

KUWAIT 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution declares Islam to be the religion of the state but declares freedom of belief is “absolute.” It declares the state will protect the freedom to practice one’s religion, provided such practice does not conflict with established customs, public policy, or morals. The constitution declares sharia to be a main source of legislation and all individuals to be equal before the law regardless of religion. Defamation of the three Abrahamic faiths (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity), publication or broadcast of material the government deems offensive to religious groups, and practices the government finds inconsistent with Islamic law are prohibited by law. In July the National Assembly passed legislation allowing the creation of separate courts for Shia Muslims for cases pertaining to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. In April the government registered The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ). The government prosecuted numerous individuals for remarks deemed religiously offensive, mostly for comments made online, and sentenced some to prison terms. The government continued to appoint and pay the salaries of Sunni imams and provide the full basic text for weekly sermons preached at Sunni mosques. It did not exercise the same oversight of Shia imams. The Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs (MAIA) fined, reprimanded, or suspended several Sunni imams for giving sermons perceived as politically motivated, insulting to other religious groups, and violating the national unity law. MAIA organized several courses for Sunni imams promoting tolerance and countering radicalization, and in October it announced the creation of a committee to monitor calls for extremism on social media. Minority religious groups said they could worship in private spaces without government interference provided they did not disturb their neighbors or violate laws regarding assembly and proselytizing. Members of most non-Abrahamic faiths and unregistered churches were not able to marry in the country. The government continued to provide added security at religious sites to all recognized non-Sunni religious groups. It required all religious communities to conduct religious events indoors. Most minority religious groups reported a continued lack of facilities for worship and difficulty obtaining permission to construct new facilities. The government did not accredit any religious schools or permit Shia religious training within the country, notwithstanding an increased need for qualified judges to staff the newly-approved Shia personal status courts. The Ministry of Education continued to ban or censor instructional materials referring to the Holocaust or Israel. Some Shia leaders continued to report discrimination in clerical and public sector employment.

Individuals continued to face societal pressure against conversion from Islam; some citizens who converted outside the country said their families harassed them because of their conversion. Hotels, stores, and businesses continued to mark non-Islamic holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali. News media continued to publish information about the celebrations of religious holidays, including material on the religious significance of Christmas. Some Muslim clerics continued to express disapproval on social media of the celebration of non-Islamic holidays and called for more government action to restrict public expression of these holidays. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) reported two instances during the year of individuals making public statements that perpetuated negative stereotypes of Jews.

In meetings with senior MAIA officials, senior U.S. embassy officials discussed the importance of promoting tolerance, including for members of minority religious groups. They noted positively MAIA's registration of the Church of Jesus Christ and encouraged the government to take the same step with other unregistered religious groups. Embassy officials underscored the importance of places of worship for all faiths, regardless of their registration status, and relayed concerns from the Hindu community about their inability to cremate their dead. In December the Charge d'Affaires and other embassy officials hosted an annual event for representatives of officially recognized non-Muslim faiths to discuss how government policies were affecting their groups. A senior embassy official and other embassy staff also hosted a roundtable in May at which leaders of non-Abrahamic faiths discussed their communities' needs. Senior embassy officials attended religious events throughout the year and discussed issues related to religious tolerance and emphasized the U.S. government's commitment to religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.0 million (midyear 2019 estimate). The Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI), a local government agency, reports there are 1.4 million citizens and 3.3 million noncitizens. The national census does not distinguish between Shia and Sunni Muslims. PACI estimates approximately 70 percent of citizens are Sunni Muslims, while the remaining 30 percent are Shia Muslims (including Ahmadi and Ismaili Muslims, whom the government counts as Shia). Community leaders have indicated there are 290 Christian citizens and a handful of Baha'i citizens. There are no known Jewish citizens.

According to information from PACI released in 2018, 64 percent of expatriates are Muslim, 26 percent Christian, and 10 percent from non-Abrahamic faiths. Sources in various noncitizen communities state that approximately 5 percent of the expatriate Muslims are Shia, while Buddhists and Hindus account for half of the non-Abrahamic faith population. Informal estimates by members of different faiths indicate there are approximately 250,000 Hindus, 25,000 Bohra Muslims, 10,000-12,000 Sikhs, 7,000 Druze, and 400 Baha'is.

