

# ITALY 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution protects freedom of religion and the right of religious communities to establish their own institutions. The constitution specifies the state and the Roman Catholic Church are independent, with their relations governed by treaties, including a concordat granting the Church a number of specific privileges and benefits, and financial support. Twelve other religious groups have accords granting many of the same benefits in exchange for a degree of government monitoring. Religious groups must register to request an accord. On July 30, the government signed an accord with the Church of England; at year's end, it was awaiting parliamentary approval. Unregistered religious groups operate freely but are not eligible for the same benefits as groups with accords; however, they may apply separately for benefits. In October the senate approved a proposal from Senator for Life and Holocaust survivor Liliana Segre to establish an extraordinary committee to fight intolerance, anti-Semitism, and hate crimes; 98 center-right senators abstained in the vote. In November the Milan prefect granted Segre a police escort after she received threatening anti-Semitic messages, and a prosecutor opened an investigation. The Muslim community, which does not have an accord, continued to experience difficulties in acquiring permission from local governments to construct mosques or to continue operating existing ones. According to a weekly newspaper, *Panorama*, there were 1,200 unofficial Muslim places of worship. Politicians from several political parties, including leader of the League (Lega) Party Matteo Salvini, who served as deputy prime minister and minister of interior from June 2018 until September 2019, again made statements critical of Islam and against the construction of new mosques. In March the Union of Islamic Communities of Italy (UCOII) President Yassine Lafram told the general assembly in Bologna that Islamic communities were not able to open “dignified” places of worship and said it was “inconceivable” that Muslims had to worship in “basements.”

There were reports of anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim incidents, including harassment, discrimination, hate speech, and vandalism. The Anti-Semitism Observatory of the Jewish Contemporary Documentation Center Foundation (CDEC), a nongovernmental organization (NGO), identified 251 anti-Semitic reported incidents during the year, compared with 181 in 2018 and 130 in 2017. Of those incidents, 172 involved hate speech on social media or the internet. The press reported examples of anti-Semitic graffiti and posters, including depictions of swastikas on walls, anti-Semitic stereotypes, and praise of neo-Nazi groups in

cities such as Rome, Milan, and Pisa. While there is no official government data from institutions or public agencies on anti-Muslim incidents, local and European NGOs reported physical and verbal attacks against Muslims, especially involving hate speech, on social media, and in the press. The NGO Vox Diritti reported 22,523 tweets containing negative messages targeting Muslims between March-May, compared with 26,783 from March-May 2018. On March 21, a woman forcibly removed a Muslim woman's hijab on a public bus in Turin and taunted her, according to press reports.

Representatives from the U.S. embassy and consulates general met with national and local government officials to encourage respect for religious freedom and equal treatment for all faiths. They also discussed the efforts to integrate new migrants, many of whom were Muslim, Orthodox, or Hindu, and second-generation Muslims. Embassy, consulate, and Department of State representatives met with religious leaders and civil society representatives to promote interfaith dialogue and awareness, social inclusion of immigrants, the empowerment of faith groups through social media, and the mobilization of youth leaders among faith groups. The embassy and consulates continued to use their social media platforms to acknowledge major Christian, Muslim, and Jewish holidays as well as to amplify initiatives that promote religious freedom and interfaith dialogue at the local level. Embassy officials met with the president of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI) and Rome Jewish community leaders to discuss how to support their efforts to counter anti-Semitism among self-defined far-right groups and civil society.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 62.3 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to a 2019 survey by Doxa, an independent Italian research center, approximately 67 percent of the population identifies as Roman Catholic. According to government officials, religious groups together accounting for less than 10 percent of the population include other Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Baha'is, Buddhists, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), the Union of Pentecostal Churches (UCP), and Ananda Marga Pracaraka Samgha, an Indian spiritual movement. Non-Catholic Christian groups account for approximately 16 percent of the population and include Eastern Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Assemblies of God, the Methodist and Waldensian Churches, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), and several smaller Protestant groups. According to the national branch of the Church of Jesus Christ, there are approximately 26,000 adherents in

the country. According to national newspaper *La Repubblica*, most followers are in Lombardy, Sicily, and Lazio Regions. The UCEI estimates the Jewish population numbers 28,000. According to the legal counsel of the Italian Federation of Progressive Judaism (FIEP), FIEP has approximately 600 members, and includes both Jews who are registered and unregistered in the local communities. The country's progressive Jews are organized into four congregations in Rome, Florence, and Milan and represented by the Italian Federation of Progressive Judaism, part of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. Doxa reports 15 percent of the population are nonbelievers or have no religious affiliation.

