

# ITALY 2023 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution protects freedom of religion and the right of religious communities to establish their own institutions. It specifies the state and the Roman Catholic Church are independent, with their relations governed by treaties, including a concordat (agreement) granting the church specific privileges and benefits, as well as financial support. Thirteen other religious groups have accords granting many of the same benefits in exchange for a degree of government monitoring. Unregistered religious groups operate freely and are eligible for some of the benefits that registered groups receive, but they must apply separately for them.

Between January and July, the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) expelled 35 individuals, mainly due to links with what the ministry characterized as “violent extremist Islamist groups.” Muslim groups – of which none has an accord with the government – continued to face challenges obtaining permission from local governments to construct mosques and provide dedicated areas appropriate for Islamic burials. Some local governments authorized construction of mosques or temporary prayer centers and to acquire or expand plots for Islamic burials, but according to the Union of Islamic Cultural Communities (UCOII), these actions were not enough to meet growing demand. In March, the government approved funding for a Holocaust museum in Rome. Media reported on antisemitic statements made by some officials and politicians, including a statement in August by active-duty General Roberto Vannacci from a self-published book: “The Holocaust occurred, but this does not qualify the Jewish religion for

protection.” Lyrics from a song written by a regional politician in Lazio referred to Jews as “a race of dominating merchants.”

There were again reports of antisemitic incidents, including physical assaults, verbal harassment, discrimination, hate speech, and vandalism. In the wake of the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks against Israel, there were numerous high-profile incidents of antisemitism, including a man threatening Genoa Rabbi Fabrizio Haim Cipriani with a screwdriver while shouting antisemitic threats. National and local media reported on numerous examples of antisemitic graffiti and posters, including depictions of swastikas on walls, antisemitic stereotypes, and praise of neo-Nazi groups in cities such as Rome, Milan, and Chieti. The Antisemitism Observatory, run by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Jewish Contemporary Documentation Center Foundation (CDEC), recorded 454 antisemitic acts during the year, compared with 241 in 2022 and 220 in 2021. Of these reports, 213 came after the October 7 attacks. CDEC recorded 259 incidents involving hate speech on social media or the internet. Local experts monitoring antisemitism said they believed the number of antisemitic incidents was vastly underreported.

Representatives of the U.S. embassy and consulates general met throughout the year with national and local government officials to encourage respect for religious freedom and equal treatment for all faiths. They also continued to discuss efforts to integrate new migrants – many of whom were Muslim, Orthodox Christian, or Hindu – and second-generation migrants living in the country. Embassy officials expressed support for a proposed agreement between the government and the country’s Muslim communities. Senior U.S. government officials visiting from Washington met with religious leaders and civil-society representatives to promote interfaith dialogue and awareness, and to encourage religious groups to be more effective in

interfaith outreach. On March 27 and October 9, the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism met with then national coordinator for the fight against antisemitism Giuseppe Pecoraro, Jewish community representatives, and governmental officials to discuss how to support their efforts to counter antisemitism, promote interfaith dialogue, and at the second meeting, discuss the response to Hamas' October 7 terrorist attacks. The embassy and consulates also continued to utilize social media platforms to recognize major Christian, Muslim, and Jewish holidays, as well as to amplify initiatives that promote religious freedom and interfaith dialogue.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 61 million (midyear 2023). According to a 2021 study by the independent Center for Studies of New Religions (CESNUR), an estimated 74.5 percent of Italians and foreigners living in the country are Catholic, 15.3 percent are atheist or agnostic, 4.1 percent are non-Catholic Christian, 3.7 percent are Muslim, and 2.2 percent are followers of other religions, including Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, Baha'is, and Sikhs. Non-Catholic Christian groups 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), the Union of Pentecostal Churches, and several other smaller Protestant groups, including other evangelical Christian groups. According to the national branch of the Church of Jesus Christ, there are approximately 26,000 adherents in the country.

According to CESNUR, citizen members of other religious groups, which together account for approximately 4.3 percent of citizens, include 566,000 Muslims, 414,000 Jehovah's Witnesses, 218,000 Buddhists, 57,000 Hindus, and 36,000 Jews. CESNUR also estimates that of 5.03 million noncitizens, 34

percent (1.71 million) are Muslim, 27 percent are Orthodox Christian, and 16 percent are Catholic. Persons from Morocco and Albania make up the largest Muslim groups, while Tunisia, Egypt, and Bangladesh are increasingly prominent countries of origin for Muslims arriving as irregular seaborne migrants. The MOI reports most Muslims in the country are Sunni.

The Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI) estimates the Jewish population numbers approximately 27,000. Per UCEI leadership, most Italian Jews are Orthodox or Modern Orthodox by U.S. standards. The Italian Federation of Progressive Judaism, which is not associated with the UCEI, reports between 500 and 600 members. There is another self-defined Jewish religious group in Catania, Sicily, which includes members who are descendants of *bnei aneusim*, Jews who were forced to convert to Catholicism during the Inquisition.

## **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 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 if 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 that treaties, including a concordat between the government and the Holy See, govern their relations.

The country's penal code contains an unenforced article on blasphemy, classifying public insults against religions or against religious followers as administrative offenses punishable by a fine ranging from €51 to €309 (\$56 to \$340). The penal code punishes other public offenses related to religion, including offenses against objects used for religious rites or offenses expressed during religious ceremonies, with a fine of up to €5,000 (\$5,500) or a prison sentence of up to two years. Those who destroy or violate objects used for religious ceremonies may be punished with up to two years in prison.

The constitution states all religious groups are equally free, and relations between the state and non-Catholic groups regarding state support are governed by agreements ("accords") between them. Relations between the state and the Catholic Church are governed by a concordat between the government and the Holy See. Representatives of a non-Catholic faith requesting an accord must first submit their request to the Prime Minister's Office. 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. Thirteen groups have an accord: the Confederation of Methodist and Waldensian Churches, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Jews, Baptists, Lutherans, the Church of Jesus Christ, the Orthodox Church of the Constantinople Patriarchate, the Italian Apostolic Church, the Buddhist Union, Soka Gakkai Buddhists, Hindus, and the Anglican Church.

The law provides religious groups with tax-exempt status and the right to recognition as legal entities once they have completed the 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 an official request to a prefect (the local MOI representative) 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 administrative 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 that are not registered may still operate legally as cultural associations and obtain tax-exempt status, legal recognition of marriages, access to hospitals and prisons, and other benefits, but those benefits are more easily obtained if a group has an accord with the government. 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 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, Veneto, and Lombardy prohibit the wearing of burqas and niqabs in public buildings and institutions, including hospitals.

The concordat with the Holy See provides for the Catholic Church to participate in the selection of teachers, paid by the state, who 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 clergy members or members of religious orders, and lessons include material selected by the state and relevant to both Catholics and non-Catholic religious groups; texts do not require approval by the Catholic Church. 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 Catholic, that meet government educational standards.

Schools are categorized as state-owned, state-equivalent, or private. The “state-equivalent” category includes public (municipal, provincial, regional, or owned by another public entity) and some private schools, which 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 ministry’s regional offices. Religious entities operate most private schools and may issue diplomas or certificates, which the government recognizes in most cases. Private school students must take final annual exams in state-owned or state-equivalent schools.

A 2019 Lombardy regional law prohibits local authorities from dividing burial plots by religious belief, although authorities have at times made exceptions.

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 EU members or signatories of the Schengen Agreement must apply with the MOI 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. Eligible applicants are those who have already received priestly ordination, or equivalent status, as well as religious ministers belonging to denominational organizations already registered with the MOI, and who intend to participate in religious ceremonies or events or ecclesiastical, religious, or pastoral activities. Visa duration varies based on the request of the religious organization.

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

## **Government Practices**

### **Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement**

According to the MOI, between January and July, the government expelled 35 individuals due to what the ministry stated were concerns for the security of the country, including individuals who the ministry stated advocated violent, extremist beliefs and/or made efforts to radicalize others. On November 6, authorities expelled a Moroccan national who had broken three crosses in two churches in Alessandria and whom they considered close to radical networks.

### **Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression**

According to media reports, on April 7, police identified – and authorities subsequently fined – a group of youths who shouted profanities at a



Catholic Good Friday religious procession of the Virgin Mary in Pontecorvo, Lazio.

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

According to leaders of the Islamic Cultural Center of Italy, the government again did not make significant progress on reaching an accord with the Muslim community, despite continuing dialogue with various Islamic religious entities. The MOI continued to recognize only the Islamic Cultural Center of Italy, which administers the Great Mosque of Rome, as a legal religious entity, a prerequisite to signing an accord, but by year's end, it had not signed one. The government recognized other Islamic groups as nonprofit organizations.

The Senate Extraordinary Committee to Fight Intolerance, Antisemitism, and Hate Crimes continued to consult experts on the nature and the root causes of hate speech, with results of the committee's fact-finding investigation of intolerance, racism, antisemitism, and incitement to hatred and violence, expected for release in 2024.

