

BELGIUM 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the law prohibits discrimination based on religious orientation. Federal law bans covering one's face in public. On March 7, the Court of Assizes in Brussels (the highest criminal court) convicted French citizen Mehdi Nemmouche of murder in the killings of four persons at the Belgian Jewish Museum in 2014 and sentenced him to life in prison. Longstanding applications for government recognition by Buddhists and Hindus remained pending. As previously announced, the federal government's termination of Saudi Arabia's lease on the Great Mosque in Brussels became effective on March 31; the mosque remained open under management of the local Muslim community, pending a more permanent restructuring. The Flemish minister of interior withdrew the recognition of one mosque, reducing the number of recognized mosques nationally to 83. Pending responses to questions it posed to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), the Constitutional Court postponed a ruling on challenges by Jewish and Muslim groups to laws in Wallonia and Flanders that came into effect during the year and that banned the slaughter of animals without prior stunning. In June the Liege prosecutor dropped discrimination charges against a man who in 2014 posted a sign outside his cafe saying dogs were welcome but Jews were not. In November the West Flanders public prosecutor's office declined to prosecute four supporters of the soccer team Club Brugge for participating in anti-Semitic chants during a match in August 2018.

There were incidents of religiously motivated violence, threats, harassment, discrimination, and hate speech against Jews and Muslims. The government's Center for Equal Opportunities, Unia, preliminarily reported for 2018, the most recent year for which data were available, 101 anti-Semitic incidents (109 in 2017), and 307 incidents (319 in 2017) against other religious groups, 90 percent of which targeted Muslims. Unia also reported a large increase in online hate speech during the first six months of the year, with 740 reported instances, compared with 369 in 2018 for the same period. In September a European Commission study found that 65 percent of respondents believed discrimination on the basis of religion or belief was widespread in the country. In January the European Commission published a Special Eurobarometer survey indicating 50 percent of residents believed anti-Semitism was a problem. Media reported that in March a driver attempted to run over two veiled Muslim sisters while they were picking up their children from school. According to Unia, nongovernmental

organizations (NGOs), and media, incidents of religious discrimination toward Muslims in both the workplace and educational institutions typically involved actions directed against women wearing headscarves and a failure to make accommodations for prayer, religious holidays, or dietary requirements. Jewish groups reported anti-Semitic statements and attitudes in media and in schools during the year, including ones related to the Holocaust. Media reported in March during the Aalst Carnival, a group displayed a float depicting negative Jewish stereotypes. During the campaign leading up to general elections in May, unknown individuals photoshopped or tagged on social media anti-Semitic statements or caricatures on the campaign material or photographs from several candidates, including Prime Minister Charles Michel.

U.S. embassy officials continued to meet regularly with senior government officials in the Office of the Prime Minister and at the Ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Justice to discuss anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic incidents and discrimination. Embassy officials also discussed with government officials the continued efforts of Buddhist and Hindu groups to obtain recognition and the status of the government's plans to encourage more mosques to apply for official recognition as places of worship. The Department of State Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism met with the Jewish and Muslim communities to discuss their concerns. The Ambassador and other embassy officials met with NGOs and religious leaders in Brussels and other communities to address anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic incidents and sentiment, and to promote religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.6 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to a December 2018 survey conducted by GESIS-Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, 57.1 percent is Roman Catholic, 2.3 percent Protestant, 2.8 percent other Christian, 6.8 percent Muslim (mostly Sunni), 0.6 percent Orthodox, 0.3 percent Jewish, 0.3 percent Buddhist, 9.1 percent atheist, 20.2 percent “nonbeliever/agnostic,” and 0.5 percent other. A 2015 study by the Catholic University of Louvain estimates the Muslim portion of the population is 7 percent. According to the study, a plurality of Muslims resides in Flanders (42.2 percent); it estimates 35.5 percent of Muslims reside in Brussels and 22.3 percent in Wallonia. According to Catholic University of Louvain sociologist Jan Hertogen, based on data in the 2015 study, 24.2 percent of the Brussels population and 7.5 percent of the Antwerp population is Muslim.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of worship, including its public practice, and freedom of expression, provided no crime is committed in the exercise of these freedoms. It states no individual may be required to participate in any religious group's acts or ceremonies or to observe the group's religious days of rest, and it bars the state from interfering in the appointment of religious clergy or blocking the publication of religious documents. It obligates the state to pay the salaries and pensions of religious clergy (according to law, to qualify these clergy must work in recognized houses of worship and be certified by those religious groups), as well as those of representatives of organizations recognized by the law as providing moral assistance based on a nonconfessional philosophy.

