

GEORGIA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for “complete freedom of religion,” separation of church and state, and equality for all regardless of religion. It also prohibits persecution on the basis of religion. Laws and policies favor the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), granting it privileges not accorded to any other religious group. Religious organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) criticized the State Agency on Religious Issues (SARI, also known as State Agency for Religious Affairs), which carried out the government’s policy on religion and functioned as its consultative body on religious issues. The Norwegian Centre for Human Rights cited SARI’s unclear mandate and lack of transparency in transferring property and financially compensating four religious groups for damages sustained during the Soviet era, and assessed that its mission gave the appearance of promoting the financial and material interests of the GOC. The Tolerance Center at the Public Defender’s Office and NGOs criticized SARI’s draft strategy on religious policy for its focus on preventing internal interference by neighboring states via ethnic and religious groups. Local authorities at times failed to grant religious denominations permits to build new places of worship and the government failed to return some properties claimed by minority religious groups held by government entities. Restrictions on religious activities in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which remained outside the control of the central government, affected the GOC and Jehovah’s Witnesses, in particular.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported 51 cases of religious discrimination against them – a reduction from the previous year – including damage and vandalism of properties, threats and instances of verbal abuse, and obstacles to their holding religious services. Muslims continued to state that societal discrimination, as well as government inaction, blocked their efforts to open a private boarding school in Kobuleti. Representatives of minority religious groups reported a widespread belief that minority religious groups posed a threat to the GOC and to the country’s cultural values. NGOs reported some GOC clergy contributed to hostile societal attitudes towards minority religious communities. The media monitoring group Media Development Foundation (MDF) documented at least 77 instances of discriminatory remarks on the basis of religion in national media.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials met regularly with senior government officials, including SARI leadership, the prime minister’s adviser for human rights and gender equality, and the president’s adviser for minority issues, to encourage

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dialogue between the government and minority religious groups that emphasized societal tolerance, and traveled throughout the country to meet with minority religious communities. In February during SARI's presentation of its draft strategy on religious policy and at the April International Conference on Peace and Religion, in Batumi, the Ambassador urged the government to promote religious freedom and tolerance and avoid creating unintended divisions. In April the embassy organized a visit of an interfaith studies expert from the United States. The speaker promoted interfaith dialogue during appearances on broadcast and print media, discussions with students and Muslim youth, and meetings with religious groups, including the GOC.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.9 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2002 census, Georgian Orthodox Christians constitute 84 percent of the population, followed by Muslims at 10 percent and members of the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) at 4 percent.

There is a strong correlation between ethnicity, religious affiliation, and region of residence. Most ethnic Georgians are affiliated with the GOC. A small number of mostly ethnic Russians are members of several Orthodox groups not affiliated with the GOC, including the Molokani, Staroveriy (Old Believers), and Dukhoboriy (Spirit Wrestlers). Ethnic Azeris are predominantly Shia Muslim and form the majority of the population in the southeastern region of Kvemo-Kartli. Other Muslim groups include ethnic Georgian Muslims in Adjara and Chechen Kists in the northeast, both of which are predominantly Sunni. Many migrants living in the southern Samtskhe-Javakheti region are ethnic Georgian Sunni Muslims, originally from Adjara. Ethnic Armenians belong primarily to the AAC and constitute the majority of the population in Samtskhe-Javakheti.

According to the census, Roman Catholics, Kurdish Yezidis, Greek Orthodox, Jews, growing numbers of "nontraditional" religious groups such as Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, and the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishnas), and people who professed no religious preference, constitute the remaining 2 percent of the population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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The constitution provides for “complete freedom of religion” and equality for all regardless of religion. The constitution prohibits persecution on the basis of religion and prohibits compelling anyone to express his or her opinion about religion. The constitution also prohibits public and political associations that stir up religious animosity. The law provides for freedom of religious belief, denomination, and conscience, including the right to choose and change religious affiliation.

