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# 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Turkey (Türkiye)

## 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. The Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), a state institution, governs and coordinates religious matters related to Islam; its mandate is to enable the practice of Islam, provide religious education, and manage religious institutions. The penal code prohibits blasphemy and provides punishment for “inciting hatred and enmity,” including showing public disrespect for religious beliefs, and it criminalizes “insulting values held sacred by a religion.”

The court case continued of nine Kurdish imams arrested in 2021 on terrorism-related charges for preaching in their native language; three defendants remained under judicial control (reporting to a local police station) at year’s end. The government continued to limit the rights of non-Muslim religious minorities, especially those not recognized under the government’s interpretation of the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which includes only Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians. The government continued to categorize Alevi worship as cultural rather than religious and did not recognize Alevi houses of worship, while Alevis continued to state that their faith deserved government recognition as such. Media outlets and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported continued entry bans and deportations of noncitizen members of Protestant congregations, and the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) International said authorities “continued to undermine religious freedom by deliberately attempting to stifle the spread of Christianity.” Government authorities in Bolu Province, who in January arrested 17 Iranian Christians and held them in removal centers for potential deportation back to Iran, later released them after they reportedly agreed to cease their home-based worship. In July, UN human rights experts called on the government to refrain from deporting 104 Ahmadi Followers of Peace and Light to their countries of origin. UN officials said most members remained in detention at year end. According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses 2023 annual report, the government did not provide civilian service alternatives to mandatory military service and did not make legislative amendments in accordance with European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) rulings in favor of Jehovah’s Witnesses. The report also said Jehovah’s Witnesses could not establish suitable places of worship because of zoning restrictions and building specifications, and group members faced fines for preaching door to door or in public places. In September, there were protests against the government’s enactment of a regulation requiring middle school students to take an additional two hours of Sunni Islam religion classes weekly and the appointment of imams in schools as spiritual counselors. The Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary on Heybeliada Island remained closed. In March, a court overturned a prior court’s ban on the translation of the Quran by Islamic theologian Ihsan Eliacik. There were continued reports of damage to the Hagia Sophia, originally built in the sixth century as a church, which the government reconverted to a mosque in 2020. Jewish citizens said government anti-Israel rhetoric gave impetus to openly antisemitic public protests. On October 18, a Samsun City Council member praised Hitler for killing Jews as he condemned an October 17 explosion at a hospital in Gaza, initially and incorrectly blamed on Israel.

According to media, in February, Istanbul police arrested 15 suspects with ties to ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) for an alleged plot to target synagogues and churches in the city. Media continued to report acts of vandalism of places of worship and cemeteries. Unidentified assailants attacked Islamic theologian and religion education teacher Cemil Kilic in March. Also in March, media outlets reported high school students performed the Nazi salute during a soccer game against a Jewish high school. Antisemitic discourse and hate speech continued in social and print media and increased in reaction to Israel’s action in Gaza following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack. For

example, following escalation of the Israel-Hamas conflict in October, an opinion piece in Islamic daily *Yeni Akit* called on the government to revoke the citizenship of Turkish Jews who serve in the Israeli military.

Senior U.S. embassy and consulate officials regularly engaged with government officials throughout the year, including at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Diyanet, and the Directorate General of Foundations (DGF), to discuss religious freedom issues. Embassy and consulate officials met with a wide range of Muslim and religious minority leaders and community representatives, including those of the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox, Jewish, Syriac Orthodox, Protestant, Alevi, Chaldean Catholic, and Baha'i Faith communities. Issues discussed included stresses on shrinking minority populations; lack of legal standing of patriarchates; continued closure of the Eastern Orthodox Halki seminary; social discrimination deriving from geopolitical issues with Israel, Greece, and Armenia; lack of full recognition of Alevi as a religious faith; compulsory religious education; and entrance bans and deportations of Protestant Christians. In September, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and the Special Envoy for Monitoring and Combating Antisemitism met with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan alongside a roundtable of American Jewish leaders in New York City and discussed how governments could work with religious actors to counter antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred.

## **Section I.**

### **Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 83.6 million (midyear 2023). The Turkish government estimates the population at 85.3 million. According to the government, 99 percent of the population is Muslim, which, according to the government, includes Alevi. Public opinion surveys published in 2021 by the research and polling firm KONDA Research and Consultancy suggest approximately 88 percent self-identify as Sunni Muslim, 6 percent self-identify as nonbelievers, 4 percent as Alevi, and the remaining 2 percent as "other." Leaders of Alevi foundations estimate Alevi Muslims comprise 25 to 31 percent of the population, while experts generally put the number at 10-15 percent. The Shia Jafari community estimates its members make up 4 percent of the population.

Non-Muslim religious groups are mostly concentrated in Istanbul and other large cities, as well as in the southeast. Exact figures are not available; however, these groups self-report approximately 90,000 Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians (including migrants from Armenia) and 25,000 Roman Catholics (including migrants from various African countries and the Philippines). There are also approximately 25,000 Syrian Orthodox Christians (also known as Syriacs), between 12,000 and 16,000 Jews, and 10,000 Baha'is. According to media outlets, numbers of Eastern Orthodox Christians markedly increased in the country to more than 200,000 during the year, largely due to the war in Ukraine leading to an influx of an estimated 154,000 Russians and 47,000 Ukrainians. The Eastern Orthodox population also includes fewer than 2,500 ethnically Greek Orthodox Christians and small, undetermined numbers of Bulgarian Orthodox and Georgian Orthodox Christians.

Estimates of other groups include: 7,000 to 10,000 Protestants and evangelical Christians; 5,000 Jehovah's Witnesses; 2,000-3,500 Armenian Catholics; fewer than 3,000 Chaldean Christians; and fewer than 1,000 Yezidis. There are also small, undetermined numbers of Nestorian, Syriac Catholic, Chaldean Catholic, and Maronite Christians. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) states its membership is 573 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 and that acts of worship may be conducted freely if they are not directed against the “integrity of the state.” The constitution prohibits discrimination on religious grounds and exploitation or abuse of “religion or religious feelings, or things held sacred by religion.” It also prohibits “even partially basing” the order of the state on religious tenets.

