

KUWAIT 2023 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

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, if such practice is in accordance with established customs and does not conflict with public policy or morals. The constitution states that sharia is a main source of legislation and that all individuals are equal before the law, regardless of religion. The law prohibits the defamation of the three Abrahamic faiths (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity), publication or broadcast of material the government deems offensive to religious groups, and practices the government finds inconsistent with Islamic law.

In August, the National Assembly approved a new law allowing the cancellation of lifetime bans on voting or running for office imposed in 2016 on Kuwaitis convicted of insulting God, or the prophets, if the perpetrators complete a period of legal rehabilitation. In July, state media reported that Kuwait participated alongside the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in preparing a draft resolution presented to the UN Human Rights Council that addressed religious hatred and desecration of holy sites and objects. Kuwait’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations told state media that the resolution aimed to eliminate all types of religious hatred based on discrimination, hostility, or violence. The government continued to appoint and pay the salaries of Sunni imams and to provide the recommended full basic text for weekly sermons preached at Sunni mosques. The government did not exercise the same oversight of Shia imams, although it paid the salaries of some Shia imams and mosque staff.

Minority religious groups said they could worship in private spaces without government interference if they did not disturb their neighbors or violate laws regarding assembly and restrictions on proselytizing. Some minority

religious groups reported a continued lack of facilities for worship and difficulty obtaining permission to construct new ones as well as problems obtaining sufficient visas for clergy or visiting staff. Authorities did not accredit any religious schools. Shia leaders continued to report widespread discrimination in clerical and public sector employment. The Ministry of Education (MOE) continued to censor materials referring to the Holocaust or Israel, encouraging students to study the Holocaust on their own using open-sourced education materials, such as the internet and news media. Individuals continued to face societal pressure against converting from Islam, and some who had converted when outside the country said their families harassed them as a result.

During a roundtable discussion with representatives from non-Abrahamic faith communities, participants noted that Kuwaiti officials generally exhibited tolerance towards the practice of their religions. Notwithstanding, they expressed that the current administrative obstacles and burdens placed on these communities had led to a less favorable situation compared to the past. One leader of a nonregistered church said his church wanted to register with the government but that there was no publicly available information on how to do so. Religious communities that are not registered by the government cannot legally sponsor their clergy, officially open places of worship, or establish bank accounts, among other essential activities required for operation. Church leaders estimated there were approximately over 100 unregistered churches operating in the country. Antisemitic stereotypes often appeared in the media, as did statements critical of some Islamic views. In October, 45 of the National Assembly's 50 members released a public, antisemitic statement urging countries not to normalize relations with Israel because "Jews usually renege on their promises."

At a December roundtable, embassy officials met with registered church leaders to discuss trends in the country regarding religious freedom. In September, embassy officials met with Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs (MAIA) representatives regarding the ministry's efforts to promote religious tolerance, its relationship with religious minority groups, and the activities of its Center for the Promotion of Moderation. Embassy officials also met

often with Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Public Authority of Manpower (PAM) representatives and raised administrative problems that several churches faced. In a meeting with the Director of the Office of International Religious Freedom, MAIA senior officials emphasized that all persons residing in Kuwait had the freedom to practice their faith with tolerance and dignity. They said the Council of Ministers had assigned the government to create a unified department dedicated to managing administrative affairs for minority faith groups. Hotels and businesses continued to mark non-Islamic holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali. Media published information regarding celebrations of non-Islamic religious holidays, such as Christmas.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.2 million (midyear 2022). U.S. government figures also cite the Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI), a local government agency, which reports that the country's total population was 4.8 million in 2023. As of June, PACI reported there were 1.5 million citizens and 3.3 million noncitizens. PACI estimates 74.7 percent of citizens and noncitizens are Muslims. The national census does not distinguish between Shia and Sunni Muslims. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the media estimate 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). PACI estimates 16.6 percent of citizens and noncitizens are Christian and 8.7 percent of citizens and noncitizens are members of non-Abrahamic faiths. Community leaders indicated there are 285 Christian citizens and a handful of Baha'i citizens. There are no known Jewish citizens, according to PACI.

