

ARGENTINA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and laws provide for freedom of religion and the right to profess freely one's faith. The constitution grants the Roman Catholic Church preferential legal status, but there is no official state religion. Several religious groups continued to express frustration that the government required them to register as both civil associations and religious groups to be eligible for benefits that the Catholic Church received without requiring registration. They also continued to criticize a 2020 General Inspectorate of Justice (IGJ) resolution requiring all civil associations, including religious groups, to have gender parity on their administrative and oversight bodies. Although many religious leaders supported continuing government COVID-19 restrictions on public gatherings, they criticized specific incidents and restrictions that prevented or broke up religious gatherings. In May, provincial police halted and dispersed an open-air Mass in Androque, Buenos Aires Province, attended by approximately 120 persons. According to the president of the interfaith Argentine Council for Religious Freedom (CALIR), local and national authorities repeatedly violated the right to religious freedom throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. On July 16, the 27th anniversary of the bombing of the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA) community center, AMIA president Ariel Eichbaum urged the government to "intensify pressure on Lebanon and the Islamic Republic of Iran to cooperate on the investigation and extradite the accused that they are currently protecting." President Alberto Fernandez told Jewish community leaders he wanted to see progress in bringing to justice those responsible for the 1994 bombing, in which 86 persons died. During the year, several religious groups and individuals protested the legalization of some abortions in January, including through statements, protests, and the refusal of some medical professional to perform abortions. Numerous public and private entities adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism during the year, including the government of Santiago del Estero Province, according to a representative of the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

During the year, media reported the country experienced increases in overall antisemitic incidents in the forms of violence, hate speech, and misinformation. According to media and the Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations (DAIA), there were violent attacks targeting Jews during the year, including a beating in January of an Orthodox Jewish father and some of his children in Cordoba Province and an attack in March in Buenos Aires by a woman on two Jewish Orthodox women. Interreligious groups such as the Interreligious Committee for

Peace in Argentina, whose members include Catholic, Protestant, evangelical Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Baha'i, as well as indigenous religious groups and CALIR, continued work to promote tolerance and increase opportunities for interreligious action on common societal challenges.

U.S. embassy officials met with senior government officials, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship's (MFA) human rights office to discuss ways to promote respect for religious minorities and counteract religious discrimination. The Charge d'Affaires spoke in September at AMIA's in-person commemoration for the victims of 9/11 and said, "In our grief, the spirit of unity with like-minded partners like our friends at AMIA strengthens our resolve to continue to fight extremism and make the world a better, safer place for our children." Embassy officials supported interfaith cooperation and universal respect for freedom of religion through public statements and social media postings, as well as in meetings with religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 45.9 million (midyear 2021). According to a 2019 survey by CONICET, the country's national research institute, 62.9 percent of the population is Catholic; 15.3 Protestant, including evangelical Christian groups; 18.9 percent no religion, which includes agnostics; 1.4 percent Jehovah's Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ); 1.2 percent other, including Muslims and Jews; and 0.3 percent unknown. Other sources state Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutherans, Methodists, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ together total 3 percent of the population. According to the Jewish Virtual Library, Jews numbered 180,000 in 2019. The Islamic Center estimates the Muslim population at 800,000 to 1,000,000. Evangelical Christian communities, particularly Pentecostals, are growing, but no reliable statistics are available. There are also small numbers of Baha'is, Buddhists, and adherents of indigenous religions.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the right to profess, teach, and practice freely one's faith. It declares the support of the federal government for "the Roman Catholic

Apostolic faith,” but the Supreme Court has ruled that it is not an official or state religion.

The government provides the Catholic Church with tax-exempt subsidies, institutional privileges such as school subsidies, significant autonomy for parochial schools, and licensing preferences for radio frequencies. The law does not require the Catholic Church to register with the Secretariat of Worship in the MFA. Registration is not compulsory for other religious groups, but registered groups receive the same status and fiscal benefits as the Catholic Church, including tax-exempt status, visas for religious officials, and the ability to hold public activities. To register, religious groups must have a place of worship, an organizational charter, and an ordained clergy, among other requirements. To access many of these benefits, religious groups must also register as a civil association through the IGJ.

