

# ARMENIA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution states that everyone has freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. It recognizes the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) as the national church and preserver of national identity but also establishes separation of “religious organizations” and the state. The law prohibits, but does not define, proselytism, which may be interpreted as forced conversion. The trial continued of a prominent Baha’i lawyer, charged in 2017 with organizing illegal migration to the country. Baha’i community members said they believed the charges were brought because of his religion. According to the *Alternative Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child With A Focus on Yezidi Children in Armenia*, minority children were frequently deprived of their freedom to practice their religion and faced challenges in preserving and expressing their ethnic and religious identities. The 2018 dismissal of a police officer for being a member of a religious organization triggered a Constitutional Court review of the laws prohibiting police officers’ membership in religious organizations. There were reports the government arbitrarily enforced the law, targeting police officers affiliated with minority religious groups. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan spoke about the importance of freedom of religion and established a working group to review AAC-government relations, the public-school curriculum on the history of the Armenian Church, and other issues. Some AAC representatives objected to the review, describing the process as a threat to Armenian national identity. In September, built with private funds on private land, the world’s largest Yezidi temple opened in Aknalich Village, Armavir Region. Speaker of Parliament Ararat Mirzoyan spoke at the inauguration, stating, “It is symbolic and logical that the largest Yezidi temple in the world is in Armenia. Armenia is a home for the Yezidi people.” Some Yezidis interviewed at the celebration said the temple was an important step for the preservation of Yezidi culture and religion, while others said the primary purpose of the temple was more likely to serve as a tourist attraction.

Religious minorities said they continued to face hate speech and negative portrayals of their communities, especially in social media. According to observers, anti-Semitic slurs were posted on social media platforms, in some cases together with cartoons depicting Jews in an offensive manner. According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, there were again societal incidents of verbal harassment towards the group’s members, to which authorities responded promptly and appropriately. There were 16 reported instances of verbal harassment, compared

with 12 in 2018. In November an AAC priest published an article on an AAC website, where he discussed The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals, Protestants, and others, referring to them as "sects." He stated, "Sectarian organizations hurt our nation by creating divisions among our people, removing it from our Holy Church and the true faith of our ancestors." Societal and family pressure also remained a major deterrent for ethnic Armenians to practice a religion other than Armenian Orthodox.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials continued to promote religious tolerance, respect for religious minorities, and interfaith dialogue during meetings with government officials. Embassy officials met with AAC leaders to discuss the right of religious minorities to practice their faiths without restrictions. In August the Ambassador hosted an event to foster interreligious dialogue, mutual respect, and cooperation – bringing together representatives of religious and ethnic minorities, civil society, and the government. In September the Ambassador, with national and local government officials, celebrated the completion of a U.S.-funded cultural preservation project of the AAC Saint Hovhannes Church and the restoration of its rare 17th century frescoes in Meghri, Syunik Region. The embassy used Facebook and Twitter to convey messages in support of religious tolerance. The Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly met with minority religious groups, including evangelical Christians and other Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ, Yezidis, the Jewish community, Apostolic Assyrians, Pentecostals, and Baha'is, as well as with individual Muslims, to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country.

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

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.0 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2011 census, approximately 92 percent of the population identifies as Armenian Orthodox. Other religious groups include Roman Catholics, Armenian Uniate (Mekhitarist) Catholics, Orthodox Christians, evangelical Christians, including Armenian Evangelical Church adherents, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, charismatic Christians, and Jehovah's Witnesses. There are also followers of the Church of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East, Molokan Christians, Yezidis, Jews, Baha'is, Shia Muslims, Sunni Muslims, and pagans, who are adherents to a pre-Christian faith. According to an International Republican Institute (IRI) poll released in 2018, 94 percent of the country's population identifies as Armenian Apostolic, 2 percent Catholic (includes all rites), 3 percent

other, and 1 percent none. A May IRI poll listed 94 percent of the population as Armenian Orthodox, 4 percent other, and 1 percent none, with no mention of Catholic affiliation. According to members of the Jewish community, there are approximately 800 to 1,000 Jews in the country.