According to information from PACI released in June, approximately 62.7 percent of the expatriate population is Muslim, 24.5 percent Christian, and 12.8 percent from non-Abrahamic faiths. Contacts in various noncitizen communities state that approximately 5 percent of the expatriate Muslim population is Shia, while Hindus and Buddhist account for most of the non-

Abrahamic faith population. Informal estimates by members of different religious groups indicate there are approximately 250,000 Hindus, 100,000 Buddhists, 25,000 Bohra Muslims, 10,000 to 12,000 Sikhs, 7,000 Druze, and 400 Baha'is.

While some geographic areas may have higher concentrations of Sunnis or Shias, the two groups are generally distributed uniformly throughout most of the country. Contacts in the Shia community state that approximately 60 percent of the Bidoon (long-time stateless resident) population is Shia.

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, if 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 Amir shall be Muslim (the Amir and ruling family are Sunni) and the state shall safeguard the heritage of Islam.

The law prohibits defamation of the three Abrahamic religions and denigration of Islamic, Jewish, and Christian religious figures acknowledged within accepted Islamic orthodoxy (e.g., prophets mentioned in the Quran and wives and companions of the Prophet Muhammad) and prescribes a punishment of up to 10 years in prison for each offense. The law bans certain topics from publication and public discussion. These include insulting religion, in particular Islam, and “sorcery.”

A national unity law prohibits “stirring sectarian strife,” promoting the supremacy of one religious group over another, 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, a fine of 10,000 to 100,000 dinars (\$32,600) to (\$326,000), or both. Repeated crimes carry double penalties. If a group or an organization violates the law, it could have its operating license revoked temporarily or permanently and face fines up to 200,000 dinars (\$652,000). Noncitizens convicted under this law are also subject to deportation.

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, the government deems offensive to religious “sects” or groups and provides for fines ranging from 10,000 to 200,000 dinars (\$32,600 to 652,000) and up to seven years’ imprisonment for violations.

There is no officially published process outlining the steps religious groups must take to register with the government. Government offices do not offer guidance on the registration process. There are no fixed criteria for an application to be approved. To register an official place of worship and gain benefits from the central government, a religious group must first receive approval for its place of worship from the local municipality. Previously, religious groups reported the municipality would pass the paperwork to MAIA for an “opinion” on the application for a worship space. MAIA would then issue a certificate listing board members for the organization, making the religious group a legal entity, followed by approvals from the PAM and the Ministry of Interior (MOI).

During the year, embassy officials met with the Undersecretary of MAIA and MFA representatives who stated the Council of Ministers had assigned the MFA, Ministry of Justice (MOJ), and MAIA to create a unified department dedicated to managing administrative affairs for minority faith groups. This

department would include responsibilities such as processing state registration for nonregistered religious communities. Until the establishment of this department, no government agency handled registration for nonregistered communities. Meanwhile, MAIA is handling administrative tasks for registered religious communities only.

The officially registered Christian churches in the country are the National Evangelical Church of Kuwait (NECK) (Protestant); Roman Catholic; Greek Catholic (Melkite); Coptic Orthodox; Armenian Orthodox; Greek Orthodox; Anglican; and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. There are no officially recognized synagogues, and, according to MAIA, none have ever applied for official recognition. The government has not registered any non-Abrahamic religious communities. Nonregistered religious groups include Hindus, Sikhs, Druze, Bohra Muslims, Buddhists, and Baha'is.

A religious group with a registered place of worship may hire staff, sponsor visitors to the country, open bank accounts, and import religious materials for its congregation. Nonregistered religious groups may not purchase property or sponsor workers and must rely on volunteers from within their community for resources. Some registered religious groups, such as NECK, have agreed to assist nonregistered groups in these matters.

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. In January, the MOI arrested a foreign laborer for possession of items allegedly used in acts of “sorcery.”