While some geographic areas have higher concentrations of either Sunnis or Shia, the two groups are distributed quite uniformly throughout most of the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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

The constitution declares sharia to be a main source of legislation and all individuals to be equal before the law regardless of religion. It declares the emir shall be Muslim (the emir and ruling family are Sunni) and the state shall safeguard the heritage of Islam. The Higher Advisory Committee on Completion of the Application of Islamic Sharia Provisions in the Amiri Diwan announced in November 2017 it had disbanded after achieving its goals.

The law states apostates lose certain legal rights, including to inherit property from Muslim relatives or spouses, but it does not specify any criminal penalty. If a Muslim man married to a Muslim woman converts from Islam, his existing marriage is annulled. If he is married to a non-Muslim woman and converts from Islam, the marriage continues to be valid. If a Muslim woman married to a Muslim man converts to another Abrahamic faith (Christianity or Judaism), the marriage is not automatically annulled, but the Muslim husband may request an annulment. If a Muslim woman married to a Muslim man converts to a non-Abrahamic faith, the marriage is automatically annulled.

The law prohibits the defamation of the three Abrahamic religions and denigration of Islamic and Judeo-Christian religious figures within accepted Islamic orthodoxy

(e.g., prophets mentioned in the Quran or companions of Muhammad), and prescribes a punishment of up to 10 years in prison for each offense.

A national unity law prohibits “stirring sectarian strife,” promoting the supremacy of one religious group, instigating acts of violence based on the supremacy of one group, or promoting hatred or contempt of any group. Violations of this law by individuals are punishable by up to seven years’ imprisonment and/or a fine of 10,000 to 100,000 Kuwaiti dinars (KD) (\$33,000-\$330,000). Repeated crimes carry double penalties. If a group or an organization violates the law, it could have its license to operate revoked temporarily or permanently, and it could be fined up to KD 200,000 (\$660,000). Noncitizens convicted under this law are also subject to deportation.

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

The law criminalizes publishing and broadcasting content, including on social media, which the government deems offensive to religious “sects” or groups, providing for fines ranging from KD 10,000 to 200,000 (\$33,000-\$660,000) and up to seven years’ imprisonment.

There is no promulgated process outlining what steps religious groups must take to register with the government. Groups must navigate this process without guidance from government offices. Although all religious groups must apply in writing for a license from their municipality to establish an official place of worship and to gain full benefits from the central government, there are no fixed criteria for an application to be approved. To obtain a license, groups must first receive approval by the local municipality for their place of worship. The municipality then turns to MAIA for its “opinion” on the application for a worship space (MAIA indicates that it does not have the authority to give formal registration of the building). MAIA then issues a certificate that lists board members for the organization, making the religious group a legal entity. Once this certificate is granted, further approvals are required by the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) and the Ministry of Interior (MOI). Once these ministries give these approvals, the municipality must grant the final license, which requires the community leaders to obtain written permission from all the immediate neighbors occupying the properties around the proposed place of worship. The government often provides applicants no information about the status of their pending registration or if they have been rejected at any point. There is no recourse to appeal the decision; it is considered a “sovereign act” and cannot be challenged in court.

The officially registered and licensed Christian churches in the country are: National Evangelical Church of Kuwait (NECK) (Protestant); Roman Catholic; Greek Catholic (Melkite); Coptic Orthodox; Armenian Orthodox; Greek Orthodox; Anglican; and the Church of Jesus Christ. In April the government officially recognized the Church of Jesus Christ. There are no officially recognized synagogues, and according to MAIA, no application has ever been submitted for one. The government does not recognize any non-Abrahamic religions. Non-recognized religious groups include Hindus, Sikhs, Druze, Bohra Muslims, and Baha'is.

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

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

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

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

It is illegal to possess or import pork products and alcohol. Importing alcohol carries a penalty of up to 10 years’ imprisonment; consuming alcohol may result in a fine of up to KD 1,000 (\$3,300).

