

Document #2031307

USDOS – US Department of State

2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Cyprus - Republic of Cyprus

Since 1974, the southern part of Cyprus has been under the control of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus. The northern part, administered by Turkish Cypriots, proclaimed itself the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”) in 1983. The United States does not recognize the “TRNC,” nor does any country other than Turkey. A substantial number of Turkish troops remain on the island. A “green line,” or buffer zone (which is over 110 miles long and several miles wide in places) patrolled by the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), separates the two parts. This report is divided into two parts: the Republic of Cyprus and the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. For areas in the north that have different Greek and Turkish names, both are listed (e.g., Kormakitis/Korucam).

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and protects the freedom to worship, teach, and practice one’s religion. It grants the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and recognizes the Vakf, an Islamic institution that manages sites of worship and property Muslims have donated, as a charitable endowment. According to press reports, on September 6, the headmaster of a public secondary school instructed a Muslim student wearing a headscarf to leave the school and return only after removing it. Then minister of education Kostas Chantziaris ordered an investigation of the case and transferred the headmaster from the school. Two of the eight functioning mosques under the guardianship of the Ministry of Interior continued to lack bathroom and ablution facilities. The Department of Antiquities continued to limit access to Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque to only two of the five daily prayers, although it routinely granted expanded access during Ramadan and at the request of the imam. The imam of Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque said Department of Antiquities security guards refused to let some non-Muslim tourists attend Friday prayers, despite the imam having invited them to attend. The government continued to allow non-Cypriot nationals living in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots to travel to Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque for pilgrimages during Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Mawlid al-Nabi. The Jewish community reported authorities continued to conduct autopsies in nonsuspicious deaths, against the community’s wishes, and the community continued to face difficulties obtaining government permission to perform animal slaughter for food production according to Jewish law.

The Jewish community continued to report isolated instances of anti-Semitic verbal harassment. The nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) Caritas and Action for Equality, Support, Antiracism (KISA) reported cases in which private employers refused to hire women who wore hijabs. According to Caritas, Muslim students faced less discrimination than in previous years. Some religious minority groups continued to report societal pressure to engage in public Greek Orthodox religious ceremonies. Greek Orthodox Christians reported they sometimes faced ostracism from that community if they converted to another religion. In September a European Commission study found that 48 percent of respondents believed discrimination on the basis of religion or belief was widespread in the country. In January the European Commission (EC) published a Special Eurobarometer survey indicating 73 percent of residents believed anti-Semitism was not a problem. Leaders of the main religious groups continued to meet under the framework of the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process (RTCYP) – an initiative of the Swedish embassy – and advocate for greater religious freedom for faith communities across the island.

U.S. embassy representatives continued to meet frequently with government officials to discuss issues including access to religious sites on either side of the “green line” dividing the country. The Ambassador met with many religious leaders to discuss religious freedom restrictions, access to religious sites, and interfaith cooperation. On September 3, the Ambassador hosted a reception for Salpy Eskidjian Weiderud, RTCYP Executive Coordinator, to encourage continued cooperation among the faith communities and with government authorities to expand religious freedom on the island. Embassy staff met with NGOs and religious leaders to discuss topics including access to religious sites island-wide and discrimination against minority religious groups. Embassy officials also visited places of religious significance on both sides of the “green line” and encouraged continued dialogue and cooperation among religious leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population of the island at 1.3 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2011 census, the population of the government-controlled area is 840,000. Of that total, 89.1 percent is Orthodox Christian and 1.8 percent is Muslim. Other religious groups include Roman Catholics, known as Latins (2.9 percent), Protestants (2 percent), Buddhists (1 percent), Maronite Catholics (0.5 percent), and Armenian Orthodox (0.3 percent), with small populations of Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Baha’is. The country’s chief rabbi estimates the number of Jews at 4,500, most of whom are foreign-born residents in the country. A Jehovah’s Witnesses representative estimates the group has 2,600 members. Recent immigrants and migrant workers are predominantly Roman Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and protects the right of individuals to profess their faith and to worship, teach, and practice or observe their religion, individually or collectively, in private or in public, subject to limitations due to considerations of national security or public health, safety, order, and morals, or the protection of civil liberties. The constitution specifies all religions whose doctrines or rites are not secret are free and equal before the law. It protects the right to change one's religion and prohibits the use of physical or moral compulsion to make a person change, or prevent a person from changing, his or her religion.