The law does not specifically prohibit proselytizing by non-Muslims, but individuals proselytizing 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 (\$326), one month's imprisonment, or both for violations. In March, the MOI posted a tweet on its X (formerly known as Twitter) account cautioning Kuwaitis and expatriates against openly violating the fasting rule during daylight hours in the holy month of Ramadan.

It is illegal to possess, import, trade, or manufacture 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 (\$3,257). It is illegal to consume alcohol publicly, which carries a penalty of up to six months' imprisonment and a fine up to 50 dinars for violations (\$163). It is illegal to import and sell pork products; the penalty ranges from three months to three years' imprisonment. In September, media outlets reported that the MOI arrested eight expatriate residents on charges related to operating an unlicensed restaurant in a private residence and serving alcohol and pork.

Islamic religious instruction is mandatory at all levels for all Muslim students in public and 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. The law prohibits organized religious education in public high schools for faiths other than Islam. Most Islamic education courses are based on Sunni Islam.

The law provides that 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, the marriage remains valid. If a Muslim woman married to a Muslim man converts to Christianity or Judaism, the marriage is not automatically annulled, but the husband may request an annulment. If a Muslim woman married to a Muslim man converts to a non-Abrahamic faith, the marriage is automatically annulled.

Religious courts administer personal status laws dealing with issues of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. Residents not belonging

to the three recognized Abrahamic religions are also subject to sharia if family matters are taken to court. According to the law, if the case is brought to court, sharia governs inheritance for all residents regardless of their religious affiliation.

Courts may follow Shia jurisprudence in matters of personal status and family law for Shia Muslims at all levels of the judiciary. The law allows for the creation of separate courts for Shia Muslims for cases pertaining to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. These courts have six judges, none of whom has a formal background in Shia jurisprudence. 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 court may consider the settlement offered by the church, although if the dispute is not settled, Sunni sharia is applied.

The law forbids, and the state does not recognize, marriage between Muslim women and non-Muslim men, but Muslim men may marry women of other recognized Abrahamic faiths. The law requires children of such marriages to be raised in their father's faith, and the father's religion governs the settlement of marital disputes. Muslim marriage and divorce cases are heard in Sunni or Shia religious courts, depending on whether the marriage certificate is Sunni or Shia. Both Sunni and Shia marriage certificates need to be authenticated by appropriate notaries. While non-Muslim divorce, inheritance, and child custody cases are heard in Sunni religious courts, Christian couples who are part of a registered church may resolve these cases following their religious customs. Local authorities and courts recognize documents in these cases, if there is a Kuwaiti signatory from the church's congregation. If the church has no Kuwaiti citizen among its congregation, the authorities will accept a signature from the church's highest authority. 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 legally in the country but may have their foreign wedding certificates recognized. Citizens who are members of

the Baha'i faith may marry abroad and petition the court to recognize their marriage.

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, or in a few cases the government, may also lease 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 children.

An individual's religion is not included on passports or national identity documents except for 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 government has not recognized political parties, including religiously based parties, or allowed their formation, although no formal law bans political parties. National Assembly candidates must nominate themselves as individuals; however, well-organized, unofficial blocs operate as political groupings inside the National Assembly.

In August, the National Assembly approved a new election law, replacing the law that had been in place since 1962. The new law allows for the lifting of the lifetime ban on voting imposed in 2016 on Kuwaitis convicted of insulting God or the prophets if they complete a period of legal rehabilitation. The National Assembly also amended a clause in early drafts of the new legislation that would have required only female voters and candidates to adhere to sharia. In August, the National Assembly voted to remove the reference to women and required all voters and candidates to "abide by the constitution, law, and Islamic Sharia regulations." In October,

a group of women activists filed a petition with the Constitutional Court challenging the constitutionality of that provision of the law.

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

Government Practices

In July, the Criminal Court sentenced an Egyptian national to seven years in prison, followed by deportation. The conviction derived from charges of inciting others to join ISIS. During the investigation, the defendant expressed his unwavering commitment to ISIS beliefs, including the excommunication of anyone who deviates from its beliefs.

