

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	602
Land:	Tyrkiet
Kilde:	Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada
Titel:	Response to Information Request – TUR200821.E
Udgivet:	25. november 2021
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	6. januar 2022

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25 November 2021

TUR200821.E

Turkey: Treatment of atheists by society and the authorities, particularly in Istanbul; whether socio-religious groups that support the government serve as informants to report the religious practices of citizens (2019–November 2021)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Information on the treatment of atheists by society and the authorities, particularly in Istanbul, was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

1. Legislation

Turkey's Penal Code provides the following:

Provoking the Public to Hatred, Hostility or Degrading [*sic*]

Article 216

1. A person who publicly provokes hatred or hostility in one section of the public against another section which has a different characteristic based on social class, race, religion, sect or

regional difference, which creates a[n] explicit and imminent danger to public security shall be sentenced to a penalty of imprisonment for a term of one to three years.

2. A person who publicly degrades a section of the public on grounds of social class, race, religion, sect, gender or regional differences shall be sentenced to a penalty of imprisonment for a term of six months to one year.
3. A person who publicly degrades the religious values of a section of the public shall be sentenced to a penalty of imprisonment for a term of six months to one year, where the act is capable of disturbing public peace. (Turkey 2004, bold in original)

2. Treatment of Atheists by Society

A report on a survey on polarization in Turkey [1] conducted by KONDA, a research and consultancy firm in Turkey (KONDA n.d.), found that the rate of atheists "who think that their rights as citizens are adequately granted" is 7 percent (KONDA Jan. 2019, 20). The same report indicates that 63 percent of atheists agree with the statement "I feel [like a] second class citizen," while 69 percent agree with the statement "I feel like a foreigner in my country" (KONDA Jan. 2019, 42, 45).

A report by the Center for American Progress (CAP), an independent and nonpartisan policy institute (CAP n.d.), states that a "nationwide survey" conducted by CAP and Turkish polling company Metropoll through private in-person and telephone polls in October 2019 found that "32 percent of Turks said deism/atheism was more dangerous" than religious extremism "[i]n today's society" (CAP Aug. 2020, 3, 12–13, 23). The same source further indicates that among voters for Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP), 50 percent said "deism/atheism was more dangerous" than religious extremism; among voters for the "ultranationalist" National Movement Party [Nationalist Action Party] (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP), a "plurality of 40 percent said deism/atheism was the bigger threat" (CAP Aug. 2020, 13, 17).

According to the *Turkey 2020 Crime & Safety Report* for Istanbul by the US Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC), atheists "remain the subject of intimidation in progovernment media, albeit at a lower level relative to other religious minorities" (US 27 July 2020, 9). IPA News, an online news portal focused on Turkish politics that was founded "by a group of journalists from Turkey living abroad" (IPA News n.d.), reports that "an outspoken theologian"

"became a target" of embedded media organisations," and was "dismissed" from his job at a high school after he was quoted saying "atheists locally follow Islamic values more than Muslims" (IPA News 16 Jan. 2019).

Duvar, an online "independent gazette" based in Turkey (Duvar n.d.), reports that the Turkey-based Association of Atheism "filed a criminal complain[t]" against *Yeni Akit*, an "Islamist, pro-government daily [newspaper]," for an article *Yeni Akit* published in February 2020 [2] "on the grounds that it insulted atheists" (Duvar 6 June 2020). The same source reports that the article "includes a number of disparaging remarks directed towards atheists" and that, according to lawyers for the Association of Atheism, *Yeni Akit* "violated" article 216 of the country's criminal code, which "punishes statements that 'humiliate or provoke hatred or hostility among people'" (Duvar 6 June 2020). Another article by the same source states that the Association of Atheism also "filed a criminal complaint against Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet) head Ali Erbaş over his comments that 'those who do not believe in afterlife can commit any malignancy'" (Duvar 10 Nov. 2020).

