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2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Turkey

Executive Summary

The constitution defines the country as a secular state; it provides for freedom of conscience, religious belief, conviction, expression, and worship; and prohibits discrimination based on religious grounds. Religious matters are coordinated and governed by the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), whose mandate is to enable the practice of and promote Sunni Islam. The government ascribed responsibility for the July 15 coup attempt to self-exiled Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen and his movement, which the government considers a terrorist organization. Following the coup attempt, the government detained over 75,000 government officials and suspended 3,600 staff from the Diyanet for allegedly being linked to Gulen and the coup attempt. Some foreign citizens, including several individuals with ties to Christian groups, faced detention, residency-permission problems, or denial of entry to the country under the state of emergency powers following the attempted coup. The government continued to prosecute individuals for "openly disrespecting the religious belief of a group." The government continued to limit the rights of non-Muslim minorities, especially those it did not recognize as covered by the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. Non-Sunni Muslims did not receive the same protections as recognized non-Muslim minorities. The government continued to treat Alevi Islam as a heterodox Muslim "sect." It did not recognize Alevi Muslim houses of worship and closed an Alevi-owned television station on allegations it spread terrorist propaganda. Courts convicted seven men of killing three Protestant church members in 2007. Religious minorities reported difficulty operating or opening houses of worship, challenging land and property disputes, and obtaining exemptions from mandatory religious classes. The government restricted minority religious groups from training clergy. Five churches mounted legal challenges to the government expropriation of 6,300 land plots in Diyarbakir in March after they were damaged during security operations against the U.S.-designated terrorist organization, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The government did not recognize the right to conscientious objection to military service. The government continued to provide security support for religious minority communities and paid for renovations and restorations of some registered religious properties.

Alevi Muslims faced protests and threats of violence. There were also threats of violence against Jews, Protestants, and Sunni Muslims. Anti-Semitic discourse continued, including a wave of anti-Semitic speech on social media following a Jewish wedding held at the newly renovated Grand Synagogue in Edirne. There were also multiple instances of anti-Alevi and anti-Semitic speech in the press and other media after the July attempted coup. Some progovernment news commentators published stories attempting to associate the coup plotters with the Jewish community and the ecumenical patriarch. Some Protestant, Catholic, and Alevi places of worship were vandalized during the year.

The U.S. Ambassador, visiting U.S. officials, and officers from the embassy and consulates continued to engage with government officials and a wide range of religious community leaders to underscore the

importance of religious freedom and interfaith tolerance, and to condemn discriminatory language against any faith. Embassy and consulate representatives and visiting U.S. government officials continued to urge the government to lift restrictions on religious groups and raised issues of property restitution and specific cases of religious discrimination. The Secretary of State and Deputy Secretary of State, in meetings with government officials in Washington, continued to call for the reopening of the Halki Greek Orthodox seminary.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 80.3 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the Turkish government, 99 percent of the population is Muslim, approximately 77.5 percent of which are Hanafi Sunni. Representatives of other religious groups estimate their members represent approximately 0.3 percent of the population, while the most recent published surveys suggest approximately 2 percent of the population is atheist.

Alevi foundation leaders estimate Alevi Muslims make up 25-31 percent of the population. The Shia Jafari community estimates its members make up 4 percent of the population. The media estimate there may be from 200,000 to four million people influenced by the movement led by Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, which identifies itself as an Islam-inspired civic, cultural, and educational movement.

Non-Muslim religious groups are mostly concentrated in Istanbul and other large cities. While exact figures are not available, these groups self-report approximately 90,000 Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians (of which an estimated 60,000 are citizens and an estimated 30,000 are illegal migrants from Armenia); 25,000 Roman Catholics (including a large number of recent immigrants from Africa and the Philippines); 17,000 Jews; 25,000 Syrian Orthodox Christians (also known as Syriacs or Suriyanis); 15,000 Russian Orthodox Christians (mostly recent immigrants from Russia who hold residence permits); 10,000 Bahais; 22,000 Yezidis (17,000 of whom are refugees who arrived in 2014); 5,000 Jehovah's Witnesses; 7,000 members of Protestant denominations; 3,000 Chaldean Christians; and up to 2,000 Greek Orthodox Christians. There also are small, undetermined numbers of Bulgarian Orthodox, Nestorian, Georgian Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, and Maronite Christians. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) estimates its membership at approximately 300 individuals.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of conscience, religious belief, conviction, expression, and worship. It stipulates individuals may not be compelled to participate in religious ceremonies or disclose their religion; acts of worship may be conducted freely as long as they are not directed against the integrity of the state. The constitution prohibits discrimination on religious grounds and prohibits exploitation or abuse of "religion or religious feelings, or things held sacred by religion" or "even partially basing" the order of the state on religious tenets.

The constitution establishes the Diyanet, through which the state coordinates religious matters. According to the law, the Diyanet's mandate is to enable and promote the belief, practices, and moral principles of Islam, with a primary focus on Sunni Islam, educate the public about religious issues, and administer mosques. Operating under the prime minister's office, with a president appointed by the prime minister, and administered by a 16-person council elected by clerics and university theology faculties, the Diyanet has five main departments: the high councils for religious affairs, education, services, publications, and public relations.