Although the constitution recognizes the special role of the GOC in the country’s history, it stipulates the independence of the GOC from the state while stating that relations between the GOC and the state shall be governed by a constitutional agreement (also called a concordat). The concordat between the government and the GOC confers unique status on the GOC; the government does not have a concordat with any other religious group. The concordat grants rights not given to other religious groups, including legal immunity for the GOC patriarch, the exclusive right to staff the military chaplaincy, exemption of GOC clergy from military service, and a consultative role in government, especially in education. Some of the concordat’s provisions, including the GOC’s consultative role in education, require implementing legislation yet to be adopted by parliament.

Religious groups may register with the government’s National Agency of the Public Registry (NAPR) as a Legal Entity of Public Law (LEPL) or as a nonprofit organization, both of which offer essentially the same benefits, including legal recognition when conducting activities, partial tax exemptions, and the right to own property and open bank accounts. Unregistered religious groups may carry out religious activities but do not receive the legal status or benefits conferred on registered groups.

To register as an LEPL, an organization must have historic ties to the country or legal recognition from Council of Europe member states as a religious organization, but the law does not state who determines what constitutes “historic ties.” In addition, an organization registering for LEPL status must submit to the NAPR information regarding its objectives and procedures and a list of its founders and governing body. The civil code defines the activities and rights of denominations registered under LEPL status. Groups registering as nonprofit religious organizations do not have to demonstrate historical ties to the country or recognition by Council of Europe members but are required to submit to the NAPR similar information about their objectives, governing procedures, and names of

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founders and members of their governing body.

The tax code considers religious activities not to be economic activities, and grants registered religious groups partial tax exemptions for donations. Religious groups other than the GOC pay profit tax on the sale of religious products, value added taxes on the provision or importation of religious products, and taxes on all activities related to the construction, restoration, and painting of religious buildings.

According to property law, no religious organization registered as an LEPL, except the GOC, can acquire nonagricultural state property through a direct sale. A denomination registered as a nonprofit organization may purchase state property. The law also grants the GOC the right to acquire state-owned agricultural land free of charge, while other religious groups must pay.

The criminal code prohibits interference with worship services, persecution of a person based on religious faith or belief, and interference with the establishment of a religious organization. Violations are punishable by fines, imprisonment, or both; violations committed by a public officer or official are considered abuses of power and are punishable by fines or longer terms of imprisonment if committed by force or arms, or by insulting the dignity of a victim. In cases of religious persecution, an individual may be imprisoned for up to three years depending upon the use or threat of violence, his or her official position, and damages caused. In cases of unlawful interference in the right to perform religious rituals involving the use or threat of violence, offenders may be imprisoned for up to two years, or in cases where the offender holds an official position, for up to five years. Interference in the establishment of a religious organization is punishable by fine, correctional work for up to one year, or imprisonment for up to two years.

Pursuant to the law, the Prosecutor General's Office (PGO) prosecutes human rights violations involving religious freedom. The Human Rights Unit within the PGO monitors the protection of religious freedom. The Public Defender's Office (PDO) serves as the human rights ombudsman and monitors complaints of restrictions on religious freedom.

SARI facilitates the compensation of Islamic, Jewish, Roman Catholic Church (RCC), and AAC religious organizations registered as LEPLs for "the material and moral damages inflicted upon them during the Soviet period." According to SARI, its mandate is to promote and ensure a peaceful coexistence on the basis of

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principles of equality and tolerance. In its draft strategy on religious policy published in February, SARI noted key responsibilities include researching the existing religious situation and reporting to the government; preparing recommendations and draft legal acts for the government; serving as a consultative body and intermediary for the government in disputes that may arise between religious associations; and issuing recommendations to relevant state institutions on the construction of religious buildings, the determination of their location, and the transferring of such properties to religious organizations.

Although the law states public schools cannot be used for the purposes of religious indoctrination, proselytizing, or forcible assimilation, the concordat gives the GOC the right to teach its religion in educational institutions and authorizes the state to pay for GOC religious schools. The law states students have the right to pursue religious study and practice religious rituals in schools “of their own accord” for the purpose of acquiring religious education, but only after school hours. The law cites no special regulations for private religious schools. Outside instructors, including clergy, may only attend or direct student religious education or activities if they are directly invited to do so by the students themselves. School administration and teachers may not be involved in this process.