According to the country's 2011 census, there are more than 35,000 Yezidis, with some more recent estimates suggesting approximately 50,000. Yezidis are concentrated primarily in agricultural areas northwest of Yerevan around Mount Aragats. Armenian Uniate Catholics live primarily in the north. Most Muslims are Shia, including Iranians and temporary residents from the Middle East.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right includes the freedom to change one's religion or beliefs and the freedom to manifest religion or belief in rituals of worship, such as preaching or church ceremonies, either alone or in community with others, in public or in private. The constitution allows restrictions on this right to protect state security, public order, health, and morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. The constitution establishes separation of "religious organizations" and the state. It recognizes the "exclusive mission of the Armenian Apostolic Church" as the national church in the "spiritual life, development of the national culture, and preservation of the national identity of the people of Armenia." The constitution prohibits the exercise of fundamental rights and freedoms to incite religious hatred. It allows conscientious objectors to military service to perform alternative civilian service.

The law prohibits, but does not define, "soul hunting," a term describing both proselytism and forced conversion. The law prohibits religious organizations with spiritual centers located outside the country from receiving funding from those foreign centers; however, there is no mechanism to enforce the law. The law also prohibits religious organizations from funding or being funded by political parties.

The law does not categorize or regulate the residence status of foreign religious volunteers.

By law, a registered religious group may minister to the religious and spiritual needs of its faithful; perform religious liturgies, rites, and ceremonies; establish

groups for religious instruction; engage in theological, religious, historical, and cultural studies; train members for the clergy or for scientific and pedagogical purposes; obtain and utilize objects and materials of religious significance; use media; establish ties with religious organizations in other countries; and engage in charity. The law does not require religious groups to register, but they must do so to conduct business in their own name (e.g., to own property, rent property, and establish bank accounts). The law does not stipulate rights accorded to unregistered groups.

To register as a legal entity, a religious community must present to the Office of the State Registrar an assessment from the Division of Religious Affairs and National Minorities stating its expert opinion whether the community complies with the requirements of the law that it be based on “historically recognized holy scripture.” It also must be “free from materialism and [be] of a spiritual nature,” have at least 200 adult members, and follow a doctrine espoused by a member of the “international modern system” of religious communities. The law does not define “free from materialism” or state which religious communities are part of the “international modern system.” The law specifies that this list of registration requirements, to which the Division of Religious Affairs and National Minorities must attest, does not apply to a religious organization based on the faith of one of the groups recognized as national minorities, including Assyrians, Kurds, Russians, and Yezidis, among others. A religious community may appeal a decision by the Office of the State Registrar through the courts.

The criminal code prohibits “obstruction of the right to exercise freedom of religion” and prescribes punishment ranging from fines of up to 200,000 drams (\$420) to detention for up to two months.

The Office of the Human Rights Defender (ombudsman) has a mandate to address violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of religion, committed by officials of state and local governments.

The law prohibits police and employees of the NSS, the service for mandatory enforcement of court rulings, penitentiary service, and rescue service from being a member of a religious organization; however, the law does not define the meaning of “membership” in a religious organization. The law prohibits members of police, military, and NSS, as well as prosecutors, customs officials, diplomats, and other national, community, and civil servants, from using their official positions for the benefit of “religious associations” or from preaching in support of them. The law also prohibits police, prosecutors, and other state and civil servants from

conducting other religious activities while performing official duties. While the law defines a “religious organization” as an association of citizens established for professing a common faith as well as for fulfilling other religious needs, it provides no definition for “religious associations.” A military service member may not establish a religious association. If a member of the military is a member of a religious association, the member does not have the right to preach to other service personnel during military service.

The penitentiary code allows penal institutions to invite clergy members to conduct religious ceremonies and use religious objects and literature. Prisoners may request spiritual assistance from the religious group of their choice. A joint Ministry of Defense-AAC agreement allows only AAC clergy to serve as military chaplains.

The law allows the AAC free access and the right to station representatives in, hospitals, orphanages, boarding schools, military units, and places of detention, while other religious groups may have representatives in these locations only with permission from the head of the institution. The law also stipulates the state will not interfere with the AAC’s exclusive right to preach freely and spread its beliefs throughout the entire territory of the country.

The law mandates public education be secular and states, “Religious activity and preaching in public educational institutions is prohibited,” with the exception of cases provided for by law. While adding a history of the Armenian Church (HAC) course in a public or private school is optional, once a school chooses to do so, the course becomes mandatory for all students in grades five to 11; there is no opt-out provision for students or their parents.