The constitution grants the Autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus (Church of Cyprus) the exclusive right to regulate and administer the Church's internal affairs and property in accordance with its canons and charter. By law, the Church of Cyprus pays taxes only on commercial activities.

The constitution sets guidelines for the Vakf, which is tax exempt and has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with its laws and principles. According to the constitution, no legislative, executive, or other act may contravene or interfere with the Church of Cyprus or the Vakf. The Vakf, which acts as caretaker of religious properties in the Turkish Cypriot community, operates only in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. The government administers and provides financial support for the physical maintenance of mosques in government-controlled areas.

In addition to the Church of Cyprus and Islam, the constitution recognizes three other religious groups: Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, and Latins (Roman Catholics). Their institutions are tax exempt and eligible for government subsidies for cultural and educational matters, including to cover costs to operate their own schools, for school fees of group members attending private schools, and for activities to preserve their cultural identity.

Religious groups not recognized in the constitution must register with the government as nonprofit organizations in order to engage in financial transactions and maintain bank accounts. To register, a religious group must submit through an attorney an application to the Registrar of Companies under the Ministry of Energy, Commerce, Industry, and Tourism stating its purpose and providing the names of its directors. Religious groups registered as nonprofit organizations are treated the same as other nonprofit organizations; they are tax exempt, must provide annual reports to the government, and are not eligible for government subsidies.

The government has formal processes by which religious groups may apply to use restored religious heritage sites for religious purposes.

According to a public school regulation, students are not allowed to cover their heads in school; however, the regulation explicitly states that the regulation should be implemented without discriminating against a student's religion, race, color, gender, or any political or other convictions of the student or the parents.

The law requires animals to be stunned before slaughter.

The government requires Greek Orthodox religious instruction and attendance at religious services before major holidays in public primary and secondary schools. The Ministry of Education (MOE) may excuse primary school students of other religious groups from attending religious services and instruction at the request of their guardians, but Greek Orthodox children in primary school may not opt out. The MOE may excuse secondary school students from religious instruction on grounds of religion or conscience and may excuse them from attending religious services on any grounds at the request of their guardians, or at their own request if over the age of 16.

The ombudsman is an independent state institution responsible for protecting citizens' rights and human rights in general. The ombudsman may investigate complaints made against any public service or official for actions that violate human rights, including freedom of religion, or contravene the laws or rules of proper administration. The ombudsman makes recommendations to correct wrongdoings but cannot enforce them.

Conscientious objectors on religious grounds are exempt from active military duty and from reservist service in the National Guard but must complete alternative service. The two options available for conscientious objectors are unarmed military service, which is a maximum of four months longer than the normal 14-month service, or social service, which is a maximum of eight months longer than normal service but requires fewer hours of work per day. The penalty for refusing military or alternative service is up to three years' imprisonment, a fine of up to 6,000 euros (\$6,700), or both. Those who refuse both military and alternative service, even if objecting on religious grounds, are considered to have committed an offense involving dishonesty or moral turpitude and are disqualified from holding elected public office and ineligible for permits to provide private security services.

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

Government Practices

On September 6, local press reported Apostolos Varnavas Lyceum Headmaster Loizos Sepos instructed a Muslim student wearing a headscarf to leave the school and only return after removing it. The headmaster subsequently told the student's father that MOE regulations did not allow students to cover their heads, according to press reports. Then minister of education Champiaouris ordered an investigation of the incident, which was concluded by September 18. The MOE did not publicize the results of the investigation and announced on September 18 it would handle the issues arising from the investigation in accordance with the law. The minister met with the student, her father, and the headmaster on September 7. In response to continued criticism from students of the school, the MOE announced on September 8 it would transfer the headmaster to the State Institutes of Further Education.