Government Practices

NGOs and minority religious denominations expressed concern over what they stated was the government’s ineffective investigation of crimes motivated by religious hatred, its actions restricting religious expression and construction or restitution of buildings used for religious purposes, and its favoritism towards the GOC. They also cited SARI’s unclear mandate and authority and its lack of procedures for allocating funds and property. The government prosecuted some religiously motivated crimes and returned some property claimed by minority religious groups that had been held by government entities, while not returning others. NGOs Human Rights Education and Monitoring Centre (EMC) and Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI) said the government inadequately addressed acts of religious intolerance and separation of state and church in public schools.

The PGO investigated 20 cases involving alleged crimes committed on the basis of religious intolerance, of which 18 concerned acts against the Jehovah’s Witnesses and two against the Muslim community. The 20 cases involved five of beatings, one of illegal interference with the performance of religious rites, five of

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persecution, seven of damage or destruction of property, one of theft, and one of a threat to damage health or property. According to the PGO, five of the 20 cases, all involving the Jehovah's Witnesses, led to prosecutions and convictions, with two individuals fined and three sentenced to community service; seven cases were terminated without further action due to lack of evidence; and eight investigations remained pending at year's end. The government also concluded three investigations it began in 2014, resulting in the prosecution and conviction of three defendants for their acts against Jehovah's Witnesses. Of the three defendants, two were fined and one was sentenced to a year of imprisonment.

EMC and TDI criticized the government for failing to carry out effective investigations in previous cases they said were motivated by religious hatred. The PDO's annual report stated the ineffective investigation of probable crimes committed on religious grounds and impunity remained a problem. The report referred broadly to "individuals who participated in acts violating the rights of Muslims in various regions of Georgia in 2012-2014."

According to NAPR, it accepted all registration applications religious organizations submitted during the year but it did not specify how many. SARI reported that at year's end, a total of 39 religious organizations were registered as LEPLs and "dozens" of religious organizations as nonprofit organizations.

As of December Rustavi municipality had not granted the RCC a permit to build a church; the RCC had been attempting to obtain such a permit for two years. The RCC reported it would take the issue to court.

SARI led the Recommendatory Commission on the Study of Property and Financial Issues of Religious Organizations, which issued nonbinding recommendations on property issues of religious organizations. TDI reported the commission only issued recommendations on transferring to religious organizations properties in state ownership that were not in dispute between two or more religious groups. According to the National Coalition Supporting Eurasian Jewry, during the year, the government transferred the ownership of nine of the 15 synagogues in the country to the Jewish community.

According to the Tolerance Center, non-GOC churches faced government resistance when attempting to obtain construction permits for churches, and it attributed government officials' resistance to general societal bias in favor of the GOC. TDI reported protests from local GOC parishioners played a major role in

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influencing the municipalities' decisions. On March 19, the Zestaponi district court ordered the municipality council of Terjola to re-issue a suspended construction permit for the Jehovah's Witnesses to build a kingdom hall. According to EMC, the municipality did not carry out the court's decision and delayed the process. As of December construction of the hall remained pending.

Officials from the RCC and the AAC said property disputes involving the GOC were not resolved in a transparent legal process and generally favored the GOC. The AAC requested restitution of five churches in Tbilisi and one in Akhaltsikhe, all of which were registered as state property and claimed by both the AAC and the GOC. Thirty other churches claimed by the AAC, as well as five churches claimed by the RCC but given to the GOC after dissolution of the Soviet Union, were also in dispute. The AAC complained about the deteriorating physical conditions of churches in dispute and noted that, unlike other groups, no properties had been transferred to its community.

The Muslim community disputed the government's ownership of some mosques in Kvemo Kartli, Adigeni, and Adjara. During the year, the government transferred the ownership of 70 mosques throughout the country to the All Muslims of All Georgia (AMAG) organization. Muslim community leaders and local and central government authorities were unable to reach a mutually agreeable solution to address overcrowding in the mosque in Batumi, which was state-owned property. Although the government purchased a building for the community there, which the AMAG opened as a residence for the mufti of west Georgia and to which it planned to add a madrassah, NGOs and independent Muslim community leaders said the building did not address overcrowding or the community's longstanding request for permission to build a second mosque.

