

# TURKEY

## TIER 2

### KEY FINDINGS

While the Turkish government has increasingly restricted a broad range of human rights, especially in the aftermath of the failed July 2016 coup d'état attempt, it has nevertheless taken some positive steps to improve religious freedom conditions in Turkey. The government has returned properties expropriated from religious minority communities, provided dual citizenship to Greek Orthodox Metropolitans so they can participate in their church's Holy Synod, and revised school curricula. However, due to the Turkish government's strict interpretation of

secularism as requiring the absence of religion in public life, no religious community—including the majority Sunni Muslim community—has full legal status, and all are subject to state controls limiting their rights to maintain places of worship, train clergy, and offer religious education. Additionally, long-standing religious freedom concerns persist pertaining to religious properties, listing of religious affiliations on national identification cards, and education. Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Turkey on its Tier 2 in 2017.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

In addition to expressing concerns to the Turkish government about the deplorable human rights situation in the country, the U.S. government should:

- Raise religious freedom issues with the Turkish government at the highest levels, including by:
  - Urging the government of Turkey to fully comply with European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) rulings on freedom of religion or belief, including
- by removing the field for religious affiliation on national ID cards' microchips and recognizing Alevi *cemevis* (gathering places) as legal places of worship and Alevi *dedes* (faith leaders) as religious leaders;
- Pressing the Turkish government to publicly rebuke government officials who make anti-Semitic or derogatory statements about religious communities in Turkey; and
- Pressing the government of Turkey to fulfill private and public promises that the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary would be reopened, and to permit other religious communities to open and operate their seminaries.
- Provide financial and in-kind support to the Turkish government to assist it in aiding the nearly three million Syrian refugees located throughout Turkey.



## BACKGROUND

The Turkish government does not maintain population statistics based on religious identity. Of the country's 80 million people, it is estimated that approximately 99 percent adhere to Islam. Of that population, an estimated 80 percent is Sunni Muslim. Between 20 to 25 million are Alevi—a religion the Turkish government views as heterodox Muslim, although some Alevi identify as Shi'a Muslim and others view themselves as a unique culture. Many Sunni Muslims consider Alevi to be non-Muslims. Turkey's non-Muslim religious minority communities are small. There are fewer than 150,000 Christians across various denominations, including Armenian and Greek Orthodox, Syriac Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Protestants, as well as small Georgian Orthodox, Bulgarian Orthodox, Maronite, Chaldean, Nestorian Assyrian, and Roman Catholic communities. The Jewish community comprises fewer than 20,000 persons. Other smaller religious communities exist in Turkey, including Baha'is.

The 1982 Turkish constitution provides for the freedom of belief, worship, and the private dissemination of religious ideas, and prohibits discrimination on religious grounds. Nevertheless, the state interprets secularism to require state control over religious communities, including their practices and houses of worship. The Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) maintains control over the practice of Islam in Turkey; all other religions are under the auspices of the General Directorate for Foundations (*Vakıflar*).

In July 2016, there was a failed coup d'état against the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, which some inside and outside of Turkey view as increasingly authoritarian. The government alleges the

violent coup attempt was orchestrated by U.S.-based Turkish-Muslim scholar and leader of the Hizmet (Gülen) Movement, Fethullah Gülen. The months following the failed coup saw mass arrests and firings of tens of thousands of suspected Hizmet members throughout the country, including academics, journalists, judges, and prosecutors, and closures of schools and universities. Books, including spiritual texts written by Gülen, have been destroyed or expropriated. Newspaper and radio outlets that reflect Gülen views on faith and practice have been sold or closed. Additionally, the head of the Religious Affairs Directorate, Dr. Mehmet Gormez, was quoted stating that Gülen and his movement are "heretics." Some government employees were later reinstated and institutions reopened, but the state of emergency, declared in July, was extended for another 90 days on January 19, 2017.

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2016–2017

### Education

The Turkish government requires primary and secondary students to attend a compulsory "Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge" course, established by the Ministry of National Education. While non-Muslim children can be exempted, they often must disclose their religious affiliation (or lack thereof), which can lead to social ostracism. While the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruled in 2014 that requiring students to disclose their religious affiliation was a violation of the European Convention, nongovernmental organizations continue to inform USCIRF that some schools in Turkey are not upholding the decision. The textbooks used in the course also have been criticized for including superficial,

limited, and misleading information about religions other than Islam. In a positive development, on February 8, 2017, Education Minister İsmet Yılmaz announced that all required religion courses would respect the ECtHR's ruling and approach all religions equally, eliminating any elevation of Sunni Islam above other religions.

### National Identity Cards

In 2010, the ECtHR ruled that a mandatory listing of religious affiliation on Turkish identification cards violated the European Convention.

Thereafter, the Turkish parliament passed a law removing the requirement from the face of the cards. The new identification cards, which went into effect on January 2, 2017, do not show the holders' religious identification, although it is a nonrequired biodata point on the card's microchip. While religious minority communities view this as an improvement, they remain concerned that a biodata field on religious affiliation could lead to discrimination if the field is left blank or lists a faith other than Islam.

### Alevis

Alevis make up 20 to 25 million of Turkey's total population. Alevis worship in *cemevis* (gathering places), which the Turkish government does not consider as legal houses of worship and thus are denied legal and financial benefits available to other houses of worship. In April 2016, the ECtHR held that the Turkish government was violating the European Convention by not recognizing Alevi places of worship and religious leaders. However, in 2016 the Turkish government designated 126 Alevi *dedes* (faith leaders), located in several European countries, as "field experts." While stopping short of deeming them as religious leaders, the designation provides them some recognition so they can advocate for the community's interests. The court also ruled that only Alevi leaders could determine which faith (Islam or not) their community belonged to.