According to the UCOII, approximately 2.5 million Muslims – approximately 4 percent of the population – live in the country. According to the Ministry of interior (MOI) and the national agency for statistics, the Muslim population is composed of native-born citizens, immigrants, and resident foreigners, but most of its growth comes from large numbers of immigrants from Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, the majority of whom live in the north. Moroccan and Albanian-origin Muslims make up the largest established groups, while Tunisia and Pakistan are increasingly important sources of seaborne migrant arrivals. The MOI reports Muslims are overwhelmingly Sunni.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states all citizens are equal before the law regardless of religion and are free to profess their beliefs in any form, individually or with others, and to promote them and celebrate rites in public or in private, provided they are not offensive to public morality. According to the constitution, each religious community has the right to establish its own institutions according to its own statutes as long as these do not conflict with the law. The constitution stipulates the state may not impose special limitations or taxes on the establishment or activities of groups because of their religious nature or aims. The constitution specifies the state and the Catholic Church are independent of each other, and treaties, which include a concordat between the government and the Holy See, govern their relations.

By law, insulting any divinity is blasphemy, a crime punishable by a fine ranging from 51 to 309 euros (\$57-\$350).

The constitution states all religious groups are equally free, and relations between the state and non-Catholic groups are governed by law based on agreements (“accords”) between them. Representatives of a non-Catholic faith requesting an accord must first submit their request to the Office of the Prime Minister. The government and the group’s representatives then negotiate a draft agreement, which the Council of Ministers must approve. The prime minister then signs and submits the agreement to parliament for final approval. Once parliament approves the implementing legislation, the accord governs the relationship between the government and the religious group, including state support. Twelve groups have an accord: The Confederation of Methodist and Waldensian Churches, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Jews, Baptists, Lutherans, Church of Jesus Christ, Orthodox Church of the Constantinople Patriarchate, the Italian Apostolic Church, Buddhist Union, Soka Gakkai Buddhists, and Hindus.

The law provides religious groups with tax-exempt status and the right to recognition as legal entities, once they have completed a registration process with the MOI. Legal registration is a prerequisite for any group seeking an accord with the government. A religious group may apply for registration by submitting to a prefect, the local representative of the MOI, an official request that includes the group’s statutes; a report on its goals and activities; information on its administrative offices; a three-year budget; certification of its credit status by a bank; and certification of the Italian citizenship or legal residency of its head. To be approved, a group’s statutes must not conflict with the law. Once approved, the group must submit to MOI monitoring, including oversight of its budget and internal organization. The MOI may appoint a commissioner to administer the group if it identifies irregularities in its activities. Religious groups not registered may still operate legally as NGOs and obtain tax-exempt status, legal recognition of marriages, access to hospitals and prisons, and other benefits, but having an accord with the government facilitates the process. The Catholic Church is the only legally recognized group exempted from MOI monitoring, in accordance with the concordat between the government and the Holy See.

An accord grants clergy automatic access to state hospitals, prisons, and military barracks; allows for civil registry of religious marriages; facilitates special religious practices regarding funerals; and exempts students from school attendance on religious holidays. Any religious group without an accord may request these benefits from the MOI on a case-by-case basis. An accord also allows a religious group to receive funds collected by the state through a voluntary 0.8 percent of personal income tax set-aside on taxpayer returns. Taxpayers may specify to which eligible religious group they would like to direct these funds.

National law does not restrict religious face coverings, but some local authorities impose restrictions. Regional laws in Liguria and Veneto prohibit the use of burqas and *niqabs* in public buildings and institutions, including hospitals.

