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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Chile

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and worship and separation of religion and state. The law prohibits religious discrimination and provides civil remedies to victims of discrimination. The National Office of Religious Affairs (ONAR) is charged with facilitating communication between faith communities and the government and ensuring the protection of the rights of members of minority religious groups.

The Jewish community and several Chilean congressmen across the political spectrum condemned a January 23 post on X (formerly known as Twitter) in which Chamber of Deputies member Jorge Brito stated that “[one] cannot lament the Holocaust while defending apartheid and criminal massacre.” In response, Chamber of Deputies member Andres Jouannet issued an official apology on behalf of the presidency of the congressional Defense Committee and the presidency of the Chamber of Deputies for Brito’s comments. After the Hamas terrorist attacks in Israel on October 7, President Gabriel Boric sent a Chilean Air Force plane to Israel to assist evacuating Chilean citizens, prompting the president of the Jewish Community of Chile (CJCH) to express appreciation for the government’s work to rescue Chileans in the conflict zone. On September 5, Foreign Affairs Minister Alberto van Klaveren Stork and Minister Secretariat General of the Presidency Alvaro Elizalde attended a *Tefilla* (prayer) at the Valparaiso Region Jewish community and the president of the CJCH hosted. At the event,

Elizalde said, "This prayer is very important, because it accounts for the religious diversity that exists in Chile. Chile's main wealth is its diversity."

According to ONAR, arson attacks on churches by unidentified individuals reportedly associated with some Mapuche Indigenous groups in Araucania continued for the eighth year in a row. Media outlets reported that 23 churches in Araucania received arson threats during the year and that on August 15, the Malleco Mapuche Resistance group caused the burning of a church and other private property in Araucania as a result of their attack. According to representatives from the Jewish community, antisemitic sentiment increased, particularly on social media, following the Hamas October 7 terrorist attack on Israel. On October 19, unknown individuals vandalized Saint Michael Archangel Catholic Church in the southern Los Lagos Region. The vandals wrote "Jesus is Palestinian" in red and green writing that damaged the recently restored facade of one of the country's oldest churches. On October 18, individuals from the Lautaro Youth Movement vandalized a synagogue in the southern city of Concepcion with graffiti and red paint writings on the exterior wall expressing support for Palestinians. On December 22, vandals defaced the oldest synagogue in Santiago with the words "overthrow Zionism." In March, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the Jewish Museum of Chile announced a joint project to develop a digital education program to teach secondary school students about Jews, antisemitism, and "how to be an ally against antisemitism."

In December, the U.S. Deputy Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism visited the country to meet with government officials, religious leaders, and the Jewish community on efforts to combat antisemitism.

The Ambassador, Chargé, and other embassy officials continued their regular engagement with government officials, including members of the National Congress regarding the status of religious minorities, interfaith dialogue efforts and reports of antisemitism. In commemoration of the U.S. President's proclamation of January 16 as Religious Freedom Day in the United States, the Ambassador invited religious leaders and the director of ONAR to a roundtable luncheon focused on promoting interreligious dialogue. Embassy leadership also met with civil society and religious leaders throughout the year to discuss religious diversity and tolerance.

Section I.

Religious Demography.

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 18.5 million (midyear 2023). According to ONAR's 2021 estimates, 70 percent of the population identifies as Catholic and an estimated 18 percent identifies as "evangelical," a term used in the country to refer to non-Catholic Christian groups, including Episcopalians, but not The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Jehovah's Witnesses, Orthodox Churches (including Armenian, Greek, Palestinian, Persian, Serbian, and Ukrainian communities), and Seventh-day Adventists. In the 2002 census, the most recent that includes religious affiliation, Baha'is, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims (Sunni and Shia, including those who identify with Sufism, among others), Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), the Church of Jesus Christ, the Orthodox Churches, and other unspecified religious groups together constitute less than 5 percent of the population. The majority of the 500,000 Chileans of Palestinian descent are Orthodox Christian. An estimated 4 percent of the population identifies as atheist or agnostic, while 17 percent of the population identifies as nonreligious.

According to ONAR's 2021 estimates, 9 percent of the population self-identifies as Indigenous. Within the Indigenous population, approximately 38 percent identifies as evangelical Protestant, 30 percent as Catholic, 26 percent as no religious affiliation, and 6 percent as other. ONAR states many of those individuals also incorporate traditional Indigenous faith practices into their worship.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and the free exercise of worship. It states these practices must not be "opposed to morals, to good customs, or to the public order." Religious groups may establish and maintain places of worship if the locations comply with public hygiene and security regulations established by laws and municipal orders. According to the constitution, religion and the state are officially separate.