Although registration with the government is not mandatory for religious groups, unregistered religious groups may not request legal recognition for places of worship. Holding religious services at a location not recognized as a place of worship is illegal and may be punished with fines or closure of the venue. A long-standing law prohibits foundations established on the basis of the religion or ethnicity of members but grants exemptions to foundations existing before enactment of the law. Currently, 167 of those exempted foundations continue to exist. A religious group may apply to register as an association or foundation provided its stated objective is charitable, educational, or cultural rather than religious.

The law prohibits Sufi and other religious-social orders (*tarikats*) and lodges (*cemaats*).

Associations by definition must be nonprofit and may receive financial support only in the form of donations. A foundation may earn income through companies and rent-earning properties. Associations have fewer legal

rights than foundations at the local level. The process for establishing a foundation is lengthier and more expensive than that for establishing an association.

The General Directorate of Foundations (GDF) under the Office of the Prime Minister regulates the activities and affiliated property of all charitable foundations and assesses whether they are operating within the stated objectives of their organizational statute. There are several categories of foundations, including those religious community foundations that existed prior to the 1936 law.

A foundation of any category may be closed only by court order, except under state-of-emergency rule or martial law, during which the government may close foundations by decree. If a foundation becomes inactive, the government may petition the courts to find the foundation no longer operational and transfer all assets to the state.

To register as an association, a group must submit a registration application to the provincial governor's office and may immediately begin operating while awaiting confirmation from the governor's office that its bylaws are constitutional. In addition to its bylaws, a group must obtain and submit as part of its application permission from the Ministry of the Interior if a foreign association or nonprofit organization is listed as a founding member; it must submit copies of residence permits of foreigners if they are founding members of the group. If the governorate finds the bylaws unlawful or unconstitutional, the association is asked to change the bylaws to meet the legal requirements, and association officials may be fined or punished by law. Associations may be closed only by court order, except under state of emergency and martial law, during which the government may close associations by decree. New associations are bound by the civil code not to discriminate on the grounds of religion, ethnicity, or race.

The penal code prohibits imams, priests, rabbis, and other religious leaders from "reproaching or vilifying" the government or the laws of the state while performing their duties. Violations are punishable by prison terms of one month to one year, or three months to two years if the crime involves inciting others to disobey the law. There are legal restrictions against insulting a recognized religion, interfering with a religious group's services, or defacing its property. Insulting a recognized religion is punishable by six months to one year in prison; interfering with a religious group's services is punishable by one to three years in prison; defacing religious property is punishable by three months to one year in prison; and destroying or demolishing religious property is punishable by one to four years in prison. Since it is illegal to hold religious services in places not registered as a place of worship, in practice, these legal proscriptions apply only to registered religious groups.

The constitution establishes compulsory religious and moral instruction in public primary and secondary schools, with content determined by the Ministry of National Education's Department of Religious Instruction. Religion classes are two hours per week for students in grades four through eight and one hour per week for students in grades nine through 12. Only students who marked "Christian" or "Jewish" on their national identity cards may apply for an exemption from religion classes. No exemptions are allowed for atheists, agnostics, Alevis or other non-Sunni Muslims, Bahais, Yezidis, or those who left the religion section on their national identity card blank. Additional Islamic religious courses may also be taken as electives for two hours per week during regular school hours in middle school and high school.

Military service is obligatory for males; there is no provision for conscientious objection. Those who oppose mandatory military service on religious grounds may face charges in military and civilian courts and are subject to prison sentences ranging from two months to two years.

National identity cards contain a space for religious identification, although individuals may choose to leave the space blank. The national identity cards include only the following religious identities as options: Muslim, Greek Orthodox, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, No Religion, or Other. Bahai, Alevi, and Yezidi, among other groups with known populations in the country, are not listed as options. Members of these groups may choose any of the available options, or leave the space blank.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), with one reservation regarding Article 27, which states that people belonging to ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities "shall not be denied the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language." The reservation asserts the right "to interpret and apply the provisions of Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in accordance with the related provisions and rules of the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey and the Treaty of Lausanne of 24 July 1923 and its Appendices."

Government Practices

The government detained or suspended over 75,000 government officials, including 3,600 Diyanet staff, and some foreign citizens, for alleged links with the Gulen Movement, which the government holds responsible for the attempted coup under the state of emergency powers. The government continued to limit the rights of non-Muslim minorities, especially those it did not recognize as being covered by the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. It

continued to consider Alevism a heterodox Muslim group and continued not to recognize Alevi houses of worship (*cemevis*). As part of a larger shut down of television and radio stations by government decree on allegations of spreading terrorist propaganda, the government closed an Alevi-owned television station in September. Alevis expressed concerns about security and said the government failed to meet their demands for religious reforms. Courts acquitted a man charged in 2012 with disrespecting the religious belief of a group; dismissed, after a three-year probation, the case against a woman accused in 2011 of insulting the Prophet Muhammad; and convicted seven men of the 2007 mutilation and murder of three members of a Protestant church who were tied to their chairs and each stabbed dozens of times before the killers cut their throats. Non-Sunni Muslims did not receive the same protections as recognized non-Muslim minorities although both experienced difficulty operating or opening houses of worship, challenging land and property disputes, or obtaining exemptions from mandatory religious classes. The government continued to train Sunni Muslim clerics while restricting other religious groups from training clergy and continued to fund the construction of Sunni mosques while restricting land use of other religious groups.