The concordat with the Holy See provides for the Catholic Church to select teachers, paid by the state, to provide instruction in weekly “hour of religion” courses taught in public schools. The courses are optional, and students who do not wish to attend may study other subjects or, in certain cases, leave school early with parental consent. Church-selected instructors are lay or religious, and the instruction includes material determined by the state and relevant to non-Catholic religious groups. Government funding is available for only these Catholic Church-approved teachers. If a student requests a religion class from a non-Catholic religious group, that group must provide the teacher and cover the cost of instruction; it is not required to seek government approval for the content of the class. Some local laws provide scholarship funding for students to attend private, religiously affiliated schools, usually but not always Catholic, that meet government educational standards.

Schools are divided into “state-owned” and “state-equivalent” categories. The “state equivalent” school includes public (municipality, provinces, regions or other public institutions owned) or private, of which the private ones may be religiously affiliated. All state-equivalent schools receive government funding, if they meet criteria and standards published every year by the Ministry of Education. The funding is released through the regional offices for education.

According to law, hate speech, including instances motivated by religious hatred, is punishable by up to four years in prison. This law also applies to denial of genocide or crimes against humanity.

All missionaries and other foreign religious workers from countries that are not European Union members or signatories to the Schengen Agreement must apply for special religious activity visas before arriving in the country. An applicant must attach an invitation letter from his or her religious group to the application.

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

## **Government Practices**

Although the government generally does not enforce offenses of blasphemy, local leaders called for enforcement of the law as part of a larger effort for measures to promote “civility.” In July the city council in the small northern town of Saonara enacted a local law prohibiting 75 types of “uncivil” behaviors, including blasphemy “against any faith or religion” and using foul language in public. Those found guilty of blasphemy face a fine up to 400 euros (\$450).

According to leaders of the Rome Islamic Cultural Center, the government again did not make significant progress on an accord despite ongoing dialogue with Muslim religious communities. On May 4, Catholic daily newspaper *Avvenire* reported sociologist Maurizio Ambrosini of Milan University commenting on the lack of an agreement between the government and the country’s Muslim communities, stating, “In several cities Muslims cannot access legal and proper places of worship and meet in semi-clandestine temporary venues difficult to monitor.” The MOI continued to only legally recognize as a religious entity the Cultural Islamic Center of Italy, in charge of the Great Mosque of Rome. The government recognized other Muslim groups only as nonprofit organizations.

On July 30, the government signed an accord with the Church of England that at year’s end was awaiting parliamentary approval.

On July 31, the Council of Ministers legally recognized the following religious entities: ISKCON, UCP, the Baha’i Community of Italy, and Ananda Marga Pracaraka Samgha. The Office of the President approved the recognitions on August 8. Legal recognition by the government is one of the steps required before formally applying for an accord.

On October 30, the senate approved a proposal from Senator for Life and Holocaust survivor Liliana Segre to establish an extraordinary committee to fight intolerance, anti-Semitism, and hate crimes; however, 98 center-right senators abstained in the vote. Segre, who was expelled from school for her religion in 1938 and sent to Auschwitz in 1943, stated, “There is a mounting wave of racism and intolerance that should be stopped in all possible ways.” Lega leader Salvini urged the far right to abstain on the vote stating, “We are against racism, violence, hate, and anti-Semitism, but we don’t want somebody on the left to stigmatize as racism something that for us is belief and right: [the principle of] Italian first.” In November the Milan prefect granted Segre a police escort after she received a wave of threats and anti-Semitic hate speech on social media, including statements of Holocaust denial. An Italian prosecutor opened an investigation of the threats.

According to press reports, on November 28, police detained 19 suspects linked to a group seeking to build a new Nazi party in the country. Media reported some members of the group, which calls itself the “Partito Nazionale Socialista Italiano dei Lavoratori” (Italian National Socialist Workers' Party), had weapons, access to explosives, and conducted recruitment activities on social media. The group frequently engaged in hate speech against Jews and center-left politicians, including Laura Boldrini and Emanuele Fiano, the latter a prominent Jewish MP of the Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, or PD). Prosecutors in Caltanissetta, Sicily, led the countrywide investigation of the network through the end of the year.

In June a Palermo principal of a public school reported its art teacher, Gino Giannetti, to national authorities for Holocaust denial under a 2016 anti-Semitism law. Giannetti reportedly told his students concentration camps contained “swimming pools for Jews’ amusement” and said he doubted the veracity of Holocaust accounts. A female student reported receiving anti-Semitic Facebook messages from Giannetti. In a June 29 Facebook post Giannetti denied being an anti-Semite, saying he had exposed students to factual accounts of the Holocaust in class.