In July, local media reported that authorities executed five convicted prisoners, including an inmate convicted of involvement in the bombing of the Al Imam Al-Sadeq Shia Mosque in Kuwait City in 2015. The attack, claimed by ISIS, resulted in 27 deaths and left more than 220 persons injured.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

Although the law does not prohibit apostasy, the government continued its policy of not issuing new official documents that record a change in religion, unless the conversion was from another religion to Islam.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

In accordance with MAIA policy, the government continued to vet, appoint, and pay all new Sunni imams to ensure compliance with the government's guidance on moderate and tolerant religious preaching. The government funded Sunni religious institutions, including mosques, and paid the salaries of most Sunni imams.

The Shia community continued to select its own clerics without government oversight. While the Shia community generally did not receive funding from the state for religious institutions and mosques, upon specific requests by some Shia mosques, the government paid the salaries of their imams and the mosque staff.

In August, media reported that the MAIA provided Saudi authorities with new assurances to enable the Bidoon to perform the Umrah pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia. The ministry had reportedly committed to ensuring the safe return of Bidoon pilgrims to the country after completing the Umrah and the validity of their identification cards. As of October, 1,789 Bidoon (compared with 17,300 Kuwaitis) had registered for the Hajj through MAIA's electronic portal. According to MAIA and the Central Agency for Remedying Illegal Residents' Status, Kuwait has consistently extended a welcome to the Bidoon community for Umrah and Hajj pilgrimage. Saudi authorities, however, have imposed restrictions on such travel, primarily due to many Bidoon lacking a biometric passport.

The government continued to provide a recommended full basic text for Friday sermons preached at Sunni mosques. Imams could preach their own sermons but needed to ensure the text adhered to the laws on political speech and avoided stoking sectarianism. MAIA required Sunni imams to send an audio recording of their sermons to them for review after they delivered them. Media sources reported that they continued to caution imams to ensure their sermons were consistent with MAIA guidelines, including refraining from discussing political issues or insulting other religions in their sermons or at any other time. MAIA also reviewed reports from worshippers and others who claimed the imam discussed politics or insulted other faiths.

Shia contacts and government officials said the government did not officially monitor Shia clerics, who were free to write their own sermons if they did not violate existing laws or instigate sectarianism. If a video of an unlawful sermon appeared on social media or a worshipper reported a cleric, the

government investigated. According to officials at MAIA and members of the Shia community, MAIA did not monitor sermons or other activities at *husseiniyas* (Shia prayer halls) or at private gatherings. Some contacts in the Shia community reported the government unofficially monitored Shia clerics' sermons during major Shia events and used agents to monitor those events.

MAIA continued to work with the MOE to expand their partnership to protect youth from radicalization and religious extremism. The two ministries provided training courses and organized discussion panels to promote the principles of moderation and tolerance. To combat extremism and promote religious tolerance, MAIA's Center for the Promotion of Moderation reported that it had organized additional lectures during the year on promoting moderation at schools and universities, increased its participation in radio and television programs, and took part in local and overseas events to exchange best practices for promoting moderation and tolerance in different communities. The center also arranged monthly discussion forums to educate MAIA employees on tolerance and the rights of non-Muslims. MAIA also provided texts for several Friday sermons on topics such as Islamic teachings on fighting government corruption, helping neighbors, the dangers of drugs, and ethics in Islam.

Representatives of registered churches said the government was generally tolerant and respectful of their faiths. Members of non-Abrahamic faiths and unregistered churches said 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 said they avoided conflict with authorities by not proselytizing or disparaging the government or other faiths. The government continued to allow non-Abrahamic faith groups to operate in rented villas, private homes, or the facilities of registered churches. Many of these groups stated they did not publicly advertise religious events or gatherings to avoid bringing unwanted attention to their organizations, either from the public or from government authorities.