The law prohibits discrimination based on religious or philosophical (e.g., nonconfessional) orientation. Federal law prohibits public statements inciting religious hatred, including Holocaust denial. Discrimination based on Jewish descent is distinguished from discrimination against Jewish religious practices. The maximum sentence for Holocaust denial is one year in prison.

The government officially recognizes Catholicism, Protestantism (including evangelicals and Pentecostals), Judaism, Anglicanism (separately from other Protestant groups), Islam, Orthodox (Greek and Russian) Christianity, and secular humanism.

The requirements to obtain official recognition are not legally defined. The legal basis for official recognition is the constitution and other laws and interpretations, some of which predate the constitution itself. A religious group seeking official recognition applies to the Ministry of Justice, which then recommends approval or rejection to parliament, which votes on the application. The government evaluates whether the group meets organizational and reporting requirements and applies criteria based on administrative and legislative precedents in deciding whether to recommend granting recognition to a religious group. The religious group must have a structure or hierarchy, a "sufficient number" of members, and a "long period" of existence in the country. It must offer "social value" to the public, abide by the laws of the state, and respect public order. The government does not formally define "sufficient number," "long period of time," or "social value." Final approval is the sole responsibility of the federal parliament; however, parliament generally accepts the ministry's recommendation.

The law requires each officially recognized religion to have an official interlocutor, such as an office composed of one or more representatives of the religion plus administrative staff, to support the government in its constitutional duty of providing the material conditions for the free exercise of religion. The functions performed by the interlocutor include certification of clergy and teachers of the religion, assistance in the development of the religious curriculum in schools, and oversight of the management of houses of worship.

The federal government provides financial support for officially recognized religious groups. The subsidies for recognized groups include payment of clergy salaries and for maintenance and equipment for facilities and places of worship, as well as tax exemptions. Denominations or divisions within the recognized religious groups (Shia Islam, Reform Judaism, or Lutheranism, for example) do not receive support or recognition separate from their parent religious group. Parent religious groups distribute subsidies according to their statutes, which may also include salaries to ministers and public funding for renovation or facility maintenance. Unrecognized groups do not receive government subsidies but may worship freely and openly.

There are procedures for individual houses of worship of recognized religious groups to obtain recognition and state subsidies. To do so, a house of worship must meet requirements set by the region in which it is located and by the federal Ministry of Justice. These requirements include transparency and legality of accounting practices, renunciation of foreign sources of income for ministers of religion working in the facility, compliance with building and fire safety codes, and certification of the minister of religion by the relevant interlocutor body. Recognized houses of worship also receive subsidies from the linguistic communities and municipalities for the upkeep of religious buildings. Houses of worship or other religious groups that are unable or choose not to meet these requirements may organize as nonprofit associations and benefit from lower taxes but not government subsidies. Houses of worship in this situation (i.e., not completing the recognition process) may still be affiliated with an officially recognized religious group.

There is a federal ban on covering one's face in public. Women who wear the full-face veil in public face a maximum fine of 137.50 euros (\$150).

Bans on the slaughter of animals without prior stunning enacted by the Flanders and Walloon regional governments took effect on January 1 and September 1,

respectively. The Brussels region still allows ritual slaughtering without stunning. The legislation does not prevent halal and kosher meat from being imported from abroad.

The constitution requires teaching in public schools to be neutral with respect to religious belief. The public education system requires neutrality in the presentation of religious views outside of religion classes. All public schools offer religious or “moral” instruction oriented toward citizenship and moral values. Outside of Flanders, these courses are mandatory; parents in schools in Flanders may have their children opt out of such courses. Francophone schools offer a mandatory one-hour per week “philosophy and citizenship” course plus an additional one-hour mandatory course on either philosophy and citizenship or the recognized religions, based on a constitutional court ruling.