According to the FIEO’s legal counsel, because relations between the government and the country’s Jews are governed by an accord between the state and UCEI, the UCEI defined the terms of Jewish identity and practice in the country. The counsel said the growth of progressive Judaism in the country had encountered resistance from the largely orthodox-Jewish UCEI. For example, progressive Jewish rabbis were not recognized by the UCEI and were therefore ineligible for Italian visas and residence permits, and they could not perform marriages having civil validity.

Regional governments and Muslim religious authorities recognized five mosques, one each in Colle Val d’Elsa in Tuscany, Milan, Rome, and two in Emilia-Romagna Region, in Ravenna and Forli, respectively. In addition, there were many sites recognized as places of worship by local governments but not considered full-fledged mosques by Muslim authorities because they lacked minarets or other key architectural features.

There were 800-1,200 unofficial, informal places of worship for Muslims, known colloquially as “garage” mosques. According to the press, authorities allowed most of these unofficial sites to operate, but they did not officially recognize them as places of worship.

According to media reports, Muslims continued to encounter difficulties acquiring permission from local governments to construct mosques. Local officials, who were entitled to introduce rules on planning applicable to places of worship, continued to cite lack of zoning plans allowing for the establishment of places of worship on specific sites as a reason for denying construction permits.

On May 19, under a legal provision entitling national and local governments to purchase certain types of facilities as “cultural assets,” the Lombardy regional administration and its governor announced plans and allocated funds to buy a chapel building from a Muslim association that planned to convert it into a mosque, according to the daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. The Association of Muslims of Bergamo, Lombardy Region, bought the chapel at auction in October 2018 from the main public hospital in Bergamo owned by regional authorities. The building had initially been assigned to a Christian Orthodox group as a place of worship but was not being used as such when it was sold. After the Association of Muslims of Bergamo bought the former chapel, the governor, a member of the League Party, required the association to sell it back under a law allowing public authorities to buy assets deemed to be of cultural significance. Later, the governor said he would allow the Christian Orthodox community to use the church building because it would not require any structural changes.

In April police in Rome closed the Masjeed-e-Rome Mosque and cultural center in Topignattara, a neighborhood with a sizable Bangladeshi Muslim community, citing administrative and criminal violations. On May 6, the president of the local association for Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Indian Muslims Dhumcatu, Siddique Nure Alam, said the city did not provide the mosque due warning to address violations raised in the closure order, as the city had done in the past.

In April the Como City Council refused a local Turkish association use of public space for Ramadan iftars. Vice Mayor Alessandra Locatelli, a member of the League Party, said in a statement, “[Islam] does not respect the fundamental rights of our society and culture,” and that “men and women are not equal” in the Islamic faith.

In June the Lombardy Regional Administrative Court ordered the closing of an unlicensed mosque and cultural center in a former workshop located in the courtyard of an apartment building in Milan, rejecting a petition submitted by the Sri Lanka Muslim community that would allow the area to be used as a place of worship. The cultural center opened in 2015 without a regular permit to use the



workshop as a place of worship. The court ruled that changing the use of a property would require a permit issued by the city administration.

In September the Court of Cassation in Milan upheld a six-month prison sentence and 9,000 euro (\$10,100) fine against a representative of the Bangladesh Cultural and Welfare Association, who was charged with violating city regulations by contracting a construction company to convert a storage site into a place of worship without prior approval. By law, no appeal was possible. This was the first time the court considered it as a criminal matter; in previous cases this type of violation generally incurred administrative penalties.

The Islamic association in Pisa appealed to the Tuscany regional administrative tribunal a September 10 decision of the city council to amend the zoning plan preventing the association from building a mosque on a piece of land it had bought. In July the Pisa Islamic Association had organized a sit-in in the town square after the Pisa City Council blocked the construction of the mosque and debated the possibility of turning the planned site into a parking area. City officials stated the lot was not large enough for the planned building. Imam Mohammad Khalil said the city council had always been hostile to the mosque and noted the city government had not met with the association since August 2018.

