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TURKEY 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution defines the country as a secular state, provides for freedom of religion, 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 promote Sunni Islam. Elected officials engaged in anti-Semitic rhetoric. In July, when protests over the conflict in Gaza were occurring, several senior government officials made anti-Semitic statements. For example, on July 19, then-Prime Minister Erdogan stated, “Those who condemn Hitler – day and night – have surpassed Hitler in barbarism.” The government continued to discriminate against Alevi Muslims, including by refusing to recognize their places of worship or exempt their children from compulsory Sunni Islamic instruction. The right to conscientious objection to military service was not protected. Trials continued for the May killing of an Alevi by a policeman and the 2011 death of an Armenian-Turkish soldier at the hands of another soldier. The government continued to prosecute individuals for “openly disrespecting” Islamic beliefs, although convictions in such cases resulted in suspended sentences. 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. Despite expressions of support from high-level government officials, there was no progress regarding the reopening of Halki Seminary. The government continued to train Sunni Muslim clerics, while restricting other religious groups from training clerics inside the country. It continued to fund the construction of Sunni mosques while restricting land use of other religious groups, although it did return parcels of land to the Syriac Orthodox community.

There was a sharp increase in anti-Semitic protests and anti-Semitic statements in mass and social media during the conflict in Gaza in July, accompanied by violence against Israeli diplomatic properties and threats of violence against the country’s Jews. The Jewish community expressed growing concern and unease over these incidents. Members of a Catholic congregation in Istanbul were threatened by reputed Sunni radicals and church property was vandalized. A Ja’fari imam was threatened in Istanbul, and the mosque where he preached was vandalized and burned.

U.S. government officials at the highest level engaged with government leaders to address religious freedom issues. The President discussed with President Erdogan

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the importance of combating anti-Semitism. The Vice President and the Secretary of State called again for the reopening of the Greek Orthodox seminary on Halki. The Ambassador, visiting U.S. officials, and embassy officers stressed the need to lift restrictions on religious groups and raised issues of property restitution and specific cases of religious discrimination. Embassy and consulate representatives regularly met with members of religious communities to promote dialogue and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 81.6 million (July 2014 estimate). According to Turkish government estimates, 99 percent of the population is Muslim, the majority of which is Hanafi Sunni. Representatives of other religious groups state the actual percentage of Muslims is lower.

Academics estimate there are 15 million to 20 million Alevis. Alevi foundation leaders report higher numbers, estimating 20 million to 25 million Alevis in the country. The Shia Ja'fari community estimates its number at three million.

Other religious groups, mostly concentrated in Istanbul and other large cities, together constitute less than 1 percent of the population. While exact figures are not available, these groups include approximately 90,000 Armenian Orthodox Christians (of which an estimated 60,000 are citizens and an estimated 30,000 are undocumented immigrants from Armenia); 25,000 Roman Catholics (including a large number of recent immigrants from Africa and the Philippines); 18,000 Jews; 20,000 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, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Anglican, and Maronite Christians. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) estimated its membership at approximately 300 individuals. Estimates of the number of atheists vary, but most recent published surveys suggest approximately 2 percent of the population is atheist.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

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Legal/Framework

The constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of conscience, religious belief, conviction, expression, and worship. The constitution prohibits discrimination on religious grounds and prohibits anyone from exploiting or abusing “religion or religious feelings, or things held sacred by religion.”

The Turkish state coordinates and governs religious matters through the Diyanet, which was established in 1924 and was added to the constitution in 1961. The Diyanet’s mandate is to promote the belief, practices, and moral principles of Sunni Islam, educate the public about religious issues, and administer places of worship. Operating under the prime minister’s office and with a president appointed by the prime minister, 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 cannot 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. All organizations, including religious groups, can register as associations or foundations. Religious groups must associate themselves with a charitable or cultural cause in order to register as either type of entity. Religious community foundations are the only religious groups permitted to own real estate.

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) 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 religious community foundations.

To register as a foundation, a group of persons or a legal entity must agree to dedicate private property to public use. The foundation then applies for a notarized certificate of representation, which specifies the foundation’s objective and its

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rights. A foundation becomes a legal entity when its registration is announced in the Official Gazette; it then is registered in the records of the civil court with jurisdiction for that location. When a court approves the registration, a foundation is registered in the central register of the GDF, at which point it is considered fully constituted. A foundation of any category may be closed only by court order. If a foundation becomes inactive, the government can petition the courts to find the foundation no longer operational and transfer all assets to the state.