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

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

Courts may follow Shia jurisprudence in matters of personal status and family law for Shia Muslims at the first instance and appellate levels. If the case proceeds beyond the appellate level to the court of cassation, the case may be adjudicated via Sunni personal status law. In July the National Assembly passed the Shia Personal Status Law, which allows for the creation of separate courts for Shia Muslims for cases pertaining to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. According to local sources, these courts have only three judges, none of whom has a background in Shia jurisprudence. The law also allows personal status cases to be adjudicated through the court of cassation under Shia doctrine. An independent Shia waqf (trust) administers Shia religious endowments. Cases are assigned to either Sunni or Shia judges based on the religious affiliation of the man. If a man is married to a non-Muslim woman, the husband's religious practice is followed. If a couple is from one of the registered churches, the settlement offered by the church may be taken into consideration; however, if the dispute is not settled, Sunni sharia is applied. Local sources suggest that the passage of the Shia Personal Status Law has increased the need for Shia religious training facilities to help staff the courts with qualified judges.

The law forbids, and the state does not recognize, marriage between Muslim women and non-Muslim men, but Muslim men may marry women of other recognized Abrahamic faiths. The law requires the raising of children of such marriages in their father's faith, and the father's religion governs the settlement of marital disputes. Muslim marriage cases are heard in Sunni or Shia religious courts, depending on whether the marriage certificate is Sunni or Shia. A Shia notary must authenticate a Shia marriage certificate. Non-Muslim divorce and child custody cases are heard in Sunni religious courts. Christian couples who are part of a registered church may marry and divorce following their religious customs, with local authorities and courts recognizing their documents. Except for Hindus and Sikhs of Indian nationality, who may marry at the Embassy of India, members of non-Abrahamic faiths and nonregistered churches may not marry legally in the country but may have their foreign wedding certificates recognized.

Citizens who are members of the Baha'i Faith may marry abroad and petition the court to recognize their marriage.

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

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

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

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

Government Practices

The government pursued several cases against individuals for violating the national unity law and fomenting sectarianism. In March journalist Abdallah Al-Hadlaq was sentenced to three years in prison for two tweets from 2018 that the court concluded offended Shia Muslims. In September the government filed slander charges against a female member of the Kuwaiti ruling family for insulting Shia Muslims in the country.

In May a criminal court sentenced a Lebanese television presenter to a year in jail with labor and fined her KD 5,000 (\$16,500) for insulting God in a program broadcast on a local satellite television channel. A court of appeals overturned the verdict in July. In July several individuals were arrested for making offensive remarks about God and the Prophet Muhammad in an online video. That same month, the director of juvenile prosecution announced that an underage noncitizen would be remanded for 10 days to a social welfare home over allegations of blasphemy. In August a court of appeals upheld the conviction of a blogger accused of contempt for Islam and fined him KD 5,000 (\$16,500) because of a tweet the court found derogatory and offensive.

In January Kuwait University law professor and anticensorship activist Fatima Al-Matar fled to the United States with her daughter after she was referred to the public prosecutor for a tweet she posted in October 2018 that was deemed blasphemous, derogatory, and offensive to religion. In March the Court of Cassation upheld verdicts by the Court of Appeals which fined Salafist cleric Othman al-Khamees and Shia Cleric Hussain al-Matouq KD 20,000 (\$66,000) each for “promoting sectarian strife” through YouTube videos.

Although the law does not prohibit apostasy, the government continued its policy of not issuing new official documents for recording a change in religion unless the conversion was from another religion to Islam. As in previous years, some religious leaders from non-Muslim religious groups said they had not heard of any case of a Muslim desiring to change religion, while others said they would not convert a Muslim in the country. All religious leaders, regardless of faith, continued to state that their sole mission was to take care of their existing community. Most religious leaders declined to speak about conversion.

In December the Constitutional Court rejected a challenge to the ban on public eating during Ramadan.

In August press reports revealed the presence of an unregistered Sikh temple (known as “Sulaibiya Gurdwara”) in a Kuwait City warehouse, which authorities closed the same month. The temple had reportedly been operating for the previous nine years and served thousands of Indians from the Sikh community.