A consensus-based commission SARI established in December 2014 did not meet to study a controversial case involving a dispute over the ownership of an abandoned building used during the Soviet era as a storage space and library in the village of Mokhe in Samtskhe-Javakheti; the building was claimed by local Muslims as a 20th century mosque and by the GOC community as the site of a former church. The Tolerance Center, TDI, and EMC criticized the closed proceedings of the commission, which was presided over by SARI's chairman and included members representing Orthodox Christians, Muslims, the Agency for Protection of Cultural Heritage, and regional and local governments. The Tolerance Center said SARI did not support the Muslim community's request for several observers on the commission, including a member of the Evangelical

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Baptist Church of Georgia. It also reported the public defender was unable to participate. According to TDI, Muslim community representatives felt the government used the commission to “protract the process” and did not believe their interests would be taken into account in any decision. Although SARI reported the disputed building had the shape of a mosque, it stated it had “never functioned as a place of worship for Muslims.”

The government continued to subsidize the restoration of certain religious properties considered national cultural heritage sites. The Ministry of Culture and Protection of Monuments provided 1,500,000 lari (\$626,000) during the year for the restoration of religious buildings on cultural heritage sites but did not provide a breakdown of how the money was spent. The ministry cited only one non-GOC project, an architectural survey, to which it gave 300 lari (\$125).

The Tolerance Center, TDI, representatives from the Muslim community independent from AMAG, and the PDO complained about religious discrimination in schools. They reported cases where teachers promoted GOC theology through religion courses, classroom prayer, and the display of icons and other religious symbols in schools, despite prohibition of proselytization in the law. Although the Ministry of Education’s general inspection department was responsible for dealing with complaints of inappropriate teacher behavior, the Tolerance Center reported the families of minorities refrained from reporting problems due to concerns about the department’s effectiveness and fears of retribution against their children. According to SARI, there were no cases of religious discrimination reported in educational institutions during the year.

On October 15, the Caucasus Apostolic Administration of Latin Rite Catholics, the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia, the Georgian Muslims Union, the Pentecostal Church of Georgia, the Trans-Caucasian Union of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Word of Life Church of Georgia, the Holy Trinity Church, and the Church of Christ, represented by the Constitutional Law Clinic of Free University and with TDI acting as their legal representatives, filed a constitutional claim requesting equal tax status for all religious organizations. As of December the case remained pending.

The GOC received 25 million lari (\$13.4 million) in government compensation. In accordance with a 2014 resolution allowing the government to compensate Islamic, Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Armenian Apostolic religious organizations registered as LEPLs for “the material and moral damages inflicted upon them

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during the Soviet period,” SARI disbursed compensation funds totaling 3.5 million lari (\$1.46 million) to religious groups in coordination with the Ministry of Finance. The Tolerance Center, TDI, and EMC questioned the criteria by which the government selected the four denominations eligible for reparations and criticized the exclusion of other faiths. EMC and the Pentecostals filed a claim in the constitutional court alleging the selection process was discriminatory. At year’s end, the claim remained pending. SARI reported the government was considering expanding the compensation to other religious organizations, although it did not specify which or how many organizations would be eligible. According to SARI, this compensation was “partial and of symbolic character,” and the government took into account denominations’ level of damage and “present day negative conditions” during the selection process.

SARI reported the government disbursed its compensation funds as follows: 2,200,000 lari (\$917,000) to the Muslim community, represented by the AMAG; 400,000 lari (\$167,000) to the RCC; 600,000 lari (\$250,000) to the AAC; and 300,000 lari (\$125,000) to the Jewish community. TDI and EMC, and some independent Muslim community leaders stated the government exerted direct influence over AMAG.

In February SARI published a draft strategy on religious policy, which stated the country must prevent external interference in its internal politics by neighboring countries attempting to influence its ethnic minority populations. EMC and TDI and religious groups criticized SARI for lack of transparency and said it was established to exert influence and control over religious communities for state security purposes. The Tolerance Center complained SARI did not have any ethnic or religious minorities serving on its staff and that the state had founded the agency without consulting a wide range of religious organizations, the PDO, or NGOs focused on protecting religious minorities’ rights.

NGOs expressed concern over the failure of the government’s 2015-2020 National Concept and Action Plan on Civic Equality and Integration to include religious minorities and freedom of religion as topics.

