

GERMANY 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The Basic Law (the constitution) prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of faith and conscience and the practice of one's religion. Some state governments and federal agencies continued to decline to recognize certain belief systems as religions, in particular Jehovah's Witnesses and Church of Scientology (COS), making them ineligible for tax benefits. State-level authorities issued public warnings about some minority religious groups and discriminated against their members in public sector hiring. Federal and state Offices for the Protection of the Constitution (OPCs) monitored the activities of some groups, including COS and some Muslim groups which the offices suspected of furthering what they considered extremist goals. Government leaders at all levels participated in rallies and spoke out against anti-Semitism. They also participated in demonstrations to condemn the use of terror and violence and expressed support for what they described as moderate forms of Islam.

Anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim speech and actions such as verbal and physical assault on those perceived to be Jews or Muslims continued. Civil society leaders spoke out against anti-Semitism and religious intolerance. The group PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West) held weekly demonstrations attended by several thousand supporters in Dresden and elsewhere, where supporters expressed anti-Muslim sentiments and general opposition to immigration. Members of civil society, including the Central Council of Muslims in Germany, the Turkish community, and prominent Jewish groups, held public rallies against intolerance and extremist violence, and promoted tolerance programs and efforts to improve Muslim integration. The Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) continued to use "sect commissioners" to warn the public of what they characterized as dangers from some religious groups, such as the Unification Church, the COS, Universal Life, and Transcendental Meditation practitioners. Some employers continued to use written agreements known as "sect filters," asking potential new employees to confirm they had no contact with Scientology. There was vandalism against synagogues and mosques.

The U.S. embassy and consulates general closely monitored the government's responses to incidents of religious intolerance, and expressed the U.S. government's concern about anti-Semitic acts and discrimination against Muslims. In various meetings throughout the year with government officials, members of

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parliament, and religious groups, embassy and consulate general representatives encouraged direct dialogue between the government and law enforcement and minority religious groups. The embassy and consulates general engaged Muslim communities through public outreach, exchanges, and other programs promoting religious tolerance. The embassy and consulates general maintained dialogue with minority religious groups, including the Hindu, Buddhist, Bahai, Alevi Muslim, Coptic Christian, and Sufi Muslim communities and human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to promote tolerance among religious groups. The U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism and the U.S. Special Representative to Muslim Communities expressed the U.S. government's strong stance against religious bigotry and intolerance at the Muslim Jewish Conference, hosted by the foreign ministry in Berlin.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 80.9 million (July 2015 estimate). There are no official statistics on religious groups. Unofficial estimates and figures provided by religious groups indicate the Roman Catholic Church has approximately 23.9 million members and the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD, defined as a confederation of Lutheran, Reformed, and United regional Churches) has approximately 23.0 million members. Together, these two Churches account for approximately 58 percent of the population. Other Protestant denominations include the New Apostolic Church, Baptist communities (including Evangelical Christian Baptists, the International Baptist Convention, Reformed Baptists, Bible Baptists, and others), and other evangelical, nondenominational Christians. Combined, they account for less than 1 percent of the population. Orthodox Christians number approximately 1.5 million.

According to government estimates, there are approximately 4 to 4.5 million Muslims, 5 percent of the population. This includes approximately 2.6 million Sunnis, 500,000 Alevis, and 226,000 Shia. In addition, although statistics on religion of migrants and asylum seekers are not available, officials and NGOs estimate Muslims make up a majority of the 1.1 million migrants and asylum seekers who arrived in the country during the year. Estimates of the Jewish population vary widely, between 100,000 and 250,000. Other religious groups include Buddhists, Hindus, Jehovah's Witnesses (222,000), and COS (5,000-10,000). Roughly 28 million persons (33 percent of the population) either have no religious affiliation or are members of unrecorded religious groups.