The Assembly of Foundations, under the General Directorate of Foundations, determines on an annual basis the minimum capital requirement for creating a foundation. Membership in the foundation cannot be limited to a single ethnic or religious group; technically, a foundation to support a specific religion is not possible under the law.

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 submit permission from the Ministry of the Interior if a foreign association or nonprofit organization is listed as a founding member as well as 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 can be fined or punished by law. Associations can be closed by court order and are bound by the civil code not to discriminate on the grounds of religion, ethnicity, or race. An association's bylaws may not restrict membership based on religion.

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.

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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. Christians and Jews, as members of recognized non-Muslim religious groups, are legally allowed an exemption from religious instruction. No exemptions are allowed for atheists, agnostics, Alevis, or other Islamic groups, Bahais, or Yezidis.

The law requires 12 years of compulsory education, including elementary, intermediate, and secondary school. Religion classes are compulsory with two hours per week for students in grades four through eight and one hour per week for students in grades nine through 12. Students who are part of a recognized minority need to apply for an exemption. Islamic religious courses may also be taken as electives for two hours per week in middle school during regular school hours. Students may choose to attend *imam-hatip* (Muslim preacher preparatory) schools starting in middle school.

A 2013 decision by the Constitutional Court reinterpreted *laiklik* (Turkish secularism) in ruling that the Primary Education Law allows the government to provide Islamic religious instruction in the classroom. The court held that the principle of secularism "has not excluded the institutional relationship between the state and the Islamic religion." The ruling also states that the preferential treatment of Islam in public schools is not discriminatory, because nothing in the law prohibits the Ministry of Education from providing religion lessons for members of non-Muslim religious groups, and because the 1923 Lausanne Treaty provides minority religions satisfactory protections.

National identity cards contain a space for religious identification, although the constitution stipulates that no one can be compelled to reveal his or her religious belief. The national identity cards provide for the following religious identities: Muslim, Greek Orthodox, Christian, Jew, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, No Religion, or Other. The applicant may also elect to leave the space blank. Bahai, Alevi Muslim, and Yezidi, among other groups with known populations in the country, are not listed as options.

Military service is obligatory and 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.

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Government Practices

Senior government officials made strongly anti-Semitic remarks, especially during the conflict in Gaza. Trials for the killing of several minority group members continued. 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. 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, although it did return parcels of land to the Syriac Orthodox community. The government continued not to recognize Alevi houses of worship (*cemevis*) and Alevis continued to experience difficulty obtaining exemptions from mandatory religion classes.

A policeman was indicted for first-degree murder in November after initially being charged with involuntary manslaughter for the May shooting of Ugur Kurt, an Alevi who was attending a funeral outside a *cemevi*. Kurt was reportedly killed by a bullet fired while police were confronting protestors in Istanbul's Okmeydani neighborhood, which contains a large concentration of Alevis. At the end of the year, the defendant's option to appeal the transfer of the charge to murder remained open. A second death occurred in May when Ayhan Yilmaz succumbed to injuries sustained during the Okmeydani protests, but no one was charged in his death, which the authorities deemed to be caused by a handmade bomb.

The trial continued of 13 individuals charged with conspiracy to commit a large-scale assault against the Izmit Protestant Church and to assassinate its pastor in 2013. Police had confiscated weapons and found evidence of prolonged, careful planning for an attack. At year's end, one suspect remained in custody; the other 12 had been released on bail.

In May the Military Court of Appeals sustained an appeal of the verdict by the Diyarbakir Military Court regarding the 2011 death of Armenian-Turkish soldier Sevag Balikci, in which another soldier had been convicted on the lesser charge of involuntary manslaughter. In 2013, the Diyarbakir court had not found Balikci to be the victim of intentional homicide or a hate crime and sentenced the defendant to 53 months imprisonment with credit for time served in pre-trial detention, leaving him approximately three years to continue serving in prison. The Diyarbakir court's finding did not satisfy the victim's family. The ruling by the appeals court sent the case back to the Diyarbakir Military Court, which took no

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further action before the year's end. The defendant remained in jail pending further judicial action.