In a November report, the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights (NCHR), a research institute, expressed concern that SARI viewed its principal mission “not as promoting freedom of religion and belief on behalf of all Georgians, but as promoting particularly the financial and material interests of the GOC.” The NCHR expressed several other concerns, including: ambiguity in SARI’s mandate

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and authority; worry that SARI considered some religions “nontraditional” and favored some above others; and a lack of procedures for allocating funds and property to religious groups.

Most prisons had GOC chapels but no specific nondenominational areas for worship. According to SARI, Roman Catholic, AAC, Baptist, Muslim, and Jewish religious services were available upon request in the military and in prisons.

On June 18, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili published a statement marking the beginning of Ramadan. On September 2, the prime minister commemorated the 120th anniversary of the synagogue in Oni. On September 24, he visited Tbilisi Mosque, where he congratulated the Muslim community on the Kurban Bayrami (Eid al-Adha) holiday.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Non-State Actors

Abkhazia and South Ossetia remained outside the control of the central government, and reliable information from those regions was largely unavailable.

In South Ossetia, Jehovah’s Witnesses were not officially recognized. Jehovah’s Witnesses remained officially banned in Abkhazia.

Individuals living outside Abkhazia and South Ossetia continued to face difficulties crossing their administrative boundaries, including to visit the gravesites of family members inside of the territories, especially in South Ossetia. SARI reported that although GOC Metropolitan of Nikozi and Tskhinvali Diocese Isaiah Chanturia continued his work in South Ossetia, he did not leave the diocese fearing he would be unable to return to fulfill his religious duties.

SARI reported GOC religious statues in Samachablo and frescoes at Tiri Monastery, both in South Ossetia, were in danger of being whitewashed.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Jehovah’s Witnesses reported continued interference with their religious activity, including physical assaults and harassment. Representatives of minority religious groups reported a widespread belief that minority religious groups posed a threat to the GOC and to the country’s cultural values. NGOs reported some

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GOC clergy contributed to hostile societal attitudes towards minority religious communities.

The Jehovah's Witness community reported 51 cases of religious discrimination against their community – a reduction from the 65 complaints the community filed with the PDO in the previous year. The 51 cases included verbal abuse, obstruction of religious services, damage and vandalism of properties, attempts to tear down public Witness stands, and efforts to prevent the group from distributing its literature. On November 23, Jehovah's Witnesses representatives from the Kingdom Hall in Vazisubani, a Tbilisi suburb, reported at least 15 bullets were fired at their building. The Jehovah's Witnesses community also reported that on November 30, an unknown individual again fired at the kingdom hall. No individuals were harmed in either incident. At year's end, an investigation into damage on the property was ongoing.

Minority religious communities, including Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholics, and Protestants, reported resistance when establishing places of worship and religious schools.

In April Jehovah's Witnesses reported they received a threatening letter from residents of Terjola, who warned of massive protests if they continued construction of a kingdom hall there and said they would be "held responsible." Local GOC church leaders stated someone was trying to provoke confrontation and make it appear that the GOC was persecuting the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Students were unable to attend a planned Muslim boarding school in Kobuleti, where in September 2014 locals nailed a pig's head to the building's front door and installed a cross near the property. According to EMC, the local population intimidated the Muslim community and the authorities did not attempt to protect the community's rights to movement and education during their investigation. Media reported the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MOIA) stated the Muslim community was allowed to use the building without any interference; however, local Muslims reported continued intimidation as locals opposed to the school erected a cross and barricades in front of the yard leading to the building. EMC filed a claim in the Batumi city court on behalf of the Muslim community alleging discrimination against MOIA representatives and local residents. According to SARI, the building was initially issued a hotel permit and was later turned into a religious school without consulting the "appropriate" local authorities. SARI

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stated Kobuleti already had a school for Muslims and that the area was densely populated by Orthodox Christians. The case remained pending at year's end.