The law prohibits discrimination based on religion, provides civil remedies to victims of discrimination based on their religion or belief, and increases criminal penalties for acts of discriminatory violence. The law prohibits discrimination in the provision of social services,

education, the ability to practice religious beliefs or gain employment, property rights, and the right to build places of worship.

By law, registration for possible conscription to the military is mandatory for all men between the ages of 17 and 45. Performing alternative service by working for the armed forces in a job related to the selectee's expertise is possible only for those studying in certain fields. The law makes no provision for conscientious objection. Only clergy from registered religious organizations are exempted on religious grounds.

The law does not require religious groups to register with the government, although there are tax benefits for those that do. Once registered, a religious group is recognized as a religious nonprofit organization. Religious organizations have the option of adopting a charter and bylaws suited to a religious entity rather than to a private corporation or a secular nonprofit. Under the law, religious nonprofit organizations may create affiliates, such as charitable foundations, schools, or additional houses of worship, that retain the tax benefits of the parent religious organization. According to ONAR, public law recognizes more than 5,957 religious organizations as legal entities. By law, the Ministry of Justice must accept the registration petition of a religious entity, although it may object to petitions within 90 days if legal prerequisites for registration are not satisfied.

Applicants for religious nonprofit status must provide the Ministry of Justice with an authorized copy of their charter and corresponding bylaws with charter members' signatures and national identification numbers. The bylaws must include the organization's mission, creed, and structure. The charter must specify the signatories, the name of the organization, and its physical address, and it must include confirmation the religious institution's charter signatories approved the bylaws. In the event the Ministry of Justice raises objections to the group, the group has 60 days to address the ministry's objections or challenge them in court. Once a religious entity is registered, the state may not dissolve it by decree. If concerns are raised regarding a religious group's activities after registration, the semiautonomous Council for the Defense of the State may initiate a judicial review of the matter. One registration per religious group is sufficient to extend nonprofit status to affiliates, such as additional places of worship or schools, clubs, or sports organizations, without registering them as separate entities.

ONAR is charged with facilitating communication between faith communities and the government and ensuring the protection of the rights of members of minority religious groups.

By law, all public schools must offer religious education as an elective class for two teaching hours per week through pre-elementary, elementary, middle, and high school. Local school administrators decide how religious education classes are structured. Most religious instruction in public schools is Catholic. The Ministry of Education also has approved instruction curricula designed by 14 other religious groups, including Orthodox and Reform Jews, evangelical Christians, and Seventh-day Adventists. Schools must provide religious instruction for students according to students' religious affiliations. Parents may have their children excused from religious education. Parents also have the right to homeschool their children for religious reasons or enroll them in private, religiously oriented schools.

The law grants all religious groups the right to appoint chaplains to offer religious services in public hospitals and prisons and does not make a distinction between registered and unregistered groups. Prisoners may request religious accommodations. Regulations allow officially registered religious groups to appoint chaplains to serve in each branch of the armed forces, the national uniformed police, and the national investigative police.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

The Jewish community and several Chilean congressmen across the political spectrum condemned a January 23 post on X by Chamber of Deputies member Jorge Brito in which he stated [with respect to Israel] that “[one] cannot lament the Holocaust while defending apartheid and criminal massacre.... Against all barbarism, for all the victims, no one deserves to live under occupation.” According to several media reports, including by University of Chile radio station Diario UChile, some lawmakers and political figures expressed their support for Brito. The mayor of the Recoleta municipality, Daniel Jadue of the Communist Party, said the state should declare the Israeli Ambassador *persona non grata* because the Israeli Ambassador called Brito a “miserable [person]” in a message on X. Jadue further said lawmakers must be treated with respect. On behalf of the president of the congressional Defense Committee and the president of the Chamber of Deputies, Jouannet issued an official apology to the Israeli Ambassador in response to Brito's comments on Israel and the ambassador. Jouannet said, “We apologize to the Israeli Ambassador on behalf of the Presidency of the Chamber of Deputies and the Department of Defense. We cooperate with Israel regularly. Israel is a partner on many issues.”

On October 7, Jadue posted on X an extensive message pertaining to the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, stating, "The people of Palestine have the right to resist. The international community has been silent for years in the face of the genocide and extermination of women and children. Surely Zionism's response will be fierce. Solution to the conflict is to end the occupation! #FreePalestine." Three hundred individuals from the Jewish community, including multiple members of Congress from Jadue's Communist Party signed a public letter condemning his antisemitic remarks, labeling them "Judeo-phobic."

After the Hamas terrorist attacks in Israel on October 7, President Boric sent a Chilean Air Force plane to Israel to assist the evacuation of Chilean citizens, prompting the president of the CJCH to express appreciation for the government's effort to rescue Chileans in the conflict zone.