Schools provide teachers, clerical or secular, for each of the recognized religious groups, as well as for secular humanism, according to the student’s preference. Teachers of religion are permitted to express their religious beliefs and wear religious attire, even if school policy otherwise forbids such attire. Public school religion teachers are nominated by a committee from their religious group and appointed by the linguistic community government’s education minister. Private, authorized religious schools (limited to schools operated by recognized religious groups), known as “free” schools, follow the same curriculum as public schools but may place greater emphasis on specific religious classes. Teachers at these religious schools are civil servants, and their salaries, as well as subsidies for the schools’ operating expenses, are paid for by the respective linguistic community, municipality, or province.

Unia is a publicly funded but independent agency responsible for reviewing discrimination complaints, including those of a religious nature, and attempting to resolve them through mediation or arbitration. The agency lacks legal powers to enforce resolution of cases but may refer them to the courts.

The justice minister appoints a magistrate in each judicial district to monitor discrimination cases and oversee their prosecution, including those involving religion, as a criminal act.

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

Government Practices

On March 7, the Court of Assizes in Brussels (the highest criminal court) convicted French citizen Mehdi Nemmouche of murder in the killings of four persons at the Belgian Jewish Museum in 2014 and sentenced him to life in prison. The court also convicted Nacer Bendrer, also French, of being an accomplice in the attack for supplying Nemmouche with the weapons he used and sentenced him to 15 years in prison.

Some observers continued to state a number of mosques opted not to seek official recognition because they received sufficient foreign funding and preferred to operate without government oversight. Notwithstanding a stated government policy of extending recognition to more mosques (which would make them eligible for government funding) and curbing foreign, radical Islamic influence over them by reducing the mosques' reliance on foreign funding and providing authorities with greater oversight, the number of recognized mosques decreased. The Flemish regional minister of interior questioned the existing recognition of some mosques and withdrew recognition of one of them during the year, reducing the number of recognized mosques nationally from 84 to 83. The Flemish government, formed on September 30, announced a strengthening of the recognition criteria by strengthening the security screening of mosques to ensure imams and worshippers were not radicalized and were not subject to direct foreign influence.

Longstanding applications for government recognition by Buddhists and Hindus remained pending at year's end. Buddhists filed a request for recognition in 2008, and Hindus in 2013. Representatives of the Buddhist and Hindu communities said they did not receive an official explanation for the delay as of year's end. There were no other pending recognition requests by religious groups. Despite the lack of recognition, Buddhists continued to receive federal government subsidies. The government did not give Hindus any subsidies. In September a member of parliament submitted a draft bill calling for the recognition of Buddhism and for a 74,100 euro (\$83,300) annual subsidy to Hindus.

The government maintained its ban on the wearing of religious symbols by employees in public sector jobs requiring interaction with the public. The September agreement forming a coalition government in Flanders stated the Flemish network for public schools, Go!, would enforce a general ban on wearing headscarves. The ban applied to schools in Flanders and Flemish schools in Brussels. Even before the Flemish government's announcement, virtually all public schools in Flanders maintained such a ban. Most public schools outside of Flanders also continued to ban headscarves, in accordance with government policy allowing individual schools to decide whether to impose such bans. According to

media reports, at least 90 percent of Francophone community public schools banned headscarves.

There were no reported changes in procedures by city and town administrations, which Muslim groups have said withhold or delay approval for the construction of new mosques and Islamic cultural centers. In Court-St.-Etienne, construction of a mosque financed with private contributions began in February. Local authorities approved the project in 2018 after delays and four previous rejections. In April city authorities in Lodelinsart approved a mosque construction project, with revisions, after neighbors filed 119 complaints against the project. In September city authorities denied a proposed mosque construction in Jette; neighbors had filed 154 complaints against that project, citing such issues as the scope of the construction and its impact on parking and transportation.

As announced in 2018 following a parliamentary commission report on terrorist attacks, the federal government terminated Saudi Arabia's lease on the Great Mosque in Brussels effective March 31. The government said it terminated the lease because the Great Mosque was spreading Wahhabi Salafism, which the government stated played a role in spreading violent radicalism. Saudi Arabia had signed a 99-year lease for the building in 1969. The government called for the creation of a new, pan-Islamic institution to manage the mosque and said the Muslim Executive, the Muslim community's official representative in discussions with the government, would be responsible for creating the institution and ensuring it began managing the mosque by the lease termination date. The transition, which was not completed by March 31, continued at year's end. The Great Mosque, however, remained open, operated by the Muslim Executive under a temporary contract.