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

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

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

The law prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, nationality, ideology, politics, sex, economic or social condition, or physical characteristics, and it requires those found guilty of discriminatory acts to pay damages or serve jail time. Discrimination may also be an aggravating factor in other crimes,

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

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

Government Practices

Representatives of several religious groups continued to state that a government requirement for religious groups to register first with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship and then with the Ministry of Interior as a civil association was redundant, noting the Catholic Church faced no such requirement. The groups said these legal processes were prerequisites for seeking tax-exempt status, visas for foreign clergy, and permission to hold public activities. Religious group representatives said they deserved a unique process, separate from that for civil associations.

Representatives of some religious groups continued to criticize a 2020 IGJ resolution requiring all civil associations, including religious groups, to have gender parity on their administrative and oversight bodies. Several religious groups continued to state this requirement was unconstitutional and violated religious freedom. They also said the government had not implemented the resolution by year's end and they knew of no religious organizations penalized for failing to comply with it.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government limited through September the size of religious activities nationwide to a maximum of 20 persons in enclosed or private open-air spaces, and to 100 persons in public open-air spaces. It similarly limited cultural, social, and recreational activities but did not limit to the same degree professional gatherings, government events, and educational events. On October 1, the government allowed full capacity for religious activities, although events of more than 1,000 persons required stricter protocols.

On May 2, provincial police halted and dispersed an open-air Mass in Androque, Buenos Aires Province, attended by approximately 120 persons. According to a police statement, the event was “openly in noncompliance” with national anti-COVID-19 restrictions. Local media reported that attendees said the Mass was broken up “on very good terms.” In a May 4 statement, CALIR president Juan Navarro said these police actions were not an isolated event and that local and national authorities had repeatedly violated the right to religious freedom throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

On September 7, CALIR released a statement objecting to some municipalities’ prohibitions on religious services on Sunday, September 12, because of nationwide primary elections and related COVID-19 precautions. Although federal law prohibits large gatherings and acts of proselytism on election days, authorities generally allowed religious services. Local media reported that the municipalities of Merlo and Bahia Blanca, in Buenos Aires Province, issued prohibitions on religious gatherings for September 12, but Merlo’s authorities retracted the order after consulting with local religious leaders.

According to Jewish community leaders, there was no progress in bringing the accused perpetrators of the 1994 AMIA bombing to justice. On July 18, the 27th anniversary of the AMIA bombing, AMIA president Eichbaum urged the government to “intensify pressure on Lebanon and the Islamic Republic of Iran to cooperate on the investigation and extradite the accused that they are currently protecting.” On July 14, President Fernandez and Secretary of Worship Guillermo Oliveri hosted AMIA leaders at the presidential residence to discuss the pursuit of justice and Fernandez told them he wanted to see progress in bringing to justice those responsible for the 1994 bombing. On July 18, Fernandez tweeted his support for families of the victims, writing, “In 27 years since the AMIA attack, the families of the 85 victims stand firm in their call for truth and justice. In memory of each one of them and in honor of those that lost their loved ones, we should stand united against impunity.” In response to Fernandez, dozens of individuals criticized what some called the “hypocrisy” of his message because of their perception that the government was complicit in allowing the impunity to occur.

In August, the MFA denounced the Iranian government’s appointment of two suspects in the AMIA bombing to senior positions in a new Iranian government. According to the MFA statement, the appointments of Ahmad Vahidi as Interior Minister and Mohsen Rezai as Vice President for Economic Affairs were an affront to the Argentine justice system and to the victims of the bombing, adding

that both Rezai and Vahidi played key roles in the decision making and planning of the AMIA attack. It called on the Iranian government to cooperate fully with Argentine judicial authorities and to allow the suspects to be tried by a competent court.

