

ARGENTINA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and laws provide for freedom of religion and the right to profess freely one's faith. The constitution provides that the government will grant the Roman Catholic Church preferential legal status, but there is no official state religion. By law, public schools are secular, but private schools run by registered religious institutions are eligible for government subsidies. The government continued its investigation into the 1994 terrorist bombing of the Argentina Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA) community center. In December a federal judge indicted former President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner on charges of "aggravated concealment" for allegedly attempting to cover up possible Iranian involvement in the AMIA bombing. In September Vice President Gabriela Michetti at the UN General Assembly urged international support for the country's demands that Iran cooperate in the continuing investigation of the AMIA attack and the 1992 terrorist bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires. On September 20, the Gendarmerie completed a forensic report concluding that Alberto Nisman, the special prosecutor in charge of the AMIA bombing investigation, was murdered in 2015. In July the Secretariat of Worship of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) submitted a draft religious freedom bill to the lower house of congress. The legislation would eliminate the requirement that non-Catholic religious groups register with the government to receive the same benefits accorded to the Catholic Church, allow for conscientious objection based on religious grounds, and protect religious dress, religious holidays, and days of worship. There was considerable debate regarding the bill within the government and society at large, which continued throughout the year.

In May several human rights organizations, including the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, criticized the Catholic Church for organizing an event calling for reconciliation between relatives of victims killed by the former military governments and 1970s-1980s military regime officers. Interreligious organizations such as Religions for Peace continued to exemplify the value of religious diversity and to take joint action in addressing common societal challenges. These groups worked to increase opportunities for multireligious action on common societal challenges. Jewish and Muslim community representatives also conducted various cultural events to promote interreligious harmony, including a "hummus festival" that attracted hundreds of participants held in Buenos Aires in September.

Embassy officials met with senior government officials, including with the secretary of worship, officials in the MFA's human rights office and in the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, to discuss ways to promote religious diversity and counteract religious discrimination. Embassy outreach efforts included regular meetings with religious and community leaders to discuss interfaith collaboration and to encourage the increased participation of religious communities in embassy-sponsored scholarship and educational programs.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 44.3 million (July 2017 estimate). Religious demographic and statistical data from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), research centers, and religious leaders vary. According to a 2014 Pew Research Center study, Roman Catholics constitute 71 percent of the population, with Protestants at 15 percent, and atheists, agnostics, and those with no religious affiliation at 11 percent. Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutherans, Methodists, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) together total 3 percent of the population. The Jewish population is approximately 250,000-300,000, and the Muslim population is estimated to be between 450,000 and one million. Evangelical Protestant communities, particularly Pentecostals, are growing in size, but no reliable statistics are available. There are also a small numbers of Bahais and adherents to indigenous religions in the country; however, no data is available on the size of these groups.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the right to profess, teach, and practice freely one's faith. It attests the support of the federal government for "the Roman Catholic Apostolic faith," but the Supreme Court has ruled that it is not an official or state religion.

The government provides the Catholic Church with tax-exempt subsidies, institutional privileges such as school subsidies, significant autonomy for parochial schools, and licensing preferences for radio frequencies. The law does not require the Catholic Church to register with the Secretariat of Worship in the MFA. Registration is not compulsory for other religious groups, but registered groups receive the same status and fiscal benefits as the Catholic Church, including tax-

exempt status, visas for religious officials, and the ability to hold public activities. To register religious groups must have a place of worship, an organizational charter, and an ordained clergy, among other requirements.

Registration is not required for private religious services, such as those held in homes, but is sometimes required to conduct activities in public spaces pursuant to local regulations. City authorities may require groups to obtain permits to use public parks for public activities, and they may require religious groups to be registered with the secretariat to receive the permit. Once registered, an organization must report to the secretariat any significant changes or decisions made regarding its leadership, governing structure, size of membership, and the address of its headquarters.

The mandatory curriculum in public schools is secular by law. Students may request elective courses of instruction in the religion of their choice in some public schools, which may be conducted in the school or at a religious institution. Many Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious groups operate private schools, which receive financial support contingent on registration with the government.

Foreign religious officials of registered religious groups may apply for a specific visa category to enter the country. The length of the visa varies depending on the purpose of the travel. Foreign missionaries of registered religious groups must apply to the Secretariat of Worship, which in turn notifies immigration authorities to request the issuance of the appropriate documents.

The board of the National Institute against Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Racism (INADI), a government agency under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, includes representatives of the major religious groups. INADI investigates suspected and reported incidents of discrimination based on religion. INADI is not authorized to enforce recommendations or findings, but its reports may be used as evidence in civil court. The agency also supports victims of religious discrimination and promotes proactive measures to prevent discrimination. INADI produces and distributes publications to promote religious tolerance.

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

Government Practices

In December a federal judge indicted former President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner on “aggravated concealment” charges, seeking her arrest on allegations she had covered up possible Iranian involvement in the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center in Buenos Aires. The court also requested the lifting of her immunity from prosecution as a sitting senator. Authorities also conducted raids linked to the case and arrested three of Fernandez de Kirchner’s former associates, including her former foreign minister, Hector Timerman. Fernandez de Kirchner and 14 others had been called to testify in October.

In September the gendarmerie (national police) completed a forensic report supporting the hypothesis that Nisman, the lead federal prosecutor responsible for the investigation of the 1994 AMIA bombing, was murdered in 2015. Nisman was discovered dead in his apartment from a gunshot to the head. Previous analyses had maintained that there was insufficient evidence to prove foul play. On December 26, a federal judge ruled Nisman was murdered that Nisman, the lead federal prosecutor responsible for the investigation of the 1994 AMIA bombing, was murdered and charged Nisman’s former assistant, Diego Lagomarsino, as an accessory to his death.

