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KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Turkey remained fairly consistent overall but did see some slight improvements. In June, the government finally released long-awaited regulations for religious minority foundations' board member elections. The government's failure to provide these regulations had prevented religious minority communities from electing foundation leadership for the last nine years. While the issuance of the regulations represented a positive development for the ability of some groups to operate, some critics [panned](#) the procedure as another means to "perpetuate state control" over non-Muslim communities. Although an April decision by the Constitutional Court ruled that schools' refusal to exempt children from mandatory religious classes violated freedom of religion or belief, the government took no apparent action to remedy the situation. On the contrary, schools reportedly [pushed](#) Kurdish students who wanted to enroll in Kurdish language courses to take religious classes instead. During the year, the government also took no steps to grant legal personality to religious communities, permit conscientious objection to mandatory military service, or reopen the Theological School of Halki or any other seminary.

The Turkish government continued to discriminate against Alevis and refuse to recognize their places of worship, known as *cemevis*. In February, Alevis [protested](#) the government's discriminatory policy of charging utility fees for their places of worship and not others, like mosques. That same month, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [announced](#) that the government would reduce the fees by classifying *cemevis* as residences rather than commercial establishments, but notably it did not categorize them as places of worship. In October, President Erdoğan [announced](#) the creation of a state-run "Alevi-Bektaşî Culture and Cemevi Directorate" to

allegedly address the community's issues; however, many Alevis [criticized](#) the move as a means to [subject](#) Alevism to government authority and [promote](#) their assimilation to Sunni Islam. Alevis also continued to experience targeted violence throughout the year. In July, coinciding with the beginning of the holy month of Muharrem, several individuals [conducted](#) a string of attacks on Alevi places of worship and associations, with one assailant reportedly stabbing a woman who had to be hospitalized. Days later, two men physically [assaulted](#) Selami Sarıtaş, the leader of an Istanbul *cemevi*.

Other religious communities, including Christians and Jews, also experienced instances of societal violence, intimidation, and the destruction or vandalization of their religious sites over the course of the year. In June, several persons [attacked](#) a Syriac family related to an alleged land dispute while the family hosted Syriac clergy members in their house. In July, vandals [destroyed](#) 36 headstones in the Jewish Hasköy cemetery in Istanbul. Remnants of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—which [maintained](#) a presence in Turkey—continued to pose a threat to religious minorities. Alleged ISIS members reportedly planned to [carry out](#) attacks on Alevis and an Ankara *cemevi*, and after the reporting period, additional [plots](#) to attack churches and synagogues also came to light.

The Turkish government continued to criminalize blasphemy or "insulting religious values" under Article 216(3) of the Penal Code, frequently levying such charges to crack down on criticism of the government and expression perceived as offensive to Islam. Throughout the year, numerous individuals and entities faced prosecution or investigation on criminal blasphemy charges, including Turkish pop singer Sezen Aksu and Swedish music streaming service Spotify.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Turkey on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Raise in all meetings with Turkish government officials and press at the highest levels for the reopening of the Theological School of Halki (Halki Seminary) and for full compliance with European Court of Human Rights rulings on freedom of religion or belief; and
- Track and comprehensively document in the U.S. Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report religious communities' efforts to open, regain, renovate, and protect places of worship and other religious sites of spiritual, cultural, or historical importance; include information on the vandalization, damage, and destruction of such sites; and work with the Turkish government to ensure their protection.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Incorporate consideration of Turkey's treatment of religious minorities and broader human rights issues into its continued evaluation of the U.S.-Turkey bilateral relationship, including in the context of proposed legislation.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Staff Visit:** Istanbul, Ankara, Diyarbakır, and Mardin in March 2022
- **Issue Update:** [Blasphemy Charges in Turkey](#)
- **Podcast:** [Conditions for Religious and Nonbelief Communities in Turkey](#)
- **Podcast:** [The Alevi Struggle for Rights in Turkey](#)

Background

The U.S. government [estimates](#) the population of Turkey at just over 83 million. The Turkish government has claimed that 99 percent of the population is Muslim, with 78 percent reportedly identifying as Hanafi Sunni. Between 10 million and 25 million people identify as Alevi, the country's largest religious minority, and there is also a small population of Shi'a Muslims. An estimated 0.2 percent of the population comprises atheists, Armenian Apostolics, Baha'is, Bulgarian Orthodox, Chaldean Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Russian Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Yazidis, and others.

