

KUWAIT 2018 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. Defamation of the Abrahamic faiths (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity), publication or broadcast of material the government deems offensive to religious groups, and practices the government deems inconsistent with Islamic law are prohibited by law. The law does not specifically prohibit proselytism, but individuals promoting proselytism may be prosecuted under laws criminalizing contempt of religion. 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. In September the government fined a Member of Parliament (MP) for insulting a Shia parliamentarian and defaming Shia Islam via Twitter posts. In June the Court of Appeals reduced the sentence of a journalist and secular activist convicted of blasphemy charges in 2017 for “contempt of Islam” and “slander of sharia.” MAIA organized several courses for imams promoting tolerance and countering radicalization. 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. 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. MAIA permitted the construction of five new Shia mosques during the year; however, most minority religious groups reported a continued lack of sufficient facilities for worship and difficulty obtaining permission to construct new facilities. The government did not accredit any religious schools or establish Shia religious training institutions. Religious minorities said they practiced self-censorship to avoid conflict with authorities. Some Shia leaders continued to report discrimination in clerical and public sector employment. Members of most non-Abrahamic faiths and unregistered churches were not able to get married locally. In July the press reported that two parliamentarians submitted a request to halt enforcement of a prohibition against registering local Baha’i marriages. The Ministry of Education continued to ban or censor instructional materials referring to the Holocaust or Israel.

Muslims continued to face societal pressure against conversion from Islam but there were no legal prohibitions to doing so. It remained illegal, however, for individuals of other faiths to convert Muslims within the country. Some citizens who converted outside the country said their families harassed them due to their conversion from Islam. 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 such material as 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. According to the NGO Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), there were instances of anti-Semitic commentary in print and on social media, including by a public university lecturer and a licensed imam.

Senior embassy officials and senior MAIA officials discussed the ministry's function to promote tolerance and religious freedom in the country, including for members of religious minority groups. In March the Department of State Special Advisor for Religious Minorities met with government officials, including MAIA senior officials and MPs from the Human Rights Committee, and with religious leaders, and attended a large private interfaith meeting. In December the U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials hosted an annual event for representatives of officially recognized non-Muslim faiths to discuss religious freedom and the challenges they faced in the country, as well as the importance of religious tolerance. A senior embassy official also hosted a roundtable 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 with participants and emphasized the U.S. government's commitment to international religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.9 million (July 2018 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. The 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.

In June the PACI released statistics indicating 64 percent of expatriates are Muslim, 26 percent Christian, and 10 percent from non-Abrahamic faiths. Sources in various expatriate communities also said 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 relatively 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 (office of the emir) makes recommendations to the emir on ways to bring laws into better conformity with sharia. The committee is an eight-member advisory body to the Amiri Diwan, led by the president of the committee. The Council of Ministers appoints members to three-year terms. Traditionally, five of the members are religious scholars (jurisprudence and sharia experts) and two specialize in economics and law. The committee functions in an advisory role and has no authority to implement or enforce its recommendations.

The law states apostates lose certain legal rights, including the right 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, then the marriage is still valid. If a Muslim woman married to a Muslim man converts to another Abrahamic faith (Christianity or Judaism), then 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, then the marriage is automatically annulled.

The law prohibits the defamation of the 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 (\$33,000 to \$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 200,000 dinars (\$660,000).

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 10,000 to 200,000 dinars (\$33,000 to \$660,000) and up to seven years’ imprisonment. Noncitizens convicted under this law are also subject to deportation.

There is no promulgated process outlining what religious groups need to submit to register with the government. In practice, groups navigate the process without much 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 the full benefits of being a registered religion with the central government, there are no transparent criteria that must be met for a registration application to be approved. To obtain an official license, groups must first register with the MAIA. If the registration application is granted, further approvals are required by the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) and the Ministry of Interior (MOI). Once these three ministries approve the registration application, the municipality must grant the final approval/license, which requires the

community leaders to obtain written permission from all the immediate neighbors occupying the properties around the proposed place of worship. In practice, the government often provides applicants with 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, as it is considered a “sovereign act” that cannot be challenged in court.

There are seven officially registered and licensed Christian churches: National Evangelical Church of Kuwait (NECK) (Protestant); Roman Catholic; Greek Catholic (Melkite); Coptic Orthodox; Armenian Orthodox; Greek Orthodox; and Anglican. There are no officially recognized synagogues, and according to the MAIA, no application has ever been submitted for one. The government does not recognize any non-Abrahamic religions. Nonrecognized 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 abilities (although some registered religious groups have agreed to assist nonregistered groups in these matters). Additionally, nonregistered groups may not purchase property or sponsor workers and must rely on volunteers from within their community for resources.

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 promoting proselytism 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 100 dinars (\$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 1,000 dinars (\$3,300).