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Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The Basic Law, which fulfills the role of the constitution, prohibits discrimination on the basis of religious opinion and provides for freedom of faith and conscience and the freedom to profess a religious or philosophical creed and practice one's religion. The Basic Law also prohibits a state church. It stipulates people shall not be required to disclose their religious convictions or be compelled to participate in religious acts. The Basic Law states religious instruction shall be part of the curriculum in public schools and parents have the right to decide whether children shall receive religious instruction. It recognizes the right to establish private denominational schools. The Basic Law guarantees the freedom to form religious societies and states groups may organize themselves for private religious purposes without constraint. It allows religious societies to receive public subsidies from the states and to provide religious services in the military, hospitals, and prisons.

Religious groups wishing to qualify as nonprofit associations with tax-exempt status must register. State-level authorities review registration submissions and routinely grant tax-exempt status; if challenged, their decisions are subject to judicial review. Groups applying for tax-exempt status must provide evidence through their statutes, history, and activities that they are a religious group.

A special partnership exists between the state and religious groups with "public law corporation" (PLC) status, as outlined in the Basic Law. Any religious group may request PLC status, which entitles the group to levy tithes (averaging 9 percent of income tax), which the state collects on its behalf, separately from income taxes, but through the state's tax collection process. PLCs pay fees to the government for the tithing service, but not all groups utilize the service. PLC status also allows for tax exemptions and representation on supervisory boards of public television and radio stations.

According to the Basic Law, the decision to grant PLC status is made at the state level. Individual states base PLC status decisions on a number of varying qualifications, including an assurance of the group's permanence, size, and respect for the constitutional order and fundamental rights of individuals. An estimated 180 religious groups have PLC status, including the EKD, the Catholic Church, the Jewish community, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventists, Mennonites, Baptists, Methodists, Christian Scientists,

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and the Salvation Army. Fifteen of the 16 federal states have granted the Jehovah's Witnesses PLC status. Although some Alevi groups have obtained PLC status, no other Muslim communities have PLC status. The COS does not have PLC status in any state.

Various laws at the federal and state levels have an impact on certain religious practices. Animal protection laws prohibit the killing of animals without anesthesia, including when part of halal and kosher slaughter practices, although some exceptions exist. For example, in Hesse, a federal administrative court decision allows for slaughter without anesthesia if trained personnel conduct the slaughter in a registered slaughterhouse under observation of the local veterinary inspection office, and the meat is for consumption only by members of religious communities requiring slaughter without anesthesia.

The law allows circumcision of males, including children, as long as it is performed in a "medically professional manner" and without unnecessary pain.

Six states (Baden-Wuerttemberg, Bavaria, Berlin, Bremen, Hessen, and Saarland) maintain headscarf bans – and in some cases bans of any religious symbol – for teachers (but not students) in public schools. In some states, these bans are extended to all civil servants. In March the Federal Constitutional Court ruled a general headscarf ban for teachers at public schools is a violation of the right to freely exercise religion but left implementation to the states, where some restrictions remain in schools and public offices.

The criminal code prohibits calling for violence or arbitrary measures against religious groups or their members or inciting hatred against them. It also prohibits assaulting the human dignity of religious groups or their members by insulting, maliciously maligning, or defaming them. It also prohibits disturbing religious services or acts of worship. Infractions are punishable by up to five years in prison and a fine.

All states offer religious instruction and ethics courses in public schools. Most public schools offer Protestant and Catholic religious instruction in cooperation with those churches, as well as instruction in Judaism if enough students (usually 12, although regulations vary state to state) express an interest. Students who do not wish to participate in religious instruction may opt out; in some states those who opt out may substitute ethics courses. State authorities generally permit religious groups to establish private schools as long as they meet basic curriculum

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requirements. Schooling is constitutionally mandated, with no provision for homeschooling, including for parents who want to homeschool for religious reasons.

State governments subsidize religiously affiliated institutions providing public services, such as religious schools and hospitals.

The law permits the government to characterize “nontraditional” religious groups as “sects,” “youth religions,” and “youth sects,” and allows the government to provide “accurate information” or warnings about them to the public. The law does not permit the government to use terms such as “destructive,” “pseudo-religious,” or “manipulative” when referring to these groups.