The AAC has the right to participate in the development of the syllabi and textbooks for the HAC course and to define the qualifications of their teachers. While the Church may nominate candidates to teach the course, HAC teachers are state employees. The law grants the AAC the right to organize voluntary extracurricular religious instruction classes in state educational institutions. Other religious groups may provide religious instruction to their members in their own facilities, but not within the premises of state educational institutions.

The labor code prohibits employers from collecting and analyzing data on the religious views of employees.

The law provides for two types of service for conscientious objectors as an alternative to compulsory, two-year military service: alternative (noncombat) military service for 30 months, or alternative labor service for 36 months. Evasion of alternative service is a criminal offense. Penalties range from two months' detention to eight years' imprisonment, depending on the circumstances of the case.

The criminal code prohibits incitement of religious hatred calling for violence through public statements, mass media, or using one's public position, and prescribes punishments ranging from fines of 200,000 to 500,000 drams (\$420 to \$1,100) to prison terms of between three and six years.

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

### **Government Practices**

During the year, Edward Manasyan, a prominent member of the Baha'i community, continued to face charges of facilitating illegal migration to the country by advising Iranians wishing to settle in Armenia. He was arrested and charged in 2017 and held under pretrial detention for eight months before the trial court judge released him on bail in July 2018. Local NGOs and human rights lawyers shared concerns about the surveillance of Baha'i community members preceding Manasyan's arrest, which they believed was approved in violation of the law because it violated lawyer-client privilege. In April the Baha'i community filed a countersuit against the NSS with the Court of Appeals, stating the NSS illegally used wiretaps to surveil a Baha'i community member and the community's office and used the information gathered as the basis to charge Manasyan. According to the documents provided to the Baha'i community, the surveillance authorizations were approved based on the assertion that Manasyan was the head of a "religious-sectarian" organization and was "soul-hunting," but no charges were proffered on these grounds.

Most public and private schools continued to teach HAC courses throughout the country in grades five through 11. There were anecdotal reports that at least one public school in Yerevan and two public schools in Yezidi villages did not teach the course.

Yezidi community representatives again reported dissatisfaction with the mandatory HAC course, terming it "religious indoctrination." While schools with an all-Yezidi student body were able to remove the course from their curriculum,

Yezidi children who attended schools with a mixed student body were obliged to take the course, regardless of parental objections. According to the December *Alternative Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child with a Focus on Yezidi Children in Armenia* prepared by local NGOs, minority children were frequently deprived of their freedom to practice their religion and faced a number of challenges in preserving and expressing their ethnic and religious identities. The report identified schools, and HAC classes in particular, as the main setting where the right of minority children to freedom of religion was frequently abused. According to the report, in addition to obliging children of religious minorities to learn about and discuss religious beliefs other than their own, the class often included religious practices such as group prayer, Bible reading, the presence of church clergy in the classroom, school trips to religious sites, and participation in religious celebrations and ceremonies. The report identified widespread discriminatory attitudes as another obstacle to the realization of freedom of religion for minority children, including the usage of “Yezidi” as an insult. According to the report, Yezidi children tended to conceal their identity from teachers and classmates to avoid discrimination. This behavior occurred most often in schools in Yerevan and other locations where Yezidis are a small minority.

Several non-AAC religious groups again said they did not object to the inclusion of the HAC course in public schools, although some objected to the prayers and making the signs of the cross, reportedly occurring during those classes, and said they would like to see a more accurate portrayal of religious groups other than the AAC. The Ministry of Education again stated that during the year it did not receive any complaints about the HAC course and that it had instructed HAC teachers to maintain the secular nature of the class and refrain from religious propaganda. According to various minority religious groups, the personality of the teacher was the crucial factor in the treatment of minority children in class. Christian groups reported no egregious cases of classroom discrimination. Cases that Christian groups considered as minor, such as perceived unfavorable treatment of a student by a teacher because of the student’s religion, were resolved between parents and schools, according to those groups. Most religious organizations said classroom discrimination was likely more common in the regions outside Yerevan where they said tolerance for religious diversity was less common.

NGOs, other religious organizations, atheists, and nonpracticing members of the AAC continued to publicly voice concerns about what they stated were elements of religious indoctrination contained in the HAC course, as well as material equating AAC affiliation with national identity. There were reports of AAC clergy teaching the course in some schools and requiring visits to AAC churches as part of the

course without providing opportunities for discussion of other faiths or for students to visit non-AAC religious sites. According to the government, during the 2018-19 academic year (September-May), AAC clergy members taught the HAC course in less than 1 percent of all schools. According to official information provided to the Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF), AAC priests taught the HAC course in six schools, four public and two private.