In July during the conflict in Gaza, then-Prime Minister Erdogan and several senior government officials made public anti-Semitic statements. Elected officials made generalized statements against Jews.

A series of protests targeted the Israeli Consulate General in Istanbul and the Israeli Embassy in Ankara on July 18. The following day, then-Prime Minister Erdogan stated the Israelis had “surpassed Hitler in barbarism.” Members of parliament from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) joined protestors waving Turkish and Palestinian flags, who damaged the Israeli ambassador's residence in Ankara with stones. Samil Tayyar, an AKP member of parliament, posted an online message to Jews saying “let your race be finished off, and may Hitler never be too far away.” Ankara Mayor Melih Gokcek reportedly stated, “We do not want an embassy of murderers in Turkey.”

Later on July 19, a senior advisor to then-Prime Minister Erdogan called on the Turkish people to “be prudent about the Jewish population in Turkey,” and said, “It is the Government of Israel, not the Israeli people, and certainly not the Jewish Community in Turkey, who are Turkish citizens, that we criticize.” In a September 22 interview, President Erdogan said, “Our criticism is not directed to the Jews. It is only and solely directed at the Israeli administration and its policies, and no one should distort this.”

After an Israeli incursion into Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem in late November, Edirne Governor Dursun Ali Sahin said, “While those bandit-like people are massacring Muslims, we are building their synagogues here.” He said that a synagogue in Edirne under renovation by the government would be reopened as “only a museum.” The Jewish community released a statement saying Israeli policies did not give any official the right to target Jews of Turkey. Deputy Prime Minister Arinc said the government “did not plan to remove the worship function” from the synagogue. Governor Sahin later retracted his comments and called the chief rabbi to apologize.

Local authorities continued to work with community leaders and synagogue officials to respond to the protests and to protect Jewish places of worship.

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The trial of Canan Arin for “openly disrespecting the religious belief of a group,” which involved a reported insult to the Prophet Mohammad, continued to be suspended for the duration of the year. Arin had been charged in 2011 after a speech she made at a conference about child marriages, but the court suspended the proceedings in 2013, provided the crime was not repeated for three years. The case against Arin will be dismissed in 2016 as long as Arin is not charged before then with a similar crime.

Internationally-known concert pianist Fazil Say’s 2013 conviction and sentence of 10 months in prison for “openly disrespecting the religious belief of a group,” which involved posting lines attributed to poet Omar Khayyam on a social media site, continued to be suspended. Say’s sentence was suspended for five years, meaning he will not be sent to prison unless he is convicted of another offense within that period.

In January the government brought charges of “disrespecting religious beliefs of a group” against 40 individuals associated with the satiric online collaborative site *Eksi Sozluk* for posts that reportedly insulted Islam. In May the court found two of the defendants guilty, and imposed suspended prison sentences of 10 and seven months, respectively. One defendant was exonerated and the cases against the 37 others were suspended for three years, provided they do not commit the same crime within that time.

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 Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians. The government did not recognize the leadership or administrative structures of these groups (e.g., the patriarchates and chief rabbinate) as legal entities, leaving them unable to buy or hold title to property or to press claims in court. The three groups, along with other minority religious communities, organized independent foundations with separate governing boards in order to hold and control individual religious properties.

The government also continued not to recognize the Ecumenical Patriarchate as the leader of the world’s 300 million Orthodox Christians, consistent with its 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

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permit only Turkish citizens to vote in the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Holy Synod or be elected patriarch.

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.

In February the Council of State, the country's top administrative court, heard arguments in a lawsuit between two segments of the Armenian religious community about the possibility of electing a new patriarch of Armenians in the country, or of electing a co-patriarch, due to the permanent incapacity of the current patriarch who was elected for life in 1998 but has not exercised his functions for many years. Both sides in the case had appealed to the interior ministry, which sets the rules for patriarchal elections. The interior ministry supported neither position, but endorsed the selection of a "deputy patriarch." The court ruled it did not have the authority to instruct a religious community how to conduct its affairs, leaving in place the creation of the deputy patriarch position. Opponents of this solution and some human rights observers said the interior ministry's actions constituted government interference in the affairs of a religious minority.