Following an attempted coup on July 15, the government on July 20 declared a three-month state of emergency, which was renewed in October. The government ascribed responsibility for the coup attempt to self-exiled Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen and his movement, which identifies itself as an Islam-inspired civic, cultural and education movement, though the government considers the movement a terrorist organization. In the three months following the coup attempt, police detained more than 75,000 individuals and formally arrested more than 41,000, many for alleged ties to the Gulen movement. The government suspended over 3,600 alleged Gulenists from the Diyanet .

Some foreign citizens, including several individuals with ties to Christian groups, faced detention, problems with residency-permissions, or denial of entry to the country under the state of emergency powers following the July attempted coup. On October 7, authorities detained a Protestant pastor and his wife, who had led a Protestant church in Izmir and worked in the country for more than 20 years. The government released the pastor's wife on October 19 and subsequently granted her a one-year residency permit. Authorities formally charged the pastor with "membership in an armed terrorist organization" on December 9. In the latter half of the year, several foreign Christian missionaries were subjected to deportation, and cancellation of valid residency permits without notice. The government provided limited explanation or justification for such actions. The government denied any anti-Christian motivation underlying these actions.

According to the Protestant community in Ankara, the government provided police protection for a Protestant place of worship in Ankara following reported threats from terrorist groups.

On July 21 and August 2, the country invoked respectively Article 15 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Article 4 of the ICCPR, following the government's proclamation of a state of emergency, to relax temporarily some of its obligations under the two covenants.

The government continued to interpret the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which refers broadly to "non-Muslim minorities," as granting special legal minority status exclusively to three recognized groups: Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians. The government did not recognize the leadership or administrative structures of non-Muslim minorities, such as the patriarchates and chief rabbinate, as legal entities, leaving them unable to buy or hold title to property or to press claims in court. These three groups, along with other minority religious communities, had to rely on independent foundations they previously organized, with separate governing boards, in order to hold and control individual religious properties. The foundations remained unable to hold elections to renew the membership of their governing boards because the government, despite promises to do so, had still not promulgated new regulations to replace those repealed in 2013 that would have allowed the election of foundation board members.

The government continued not to recognize the Ecumenical Patriarchate as the leader of the world's 300 million Orthodox Christians, consistent with the government's stance that there was no legal obligation to do so. The government's position remained that the ecumenical patriarch was not "ecumenical," but only the religious leader of the country's Greek Orthodox minority population. The government continued to permit only Turkish citizens to vote in the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Holy Synod or be elected patriarch but continued its practice of granting citizenship to a number of Greek Orthodox metropolitans under the terms of a 2011 stopgap solution to widen the pool of candidates to become the next patriarch. The Istanbul Governorate, which represents the government in Istanbul, continued to maintain that leaders of the Greek Orthodox (Ecumenical Patriarchate), Armenian Apostolic Orthodox, and Jewish communities must be Turkish citizens, although coreligionists from outside the country had assumed informal leadership positions of these groups in some cases.

The Armenian Apostolic Patriarchate and the Ecumenical Patriarchate continued to seek legal recognition. Their communities operated as conglomerations of individual religious foundations. Because the patriarchates did not have legal personality, associated foundations controlled by individual boards held all the property of the religious communities, and the patriarchates had no legal authority to direct the use of any assets or otherwise govern their communities.

The government did not enforce the legal ban against *tarikats* and *cemaats*; these groups remained active and widespread.

A majority of Protestant churches reported facing bureaucratic difficulties in registering as a place of worship and as a result, continued to be registered as church associations and to meet in unregistered locations for worship services. According to the Protestant community, there were five foundations (four from before 1936), 34 associations, and over 30 representation offices linked with these associations.

In September the government shut down 20 television and radio stations that authorities said were spreading terrorist propaganda. One of the shuttered stations was Alevi-owned TV10. In December the Radio and Television High Council shut down Alevi television channel Yol TV for “insulting President Erdogan, promoting discrimination in society, and praising terrorist organizations.”

In a September retrial, an Istanbul court acquitted Fazil Say of “openly disrespecting the religious belief of a group” for reportedly posting lines attributed to poet Omar Khayyam on social media. This followed the Supreme Court of Appeals’ October 2015 ruling that Say’s posting constituted freedom of expression, which had reversed Say’s original 2013 conviction and suspended his 10-month prison sentence.