According to media reports, the government's plans to review the HAC curriculum and possibly replace it with a broader History of Religions class spurred heated debate, with more traditional groups describing the plans as an attack on Armenian identity and stating the course was needed to stop the spread of "sects." On November 4, Prime Minister Pashinyan in a live Facebook broadcast discussed the issue of the HAC course, questioning the separate teaching of AAC and general Armenian history classes. In an interview with RFE/RL Armenia, AAC Chancellor Bishop Arshak Khachatryan said the position of the AAC had not changed and that in the Church's opinion HAC should remain a separate course. In the same media report, historian Vahram Tokmajyan said the ongoing discussions around the HAC were a "fake agenda," since before any substantive changes could be made to the school curriculum, new official educational objectives had to be adopted, a lengthy process expected to last until 2021-2022. Some observers said the discussion of the HAC course was being used by government opponents to manipulate public opinion.

According to the EPF, the following phenomena connected with the HAC course raised concerns: performing religious rituals or elements of religious rituals during classes; preaching and sowing hatred against religious organizations other than the AAC; equating religious and national identity; sowing intolerance toward other opinions; and hindering creative and critical thinking. According to some minority religious groups, a similar intolerance of religious groups other than the AAC, including slurs insulting minority religions, also occurred in universities.

Based on a Ministry of Education program launched in 2012, school administrations continued to have the option to include an additional course, entitled "History of the AAC/Christian Education," in their curriculum for grades two through four. During the new school year, 74 schools followed this option, the same number as the previous year.

According to the government, as in 2018, no religious groups other than the AAC requested to visit a military unit. The chaplaincy program, a joint Ministry of

Defense-AAC initiative, continued to allow only AAC clergy to serve in the program.

According to official information from the Ministry of Justice, to satisfy the spiritual needs of detainees and convicts, AAC clergymen regularly visited penitentiaries, organized baptisms, offered liturgies, and celebrated holidays. Representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Armenian Evangelical Church visited penitentiaries seven, four, and 17 times, respectively, during the first nine months of the year for spiritual conversations with convicts.

On March 12, *Epress.am*, an independent online news outlet focused on human rights, published an article entitled "The Army Converts Atheists." The article reprinted a copy of a questionnaire, initially posted by a Facebook user and reportedly distributed in military commissariats to be completed by future conscripts. One of the questions was: "Religious affiliation: if you belong to or are affiliated with any religious sect, belief, faction, or organization. You must also indicate since which year, as well as which of your family members belong to this or another belief. If not, fill in as a follower of the Armenian Apostolic Church." The government did not respond directly to the news item but stated the Ministry of Defense did not organize discussions or seek information on the religious affiliations of conscripts.

On February 19, the Center for Religion and Law filed a lawsuit on behalf of a teacher in Yelpin Village in Vayots Dzor Region against her school administration, requesting the 2017 decision reducing her classes be rescinded, the number of classes she taught restored, she be paid back wages, and the fact she was subjected to discrimination on religious grounds be acknowledged. According to the Center for Religion and Law, the teacher had become a subject of discrimination based on her religion after the parents of students had accused the teacher of belonging to a "sect" because she was a member of an evangelical Christian church. The parents initially stopped allowing their children to attend her classes, stating they feared she might indoctrinate them. The acting principal temporarily restored the teachers' hours despite community pressure, including the threat that he would not be elected principal on a permanent basis unless the teacher was removed. As of early December, the teacher continued to teach at the school, and the acting principal had managed to convince the parents to send their children to her class.

According to the Center for Religion and Law, in October 2018, the national chief of police dismissed longtime police officer, Edgar Karapetyan, on the grounds he

was attending an evangelical Christian church and, according to police, was a member of a religious organization, although it was not customary for religious groups to maintain membership records. According to local observers, the same legal restrictions were not enforced for AAC members. The Center for Religion and Law appealed the dismissal to the Administrative Court and requested Karapetyan be reinstated, paid back wages, and that the court acknowledge he had been subjected to discrimination on religious grounds. The Administrative Court suspended the hearings and appealed to the Constitutional Court to determine if the relevant provisions of the law on police service complied with the constitution. On September 13, the Constitutional Court accepted the appeal. The court did not rule on the case by year's end.