The constitution establishes the Diyanet, through which the state coordinates Islamic matters. According to the law, the Diyanet’s mandate is to enable the beliefs, practices, and moral principles of Islam, with a primary focus on Sunni Islam; educate the public about religious issues; and administer mosques. By law, its duties include writing the sermon delivered in all mosques across the country and at Diyanet-staffed mosques abroad each Friday. The Diyanet operates under the presidency, with its head appointed by the President and administered by a 16-person council elected by clerics and university theology faculties. The Diyanet has five main departments, called high councils: religious services, hajj and umrah services, education, publications, and public relations. While the law does not require that all members of the council be Sunni Muslim, in practice this has historically been the case.

The penal code prohibits blasphemy and provides punishment for “inciting hatred and enmity,” including showing public disrespect for religious beliefs, and it criminalizes “insulting values held sacred by a religion.” Insulting a religion is punishable by six months to one year in prison.

The penal code prohibits religious clergy 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.

Although registration with the government is not explicitly mandatory for religious groups to operate, a group must be registered to request legal recognition for places of worship. Gaining legal recognition of a place of worship requires permission from local municipalities for the construction or designation of a new place of worship. When granting permission to construct or designate a new place of worship, municipalities do not need to consult with central government authorities in advance of their decision; it is against the law, however, to hold religious services at a location not recognized by the central government as a place of worship, and the government may fine or close the venues for violating the law.

Interfering with the service of a religious group 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. Because it is illegal to hold religious services in places not registered as places of worship, in practice, these legal proscriptions apply only to recognized religious groups.

The law prohibits Sufi and other Islamic religious-social orders (*tarikats*) and lodges (*tekke* or *zaviye*), although authorities do not enforce these restrictions.

Military service is obligatory for males; there is no provision for conscientious objection. A government policy allows individuals to pay a fee, as of July, of 122,351 Turkish lira (\$4,100) instead of performing full military service; however, they are required to complete a three-week basic training program. Those who oppose mandatory military service on religious grounds may face charges in civilian courts and, if convicted, could be subject to prison sentences ranging from two months to two years.

The leadership and administrative structures of religious communities do not have a legal personality, leaving them unable to directly buy or hold title to property or press claims in court. Communities rely on separate foundations or associations governed by individual boards to hold and administer assets and property.

The law prohibits the establishment of foundations based on the religion or ethnicity of members but grants exemptions to foundations existing before 1935. Non-Muslim citizens direct these longstanding foundations; 167 continue to exist, the majority of which are associated with the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish communities. In practice, a religious group may successfully apply to register as an association or foundation provided its stated objective is charitable, educational, or cultural rather than religious. There are 13 Protestant foundations (four of which existed before 1935), 33 Protestant associations, and more than 73 representative offices linked with these associations.

The DGF, under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, regulates the activities and affiliated properties of all foundations and assesses whether they are operating within the stated objectives of their organizational charter. There are several categories of foundations, including religious community foundations existing prior to the 1935 law.

Government guidelines published in 2022 enable religious minority foundations to conduct elections for members of their governing boards. The guidelines apply to 163 of the 167 foundations represented by the DGF and run by Greek Orthodox, Armenian, Jewish, Syriac, Chaldean, Bulgarian Georgian, and Maronite communities. According to the guidelines, the foundations must conduct elections at least once every five years to elect boards with seven members (or an alternative odd number of members, minimum three and maximum 11). Voters must be members of the same minority communities as the foundations whose boards they are electing. Candidates must be citizens over 18 years of age, literate, and without certain types of criminal offenses on their records. Within Istanbul, minority communities with fewer than 15 foundations may hold elections on a provincial basis, while communities with more than 15 foundations must split their voting into three electoral districts. Elections must be overseen and administered by electoral committees chosen by the current board and approved by the DGF; these committees may include a maximum of two members from the current board, who must be community members but not candidates.

If a foundation becomes inactive, the government may petition the courts to rule it is no longer operational and transfer its assets to the state. Only a court order may close a foundation of any category, except under a state of emergency, during which the government may close foundations by decree.

A foundation may earn income through companies and rent-earning properties, as well as from donations. The process for establishing a foundation is lengthier and more expensive than that for establishing an association, but associations have fewer legal rights than foundations at the local level.

Several religious communities have formally registered corresponding associations. Associations must be nonprofit and receive financial support only in the form of donations. To register as an association, a group must apply to the provincial governor's office with supporting documentation, including bylaws and a list of founding members. A group must also obtain permission from the Ministry of Interior as part of its application if a foreign association or nonprofit organization is a founding member; if foreigners are founding members of the group, the group must submit copies of its residence permits. If the governorate finds the bylaws unlawful or unconstitutional, the association must change them to meet the legal requirements. Under the law, the governorate may fine or otherwise punish association officials for actions deemed to violate the organization's bylaws. A court order may close an association, and the Ministry of Interior may temporarily close an association or foundation and apply to a court within 48 hours for a decision on closure. Otherwise, the government may close associations and foundations by decree under a state of emergency. The civil code requires associations not to discriminate on the grounds of religion, ethnicity, or race.

By law, prisoners have the right to practice their religion while incarcerated; however, not all prisons have dedicated places of worship. According to the law, prison authorities must allow visitation by clergy members of registered religions and allow them to offer books and other materials that are part of the prisoner's faith, provided the prisoner is a member of a registered religion.

The constitution establishes compulsory religious and moral Islamic education in public and private schools at all levels starting with fourth grade, with content determined by the Ministry of National Education's Department of Religious Instruction, which falls under the authority of the presidency. Mandatory religion classes are two hours per week for students in grades four through 12. Under a new regulation enacted during the year, students in fifth through tenth grades are required to select an additional weekly two-hour Sunni Islam religion class. Only students who marked Christian or Jewish on their national identity cards may apply for an exemption from religion classes. Atheists, agnostics, Alevis, those whom the government considers other non-Sunni Muslims, Baha'is, Yezidis, Hindus, Zoroastrians, Confucians, Taoists, Buddhists, or those who left the religion section blank on their national identity card are rarely granted exemptions from the classes. Middle and high school students may take additional Islamic religious courses as electives for two hours per week during regular school hours.