On December 5, the Constitutional Court ruled that two provisions of a law adopted by the Lombardy Regional Council in 2015 were unconstitutional because "... freedom of religion includes the freedom of worship, authorities cannot obstruct the establishment of religious sites." The two measures the court considered unconstitutional required a specific procedure for obtaining authorization to establish all places of worship regardless of their impact on the sites and the discretionary authority of local authorities to adopt a zoning plan that would reflect their decisions to permit or prohibit the establishment of new places of worship. The president of the House of Islamic Culture of Milan, Benaissa Bounegab, characterized the ruling as "a step toward normality," while the president of the National Evangelical Conference, Riccardo Tocco, noted that based on regional law, 27 places of worship had been closed down; however, the decision opened up negotiations for a new policy with the local authorities. In October 2018, the Regional Administrative Court of Lombardy had accepted an appeal by the Muslim community of Varese of a denial of a permit to build a mosque in Sesto Calende, requesting the Constitutional Court re-examine the constitutionality of the 2015 regional law.

According to Catholic daily newspaper *Avvenire*, on December 5, the Council of State (the highest administrative court) upheld the March 2018 ruling of the Regional Administrative Court of Lombardy annulling the 2017 decision of the city council of Sesto San Giovanni, near Milan. The ruling blocked the construction of an Islamic cultural center and mosque on the grounds the center did not comply with all the requirements agreed to by the city council and the Muslim community. The president of the local Islamic cultural center, Gueddouda Boubakeur, said, “The ruling guarantees the right to worship that is a basic need, not a luxury.” In April 2018 local authorities had appealed the regional court’s ruling to the Regional Administrative Court.

On October 11, the Milan City Council approved a zoning plan authorizing two Buddhist temples, seven evangelical Christian and Baptist churches, three Orthodox churches, four Islamic places of worship (a designation determined by Islamic authorities in the country), and seven Catholic churches. Only places of worship authorized in the zoning plan have legal status; Milan has 25 Islamic places of worship and approximately 100 evangelical Protestant churches. Muslim leader and member of the municipal council Sumaya Abdel Qader called the decision “a historic step, even if not fully satisfactory, for the rights to worship of all minorities.” She noted that the center-right opposition in the municipal council had requested additional requirements that only applied to Muslim communities, but its proposal was rejected as inconsistent with the regional law on zoning.

Muslim associations said in Lombardy dedicated areas for Muslim burials in cemeteries were insufficient to meet the needs of the communities.

In February the League Party, other center-right parties, and the Five Star Movement (M5S) members of the Lombardy Regional Council approved an amendment that negated a provision of the 2009 funerary law compelling private associations to allow burials in their allocated spaces in public cemeteries regardless of sex or religion. League Party member Andrea Monti sponsored the bill and said the law would stop “predominantly Muslim ghettoization” of cemeteries. Muslim leaders said the law likely would limit cemetery space for Islamic burials.

On July 4, the council of the Commune of San Donato Milanese, a Milan suburb, reserved 25 spaces for Islamic burials in the Monticello public cemetery. Muslim leaders stated this was an insufficient number of spots for the Muslim community.

Local governments continued to rent out public land at discounted rates to religious groups, usually Catholic, for constructing places of worship. Government funding also helped preserve and maintain historic places of worship, which were almost all Catholic.

Politicians from several parties, including League, Brothers of Italy (FdI), and Casa Pound, a far-right political association established in 2003 and named after the anti-Semitic poet Ezra Pound, again made statements critical of Islam. In March OCOII President Lafram wrote to then deputy prime minister and interior minister Salvini, leader of the League Party, requesting increased protection of mosques following the March 15 terrorist attacks on a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand. According to press reports, Salvini publicly condemned the New Zealand attacks as “odious,” but also stated, “The only extremism that merits attention is the Islamic kind.” Lafram also told the general assembly in Bologna that Islamic communities were not able to open “dignified” places of worship and said it was “inconceivable” that Muslims had to worship in “basements.”