There were reports from other minority religious groups that their members were discriminated against in seeking public employment. Some individuals employed by public offices or law enforcement said they were afraid to make their religious affiliation known at the workplace or attend church services because they feared losing their jobs if they did so.

Even though there was no mechanism for enforcement of the legal provision prohibiting funding of religious organizations by spiritual centers located outside the country, several religious organizations said they adhered to the ban and restricted their operations because they did not want to violate the law.

Members of Jehovah's Witnesses said they continued to face difficulties in building places of worship because of interference by local officials throughout the country. At year's end, three cases dating from 2016 were pending before the European Court of Human Rights regarding the prohibition by the Yerevan City Municipality on building places of worship on land owned by the Jehovah's Witnesses. Other minority religious groups also reported problems receiving the necessary permits and spoke of the informal role played by the AAC in blocking those permissions. According to some groups, because of the difficulties in building a new place of worship, they instead purchased existing properties and reconfigured them to meet the community's religious needs.

At year's end, 129 Jehovah's Witnesses were working in the alternative civilian service program, compared with 123 in 2018. The alternative service appointments included positions in various hospitals; local utility companies; park maintenance services; and facilities such as boarding schools, eldercare facilities, and orphanages. According to government sources, Jehovah's Witnesses were the only individuals participating in these programs, and none chose to serve in the

alternative military service (military service that does not involve combat duty or the carrying, keeping, maintaining, or using of arms).

On January 29, Prime Minister Pashinyan established by decree a working group on government-AAC relations. The prime minister's chief of staff led the working group, which included deputy ministers of justice, defense, education, and other ministries and agencies, as well as five representatives of the AAC, including Chancellor of the AAC Bishop Khachatryan. Prime Minister Pashinyan and Catholicos of All Armenians Garegin II co-chaired the group's first meeting on May 3. The prime minister noted AAC's unique role in the preservation of national identity and stated that the working group would review relations between the state and Church and discuss issues such as taxation and the mandatory teaching of the HAC course in schools.

On May 24, Prime Minister Pashinyan participated in an EPC regional conference held in Yerevan entitled "Contemporary Issues of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Armenia, Georgia, and Beyond." The prime minister emphasized the government's commitment to religious freedom. In his welcoming speech he stated, "Freedom of religion, freedom to believe in God is first of all the freedom of an individual to believe in himself."

During Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan's participation in the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom held in Washington D.C in July, he stated, "Armenia became a safe haven for a number of vulnerable religious minorities, particularly Yezidis and Assyrians. Today Yezidis are the strongest minority group in Armenia, and we are very proud that the biggest temple of this ancient people very soon will open in their Armenian homeland."

On September 29, the world's largest Yezidi temple, Quba Mere Diwane, opened in the small village of Aknalich in Armavir Region. Speaker of Parliament Mirzoyan said at the opening, "It is symbolic and logical that the largest Yezidi temple in the world is in Armenia. Armenia is a home for the Yezidi people. The children of the Yezidi people have been standing beside their Armenian brothers at many fatal and heroic moments." Many Yezidis interviewed at the celebration stated the opening of the temple was an important step for the preservation of Yezidi culture and religion, while others said the primary purpose of the temple was more likely to serve as a tourist attraction. A private venture maintained by the family that funded its construction, and sited on private land, the temple attracted tourists during the year in addition to serving as a site for Yezidi funerals.

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

According to several minority religious groups, negative private media portrayals and hate speech continued to be some of the most difficult problems their communities faced. Some groups reported problems with ensuring coverage of events by private broadcast media and the reluctance of editors to interview leaders of religious groups other than the ACC about their views and activities. Another minority religious group reported societal and family pressure as the most significant deterrent for their members to freely practice their belief.

According to observers, extremely offensive anti-Semitic slurs were posted on social media platforms, in some cases together with cartoons depicting Jews in an offensive manner. The use of offensive slurs was particularly prevalent in posts on Facebook by anonymous antigovernment individuals targeting the Jewish leader of an international foundation. Some posts commented on a “Turkish-Masonic-Jewish” conspiracy aimed against the Armenian people.