The government issues chip-enabled national identity cards that contain no visible identification of religious affiliation. The information on religious affiliation is recorded in the chip and remains visible to authorized public officials as "qualified personal data" and protected as private information. Older national identity cards that are still in use contain a space for religious identification with the option of leaving the space blank. The new cards include the same options for religious identities as the older cards: Muslim, Greek Orthodox, non-Orthodox Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, Tengri, "no religion," or "other/unknown." Baha'is, Alevis, Yezidis, and other religious groups with known populations in the country do not have the option to select their religious group, requiring members of these or other religious groups or those who have no religion to leave the category blank or choose "other/unknown."

According to labor law, private and public sector employers may not discriminate against employees based on religion. Employees may seek legal action against an employer through the labor court. If an employee can prove a violation occurred, the employee may be entitled to compensation of up to four months of salary, in addition to the reversal of the employer's decision.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, with one reservation regarding article 27, which states individuals 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 country's constitution and the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne and its appendices.

## **GOVERNMENT PRACTICES**

### **Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement**

Authorities reported no further action in the investigation of police violence in 2022 against members of the Furkan Foundation, who were demonstrating to seek the release of eight other members detained in connection to a kidnapping case. Reportedly, Furkan is known for its opposition to President Erdogan's political Islamist policies. According to Furkan Foundation members, a 15-year-old child was among those injured and required hospitalization.

The case of Syriac Orthodox priest Father Bilecen (also known as Father Aho) remained pending on appeal at year's end. In 2021, a court sentenced Aho to 25 months in prison for "aiding a terrorist organization." In 2018, authorities in Mardin Province arrested Aho and two other Syriacs

for providing bread and water to members of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) visiting the Mor Yakub Monastery. According to Aho, he provided food and water because his religion "commanded" him to help others. He stated he acted "out of my belief, not out of help to any organization."

The case of nine Kurdish Sunni imams arrested in 2021 continued through the end of the year. According to media reports, prosecutors sought to close the organization to which the nine imams belong, the Religious Scholars Solidarity Association (DIAYDER). The government charged them with terrorism-related offenses for preaching in their native language; the DIAYDER's president was the last defendant under arrest until his release in January. Four defendants, including the president, were required to report regularly to local police (known as judicial control) through year's end.

The country continued to host a large diaspora community of ethnic Uyghur Muslims from the People's Republic of China (PRC). According to some community members, they continued to face threats and pressure from the PRC remotely via social media, and they said they feared the PRC would seek the forcible repatriation of some Uyghur Muslims; however, they knew of no cases of deportations. Uyghur community members continued to express concern regarding an extradition treaty the government signed with the PRC in December 2020, although there appeared to be no movement toward its ratification. According to media reports, human rights defenders, and government statements, the government showed a willingness to protect Uyghur Muslims in the country, did not deport any Uyghurs to the PRC during the year, and consistently reiterated this policy. In September, President Erdogan told the UN General Assembly, "We underline at every opportunity that we respect China's territorial integrity and sovereignty. In addition, we will continue to express our sensitivity regarding the protection of the rights and freedoms of the Uyghur Turks, with whom we have strong historical and humanitarian ties, and keep it on the agenda."

### **Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression**

On October 20, an Izmir court gave a 10-month suspended sentence to Mert Atakan Durmaz for inciting hatred and enmity, based on his social media post of the burning of a Quran. The defendant had been drinking alcohol with a codefendant, whose case was dropped upon his death in May.

In May, an Istanbul court gave a 10-month suspended sentence to pop singer Gulsen Colakoglu for "inciting hatred and enmity" after she joked during a 2022 concert that the "perversion" of one of her musicians was due to his education in a religious school.

In February, media outlets reported that a judge had sentenced folk singer Musa Eroglu to six months in prison for "insulting moral religious values." An Alevi foundation filed a criminal complaint against Eroglu for using harsh language in a song that described Imam Ali, who is revered by Alevis and Shia Muslims. The judge subsequently converted the prison sentence to a fine of 2,240 Turkish lira (\$76).

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses annual report, the government did not recognize conscientious objection to mandatory military service and did not provide civilian service alternatives in line with international norms. In response to previous ECHR rulings in favor of conscientious objectors, the government had paid damages to plaintiffs but did not make required amendments to legislation during the year. The report stated authorities fined more than 30 Jehovah's Witnesses for draft evasion in the previous five years, many of them in repeated cycles of prosecutions and acquittals. These included Askin Saygin, acquitted in March in the latest of a six-year series of trials for refusing military service; Berk Celikyaziciyan, whose trial for draft evasion remained on appeal at the end of the year; and Mehmet Bulent Yalinay, whom authorities continued to repeatedly fine for draft evasion for refusing military service as a conscientious objector. Courts overturned 10 of Yalinay's 11 fines, while the 11th was pending on appeal to the Constitutional Court at year's end.

## **Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others**

The government continued its longstanding policy of interpreting 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 continued not to recognize the leadership or administrative structures of non-Muslim minorities, such as the Armenian Apostolic Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, and the Chief Rabbinate, as legal entities, leaving them unable to buy or hold title to property or press claims in court. These three groups, along with other minority religious communities, had to rely on independent foundations they had previously organized, which were overseen by separate governing boards, to hold and control each religious property.

Four foundations that managed Greek and Armenian and Jewish community hospitals, including, for example, Surp Agop, Balikli, and Surp Pirgic Hospitals in Istanbul, were administratively under the Ministry of Health and not subject to DGF regulations. At the end of the year, they were awaiting separate regulations.

Multiple Protestant Church representatives continued to report bureaucratic difficulties in registering places of worship. Church representatives said they were obliged to continue meeting in unregistered locations for worship services because local officials did not approve registration applications and continued to impose zoning standards on churches, including minimum space requirements of at least 10,764 square feet. Officials did not apply this requirement to Sunni Muslim congregations, which they permitted to build worship facilities in malls, airports, and other smaller spaces. In addition, some Protestant churches reported local authorities did not allow them to display crosses on the exterior of their buildings.