The case of women’s rights activist and lawyer Canan Arin, who was charged with “openly disrespecting the religious belief of a group” for a reported insult to the Prophet Muhammad, was dismissed as a result of the expiration of a three-year probation period. Arin had been arrested in 2012 after delivering a speech at a conference in 2011 about child marriage, where she mentioned the Prophet Muhammad as an example. In 2013, the court had suspended the proceedings, provided the crime was not repeated for three years.

In September a Malatya Heavy Penal Court found seven men guilty of murdering three members of a Protestant church (two Turkish converts to Christianity and a German citizen) in April 2007. The court sentenced five of the defendants to three aggravated life sentences each and the other two to six years in prison. The court acquitted 14 others, including former military officers who had been charged with plotting the killings. The trial took nine years and 115 court sessions. According to the court, several of the accused recorded on their cell phones the treatment of the victims, which involved mutilation, including binding the victims to chairs and stabbing them each dozens of times before cutting their throats. The court ruled the local antiterror police and gendarmerie officers who were on duty at the time of the murders should also be investigated. At year’s end, authorities were investigating these officials and had not filed charges against any of them. In January, Malatya Administrative Court found the Interior Ministry and Malatya governor’s office negligent and ordered them to pay the German victim’s family a financial compensation of 417,000 Turkish lira (\$113,596). Damages have also been awarded to the families of the two Turkish victims.

A hearing took place on October 19 in the ongoing trial of 13 individuals charged with conspiracy to commit a large-scale assault against an Izmit Protestant church and to assassinate its pastor in 2013. Additional hearings were postponed until February 2017, as the court awaited the results of an investigation against two law enforcement officials for their alleged involvement in the plot. All suspects had previously been released pending trial.

In December a prosecutor in Izmir asked for 40 years imprisonment for three suspects who battered a *muezzin* (who recites the call to prayer at mosques) on the night of the July coup attempt. The muezzin was attacked for reading out the Muslim funeral call (*se/a*) to invite people to resist the coup. The case was ongoing at year’s end.

The state continued to provide training for Sunni Muslim clerics while restricting other religious groups from training clerics inside the country, including following requirements set by the Higher Education Board, which supervised all higher education institutions. The lack of monastic seminaries within the country meant that the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox Patriarchates were unable to train their clerics. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, leader of the Greek Orthodox Church, repeatedly called on the government to allow the Halki Seminary to re-open as an independent institution. In 1971, a Constitutional Court ruling that prohibited the operation of private institutions of higher education led to the seminary’s closure.

In January the government announced that public employees would be allowed to arrange their lunch breaks according to the time of prayer on Fridays. In August the government lifted a regulation preventing women police officers from covering their heads for religious purposes.

According to Protestants, many prosecutors and police continued to regard certain public religious speech and religious activism with suspicion, such as proselytism by Protestant evangelicals. In August the police deported four South Korean missionaries who were distributing Bibles in Gaziantep.

In February the City Council of Bursa denied the application by German Catholic, Latin Catholic, Orthodox, and Turkish Protestant congregations to renew their permit for a building which the groups had shared for more than 10 years, and requested the eviction of these groups. The decision was cancelled a few days later, however,

and no final solution has yet been reached. The congregations are able to use the church as negotiations continue.

In May the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that Turkey violated the religious freedom of Jehovah's Witnesses in Izmir and Mersin by refusing to provide them appropriate places of worship. In October the ECHR rejected the government's appeal of the decision. The government had not taken any steps to resolve the issue by year's end.

According to Protestant groups, many local officials continued to impose zoning standards on churches, such as minimum space requirements, that they did not impose on mosques. Local officials required Protestant groups to purchase 2,500 square meters of land (27,000 square feet) to construct churches, even for small congregations. Officials did not apply this requirement to Sunni Muslims, who were permitted to build small mosques in malls, airports, and other spaces. The Protestant groups said they had not applied for permits to build any new churches during the year, in part because of the zoning requirements.

In the historic and ancient Sur District of Diyarbakir Province, the Kursunlu Mosque, Hasirli Mosque, Surp Giragos Armenian Church, Mar Petyun Chaldean Church, Syriac Protestant Church, and the Armenian Catholic Church were all severely damaged during fighting between the government and the PKK between December 2015 and March. In March the government issued a decree expropriating these properties, in addition to the Syriac Mother Mary Church and Diyarbakir Protestant Church, as part of a larger expropriation of 6,300 land plots in Sur following the cessation of the fighting. Then-Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and the general director of foundations stated the expropriation was designed to facilitate the protection and reconstruction of damaged properties, and the government intended to return the properties it determined could be salvaged, once repaired, to the original owners.

As with nonreligious properties elsewhere in Sur, the government provided little information on expropriation or compensation to the original owners, and they were not included in reconstruction planning. The Syriac and Protestant Churches and the Chaldean and Armenian Apostolic Church foundations legally challenged the expropriations. At year's end, these cases remained ongoing, and the government had not paid compensation to the religious groups for the expropriation or property damage. In September the GDF began restoring the expropriated Armenian Catholic Church. The government said the Ministry of Culture would coordinate the restoration of some properties and the GDF would restore properties they owned.