Government Practices

Some state governments and federal agencies continued to decline to recognize certain belief systems as religions, in particular Jehovah’s Witnesses and Scientologists, making them ineligible for tax benefits. The government continued to investigate Scientologists and Muslim groups for reported constitutional violations. The court decision declaring the headscarf ban for teachers in public schools unconstitutional left states to implement legal changes. Scientologists continued to report instances of governmental discrimination, such as the use of “sect filters” to block them from public sector employment. Police investigated anti-Semitic incidents to determine if they violated bans on anti-Semitic speech and acts but sometimes terminated investigations without bringing charges because of lack of evidence.

In November Jehovah’s Witnesses were granted PLC status in Baden-Wuerttemberg and in December in Bremen. These decisions followed the June ruling of the Federal Constitutional Court that Bremen’s 2011 parliamentary decision to deny Jehovah’s Witnesses PLC status was unconstitutional because only administrative – not parliamentary – bodies may determine a religious community’s PLC status. The Jehovah’s Witnesses’ application for PLC status in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), filed in 2006, remained pending.

The status of the COS remained unresolved. No court at the state or federal level issued any ruling on whether Scientology was a religion.

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In April a female Muslim student in NRW won a slander suit against a man who called her a jihadist for wearing a headscarf and head-to-toe clothing while shopping. The court fined him 750 euros (\$804).

States reviewed their legislation to match the Federal Constitutional Court ruling that overturned the ban on the wearing of headscarves by teachers in public schools. Two states, Lower Saxony and NRW, lifted existing bans, and others determined their bans were constitutional, such as in Berlin, where the law prohibits teachers or other civil servants (but not students) from wearing any religious symbol.

In October leaders of a Dusseldorf elementary school refused to allow women wearing burkas, *niqabs*, or other face veils onto the school grounds, stating the veils frightened children and made it difficult to identify the wearer as the person authorized to pick up children. A school in Essen with similar concerns resolved the issue by having women in burkas and *niqabs* show their faces to school officials in a private room.

On December 17, special forces of the Baden-Wuerttemberg state police raided six members' residences and the mosque of the Mesdschid Sahabe Cultural and Education Center in Stuttgart, confiscated material, and closed the building permanently, stating the group supported the use of violence as a means to accomplish religious objectives. The state's minister of interior banned the organization from further activity, stating raids in March had provided material evidence Mesdschid Sahabe supported terrorism by funding and recruiting at least 10 known foreign fighters for the conflict in Syria.

On July 3, the Bremen regional court ruled a police search of the mosque of the Islamic Cultural Center (IKZ) on February 28 was unlawful because police had mishandled threat information. Bremen police said they suspected a person of distributing automatic weapons for a possible terror attack to individuals with ties to the IKZ. IKZ leaders reported police destroyed the front door, handcuffed and forced several mosque visitors to lie on the floor for hours, and ignored crying children. The IKZ denied statements by Bremen's OPC and Bremen's interior ministry that the mosque supported Salafist groups. The police found no weapons.

Education, including religious instruction and curriculum, remained under the authority of the individual states. The number of classes on Islam in public schools continued to grow as states with existing programs, such as Baden-Wuerttemberg

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and Hessen, further expanded offerings of religious classes on Islam to additional grade levels and schools. Teachers of classes on Islam were both Muslim and non-Muslim. Many states cooperated with Muslim communities by forming advisory councils to assist in planning the curriculum. Universities created programs to train additional instructors to teach these classes. The Alevi community continued to offer religious lessons in schools in seven federal states for approximately 1,500 students.

Federal and state OPCs continued to observe a number of Muslim groups the OPCs suspected of furthering goals they said were incompatible with the Basic Law, such as “creating a theocracy based on their interpretation of sharia in which the free and democratic constitutional order would no longer have any legitimacy.” One example was the Muslim Brotherhood, with 1,000 members, whose ideology the OPCs stated was “socially disintegrative.” Per the federal OPC’s annual report, the OPCs also suspected the 30,000-member Milli Gorus Islamic Community, an organization of the Turkish diaspora, of using political and social influence to achieve an Islamic order according to the group’s interpretation.