According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses annual report, the group could not establish suitable places of worship because of zoning restrictions and building specifications specifically tailored to Islamic mosques. Despite a 2016 ECHR ruling that the regulations were discriminatory and impeded free religious practice, the report stated authorities denied or ignored the group’s subsequent 57 requests for land allocation. Municipal and provincial authorities challenged or defied court verdicts supporting the group’s rights by refusing to grant permits for Jehovah’s Witnesses to establish places of worship and by closing existing premises validated by court rulings.

On March 9, an Izmir court reiterated its earlier verdict in favor of Jehovah Witnesses’ application to register a place of worship. Municipal authorities previously had denied this permission but the court overruled the city in 2018. In 2022, a higher court granted the municipality’s appeal. On March 9, the lower court reviewed the case and insisted on its prior verdict in favor of the Jehovah Witnesses’ application. The municipality again appealed, and the case outcome remained pending at the end of the year with a judicial board.

In Konya, Jehovah’s Witnesses opened a place of worship on March 27, which authorities shuttered on July 20 after neighbors filed complaints against the use of the premises for religious purposes. The group appealed on September 13, and the case continued through year’s end.

The Armenian Apostolic Patriarchate and the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate continued to seek legal recognition, and their communities operated as conglomerations of individual religious foundations.

While Alevis continued to state they are a religious faith that deserves government recognition as such, the government continued to categorize Alevi worship as cultural rather than religious and to not recognize Alevi houses of worship (cemevis), despite a 2018 ruling by the Supreme Court of Appeals requiring such recognition. In 2018, the head of the Diyanet said mosques were the appropriate places of worship for both Alevis and Sunnis.

The government continued to permit annual and other commemorative religious worship services at religiously significant Christian sites previously converted to state museums, such as St. Peter's Church in Antakya, St. Nicholas' Church near Demre, St. Paul Church near Isparta, the Church of the Holy Cross on Akdamar Island, and the House of the Virgin Mary near Selcuk. According to minority communities, this was often a pragmatic option at sites where local congregations were no longer large enough to sustain full-time clergy and staff. On December 6, for the first time in 10 years, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew presided over a service commemorating the death of Saint Nicolas in Antalya's Saint Nicolas Church.

The government continued to provide Sunni Muslim inmates in larger prisons access to *mesjids* (small mosques) and Sunni preachers. The government did not provide clergy in prisons for non-Sunni religious groups; however, their clergy could visit and minister to adherents with the permission of the public prosecutor.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses annual report, group members faced fines for public disturbance when preaching door to door or in public places, or for "occupying the sidewalk" with carts offering their religious publications. The report stated police falsely accused Jehovah's Witnesses of selling goods or services they offered free of charge. According to examples in the report, courts sometimes annulled the fines and at other times upheld them.

On January 22, in Kartal District, Istanbul, police detained four Jehovah's Witnesses for preaching door to door, although the resident with whom they had spoken said he was not troubled by the visit and did not wish to press charges. The public prosecutor charged the four with "disturbing others to sell goods or services," although the Jehovah's Witnesses offered their literature for free; the prosecutor called for courts to fine each of them 617 Turkish lira (\$21). On May 24 and August 29, local courts upheld the fines. The charges were misdemeanors and therefore could not be appealed.

On February 10, in Aydin, three Jehovah's Witnesses who were maintaining a sidewalk cart of free religious literature were each fined 1,295 Turkish lira (\$44) for "acting contrary to order." On September 1 and 12, a local court annulled the fines.

On July 12, in Mersin, four Jehovah's Witnesses with a literature cart were charged with "occupying the sidewalk" and each fined 617 Turkish lira (\$21), while police confiscated their cart and publications. On September 6 and October 3, two local courts upheld three of the fines. The fourth verdict remained pending at the end of the year.

The Diyanet continued to regulate the operation of and compose the mandatory Friday sermon given in all registered mosques, and it paid the salaries of Sunni personnel. The government continued to provide land for the construction of Sunni mosques and to fund their construction through municipalities. According to the Diyanet's most recent published statistics, there were 89,302 Diyanet-operated mosques in the country at the end of 2022, compared with 89,817 at the end of 2021, the first decrease in the number of mosques in at least a decade.

In September, authorities charged an individual with "destroying public property" and "damaging places of worship" for entering a restricted zone in the Hagia Sophia Mosque and breaking a door while trying to open it. The legal process against the individual continued through year's end. Separately, the government undertook broader renovations of Hagia Sophia, which remained open while restoration was underway. The restoration to address structural cracks and materials fatigue began with the imperial tombs in the garden and was expected to continue with one of the minarets and the main structure in the coming years. In October, Minister of Culture Mehmet Nuri Ersoy said the entrance to Hagia Sophia would not be free of charge for foreign nationals after January 2024, but upper galleries would then be reopened for tourists to view historic Christian Orthodox mosaics.

The fifth century Chora Church (referred to as Kariye), scheduled for reconversion from a museum to a mosque in 2020, remained closed at year's end while under restoration.

The government again granted the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate permission to hold annual services at the fourth century Sumela Monastery in Trabzon. The government again did not permit the patriarchate to hold annual services at St. Nicholas Monastery in Cappadocia.

Renovations continued on the newly reopened Jewish Cultural Heritage Project in Izmir, a cluster of nine historic synagogues (Bikur Holim, Bet Hillel, Portekiz, Etz Hayim, Hevra, Salom, Algazi, Forasteros, and Sinyora) in the Kemeralti old market district that combined to form an open-air museum along the lines of Jewish quarters in other European cities. Beginning in 2014, a series of restoration projects transformed several of the old buildings into cultural hubs and performance spaces, with work underway on the remainder. In its various stages, the project received funding from the municipal government, foreign governments and the EU, and from the Izmir Jewish Community Foundation. During the year, the city's Jewish Community Center (JCC) completed roof repairs on Foresteros Synagogue, with financial support from Germany. The JCC also submitted plans to city authorities for the restoration of Hevra and Foresteros Synagogues and creation of a visitors' center, with continued EU funding.

Separately, in Izmir's Asansor District, the municipal monuments board approved renovation of Ros Aar Synagogue, to be undertaken in 2024 with funding from the Izmir Jewish Community.