In August the Department of Antiquities closed the Limassol Great Mosque for restoration without previously informing the Muslim community of the nature of or timeline for the restoration, according to Imam Shakir Alemdar, Representative of the Mufti in Cyprus. The representative sent a letter to the Ministry of Interior (MOI), which had not responded by year's end.

Muslim community leaders stated the government continued to allow the community access for religious services to only six of 19 mosques located on cultural heritage sites, as well as to two other mosques not located on such sites. Of the eight functioning mosques, seven were available for all five daily prayers, and six had the necessary facilities for ablutions. The government again failed to respond to the Muslim community's long-standing request for permission to make improvements at the functioning mosques, and there was no change from previous years in either the number of open mosques or the number of ablution and bathroom facilities available at those mosques. Bayraktar and Dhali Mosques had no ablution facilities and no bathrooms. The government installed temporary bathrooms at Bayraktar Mosque and Dhali Mosque during Ramadan. In 2018 the MOI determined ablution and bathroom facilities for Dhali Mosque could not be installed at the local imam's house across the street from the mosque due to structural issues. During the year, the MOI said installing facilities remained difficult due to limited space near the mosque; however, it said it planned to identify a suitable location and develop new plans.

The Department of Antiquities of the Ministry of Communications and Works provided bathroom facilities approximately 330 feet from Bayraktar Mosque. In October the Department of Antiquities said it was studying the placement of ablution facilities near Bayraktar Mosque. It said any new additions must be carefully placed because the mosque was part of the medieval Venetian wall of the city, an officially recognized ancient monument.

In October the imam of Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque said Department of Antiquities security guards stationed at the complex refused to let some non-Muslim tourists attend Friday prayers, despite the imam having invited them to attend. He also said visiting Department of Antiquities staff refused to wear appropriate clothing when entering the complex and security guards sometimes allowed visitors to enter the mosque wearing shoes. He said he spoke with the Head of the Antiquities Department but did not reach agreement on these issues by year's end.

According to the RTCYPP, the Muslim community, Republic of Cyprus authorities, local press, and the UNFICYP, the government continued to waive visa requirements for the movement of non-Turkish Cypriot pilgrims south across the “green line” to visit Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque to conduct prayers and services on special occasions. To cross the “green line” without identification checks to visit religious sites, Turkish Cypriots and foreign nationals residing in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots were still required to submit requests to UNFICYP, which then facilitated the approval process with the government.

According to the RTCYPP and local press, on June 6, 600 pilgrims, primarily of Turkish origin, crossed from the area under Turkish Cypriot administration to attend a special service led by Mufti of Cyprus Talip Atalay at Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque for Eid al-Fitr (compared with 884 in 2018). On August 13, police again escorted approximately 305 Turkish Cypriots, Turks, and other foreign nationals to Hala Sultan Tekke for prayers on Eid al-Adha (compared to 300 in 2018). On November 11, 415 pilgrims crossed into the government-controlled area to attend prayers at Hala Sultan Tekke on Mawlid al-Nabi (compared to 655 in 2018). A Muslim community representative said the government did not impose any new restrictions on those who could cross for the pilgrimages.

On January 25, UNFICYP facilitated the visit of 28 Turkish Cypriots to Deneia village inside the buffer zone for the first prayer service at Deneia Mosque since 1963. After the service, Deneia community leader Christakis Panayiotou held a welcome reception for the Turkish Cypriots.

Representatives of the Jewish community again reported authorities continued to perform autopsies on deceased members of the community for deaths that were not suspicious, a practice they said violated Jewish religious beliefs. They stated that, despite continuing to raise the issue with government authorities, it remained unresolved.

Jewish representatives said local Department of Veterinary Services officials continued to deny exemptions from the requirement to stun animals before slaughter, despite granting exemptions in previous years. A Department of Veterinary Services official said the department no longer granted exemptions for religious slaughter. The Jewish community reported they were able to import kosher meat from other European Union (EU) countries at a significantly higher cost than if it were locally available.