Scientists continued to report instances of governmental discrimination. “Sect filters,” which were signed statements asking potential government employees and contractors to confirm they had no contact with Scientists and rejected their doctrines, remained in use in the public and private sectors, although courts at the state and federal level had ruled it was improper to use them to deny employment or contracts to Scientists. In May the Baden-Wuerttemberg government narrowed its policy to require signed “sect filters” only from external subcontractors providing promotional materials, job training, and IT and business consulting. The subcontractors had to indicate they would not apply Scientology’s methods in providing services to the state.

On January 16, the Stuttgart Superior Court ordered the city of Stuttgart to pay 4,780 euros (\$5,135) in lost income to a tree expert it had hired to train park employees on tree care. The expert had sued the city after it cancelled its contract with him when he refused to sign a “sect filter” stating he rejected Scientology methods and had not been trained in them.

According to annual federal and state OPC reports and COS members, the federal and state OPCs in Baden-Wuerttemberg, Bavaria, Berlin, Bremen, Hamburg, Lower Saxony, NRW, and Thuringia monitored the activities of the COS,

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reportedly by evaluating Scientology publications and members' public activities to determine whether they violated the constitution.

Four of the major political parties (the Christian Democratic Union, Christian Social Union, Social Democratic Party, and Free Democratic Party) continued to exclude Scientologists from party membership.

As individual cases progressed through the court system during the year, Bavarian authorities returned some of the children of members of the Twelve Tribes religious community in Klosterzimmern to the custody of their parents. Other children remained in foster care. Bavarian authorities had taken approximately 40 children of Twelve Tribes members into protective custody in September 2013 in response to allegations of child abuse due to the community's practice of corporal punishment, a practice prohibited by federal law. In at least one of the custody cases, the Federal Constitutional Court rejected the parents' appeal of lower court custody denials on the basis that their religious freedom had been violated; this exhausted those parents' legal options to regain custody. In another case, a court granted the parents' appeal to regain custody of their two children after the parents told the court they had left the Twelve Tribes community and did not adhere to prohibited practices. Although not all cases had been resolved, in most cases authorities returned infants and children more than 15 years old to their parents, reportedly because Twelve Tribes members did not administer corporal punishment to those age groups. Reports varied on the number of children returned.

In November 2014, the Federal Constitutional Court rejected the final appeal from parents whose request to homeschool their children on religious grounds had been rejected by regional courts in Hesse in 2013 and 2014. The family had stated mandatory school attendance exposed the children to pornographic images during sex education classes.

On May 26, a court sentenced five Kurdish men for an October 2014 arson attack against a mosque in Bad Salzuflen, NRW. The two primary perpetrators were sentenced to three-and-a-half years in prison. The other three were convicted of aiding and abetting the attack; two received parole and the third a fine. The perpetrators stated they were drunk when they decided to attack the mosque as retribution for extremist violence against Kurds in Iraq and Syria.

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On February 5, a local court in Wuppertal sentenced three Palestinian men for throwing Molotov cocktails at the main synagogue in Wuppertal in 2014. The building was empty at the time. Two men received 18-month suspended sentences for aggravated arson, and the third man, 18 years old, was placed on juvenile probation. The judge agreed with the defendants, who said their actions were not anti-Semitic but instead were an attempt to draw people's attention to violence in Gaza. The head of the Wuppertal Jewish community, however, said he believed the attack was an act of anti-Semitism and expressed concern over the leniency of the sentence.

On December 9, a state court said there was no basis for the charges filed by Wuppertal prosecutors against nine Muslims, including Muslim activist Sven Lau, for misuse of uniforms for intimidation, and against 11 others for violating laws on assembly. In September 2014, the media reported that the group wore jackets labeled "Sharia Police" and briefly staged patrols in Wuppertal, Aachen, and Bonn to counter alcohol consumption, gambling, smoking, and concerts and to pressure youth to convert to Islam.

In November the Berlin Regional Court sentenced a Danish imam, who in 2014 had called for the death of Jews during prayers at a Berlin mosque, to pay a fine of 1,800 euros (\$1,933) for incitement of hatred and endangering the peaceful coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims. NGOs and local residents had criticized other imams at the mosque for hate speech in previous years; local politicians called for the mosque to be banned.