In accordance with MAIA policy, the government continued to vet and appoint all new Sunni imams. Media sources quoted senior MAIA officials as stating the government vetted every Sunni imam to ensure compliance with the government’s view of moderate and tolerant religious preaching. The Shia community continued to select its own clerics without government oversight.

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

dissatisfied if the imam discussed politics or insulted other faiths. Shia sources and government authorities said the government did not officially monitor Shia clerics, who were free to write their own sermons if they did not violate existing laws or instigate sectarianism. If a questionable video appeared on social media or a worshipper reported a cleric, the government investigated. Some sources, however, stated they believed the government unofficially monitored Shia clerics. According to officials at MAIA and members of the Shia community, MAIA did not monitor sermons or other activities at the *husseiniyas* (Shia halls for religious commemorations) or at private gatherings. In June MAIA announced it had referred the case of a Sunni imam at the Munira al-Khalid Mosque to MAIA's committee in charge of religious professional affairs after he allegedly criticized Egypt in a sermon. In August MAIA suspended a muezzin and an expatriate Sunni imam for meddling with "political and sectarian issues."

During the year, MAIA organized several courses for Sunni imams to make their messages more effective in promoting tolerance and countering radicalization. In March Director of the Center for the Promotion of Moderation Abdullah Al-Shuraika said the center had not received any reports of cases of youth extremism from parents since 2018. In October Al-Shuraika announced the creation of a committee specializing in monitoring extremist calls on social media and fake accounts, which Al-Shuraika said were aimed at "promoting sedition and provoking sectarianism." In July Assistant Undersecretary of MAIA for Cultural Affairs Dawood Al-Asousi said 30 citizens who had previously adopted ISIS ideology had been "rehabilitated" after intensive programs to help them renounce extremism and to guide them back to the path of moderation and tolerance. In March MAIA announced it would organize Friday sermons and lectures with government-approved "moderate" messages in mosques of non-Arabic-speaking Muslim communities.

The government funded Sunni religious institutions, including mosques, and paid the salaries of all Sunni imams. The Shia community generally did not receive funding from the state for religious institutions and mosques. The government paid the salaries of some Shia imams; some Shia mosques requested government assistance and received funds to pay for salaries and maintenance of their facilities.

According to the government, during the year MAIA investigated three imams it considered to have made provocative statements that violated laws against harming national unity or insulting other religious groups. Disciplinary actions included temporary suspension, permanent suspension, and referrals to MAIA's counseling committee.

Representatives of registered churches continued to state the government was generally tolerant and respectful of their faiths. The Anglican Church was allowed to build a new chapel after its previous chapel was damaged by flooding in 2018. The new chapel includes more space for worship than the previous structure. Members of non-Abrahamic faiths and unregistered churches continued to state they remained free to practice their religion in private but faced harassment and potential prosecution if they disturbed their neighbors or violated laws regarding assembly and proselytizing. They also continued to say they avoided conflict with authorities by not proselytizing or disparaging the government or other faiths. The government continued to allow such groups to operate in rented villas, private homes, or the facilities of registered churches. Many of these groups said they did not publicly advertise religious events or gatherings to avoid bringing unwanted attention to their organizations, both from the public and from government authorities. In June the Public Authority for Manpower imposed a fine of KD 100 (\$330) per worker on the Roman Catholic Church for not committing to recruiting the required percentage of citizens as employees. Another church reported a total of KD 6,000 (\$20,000) in fines for failure to abide by this policy.

Members of non-Abrahamic faiths and unregistered churches continued to say they experienced hardships in commemorating major religious or life events. Almost uniformly across these communities, members said they lacked sufficient religious facilities and religious leaders or clerics to lead prayers, bless births and marriages, and conduct appropriate death rituals.

In many cases, members of these religious groups stated they resolved conflict internally within their communities rather than take legal action in the courts where they would be subject to sharia.

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

The MOI continued to provide added security and protection at religious sites for all recognized non-Sunni religious groups. Religious leaders of Abrahamic faiths continued to report that the government, citing security concerns, kept in place the ban on outdoor religious observances instituted following an ISIS bombing of a

Shia mosque in 2015 that killed 27 persons. In April MOSA rejected applications submitted by two Islamic charity organizations to hold religious awareness campaigns in public places, including public gardens, beaches, and malls.