On January 21, M5S Senator Elio Lanutti referenced the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and an online anti-Semitic article in a tweet that said, “Even today [the Rothschild family] controls the banking system.” PD party leader Nicola Zingaretti condemned the statement on Twitter and PD Senate Vice President Ettore Rosato requested M5S to expel Lanutti. In a Facebook post, M5S party leader and then deputy prime minister Luigi di Maio wrote, “On behalf of the M5S I distance myself from the comments made by Senator Lanutti.” President of the Jewish Community Ruth Dureghello reported Lanutti to the Rome Public Prosecutor’s office, which opened an investigation in February.

Brothers of Italy party leader Giorgia Meloni criticized a U.S. Jewish philanthropist for his contributions to European election campaigns. In a March 24 tweet, she called him a “usurer,” a term with anti-Semitic connotations in Italian.

In April a Muslim woman, Nasry Assiya, ran as M5S candidate for Montoro City Council. Media reported Brothers of Italy Senator Antonio Iannone said her candidacy was an endorsement of “cultural expressions distant from our West” such as sharia, child marriage, and polygamy. Online comments protested her wearing a veil in official campaign photographs.

In May then Ministry of the Interior undersecretary Nicola Molteni stated he opposed the Lombardy Regional Court’s decision to permit prayer in a space owned by Asslam, an Islamic Cultural Association in Cantu, Lombardy Region.

Molteni cited an MOI April 30 directive that warned mass migration and Islamic cultural centers were potential vectors for extremism, citing this concern as justification for his opposition to allowing prayer space. Molteni also made statements calling for the suspension of all mosque construction until the government approved an accord with Muslim leaders.

On April 9, the Council of the State, the country's highest administrative court, upheld the city of Genoa's order to remove a billboard erected by the Union of Atheists, Agnostics, and Rationalists protesting laws allowing doctors to refuse to conduct medical procedures for reasons of religion or conscience. The city said the billboard violated religious liberty and personal expression.

In June the Islamic Cultural Center of Bologna held the first Muslim summer camp in the country. According to the press, League Counselor of the Commune Umberto Bosco said the camp was the start of "auto-ghettoization," and political party Italian Force (Forza Italia) parliamentarian Galeazzo Bignami stated, "Wake up Bologna, before it's too late." The presidents of two Christian associations, Christian Associations of Italian Workers and Christian Action, made public statements supporting the camp.

On October 6, the New Force Party (Forza Nuova), commonly identified as far right, held a protest in Bologna against a local decree granting a Muslim association the right to use a piece of land for 99 years on which it had already established an Islamic cultural center. Protestors carried banners reading, "Christian Bologna, never Muslim" and "No Mosque."

Amnesty International reported 79 tweets from the country's political party leaders during the April 15-May 24 European parliamentary election campaign were anti-Islamic, representing 0.9 percent of the tweets.

On January 24, Holocaust Remembrance Day, President Sergio Mattarella hosted a ceremony to commemorate the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp and stressed the need to remain vigilant, stating, "The evils of Auschwitz and the Shoah can come back as a lethal virus." He concluded, "We should monitor and fight all forms of racism."

On October 30, parliament approved the establishment of a parliamentary committee to investigate intolerance, racism, and anti-Semitism proposed by Italian-Jewish Holocaust survivor and Senator for Life Liliana Segre, modeled on

the Council of Europe's No Hate Parliamentary Alliance that would replace the now-suspended Jo Cox Commission.

In November Rome Mayor Virginia Raggi held a contest among high school students to rename two streets originally named after two 1930s fascist-era scientists who promoted anti-Semitic race laws. The streets were renamed in honor of scientists from the same era who were Jewish or who opposed fascism.

In November the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan announced it would establish a project to monitor anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and other types of hate speech based on religious and cultural affiliations. According to the university, the project will be partially funded by the National Office Against Racial Discrimination and will work with CDEC and the Italian Young Muslim Association to identify and analyze trends in hate speech. While the CDEC previously primarily focused on trends in anti-Semitism and online hate speech targeting Jews, this project will be the first independent research center to track and report on trends in hate speech against Muslims and anti-Muslim sentiment.

In May the Supreme Court upheld a lower court ruling that affirmed the rights of patients to grant power of attorney to an agent who will uphold the patient's decision to refuse a blood transfusion, in accordance with the position advocated by Jehovah's Witnesses.