Representatives from various religious communities said the bulk of property claims by minority religious communities for lands and buildings seized by the state in the twentieth century had been settled over the last decade, mostly to the communities' satisfaction, although a few remaining cases were still moving very slowly through legal and government channels.

Many public buildings, including universities, continued to maintain small mosques. A Ministry of National Education regulation requires every new school to have an Islamic prayer room. Authorities continued to deny Alevis the right to establish similar places of worship in government buildings. Alevi leaders reported the approximately 2,500 to 3,000 cemevis in the country were insufficient to meet demand. The government continued to state Diyanet-funded mosques were available to Alevis and all Muslims, regardless of their school of religious thought.

In August, the government enacted a regulation requiring students in middle school (fifth through 10th grades) to take an additional two hours of Sunni Islam religion classes weekly. Teachers' union Egitim-Sen described the change as a violation of freedom of religion and conscience. In September, Egitim-Sen along with parents' associations, Alevi organizations, and political parties, marched in Izmir to protest the additional religious classes as well as the Education Ministry's and Diyanet's joint "I am Sensitive to my Environment, I am Staying True to my Values" (CEDES) project to appoint imams to schools as spiritual counselors.

Religious communities, particularly Alevi Muslims, continued to raise concerns regarding several of the government's education policies. The government continued not to comply with a 2013 ECHR ruling that found the compulsory religion courses in public schools violated educational freedom. The ECHR denied the government's appeal of the ruling in 2015 and upheld the Alevi community's legal claim that the government-mandated courses promoted Sunni Islam and were contrary to Alevi religious convictions. Authorities added material on Alevism to the religious course curriculum in 2013 after the ECHR decision, but Alevi groups stated the material was inadequate and, in some cases, incorrect, and teachers often ignored it. They continued to call on the government to implement the ECHR decision.

Non-Sunni Muslims and nonpracticing Muslims said they continued to face difficulty obtaining exemptions from compulsory religious instruction in primary and secondary schools and often had to choose from electives dealing with different aspects of Sunni Islam, particularly if their new identification cards listed their religion as Muslim. Reportedly, because only Christian and Jewish children could opt out of the religion course, teachers assumed all other students were Muslim and thus required to take the course. The government said the compulsory instruction covered a range of world religions, but some religious groups, including Alevis and Christian denominations, stated the courses largely reflected Hanafi Sunni Islamic doctrine and contained negative and incorrect

information regarding other religious groups, such as some educational texts referring to Alevi beliefs as mysticism.

The government continued to expand and fund Islamic *imam hatip* education, a vocational religious school to train government-employed imams. At year's end, there were 3,432 imam hatip middle schools (18.2 percent of all middle schools), compared with 1,131 such schools in 2013, accounting for 13.5 percent of middle school pupils. At the high school level, 1,715 schools were imam hatip (13.5 percent of all high schools), compared with 442 in 2004; the share of high school students grew from 2.4 percent in 2004 to 9.3 percent at year's end.

Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish religious community foundations continued to operate schools under the supervision of the Ministry of National Education. Children of undocumented Armenian migrants and Armenian refugees from Syria could also attend. Because the government continued to classify legal migrant and refugee children as "visitors," they were ineligible to receive diplomas from these schools. The curricula of these schools included information unique to the cultures of the three groups and teachable in the minority groups' languages.

The government continued to provide funding for public, private, and religious schools teaching Islam. It did not do so for minority religious schools the government recognized under the Lausanne Treaty, except for paying the salaries of teachers who taught subjects required to be in Turkish, such as Turkish literature. The minority religious communities funded all the schools' other expenses through donations, including from church foundations and alumni.

In March, an Istanbul court overturned another court's ban on the translation of the Quran by Islamic theologian Ihsan Eliacik. The case was based on a Diyanet complaint stating it had sole authority over translations and explanations prepared by other theologians.

In January, an Istanbul appeals court reached a decision on a 2022 case regarding the transfer to the Diyanet of a derelict hospital building and its surrounding lands, which the Diyanet had planned to convert to an Islamic educational center on the same island (Heybeliada) as the closed Halki Seminary. The court annulled the transfer, basing its verdict on the Diyanet's lack of consultations with the Ministry of Culture regarding the suitability of its plans to repurpose the properties.

The government continued to provide training for Sunni Muslim clerics while restricting other religious groups from training clergy inside the country. The Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox Patriarchates remained unable to conduct formal theological training within the country, and the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary remained closed.

Multiple reports continued to state Protestant communities could not train clergy in the country and therefore relied on foreign volunteers to serve in leadership capacities. Local Protestant communities stated they aimed to develop indigenous Turkish leaders in their congregations because it was becoming increasingly difficult to rely on foreign volunteers. Several Protestant clerics, including evangelical Christian pastors, conducted services while in the country on long-term tourist residence permits.

### **Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment**

Protestant community sources said the government continued to target their members with deportations and entry bans, including those who had lived legally as long-term residents in the country for decades without previous immigration difficulties. Some cases were pending appeal at the Constitutional Court, and two were also pending at the ECHR. Other individuals with entry bans or residence permit denials requested a review of their immigration status through the country's legal system, but court challenges were hampered by the government's refusal to share the grounds for deportation, citing national security.

The national Presidency of Migration Management (PMM) reported the government had deported 22 U.S. citizens as of June 16. Although the government would not reveal the grounds for its actions, citing national security, most cases appeared to be linked to evangelical Christian groups, including 19 members of a church community in Bolu. Some individuals had received letters from government authorities advising them of their expulsions from the country; others only discovered their status when applying for residence renewal or at passport control when traveling internationally.

According to online news site the Christian Post, in May, ADF International filed a case with the ECHR on behalf of Rachel Zalma, a British citizen previously residing in the country, to whom the government in 2020 assigned an “N-82” security code identifying her as a risk to national security and refused to allow her to reenter the country. In a statement, ADF International legal officer Lidia Rieder said, “We are filing Rachel Zalma’s case before the ECHR to challenge Turkey’s discriminatory treatment of Christians. We hope the court will hold Turkey accountable so Christians can once again live their lives without the threat of deportation or unchallengeable reentry bans hanging over them. Regrettably, Turkish authorities continue to undermine religious freedom by deliberately attempting to stifle the spread of Christianity.” ADF International said the number of Christians in the country had dwindled from 20 percent to 0.2 percent of the population over the previous century, attributing this decline partly to the government’s systematic mistreatment of Christians.