The government continued to require the Shia community to conduct Ashura activities inside closed structures rather than at outdoor locations. The government did not permit public reenactments of the martyrdom of Hussein or public marches in commemoration of Ashura. The government continued to station security forces outside some Sunni mosques and all Shia and Christian religious venues during times of worship throughout the year as a deterrent to possible attacks. The government also continued to provide security to Shia neighborhoods during Muharram and Ashura.

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

Only private shops owned by religious organizations could legally import, display, or sell non-Islamic religious literature. Church leaders continued to report the government permitted registered Christian churches to import religious materials for use by their congregations under the condition that none of the content insulted Islam. Registered churches reported they were able to import religious materials in any language. Members of non-Abrahamic faiths and nonregistered churches continued to state they could import religious materials for their congregations if they brought in the materials as personal items when entering the country and did not try to sell them in public stores. Minority religious communities said they continued to be selective in the religious materials they imported and even more selective in giving access to the materials. They said they did not allow the circulation of these materials outside their congregations.

The municipality of Kuwait handled building permits and land issues for non-Abrahamic faiths and nonregistered churches. The government said it received no applications for construction of new churches from religious groups during the year. The Greek Catholic Church indicated that it had requested in April additional land near its location to accommodate more worshippers. The government said it did not receive additional requests for registrations of new groups during the year.

Shia community members reported a continued lack of facilities for worship and difficulties obtaining permission to construct new facilities, caused by the government's delay in approving repairs to existing mosques or constructing new

ones. MAIA reported there were 1,656 mosques in the country, including 32 mosques opened during the year. According to 2018 government statistics, of the 1,601 mosques existing that year, 1550 were Sunni and 51 Shia. Five new Shia mosques received permission to be built that year. A source from the Shia community said the government opened no new Shia mosques in 2019. There were 20-30 *husseiniyas* registered with the MOI and thousands of smaller Shia gatherings that took place in private homes.

Christian churches continue to report that government authorities did not respond to their petitions for expanding existing places of worship. Some churches said they stopped submitting such requests because the government did not respond.

Again citing security concerns, authorities stated they continued to act against unlicensed mosques. The government tasked MAIA, MOI, the municipality of Kuwait, and other agencies with finding solutions to end the use of illegal mosques. During the year, the government continued to raid makeshift mosques in remote areas and close them for operating without proper licenses. MAIA continued to operate under a mandate from the Council of Ministers to demolish unregistered mosques, stating that some of those mosques served as platforms of extremism. The demolition of these mosques continued during the year. Authorities said new unlicensed mosques continued to open. MAIA attempted to bring some underground mosques under its supervision by appointing and vetting imams, monitoring sermons, and getting them licenses through municipalities.

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

According to church leaders, although most churches provided faith-based instruction for children, none of them had government-accredited church-based schools. Accreditation for church-based schools would enable students to receive religious education while fulfilling government requirements and allow school graduates to move on to higher education. The NECK repeatedly requested accreditation for its church-based school for many years, most recently in 2017, but authorities had not responded by year's end. The Armenian Church and the Bohra Muslim community continued to operate accredited community schools in lieu of seeking accreditation as religious schools. Other groups continued to report they conducted religious studies in their places of worship.

The government continued its practice of not responding to requests to establish Shia religious training institutions. Shia Muslims had to seek religious training and education abroad. The College of Islamic Law at Kuwait University, the only institution in the country that trains imams, provided some Shia jurisprudence courses but did not permit Shia professors on its faculty.

Shia leaders continued to report that the lack of Shia imams limited their ability to staff Shia courts, causing a backlog of personal status and family cases. To address the backlog and shortage of staff, an ad hoc council the government created many years ago under the regular marital issues court to apply Shia jurisprudence continued to function. In July Member of Parliament Saleh Ashour said there was a shortage of Shia judges who could implement the new Shia Personal Status Law, and called for more to be trained. Ashour said the law was being applied through four circuit courts and at all litigation levels, including the court of cassation level.