On November 26, an AAC priest published an article entitled “Sects” on the website of one of the churches of the Araratian Pontifical Diocese, where he discussed several religious groups, including the Church of Jesus Christ, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals, Protestants, and others, referring to them as “sects.” According to the priest, “Sectarian organizations hurt our nation by creating divisions among our people, removing it from our Holy Church and the true faith of our ancestors.”

A minority religious group reported that an AAC priest, who in September 2018 blamed the “evangelical sect” for the country’s loss of statehood in the past and accused it of working with the country’s historic enemy, the Turks, continued to enter public schools during the year. The priest urged students not to attend Sunday schools organized by evangelical Christian churches, even though the AAC had reportedly advised him not to provide such advice.

According to media analysts, private individuals affiliated with or sympathetic to the former government ousted in 2018 continued to use religious issues to denounce the government. According to media and religious freedom experts, those individuals used various websites, controversial blogs, local troll factories, false Facebook groups, and false stories to propagate the idea that the revolution was carried out by minority religious groups or “sects” (commonly considered any group other than the AAC).

The NSS continued its 2018 criminal case on charges of incitement of religious hatred against the creators of a 2018 Facebook page that falsely presented itself as associated both with the Word of Life Church and the prime minister's Civil Contract party. According to Word of Life representatives, the Facebook page posted a photograph of the senior pastor of the Church and included an article with anti-Armenian and anti-AAC statements, causing a public uproar against the Church. On April 8, the prosecution charged Iranian-Armenian dual citizen Armen Abi in this case; the investigation continued through year's end.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, there were incidents of verbal harassment toward the group's members while publicly manifesting their religious beliefs. During the year, there were 16 reported instances of verbal harassment, compared with 12 in 2018 and 32 in 2017. In some cases, unknown individuals overturned and damaged the group's literature display carts. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, police responded promptly and issued warnings when individuals were identified, and as a result, the number of incidents decreased compared with previous years. Some other religious groups also reported anecdotal incidents of harassment by local community members, including some who said they were harassed by locals who had misidentified them as Jehovah's Witnesses.

There is one Shia mosque, located in Yerevan, serving all Islamic groups.

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

The Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to promote religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue during meetings with government officials. The Ambassador and other embassy officials raised reported discrimination against minority religious groups, including religious education in schools. Embassy officials monitored the trial of the Baha'i charged and facing prosecution on what the group stated were religious grounds.

The Ambassador regularly met with representatives of the government, political parties, social groups, and religious minorities to discuss problems of discrimination faced by religious minorities, foster a dialogue between the government and the religious groups, and explore cooperative solutions to those problems. In August the Ambassador hosted an event to foster interreligious dialogue, mutual respect, and cooperation, bringing together representatives of religious and ethnic minorities, civil society, and the government to discuss issues of concern and foster a dialogue among the groups.

On September 17, the Ambassador and national and local government officials marked the completion of a U.S.-funded cultural preservation project in Meghri, Syunik Region. Launched in 2016, the project involved the preservation of the most critically endangered parts of the AAC Saint Hovhannes Church and the restoration of its rare 17th century frescoes, painted in the unique Persian-Armenian style.

The Ambassador met with leaders of the AAC and engaged them on the importance of supporting the right of religious minorities to practice their faiths without restrictions.

Embassy officials attended conferences and discussions on nondiscrimination, national religious minorities, and religious tolerance regularly hosted by the EPF, including a regional conference held in Yerevan titled, “Contemporary Issues of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Armenia, Georgia, and Beyond.” Embassy officials participated in the EPF Annual Media Award jury and February 26 ceremony to support religious tolerance in media.

In October embassy officials visited an Assyrian village in Armavir Region and in December the new Yezidi temple in Aknalich Village. They held regular meetings with representatives of the AAC and religious and ethnic minorities, including evangelical Christians and other Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses, adherents of the Church of Jesus Christ, Yezidis, the Jewish community, Apostolic Assyrians, Pentecostals, and Baha’is, as well as meeting with individual Muslims. In these meetings, embassy officials and religious group representatives discussed the state of religious freedom in the country, including minority religious group concerns. They also met with civil society groups to discuss concerns about the HAC course taught in public schools, as well as the importance of respect for religious freedom in the country.

The embassy used social media, including Twitter and Facebook, to send messages supporting religious diversity and tolerance.