The constitution [defines](#) Turkey as a secular (*laik*) state and provides for the freedom of conscience, religious belief, and conviction. Despite these provisions, the government maintained an active role in religious affairs, directly overseeing the practice of Islam through the official Directorate of Religious Affairs, or Diyanet, and managing the affairs of other religious communities through the General Directorate of Foundations (*Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü*).

The overall situation for human rights in Turkey continued to decline amid the government's ongoing targeting of political opponents, censorship of media, and alleged use of torture. The downward trajectory of recent years led Human Rights Watch to [assert](#) that "the authoritarian and highly centralized presidential government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has set back Turkey's human rights record by decades." In June, the European Parliament [adopted](#) a report that reiterated serious human rights concerns and called on Turkey to address persistent religious freedom issues such as: lack of legal personality for religious communities, compulsory religious education, failure to recognize Alevis and their places of worship, restrictions on the training and succession of clergy, and the continued closure of Halki Seminary. According to reports, Turkey also [rejected](#) the citizenship applications of some Uyghurs due to purported "national security" and "public order" risks.

Foundation Elections and Other Discriminatory Policies

The government has regularly inserted itself in the internal affairs of religious communities, interfered in leadership elections, and prevented religious minorities from opening places of worship and training facilities for religious leaders. For the last nine years, the many religious minority communities that manage their affairs through foundations have been unable to elect new leadership due to the government's refusal to issue regulations for those elections. Finally, in June, the government [published](#) those regulations but [included](#) a new residency requirement for candidates competing in parts of Istanbul, generating concerns that it would limit participation. Armenian Patriarch Sahak Maşalyan [stated](#) that the patriarchate did not know why religious communities had to wait so long to hold elections, and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew [criticized](#) the extended delay as a "great injustice" and expressed his disappointment that the state did not heed the communities' appeals on various elements of the regulations.

In June, a citizen [won a lawsuit](#) to have information included on his national identification card to reflect Tengrism as his religion instead of Islam, after the Ministry of Interior reportedly denied his initial request.

Charges of Blasphemy

Turkish authorities continued to [rely on](#) blasphemy charges to penalize individuals considered critical of the government or perceived to have "insulted" Islam. In January, a group [lodged a complaint](#) against pop singer Sezen Aksu on such charges after she posted a clip of a five-year-old song to YouTube in which she referred to the religious figures of Adam and Eve as "ignorant." In a thinly veiled reference to Aksu, President Erdoğan [threatened](#) to "tear out those tongues," while the Diyanet [warned](#) citizens "to be extremely sensitive and careful in every sentence, statement and approach made about the distinguished, leading, and exemplary figures of Islam." In August, the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office announced an investigation into Spotify after complaints emerged that users had created "insulting" playlist names such as "God's Ringtone," "Songs God listened to while exiling Adam from paradise," and "Eve didn't hear when God announced the forbidden fruit [because she was] listening to this playlist," among others. In September, authorities [began an investigation](#) against a scholar and atheist who called certain religious figures "fairy tales." Yet another individual was [indicted](#) on incitement charges after he posted a photo during the holy month of Ramadan of himself and others drinking alcohol captioned with the phrase "may the lord accept."

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Turkey [continued](#) to cooperate closely on matters related to security and economic relations. With the launch of Russia's full-scale invasion and war against Ukraine, the U.S. government increasingly [engaged](#) with the Turkish government—which has attempted to [position](#) itself as a potential mediator to the conflict—on efforts to assist Ukraine. In April, the United States and Turkey [launched](#) the U.S.-Turkey Strategic Mechanism, which convened three times throughout the year to review aspects of the bilateral relationship such as trade, defense cooperation, and counterterrorism. During the year, the State Department condemned Turkey's unjust convictions and sentencing of philanthropist [Osman Kavala](#) and Istanbul Mayor [Ekrem İmamoğlu](#).

The U.S. government continued to raise religious freedom concerns in Turkey. In September, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Rashad Hussain [traveled](#) to Turkey, where he met with Turkish officials including the Spokesperson and Chief Advisor to the President [İbrahim Kalın](#) and President of Religious Affairs [Ali Erbaş](#). Public messaging, however, [indicated](#) a greater focus on refugees and individuals fleeing religious persecution in other countries than on Turkey's own religious freedom violations. U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Jeffrey L. Flake also [met](#) with representatives of various religious communities.