### Anti-Semitism

The Turkish Jewish community reports that it is able to practice its religion freely and that synagogues receive ongoing security protection from the government. However, anti-Semitism, especially in print and social media, remains an issue in Turkey. Additionally, officials of the ruling Justice and Development (AK) Party have, on occasion, used anti-Semitic rhetoric, especially when relations between Turkey and Israel are strained.

Turkey is the only majority Muslim country that actively contributes to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. For the second year in a row, in December 2016 the Turkish government held Holocaust Remembrance Day services, at which Foreign Minister Yıldırım Tuğrul Türkeş spoke. The same month, also for the second time,

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Hanukah was celebrated publicly in Istanbul's Esma Sultan Mansion. Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Veysi Kaynak and other political, civil society, and religious leaders attended.

### Greek Orthodox

The Turkish government continues to require that only Turkish citizens can be members of the Greek Orthodox Church's Holy Synod, which elects that community's Patriarch. Since 2010, however, 30 foreign Metropolitans have been approved for dual citizenship. The Greek Orthodox Theological School of Halki remains closed, as it has been since 1971, and the Turkish government continues to cite the Greek government's lack of religious freedom for the Turkish Muslim minority in Western Thrace as the primary reason, based on the principle of reciprocity in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. However, on January 6, 2016, the Turkish government permitted a Greek Orthodox Epiphany celebration in Izmir. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate is also permitted to conduct religious services at religiously significant historical sites. For the 2015–2016 school year, a minority middle-high school in Gökçeada was also reopened. Additionally, Turkish authorities approved a request to open a Greek minority preschool on the island.

## Protestants

The Protestant population in Turkey is estimated to be between 6,000 and 7,000 people. In 2016, as in previous years, there were reports of Protestant churches being vandalized and pastors receiving hate speech via text messages, Facebook, and e-mails. The community has complained that the government has not addressed their concerns or provided sufficient protection to targeted churches or pastors.

In October 2016, Reverend Andrew Brunson, a U.S. citizen who has been living and leading a small church in Izmir, Turkey, for over 20 years, was detained and charged with terrorism due to alleged ties to Gülen and the failed July 2016 coup attempt.

## Sunni Muslims

The Sunni majority in Turkey, outside of those recently identified as alleged Hizmet members, have seen religious freedom improvements under the AK Party government. Previously, public servants were prohibited from attending Friday prayers during their office hours. In January 2016, the Turkish Prime Ministry announced that public servants were no longer outlawed from doing so. Moreover, in February 2017, the ban on hijabs in the Turkish police and military was removed. The Turkish military, the most secular institution in the Turkish state, has banned the veil since the 1980s.

## Religious Minority Properties

Historically, the Turkish government expropriated religious minority properties. Beginning in 2003, and especially since a 2011 governmental decree, more than 1,000 properties—valued at more than 2.5 billion Turkish lira (one billion U.S. dollars)—have been returned or compensation paid. The process is still ongoing, although some minority communities have complained about delays and denials. In addition to returning or providing compensation for properties, in 2016 the Turkish government paid for the utility costs of 419 minority places of worship, including 355 churches, 24 chapels, and 40 synagogues.

In January 2015, the Turkish government granted the Syriac Orthodox community land to build a church in Yesilkoy, although the project has stalled after the excavations—which began in 2016—unearthed historical graves belonging to the Latin Catholic community.

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## Hagia Sophia

For several years, the Christian community in Turkey has raised concerns about a potential change in the status of the historic Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Despite its legal status as a museum since 1935, over the years some Greek Orthodox have called for the Hagia Sophia to be reopened as a church, and some Muslims, including at times Turkish parliamentarians, have called for it to be opened as a mosque. The Turkish government has told USCIRF that it has no intention to change the Hagia Sophia's legal status. However, during Ramadan 2016, Turkish state radio and television aired a *Diyanet*-produced series from the Hagia Sophia that included readings of the Qur'an, and the Muslim call to prayer was broadcast for the first time in 85 years from the minarets of the museum.

## Northern Part of the Republic of Cyprus

Turkey has occupied nearly one-third of Cyprus since 1974. There were no reports in the last year of religious communities being denied access to houses of worship, cemeteries, and other historical and cultural sites outside of Turkish military zones or bases.

## U.S. POLICY

Turkey is an important strategic partner of the United States; it is a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally and there is a U.S. airbase in Incirlik, in southern Turkey. The U.S.-Turkey relationship includes many matters, most importantly regional stability and security due to Turkey's shared borders with Syria, Iraq, and

Iran, and Turkey's role in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). However, since 2014 U.S.-Turkey relations have become increasingly strained due to disagreements between the United States and Turkey on the Syrian crisis. Additionally, the Turkish government protests U.S. support of Kurdish forces fighting ISIS in Iraq and Syria. The Turkish government believes Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria are associated with or sympathetic to the Kurdish Workers' Party in Turkey, which both Turkey and the United States have designated as a terrorist organization. Tensions between the governments were further exacerbated after the failed July 2016 coup, when the Obama Administration failed to extradite Gülen, whom the Turkish government blames for the coup attempt.

In mid-February 2017, Vice President Mike Pence assured Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım that the United States would continue close cooperation with Turkey in the fight against ISIS. The anti-ISIS coalition currently uses the Incirlik airbase to launch its air operations against the terrorist group.

Since 2011, the United States has provided funding for refugees in Turkey through the United Nations (UN) refugee agency, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, totaling \$66.6 million. Turkey is hosting at least 2.8 million registered Syrian refugees from various religious faiths who fled to Turkey to escape persecution from the Bashar al-Assad regime and ISIS. The Turkish government estimates that aid to Syrian refugees from public offices, nongovernmental organizations, and the Turkish public has reached about \$25 billion.