Islamic religious instruction is mandatory at all levels for all Muslim students in public schools and in 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, and there is no penalty for not doing so. 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. Expatriates of non-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.

The law forbids and does not recognize marriage between Muslim women and non-Muslim men, but Muslim men may marry women of other 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 as per their religious customs, and local authorities and courts recognize their religious 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 in the country, but may have their foreign wedding certificates recognized. Citizens of the Baha'i Faith may marry abroad and petition the court to recognize their marriage.

Courts may follow Shia jurisprudence in matters of personal status and family law for Shia at the first instance and appellate levels. If the case proceeds beyond the appellate level to the Court of Cassation, the case is adjudicated via Sunni personal status law. 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.

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 offspring.

An individual's religion is not included on passports or national identity documents, with the exception of 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

Media reported that in January the Criminal Court sentenced Fouad Al-Rifai, a self-proclaimed preacher and owner of the NGO "Wathakker Centre," 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. Media reported subsequently that the government ordered his center, which was registered under the Ministry of Commerce, be closed for one year.

The government pursued several cases against individuals for allegedly insulting Shia doctrine. In March the Court of Appeals overturned the acquittal verdict of Salafist cleric Othman Al-Khamees on a case dating back to 2015 related to charges of violating the national unity law, insulting Shia Islam by calling it "deviant doctrine," and stirring up sectarianism through YouTube posts. The court also fined him 20,000 dinars (\$66,000). In September the Court of Cassation fined MP Mohammed Hayf 2,000 dinars (\$6,600) for insulting Shia MP Saleh Ashour and defaming Shia Islam via Twitter posts in which he described Ashour as representing the "Takfiri school of Shia doctrine" (meaning Hayf accused Ashour of being a Shia extremist who called other Muslims non-believers).

According to press reports, in June the Court of Appeals reduced by four months the sentence of journalist and secular activist Abdul Aziz Abdullah al-Qena'ei. In

2017, a court of misdemeanors had convicted al-Qenaie in a blasphemy case for “contempt of Islam” and “slander of sharia” for comments he made on a program aired by the Qatar-based television channel Al-Jazeera. During the program, he stated freedom did not exist in Islam and that sharia involved “criminal acts” and promoted extremism and terrorism. Many individuals reacted to his comments by posting on social media that those who insulted Islam and sharia in this way were “atheists.” He was originally sentenced to six months imprisonment with labor, but his sentence was suspended pending the appeal process.

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 Kuwait. All religious leaders, regardless of faith, continued to state that their sole mission was to take care of their existing community. A few leaders refused to speak about conversion.

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 in the country.

In accordance with MAIA policy, the government continued to vet and appoint all new Sunni imams. Media sources quoted senior MAIA officials as saying 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. Sunni imams could add content to the sermons but needed to ensure the text adhered to the laws on political speech and avoided stoking sectarianism. MAIA required Sunni imams to send a recorded audio of their sermons to MAIA for review. MAIA also relied on reports of worshipers and others who might be unsatisfied 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 as long as 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, 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.

During the year, MAIA organized several courses for Sunni imams to make their messages more effectively promote tolerance and counter radicalization. MAIA also established an annual award for imams for “creativity and excellence in countering radicalization.”

In January MAIA announced it would increase efforts to promote national unity and strengthen religious tolerance and promote moderate interpretations of Islam. MAIA did not announce any specific results by year’s end.

Media reported that in December MAIA suspended Sheikh Fahad al-Kandari, who was preaching at the Hisham ibn Amer Mosque in Kuwait City, for “publicly exaggerating the praise of the Prophet and asking Allah to shower mercy and forgiveness on Amina bint Wahab, the mother of the Prophet,” who had died before Islam. According to media reports, al-Kandari said MAIA suspended him without first questioning him and he would file a grievance and a lawsuit.

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 nine imams it considered to have made provocative statements that violated laws against harming national unity or insulting other religious groups. MAIA warned four imams, reprimanded two, and suspended two permanently. One imam’s case remained under investigation at year’s end.

In May the Court of Cassation fined a blogger 10,000 dinars (\$33,000) for violating the national unity law, showing contempt for Shia Islam, and inciting hatred and sectarianism.

According to representatives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in December the Church submitted an application to be officially registered with MAIA.

Representatives of registered churches continued to state the government was generally tolerant and respectful of their faiths. Members of non-Abrahamic faiths and nonregistered 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. 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.

Members of non-Abrahamic faiths and nonregistered churches continued to say they experienced hardships in commemorating major 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 commemorations. Municipal governments 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 provided security and protection for licensed places of worship. 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. 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. Members of the various faiths said they were grateful for the added security.

Authorities continued the government's long-standing practice of prohibiting churches from displaying exterior signs, such as a cross or the congregation's name.