The government did not return any properties during the year that it had seized in previous decades. Since 2011, the GDF had received 1,560 applications from religious minority foundations, which had applied for compensation for seized properties. They had returned 333 properties and paid compensation for 21 additional properties. The other applications pending from 2011 were rejected because they did not meet the criteria as outlined in the 2011 compensation law. Since the time period for submitting compensation applications had expired, no religious foundations submitted new applications during the year. The Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Jewish, Syrian Orthodox, Bulgarian Orthodox, Georgian Orthodox, Chaldean, and Armenian Protestant communities had previously submitted applications for the return of properties. Religious institutions and communities without legally recognized foundations were unable to seek compensation for seized properties.

In April the Istanbul Forestry Directorate filed a lawsuit requesting the cancellation of the deeds for two properties returned to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2012. One of the two properties includes the hill on which Halki Seminary is located.

In March the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church's Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia (based in Lebanon) made a second application for expedited review of a lawsuit, filed with the Constitutional Court in April 2015, to recover the centuries-old headquarters of the Catholicosate of Sis in the Kozan District of Adana Province. According to the lawsuit, the headquarters, now controlled by the government but once a center of Armenian Christian life, was wrongly seized in 1915 and should be returned. In June the Constitutional Court rejected the application on procedural grounds. In December the Catholicosate applied to the ECHR for the return of the property.

Throughout the month of Ramadan, the government's religious television channel, *Diyanet TV*, broadcast a daily recitation of Quranic verses from the Hagia Sophia, which was secularized and transformed into a museum in 1935. The director of religious affairs gave a special interview from the Hagia Sophia while the Muslim call to prayer was broadcast from its minarets. In October the government appointed a full-time imam to the Sultan's Pavilion, an annex built during the Ottoman period that is adjacent to, but physically separated from the Hagia Sophia. Previously, the pavilion hosted prayers twice a day with the participation of an imam from a nearby mosque. Since appointment of the new full-time imam, prayers were held five times a day in the pavilion.

The government continued to permit annual and other commemorative religious worship services at religiously significant sites previously converted to state museums, such as St. Peter's Church in Antakya, St. Nicholas'

Church near Demre, and the House of the Virgin Mary near Selcuk. The Ecumenical Patriarchate cancelled this year's service at Sumela Monastery near Trabzon because of ongoing restoration; a ceremony was held at an alternative site. The government and the Armenian Patriarchate cancelled a service at Akdamar Church, a medieval Armenian Apostolic Church in Vandue, because of ongoing security operations against the PKK. Some municipal and religious minority group leaders called for these sites to be open to worship throughout the year without restrictions.

At year's end, the government still had not complied with a 2013 ruling by the ECHR which found that the government's compulsory religion courses in public schools violated educational freedoms, even though the ECHR had denied the government's appeal of the ruling in 2015. The ECHR ruling upheld the Alevi community's claim that the courses promoted Sunni Islam and were contrary to their religious convictions. Although authorities added material on Alevism to the religious course curriculum in 2011 after the ECHR decision, many Alevis stated the material was inadequate and, in some cases, incorrect. Construction began in March 2015 on an Alevi school, which then-National Education Minister Nabi Avci said the government would build in cooperation with the NGO Helping Hands Foundation as a venue for teaching Alevi-Bektashi beliefs. According to the government, construction of 40 percent of the school's main building and 15 percent of the annex buildings had been completed by the end of the year.

In June Alevi organizations issued a statement protesting a Ministry of National Education memorandum that mandated teachers to read and study a book that the Alevis said described the Alevi Muslim faith as "distorted" and "decayed."

Non-Sunni Muslims said they faced difficulty obtaining exemptions from compulsory religious instruction in primary and secondary schools, particularly if their identification cards listed their religion as "Muslim." Members of other minority religious groups, including Protestants, also said they had difficulty obtaining exemptions. Because no alternative is provided for students who are exempted from the compulsory religious instruction, those students stand out and as a result may face additional social stigma.

The government said that the compulsory instruction covered the range of world religions, but religious groups, especially Alevis and members of the Syriac Orthodox community, stated the courses largely reflected Hanafi Sunni Islamic doctrine and contained negative and incorrect information about other religious groups. Some Alevis noted that students were taught incorrect information about their own faith and their parents then had to correct it at home. While the government allowed non-Muslims to select other electives to fulfill their required coursework for graduation, non-Sunni Muslims reported they often had to choose from electives concerning different aspects of Sunni Islam.

The Minister of National Education announced in October 2014 that students who attended non-Muslim minority community schools would be permitted to take elective courses in their own religion. According to the government, these courses became available for religious minority groups in 2015.

The government reported that 218 Armenian Orthodox students and 43 Jewish students answered questions on their respective religions in the high school entrance exams.

The government continued to permit the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish religious community foundations to operate schools under the supervision of the education ministry, and also allowed children of their noncitizen coreligionists, including children of undocumented Armenian migrants and Armenian refugees from Syria, to enroll in them. Because these migrant and refugee children were legally classified as "visitors," they were ineligible to receive a diploma from these schools. The curricula of these schools included information unique to the cultures of the three groups and could be taught in the minority groups' languages. The three communities financed most of the cost of these schools; the government paid for teachers in classes taught in the Turkish language. The government did not permit other religious groups to operate schools.