The Istanbul governorate continued to maintain that leaders of the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, 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 government continued its practice of granting Turkish 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 government continued to consider Alevism a heterodox Muslim sect and did not financially support religious worship for Alevis. Alevi leaders said the government failed to meet their demands for religious reforms and complained of discrimination and violence. Sufi and other religious-social orders (*tarikats*) and lodges (*cemaats*), banned officially since 1925, remained active and widespread as the government did not enforce the ban.

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The state continued to provide training for Sunni Muslim clerics while restricting other religious groups from training clerics inside the country, for example through requirements imposed by the Higher Education Board. The Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox Patriarchates were unable to train their clerics in monastic seminaries within the country. The Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate continued to seek to reopen the Halki seminary on the island of Heybeli, closed in 1971 in response to a law that required all private colleges for religious training to be affiliated with a state-run university and to meet government requirements that do not permit the operation of a seminary within a monastic community. Several high-level government officials expressed support for reopening Halki seminary; however, by year's end no progress had been made.

In September the Ministry of Education lifted the ban on headscarves for middle and high school students. The government had previously lifted the ban on headscarves for civil servants, but the ban remained in force for judges, police, and the military.

Many prosecutors and police reportedly continued to regard certain public religious speech and religious activism with suspicion, such as proselytism by Protestant evangelicals and Mormons. Both groups reported significant government interference, including surveillance and arbitrary police action. Anti-missionary rhetoric remained in required school textbooks, and police occasionally reported students who met with Christian missionaries to university authorities or the students' families.

In June the press reported that parliament's computers were blocking all of the websites of the country's Protestant churches. The parliament system classified the website of the Diyarbakir Church as pornography. The pastor of the Diyarbakir Church said that "paranoia" pervaded the country about missionary activities, in particular conversions from Islam to Christianity. Government officials reportedly lifted the block following complaints.

Many state buildings, including universities, maintained *mesjids* (small mosques) in which Muslims could pray. The government continued to deny Alevis the right to establish similar places of worship in government buildings, and government buildings did not contain places of worship for non-Muslims.

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

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Municipalities continued to pay the utility bills for mosques located within their boundaries. These benefits remained uniquely available to Sunni Muslim mosques, with other religious institutions paying their own utility bills. The Diyanet Foundation, a quasi-governmental entity, continued to own many of the mosques around the country.

Christian religious groups reported difficulties opening, maintaining, and operating houses of worship. Although a 2003 amendment to the law allowed cultural associations as well as foundations to establish legal places of worship, authorities have approved only one new Christian church as a legal place of worship since the founding of the republic in 1923.

The majority of Protestants met in unregistered locations for worship services. The government reportedly recognized only 15 Protestant churches as official places of worship throughout the country, including several chapels run by foreign diplomatic missions. Protestant groups reportedly used approximately 40 rented buildings and more than 100 residences for unregistered worship services. Several Protestant churches reported difficulties obtaining permission to modify rented space and to use public space for community activities in a manner similar to other civil 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 27,000 square feet of land (approximately 0.6 acres) to construct churches, even for small congregations. Officials did not apply this requirement to Sunni Muslims, who were permitted to build *mesjids* in malls, airports, and other spaces.

The Syrian Orthodox community continued to seek to build a second church in Istanbul to accommodate its growing population. The community had one church in Istanbul to serve an estimated local population of 17,000 to 20,000. In 2011, President Gul and Prime Minister Erdogan publicly endorsed a second church. While Muslim communities received government funding for construction of places of worship, the Syrian Orthodox community did not request such funding. Instead, the community requested that the municipality provide free land for the construction of a place of worship. In January the Regional Board for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage ruled against the project to build the second church proposed by the Syriac Church Foundation on land offered by the

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municipality. The Syriac Church Foundation amended the project proposal and was awaiting a decision at year's end.

Although Alevi groups were able to build new *cemevis*, the government continued to deny requests by Alevis to recognize *cemevis* as places of worship and did not provide financial support from the Diyanet. Alevi leaders reported there were approximately 2,500 to 3,000 Alevi *cemevis* in the country, an insufficient number to meet their needs. At year's end, Alevis continued to operate the Cankaya Cemevi Building Association while awaiting a final verdict by the country's highest court, the General Assembly of the Court of Cassation, on an appeal of a lower court's decision to dismiss a request to shut it down. This second appeal was made by the provincial directorate in charge of associations of the Ankara governor's office, which had filed the complaint against the building association for refusing to remove a description from its charter referring to *cemevis* as houses of worship.