Leaders of registered churches reported government authorities continued to allow only citizens to sign official documents, even if the citizens were not among the churches' ordained clergy. If there were no citizen members, authorities continued to recognize the highest church authority as the official signatory of the church. To address the problem, some churches opted to have their members' documents initially attested by their respective embassies before submitting them to local authorities.

Churches reported PAM no longer fined them, as was the case in previous years, for not hiring the required percentage of citizens as employees, since PAM had informally dropped the requirement.

Members of non-Abrahamic faiths and unregistered churches said they experienced difficulties in celebrating major religious or life events. Many members said they lacked adequate facilities but noted clerical support for prayers, blessings of births and marriages, and conducting proper death rituals is available. In many cases, members of these religious groups stated they resolved conflicts, such as child separation issues in divorce, marital status, or inheritance, within their communities rather than in the courts, where they would be subject to sharia.

Attendees at a roundtable discussion with representatives from non-Abrahamic faiths said that the country generally tolerated their religions but that they felt less comfortable practicing their faiths. They said that while they understood there were red lines they could not cross, they were not sure what those lines were. Participants said that because most members of these communities were expatriates, they feared that practicing their religion openly could lead to their deportation.

The government continued to require religious groups to obtain registration from their municipalities for religious celebrations. Authorities retained the right to withdraw the registration 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, since they presumed authorities would reject their request.

The MOI continued to provide security and protection at religious sites for all recognized non-Sunni religious groups. Muslim and Christian leaders said that the government, citing security concerns, kept in place a ban on outdoor religious observances instituted following the 2015 ISIS bombing of a Shia mosque that killed 27 persons. The government continued to station security forces throughout the year outside major Sunni mosques and all Shia and Christian religious venues during times of worship to deter attacks. The government also continued to provide security to Shia neighborhoods during Muharram and Ashura observances.

The government did not permit public reenactments of the martyrdom of Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, or public marches in commemoration of Ashura, and required the Shia community to observe Ashura within closed structures rather than at outdoor locations. In April, the MOI dispatched an estimated 4,000 security personnel to protect 110 husseiniyas commemorating Ashura. Public security personnel, detectives, and special forces deployed in front of each husseiniya, accompanied by rescue and traffic patrols to facilitate traffic. The MOI permitted volunteers to conduct inspections of entrants into Shia houses of worship while security personnel inspected the surroundings. Security services placed metal detectors at the entrances.

Authorities continued the government's longstanding practice of prohibiting churches from displaying exterior signs, including crosses or church bells.

The government allowed only shops owned by registered religious organizations to import, display, or sell non-Islamic religious literature. The government did not allow non-Islamic religious publishing companies to operate, although several churches published religious materials solely for their congregations' use. Church leaders said the government permitted registered churches to import religious materials for use by their congregations if none of the content insulted Islam. Registered churches

reported they could import religious materials in any language. According to the Ministry of Information, MAIA reviewed books of a religious nature. Members of non-Abrahamic faiths and nonregistered churches said they could import religious materials for their congregations if they brought in the materials as personal items when entering the country and did not try to sell them in public stores. While minority religious communities stated they continued to be selective in the religious materials they imported, and even more selective in giving access to the materials, many members noted this was less of an issue during the year because their activities had moved almost entirely online during the pandemic. They said they did not allow the circulation of these materials outside their congregations.

In July, state media reported that the country participated in preparing a draft resolution, alongside the OIC, presented to the UN Human Rights Council that addressed religious hatred and desecration of holy sites and objects. Kuwait's Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva told state media that the resolution aimed to eliminate all types of religious hatred based on discrimination, hostility, or violence.

Municipalities handled building permits and land issues for religious groups. The government stated it received no applications for the construction of places of worship from non-Islamic religious groups during the year. The government reported it did not receive additional requests for registrations of new groups during the year.

During a meeting with nine leaders of registered and nonregistered churches in March, the leaders agreed that Christians in the country did not face harassment. Nevertheless, the leaders shared concerns that churches had no assigned government agency or department to address their issues. The leader of one nonregistered church said his church was interested in registering, but there was no publicly available information on how to register. The leaders estimated there were approximately 100 unregistered churches operating in the country and reported that approximately two years prior, PAM imposed restrictions on the number of new visas for which churches could apply on behalf of their clergy.

