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TURKEY

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Turkey remained poor, with no improvement from the previous year. Many religious communities continued to face bureaucratic obstacles that prevented or seriously impeded their ability to practice their religion or belief. Notably, the government maintained its refusal to grant legal personality to religious groups and yet again rejected a petition to allow religious foundations to hold long-delayed board member elections. Similarly, the government took no steps to reopen the Theological School of Halki (Halki Seminary), preventing the Ecumenical Patriarchate from training clergy for more than 50 years. The Turkish government also [did not permit](#) conscientious objection to mandatory military service and convicted those who attempted to exercise that right.

Throughout the year, both religious and ethnic minorities faced governmental or societal targeting along religious lines. In July, police reportedly [detained](#) 28 imams—and of those, they formally arrested nine—for preaching in Kurdish. Police officers questioned the imams about praying in Kurdish and their failure to adhere to the government’s official sermons, acts that law enforcement equated with support for a terrorist organization. As in previous years, Alevis were beset by a number of threatening incidents. In August, unidentified individuals [broke into](#) and damaged an Alevi house of worship (cemevi) in Istanbul, and several Alevis’ houses were [marked](#) and [vandalized](#) in separate episodes in the cities of Adana and Yalova. Protestant communities experienced persistent difficulties. Foreign Protestants whom the Turkish government either deported or prevented from entering the country in recent years unsuccessfully sought to overturn those bans and [appealed](#) to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). In late December, a Protestant church in

the Istanbul neighborhood of Kadıköy was discovered with “Allah 1” [graffitied](#) across the front door. The Turkish government also failed to protect other religious sites, including historical places of worship and cemeteries. For instance, a private citizen [demolished](#) the Surp Toros Armenian church in Kütahya, and construction in the province of Van [toppled](#) headstones in an Armenian cemetery.

Government officials at various levels expressed antisemitism through statements and social media posts. In May, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan used antisemitic [language](#) in a televised speech, prompting strong [condemnation](#) from the U.S. Department of State. In November, a court in Bursa [ruled](#) that a man who called President Erdoğan “a Jew” on social media had insulted the President, and it ultimately convicted the man and fined him approximately 721 USD (7,000 Turkish lira). President Erdoğan’s lawyer argued that the remark was “humiliating [and] damaging to his honor and respectability.” In other instances of antisemitism, unknown individuals [set fire](#) to the gateway of a disused synagogue, and online groups [hacked](#) and carried out [cyberattacks](#) on *Şalom*, Turkey’s only Jewish newspaper, and *Avlaremoz*, a Turkish-language Jewish news platform. The Turkish government maintained its law criminalizing blasphemy, or “insulting religious values,” and penalized those perceived to have insulted or mocked Islam. In January, authorities [arrested](#) two university students on charges of insulting religious values after they displayed a poster depicting a religious site alongside lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) flags, and in March, a government body [fined](#) two news networks on a similar basis. Individuals, including atheists, [reported](#) experiencing discrimination in societal and professional settings due to their beliefs.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Turkey on the U.S. Department of State’s 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 ECtHR rulings on freedom of religion or belief;
- Track and comprehensively document in the State Department’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 historic importance; include information on the vandalization, damage, and destruction of such sites; and work with the Turkish government to ensure their protection; and

- Prioritize travel to Turkey for officials at the highest levels of the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom and Office of the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism to raise issues

related to freedom of religion or belief and antisemitism directly with Turkish counterparts.

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 such as the [Turkey Human Rights Promotion Act of 2021](#) and the [Turkey and Ecumenical Patriarchate Religious Freedom Act of 2021](#).

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom in Turkey in 2021](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Destruction of Cemeteries](#)
- **Podcast:** [Sivas Massacre and Turkey’s Persecution of the Alevi Community](#)
- **Podcast:** [50 Years and Counting: The Continued Closure of Halki Seminary in Turkey](#)

Background

Turkey has an [estimated](#) population of nearly 82.5 million people, of whom more than 99 percent [identify](#) as Muslim. Most Muslims in the country follow Sunni Islam, but between 10 million and 25 million identify as Alevi. Alevis represent the country's largest religious minority, but the government refuses to recognize or grant the community certain rights it accords to some other religious groups. Around 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](#) the country as a secular state and guarantees the freedom of conscience, religious belief, and conviction. However, the government also exercises extensive control over both majority Muslim and non-Muslim religious communities through either the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), which oversees the practice of Islam, or the General Directorate of Foundations (*Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü*), which regulates other religious communities.