Alevis continued to petition the courts to have *cemevis* legally recognized as places of worship. A case dating from 2011 concerning the right of Alevis to designate *cemevis* as places of worship remained pending in the Supreme Court of Appeals after the prosecutor appealed a lower court's ruling that affirmed the group's right to do so. The lower court had held that *cemevis* had been known as places of worship for Alevis for hundreds of years, and a charter referring to *cemevis* as places of worship was not in contravention of the constitution or prohibited by law.

The government continued to allow religious minority foundations to apply for the return of, or compensation for, properties seized by the government in previous decades. During the year, the government returned 25 properties to religious community foundations, declined 170 applications for lack of evidence or because they were found to be duplicative, while 970 applications remained pending. Since 2011, the GDF has received 1,560 applications for the return of properties seized from the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Jewish, Syrian Orthodox, Bulgarian Orthodox, Georgian Orthodox, Chaldean, and Armenian Protestant communities. Religious institutions and communities that did not have legally recognized foundations, such as the Roman Catholics and Anglicans who have tried but not succeeded in establishing such foundations, were not able to seek compensation for seized properties.

In January the Surp Pirgic Armenian Hospital Foundation, which has links to the Armenian Apostolic Church, obtained title to more than 42,000 square meters

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(452,000 square feet) of land in Istanbul that was promised to the foundation in 2012. In late 2013, the GDFs formally approved the return of the land.

In February the government returned disputed parcels of land totaling more than 240,000 square meters (2.58 million square feet) to the Mor Gabriel Syriac Orthodox Monastery. According to the media and several religious groups, the restitution took place at the insistence of then-Prime Minister Erdogan and with the approval of the GDF. Additional parcels totaling more than 300,000 square meters (3.23 million square feet) remained in dispute at the end of the year. A case remained pending at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) to determine ownership of some of the parcels that remained in dispute. The land dispute had begun in 2008, when the Undersecretariat of the Treasury, the Department of Forestry, and nearby villages initiated a series of court cases against the monastery for the land.

The government continued to permit annual and other commemorative religious worship services at religiously significant sites previously converted to state museums, such as the Sumela Monastery near Trabzon, Akdamar Church near Van, St. Peter's Church in Antakya, St. Nicholas' Church near Demre, and the House of the Virgin Mary near Selcuk. Some municipal and minority religious group leaders called for these sites to be opened to worship without restrictions, and for other sites to be considered for religious services as well.

In December the government appealed a ruling by the ECHR which found that the government's compulsory religion courses in public schools violated educational freedoms. The ECHR was responding to a complaint by Alevis who argued that the courses promoted Sunni Islam, which was contrary to their religious convictions. Prime Minister Davutoglu said the courses were a necessary tool to combat Islamic "radicalization." The National Education Convention in December recommended increasing the compulsory religion course to two hours per week at all levels and starting the course from grade one.

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. The government said that the compulsory instruction covered the range of world religions, but religious groups, especially Alevis and members of the Syrian Orthodox community, stated that the courses largely

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reflected Hanafi Sunni Islamic doctrine and contained negative and incorrect information about other religious groups. While the government allowed non-Muslims to select other electives to fulfill their required coursework for graduation, non-Sunni Muslims reported they often were only allowed to choose from electives concerning different aspects of Sunni Islam.

In October the minister of education announced that students who attended non-Muslim minority community schools would be permitted to take elective courses in their religion, although courses had not started at the end of the year.

Alevis reported the government did not include any of their distinct doctrines or beliefs in the compulsory religious education curriculum for Muslim students and that school officials regularly denied Alevis the right, as ruled by the ECHR in 2007, to be exempted from it. Although authorities added material on Alevism to the religious course curriculum after the ECHR decision, many Alevis stated this material was inadequate and, in some cases, incorrect. Alevi leaders reported teachers sometimes physically mistreated children attempting to opt out of classes or singled them out for mistreatment by other students. Alevis had many unresolved discrimination cases against the Ministry of Education pending in national courts at the end of the year.