The Daily Dot, an online news portal based in Texas covering "internet culture" (Daily Dot n.d.), reports that "Turkey has been quietly censoring atheist and anti-Muslim websites as defamatory" (Daily Dot 4 Mar. 2015). According to sources, a 2015 court order resulted in 49 URLs being "banned" (UN 21 June 2017, para. 49; Daily Dot 4 Mar. 2015), the "majority, if not all" of which dealt with "atheist or anti-Muslim themes"; sites affected included the Association of Atheism's website (Daily Dot 4 Mar. 2015). The Daily Dot further noted that the issuing judge did not provide a reason for the order but stated that that an investigation was "ongoing" (Daily Dot 4 Mar. 2015). Further information on the court-ordered website ban could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The *Guardian* reports that, according to a 2020 study by Sakarya University and the Ministry of Education in Turkey that "look[ed] at religious curricula in Turkey's school system," students are "'resisting compulsory religion lessons, the government's 'religious generation' project and the concept of religion altogether'" (*The Guardian* 29 Apr. 2020). The same source states that "[a]lmost half of the teachers interviewed said their students were increasingly likely to describe themselves as atheists, deists or feminists, and challenge the interpretation of Islam being taught at school" (*The Guardian* 29 Apr. 2020).

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, an associate professor at St. Lawrence University in the US, who specializes in the relationship between religion and national identity in Turkey, stated that there are mandatory classes in religious education which you can "theoretically opt out of," but in practice, only individuals designated non-Muslims (individuals who are identified as Jewish, Greek Orthodox, or Armenian) are "likely" to be able to opt out (Associate Professor 20 Oct. 2021). Sources indicate that atheists, agnostics (Australia 10 Sept. 2020, para. 2.32; US 12 May 2021, 6) and individuals who leave the religion section blank on their national ID cards are not given exemptions (Australia 10 Sept. 2020, para. 2.32) or "rarely granted exemptions" (US 12 May 2021, 6) from compulsory religious and moral classes (Australia 10 Sept. 2020, para. 232; US 12 May 2021, 6). The same sources report that these classes take place in "public primary and secondary schools" (Australia 10 Sept. 2020, para. 232) or in "public and private schools at all levels starting with fourth grade" (US 12 May 2021, 6). The Associate Professor noted that even if parents wish to raise their children without any religion, the children will still have to attend classes that teach Islam (Associate Professor 20 Oct. 2021). The same source further stated that the Turkish state has been "advantaging" religious high schools over secular high schools, and as a result, parents "might be forced" to send their child to a religious high school where religion plays a "very large" role in education (Associate Professor 20 Oct. 2021).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a professor at the Philipps University of Marburg in Germany who specializes in contemporary Turkish studies, atheism, and non-belief indicated that an atheist father they interviewed [3] "registered his daughter as 'Christian' because this was the only way to have her exempted from the compulsory religious classes at school" (Professor 21 Oct. 2021). The same source further stated, based on the interviews they conducted, that "[m]any parents" register their children as Muslim "out of fear their children would suffer from discrimination at school or later in life," such as in the workplace or military (Professor 21 Oct. 2021).

Duvar cites the head of Diyanet as stating that "children must be protected from ideologies other than Islam," and "warn[ing] against 'organizations that promote deism and atheism'" (Duvar 29 Mar. 2021). According to *Cumhuriyet*, a newspaper in Turkey, the head of the Smuggling, Intelligence, Operations and Information Collection Department (Kaçakçılık İstihbarat Harekât Ve Bilgi Toplama Dairesi Başkanlığı, KİHBİ) stated in a presentation on behalf of the

Ministry of Interior at a workshop on the [translation] "'mental health'" of young people that such "'bad habits'" as "'atheism, deism, paganism, Tengriism [and] drugs'" are "the most important threats faced by young people who fall into the 'spiritual' void" (*Cumhuriyet* 29 Dec. 2019).

According to the Associate Professor, if an individual is looking for a job with a "socially conservative" municipality, being an atheist is a "strong mark" against them (Associate Professor 20 Oct. 2021). Similarly, the Professor stated that "[n]on-religious or atheist employees" of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (Istanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi) "appear to be afraid of losing their job or being harassed by colleagues and superiors if they reveal" their non-religiousness (Professor 21 Oct. 2021). The Professor gave the example of "a young atheist woman who worked for the (then AKP-run) Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality and only took off her headscarf after leaving her workplace for the sake of avoiding conflict with her superiors and colleagues" (Professor 21 Oct. 2021). The same source further noted that within the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality under AKP governance, "fasting during Ramadan was enforced upon everyone at the workplace," since food and drinks were no longer provided in the cafeteria or during meetings (Professor 21 Oct. 2021). The Associate Professor stated that because the government views an individual's "religiousness" as an indication of loyalty, there are economic incentives, such as hiring and promotion, and pressures for individuals to "demonstrate" their religion (Associate Professor 20 Oct. 2021). The same source noted that at companies that are concerned about government contracts or owned by "religious conservatives," there may be pressure for individuals to publicly practice their religion, for example by fasting or attending midday prayers (Associate Professor 20 Oct. 2021).