The government limited the number of students admitted to public secondary schools, assigning tens of thousands of students, based on entrance exam scores and proximity, to state-run religious schools, known as "*imam hatip*" schools. The government converted some regular public schools to *imam hatip* schools, and students reported this created a geographical hurdle for those who preferred to attend nonreligious schools. Enrollment in the *imam hatip* schools increased to 1.1 million students, up from approximately one million in 2015. Critics, including secular-minded parents, expressed concern the government was favoring religion over secularism in education policy. Following the July 15 coup attempt, the government closed at least 1,043 private schools, many of which were affiliated with the movement led by Fethullah Gulen, which the government designated as a "terrorist group." The government converted some of the private schools to *imam hatip* schools.

In February the education directorate of the Uskudar district in Istanbul published an official memorandum asking school administrators and teachers to encourage more students to take elective religion classes.

Some required school textbooks contained language critical of missionaries. In an eighth grade textbook called *History of the Turkish Republic Reforms and Atatürkism*, missionary activities were listed in a section titled "National Threats."

Many state buildings, including universities, maintained small mosques in which Muslims could pray. The government continued to deny Alevis the right to establish similar places of worship in government buildings, which did not contain places of worship for non-Sunnis. Although Alevi groups were able to build new *cemevis*, the Diyanet continued to decline to provide financial support for *cemevi* construction, in contrast with the support the Diyanet provided to Sunni groups. Alevi leaders reported there were approximately 2,500 to 3,000 Alevi *cemevis* in the country, an insufficient number to meet their needs. The government continued to state Diyanet-funded mosques were available to Alevis and all Muslims, regardless of their school of religious thought.

The government still had not legally recognized *cemevis* as places of worship, even though the Supreme Court of Appeals had affirmed a lower court's decision in August 2015 that *cemevis* are places of worship and should receive the same benefits that Sunni mosques receive, such as being exempt from paying utility bills. Most municipalities waived the utility bills only for Sunni Muslim mosques. A number of municipalities led by the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and People's Democratic Party (HDP), however, recognized *cemevis* and waived utility bills. Alevis issued public statements calling on the government to comply with the Supreme Court's ruling. In a January interview with *Milliyet* newspaper, President of the Diyanet Mehmet Gormez stated he opposed the recognition of *cemevis* as places of worship and said the issue was a "red line" for the Diyanet as its longstanding policy was that *cemevis* cannot be regarded as an alternative to mosques.

In June the imams of three different mosques in Izmir refused to announce a funeral service that would be held at a *cemevi*, saying they could not use the word "*cemevi*" in an announcement from a mosque.

The government continued to donate land for the construction of mosques and fund their construction through the Diyanet or municipalities.

In April the ECHR ruled Alevis were subjected to discrimination in receiving public services and were not receiving equal treatment from the government as compared with Sunni Muslims. Although the government was required by the ECHR to submit an action plan to address these concerns, the government had not done so by year's end. The government stated it was working on submitting an action plan to ECHR to address these concerns.

In September the Diyanet began to send groups of Alevi elders to 12 different European cities to discuss Alevi religious practices at the request of Alevi- and Jafari-origin Turkish citizens living in Europe.

In February a newspaper run by government-appointed trustees highlighted the Christian faith of CHP spokesperson Selin Sayek Boke and said that her religious identity caused "serious discomfort" in the party – a move supporters interpreted as an attempt to undermine her credibility because of her faith.

The Diyanet regulated the operation of 86,762 registered mosques. The Diyanet paid the salaries of 74,379 religious personnel in 2002 and 117,378 religious personnel at the end of 2015, the last year for which data was available. The government did not pay the salaries of religious leaders, instructors, or other staff belonging to other religious groups. In January however, the chief ombudsman's office issued an advisory opinion that the Diyanet should pay priests' salaries, following an appeal by the head of the Boyacikoy Surp Yerits Mangants Armenian Church Foundation. The chief ombudsman said he was in favor of "eliminating unjust treatment by amendment of related regulations."

On July 19, the Diyanet stated it would not offer religious funerary services, including funeral prayers, for soldiers involved in the July 15 coup attempt, except for those "forcibly dragged" into the coup attempt. This was the first time that the Diyanet declared that it would not offer religious funerary services for a group of people.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, members faced prosecution and fines for their refusal to serve in the country's military forces. In March conscientious objector Baris Gormez, a Jehovah's Witness, was fined 7,500 lira (\$2,500) by the Isparta Military Court for defiance of authority following a government appeal of a previous acquittal by the same court. In June Gormez appealed the fine and the case remained pending at year's end.

In March prosecutors in Izmir initiated two separate cases against Ersin Olgun, a Jehovah's Witness, for desertion of the military. Jehovah's Witnesses officials reported there were 19 similar cases for desertion and evasion of military eligibility examinations.