The Syriac community opened a preschool in Istanbul, after a 2013 ruling by the Ankara 13th Administrative Appeals Court held that the Syriac community should be recognized as a “Lausanne minority” and allowed to open schools to serve its community, with some instruction permissible in the native neo-Aramaic language of the community. By year’s end, the Ministry of Education had not issued a ruling on the 2013 petition by the Syriac community to open a primary school in Mardin. One GDF-approved Greek school, closed in 1964 and re-opened in 2011, continued to operate on the island of Gokceada (known as Imvros in Greek).

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 non-citizen coreligionists, including children of undocumented Armenian migrants and Armenian refugees from Syria, to enroll in them. However, because these children were legally classified as “visitors,” they were ineligible to receive a diploma from those 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 government did not permit other religious groups to operate schools.

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Because non-ethnic Turks could not receive degrees from licensed religious community schools, many Armenian immigrant parents remained reluctant to enroll their children in them and opted instead for unlicensed “basement” schools organized on the same model as schools in Armenia and whose degrees were accepted upon transfer back to Armenia. The government tolerated, but did not approve, these schools.

The government limited the number of students admitted to public schools, assigning tens of thousands of students to state-run religious schools, known as *imam hatip* schools. Enrollment in the *imam hatip* schools reached almost a million students from just 63,000 over the past 12 years. Minister of Education Nabi Avci said the increase was a result of a demand from religiously conservative families who had been marginalized before the AKP came to power. Critics, including secular-minded parents, expressed concern that the government was favoring religion over secularism in education policy. Some parents expressed concern that the secular schools attended by their children would be transformed into *imam hatip* schools. In August the Yesil Bahar Secondary School in Kadikoy in Istanbul was among hundreds of secular schools converted to religious ones. Parents staged protests, and the conversion was reversed.

The Diyanet regulated the operation of 85,412 registered mosques and employed 121,845 personnel as civil servants at the end of 2013, the last date for which data was available. The government did not employ religious leaders, instructors, or other staff for other religious groups.

In December the ECHR found discrimination on the basis of religion in the system for granting exemptions from payment of electricity bills for places of worship. The case before the ECHR involved Istanbul’s Yenibosna Cultural Center, which was run by the Cem Foundation and housed a *cemevi* and funeral home. In 2006, the Cem Foundation’s request for an electricity bill exemption was declined based on an opinion by the Diyanet that Alevism was not a religion. Since then, the center had accumulated nearly \$300,000 worth of electric bills. The court found the Cem Foundation had sustained “a difference in treatment without any objective or reasonable justification” because, like recognized places of worship, *cemevis* were “places intended for the practice of religious rituals.” The ECHR did not assess a penalty but gave the government and the Cem Foundation six months to propose an estimate for damages. Prime Minister Davutoglu said the decision would not affect the government, which would “continue to follow (its) own path.”

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Although the ECHR during the year again ruled against the government for failure to establish conscientious objector status for those with religious and philosophical objections to military service, no reforms were introduced to recognize the right of conscientious objection or to prevent the criminal prosecution of conscientious objectors for refusal to perform military service.

According to officials of the Jehovah's Witnesses, members faced prosecution and fines for their refusal to serve in the country's military forces. In June an ECHR ruling ordered the government to pay damages to Baris Gormez and three other Jehovah's Witnesses (Caglar Buldu, Ersin Olgun and Nevzat Umdü) for having subjected them to inhuman and degrading treatment and violating their freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. The men had been prosecuted and convicted in 2012 for refusing to perform military service following their application as conscientious objectors, although sentences had not been handed down. The case remained before the Military Court of Appeals at the end of the year, after the prosecutor appealed a lower court's decision to acquit Gormez.

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

The government forced some religious workers to leave the country when their residence permits, which were not linked to their religious work, were not renewed. Some individuals had lived in the country for years. In previous years, government officials stated that a religious worker residence permit existed, but could not explain how one could be obtained.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Jewish community leaders expressed concern over a sharp increase in anti-Semitic protests and media postings during the conflict in Gaza. Christians, Jews, and non-Sunni Muslims faced threats of violence and vandalism of property. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

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In June reputed Sunni radicals entered St. Stephanos Catholic Church in the Yesilkoy neighborhood of Istanbul during a baptism ceremony and threatened members of the church congregation. As the intruders were being escorted out of the church, one reportedly brandished a knife and threatened to stab a member of the congregation. In May vandals stole audio equipment and set a fire in a chapel of the same church, which is also used by the Syriac Orthodox community. No one was injured, but church property was destroyed. Police stationed a police car outside the church for several weeks following the incident.