The Jewish and Muslim communities maintained their legal challenge to the decisions by the Flanders and Walloon regional governments to ban slaughter without prior stunning. The Walloon ban went into effect on September 1. There were no temporary slaughterhouses authorized in Brussels and Walloon Region to carry out slaughter without prior stunning during Islamic holidays. A large slaughterhouse that performed ritual slaughter continued to operate in Brussels but could not accommodate all requests. The Belgian Constitutional Court had been scheduled to decide the issue on April 4 but postponed its ruling and sought guidance from the CJEU. Specifically, the Constitutional Court asked the CJEU to clarify restrictions and exemptions regarding ritual slaughter, the scope of these rules and their compatibility with religious freedom, and the distinction between ritual slaughter and other forms of animal killing. At year's end, the CJEU had not

responded to the Constitutional Court's queries. More than 50 religious groups appealed to the Constitutional Court to overturn the slaughter ban, according to Religion News Service.

In April eight religious leaders representing the Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Evangelical, Jewish, and Muslim communities issued a public statement calling for schools in the country to maintain compulsory religion courses, which they said encouraged dialogue among cultures and religions. The statement followed recommendations by some politicians to introduce secularism in the constitution, which some observers said could eventually lead to an end of religious courses in schools. The government decided not to consider a change in the constitution.

According to a report on the website of state broadcaster Belgian Francophone Radio and Television, following the May general elections, federal railway agency employees in Brussels who supported what political analysts described as far-right parties delivered Nazi salutes and made racist comments at work. The company opened an internal investigation of these acts and released a public statement denouncing them.

Media reported that in June the Liege prosecutor dropped discrimination charges against a Turkish man who in 2014 put a sign on the door outside his cafe reading in French, "Entrance allowed for dogs, but not for Zionists" and in Turkish, "In this establishment, dogs are allowed, but Jews will never be." A spokesperson for the Liege prosecutor's office did not provide a reason for dismissing the charges.

Media reported that in November the West Flanders public prosecutor's office declined to prosecute four supporters of the soccer team Club Brugge for singing anti-Semitic songs during a match in August 2018. The individuals were among a group of fans who chanted, "My father was a commando, my mother was in the SS, together they burned Jews, 'cause Jews burn the best." In 2018 the national soccer association banned the four from entering all major stadiums in the country for three years. According to media, prosecutors explained their decision saying the stadium ban was sufficient punishment. Michael Freilich, a Jewish parliamentarian (MP) from the New Flemish Alliance Party, criticized the decision.

On December 25, MP Freilich posted to his YouTube channel a video of himself walking through the parliament building carrying a Hanukah menorah and then lighting it in a room in which a Christmas tree was also on display. In the video, Freilich explained the significance of the Hanukah menorah. According to the

Jewish Telegraph Agency, New Flemish Alliance Party members Pinar Akbas and Pieter Boudry criticized Freilich's action. Akbas wrote on Twitter, "Secularism is for everyone or for none at all." Boudry wrote, "No religious clothes and symbols for politicians and civil servants." Freilich told the Jewish Telegraph Agency, "If we allow Christmas trees and a nativity scene, the menorah is as similar a cultural Jewish heritage item and should not be banned."

In 2018, the most recent year for which information was available, the Ministry of Justice allocated approximately 112 million euros (\$125.8 million) to religious and secular humanist groups (up slightly from 111 million euros [\$124.7 million] in 2017): 92.3 million euros (\$103.7 million) to recognized religious groups (including 4.9 million euros [\$5.5 million] to Muslims; the individual allocations to other religious groups were unavailable), 19.5 million euros (\$21.9 million) to secular humanists, and 160,000 euros (\$180,000) to Buddhists. According to the 2018 report of the Observatory of Religions and Secularism at the Free University of Brussels, the Muslim community, unlike other recognized religious groups, continued to receive a smaller percentage of the government's allocation than what nongovernmental sources estimated was its current share of the population.

Police continued to offer a voluntary, day-long course, "The Holocaust, the Police, and Human Rights" at the Dossin Barracks in Malines, site of a Holocaust museum and memorial. The training consisted of a visit to the museum at the barracks site from which Nazis transported Jews and Roma to concentration camps to the east during World War II, and a workshop focusing on radicalization, collective violence, exclusion, and polarization. The training was a joint collaboration among federal and local police, the center at the Dossin Barracks, and Unia. According to federal police, approximately 10,000 persons, approximately one-fifth of the total force, had undergone the training since its inception in 2014.