No public shops 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 as long as 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 Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the municipality of Kuwait handled building permits and land issues for non-Abrahamic faiths and nonregistered churches. The government continued to prohibit non-Abrahamic religions and nonregistered churches from having public places of worship. The government said it received no applications for construction of new churches from religious groups during the year.

Some religious groups without a licensed place of worship stated they could conduct worship services without government interference provided they did not disturb their neighbors or violate laws regarding assembly and proselytizing. The government continued to allow such groups to operate in rented villas, private homes, or the facilities of registered churches.

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 1,601 mosques in the country, including 40 mosques opened during the year. According to the government, of the 1,601 mosques, 51 were Shia, with five new Shia mosques receiving permission to be

built during the year. There were also 20-30 *husseiniyas* registered with MOI and thousands of smaller Shia gatherings that took place in private homes.

Citing security concerns, authorities stated they continued to take action 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 also received a mandate from the Council of Ministers to demolish 115 unregistered mosques, stating that some of those mosques served as platforms of extremism. The demolition of these mosques began during the year. Authorities said new unlicensed mosques continued to open, however.

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 operated 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 country's only imam training institution, 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. Shia leaders said the establishment of a Shia Court of Cassation, approved in 2003, remained delayed because the government had not approved the establishment of Shia religious training institutions.

According to press reports, in July two parliamentarians submitted a request to the prime minister to have the MOJ stop enforcing a 1966 ministry decision that prohibits registration of local marriages between persons of the Baha'i Faith. The prime minister referred the request to the MOJ for action. The issue remained pending at year's end.

Even though Shia make up an estimated 30 percent of the population, they remained underrepresented at all levels of government: six of 50 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 July MP Saleh Ashour commented on Twitter that the new group of public prosecutor recruits included 94 Sunnis and just three Shia. He added that there was only one Shia graduate student among the top 10 highest achievers at Kuwait University's law school and he was excluded from the 2018 public prosecution recruiting class. Some Shia leaders said authorities made decisions about employment in a nontransparent manner and did not treat Shia fairly or give them equal opportunities.

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. Leaders of non-Abrahamic faiths continued to report their religious leaders could only lead their religious communities outside the regular hours of their nonreligious employment.

Media coverage included news on events and celebrations held by various Christian denominations in the country such as Christmas Mass celebrations and church inauguration anniversaries attended by high-level government officials. On January 7, Deputy State Minister for Amiri Diwan Affairs Sheikh Ali al-Jarrah and

other public officials attended the Egyptian Coptic Church's Christmas Mass in Hawally. On November 16, representatives of the emir attended the 70th anniversary of the inauguration of St. Paul's Church in Ahmadi.

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. Dr. Nazim Al-Misbah, a well-known Sunni cleric, tweeted in December that "the celebration of Christmas is not permitted in our Sharia because it is a religious festival for the Christians."

The NGO MEMRI reported several instances during the year of clerics and others making statements that perpetuated negative stereotypes of Jews. According to MEMRI, on January 6, a licensed imam, Mohammed Al-Humoud Al-Najdi, posted an anti-Semitic lecture on the "Traits of the Jews" on YouTube, during which he said, "Treachery is a principle deeply ingrained in the nature of the Jews." On January 10, Bassam Al-Shatti, a licensed imam and a lecturer in the Religious Faith and Preaching Department at Kuwait University, published a column called "Traits of the Jews" in the *Al-Anba* daily newspaper. Among the anti-Semitic comments he made, Al-Shatti wrote that Jews "spread corruption, drugs, alcohol, licentiousness, and abomination in the world among the peoples."

The NECK continued to allow 85 unregistered congregations to use its facilities.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Senior embassy officials met with senior MAIA officials to discuss the ministry's function to promote tolerance and religious freedom in the country, including for members of religious minority groups. In March the Department of State Special Advisor for Religious Minorities visited the country and met with government officials and religious leaders. He also attended a large private interfaith meeting with Sunni, Shia, and Christian religious leaders, as well as community leaders and business people from different faiths. During his meetings with MAIA senior officials and MPs from the Human Rights Committee, he stressed the importance of religious freedom.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers met 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. In December the Ambassador and other embassy officials hosted an annual event for leaders of various registered churches to discuss religious tolerance. The Ambassador spoke with each leader to learn how the government policies were affecting the congregations and how the situation compared with that of previous years. He also stressed the importance of religious freedom. During the year, embassy officials and religious leaders discussed the needs of the various 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 December a senior embassy official and other members of the embassy staff hosted members of nonrecognized religious groups (Hindus, Sikhs, Druze, Bohra Muslims, and Baha'is) at a roundtable to discuss their communities' needs. Senior embassy officials also attended religious events throughout the year, including the observations of Ashura, Easter, Baha'u'llah's Birth, Christmas, 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.