Some non-Muslims stated that listing their religious affiliation on national identity cards exposed them to discrimination and harassment. Members of many religious groups continued to state that, by not including a religious identity or listing an identity other than Muslim on applications for employment, they were precluded from obtaining government jobs and were discriminated against in the private sector.

In February then-Interior Minister Ekan Ala said the national identity cards would be replaced with new ones without a visible religion section; instead, the religious affiliation of an individual would be recorded in a chip on the card, visible only when scanned by a computer. According to the government, new identity cards were in distribution in four provinces, which would go up to 11 by year's end.

In December Forestry Minister Veysel Eroglu said that Fethullah Gulen "will end up dying in the U.S. and be buried in a Jewish cemetery."

Ankara University hosted an event to commemorate Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27. Then-Minister for European Union Affairs Volkan Bozkır attended the event.

In February the government again commemorated the nearly 800 Jewish refugees who died aboard the *Struma* when it sank off the coast of Istanbul in 1942. The governor of Istanbul attended the commemoration and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement expressing support for religious tolerance. In December a public menorah lighting took place before several hundred people in Istanbul's Besiktas district. The country's Chief Rabbi led the ceremony, with participation from government representatives and members of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities. Deputy Prime Minister Veysi Kaynak, who attended the ceremony, said in his speech that Jews were never a minority in Turkey and that "they are the owners of the country as much as we are."

Muslim, Jewish, and Christian religious leaders joined representatives from various municipalities in Istanbul for a public iftar in June. The Diyanet also hosted an iftar for representatives and members of non-Muslim communities.

In September the first Christian cemetery in the province of Yalova was opened with a ceremony attended by the mayor.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

During the July coup attempt, there were attacks against some Muslim clerics. There were threats of violence and protests against Alevis. There were threats of violence against the Jewish community and anti-Semitic and anti-Alevi discourse in the media, including after the coup attempt. Various groups threatened Christian churches. Alevi Muslims and Christians reported regularly being the subject of discrimination and hate speech. There were incidents of vandalism against Protestant, Catholic, and Alevi places of worship.

On the night of the July 15 coup attempt, there were attacks, including stabbings, against more than 60 imams reciting prayers and calling for support against the coup through the minarets, according to news reports. In Istanbul's Fatih municipality, a coup supporter stabbed an imam. The perpetrator was captured after the attack and prosecuted in September. The trial remained ongoing at year's end.

Following the coup attempt, many Alevis reported threats of violence. On July 17, protesters entered an Alevi neighborhood in Malatya and reportedly shouted slogans against the failed coup and denigrating Alevis. On August 18, an armed group fired several shots in front of the Garip Dede Cemevi in Istanbul's Kucukcekmece district before fleeing. There were no reported casualties and by year's end police had not identified the attackers. Alevis said police prevented attacks in Alevi neighborhoods and no major security incidents occurred in the days immediately following the coup attempt.

Jewish residents continued to express concern about anti-Semitism and increased threats of violence throughout the country. The government responded to specific threats of violence against Jewish schools by implementing enhanced security measures.

In September police increased security precautions around a *cemevi* and the Gaziantep Alevi Culture Union in the Duztepe neighborhood of Gaziantep following a report the locations might be the target of a terrorist attack.

Various groups threatened Christian places of worship. According to Protestant groups, on February 14 members of a Protestant church in Adana's Yuregir District distributed flowers to neighbors when a group came to the church with threats and protests, saying they would return on Sunday. The incident was reported to the security forces, and the police provided security with no further reported incidents.

In March the chair of the Sharia Association was fined 7,080 Turkish Lira (\$1,928) for insulting and 6,000 Turkish Lira (\$1,634) for threatening the chair of the Atheism Association.

The Syriac Orthodox community continued to seek agreement with the Latin Catholic community to build a second church in Istanbul to accommodate its growing population. The Syriac Orthodox community to date had

only one church in Istanbul to serve an estimated local population of 17,000 to 20,000. Because the land offered by the Istanbul municipality to the Syriac Church Foundation to build a second church previously belonged to the Latin Catholic Church, the Regional Board for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage required a written agreement between the two communities. The Syriac Orthodox and Latin Catholics had not reached agreement by year's end.

In June high school students protested in favor of modern, scientific, and secular education, including against the growth of *imam hatip* schools and inclusion of Quranic study electives in public schools.

Progovernment news commentators published stories attempting to associate the July 15 coup plotters with the Jewish community and the Christian community, as well as the ecumenical patriarch. In August *Aksam* newspaper claimed the ecumenical patriarch helped the coup plotters, an allegation based on falsely reported statements by a former U.S. Ambassador to Yemen. The story was immediately denied both by the Patriarchate and the former U.S. Ambassador to Yemen. In August a columnist in progovernment daily *Yeni Safak* associated the July 15 coup plotters with Jews by claiming the mother of Fethullah Gulen, the alleged organizer of the failed coup attempt, had a Jewish name. In December a columnist in *Sabah* said Fethullah Gulen was a "very clever man" who can "smell money and power instantly because he is a Jew." He went on to link Jews to brothels and called them "liars expert at disguise."