The administration of President Mauricio Macri administration also publicly expressed its commitment to transparency and pursuing justice in the investigation of the 1992 terrorist bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires.

In July the secretary of worship submitted a draft religious freedom bill to the lower house of congress that would eliminate the requirement that non-Catholic religious groups register with the government to receive the same benefits accorded to the Catholic Church, allow for conscientious objection on the basis of religion, and protect religious dress, religious holidays, and days of worship. While President Macri, the Permanent Commission of the Argentine Catholic Bishops, and some other religious groups supported the draft bill, others opposed it. Catholic Archbishop of La Plata Reuben Aguer said the draft bill challenged the Catholic Church’s “elevated status” in the country. The country’s branch of Amnesty International also opposed the draft bill, stating it could allow doctors to refuse to provide contraception, judges to refuse to officiate at same-sex marriages, and teachers to refuse to teach evolutionary theory because of their religious beliefs. There was no action on the draft legislation by year’s end.

According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, on October 22, approximately 20 individuals appearing to be local police officers harassed attendees of the Pueblo Grande Baptist Church and threatened them with arrest. The officers left after

local Gendarmerie officers protecting the church intervened and demanded the individuals show identification.

Jewish groups said relations with the government continued to improve under the Macri administration. The groups said the relationship had transformed from one of distrust to one of close collaboration, particularly in light of what they stated was the administration's strong commitment to resolve the Nisman murder and to pursue justice in its investigations of the 1994 AMIA attack and the 1992 terrorist bombing of the Israeli embassy.

Secretary of Worship Ambassador Santiago de Estado, Undersecretary for Worship Ambassador Alfredo Abriani, the Buenos Aires director general for religious affairs, and other government representatives continued to host and attend religious freedom conferences, interreligious dialogues, rabbinical ordinations, and Rosh Hashanah, Eid al-Adha, and Eid al-Fitr celebrations, as well as other religious activities, including those held by Protestant and Orthodox churches. In November the city of Ushuaia hosted the Second World Congress on Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue, aimed at promoting interreligious dialogue and understanding.

INADI continued to spearhead education campaigns directed at public and private schools to facilitate a better understanding among youth of religious tolerance and respect for diversity. In March INADI announced a new partnership with UNICEF to counter cyberbullying, including religious discrimination.

In June police in Buenos Aires seized a large cache of Nazi-era objects, including instruments used in Nazi medical experiments, in a private house. The minister of security stated it was the largest seizure of Nazi objects in the country's history. Police identified several suspects; however, there were no arrests by year's end.

In July the MFA delivered approximately 40,000 World War II-era documents to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, including diplomatic correspondence from Argentina's embassies in Europe, visa applications from Jewish refugees and applicants, and newspaper articles. In September the government presented approximately 140,000 World War II-era documents to Israel during a visit by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On March 8, individuals protesting the Catholic Church's stance on abortion set fire to the Catholic Cathedral of Buenos Aires, causing property damage. On October 15, a group protesting the Catholic Church's policies on abortion and prostitution set fire and damaged property at a church in the town of Resistencia, Province of Chaco. Two bystanders received minor injuries when attempting to intervene.

In May several human rights organizations, including the Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, an organization of mothers whose children disappeared during military rule in the 1970s and 1980s), criticized the Catholic Church for organizing an event calling for reconciliation between relatives of victims killed by the former military governments and 1970s-1980s military regime officers. The human rights organizations said the event, organized by the Argentine Bishops' Conference, was an attempt to deflect the Catholic Church's perceived complacency with the military government's repressive actions against its opponents.

On September 11, anti-Semitic graffiti appeared around Buenos Aires, including on the walls of the Israeli Embassy, protesting the visit of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu.

In November a host of the national television show "Us in the Morning" was fired after she posted anti-Semitic comments on her Twitter account. INADI published a statement repudiating the host's "racist" declarations.

The Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations (DAIA) documented 351 reported complaints of anti-Semitism in 2016, compared with 478 reported complaints of anti-Semitism recorded in 2015. DAIA continued to track complaints of verbal, physical, and online harassment or anti-Semitic remarks, as well as anti-Semitic language in public spaces, including social and traditional media and during demonstrations and protests.

Interreligious organizations groups such as Religions for Peace, whose members included Catholic, Protestant, evangelical Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Bahai, and indigenous religious groups, continued to exemplify the value of religious diversity. These groups worked to increase opportunities for multireligious action on common societal challenges.

Jewish and Muslim community representatives conducted various cultural events to foster closer community ties, including a “hummus festival” held in Buenos Aires in September.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with government representatives, including with the Secretary of Worship, the MFA’s human rights office, and the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, to discuss ways to promote religious diversity and interfaith cooperation. In meetings with government officials at the national and Buenos Aires city levels, the Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials discussed tolerance, the country’s interfaith movement, and measures to counteract religious discrimination. In meetings with the Secretary of Worship, embassy officials emphasized the importance of religious freedom and interfaith dialogue, as well as discussing the status of the AMIA case and ways to counter anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment.

Embassy outreach included regular meetings with religious and community leaders, including members of interreligious organizations. In these meetings, embassy officials discussed the status of religious freedom and interfaith dialogue, as well as the conditions and integration of refugees, the status of the AMIA case, and ways to counter anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment and promote religious tolerance. Embassy officials regularly attended conferences, observances, and commemorations organized by religious groups and NGOs, including DAIA, AMIA, the Islamic Center of Argentina, the Islamic Center for Peace, the Evangelical Church of Argentina, and the United Religious Initiative. Embassy officials continued to encourage the increased participation of religious communities in embassy-sponsored scholarship and educational programs. Embassy officials supported interfaith cooperation and universal respect for freedom of religion through both public statements and social media campaigns.