According to press reports, on October 7, judges dropped obstruction of justice charges against Vice President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner in relation to a Memorandum of Understanding signed with Iran in 2013 when she was president. The court stated that the memorandum, “regardless of whether it is considered a political success or a failure, did not constitute a crime or an act of cover up.” On October 25, DAIA appealed the ruling, which remained pending at year end.

On January 24, a law entered into effect legalizing abortions through the 14th week of pregnancy and in later stages if the pregnancy was the result of rape or threatened the life of the mother. Many religious organizations, including the Catholic Church and the Christian Alliance of Evangelical Churches (ACIERA), criticized the law, and a growing number of medical professionals – especially in rural areas – refused to perform abortions on religious and ethical grounds. Most of the 120 gynecologists in the province of Jujuy, for example, declared themselves as conscientious objectors, as permitted in the law.

On March 27, approximately 50,000 persons, according to organizers, participated in marches in 14 of the 23 provinces to express their support for overturning the abortion law. With the encouragement of ACIERA, marchers demonstrated in Rio Negro, Tucuman, Chubut, Entre Rios, Cordoba, Buenos Aires, Chaco, Corrientes, Salta, Mendoza, Chaco, Corrientes, Santiago del Estero, and Santa Fe Provinces.

Catholic Church representatives continued to discuss measures to reduce their use of federal funding following a 2018 agreement between the government and the Argentine Episcopal Conference (CEA), representing the Catholic Church, that delineated a formal, mutually agreed plan to gradually reduce the state’s direct financial support to the Church. Under the agreement, government funding primarily allocated for the salaries of bishops and stipends for seminarians decreased from almost 157 million pesos (\$1.46 million) in 2019 to 150 million pesos (\$1.39 million) in 2020.

On May 20, Juan Carlos Giordano, a representative of the lower house of congress and member of the Socialist Left Party, stated during a session of congress, “An end must be brought to the Zionist state and a unified state must be imposed across the entirety of the historical territory of the Palestine – lay, not racist, and

democratic.” DAIA denounced the statement, stating that it met the IHRA definition of antisemitism, as adopted by the lower house of congress in June 2020. By year’s end, the lower house had not sanctioned Giordano.

On January 6, Pablo Ansaloni, a representative of the lower house of congress and a leader of the Argentine Union of Rural Workers (UATRE), told a virtual meeting of the union, “We are more united than ever, no one can break us – no one from beyond our province, because they are like the Jews, they have no homeland, they don’t know where they are or who they represent.” Ansaloni faced criticism for his comments from several civil society actors, including DAIA and UATRE. On January 20, UATRE dismissed Ansaloni, stating his dismissal was due to his antisemitic statements.

Numerous public and private entities adopted the IHRA definition of antisemitism during the year, including the government of Santiago del Estero Province, according to a representative of the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

Secretary of Worship Guillermo Oliveri, Human Rights Secretary Horacio Pietragalla, and other government representatives again participated in religious freedom conferences, interreligious dialogues, Catholic services, and Rosh Hashanah observances, as well as other religious activities, including those held by Protestant and Orthodox churches. They often did so virtually or through recorded videos, due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions on public gatherings.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

During the year, media reported the country experienced overall increases in antisemitic incidents. According to media and DAIA, in January, individuals forcibly stopped an Orthodox Jewish family traveling by car from La Falda to La Cumbre in Cordoba Province and yelled “[expletive] Jews, get out of here. Death to the Jews!” When the father of the family left his vehicle to attempt to calm the situation, the assailants beat him and continued to shout epithets. After his children tried to intervene, they too were beaten. According to the report, the father and children managed to get back into the car and later filed a police report. Authorities later arrested the suspected assailants but took no further action through year’s end. DAIA denounced the incident.