Even though Shia make up an estimated 30 percent of the population, they remained underrepresented at all levels of government: six of 50 elected members in parliament, one of 16 cabinet members, one of six Amiri Diwan advisors, and disproportionately few senior officers in the military and police force. Shia community leaders continued to say there was a “glass ceiling” in promotions and difficulties in obtaining government jobs. Some Shia leaders said discrimination continued to prevent Shia from obtaining training for clerical positions and leadership positions in public sector organizations, including the police force and the military/security apparatus.

In February the government allowed the NGO Wathakker Center, which promotes the teachings of Sunni Islam and provides religion classes for children, to reopen after a one-year mandated closure following the 2018 sentencing of its owner, Fouad Al-Rifai. Al-Rifai was sentenced to eight years in prison with labor for posting a video inciting violence against Shia citizens and for contempt of Shia Islam through Twitter posts that contained abusive phrases against Shia Islam. In December Al-Rifai was sentenced to an additional four months in prison for similar Twitter posts insulting Shia Islam.

In January a member of parliament proposed two bills that would amend the citizenship law by removing religion as a requirement for granting Kuwaiti citizenship.

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

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Hotels, stores, and other businesses continued to mark non-Islamic holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali. During the Christmas season, Christmas trees and lights appeared in stores, malls, and homes, and Christmas music played in public places, including songs with Christian lyrics.

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

Some Muslim clerics continued to express disapproval via social media of the celebration of non-Islamic holidays and called for more government action to restrict public expression of these holidays. In December the Wathakker Center tweeted an image that said, “No Christmas, do not celebrate the Holy Trinity, do not proselytize in Muslim lands.”

MEMRI reported two instances during the year of individuals making public statements that perpetuated negative stereotypes of Jews. In January singer Monia Al-Hob said on judgment day Muslims would fight Jews and there would be a special gate to hell for them. In February researcher Muhanna Hama al-Muhanna posted a video on his YouTube channel, stating Jews used human blood, especially from Christian children, in making food, and he repeated other anti-Semitic stereotypes.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Senior embassy officials continued to meet with senior MAIA officials to discuss the importance of promoting tolerance and religious freedom in the country, including for members of recognized and unrecognized minority religious groups. Embassy officials noted positively MAIA's registration of the Church of Jesus Christ and suggested the ministry build on this action by registering other unregistered faiths. Embassy officials underscored the importance of places of worship for all faiths regardless of their registration status, and relayed concerns of the Hindu community about their inability to cremate their dead. Embassy officials raised the closure of the Sikh temple with officials of both MAIA and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stating that denial of the right to a place to worship contravenes the fundamental right to religious freedom and rights enumerated in the Kuwaiti constitution.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to meet with leaders and representatives of minority religious groups and with NGOs involved with religious issues to discuss the challenges religious minorities faced in their interaction with the government, such as difficulties obtaining places of worship, paying fines for not hiring citizen workers, lack of a transparent process for achieving recognition, and the inability to practice certain religious rituals, including marriage and burials. In December the Charge d'Affaires hosted an annual event for representatives of officially recognized non-Muslim faiths. The Charge spoke with each leader to learn how the government policies were affecting their groups and how the situation compared with previous years, including requests to expand existing spaces of worship and steep fines for not hiring the requisite number of citizen employees at their facilities. He underscored the embassy's commitment to continuing to raise issues of religious freedom with the government. Embassy officials also engaged with a professor at a sharia college, and with Sunni and Shia members of parliament (including the head of the Human Rights Committee) in order to discuss the rights of religious minorities and the status of religious freedom in the country.

During the year, embassy officials and religious leaders continued to discuss the needs of the various religious groups, which continued to include more space for worship, more transparency in the registration process for new churches, and permission to obtain religious school accreditation. In May a senior embassy official and other embassy staff hosted members of unrecognized religious groups (Hindus, Sikhs, Druze, Bohra Muslims, and Baha'is) at a roundtable to discuss their communities' needs. Senior embassy officials also continued to attend

religious events throughout the year, including the observations of Ashura, Easter, Baha'u'llah's Birth, Christmas, Diwali, and the Sikh Vaisakhi Day celebration. At these events, they discussed issues related to religious tolerance with participants and emphasized the U.S. government's commitment to religious freedom.