### **Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment**

National leaders of the larger Islamic organizations said an apparent effect of the lack of a formal agreement between the government and any Muslim group is a proportionally small number of formally recognized mosques, representing a challenge for locating adequate worship spaces for the country's more than 2.3 million Muslims. They said a lack of a national central body representing a majority of the country's Muslims could also be a factor.

Regional governments and Muslim religious authorities continued to recognize eight mosques, respectively, in Colle Val d'Elsa, Albenga, Milan, Rome, Ravenna, Forli, Palermo and Catania. In addition, local governments continued to recognize many other sites as Islamic places of worship, although some Muslim authorities said these were not full-fledged mosques because they lacked minarets or other key architectural features such as domes.

According to local media, there were also an estimated 800 to 1,200 unofficial, informal places of worship for Muslims in 2019 (the most recent figure). According to press reports, authorities allowed most to operate but did not officially recognize them as places of worship.

Media outlets reported that on August 29, the city of Milan provided a Muslim community with a public building for use as a mosque with a capacity of 3,500, including plans for a cultural association, a garden, and areas dedicated to women and children. The opening was scheduled for April 2024.

Muslim leaders stated they continued to experience difficulties in obtaining approvals from some local governments to construct mosques. Some local officials continued to cite a lack of zoning plans allowing for the establishment of places of worship on specific sites as a reason for denying construction permits, rather than anti-Muslim sentiment.

In other locations, Muslim groups continued to acquire new spaces for worship. On May 13, Mayor of Florence Dario Nardella announced the selection of a facility that will host a permanent mosque. Archbishop of Florence Giuseppe Betori said “the [Catholic] Church shares in the joy of this

positive outcome, which responds to a primary need of human beings and the right of every community to freely profess its religious faith.” On September 26, the owner of the previous facility used as a place of worship extended the group’s occupancy to May 9, 2024, which gave them a space for worship until the new mosque opened.

On September 16, the Italian Islamic Confederation, the mayor, and representatives of other religious groups inaugurated a new mosque in Pinerolo (Piedmont).

On August 4, the municipality of Alessandria approved a 92-year lease for a parcel of land to the local Muslim association to build a new mosque. Opposition parties contested the terms of the lease, stating the rent was too low given the value of the property.

In June, Mayor of San Dona Alberto Teso, in the province of Venice, met with a delegation of six representatives of local Muslim groups to discuss the opening of a new mosque to accommodate the growing local Muslim community. The mayor assured full cooperation of local authorities to process the request for authorization to open a new place of worship.

On May 15, the municipality of Mestre blocked conversion of a former supermarket into an Islamic cultural center and mosque following local opposition. Residents opposed to the center said it was noisy and did not have authorization to use the space for religious services. The Muslim community appealed the measure, and in August, the regional administrative court suspended the decision of the municipality, thereby allowing followers to use the facility as a place of worship.

On June 10, the Chamber of Deputies began debate on a bill – introduced by members of parliament from Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy Party – that would prohibit religious communities without an accord with the government from using their own or rented properties, including garages and industrial warehouses, for religious activities. In an October 10 parliamentary hearing, representatives of Muslim and Christian communities said the policy would be discriminatory and violate the constitutional right to religious freedom. Opposition lawmakers were against the initiative, stating that if the law passed, it would restrict religious freedom and violate constitutional principles.

Local governments continued to lease public land at discounted rates to non-Muslim religious groups, predominantly Catholic, to construct places of worship. The government also provided funds toward preservation and maintenance of historic places of worship, which were almost all Catholic, with some prominent exceptions such as the Jewish ghetto in Venice.

According to the UCOII, 76 local governments maintained dedicated burial spaces for Muslims. Muslim associations reported a continued insufficient number of burial plots to meet the needs of Muslim communities in Lombardy, Lazio, and other regions, prompting many immigrant families to bury the remains of their relatives in their countries of origin.

On March 4, UCOII appealed to all municipalities with Islamic cemeteries to authorize burial of Muslim migrants who died in the February 26 shipwreck near Cutro, which claimed more than 90 lives.

Pastor Leonardo Chirico of Breccia di Roma Church, an evangelical church in Rome, reported that on May 26, the tax authority appealed to the Court of Cassation against the tax exemption granted to the religious group by

another Rome court on the grounds that the facility did not have the architectural features of a traditional church. Chirico said the church spent €12,000 (\$13,200) in legal fees to defend its right to tax-exempt status. He also said “the zoning regulations were costly and unfair for religious minorities.”