In January a columnist in the Islamist *Vahdet* newspaper said gorillas and chimpanzees in northern Africa were "cursed Jews."

In May the first Jewish wedding held in more than four decades at the newly renovated Grand Synagogue in Edirne, which included attendance by local government officials, triggered a deluge of anti-Semitic speech on social media. On Periscope, a popular video streaming service that offered a live feed of the wedding, some social media users wrote "Kill the Jews" and "Such a pity that Hitler didn't finish the job."

In June a theology professor said on government-owned TRT TV that "those who did not pray were animals." Many secularists, Alevis, and the Diyanet criticized the professor for his remarks.

In August on a Halk TV program, a guest commentator stated that Gulenist schools in the United States trained both Mormons and Gulenists.

Various nationalist Islamic groups continued to advocate transforming some former Orthodox churches, including Istanbul's Hagia Sophia museum, into mosques. The campaigns intensified after the Hagia Sophia of Trabzon, a 12th-century Byzantine church that had been operating as a museum for the previous 50 years, was converted into a mosque in 2013. On May 28, thousands participated in a morning Muslim prayer outside Istanbul's Hagia Sophia. The Anatolian Youth Association organized the event within the context of the government's celebration of the 563rd anniversary of the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul. In October a commentator on the media channel Kanal A said the 1935 decision to turn the Hagia Sophia from a mosque into a museum was part of a British and American conspiracy.

In November propaganda flyers appeared in the Fener neighborhood, where the Ecumenical Patriarchate is located, stating the patriarch used foreign Christian funding to purchase properties in Fener and renovate them into Western-style coffee shops, restaurants, and antique stores. The Patriarchate denied the allegations.

On February 25, four men attacked the Agape Protestant Church in the Guzelyali neighborhood of Samsun's Atakum district. Video footage from the church's security camera showed the suspects kicking the church's door after ringing its bell. Authorities detained four suspects on March 1 for "harming property."

In July small groups threw stones and broke windows of the Santa Maria Catholic Church in Trabzon and the Malatya Protestant Church. Muslim neighbors dispersed the vandals.

In March unidentified people wrote "Alevis get out" on houses in an Alevi neighborhood in Istanbul's Sariyer district.

In January the historic Istipol Synagogue in the Balat neighborhood in Istanbul reopened after 65 years with a morning prayer. The synagogue was built in 1694 for Jewish immigrants. After the reopening, vandals spray-painted anti-Semitic words on an outside wall.

In December members of a nationalist/Islamist youth association, Alperen Ocaklari, protested New Year celebrations by putting a gun to the head of another member dressed as Santa Claus. The president of Alperen Ocaklari said the protest was intended to draw attention to the idea that New Year's is a Christian holiday and that "as Muslim Turks, we should be more sensitive to Islamic holidays rather than holidays that don't belong to our culture."

In June the Jewish community again hosted an iftar at the Grand Edirne Synagogue for hundreds of participants, including Muslims and Christians.

In August the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate elected a new Metropolitan for Izmir, the first election of a metropolitan for the city since 1922. In September Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew performed a liturgy at Agios Voukolos Church in Izmir for the new metropolitan's coronation.

In January members of the Greek Orthodox community observed Epiphany with a traditional cross-throwing ceremony in Izmir for the first time in 94 years.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Ambassador, embassy and consulate officials, and visiting U.S. officials regularly engaged with government officials throughout the year, including at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Diyanet, and GDF, to underscore the importance of religious freedom, interfaith tolerance, and condemning hateful or discriminatory language directed at all religious groups. They urged the government to implement reforms aimed at lifting restrictions on religious groups, raised the issue of property restitution and restoration, and discussed specific cases of religious discrimination. The Ambassador and Consul General in Istanbul raised the issue of the Hagia Sophia's historical importance and extraordinary significance, as a symbol of peaceful coexistence and meaningful dialogue between religions, in their meetings with government officials. At the Consulate in Adana, senior consulate officials, and senior visitors urged the rapid restitution of church properties expropriated in Diyarbakir.

In meetings in Washington, the Secretary of State and Deputy Secretary of State urged government officials to reopen the Greek Orthodox seminary in Halki. The U.S. Ambassador, in meetings with government officials reiterated the U.S. position on this issue.

In June the Department of State's Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism met with government officials, Chief Rabbi Isak Haleva, and members of the Jewish community to discuss anti-Semitism and to underscore support for the community.

In October the Department of State's Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs met with government officials and various religious minority communities, including the Protestant, Alevi Muslim, and Syriac Orthodox communities, to discuss religious freedom concerns following the July 15 coup attempt. The Special Representative also expressed support to government officials and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew for reopening the Halki seminary.

The Ambassador and embassy and consulate officials regularly engaged with a wide range of religious community leaders to address concerns and promote interreligious dialogue. They utilized social media platforms to emphasize the importance of inclusion of religious minorities and counter perceptions of anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States.