The case of a foreign pastor who was deported in 2018 and subsequently banned from reentering the country for publicly evangelizing in the streets of Istanbul remained pending with the ECHR. The pastor, represented by ADF International, accused the government of religious persecution.

Estimates varied of the cumulative impact of government pressure on the evangelical Christian community in the country, since many who left were not recorded. In other cases, there was a multiplier effect when PMM canceled the residence permit of just one member of a family, forcing all to leave. A 2022 Human Rights Violations Report published by the country’s Protestant Churches Association stated, “a total of 185 people have received the [N82] code” in recent years, across a range of foreign nationalities. According to the Protestant Churches Association, the government issued new N-82 codes against 33 individuals during the year, also impacting 30 additional family members. Those 33 persons comprised 22 U.S., four South Korean, four Canadian, one British, one Danish, and one German citizens.

In January, Bolu authorities arrested 17 Iranian Christians and held them in removal centers for potential deportation back to Iran, according to Article 18, a UK-based NGO dedicated to the protection and promotion of religious freedom in Iran and advocacy on behalf of its persecuted Christians. Authorities later released them and allowed them to retain their refugee status in the country. According to sources close to the group, their release occurred after they agreed to a police demand to cease their home-based worship meetings.

Iranian sources reported authorities took at least three other Iranian Christians in Yalova, Aksaray, and Istanbul to deportation centers. Although authorities later released them, sources said the three could face a continued threat of deportation.

In July, UN human rights experts released a letter calling on the government to refrain from deporting 104 Ahmadi Followers of Peace and Light to their countries of origin. According to the experts, Edirne police detained the 104 individuals when they attempted to cross into Bulgaria to seek refuge there. The UN experts wrote that police reportedly used excessive force, resulting in the injury of at least 30 members of the group, including nine women. They said many Ahmadis reported having been tortured or subjected to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment by police officers, including beatings, sexual harassment, and intentional deprivation of sleep. According to the letter, “Since the inception of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light in 1999, its members have been labelled [in their countries of origin] as heretics and infidels and are often subjected to threats, violence, and illegal detention.” “They are particularly at risk of detention due to blasphemy laws [in their countries of origin], in violation of their right to freedom of religion or belief,” the UN experts said. According to the letter, the group included individuals who moved to

the country from other Muslim-majority countries. In September, a court ruled the individuals were at the border and did not attempt to cross the border illegally and that their actions at the border were protected by the constitution, including the right to assembly and demonstration. According to UN officials, however, most members were still in detention at year end, while some members had been released and were still in the country, and several others had returned willingly to their countries of origin rather than face detention.

The government continued its longstanding policy of not formally acknowledging the status of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew as leader of the world's approximately 300 million Orthodox Christians, although individual political leaders and government departments appeared to recognize it informally. The government's official position remained that the Ecumenical Patriarch was the religious leader only of the country's Greek Orthodox minority. According to a leader of the ethnic Greek community, this approach adhered to the 2010 Venice Commission ruling that the government was not obliged to use the Patriarch's full title, which includes "Ecumenical," but that it also must not prohibit or hinder its use by others.

The government continued to permit only Turkish citizens to vote in the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Holy Synod or to be elected patriarch and continued its practice of granting citizenship to Greek Orthodox metropolitans under the terms of the government's 2011 stopgap solution intended to widen the pool of candidates eligible to become the next patriarch. The government continued to maintain that leaders of the Greek Orthodox (Ecumenical Patriarchate), Armenian Apostolic Orthodox, and Jewish communities must be Turkish citizens.

During the year, some Alevi representatives were generally dismissive of President Erdogan's 2022 initiative for the creation of an "Alevi-Bektashi Culture and Cemevi Presidency" within the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the ensuing decree formally establishing the new body. The decree allowed for sponsoring research and conferences on Alevi culture and providing material and administrative support to cemevis, including funding the salaries of cemevi leaders and covering operating costs such as utilities. Some Alevis saw the initiative as an effort to satisfy ECHR verdicts and an attempt to assimilate Alevis into mainstream Sunni Muslim culture.

Effective beginning in January, the government lowered gasoline prices by approximately 43 percent for places of worship, including cemevis.

During the year, the government did not allocate any funding for religious minority publications, including newspapers, compared with 300,000 Turkish lira (\$10,200) in 2022.

Jewish citizens continued to express concern regarding antisemitism and security threats. According to members of the community, the government continued to coordinate with them on security issues. They said the government was responsive to requests for extra security, particularly during waves of pro-Palestinian protests over the Israel-Hamas conflict. Community members said official government rhetoric was strongly critical of Israel's policies and leadership, but they did not feel it constituted hate speech against Jews. They said, however, the government's anti-Israel rhetoric gave impetus to public protests that were openly antisemitic. Jewish representatives said the government did not prosecute hate speech by members of the public or on social media even though the law criminalizes "inciting hatred and enmity," and authorities applied the law when Muslims were on the receiving end of hate speech.

On May 19, an imam in the Sultangazi District of Istanbul spoke out against opposition parties before the May 28 national elections, accusing them of secretly belonging to religious minorities and urging Muslim loyalists to take up arms against these candidates, whether metaphorically or literally. In his sermon in Cebeci Mosque, the imam said, "Brothers, prepare your weapons. Set your weapons on the evening of May 28. My two guns are loaded to the brim. I dare you! What is this we suffer from you? For 80 years, what has this country suffered from you, from the crypto Jewish and Armenian offspring? We have so many martyrs." Armenian lawyer Simon Cekem filed a criminal complaint against the imam, which was pending at year's end.

On October 18, a city council member in Samsun praised Adolf Hitler for killing Jews, as the council member condemned an explosion at a hospital in Gaza on October 17, which was initially and incorrectly blamed on Israel. He stated, “Today, I once again remember Hitler with gratitude... And I condemn Israel. Hopefully, the end of this state of terror will come soon, and after the world is cleansed of Jews, peace and tranquility will be achieved.”

