

# **ARGENTINA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and laws provide for freedom of religion and the right to profess one's faith freely. The constitution provides that the government will support the Roman Catholic Church. 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 bombing of the Argentina Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA) community center. In March President Mauricio Macri told leaders attending the Plenary Assembly of the World Jewish Congress that his government was "fully committed to ... mak[ing] headway" in the investigations of the AMIA attack, the 1992 terrorist bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, and the unsolved death of AMIA Special Prosecutor Alberto Nisman. The government continued to provide protection for Baptist Pastor Marcelo Nieva and his church following multiple incidents of harassment and intimidation targeting the pastor for his work against human trafficking and gender-based violence. A government official from a small city in Buenos Aires Province resigned from his position after he made a post on social media disparaging Muslims; the posting engendered widespread criticism on traditional and social media. The government initiated an education campaign in public and private schools to counter a rise in anti-Muslim sentiment, which observers attributed to public reaction to terrorist attacks in Europe and in response to the government's announcement of its decision to accept 3,000 Syrian refugees.

In August students from the Lanus Oeste German School in Buenos Aires who were wearing swastika armbands and false Hitler mustaches instigated a fight with a group of Jewish students at a nightclub. In July a plastic bottle filled with cement was thrown through the window of the Maccabi Jewish community center in Santa Fe province. Attached to the bottle was a note threatening further violence and bearing the logo of ISIS. The Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations (DAIA) documented 478 reported complaints of anti-Semitism in 2015, the most recent available data, an increase of 55 percent over the previous year. More than half of the incidents occurred on the internet or through social media. The group attributed the increase to more awareness and a change in reporting format.

Embassy representatives met with government representatives to discuss ways to counter anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment. The U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism met with the secretary of worship and the minister for human rights at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss religious

tolerance and anti-Semitism. Outreach efforts included regular meetings with religious and community leaders. The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials actively engaged with the government, civil society groups, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to facilitate interfaith dialogue and promote religious tolerance.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 43.9 million (July 2016 estimate). National census data does not track religious affiliation. Religious demographic and statistical data from NGOs, research centers, and religious leaders vary. According to the Pew Research Center, Roman Catholics constitute 71 percent of the population. Protestants are 15 percent, and atheists, agnostics, and those with no religious affiliation constitute 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.

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

#### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for the right to profess, teach, and practice one's faith freely. 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.

Non-Catholic groups may register with the Secretariat of Worship in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship. Registration is not compulsory but provides for tax-exempt status for religious groups, visas for religious officials, the ability to hold public activities, as well as other benefits. Non-Catholic religious groups may register and receive the same status and fiscal benefits as Catholic groups. 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 in homes, but is sometimes necessary to conduct activities in public spaces pursuant to local regulations. For example, 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 an organization is registered, it must report to the secretariat any significant changes or decisions made regarding its leadership, governing structure, size of membership, address of headquarters, or other relevant information. The government has recognized more than 5,300 non-Catholic religious groups.

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.

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.

Foreign religious officials of registered religious groups may apply for a separate category of visa to enter the country. The length of the visa can vary 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 does not have the authority 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**

The investigation into the death of Special Prosecutor Alberto Nisman continued through the year. In January 2015 Nisman, the lead federal prosecutor responsible

for the investigation of the 1994 bombing of the AMIA community center in Buenos Aires, was discovered dead in his apartment from a gunshot to the head. In March President Macri told leaders attending the Plenary Assembly of the World Jewish Congress that his government was “fully committed to... mak[ing] headway” with the investigation of the unsolved death of Special Prosecutor Nisman. The government also continued its investigation into the 1994 bombing of the Argentina Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA) community center. In March President Macri told leaders attending the Plenary Assembly of the World Jewish Congress that his government was “fully committed to... mak[ing] headway” in the investigations of the AMIA attack, the 1992 terrorist bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, and the unsolved death of AMIA Special Prosecutor Alberto Nisman.

The government continued to protect Pastor Marcelo Nieva and his Baptist Evangelical church in Rio Tercero, Cordoba Province, following violence directed towards his church in October 2014. Nieva stated that on April 24, an assailant in an automobile threatened him and his spouse, and that criminal groups continued to harass him and his church because of his social work, particularly with victims of sex trafficking and gender-based violence.

In August the institutional relations director for the city of Chacabuco, Buenos Aires Province provoked widespread criticism on traditional and social media after he published an anti-Islamic statement on his Facebook account. The official resigned his position with the local legislature as a result of the controversy.

In September the government announced that INADI would conduct an education campaign at public and private schools to facilitate a better understanding of Islamic culture, religion, and tradition among young people. The educational campaign was designed to counter a rise in reported complaints of discrimination against Muslims that media reports attributed to public reaction to news of terrorist attacks in Europe credited to ISIS, and to the government’s decision to accept 3,000 Syrian refugees.

Jewish groups reported that relations with the government had improved since the change of administration in December 2015. The groups said the environment between the government and the Jewish community transformed from one of hostility to one of close collaboration.

The secretary of worship, the Buenos Aires director general for religious affairs, and other government representatives hosted and attended 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 throughout the year.

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

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

On August 25, students from the Lanus Oeste German School of Buenos Aires engaged in a fistfight at a nightclub in Bariloche with Jewish students from the Society for Trades and Agricultural Labor (ORT) School of Buenos Aires. Some of the students from the German school wore swastika armbands and false Hitler mustaches, and deliberately provoked a brawl with the Jewish students; no one was seriously injured in the fight. The German school students were disciplined and compelled by the school headmaster to visit the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum in the company of the Jewish students.

On July 5, an unknown assailant threw a plastic bottle filled with cement through the window of the Maccabi Jewish community center in Santa Fe Province. A note was attached to the bottle, which read “This is a warning, the next one will explode.” The note contained the ISIS logo and the Arabic expression “*Allahu Akbar* (God is great).”

DAIA documented 478 reported complaints of anti-Semitism in 2015, an increase of 55 percent over the previous year. Less than 10 percent of incidents involved violence and more than half occurred on the internet, including through social media. DAIA attributed the increase in complaints to modified procedures for accounting for incidents of anti-Semitism on social media, and to expansive media attention of the investigation into the death of Special Prosecutor Nisman in 2015.

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

In regular meetings with the Secretariat of Worship, religious leaders, and civil society organizations, U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom, interfaith dialogue, refugees, the status of the AMIA case, and ways to counter anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment. On July 18 the U.S. Special Envoy to

Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism met with the secretary of worship and the minister for human rights at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss religious tolerance and anti-Semitism. The parties discussed challenges associated with the country's pledge to accept 3,000 Syrian refugees, and how religious institutions of all faiths could partner with the government to assist in the reception and integration of refugees.

In meetings with senior Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim leaders from the national government and the city government of Buenos Aires, the Ambassador discussed religious tolerance, diversity, the interfaith movement, refugees and the poor, and measures to counteract religious discrimination.

The U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism was a panelist at the first Latin American Global Forum Against Anti-Semitism in Buenos Aires on July 16. The forum sought to advance a regional approach to combatting religious discrimination and anti-Semitism, and to promote greater interfaith dialogue. The Special Envoy and the Ambassador met with national religious and civic leaders and civil society organizations such as DAIA, AMIA, B'nai B'rith International, the World Jewish Congress, and the Islamic Center of Argentina.

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. The events advocated interfaith cooperation and universal tolerance in respecting the freedom of religion. The embassy also participated in the Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue World Congress.