It reiterated the country’s commitment to religious freedom, while also highlighting what it described as the need to combat “political Islam” and the dangers of radicalization, anti-Semitism, violence, and terrorism. It defined political Islam as an ideological rejection of the country’s modern constitutional state that sought the Islamization of political and social life. Specific proposals to prevent radicalization include limiting foreign financing of religious organizations, monitoring and potentially closing private Islamic schools not complying with legal requirements, and entrusting law enforcement with the authority to close places of worship that supported terrorism.

In June the Mauthausen Committee published a report linking the FPOe with right-wing extremism. The report stated extremist activities of FPOe politicians had increased, citing 68 incidents occurring in the four and a half years before the 2017 parliamentary elections, compared with 38 incidents in the six months after those elections. According to the report, of the 38 cases, 14 were connected with anti-Semitism and eight involved FPOe leaders or members of the federal government.

For example, in March the FPOe Party Chairman of Imst District, Wolfgang Neururer, sent images of Adolf Hitler to FPOe members on social media, with one of the pictures captioned, “Adolf, please show up! Germany needs you!” The public prosecutor in Innsbruck was investigating Neururer and another FPOe Party official in Imst. In January the FPOe appointed Heinrich Sickl to the Graz municipal council. Sickl, according to the Mauthausen report, was co-editor of *Aula*, a publication that disseminated anti-Semitic content. The report added that two other FPOe politicians, Members of Parliament Axel Kassegger and Wendelin Molzer, held leadership positions in *Aula*. In response, on June 8, Sickl, who was also head of the FPOe’s Styrian association of university graduates, announced *Aula* would cease publication as of June. Following the closure of *Aula*, the party’s Styrian chapter founded a new publication called “Freilich” under Sickl’s leadership and released its first issue in December.

During the year, according to the Mauthausen report, FPOe District Councilor in Vienna-Leopoldstadt and diplomat, Jürgen-Michael Kleppich, was recalled from the Austrian Embassy in Israel after he posted a picture on social media of his grandfather in a Nazi uniform. According to the report, Robert Kiesinger, a consultant at the FPOe educational institute, posted a cover page of a Nazi calendar from 1943 as his Easter greeting on social media. The calendar showed a “life rune,” a banned Nazi symbol.

The police continued to provide extra protection to the Vienna Jewish community’s offices and other Jewish community institutions such as schools and museums. Law enforcement authorities stated the government provided the protection due to general concerns over the potential for anti-Semitic acts against Jewish institutions.

In November Chancellor Sebastian Kurz hosted a high-level conference on “Europe beyond Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism – Securing Jewish Life in Europe” in Vienna. The event brought together leaders from Europe and the Jewish community on both sides of the Atlantic and focused on concrete measures to combat anti-Semitism, including providing better physical security for Jewish communities, and reinforcing legislation and improving education to combat anti-Semitism.

On November 19, Interior Minister Kickl hosted a conference in the context of Austria’s EU Council presidency on values, rule of law, and security in response to anti-Semitic threats. Kickl warned against “the new intensity of anti-Semitic

threats in Europe ... triggered by political Islam,” and pledged to expand protection of Jewish facilities in the country.

In December, at the conclusion of the country’s EU Council presidency, the council adopted a declaration on the fight against anti-Semitism and the development of a common security approach to protect Jewish communities and institutions. The declaration included calls on member states to adopt a “holistic strategy” to fight all forms of anti-Semitism; endorse the working definition of anti-Semitism of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance; take measures against hate crimes and incitement to hatred and violence against Jews; emphasize Holocaust education for all; introduce training about intolerance and anti-Semitic prejudice in schools and vocational and integration programs; and increase efforts to ensure the security of Jewish persons and institutions. Yad Vashem Chairman Avner Shalev thanked Chancellor Kurz for his “personal efforts” leading to the adoption of the declaration.

On a June trip to Israel, Chancellor Kurz said, “We Austrians know that in light of our own history, we have a special responsibility toward Israel and the Jewish people. I can assure you that Austria will fight all forms of anti-Semitism in Europe with determination, be it the still-existing one or also new imported anti-Semitism.” Kurz also called for Holocaust education and spoke against anti-Semitism at a press conference in Berlin in March with German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

In February Education Minister Heinz Fassmann (OeVP) stressed the country’s commitment to pursue a policy of zero tolerance toward anti-Semitism at the “An End to Antisemitism!” conference in Vienna. The European Jewish Congress organized the conference, held at the University of Vienna, in collaboration with the University of Tel Aviv and New York University.