Jewish representatives said the government continued not to respond to their long-standing request to grant the Chief Rabbinate of Cyprus the right to officiate (sign as an authorized individual) documents, including marriage, death, and divorce certificates.

A Jehovah's Witnesses representative said the Jehovah's Witnesses were not allowed to bury their adherents in some municipal cemeteries, which were often managed by local Greek Orthodox churches. After the community wrote a letter to the Ministry of Interior, Larnaca Municipality responded it had designated a place within the municipal cemetery for non-Greek Orthodox groups to bury their followers.

Representative of the Mufti of Cyprus Imam Alemdar said the Larnaca Turkish cemetery was completely full. He sent a letter to the MOI requesting that a Vakf property near Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque be made available as a cemetery. The MOI had not responded by year's end.

In June the Cyprus Humanists Association said a school in Famagusta District presented a student with an award donated by a local business that was conditional on the student being an Orthodox Christian. The association said public schools previously presented similar awards conditional on the students being Greek Orthodox. It called on the Ministry of Education, the ombudsman, and Commissioner for the Rights of the

Child Leda Koursoumba to prevent discrimination and maintain the secular character of public schools. The commissioner’s office said as of year’s end it had not received any formal complaints.

The military continued to require recruits to take part in a common prayer led by Church of Cyprus clergy during swearing-in ceremonies. Recruits of other faiths, atheists, and those who did not wish to take the oath for reasons of conscience could refrain from raising their hand during the ceremony. They instead recited a pledge of allegiance at a separate gathering.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

Representatives of the Jewish community continued to report instances of anti-Semitic verbal harassment on the street.

Caritas reported discrimination against Muslim children in schools declined compared with previous years. Caritas reported increased diversity awareness and language training during the year generally improved behavior towards non-native Muslim students.

Caritas and KISA said women wearing hijabs often faced difficulties finding employment. According to Caritas, in August a Somali woman was refused employment in a hotel because she was wearing a hijab. The prospective employer wrote in the applicant’s rejection letter that “the covering of her face with a scarf is a problem.” The woman filed a complaint with the ombudsman that was under review at year’s end.

Members of minority religious groups continued to report societal pressures to participate in public religious ceremonies of majority groups. For example, children of various religious minorities said they faced social pressure to attend Greek Orthodox religious ceremonies at school. An Armenian Orthodox representative said community members who married Greek Orthodox received pressure from family members to have a Greek Orthodox wedding and follow Greek Orthodox rituals. Similarly, Armenian Orthodox army recruits reportedly felt peer pressure to take the oath administered by a Greek Orthodox priest.

Some Greek Orthodox adherents who converted to other faiths reportedly continued to hide their conversion from family and friends due to fear of social ostracism.

In May the EC carried out a study in each EU-member state on perceptions of discrimination and published the results in September. According to the findings, 48 percent of respondents believed discrimination on the basis of religion or belief was widespread in Cyprus, while 48 percent said it was rare; 58 percent would be comfortable with having a person of a different religion than the majority of the population occupy the highest elected political position in the country. In addition, 98

percent said they would be comfortable working closely with a Christian, 81 percent said they would be with an atheist, 84 percent with a Jew, 78 percent with a Muslim, and 81 percent with a Buddhist. Asked how they would feel if their child were in a “love relationship” with an individual belonging to various groups, 98 percent said they would be comfortable if the partner were Christian, 52 percent if atheist, 52 percent if Jewish, 48 percent if Buddhist, and 40 percent if Muslim.

In January the EC published a Special Eurobarometer survey of perceptions of anti-Semitism based on interviews it conducted in December 2018 in each EU member state. According to the survey, 73 percent of residents believed anti-Semitism was not a problem in Cyprus, and 47 percent believed it had stayed the same over the previous five years. The percentage who believed that anti-Semitism was a problem in nine different categories was as follows: Holocaust denial, 26 percent; on the internet, 23 percent; anti-Semitic graffiti or vandalism, 18 percent; expression of hostility or threats against Jews in public places, 19 percent; desecration of Jewish cemeteries, 20 percent; physical attacks against Jews, 18 percent; anti-Semitism in schools and universities, 19 percent; anti-Semitism in political life, 18 percent; and anti-Semitism in the media, 21 percent.