On June 23, Badar Eddine Mennani became the first Muslim national police officer (*carabiniere*) which media said was a sign of increased government openness to diversity.

The city of Rome continued to foster collaboration among the Jewish community, Waldensian Evangelical Church, Islamic Cultural Center of Italy, and Italian Buddhist Union to promote better knowledge of different faiths, primarily among students. Rome officials and leaders of these religious groups signed an agreement on interfaith cooperation in 2001. During the year, religious leaders organized several cultural events and presentations in public schools to increase awareness of religious diversity.

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

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

The CDEC recorded 251 incidents of anti-Semitism over the year, compared with 181 in 2018. Reports of anti-Semitic incidents published on CDEC's website included discrimination, verbal harassment, particularly at soccer matches and other sporting events, online hate speech, and derogatory graffiti. Internet and social media hate speech and bullying were the most common forms of anti-Semitic incidents, according to CDEC, which continued to operate an anti-Semitism hotline for victims of, and witnesses to, anti-Semitic incidents.

On March 21, a woman forcibly removed a Muslim woman's hijab on a public bus in Turin and taunted her, according to press reports. Seeing the Muslim woman was uncomfortable sitting near a dog on the bus, the woman also reportedly said, "You're afraid of a dog but not to blow yourself up." Other passengers reportedly voiced their support for the Muslim woman, chanting, "We [are all] Italy."

On September 20, the Bangladeshi community organized a demonstration to protest racism and anti-Muslim sentiment in Naples following an incident in August in which attackers threw stones at two Bangladeshi street vendors. Demonstrators told media they wanted more protection and said they felt unsafe in Naples and throughout the country.

According to NGO Italian Observatory on Human Rights, 76 percent of tweets (15,196) sent in the country about Jews during the European parliamentary election campaign were negative. The NGO Vox Diritti reported 15,196 tweets containing anti-Semitic messages between March and May compared with 26,783 in the same period of 2018. Many anti-Semitic tweets came from Rome, Milan, and Turin. The NGO said spikes in tweet traffic correlated with national media stories involving Jews, including the harassment of journalist Gad Lerner at a New Force rally in Prato March 23 (700 tweets), and Georgia Meloni's "usurer" tweet March 27 (approximately 500 tweets). The largest spike (approximately 3,150 tweets) occurred on April 16, the day media reported a Ferrara public middle school student threatened to "reopen Auschwitz" to a Jewish classmate student. The principal told a local newspaper he would review the incident with teachers. Jewish Community of Ferrara President Andrea Persano told the Association of Italian Journalists anti-Semitism was on the rise. The same organization said 74 percent of all tweets (22,532) regarding Muslims were negative during the same period, a 6.9 percent increase from 2018. Most anti-Muslim tweets originated in Turin, Bologna, Milan, and Venice.

According to a 2018 Pew Research Center study, 76 percent of Italians supported some restrictions or a total ban on female Muslim religious clothing, including the

hijab. According to a 2018 Pew Research Center survey on “Being a Christian in Western Europe,” 53 percent of respondents in the country agreed with the statement that Islam is “fundamentally incompatible with [Italy’s] culture and values.” Sixty-three percent of practicing Christians in the country concurred.

According to a 2018 survey from the National Statistics Agency of Italy, 18 percent of second-generation Muslims (20 percent of men and 18 percent of women) experienced faith-based workplace discrimination. Of immigrants arriving in the country before 12 years of age, Muslim respondents stated they experienced religious discrimination more frequently than other kinds of discrimination (20 percent) compared with the Christian Orthodox (16 percent) and Catholic (14 percent) faiths. Twenty-nine percent of respondents belonging to other Christian denominations and Jews reported they most frequently experienced societal discrimination for not being Catholic.