After Chancellor Angela Merkel attended commemorations in Paris on January 11 for the January 7-9 terrorist attacks there, she made a clear distinction between Islam itself and those who commit or call for acts of violence in the name of Islam in order to oppress others, and emphasized the importance of continually engaging in a dialogue with Muslims. On January 13, President Joachim Gauck, Chancellor Merkel, Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel, most cabinet members, party and caucus chiefs, members of the national parliament, as well as high-ranking Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish leaders joined a Muslim-organized gathering of approximately 10,000 people at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin to commemorate the victims of the Paris attacks. Leaders called for a tolerant, open-minded country and expressed support for freedom of religion and speech.

At several public events in the days after the terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13, Chancellor Merkel and members of her cabinet condemned the attacks and

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emphasized Germany's commitment to individual rights, tolerance, and respect for others. Federal Commissioner for Integration, Migration, and Refugees Aydan Oezoguz warned against “driving people into the arms of extremists by placing all Muslims under general suspicion.”

The government continued to subsidize some Jewish groups. An agreement between the federal government and the Central Council of Jews provided supplemental funding to the Jewish community to help maintain Jewish cultural heritage, restore the Jewish community, and support integration and social work. The federal government continued to cover 50 percent of maintenance costs for Jewish cemeteries. State governments also accepted an ongoing obligation to provide financial support to the Jewish community, including renovating old synagogues and constructing new ones. State and local police units continued to provide security measures around synagogues and other Jewish institutions.

The federal government continued to provide 10 million euros (\$10.7 million) annually to help maintain Jewish cultural heritage. In addition, the federal government provided financial support to the Institute for Jewish Studies in Heidelberg, the Rabbi Seminar at the University of Potsdam, and the Leo Baeck Institute. State governments provided additional funds to Jewish organizations in various amounts.

Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere continued to participate in the German Islam Conference, an ongoing forum for dialogue among federal and state government representatives, Islamic organizations, and prominent Muslims. The annual plenary held in previous years was replaced by working groups meeting quarterly and produced papers focused on social work and pastoral care of Muslim communities.

On January 31, the Academy of World Religions at the University of Hamburg established the first chair for the study of Alevism worldwide. The organization The Kurdish Community in Germany welcomed this recognition.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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Manifestations of anti-Semitism continued, including physical and verbal attacks at public demonstrations, sporting and social events, and statements appearing in certain media. Authorities attributed the incidents to adherents of the extreme right as well as to some Muslims. NGOs monitoring and working to counter anti-Semitism continued to report a rising anti-Semitic trend among Muslim youth, who they found were increasingly involved in attacks on and harassment of Jews. Civil society representatives spoke out against anti-Semitism. Muslim groups held demonstrations in which they condemned the use of terror and violence and expressed their support for what they described as moderate forms of Islam. Catholic and Protestant churches continued to oppose Scientology publicly, and the COS said private companies continued to use “sect filters” against its members. There was vandalism against synagogues and mosques. Because ethnicity and religion were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize some incidents specifically as being solely based on religious identity.

According to the most recent federal OPC report, authorities categorized 31 violent incidents in 2014 as manifestations of anti-Semitism motivated by right-wing extremism (down from 45 in 2013). NGOs and members of Jewish communities stated many anti-Semitic incidents, especially among youth in and near schools, were not reported. Incidents included physical and verbal assaults on, and harassment of, Jews in public places, such as public transportation, sports events, and school grounds. Federal authorities generally took action against the perpetrators of anti-Semitic offenses.

In January a group of young men speaking German and Arabic spat on, beat, and kicked a 26-year-old Israeli man in Berlin. The victim stated he asked them to stop singing anti-Semitic songs on the subway and recorded the singing on his mobile phone. The men followed him off the train and assaulted him when he refused to delete the recording. In March police charged one suspect in the case with aggravated assault and incitement to hatred.