2.1 Situation in Istanbul

According to sources, the treatment of atheists in Istanbul "very much depends on the particular neighbourhood" (Professor 21 Oct. 2021) or "depends on the neighbourhood you live in" and its level of crime (Associate Professor 20 Oct. 2021). The Associate Professor stated that, for example, "in an upscale, secular neighborhood you would not face any issues" (Associate Professor 20 Oct. 2021). According to the Professor, "[i]n some 'secular neighbourhoods' governed by the opposition (e.g., Kadıköy, Beşiktaş, Bakırköy), atheists and non-religious persons usually will not encounter any problems in everyday life" but "[i]n other areas," such as Ümraniye, Fatih, and Zeytinburnu, "atheists are openly

discriminated [against] and sometimes threatened and attacked" (Professor 21 Oct. 2021). The same source added that "[m]any people feel entitled to sanction non-religious behaviour in everyday life – verbally and physically" and that [p]eople in conservative neighbourhoods usually hide their non-religious identities. They are afraid of social isolation, job loss, [and] physical harm to themselves and their children. This situation [has] certainly [been] exacerbated under AKP rule. Several people told me that they no longer dare to drink tea on their balconies during Ramadan or have an alcoholic drink (rakı, beer) in front of their houses out of fear [of] provok[ing] an aggressive reaction from their pious, conservative neighbours, who feel encouraged by public hate speech to act on behalf of Islam and the government. The[re is] fear of the "provoked public" and the lack of protection from the authorities represents a constant threat. (Professor 21 Oct. 2021)

3. Treatment of Atheists by Authorities

According to the Associate Professor, "there is no way" for the authorities to know that an individual is an atheist "unless they are outspoken about it" (Associate Professor 20 Oct. 2021). The same source noted that an individual is "unlikely" to be subject to harassment by the police or state unless they have chosen to "make [their] beliefs public," but further stated that it is "unlikely" that the state would take any "direct measures" against an "outspoken" atheist (Associate Professor 20 Oct. 2021). In contrast, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, a lecturer at an American university who specializes in Turkish studies indicated that "[e]specially at the national level, authorities do not acknowledge the rights and freedoms of atheists" and do not "allo[w] them to express their views and opinions" (Lecturer 25 Oct. 2021). According to the same source, "this is part of a wider view" in which "many" groups "are stigmatized based on their individual identities" (Lecturer 25 Oct. 2021).

3.1 Situation in Istanbul

The Professor stated the following:

From the interviews I conducted, I have learned that some atheists have encountered discrimination while dealing with the authorities in Istanbul in recent years—especially with regard to registering their newborn children. One person told me that his son was "automatically" registered as Muslim without his

knowledge, and the ... civil servant [responsible] at first denied that the [religious] category 'none' even exists. Only after a serious argument was the religious identity marker removed from the child's birth certificate. (Professor 21 Oct. 2021)

Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. Local Militias and Religious Practices of Citizens

Information on whether local militias serve as informants to the government to report the religious practices of citizens was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. However, the following information may be of interest.

According to the Associate Professor, "the central State is not keeping tabs on individual religious practice" (Associate Professor 20 Oct. 2021). In contrast, the Lecturer indicated that while

[t]here is no proof or evidence to confirm that there are local militias informing the government on the religious practices of citizens, ... there is a portal called [the Presidency's Communication Centre (Cumhurbaşkanlığı İletişim Merkezi, CİMER)] [4]—i.e., a hotline or online application via Turkey's e-government portal—through which citizens of Turkey can legally petition against individuals involved in anti-state behavior. (Lecturer 25 Oct. 2021)

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an assistant professor at a university in Turkey who specializes in the freedom of thought and faith of disadvantaged communities in Turkey stated that

since the early years of the AKP government they [have] installed a series of easy-access complaint lines (for anything you can imagine: medical malfunctions, teachers at public schools, a TV show, etc.). This new strategy ideally aims to build a direct line between the people and their only guardian, the AKP government, against the class of "elite (republican and secular) technocrat,"

...

These channels then turned into a national level snitching mechanism simply because the complaining person does not need to disclose their identity and [will] not be held responsible even if their complaint has no real grounds.

...