In March in Viterbo, authorities discovered a swastika and antisemitic graffiti targeting Elly Schlein, the newly elected secretary of the Democratic Party. Authorities promptly removed the graffiti. Prime Minister Meloni called the episode “a shameful and indecent act.” Representatives of all political parties in parliament expressed solidarity with Schlein.

In August, the Ministry of Defense removed General Roberto Vannacci from his military post two weeks after the release of his self-published book *The World Upside Down*. In the book, Vannacci wrote, “The Holocaust occurred, but this does not qualify the Jewish religion for protection.” In December, Vannacci was assigned to a new position.

On August 29, Marcello De Angelis, spokesperson of Lazio Regional President Francesco Rocca of the FdI Party, resigned as a result of statements reported by press that in 1995 De Angelis authored an antisemitic song – which he later disavowed – with lyrics referring to Jews as “a dominating race of merchants, [and] if with gold they bought my home and my land, my freedom is paid with blood!” among other antisemitic phrases. President of the Jewish Community of Rome Victor Fadlun commented in a social media post, “We repudiate the clichés of antisemitism and the shameful distortions of historical truth.” De Angelis replied, “The lyrics go back to a period of my life in which I do not recognize myself. I feel embarrassment and horror as they can still cause offense and

suffering today. Unfortunately, I cannot go back and erase the past. I can only strive every day to repair it.”

On July 23, Monfalcone Mayor Anna Cisint, a member of the Lega Party, said the decision of Muslim women to swim fully covered was “unacceptable behavior.” She released a public statement saying, “Those who come from different communities have an obligation to respect the rules and customs that apply in the local and Italian context,” and added, “Practices of dubious value for decorum and hygiene overturn every rule of social coexistence.”

The European Jewish Congress reported that Milan police charged 24 persons on January 27, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, for posting antisemitic online attacks, including death threats, against Senator-for-Life Liliana Segre, a Holocaust survivor. Those charged included celebrity chef Gabriele Rubini. Rubini accused Segre of “a deafening silence over the plight of Palestine,” and called Israel a “fascist” state. Segre had reported the online threats and insults to authorities in December 2022.

Speaking at an emergency summit on global antisemitism at the parliament in November, then national coordinator for the fight against antisemitism Giuseppe Pecoraro said, “October 7 changed everything,” adding that where once there were “isolated episodes,” he now sees a unified “antisemitic phenomenon.”

On January 27, Holocaust Remembrance Day, President Sergio Mattarella hosted a ceremony to commemorate the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp.

According to media reports, on June 29, police searched the homes of 10 members of neo-Nazi groups based in Naples and Salerno suspected of

distributing propaganda and incitement to commit racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination.

On March 10, Prime Minister Meloni met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and reiterated her government's commitment to fight antisemitism.

In March, the government announced a grant of €10 million (\$11 million) for establishing a Holocaust museum in Rome – a city in which the Axis powers detained 1,024 Jews during World War II and deported them to concentration camps. In October, parliament approved the allocation.

The city government of Rome continued public expressions of support for collaboration and understanding through support of the interreligious roundtable (*Tavolo Interreligioso*) interfaith network, which includes the Jewish community, the Waldensian Evangelical Church, the Eastern Orthodox communities, the Islamic Cultural Center of Italy, the Italian Hindu Union, and the Italian Buddhist Maitreya Foundation. In May, the group held a seminar on the right to conduct funerals consistent with the culture and religion of each citizen.

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

### **Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom**

On June 26, Interior Minister Matteo Piantedosi, Minister for Sports and Youth Andrea Abodi, then national coordinator for the fight against antisemitism Pecoraro, and Italian Soccer Federation president Gabriele Gravina signed a memorandum of understanding on preventing and fighting

antisemitism in sports. The memorandum banned antisemitic symbols and slogans in stadiums, encouraged initiatives aimed at fighting antisemitism, and proposed strengthening penalties for antisemitic incidents to include imprisonment from six months to two years, with an additional eight months if they involve the selling of fascist or Nazi memorabilia online. On July 20, Pecoraro met representatives of police and governmental agencies responsible for collecting data on antisemitism to coordinate monitoring and evaluate trends.

On November 23, parliament hosted an international emergency summit on global antisemitism. At the summit, Israeli Ambassador Alon Bar said that, while the country's Muslim population did not seem to fear self-identifying or wearing religious symbols or publicly supporting Hamas, the Jewish population was taking care to go unnoticed due to fear of attack.