On February 19, actor and singer Nicolas Pauls posted on Instagram a cartoon depicting a gigantic sleeved arm with a Star of David on it and a hand pressing down on dozens of persons with the caption, “To know who rules over you, simply

discover whom you may not criticize.” Martin Souto, a television host and friend of Pauls, reposted the picture. Both faced intense criticism from social media, and both later apologized publicly.

According to *vis-a-vis* news portal, in March, an unidentified woman rammed her car into another car in which two Orthodox Jewish women were traveling in downtown Buenos Aires. According to a witness, after the Orthodox Jewish women exited their car, the assailant pulled off the *sheytl* (wig worn by Orthodox Jewish women) of one of the women and then pushed her to the ground, shouting, “You [expletive] Jew. I’m going to kill you; you should all have died in the Holocaust!” Police at first ordered the female assailant to leave but later arrested her after she tried to run over the two Jewish women.

On March 2, unknown vandals damaged the sanctuary of Our Lady of Peace Cathedral in Lomas de Zamora, Buenos Aires Province, stealing crowns from statues of the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus.

On May 22, journalist Hugo Ojeda published an article entitled, “Song to Palestineuschwitz,” that compared Israeli actions in Palestinian territories to Nazi concentration camps, adding that Israel’s “ethnic cleaning operations . . . exceeded the crimes that the genocidal Nazis of the past century inflicted on gypsies, communists, homosexuals and jews [sic].” DAIA condemned Ojeda’s article, and the publisher *Pagina 12* later deleted the article. Ojeda made no public apology.

In June, the Israeli Ambassador remarked during a panel at the College of Law in La Plata that the country was breaching its trade obligations by restricting shipments of meat to Israel. In response, the owner of a chain of butcher shops and former Justicialist Party politician, Alberto Samid, tweeted, “The best that could happen is that the Jews no longer buy meat from us . . . the world does not want to sell them anything. They are a disaster as clients.” Samid did not apologize for his remarks despite receiving widespread public criticism. In April, Samid accused pharmaceutical company Insud CEO Hugo Sigman of selling COVID-19 Astra-Zeneca vaccines to the “gringos.” Samid wrote on Twitter, “This MOISHE has no limits. He never gets tired of stealing from us!!!! When are we going to go to Garin [the town where Insud is located] to block his laboratory?”

On June 3, unknown individuals spray-painted an evangelical Christian church in Neuquen Province and several Catholic institutions in San Luis Province during a day of nationwide protest against gender-based violence. The Secretariat of

Worship decried the vandalism in a statement on social media, noting that it distracted from the demonstrators' message promoting women's rights.

On July 26, DAIA objected to the use of Anne Frank's likeness during an episode of *Showmatch*, a gameshow on the private television station *El Trece*. Producers projected a photograph of Anne Frank alongside a contestant singing about women "who don't leave the house." This incident was reported to the public defender. The show's producers issued a joint communique with the Anne Frank Center in Buenos Aires calling the episode an "unintentional error" and pledging to use it as a "learning experience."

In August, evangelical Christian groups, including ACIERA, denounced a television production for Netflix entitled *El Reino* ("The Kingdom"), stating it fomented stereotypes and prejudices against evangelical Christian groups. The plot depicted a fictional evangelical Christian pastor of questionable ethics who runs for president.

On August 23, prominent lawyer Alejandro Fargosi attacked parliamentarian and human rights activist Myriam Bregman as a "militant leftist Jew." Fargosi's comments were widely criticized on social media, both by political figures and Nobel Laureate Adolfo Perez Esquivel, and President Fernandez expressed his solidarity with Bregman on Twitter. Bregman told local media that Fargosi never apologized.