On September 15, President Erdogan conveyed his “wholehearted” wishes to the Jewish community for Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. In a message released by the Directorate of Communications on its website, President Erdogan stated, “Different religious faiths, compassion and tolerance are elements that enrich our society. Special days, which enable our citizens to freely make their culture and traditions keep existing, adorn our social lives and contribute to the reinforcement of our friendship and unity dating back a long time in history. With these thoughts in mind, I wish Rosh Hashanah may bring health, peace and welfare to all Jews, our Jewish citizens in particular.”

The *Jerusalem Post* reported that during a meeting with 15 Jewish leaders in New York on September 20, President Erdogan stated, “Antisemitism is a crime against humanity.”

In December, President Erdogan issued a statement congratulating the country’s Jewish citizens on the occasion of Hanukkah. He said, “The understanding of tolerance, which rejects all forms of discrimination on the basis of language, belief, and race, is one of the most valuable legacies of our deep-rooted history and civilization. Amid rising intolerance towards different beliefs and identities in various parts of the world, we attach great importance to protecting these values by standing against all forms of discrimination. The freedom of all our citizens to practice their beliefs will continue to be under the guarantee of our state today and tomorrow as it was yesterday.”

In February, the government for the eighth consecutive year commemorated the nearly 800 Jewish refugees who died aboard the *Struma*, a ship that sank off the coast of Istanbul in 1942 after being quarantined for two months and then towed out to sea by the government. Governor of Istanbul Davut Gul, Chief Rabbi Ishak Haleva, other members of the Jewish community, and members of the diplomatic community attended the commemoration. Deputy Governor of Istanbul Ozlem Bozkurt Gevrek stated, “I believe that it is the common responsibility of all humanity to fight against all kinds of discrimination in our age where problems such as antisemitism, anti-Islam, xenophobia and racism have become widespread like a virus, in order to prevent similar tragedies from occurring. It is very important to make efforts for the same purpose to prevent the same traumas and other Holocausts from happening again. I offer my deepest condolences to our Jewish citizens, with whom we have lived together for centuries and who share our joys and sorrows.”

### **Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom**

In April, an imam said that members of the ruling Justice and Development Party called and asked him to convince the members of his mosque’s congregation to attend President Erdogan’s political rally in Izmir Province. Imam Kilic said that as an imam, he did “not belong to a party. I just have a duty in the mosque to convey religion to people.” He refused the request because such an act would be “against the principle and purpose of this mosque.”

## **Section III.**

### **Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

In February, media sources reported Istanbul police arrested 15 suspects with ties to the ISIS-K terrorist group for allegedly plotting to target churches and synagogues in the city. According to a police statement, 15 persons “were detained on the grounds that the so-called Khorasan Province leadership of Daesh [ISIS] ordered an action against the Swedish and Dutch consulate generals and places of worship belonging to our Christian and Jewish citizens in Istanbul.” On July 20,

the *Yeni Safak* newspaper reported a Tajik member of the group confessed details of the planned attacks.

On December 29, police and intelligence captured three alleged high-ranking ISIS-K members and 29 linked suspects allegedly plotting attacks on churches and synagogues as well as on the Iraqi embassy in Ankara. The investigation continued through year's end.

Media outlets reported unknown assailants attacked Islamic theologian and religion education teacher Cemil Kilic in front of his home on March 25. Kilic announced the attack on social media, reporting, "They attacked by saying Allahu Akbar ["God is the greatest" in Arabic] with sticks. They are waiting in front of my house." According to media reports, Kilic was known for having harshly criticized violent Islamic "cults" and their leaders in the country.

In July, an Ankara court sentenced Ahmet Ozan Karaca to eight years and nine months in prison for involvement in the 2022 attacks on Alevi institutions and cemevis in Ankara. The court then deferred the sentence based on time already served, and it acquitted two other defendants on the grounds of lack of evidence. In response to the release of the defendants, Democratic Alevi Associations Ana Fatma Cemevi Ankara Branch president Mustafa Karabudak, whose cemevi was one of the targets, said, "This lack of punishment will result in future attacks and massacres. The court that released the defendant today will create another defendant tomorrow."

On January 17, media sources reported unknown perpetrators wrote "Islam is the only way" on the garden wall of Aya Yorgi Greek Orthodox Church in the Edirnekapi District, Istanbul. There were no reports of any investigation regarding the incident.

On June 4, a private group held an electronic dance music party at the 19th century Greek Orthodox Saint Voukolos Church in Izmir. The Greek Foreign Ministry and local Greek Orthodox community leaders condemned the incident. In response, Izmir municipal authorities stated the event was a violation by the company Gaia Project that had rented out the church and said they were "very sorry about hurting the Greek Orthodox Community."

After February's massive earthquake in the country's southeast, local website 5GVirusNews accused an Israeli search-and-rescue team on social media of stealing Turkish patrimony by taking 200-year-old scrolls of the Book of Esther back to Israel from a synagogue in Antakya. The Israelis said they had removed the scrolls from the wrecked building for safekeeping, and the Chief Rabbinate in Istanbul confirmed the items were duly returned to its care. 5GVirusNews made similar wrongful accusations of theft against an Istanbul-based rabbi when he posted videos of rescuing 500-year-old Torah scrolls.

In March, students at Istanbul's Uskudar American Academy performed the Nazi salute during a soccer game against Ulus Private Jewish High School. The Jewish Community of Turkey condemned the incident. In response, the academy issued a statement stating, "We would like to emphasize that we stand against all kinds of discrimination in accordance with our institutional and educational philosophy." The academy apologized to the Jewish school and had students conduct a joint assembly meeting to discuss the history of Nazis and the offense inherent in the Nazi salute.

According to news reports, in August, the lawyer of a family whose child was killed in 2009 wrongly claimed the convicted murderer was Jewish and that Jews performed blood rituals since the Ottoman era.

In August, a seminar in Istanbul on Judaism was cancelled following a campaign by the Islamic daily *Yeni Akit* targeting the same rabbi who had been wrongly accused of scroll theft. The campaign labeled the rabbi as an LGBTQI+ supporter and stated the Chabad movement with which he was affiliated partnered with criminal elements such as the "Fethullah Gulen network" to exert influence and control inside and outside the country. The newspaper published the rabbi's photograph and home address and labeled him as "Satan himself." The Jewish Community of Turkey issued a statement to "condemn the illegal, unfair and provocative broadcasts" against the rabbi.