On January 8, Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl (FPOe) spoke to the newspaper *Kurier* and expressed concern over what she said was rising Islamist-based anti-Semitism in Europe, pledging to work against it.

FPOe Party Chairman Vice-Chancellor Heinz Christian Strache repeatedly called for zero tolerance for anti-Semitism or the glorification of Nazism. For example, he issued a statement on November 9, commemorating the 80th anniversary of the 1938 Kristallnacht Nazi pogroms against Jews. He called for zero tolerance again in a Facebook message on the eve of the right-wing “Akademikerball” party in February. In a speech commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Republic of

Austria in November, Strache termed the National Socialist era as the “darkest chapter in Austria’s history,” which had resulted in terrible suffering of human beings, and warned that everything must be done to prevent a reoccurrence.

In March President Alexander Van der Bellen gave a speech during the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the Nazi German annexation of the country. Van der Bellen said Austrians “were not only victims, but also perpetrators, often in leading positions” during German occupation. He added, “The German Wehrmacht came overnight. But the contempt for human rights and democracy did not come overnight,” and that support for Nazism and anti-Semitism in the country existed before 1938. At the same event, Chancellor Kurz said, “We must never forget this dark chapter of our history” and pledged the government would create a new memorial commemorating more than 65,000 Austrian Jews killed during the Holocaust. In an October visit to the historic Waehring Jewish cemetery in Vienna’s 18th district, Kurz said the government would provide support to restore the cemetery. The cemetery was closed at the end of the 19th century and partly destroyed during the National Socialist era.

The government continued to refuse residence permits for foreign imams financed by foreign sources.

In October, referring to the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Arabian Consulate General in Istanbul, the three opposition parties, the Social Democrats, NEOS, and List Pilz/Jetzt, questioned the legitimacy of the Vienna-based King Abdullah International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID). They criticized what they described as the deterioration of the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia over the previous two years. Liste Pilz/Jetzt called for the center to close. Foreign Minister Kneissl rejected the calls for closure of KAICIID, stating the government could not “just close an international organization,” but adding that her ministry would “closely monitor reforms of the center to reach progress in interreligious dialogue.”

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

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

According to the interior ministry, there were 39 anti-Semitic and 36 anti-Muslim incidents reported to police in 2017, the most recent year for which statistics were available, compared with 41 and 28 incidents, respectively, in 2016. The majority

of cases involved hate speech on the internet by neo-Nazis, as well as instances of persons giving the Hitler salute or shouting Nazi slogans.

The IGGIO's Documentation Center on Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Racism stated the number of reports of anti-Muslim incidents it received had been increasing since it began collecting such statistics in mid-2014. It received reports of 540 anti-Muslim incidents during the year, a 75 percent increase over the 309 reports in 2017, which represented a 22 percent increase over 2016. The center attributed the increase in reported incidents in part to its higher public profile. More than half of the incidents in 2018 occurred online. Other incidents included verbal abuse and anti-Muslim graffiti. According to the center, in 2017, as in previous years, 98 percent of all incidents were directed against women. Of the total in that year, 30 percent of cases involved hate speech, and 28 percent verbal aggression. Others included discrimination and graffiti. The center stated it believed a large number of cases were related to tensions during the 2017 national parliamentary election campaign, where the European migration crisis was a contentious topic of debate.

The IKG's Forum Against Anti-Semitism did not yet have figures for anti-Semitic incidents reported during the year to compare with the 503 incidents it recorded in 2017.

A report from the NGO Initiative for Discrimination-Free Education listed a total of 172 cases of discrimination in schools in 2017 and attributed 50 percent of these cases to "Islamophobia." The report cited multiple incidents of discrimination in the school system, including disparaging comments and unfair treatment from educators towards Muslim students. Many involved charges of discrimination against female students for their use of a headscarf. One student said a teacher insulted her for attempting to use a modest "burkini" swimsuit during mandatory swim classes. In another case, a parent complained that a teacher assumed her child did not speak German adequately because she wore a headscarf.

In 2017, the government recorded 867 cases of incitement to hatred based on national origin, race or religion, and 108 convictions, up from 672 cases and 55 convictions in 2016. The government did not provide any information on how many of the cases involved religion.