In January the government revived a federal-level taskforce to combat anti-Semitism, in response to Unia's request to reactivate the "Anti-Semitism Council." The council was created in 2004 to combat anti-Semitism but had not met since 2013. Vice Prime Minister and Minister for Equal Opportunities Kris Peeters said the government revived the taskforce in response to evidence from national and European Union (EU)-level rapporteurs that violent, anti-Semitic incidents were on the rise in recent years.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Media and NGOs, including Amnesty International, the Collective against Islamophobia in Belgium, and Unia reported incidents of violence, threats, harassment, discrimination, and hate speech against Muslims and Jews during the year. Unia reported 101 anti-Semitic incidents – which it defined as incidents against Jewish persons rather than against Jewish religious practices and tracked separately – and 307 complaints of other religious discrimination or harassment in 2018, the most recent year for which data were available, compared with 109 anti-Semitic incidents and 319 other complaints in 2017. Approximately 90 percent of incidents targeted Muslims. There were three incidents against Christians, 12 against Jewish religious practices, and four against nonbelievers. According to Unia, 37.1 percent of the incidents in 2018 involved speech in media or on the internet (slightly less than half of these media/internet complaints involved Facebook postings); 18.2 percent concerned discrimination in the workplace; and 23.3 percent occurred in the education sector (where a plurality of incidents involved restrictions or prohibitions on wearing of the hijab).

In May the European Commission carried out a study in each EU member state on perceptions of discrimination and published the results in September. According to the findings, 65 percent of respondents believed discrimination on the basis of religion or belief was widespread in Belgium, while 34 percent said it was rare; 82 percent would be comfortable with having a person of a different religion than the majority of the population occupy the highest elected political position in the country. In addition, 97 percent said they would be comfortable working closely with a Christian, and 93 percent said they would be with an atheist, 92 percent with a Jew, 89 percent with a Muslim, and 92 percent with a Buddhist. Asked how they would feel if their child were in a “love relationship” with an individual belonging to various groups, 97 percent said they would be comfortable if the partner were Christian, 89 percent if atheist, 82 percent if Jewish, 84 percent if Buddhist, and 71 percent if Muslim.

In January the European Commission published a Special Eurobarometer survey of perceptions of anti-Semitism based on interviews it conducted in December 2018 in each EU member state. According to the survey, 50 percent of residents believed anti-Semitism was a problem in Belgium, and 48 percent believed it had stayed the same over the previous five years. The percentage who believed anti-Semitism was a problem in nine different categories was as follows: Holocaust denial, 57 percent; on the internet, 61 percent; anti-Semitic graffiti or vandalism, 52 percent; expression of hostility or threats against Jews in public places, 59 percent; desecration of Jewish cemeteries, 54 percent; physical attacks against

Jews, 56 percent; anti-Semitism in schools and universities, 52 percent; anti-Semitism in political life, 46 percent; and anti-Semitism in media, 45 percent.

In November the Anti-Defamation League released the results of a survey on anti-Semitic views of the country's residents. The survey cited stereotypical statements about Jews and asked respondents whether they believed such statements were "probably true" or "probably false." The proportion agreeing that various statements were "probably true" was: 50 percent that Jews are more loyal to Israel than to Belgium; 38 percent that Jews have too much power in the business world; and 40 percent that Jews talk too much about the Holocaust.

In January the Brussels Criminal Court sentenced an Orthodox Christian woman to three years in jail for stabbing her daughter in the abdomen and under the chin after the daughter converted to Islam and secretly married a Muslim.

According to media reports, on March 22, a driver cursed at and attempted to run over two veiled Muslim sisters while they were picking up their children from school. One of the women told the press that in 10 years in the country they had never experienced problems before. "I am still in shock," she said. Police arrested the driver. As of year's end no further information was available on the case.

Media reported that on June 11, security guards stopped an Iraqi man carrying three knives as he tried to enter the Romi Goldmuntz Synagogue in Antwerp during a Jewish holiday. Police arrested the man. As of year's end no further information was available on the case.

Unia reported 56 complaints of workplace discrimination based on religion in 2018, compared with 82 in 2017. The reported discrimination principally targeted Muslims.