On December 5, the Italian and Roman Jewish Communities organized a "No antisemitism, no terrorism" rally in Rome. Israeli President Isaac Herzog opened with a video message of encouragement. Leaders of major political parties attended, as did senior government ministers. An empty highchair stood at one corner of the stage – an homage to Israeli children killed or kidnapped by Hamas in the October 7 terrorist attack.

In April, Mayor of Rome Roberto Gualtieri attended an iftar at the Grand Mosque. Gualtieri stated the city council highly valued the active presence of the Islamic Cultural Center and the huge contribution citizens of the Islamic faith make every day to the city of Rome, and added, "Our city is proud to be open, multicultural, and multireligious."



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

Antisemitic and anti-Muslim speech and incidents increased during the year. Reports of antisemitic incidents published on CDEC's website included discrimination, verbal harassment – particularly at soccer matches and other sporting events – online hate speech, and derogatory graffiti. CDEC recorded 454 incidents of antisemitism during the year, compared with 241 incidents in 2022 and 220 incidents in 2021. Of these reports, 213 incidents occurred after the Hamas October 7 attacks on Israel. Internet and social media hate speech and bullying were the most common types of incidents, according to CDEC. They reported 259 incidents involving hate speech on social media or the internet. Social media with anti-Muslim sentiment also increased, primarily in the northeastern part of the country.

The Observatory on Antisemitism reported 22 cases of antisemitic posts on Facebook, stating these represented only a small percentage of such posts. Four *Stolperstein* memorial stones commemorating victims of the Holocaust were defaced in Rome between October 31 and November 1. Rome Mayor Gualtieri characterized the vandalism as “unacceptable and pitiable,” and affirmed his solidarity with the city's Jewish community. Rome Jewish Community President Fadlun condemned the perpetrators and underscored his trust in Rome police to protect the city's Jewish population and institutions.

The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe reported 156 cases of grave desecration and 54 attacks on places of worship in the country in 2022, the most recent statistics available. This compared with 195 and 60 cases,

respectively, in 2021. It also reported that in 2022, there were 46 antisemitic incidents, two cases of violent attacks against Muslims, and 104 attacks against Christian places of worship. The national police's Observatory on Security against Acts of Discrimination (OSCAD) reported 232 crimes of discrimination between January and July, of which 92 were based on religious affiliation and 73 on ethnicity. OSCAD defined crimes of discrimination as crimes motivated by ideological, cultural, religious, or ethnic prejudices. Chief of Police Vittorio Pisani reported 200 cases of antisemitism registered by OSCAD between October 7 and December 31, compared with 17 received in the same period of 2022.

On April 13, the Islamic Community of Italy denounced the desecration of Muslim tombs by unknown persons in a municipal cemetery in Bari.

In 2022, the National Office to Fight Racial Discrimination collected 287 reports of discrimination on the grounds of religion or personal beliefs, of which 177 involved episodes of antisemitism and 46 anti-Muslim incidents.

On November 15, UCOII president Yassine Lafram sent a letter to the president of Mediaset TV network, stating its channels had spread Islamophobia. He said some programs had negatively portrayed Muslims in the context of the Israel-Hamas conflict, contributing to rising discrimination against Muslims. Lafram urged intervention against both Islamophobia and antisemitism on television. Media reported Mediaset said its programs upheld a diverse range of opinions. The following day, Rete 4 (part of Mediaset TV) host Paolo Del Debbio responded to Lafram's letter in an interview in national daily newspaper *La Stampa*, stating some imams in the country were fueling hatred and antisemitism and adding, "Hamas is an Islamic terrorist organization, this does not mean that all Muslims are terrorists, but those of Hamas are terrorists by self-declaration."

The CDEC reported several cases of insults on the internet and of graffiti against Jewish residents during the first half of the year, including insults against Holocaust survivor Liliana Segre posted on X (formerly Twitter) in September. Most incidents occurred during Jewish holidays or celebrations.

On March 20, a German fan attending a soccer match in Rome wore a “Hitlerson 88” shirt while watching the game. (The number 88 is a numerical code for “Heil Hitler.”) Authorities banned him for life from attending games of the Lazio soccer club. Ruth Dureghello, then president of the Jewish Community of Rome, condemned the incident and posted on social media that at the same soccer match, fans were singing antisemitic chants. In August, the government and the national soccer team announced that no players were allowed to use the number 88 on their shirts, adding that the club would implement a code of ethics in line with International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance guidelines.