On August 27, lawyer Gregorio Dalbon made antisemitic comments during a radio interview. Dalbon, whose clients included President Fernandez and Vice President Fernandez de Kirchner, accused the Jewish community of bribing a prosecutor in charge of the investigation of a violation of quarantine by President Fernandez, his wife, and friends. DAIA condemned Dalbon's comments. On August 31, Dalbon publicly apologized, after apparently meeting with DAIA officials. According to media, on September 2, a group of judges requested Dalbon's suspension from the Argentine Bar Association for these and what they stated were other offensive comments.

In September, individuals were caught trying to steal 223 bronze plaques from headstones in La Tablada Jewish Cemetery in Buenos Aires. The week before, more than 100 headstones had been smashed. AMIA leaders implored local authorities to provide more security at the cemetery, saying it appeared to be a "free zone."

A September 15 article from the University of Buenos Aires' student media criticized the lack of Muslim viewpoints in local media during events in Afghanistan. The article, noting a rise in anti-Muslim sentiment, described an incident in which a Muslim student was heckled as she stepped from a bus with, "Be careful, she has a bomb!"

On September 24, unknown vandals damaged the sanctuary of the Cathedral of San Maron in the Retiro neighborhood of Buenos Aires and stole items from the church. The CEA and Secretary of Worship Oliveri denounced the vandalism.

Interreligious groups such as the Interreligious Committee for Peace in Argentina, whose members included Catholic, Protestant, evangelical Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Baha'i, as well as indigenous religious groups and CALIR, continued to work on increasing opportunities for interreligious action on common societal challenges. CALIR issued statements denouncing acts of vandalism against religious institutions and sponsored local conferences, including a regional forum on religious freedom held on October 28-29.

In October, Jews, Christians, and Muslims jointly painted over Nazi symbols that had been placed on Jewish gravestones in the Jewish community of Santa Fe cemetery. According to Horacio Roitman, Santa Fe's DAIA representative, this response to the acts of hatred was "owed to the whole society."

According to a University of San Martin study released in June, nearly 40 percent of the population believed that "Jewish businessmen" were benefiting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Asked whether they agreed with the statement, "Behind the coronavirus pandemic, there are figures such as Soros and laboratories of Jewish businessmen who seek to profit financially," 30 percent of respondents said they concurred "strongly." An additional 7 percent agreed to some extent with the statement. Of the 43 percent of respondents who disagreed, 38 percent completely rejected the statement, and 19 percent said they either did not know or were indifferent. The study's main author, Ezequiel Ipar, said he was surprised by the "magnitude of antisemitic sentiment," particularly among youth.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with government representatives, including from the MFA's Secretariat of Worship and human rights office, to discuss ways to promote respect for religious minorities and interfaith cooperation. In meetings with government officials, the Charge d' Affaires and other embassy officials discussed tolerance and

understanding among the country's many religious groups, the country's interfaith movement, and measures to counteract religious discrimination.

In July, the Charge d'Affaires toured a COVID-19 vaccination center hosted by the King Fahd Islamic Cultural Center in Buenos Aires and met with its leaders. They discussed the relationship of members of the center with the government, the community, and other faith groups.

In July, embassy officials attended an online commemoration to mourn the victims of the 1994 terrorist attack on the AMIA. The embassy and AMIA also collaborated in September for an AMIA-produced remembrance video for the victims of 9/11, and the Charge d'Affaires delivered remarks alongside AMIA president Eichbaum at an in-person memorial event. The Charge said, "In our grief, the spirit of unity with like-minded partners like our friends at AMIA strengthens our resolve to continue to fight extremism and make the world a better, safer place for our children." In September, embassy officials met with DAIA, AMIA, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and the Simon Wiesenthal Center to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country and ways in which the embassy could support communities of all faiths.

Embassy outreach included virtual conversations with religious and community leaders, including those of the CEA, the Church of Jesus Christ, ACIERA, the Islamic Center of Argentina, the NGO Islam for Peace, DAIA, and AMIA. In the meetings, embassy officials discussed the status of religious freedom and interfaith dialogue and ways to promote them. The embassy's social media accounts also promoted respect for religious diversity.