According to Unia, NGOs, and media, incidents of religious discrimination toward Muslims in both the workplace and educational institutions typically involved actions directed against women wearing headscarves and a failure to make accommodations for prayer, religious holidays, or dietary requirements.

In May Unia supported a complaint to the labor court filed by a Muslim woman who said the Brussels public transportation company denied her employment because she wore a headscarf. In its plea the Unia legal advisor alleged general discrimination specifically against Muslim women who wear the headscarf, rather than more broadly against Muslims or women within the company.

Unia preliminarily reported a doubling of notifications of online hate speech during the first six months of the year to 740, compared with 369 notifications during the same period in 2018. Unia stated notifications consisted of initial reports, not all of which it would, after investigation, accept as actual instances of discrimination. In addition, some notifications were duplicate reports of the same incident, and not all online hate speech notifications were linked to religion. According to Unia, the run-up to the general elections, which took place in May, was a “traditional peak” time for online hate speech.

During the campaign leading up to general elections in May, unknown persons photoshopped or tagged on social media anti-Semitic statements or caricatures on the campaign material or photographs from several candidates, including Prime Minister Michel. In April a Communist Party activist posted on Facebook a photoshopped picture depicting Prime Minister Michel as an Orthodox Jewish rabbi. The man subsequently removed the post.

Jewish groups reported anti-Semitic statements and attitudes in media and in schools during the year, including on the Holocaust. *La Derniere Heure*, a daily newspaper, reported that on November 16, a high school teacher in Huy, who taught about Islam as part of the religious studies curriculum, posted on his Facebook page a video of an imam’s sermon. In the video, the imam said, “For those who cooperate with the Jews, work with the Jews, and those who plot with the Jews, O Allah, take them very quickly and without delay, O Allah, shake their bases and destroy their structures.” Education ministry officials in Wallonia said they filed a hate speech complaint against the teacher with police.

On July 27, *De Morgen*, a daily newspaper, published an opinion column by Dimitri Verhulst characterizing Jews as “land thieves with ‘ugly noses’ and superiority complexes.” The article cited the late French-Jewish singer Serge Gainsbourg as saying, “Being Jewish is not a religion; no God would give creatures such an ugly nose,” which according to the Jewish Telegraph Agency was a misquote. Domestic and international Jewish leaders and groups, including Chief Rabbi of the Netherlands Binyomin Jacobs, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, B’nai B’rith Europe, the Forum of Jewish Organizations (which represents Jewish groups in the Flemish Region), and the Israeli Ambassador called the article anti-Semitic. The newspaper eventually issued a correction in which it removed references to facial features from the article, but the newspaper’s editor-in-chief Bart Eeckhout said the accusations of anti-Semitism were attempts to silence *De Morgen*’s criticism of Israeli policies.

In September the European Jewish Association issued a statement protesting an online sign language video dictionary compiled by the public University of Ghent, which included a gesture signaling a hooked nose as the definition of “Jew.” European Jewish Association Director Menachem Margolin called that and another video depicting Jews racist and demeaning and asked the university to remove them from the dictionary. The university subsequently added a label under the video showing the hooked nose gesture indicating the sign had a “negative connotation.”

In March during the Aalst Carnival, the group Vismooil’n displayed a float depicting Orthodox Jews with crooked noses standing atop bags of gold coins, with one of the figures carrying a white rat on its shoulder. A number of Jewish groups, including B’nai B’rith International and the Simon Wiesenthal Center, said they were “sickened” or “disgusted” with the display, and several, including the Coordination Committee of Jewish Organizations of Belgium (CCOJB), filed a complaint with Unia. In a statement, the groups said, “...at worst, this is a reproduction of the worst anti-Semitic caricatures of the Nazi era.” According to the *Het Laatste Nieuws* newspaper, a spokesperson for the European Commission stated, “It is unthinkable that such imagery is being paraded on European streets 70 years after the Holocaust.” While Unia did not assess the float to be illegal, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) condemned the parade and said it was considering removing the annual event from its List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Citing freedom of expression, Aalst Mayor Christoph d’Haese said the float should be allowed. In early December, shortly before the date UNESCO had said it would announce its decision on the status of the carnival, d’Haese requested UNESCO remove the carnival from the heritage list, stating the organization was biased and had already made the decision to drop the carnival. On December 13, UNESCO removed the carnival from the heritage list, stating it had done so because of the “repetition of racist and anti-Semitic representations.”