Shia community members reported a continued lack of facilities for worship and difficulties obtaining permission to construct new facilities or approving repairs to existing facilities due to government delay. As of December, MAIA reported there were 1,776 mosques in the country, including over 100 Shia mosques. MAIA reported there were 2,034 imams registered with the ministry. MAIA reported there were over 570 registered husseiniyas and more that were not registered. Typically, husseiniyas are not obliged to register with MAIA, as MAIA perceives them as social gathering places rather than religious institutions.

The government instructed MAIA, the MOI, the Kuwait City municipality, and other entities to end the use of unregistered mosques. MAIA continued to operate under a mandate from the Council of Ministers to demolish unregistered mosques, stating that some of those mosques served as extremist platforms. Authorities did not report whether there were new, non-registered mosques opened during the year or whether any nonregistered mosques were closed during the year.

According to the NGO Minority Rights Group International and members of the Shia community, Shia Muslims were not allowed to organize religious courses in public high schools or establish religious training centers due to legal requirements that all public Islamic education courses use the Sunni interpretation of Islam. According to MAIA, a few private schools, including one state-registered Iranian school, use Shia education courses in their curriculum.

The MOE continued to censor instructional materials, including fiction and nonfiction books and textbooks, that referenced the Holocaust or Israel.

The MOE permitted public schools to teach and celebrate only Islamic holidays. Members of non-Islamic faiths said the government usually 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, the government did not accredit church-based schools. Accreditation for church-based schools would enable students to receive religious education while fulfilling government requirements and allow graduates to move on to higher education. Evangelical group NECK said it had requested accreditation for its church-based school for many years, most recently in 2017, but that authorities still had not responded. After years of unsuccessful attempts, NECK decided to stop seeking accreditation. The Armenian Church and the Bohra Muslim community continued to operate accredited community schools in lieu of seeking accreditation as religious schools. Other groups continued to report that they conducted religious studies in their places of worship.

Contacts stated that there were insufficient training facilities to staff courts with qualified judges. Shia leaders continued to report that a 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 Shia jurisprudence council created by the government many years earlier under the marital issues court continued to function.

The government continued its practice of not responding to requests to establish Shia religious training institutions. Shia Muslims were obliged to seek religious training and education abroad. According to the NGO Freedom House, the government did not permit the training of Shia clerics in the country. According to members of the Shia community, the College of Sharia and Islamic Studies at Kuwait University, the only institution in the country that trains imams, provided some background on Shia jurisprudence in some of its courses but did not have Shia professors on its faculty.

In March, during a meeting at Kuwait University with embassy officials, Abdullah al-Ajmi, acting Dean of Sharia College, said the college had approximately 4,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled, both men and women and Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis, including several Shia students.

According to reports by press and community members, to encourage qualified nationals to apply for positions as imams and muezzins and increase the number of citizens working in these positions, MAIA continued to use less stringent testing criteria introduced in 2020. Some observers said this was part of an ongoing government effort to reduce its reliance on foreign workers and to provide economic opportunities to Kuwaiti citizens.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

Shia remained underrepresented at all levels of government. Following parliamentary elections in June, seven of 50 elected members of the National Assembly; one of 16 cabinet members; one of six Amiri Diwan advisors; and disproportionately fewer senior officers in the military and police force were Shia. Shia community leaders continued to say there was a “glass ceiling” for Shia in promotions and that they faced difficulties in obtaining government jobs. Shia leaders said it was particularly difficult for Shia to ascend to leadership positions in the MFA, the MOE, the Public Prosecutor’s Office, and the MOJ. They said Shia also rarely held leadership positions in the security forces. 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 and other security services. According to the NGO Minority Rights Group (MRGI), some Shia faced discrimination and obstacles when applying for senior leadership positions in the public sector.