In December, Foreign Minister van Klaveren and other government officials attended a reception that the CJCH hosted in honor of a delegation from the American Jewish Committee and the U.S. Deputy Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism. On September 5, Foreign Minister van Klaveren and the Minister Secretariat General of the Presidency Alvaro Elizalde attended a Tefilla hosted by the Valparaiso Region Jewish Community and the CJCH President Ariela Agosin in Vina del Mar. Leaders of other religious faiths attended and offered an interreligious prayer at the religious ceremony's conclusion. Elizalde said, "This prayer is very important, because it accounts for the religious diversity that exists in Chile. Chile's main wealth is its diversity. I hope this is the cultural heritage for future generations. That means strengthening democracy and valuing diversity as our main wealth."

In March, government officials, including Foreign Minister van Klaveren, then Education Minister Marco Avila and legislators met with a high-level delegation from the ADL and discussed ways to counter antisemitism in the country. Former President Sebastian Pinera also attended. The government has not adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism, and officials continued to express concerns with respect to proposing legislation that focused on one group, as several minority groups in the country were calling for a broader, more robust antidiscrimination policy.

On December 15, in conjunction with Minister Elizalde and CJCH President Agosin, the Presidential Palace hosted a Hannukah celebration. At the event, Elizalde discussed the need for respect and love for all people of all faiths. Agosin spoke of the suffering of Jews around the world and those lost in the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks against Israel.

On December 26, President Boric, former Presidents Michelle Bachelet and Pinera attended an Orthodox Christmas ceremony held at the Palestinian Club.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to ONAR, arson attacks on Catholic and evangelical Christian churches in Araucania Region by unidentified individuals reportedly associated with Mapuche Indigenous groups continued to occur, marking the eighth year in a row of such attacks. According to media reports, 23 churches in Araucania reportedly received arson threats during the year. ONAR reported its regional directors continued to maintain contact with the churches and communities affected by the arson attacks and that ONAR held discussions with governors regarding possible assistance. According to academic and nongovernmental sources, the Mapuche, the country's largest Indigenous group, considered most of Araucania as ancestral, sacred territory and continued to call for the government to return lands confiscated prior to the return to democracy in the late 1980s. Some factions of the Mapuche reportedly continued to use violence, including attacks on churches and private residences, to demand the return of land.

According to *El Pais*, on August 15, the Malleco Mapuche Resistance group perpetrated an attack that burned an evangelical church, a house, and a private vehicle in the municipality of Ercilla in the Araucania Region. Following the attack, an unidentified group of individuals shot at officers of the National Uniformed Police (Carabineros). Neither police nor nearby civilians were reportedly injured.

On October 19, unknown individuals vandalized with graffiti the Saint Michael Archangel Catholic Church in the remote Calbuco municipality in the southern Los Lagos Region. Red and green writings reading "Jesus is Palestinian" damaged the recently restored church's facade. The Catholic church, built in the seventeenth century, is among the oldest churches in the country, and part of the country's historical patrimony.

On October 18, individuals vandalized a synagogue in the southern city of Concepcion with graffiti and red paint writing on the exterior walls that read, "Free Palestine. Let's overthrow Zionism and imperialism.... Lautaro Youth Movement." Following the incident, the group acknowledged its responsibility for the attack, posting on social media that it did so to "categorically repudiate the genocide of which the Palestinian people are being subjected at

the hands of the Zionist beast,” adding, “We also did it to highlight, value, and support the battle that the decent Palestine people are fighting for their freedom.”

On December 22, vandals defaced the oldest synagogue in Santiago with the words “overthrow Zionism.” In response, the CJCH posted on X, “The vandalization of the Bicur Joiliam Synagogue, the first in Santiago (1930) is a demonstration of unacceptable antisemitism. This phenomenon has increased around the world due to the conflict between Israel and Hamas and the positions adopted by authorities and opinion leaders, which naturalized #Judeophobia in society.” The community condemned the incident and other incidents of hate speech, which increased after October 7.

Police investigations of the incidents of vandalism and church burnings remained pending at the end of the year.

According to the Jewish Community, antisemitic sentiment increased, primarily on social media, after Hamas attacked Israel on October 7. ONAR said, however, most of the commentary condemned Israel’s actions in relation to the conflict and did not attack the Chilean Jewish community.

In March, the ADL and the Jewish Museum of Chile announced a joint project to develop a digital education program to teach secondary school students about Jews, antisemitism, and “how to be an ally against antisemitism.” According to the organizations “Combatiendo el Odio y el Antisemitismo Juntos” (Combating Hate and Antisemitism Together), they aimed to equip students with basic facts about Jews and antisemitism to prevent social media stereotypes from filling that knowledge gap. Jewish Museum President Dalia Pollak said, “We are thrilled to launch this initiative, as it will provide the Museum with an opportunity to educate students about the ever-evolving nature of antisemitism, while also giving them a fundamental understanding of what it means to be Jewish and how and why Jews found refuge in Latin America.”