In a February video posted on social media, students at Pater Jozefleten Catholic High School in the town of Melle were shown dressed as “Saudi Muslims.” One of the students dressed as a suicide bomber, wearing a black face mask and a belt of fake explosives. The video also showed female students wearing full veils and a fake imam leading students in a simulated prayer session. Following the appearance of the footage, there was a wave of criticism on social media. In a statement posted on the school’s Facebook page, the school principal later said the event in question was a school tradition, part of the pregraduation celebration for

students in their senior year, during which the students dressed in different costumes on different days; their intention, he added, was not to insult anyone.

On June 5, an Antwerp court sentenced Twitter user “Fidelio” to a 10-month suspended sentence and an 800-euro (\$900) fine for incitement to hatred and posting explicit material inciting violence against Muslims. For years, the man had posted content against Muslims and against the director and a staffer of Unia, including statements calling for the extermination of Muslims and the two named Unia staff members for defending them.

In April the Islamic Union in Brussels launched a “Good morning, I’m Muslim” campaign in that city and in the cities of Antwerp, Charleroi, Genk, Liege, and Namur. Muslim volunteers engaged in conversations with the public and distributed flyers and red roses in what organizers said was an effort to dispel anti-Muslim prejudice.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials discussed continued anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic incidents and sentiment in meetings with representatives from the Office of the Prime Minister; the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Interior, and Justice; and regional governments. Embassy officials also discussed with government officials the continued efforts of Buddhist and Hindu groups to obtain government recognition and the status of the government’s plans to encourage more mosques to apply for official recognition as places of worship.

The Department of State Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism visited Brussels in May and met with head of the Jewish Consistoire Philippe Markiewicz, with Unia directors, and with the director of the human rights division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Special Envoy also met with Jewish groups on issues of concern, particularly the ban on ritual slaughter in Flanders and Wallonia. With the Ambassador, he visited the Jewish Museum in Brussels and attended an iftar for Jews and Muslims organized by the museum in a show of support for interreligious dialogue and tolerance.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly met with religious leaders to discuss incidents of religious discrimination and ways to counter public manifestations of anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic sentiment. They continued engagement with activists from the Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish communities, including with leaders from the Consistoire (official representatives of authorities

for Jewish community matters with the government), the Muslim Executive, and the CCOJB to promote interreligious understanding.

From October 2018 through March, the embassy sponsored an exhibit at the Jewish Museum featuring a well-known Jewish-American photographer. At the embassy's request, museum officials brought in disadvantaged youth (mainly Muslim) for a guided tour of the exhibit and to talk about empowerment, community activism, and art as peaceful tools to bring about positive societal change. The Ambassador also toured the exhibit together with museum officials.

On October 2, the Ambassador visited the Great Synagogue of Europe in Brussels with head of the Consistoire Markiewicz and Great Rabbi Albert Guigui. They discussed the Jewish community's concerns about the rise of anti-Semitism.

On October 28, the Ambassador and other embassy officials visited the Jewish Orthodox community of Antwerp at the invitation of a federal MP. Embassy officials discussed with community representatives issues of concern, including what they saw as the secular and anticlerical nature of the country, the ban on ritual slaughtering, and possible future hurdles to Jewish religious practices.

On November 21, the Ambassador met in Ghent with the leadership of the think tank Centre of Expertise for Intellectual Reformation, Research and Advice (CIRRA), which focuses on intercultural relations and Islam-related topics, to learn about efforts in the local Muslim community to promote religious tolerance and inclusion.

During Ramadan, the embassy hosted a panel discussion on Muslim identity featuring several prominent Muslims who had previously participated in embassy-funded exchange programs in the United States. The audience consisted of other former participants of embassy exchange programs, all of whom participated in an iftar immediately after the panel, where there was continued discussion of issues of religious freedom and tolerance.

The embassy used social media to promote religious freedom. In October the embassy posted to its Facebook page about the Ambassador's visit to Antwerp, during which he met with Jewish community leaders to discuss anti-Semitism, visited the Antwerp Grand Synagogue, and paid his respects at the Holocaust Memorial monument for the Jews deported during WWII. In November the embassy posted on its Facebook page about the meeting in Ghent between the Ambassador and founders of CIRRA.