On June 22, the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage (TCCH), one of the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot technical committees established as part of the UN-facilitated settlement negotiations process, organized an inauguration ceremony to mark the completed restoration of Camii-Kebir Mosque in the city of Paphos. The mosque is classified as an ancient monument, and it did not function as an active mosque after restoration.

The leaders of the main religious groups on the island continued to meet regularly and visit places of worship on both sides of the buffer zone within the framework of the RTCYPP. On March 19, the leaders of the Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Armenian, Maronite, and Roman Catholic religious groups visited the collapsed Saint James Church in the buffer zone in Nicosia. They called for restoration of Saint James Church without delay, as well as for the restoration of Saint George Church, also located in the buffer zone in Nicosia.

On March 15, the religious leaders of the five groups recognized by the constitution jointly condemned the terrorist attacks at two mosques in New Zealand. On April 21, Mufti of Cyprus Atalay issued a statement condemning the terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka targeting Christians on Easter Sunday.

On June 4, Christian religious leaders under the framework of the RTCYPP issued a joint greeting for the Mufti of Cyprus and all the Muslim faithful wishing them a blessed Eid al-Fitr.

A joint project of religious leaders through the RTCYPP offering Greek and Turkish language classes for members of the Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Armenian Orthodox, Maronite, and Roman Catholic communities continued; participants included priests, imams, nuns, and laypersons who worked for faith-based organizations. On May 9, language class participants attended an iftar at Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives continued to meet frequently with government officials from the Ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Justice, as well as the Department of Antiquities, to discuss religious freedom issues, including encouraging greater access to religious sites on either side of the “green line” and discrimination against minority religious communities.

The Ambassador discussed restrictions on access to religious sites and interfaith cooperation with many religious leaders, including the Archbishop of the Church of Cyprus, the Archbishop of the Maronite Church of Cyprus, the Archbishop of the Armenian Orthodox Church of Cyprus, and the Apostolic Nuncio. The Ambassador visited Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque and discussed the mosque’s limited hours of operation and the condition of Larnaca Turkish Cemetery with the resident imam. She also visited the Jewish Community Center in Larnaca and discussed religious freedom and religious-based discrimination with the Chief Rabbi of Cyprus. The Ambassador discussed with the Swedish ambassador ways to promote religious freedom on the island and to support the efforts of the RTCYPP to encourage cooperation among religious leaders. On September 3, the Ambassador hosted a reception to honor RTCYPP Executive Coordinator Salpy Eskidjian Weiderud, a recipient of the Secretary of State’s 2019 International Religious Freedom Award, and to encourage continued cooperation among the faith communities and with government authorities to expand religious freedom on the island.

Embassy staff continued to discuss religious freedom issues, including religious-based discrimination, with NGOs Caritas and KISA. They engaged representatives of the Anglican, Armenian Orthodox, Baha’i, Buddhist, Evangelical, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jewish, Maronite, Muslim, and Roman Catholic communities to hear their concerns about access to and the condition of religious sites and cemeteries, incidents of religious-based harassment and discrimination, societal attitudes toward minority religions, and obstacles to religious freedom. Embassy officials supported religious leaders’ continuing dialogue within the RTCYPP and encouraged continuing reciprocal visits of religious leaders to places of worship on both sides of the “green line.”

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2019)



Country:

Cyprus

Source:

USDOS – US Department of State [\(/en/source/11558.html\)](/en/source/11558.html)

Original link (no longer valid):

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/cyprus/>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

10 June 2020

Document ID:

2031307

Austrian Red CrossAustrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research
and Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien

T (Telefon) +43 1 589 00 583F (Fax) +43 1 589 00 589info@ecoi.net

ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