President Erdoğan and his government continued to support efforts to [promote](#) Sunni Islam, including through [educational policies](#) and controversial moves to [raise](#) the profile and influence of the Diyanet. Although many religious communities encountered obstacles related to their freedom of religion or belief, the government [rebuffed](#) their requests to try and resolve these issues during the year and instead [insisted](#) that "everyone lives as they wish, regardless of their beliefs." Turkey's acts of military aggression beyond its borders, including in Iraq and Syria, also contributed to destabilizing conditions for religious and ethnic minorities residing in those areas. For more information on religious freedom violations by Turkey and Turkish-backed forces, see the Annual Report chapters on Iraq and Syria.

Government Stifling of Religious and Other Minorities

Government policies—many of which have existed and been implemented for years and in some cases decades—stifled the ability of religious and nonreligious communities to express and practice their beliefs. Regulations and acts of government interference regularly impeded the functioning of those communities (both by denying them status as legal entities and [blocking](#) elections), prevented them from opening places of worship, and restricted them from training clergy and future religious leaders.

Authorities increasingly cracked down on members of religious and other minority groups in connection with elements of their speech and religion. In the case of the imams detained or arrested for conducting sermons in Kurdish, the prosecution [pointed](#) to their use of certain Kurdish words as "evidence" of their alleged connection with a terrorist organization. As of the end of the reporting period, their trial was still [ongoing](#). In September, civil servant and head of the Diyanet Ali Erbaş [warned](#) that citizens should conduct themselves on

social media in line with Islamic values and suggested that the government introduce regulations with this aim. Many charges related to blasphemy originated with social media posts that officials believed insulted Islam. In January, a prosecutor's office [launched](#) an investigation into an individual who posted commentaries on Islam to YouTube. In March, journalist Hakan Aygün [received](#) a 7.5-month prison sentence for a Twitter post in which he criticized President Erdoğan through a religious pun.

Vandalism and Threats to Religious Sites

Government negligence, vandals, and so-called "treasure hunters" posed serious threats to, damaged, or destroyed religious sites over the course of the year. In the city of Erzurum, an urban development project [threatened](#) to further damage the 18th-century Surp Minas Armenian church. Unknown individuals carrying out an unauthorized excavation also caused [damage](#) to the Surp Toros Gregoryan Armenian church in Kayseri. Finally, in yet another example of the government converting a former church into a mosque, the Diyanet [opened](#) the Hagia Sophia in Edirne to Muslim worship in December.

Key U.S. Policy

Relations between the United States and Turkey remained strained despite continued high-level [engagement](#) that sought a [return](#) to "constructive relations" and the "effective management of disagreements." Although the U.S. government frequently [reiterated](#) its interest in improving the bilateral relationship, a host of issues continued to stymie cooperation, including the Turkish government's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system and its ongoing disregard for human rights and fundamental freedoms. In October, President Erdoğan [threatened](#) to expel then U.S. Ambassador to Turkey David M. Satterfield, along with nine other ambassadors, after they [called](#) for the release of Turkish philanthropist Osman Kavala on the fourth anniversary of his unjust imprisonment. Both countries are allies as members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The U.S. government took a stronger stance on religious freedom issues in Turkey compared to previous years in both its public messaging and engagement. In June, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price [issued](#) a press statement on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the closing of Halki Seminary urging the Turkish government to respect freedom of religion or belief, allow the reopening of Halki Seminary, and permit all religious groups to train clergy. In October, President Joseph R. Biden [hosted](#) His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and discussed, among other issues, "the importance of religious freedom as a fundamental human right." Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken also met with the Ecumenical Patriarch during his visit, and he [underscored](#) U.S. concern for religious minorities in Turkey and the U.S. government's continued prioritization of the reopening of Halki Seminary.