Jewish community representatives said antisemitic messages and hate speech in social and print media were common and went unquestioned. They added that societal hostility toward Jews sometimes manifested itself in vandalism directed at Jewish places of worship. Following Hamas' October 7 terrorist attack on Israel and Israel's counteroffensive in Gaza soon thereafter, the number and severity of antisemitic actions markedly increased. On October 7, two individuals physically assaulted the same Istanbul-based Chabad rabbi while he was walking with his family to a synagogue. The assailants drove their motorcycle onto the sidewalk and shouted threats at the family. The perpetrators remained at large at year's end.

On October 28, an individual wrote "Murderer Israel" with red spray paint on the entrance facade of the Etz Hayim Synagogue in Izmir. The perpetrator also scrawled graffiti on the synagogue's door and on sign plates beside it. Police caught the perpetrator and referred him to the public prosecutor.

On October 26, a bookstore in Istanbul hung a sign on its front door that read "Jews not allowed" in English and Turkish.

On October 17, an explosion at a hospital in Gaza – initially incorrectly blamed on Israel and notwithstanding the Jewish Community of Turkey's message condemning the explosion – led to social media posts calling for Jews to leave Turkey as well as threatening that Jews were not safe in the country. Numerous social media messages included praise for Adolf Hitler.

On October 17, *Yeni Akit* called for Turkish individuals serving in the Israeli military to be stripped of their citizenship. The newspaper stated, "Following Hamas' operation, Zionists with Turkish passports who obey the orders of Israel, which calls its citizens with dual passports all over the world to join the occupation army and massacre Palestinians, must be expelled from citizenship according to Turkish Law."

The trial of four adolescents charged with damaging 81 tombstones in the Jewish cemetery in Istanbul in 2022 continued. They faced potential prison sentences of six months to two years.

According to Avalremoz, an online site tracking antisemitic incidents in the country, on November 8, unknown assailants in Istanbul threw stones at the Virgin Mary Church and Greek high school in Fener. Apparently confusing the Greek properties for Jewish ones, the vandals wrote "Down with Israel" and "Jerusalem is the capital of Palestine" on the walls of the school and church.

On November 20, a group of individuals identifying themselves as physicians protested Israel's military operations in Gaza near the Or-Ahayim Jewish Hospital in Istanbul. Or-Ahayim Hospital issued a statement on X (formerly Twitter) to condemn the protests.

In November, multiple individuals posted on social media the claim that Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu had announced an agreement with President Erdogan whereby one million Palestinians would be granted Turkish citizenship in exchange for a payment of two billion U.S. dollars. Government sources issued disclaimers against the rumors, which triggered antisemitic responses including calls to deport Turkish Jews as well as Armenians and Greeks from the country and bring in Palestinians.

In November, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's statement that "there are no rules where there are terrorists," regarding the Gaza conflict, triggered social media posts cursing Zelenskyy based on his Jewish identity.

In November, according to press reports, individuals used the hashtag #Netanyahu to post antisemitic comments on social media. A user criticized President Erdogan for targeting Israeli President Netanyahu instead of Jews. Messages included calling Jews a "devilish people" and stating Jews had "no right to live" in the country.

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ continued to say they were treated with suspicion in the press and on social media, which they said wrongly associated them with conspiracy theories. As

reported by other Protestant groups, some followers avoided church services for fear of attracting suspicion and social discrimination.

In March, the Syriac Orthodox community completed construction of the Mor Efreem Church in Istanbul, the first newly built church since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Mor Efreem was officially opened with speeches by President Erdogan, government ministers, and senior clergy on October 8, followed by a religious consecration by the Syriac Patriarch on October 15. President Erdogan emphasized his administration's benevolence to minority religious groups, citing the return of more than 1,000 properties to the Syriacs alone. Community members expressed their delight and appreciation for a dedicated place to worship after years of borrowing space from other Christian denominations.

In late January, outrage over a Quran-burning outside the Turkish embassy in Sweden by anti-Islam activist Rasmus Paludan led to days of protests. According to media reports, approximately 250 individuals gathered outside the Swedish Consulate in Istanbul, where protesters set fire to a photo of Paludan.

## **Section IV.**

### **U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The Ambassador, other embassy and consulate officials, and visiting U.S. government officials regularly engaged with government representatives throughout the year, including at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Diyanet, and DGF, to discuss religious freedom issues, including religious education. They underscored the importance of religious freedom, interfaith tolerance, and equal treatment under the law, and of condemning hateful or discriminatory language directed at any religious group. They sought government representatives' responses to specific religious freedom concerns raised by local religious communities and explored how best the governments of the two countries could collaborate to protect and respect religious freedom.

In September, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and the Special Envoy for Monitoring and Combatting Antisemitism met with President Erdogan alongside a roundtable of American Jewish leaders in New York City on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. Participants discussed how governments could work with religious actors to counter antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred. Religious leaders raised the need for interreligious community building and mutual protection of the right to freedom of religion and belief.

Senior embassy and consulate officials continued their regular engagement with a wide range of religious community leaders to hear and address their concerns. Discussion topics included stresses on shrinking minority religious populations; lack of legal standing of patriarchates; continued closure of the Eastern Orthodox Halki Seminary; social discrimination deriving from geopolitical issues with Israel, Greece, and Armenia; increased antisemitism in the wake of the Israel-Hamas conflict; lack of full recognition of Alevis as a religious faith; compulsory religious education; entrance bans and deportations of Protestant Christians; and concern for possible Turkish government deportations of asylum seekers to their home countries where they could face religious persecution. Embassy officials met with members of Sunni Muslim, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Jewish, Armenian Protestant, Armenian Catholic, Protestant, Alevi, Syriac Catholic, Roman Catholic, Chaldean Catholic, Baha'i Faith, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Church of Jesus Christ religious groups, among others, throughout the country and throughout the year.

The embassy and consulates regularly posted messages on social media marking meetings with religious officials, annual holidays, and occasions of religious celebration to reinforce U.S. policies of religious freedom, tolerance, and diversity.