According to news reports in August, a group of approximately 50 persons demonstrated in support of Muslim women who chose to wear burkinis at a Trieste area beach. The demonstrators wore full-length clothing and said they rejected individuals who insulted burkini-wearing women. The president of the Italian Consortium of Solidarity cited the European Convention on Human Rights, saying it guarantees “the mandatory freedom of a person to demonstrate their beliefs in public, including through clothing.”

As in previous years, press outlets reported cases of antisemitic and anti-Christian vandalism, including graffiti with swastikas, antisemitic stereotypes, and praise for neo-Nazi groups, on public and private property in cities such as Rome, Milan, and Chieti. On April 25, local press outlets

reported the presence of graffiti in the outskirts of Rome that stated, “Rome marches again, Lazio-Livorno, same initials, same oven, Jewish Lazio.” On April 11, authorities found a swastika in the main square of Monte San Giovanni Campano, in the province of Frosinone.

The Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe reported that in February, unidentified persons had vandalized the St. Mary of Hope Church in Catanzaro, Calabria. According to the parish priest, the church had also suffered from vandalism in the past.

In April, Israel-based i24 News reported that unidentified individuals defaced a mural of the Simpson family commemorating the deportation of Jews from Milan Central Station, the site of Milan’s Holocaust Memorial. According to the artist, the mural, entitled “Track 21 The Simpsons deported to Auschwitz,” symbolizes the hundreds of Jews who were loaded onto livestock wagons headed for the concentration camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Mauthausen, Bergen-Belsen, Flossenbuerg, Ravensbrueck, Fossoli and Bolzano. During the year, vandals defaced the mural three separate times.

In January, the Catholic Church marked the 34th annual Day of Jewish and Christian Dialogue.

According to UCEI, approximately 80,000 taxpayers designate the 0.8 percent of their income tax, which is required to be given to a religious organization, to UCEI. By its estimate, approximately 65,000 non-Jews support the community financially.

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

U.S. embassy and consulates general officials discussed religious freedom with representatives of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, MOI, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Coordinator for the Fight Against Antisemitism, and local government officials in Rome, Naples, Milan, Trieste, and Florence. Discussions centered on the establishment of new places of worship requested by religious groups, relations between the government and Muslim religious communities, the prospect for an accord between the government and Muslim communities, and antisemitic and anti-Muslim incidents. During these meetings, U.S. officials and government counterparts also discussed the integration of asylum seekers and migrants, many of whom were Muslim, Orthodox Christian (including Romanian, Russian, and Bulgarian Orthodox), or Hindu.

Officials from the embassy and consulates general, as well as senior Department of State officials visiting from Washington, met with members of the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities across the country to stress the importance of interfaith dialogue and to share U.S. best practices regarding education, the integration of second-generation migrants, and social media networking to promote respect for religious diversity. On February 6, the Milan consul general attended the unveiling of an informational display at Milan Central Station's Track 21 Holocaust Memorial. The ceremony included Mayor Beppe Sala and Holocaust survivor and Senator-for-Life Segre and took place on the anniversary of Segre's arrival at Auschwitz in 1944 on a train that departed from track 21. Media quoted Segre stating, "The unexpected meeting with the American consul [general] on this special day makes me think about the end of [my] imprisonment [...] and the word liberty, which shall never be forgotten." She also highlighted the importance of remembering "those who gave us freedom," saying, "The Americans should never be forgotten."

Embassy and consulates general officials continued to meet with representatives of civil society groups, including Catholic Church-affiliated Caritas and Sant'Egidio, as well as with Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish leaders in cities throughout the country. U.S. officials urged the social inclusion of immigrants, many of whom are Muslim, as well as dialogue among various religious groups, and monitored the ability of groups to practice their religion freely. On March 27 and October 9, the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism met with then national coordinator for the fight against antisemitism Pecoraro, Jewish community representatives, and governmental officials to discuss how to support their efforts to counter antisemitism, promote interfaith dialogue, and address the October 7 Hamas attacks against Israel.

On March 29, the embassy facilitated meetings between the executive director of the nonprofit Campaign for Uyghurs, Rushan Abbas, and representatives of the Muslim and Jewish communities to discuss the challenges of protecting the rights of religious minorities in the country as well as around the world.

The embassy and consulates general continued to utilize social media platforms to recognize major Christian, Muslim, and Jewish holidays and to promote respect for all faiths, as well as to amplify initiatives that support religious freedom and encourage interfaith dialogue at the local level. This included posting of Department of State statements regarding the International Religious Freedom Act and related topics.