ADL also [unveiled a new Spanish-language translation](#) of its comprehensive guide to contemporary antisemitism, making the online guide “[Antisemitismo al descubierto](#)” (“[Antisemitism Uncovered](#),”) available to Chilean and other Spanish-speaking audiences around the world for the first time.

On September 15, at an interfaith Te Deum in the Valparaiso Region, the Bishop of the Valparaiso Diocese Monsignor Jorge Patricio Vega urged all individuals to persevere in a “dialogue of brothers” that could help all Chileans to sow today what future generations will

reap tomorrow: A more just, equitable, and fraternal nation, where today's divisions can be truly healed." Vega's remarks occurred in the context of public engagements that government officials, armed forces personnel, and religious leaders attended to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the military coup that deposed the government of former President Salvador Allende.

During the year, religious groups and umbrella organizations, such as the Chilean Association of Interreligious Dialogue for Human Development, which includes Catholics, Orthodox Church representatives, Seventh-day Adventists, Anglicans, Baptists, Evangelicals, Lutherans, members of the Church of Jesus Christ, Jews, Muslims, Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Brahma Kumaris, and individuals who follow Indigenous spiritual traditions, held several events, including their annual interfaith dialogue.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

On December 3-5, the U.S. Deputy Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism visited the country and with the Ambassador, met government officials, including Foreign Minister van Klaveren, Director of the National Office of Religious Affairs Omar Cortes, religious leaders, and members from the Jewish community to discuss efforts to combat antisemitism. In meetings with government officials and religious leaders, the Deputy Special Envoy said countering antisemitism is a fundamental part of both countries' shared commitment to safeguarding human rights and religious freedom. The Deputy Special Envoy also participated in a panel, "Best Practices in Combating and Preventing Global Antisemitism in the Aftermath of October 7" as part of the American Jewish Committee's Annual Strategic Forum for Ibero-American Jewish Community Leaders, organized with the CJCH. In remarks, the Deputy Special Envoy said, "We [the United States] will continue to engage with governments and civil society around the world to address antisemitism, build interfaith understanding, and delink the conflict in the Middle East from efforts to increase understanding and acceptance among Muslims, Christians, and Jews."

The Ambassador, Chargé, and other embassy representatives regularly engaged government officials from ONAR, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Interior Ministry, and the National Congress to discuss the status of religious minorities in the country, interfaith dialogue efforts, reports of antisemitism, and institutional cooperation between government and religious organizations.

In commemoration of the President's proclamation of January 16 as Religious Freedom Day in the United States, on January 19, the Ambassador welcomed religious leaders from the country's main faiths and communities and ONAR Director Omar Cortes, to a roundtable luncheon aimed at promoting interreligious dialogue. The leaders represented the following religious and faith communities: Catholic, evangelical, Jewish, Baha'i, the Church of Jesus Christ, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, and the Mapuche Indigenous tradition. The Ambassador, Chargé, and other embassy officials continued their regular engagement with government officials and members of the National Congress regarding the status of religious minorities, interfaith dialogue efforts and reports of antisemitism.

In October, the Ambassador hosted a luncheon for the American Jewish Committee and members of the CJCH. The Ambassador acknowledged the global uptick in security concerns for Jews. She said, "Combating antisemitism is a top priority for the President ... and here at Embassy Santiago, we carry out that mission for religious freedom and civil rights. Last year, the Department of State released a four-prong strategy to combat antisemitism as part of the Western Hemisphere Action Plan, which includes increasing citizen security, strengthening government-civil society cooperation, countering false media narratives, and collaborating in the region. The Ambassador concluded by quoting Anne Frank, "No one has ever become poor by giving."

In March, the Ambassador hosted a reception for the ADL with members of the CJCH and broader Chilean society and discussed the importance of religious tolerance. The embassy hosted an internal meeting with the ADL to raise awareness about ADL's work and educate the embassy community about why combatting antisemitism and hate speech is critical to the mission of the U.S. government and embassy.

Throughout the year, the embassy advocated the government's adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism.

During the year, the Ambassador, Chargé, and other embassy representatives met with civil society and religious leaders, including from the Jewish, evangelical, and Catholic communities, to discuss religious diversity and tolerance and incidents of concern, including perceived threats to Jewish and Catholic communities.

The embassy continued to use social media to underscore the importance of interfaith understanding and tolerance, including posting articles on religious freedom, interfaith celebrations in the United States, and the International Religious Freedom Day commemoration.

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