In its 2015 monitoring report, which covered February 2014 to February 2015, NGO MDF documented at least 77 instances of religiously motivated discriminatory statements, including 26 made against the Jehovah's Witnesses, 37 "Islamophobic" or "Turkophobic" statements with respect to the construction of new mosques, seven anti-AAC statements in the context of the AAC's claims for the return of disputed churches, and seven statements against the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia. Basil Mkalavishvili, a former priest expelled by the GOC, made several statements in the media calling the Jehovah's Witnesses a violent and satanic sect. The MDF report also cited several hundred more instances of discriminatory speech that were likely religiously motivated.

On October 16, the GOC released a statement in which it said that the eight religious organizations represented by TDI in their suit petitioning equal tax treatment for all religious groups sought to abolish the GOC's tax exemptions. TDI responded on October 20, stating the suit did not question the concordat.

In June the Yezidi Kurds celebrated the opening of their first temple and cultural center in Tbilisi on land donated by the government in 2009. State Minister for Reconciliation and Civil Equality Paata Zakareishvili congratulated the Yezidi Kurd community, highlighting its contributions to society and the importance of the center in helping Yezidi Kurds preserve their "ancient religion, beautiful language, and culture."

Cartu Fund, a charitable organization established by former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, restored the 120-year-old synagogue in Oni.

In October the Union of Orthodox Parents protested outside the Ministry of Education and demanded the resignation of the minister of education for allowing Halloween celebrations in schools. The protesters said Halloween represented devil worship and Satanism. The Ministry of Education had stated it would not dictate whether people should celebrate Halloween and the GOC distanced itself from the protesters, noting the patriarchate did not agree with their views. The group also protested the Ministry of Education's intention to add a new school elective called Society and Me, which the ministry said was aimed at raising student awareness about healthy lifestyles, tolerance, and environmental protection.

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Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives maintained close contact with officials from the government, including SARI, the prime minister's adviser on human rights and gender equality, and the president's adviser on national minorities. During these meetings U.S. embassy representatives discussed ethnic and religious minority issues and shared the United States' experience with respect to the separation of church and state. The embassy also met with the PDO and the Tolerance Center, and with NGOs that address religious freedom, including 21st Century Union, EMC, and TDI. Embassy officials maintained contact with various community religious leaders to monitor religious freedom. During these meetings, the Ambassador and embassy officials encouraged dialogue between the government and minority religious groups that emphasized societal tolerance and integration into society.

On February 23, during a SARI presentation of the state's draft strategy for the development of religious policy, the Ambassador underlined the importance of government dialogue with minority religious communities and action to address their concerns to ensure their inclusion into society.

In March embassy officials visited the planned Kobuleti boarding school to show support for the school's administrators and local Muslim community.

In April the embassy organized a visit of an expert on religion and interfaith studies from the United States. The speaker promoted interfaith dialogue and tolerance during appearances on television and radio and in print media, as well as in lectures with university students, discussions with Muslim youth, and meetings with the AAC and GOC.

On April 18 to 19, the Ambassador and embassy officials, together with the visiting interfaith studies expert, attended the Batumi International Forum on Religion and Peace organized by the Georgian Muslims Union to support interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance, and stress the importance of government engagement with religious leaders. Attendees included international leaders, SARI's chairman, and representatives from different faiths, including the Muslim community, AAC, and GOC. At the conference, the Ambassador and U.S. expert spoke on the need to facilitate interfaith understanding, dialogue, respect, and peaceful coexistence. At the conference's conclusion, the participants signed a

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communicate affirming the dignity of all human beings and urging that their religious feelings be respected and their religious freedom safeguarded.

In May the embassy sponsored the visit of five civil society representatives working on religious issues for a program on religious freedom and interfaith Issues in the United States. In June the embassy sponsored another visit to the United States by an ethnic Georgian Muslim journalist to participate in a program on the role of women in preventing violent extremism, which included discussions on interfaith efforts to prevent terrorism and radicalization.

On November 9, the Deputy Chief of Mission spoke at a PDO event in recognition of the International Day of Tolerance. He commended the Tolerance Center and civil society for their efforts to deepen interfaith and interethnic understanding, respect, and peaceful coexistence. On November 12, the Ambassador commemorated the day by attending a photo exhibit and reception organized by TDI and the president's office. During his speech at the event, the Ambassador underlined that tolerance, including religious tolerance, lies at the heart of our objective to create a global community built on the shared values of solidarity, social justice, and respect for human rights.