The NGO Research and Information Agency on Anti-Semitism (known as RIAS) reported Berlin police recorded at least four anti-Semitic incidents on July 30 near the hotel where athletes stayed during the European Maccabi Games. Unknown attackers threw stones and shouted epithets and statements such as “kill Israel” at six Jews at a nearby train station.

Muslim organizations such as the Turkish-Islamic Union of the Agency for Religion expressed concern about arson attacks and vandalism against mosques,

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and some organizations said Muslims experienced an increase in attacks as the number of migrants and asylum seekers increased sharply. Statistics on the number of attacks were unavailable.

PEGIDA held weekly demonstrations in Dresden where, amid calls for curbs on immigration in general, their supporters regularly expressed anti-Muslim sentiment. The generally peaceful demonstrations attracted 5,000-10,000 protesters, occasionally reaching higher numbers. Similar but smaller groups held protests in several towns and cities across the country, some of which resulted in violence, such as thrown bottles and stones, between the PEGIDA demonstrators and counterdemonstrators. Counterdemonstrators from political parties, churches, NGOs, and union groups called for tolerance and outnumbered PEGIDA demonstrators everywhere except in Dresden. On January 6, the Catholic Archdiocese of Cologne, in protest against Cologne's PEGIDA group, turned off the exterior lighting of the Cologne cathedral. In addition to anti-Muslim protesters, some PEGIDA rallies attracted neo-Nazis and anti-Semitic activists, according to local OPCs.

In October the media reported a Muslim Afghan at a refugee shelter in Hamburg beat an Iranian Christian convert for sharing his faith with people at the shelter. Prosecutors charged the suspect with attempted manslaughter and physical assault and stated that a religious dispute played a factor in the attack.

On June 24, unknown perpetrators committed arson against a mosque in the Munich suburb of Pasing. According to police investigations, they lit the fire on a neighboring property by leaning several pieces of wood against a shed to ignite the wall separating the two properties. The incident caused no damage or injuries. The mosque's imam extinguished the fire after calling the fire department. Police suspected xenophobic motives but apprehended no suspects.

"Sect filters" continued to be used in private sector employment and contracts. The COS stated a number of companies placed restrictions on hiring and contracting members of the COS. Some members of COS said they did not legally challenge these filters because they said they feared the stigma and loss of business clients and contracts.

The Catholic Church and the EKD continued to oppose Scientology publicly, although COS members said press reporting and public reactions to Scientology decreased. "Sect commissioners" of the EKD and the Catholic Church

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investigated “sects, cults, and psycho groups” and publicized what they considered to be the dangers of these groups. EKD “sect commissioners” warned the public about the alleged dangers also posed by the Unification Church, Bhagwan-Osho, Transcendental Meditation, and Universal Life. Print and internet literature produced by “sect commissioners” portrayed these groups unfavorably.

In November the Hamburg District Court sentenced a woman to 10 months in prison for incitement of hatred for publicly claiming multiple times that Auschwitz was never an extermination camp and that millions of Jews were not killed during the Nazi era. She repeated these statements in front of the court.

According to authorities, the most common anti-Semitic acts involved the desecration of Jewish cemeteries and monuments with graffiti that included swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans. There were also reports of anti-Semitic hate speech.

RIAS reported unknown perpetrators shouted anti-Semitic epithets at people participating in a march in Berlin on November 9 to commemorate the anniversary of Kristalnacht, a series of coordinated attacks on Jewish synagogues and institutions in 1938. The following day, anti-Semitic graffiti was found on multiple Holocaust memorials.

In February the As-Sahaba mosque in Hamburg expelled an imam from its religious community after the Schura, a local association of approximately 40 Islamic communities in Hamburg, threatened to remove the mosque from the council. Hamburg’s OPC had previously warned against attending the imam’s sermons, which the OPC said were radical and indirectly encouraged young men to travel to Da’esh (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant)-controlled territories. After the expulsion, the mosque suspended its participation in the Schura while it restructured.