IF you share something on your social media account or make a statement about atheism or against Islam, AND IF someone makes a complaint about you through [the] CIMER system, YES you can face (a) legal process and (b) social media stigmatization. (Assistant Professor 21 Oct. 2021, emphasis in original)

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] The KONDA report is based on the results of a field survey that was conducted in January 2019 through "face-to-face interviews with 2659 people in their homes in 148 neighborhoods and villages of 100 districts including the central districts of 30 provinces" (KONDA Jan. 2019, 5).

[2] The article by *Yeni Akit* states that [translation] "empty minds who read scientific articles and get lost in the world of atoms become atheists," and that "[a] man without faith is an empty mind" (*Yeni Akit* 11 Feb. 2020). The same source further notes that [translation] "atheists say that they are respectful to everyone, but over time" they can become "dangerous" (*Yeni Akit* 11 Feb. 2020).

[3] The Professor conducted "approximately 30 in-depth life history, biographical interviews with self-professed atheists in Turkey" from 2017 and 2019 (Professor 21 Oct. 2021).

[4] An article on the website of Turkey's Directorate of Communications states that CIMER "was established upon President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's instruction" to respond to the public's "requests, complaints and applications for information" (Turkey 12 Mar. 2019). The same source cites the Director of Communications as stating that CIMER "'strengthen[s] the state-society relationship'" and "'facilitate[s] an effective supervisory mechanism'" (Turkey 12 Mar. 2019).

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Assistant professor at a university in the Netherlands who specializes in Kurds, Alevis, ethnic groups and ethnic politics in the Middle East, including Turkey; associate professor at a university in Canada who specializes in borders and mobility, security studies, and political sociology; associate professor at an American university who specializes in comparative politics in the Middle East, social movements, democratization, religion, and politics; associate professor at an American university who specializes in identity, religion, ethno-history, conflict, and Kurdish studies in Southwest Asia and the Middle East; Association for Human Rights and Solidarity for the Oppressed (MAZLUMDER); Atheist Alliance of America; Ateizm Derneği; Belgium – Cedoca; dean and instructor in the Faculty of Religious Studies at a Turkish university; director at a Turkish university who specializes in human rights law; Ex-Muslims of North America; Gatestone Institute; human rights lawyer, columnist and former president of the Human Rights Agenda Association; member of the of the Human Rights Network (Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law); professor at an American university who specializes in secularism and state policies in Turkey; professor at an American university who teaches anthropology and specializes in Turkey; professor at a Swedish university who specializes in

political Islam, Turkish politics, ethnic identity and gender issues; researcher at a German university who specializes in contemporary Turkish studies, atheism, and non-belief; retired professor of political science from a university in Turkey who specializes in political sociology, sociology of religion, secularism, and citizenship; senior fellow at Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity; theologian and professor at a Turkish university who specializes in Shi'ism, present-day Salafism, contemporary Islamic movements, and religious-political relations; Turkish Bar Council.

Internet sites, including: Ahval; Al Jazeera; Al-Monitor; Amnesty International; *The Arab Weekly*; AsiaNews; Ateizm Derneği; Atheist Alliance of America; The Atheist Conservative; *The Atlantic*; Austrian Red Cross – Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation; BBC; Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies; Belgium – Commissariat général aux réfugiés et aux apatrides; Bertelsmann Stiftung; Bianet; Brookings Institution; Cato Institute; Center for Strategic and International Studies; Council on Foreign Relations; *de Volkskrant*; Denmark – Danish Immigration Service; Deutsche Welle; European Policy Centre; EU – European Asylum Support Office; *The Ex-Muslim*; Fédération internationale pour les droits humains; France – Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides; Freedom House; Gatestone Institute; Georgetown University – Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs; Hrant Dink Foundation; Hudson Institute; Humanists International; Human Rights Watch; *Hürriyet Daily News*; International Crisis Group; INTERPOL; *Kathimerini*; London School of Economics and Political Science; Michigan State University – *International Law Review*; Minority Rights Group International; The National Interest; Netherlands – Ministry of Foreign Affairs; The New Humanitarian; Norway – Landinfo; openDemocracy; Organisation suisse d'aide aux réfugiés; Radio Free Asia; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; Reporters sans frontières; Reuters; Rice University – Baker Institute for Public Policy; Transparency International; Turkey – Ministry of National Education; Turkey Tribune; *Turkish Policy Quarterly*; UK – Home Office; UN – Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Refworld, UN Women; US – CIA *World Factbook*, Commission on International Religious Freedom, Library of Congress; Voice of America; *The Week*; Wilson Center; World Bank; WorldReligionNews.com.

Date modified:

2020-06-01