The MOI, in coordination with PAM, issued visas for clergy and other staff to work at registered places of worship. The government continued to impose quotas on the number of clergy and staff of registered religious groups entering the country but sometimes granted additional slots upon request. Church leaders stated that within the past year, the MOI had granted significantly fewer visas for clergy and other staff, which affected their daily operations, especially for registered churches with multiple congregations and thousands of worshippers. The government continued to require foreign leaders of unregistered religious groups to enter the country as nonreligious workers.

Only Muslims and Christians are permitted to pray communally and possess religious literature while detained. Authorities allowed Muslim imams and Christian clergy access to prisoners and detainees for religious observance, but unrecognized religions did not have this privilege.

With the end of COVID-19 restrictions, media coverage included news on events and celebrations, such as Christmas services and church inauguration anniversaries held by various denominations and attended by senior government officials.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Societal pressure continued against conversion from Islam, according to minority religious leaders and citizens. Leaders and members of religious communities said they did not convert Muslims to other faiths in the country. Some citizens who converted when outside the country said their families harassed them following their conversion.

The NGO MRGI reported that Shia were marginalized religiously, economically, socially, and politically, despite some Shia coming from wealthy merchant families.

In September, prominent Sunni cleric Othman al-Khamis said during a podcast interview that a certain group of Shia were infidels or disbelievers. Shia community members, including former National Assembly members Saleh Ashour and Abdul Hamid Dashti, publicly criticized the remarks, and called upon the government to hold al-Khamis accountable. Several Shia Kuwaitis demanded on social media that the government apply the National Unity Law, which provides punishment for defaming or insulting religion, especially Islam, to al-Khamis, accusing him of sowing discord and division among Kuwaitis.

According to press and social media, antisemitic rhetoric generally originated from self-proclaimed Islamists or opinion writers, including clerics making anti-Israeli statements during Friday sermons. Columnists often conflated Israeli government actions or statements with those of Jews more broadly. In October, 45 of the National Assembly's 50 members released a public, antisemitic statement urging countries not to normalize relations with Israel because "Jews usually renege on their promises."

Hotels and businesses continued to mark non-Islamic holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali. During the Christmas season, trees and lights appeared in stores, malls, and homes. News media continued to print information about religious holiday celebrations, including material on the religious significance of the holiday.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In October and November, U.S. embassy officials again convened meetings with representatives from minority faith groups, including the Shia, Hindu, Baha'i, and Christian communities, to address various religious freedom concerns. Topics of discussion included the current state of religious freedom within the country, obstacles faced by nonregistered communities in gaining government registration, and initiatives aimed at fostering dialogue among religious groups and citizens.

In March, the Director and Deputy Director of the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom visited the country. During this visit, the Director met with government officials from the MFA, MAIA, MOE, the Center for Moderation Promotion, members of National Assembly's Human Rights Committee, academics from Kuwait University Sharia College, representatives of religious majority and minority communities, and civil society groups to discuss the status of religious freedom in the country and explore strategies to enhance respect for and protection of religious liberty.

During the Director's MAIA meeting, senior officials said that MAIA was negotiating with the MFA to establish a department that would handle

requests for renewal of government registration from Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic faiths and to resolve the matter in 2023. In the interim, they said that any requests from registered churches could be directed to the Office of the MAIA Undersecretary.

During the year, embassy officials continued to meet with religious leaders and members of the Sunni, Shia, Bohra, Hindu, Druze, Baha'i, and Christian communities and focused on each group's needs. Nonregistered communities expressed concerns about identifying the appropriate government point of contact to address their community needs and navigating the legal process of registering their religious communities with the state. Registered churches continued to request expansion of their worship spaces, and permission to obtain religious school accreditation.

Throughout the year, senior embassy officials participated in various religious celebrations, including Ashura, Easter, Christmas, and Baha'i events. At these gatherings, which sometimes included events hosted by the Ambassador, embassy officials engaged in discussions concerning religious tolerance and reiterated the U.S. government's steadfast support for religious freedom.