In December the European Union's Agency for Fundamental Rights (EU-FRA) released its second survey of Jewish experiences and perceptions of anti-Semitism. EU-FRA targeted Jewish populations through community organizations, Jewish

media, and social networks; 526 individuals who identified themselves as Jewish residents of Austria responded to the online survey. Twenty-two percent said they had witnessed other Jews being physically attacked, insulted, or harassed in the previous 12 months, and 28 percent reported being harassed over the same period. One-fifth of respondents said they had felt discriminated against because of their religion or belief; 75 percent thought anti-Semitism had increased over the previous five years.

In May Croats and Bosniaks gathered in Bleiburg for an annual commemoration of Nazi-allied Croatian troops and civilians killed in 1945. Three Austrian Members of the European Parliament from the People's, Social Democratic, and NEOS Parties, Othmar Karas, Josef Weidenholzer, and Angelika Mlinar, stated at a press conference in Vienna the commemoration should not be held in its current format, because it was used as a platform for extremists for the fascist Ustashe movement and its symbols. Raimund Fasten of the Austrian Jewish community joined the press conference and said the Bleiburg commemoration was “an outrageous provocation” for the Jewish community. Peter Kaiser, Governor of Carinthia Province, where Bleiburg is located, called the commemoration “an extremist event.”

In June the state court in the southern city of Klagenfurt handed down a 15-month suspended sentence to a Croatian man on charges of the glorification of Nazi ideology for giving a Nazi salute during the Bleiburg commemoration.

In August the public prosecutor in the Province of Burgenland launched investigations of five students who allegedly played Nazi guards as part of coursework designed to teach them about the risks of indoctrination.

In several postings on Facebook throughout the year, a Lower Austrian woman denounced Muslims, calling them, for example, “human trash.” A court in Lower Austria convicted her of incitement in September and gave her a nine-month partially suspended prison sentence.

Also in March, the Vienna criminal court convicted a former physician of glorifying Nazi crimes and sentenced him to a one-and-a-half year suspended prison sentence. The man had posted speeches by Adolf Hitler on Facebook between October 2015 and January 2016.

In March a court in the Lower Austrian town of Krems convicted a 66-year-old prison inmate of neo-Nazi activity for writing letters while in prison to government

officials in 2016-17, denying the existence of gas chambers in Nazi concentration camps. The court sentenced the man to a four-year suspended prison sentence and ordered his transfer to an institution for mentally ill criminals.

In February the FPOe failed to prove in court its charges that the Muslim Youth of Austria (MJOe) was an Islamist organization. The court ordered the FPOe to pay MJOe court costs.

Fourteen Christian groups, among them the Roman Catholic Church, various Protestant denominations, and eight Orthodox and Old Oriental Churches, continued to meet within the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Austria. Baptists and the Salvation Army had observer status on the council. The council met twice a year. There were two permanent working groups on “Religion and Society” and “Media.” Activities included joint religious services, for example on the “Day of Jewry” in January, and joint charitable activities.

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

The U.S. Ambassador, Charge d’Affaires, and other embassy representatives met regularly with government officials, including from the Department for Integration and Division of Dialogue of Cultures at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Interior, to discuss religious freedom. Topics discussed included the concerns of religious groups, integration of Muslim refugees, cooperation with religious groups in combating terrorism, and measures to combat anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment.

The Ambassador met with religious group representatives, such as the leadership of the IGGIO, IKG, Roman Catholic Church, Lutheran Church, and various Orthodox Churches, to discuss their relations with the government, instances of discrimination, and interreligious dialogue. The embassy also met with youth groups of religious organizations to discuss issues such as anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment.

The embassy continued to engage with and support the Jewish community to promote religious tolerance and combat anti-Semitism. Embassy representatives again participated in the International Advisory Board of the Mauthausen Memorial Agency to promote remembrance of the Holocaust and Holocaust education and advocated continued efforts of the agency to pursue increased outreach to combat anti-Semitism among youth, such as by encouraging more school groups to visit the Mauthausen site.

The embassy supported the first ever Muslim-led initiative to counter anti-Semitism in the country. The initiative, led by the MJOe, headed by three former participants of Department of State-sponsored exchange programs, conducted a series of events, roundtables, and visits to Auschwitz for MJOe members. The MJOe worked closely with the Jewish community and the Jewish museum to foster dialogue and promote awareness among Muslim youth.

The embassy Charge d’Affaires and the Charge d’Affaires of the U.S. Mission to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, headquartered in Vienna, as well as the Charge of the U.S. Mission to the United Nations in Vienna, attended the commemoration of the liberation of the Mauthausen concentration camp in May. The embassy’s Charge d’Affaires stressed the importance of religious freedom, and that the liberators of Mauthausen helped end the notion that one person is better than another because of his or her religion.