In reaction to the January 7-9 terrorist attacks in Paris, religious leaders from the Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim communities condemned the killings as an attack against freedom of speech, faith, and common values of tolerance and neighborly love, and cautioned against any acts of revenge. They published a joint manifesto against violence, stating no one may kill in the name of God. Separately, the Central Council of Muslims in Germany condemned the attacks as a betrayal of Islam and cautioned against letting them divide society and cause hatred and discord between religions. In reaction to the November 13

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terrorist attacks in Paris, the Coordination Council of Muslims, representing five major Muslim associations in the country, released a joint public statement on November 16 against Islamist terrorism, in which they condemned the attacks as “malicious and barbarian” and said they were attacks on all peace-loving people.

Many civil society groups continued to seek improved societal respect for religious freedom through tolerance programs, multifaith groups, and dialogue. In April the German-Moroccan Forum started an initiative in Essen to meet monthly to create dialogue and tolerance among members of Jewish and Muslim communities. The Saalam-Shalom Initiative in Berlin similarly held seminars to engage in dialogue on current topics, such as headscarves and kosher and halal practices. Jewish NGOs such as the Central Council of Jews and the Jewish Forum for Democracy and Against Anti-Semitism provided input and assistance on a variety of government-sponsored tolerance education programs focusing on anti-Semitism.

In November television officials withdrew the nomination of singer Xavier Naidoo as the country’s representative at the 2016 Eurovision song contest after protests on social media criticized some of his song lyrics as anti-Semitic.

On January 14, unknown perpetrators defaced a mosque construction site in Dormagen, NRW, with Nazi symbols and xenophobic slogans. The site had also been vandalized on December 20, 2014. Local authorities apprehended no suspects but increased security around the site.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy and consulates general closely monitored the government’s responses to incidents of religious intolerance. Embassy and consulate general representatives expressed U.S. government concern about discrimination and anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic acts to state and federal officials, including at the Federal Commission for Integration, Migration, and Refugees, as well as at the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and the Interior.

In various meetings throughout the year with government officials, members of parliament, and religious groups, embassy and consulate general representatives encouraged direct dialogue between the government and law enforcement and minority religious groups. Embassy and consulate general officials engaged in activities to promote positive attitudes toward minority religious groups, including the Muslim community. The embassy and consulates general conducted an active

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program of engagement with the Muslim community that included exchanges, outreach efforts, and guest speakers. As part of the outreach program, embassy and consulate general officers regularly hosted activities and meetings with members of the Muslim and Jewish communities. They also engaged with interfaith dialogue groups. In August in the Wedding district of Berlin the Ambassador visited a mosque, attended a daily prayer service, and discussed the challenges facing the Muslim community. In November the Ambassador visited the Kreuzberg Action with Music organization, which helps Muslim children integrate into the community through music. In December the Ambassador hosted a reception with key members of the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities prior to the annual lighting of a large outdoor menorah in Berlin.

Embassy and consulate general representatives met with members and leaders of numerous local and national religious and civil society groups to discuss religious freedom, including the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches; the Bahai, Alevi Muslim, Coptic Christian, and Sufi Muslim communities; the Konrad Adenauer Foundation; the Central Council of Muslims; the Association of Islamic Cultural Centers; the Central Council of Jews; the COS; and human rights NGOs.

The Ambassador continued the practice of hosting an annual event to bring together religious and ethnic community leaders to discuss interreligious tolerance and understanding. The Ambassador used the occasion to encourage government leaders and civil society to continue their condemnation of anti-Semitism. The approximately 170 guests included prominent members of the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities, as well as German, Turkish, and Arab leaders in business, politics, and civil society, and minority youth leaders. Participants said it was the only event of its kind in the country where such a diverse group of religious leaders gathered in a setting where they felt comfortable discussing common challenges.

In August the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism and the U.S. Special Representative to Muslim Communities expressed the U.S. government's strong stance against religious bigotry and intolerance at the Muslim Jewish Conference, hosted by the foreign ministry in Berlin. Approximately 140 young Muslims and Jewish leaders from approximately 40 countries discussed various issues including anti-Muslim prejudice, anti-Semitism, religion, conflict transformation, and the challenges of living as a religious minority.