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, 48 percent of respondents believed discrimination on the basis of religion or belief was widespread in Italy, while 47 percent said it was rare; 81 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, 92 percent said they would be comfortable working closely with a Christian, and 91 percent said they would be with an atheist, 86 percent with a Jew, 83 percent with a Buddhist, and 79 percent with a Muslim. Asked how they would feel if their child were in a “love relationship” with an individual belonging to various groups, 90 percent said they would be comfortable if the partner were Christian, 91 percent if atheist, 82 percent if Jewish, 77 percent if Buddhist, and 66 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, 58 percent of residents believed anti-Semitism was a problem in Italy, and 38 percent believed it had stayed the same over the previous five years. The percentage who believed that anti-Semitism was a problem in nine different categories was as follows: Holocaust denial, 61 percent; on the internet, 59 percent; anti-Semitic graffiti or vandalism, 60 percent; expression of hostility or threats against Jews in public places, 61 percent; desecration of Jewish cemeteries, 59 percent; physical attacks against Jews, 60 percent; anti-Semitism in schools and universities, 58 percent;

anti-Semitism in political life, 50 percent; and anti-Semitism in the media, 53 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: 51 percent that Jews are more loyal to Israel than to Italy; 31 percent that Jews have too much power in the business world; and 45 percent that Jews talk too much about the Holocaust.

The press reported examples of anti-Semitic graffiti and posters, including depictions of swastikas on walls, anti-Semitic stereotypes, and praise of neo-Nazi groups in Rome, Milan, Pisa and other cities.

On May 30, media reported unknown individuals in Rome's former Jewish ghetto defaced a *stolperstein* or "stumbling block," an engraved brass plaque placed on a cobblestone in front of the original place of residence of Holocaust victims. Unidentified individuals defaced the plaque with a sticker in German that said, "A murderer always returns to the scene of the crime." Jewish community leaders said a police surveillance camera protecting the site was disabled before the incident.

On August 12 and 21, members of animal activist groups Animal Front and Animal Revolution protested outside a halal butcher shop during Eid al-Adha in the town of Robecca sul Navaglio in Lombardy. Media reported protesters called Muslims "assassins" and encouraged Muslims to "sacrifice their kids" instead of animals. Photographs from the demonstration showed banners reading "bloodthirsty Muslims."

On January 14, in Rome, the Church of Jesus Christ inaugurated its first temple and cultural center in the country.

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

Representatives from the embassy and consulates general met with representatives of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Ministry of Interior, and local government officials in Rome, Sicily, Naples, Milan, Turin, Bologna, Florence, Modena, Reggio Emilia, and Pisa to discuss the establishment of new places of worship requested by religious groups, relations between the government and



Muslim religious communities, anti-Semitic incidents, and assistance in tracing the contents of the Jewish communal library of Rome, which the Nazis looted in 1943. During these meetings, embassy and government officials also discussed the integration of asylum seekers and migrants, many of whom were Muslim, Orthodox, or Hindu.

The embassy and consulates general and visiting Department of State officials met with the Muslim and Jewish communities to stress the importance of interfaith dialogue and to share U.S. best practices regarding education, integration of second-generation Muslims, and social media networking.

In May the embassy and consulate general in Milan hosted iftars that included representatives from Muslim communities, government officials, and youth leaders promoting interfaith dialogue.

Embassy and consulates general officials continued to meet with representatives of civil society groups, including Caritas, Sant'Egidio, and Anolf, as well as Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish leaders in cities throughout the country. U.S. officials urged the social inclusion of immigrants, many of whom were Muslim, and dialogue among various religious groups, and monitored groups' ability to practice their religion freely.

The Consulate General in Milan awarded a grant to a Muslim youth group in Turin to support a three-day workshop to foster greater community dialogue among persons of different religions and respect for religious diversity. The event was hosted in an Islamic cultural center located in one of the city's most religiously diverse neighborhoods and included youth trainers from the Muslim and Catholic communities.

The embassy and consulates continued to use their social media platforms to acknowledge major Christian, Muslim, and Jewish holidays as well as amplify initiatives that promote religious freedom and interfaith dialogue at the local level. They also retweeted Department of State statements and tweets on the International Religious Freedom Act and related topics.

Embassy officials met with the president of UCEI and Rome Jewish community leaders to discuss how to support their efforts to counter anti-Semitism among far-right groups and civil society.

The Ambassador attended a November 21 ceremony led by Rome Mayor Raggi of the M5S to change the names of two Rome streets named after fascist-era scientists who signed the “Race Manifesto” of 1938 that became the basis of Mussolini’s Race Laws. Also present were the UCEI chair, the president of Rome’s Jewish community, and the Israeli ambassador.