In July a group of individuals, reported by sources to be Sunni radicals, threatened the imam of the Ja'fari Muhammediye Mosque in Istanbul. A week later, the mosque was vandalized and set on fire. The imam stated he had received many threats over the previous week, and the assailants had demanded that prayers not be held at the mosque. Police investigated the matter and concluded that the fire was set by thieves. The Ja'fari community disputed the police findings.

In December the office and bookstore of a Protestant church in Kadikoy, Istanbul were vandalized and thousands of Bibles were burned. Police initially said the incident was a random act of vandalism but began investigating the matter when they discovered a suspect had made repeated visits to the site. At year's end, the investigation was ongoing.

Jewish leaders expressed growing concern and unease in the Jewish community after the series of protests and attacks on the Israeli Embassy and ambassador's residence in Ankara and Consulate General in Istanbul in July during the conflict in Gaza. These attacks, as well as threats against Jews, led to Israel briefly recalling some of its diplomats and dependents. Following anti-Semitic statements by media outlets, the chief rabbi and the Jewish community lay board issued a press release condemning the anti-Semitic statements. According to Gonzo Insight, a local research group which analyzes internet content, between July 17 and 18 there was a significant spike in comments by Turkish users supporting the Nazi genocide of the Jews (the Holocaust).

In July pop star Yildiz Tilbe posted a series of anti-Semitic messages online, including "May God bless Hitler." Members of Turkey's Jewish community pressed for legal action against Tilbe and issued a statement calling her posts offensive and demanding an apology.

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On September 16, the Istanbul branch of the Human Rights Association petitioned the Ministries of Justice and Interior to investigate “rising anti-Semitism” in the country.

Nesim Guvenis, deputy chairman of the Association of Turkish Jews in Israel, stated on October 21, that harsh statements from the Turkish government had triggered anti-Semitism and led to the migration of hundreds of Jewish youths to the United States and Europe. A variety of newspapers, commercials, and television shows continued to carry anti-Semitic messages, and anti-Semitic literature was common in bookstores.

In the Yeni Akit newspaper, one writer warned that if the country’s Jews did not condemn Israel, they could be subjected to pogroms such as that faced by the nation’s Greek community in 1955. A pro-government news outlet posted a declaration online by Bulent Yildirim of the Humanitarian Relief Foundation saying if the nation’s Jewish community did not put an end to Israeli actions, “very bad things will happen.”

Various Islamic groups continued to advocate transforming some former Orthodox churches into mosques, especially after the Hagia Sophia of Trabzon, a 12th century Byzantine church which had been operating as a museum for the past 50 years, was converted into a mosque in 2013.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The President, Vice President, Secretary of State, and Ambassador engaged with government officials throughout the year to address religious freedom issues and stress the importance the United States places on religious tolerance.

In September the President discussed with President Erdogan the importance of combating of anti-Semitism. The Vice President and the Secretary of State continued to call for the reopening of the Greek Orthodox seminary in Halki in meetings with government officials in Washington. The Ambassador, in private meetings with government officials and publicly through local media, reiterated the U.S. position on these issues. The Department of State publicly condemned anti-Semitic statements, calling them “offensive and wrong” and said they “hurt Turkey’s international standing.”

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The Ambassador, visiting U.S. officials, and embassy officers urged the government to implement reforms aimed at lifting restrictions on religious groups and also raised property restitution and specific cases of religious discrimination. Embassy officials issued public statements drawing attention to religious discrimination. U.S. consulate general officials met with government counterparts to discuss barriers encountered by U.S. citizens attempting to obtain visas as religious workers and to clarify the process by which religious worker visas or residence permits were granted.

The Ambassador, embassy, and consulate general representatives maintained close relations with “traditional” and recently established religious groups, meeting frequently with them – individually and collectively – to discuss religious freedom concerns and promote interreligious dialogue. Embassy and consulate general personnel hosted or attended events during Ramadan and Jewish and Christian holidays, and on Holocaust Remembrance Day.