

CYPRUS 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Since 1974, the southern part of Cyprus has been under the control of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus. The northern part, administered by Turkish Cypriots, proclaimed itself the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”) in 1983. The United States does not recognize the “TRNC,” nor does any country other than Turkey. A substantial number of Turkish troops remain on the island. A buffer zone, or “green line,” patrolled by the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), separates the two parts. This report is divided into two parts: the Republic of Cyprus and the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. For areas in the north that have different Greek and Turkish names, both are listed (e.g., Kormakitis/Korucam).

REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and protects the freedom to worship, teach, and practice one’s religion. It grants the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and recognizes the Vakf, an Islamic institution that manages sites of worship and land Muslims have donated as a charitable endowment. Authorities closed the only functioning mosque in Paphos from October 2017 to May due to construction in the area and denied the Muslim community’s request to use the Grand Mosque as an alternative. The government granted Turkish Cypriots and foreigners in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots access to religious sites in the area it controls, including for three visits to Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque during Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Mawlid al-Nabi. On June 11, the government allowed Mufti of Cyprus Talip Atalay to attend an iftar with the Muslim community at Kato Paphos Mosque, marking the first time in more than four decades the mufti visited and prayed with the Muslim community of Paphos during Ramadan. A Jehovah’s Witnesses representative reported difficulties accessing municipal cemeteries and in distributing pamphlets in Ayia Napa. The Cyprus Humanists Association said the Ministry of Education (MOE) and public schools discriminated against atheist students, and the MOE on its website advised students to reject atheism.

The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Caritas reported instances of physical attacks and threats against Muslim students in Paphos. The Jewish community reported incidents of anti-Semitic threats and verbal harassment. Some religious minority groups reported pressure to engage in religious ceremonies of majority

groups. Greek Orthodox Christians reported they sometimes faced ostracism from that community if they converted to another religion. Leaders of the main religious groups continued to meet and reaffirmed their commitment to promoting religious freedom across the island.

The U.S. Ambassador attended language classes for interfaith leaders coordinated by the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process (RTCYPP), an initiative of the Swedish embassy that facilitates cooperation among religious leaders to advocate peace and access to and protection of religious sites and monuments. The Ambassador discussed access to religious sites and interfaith dialogue with Church of Cyprus Archbishop Chrysostomos. Embassy staff met with the government, NGOs, and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom, including access to religious sites island-wide and discrimination against minority religious groups. Embassy officials encouraged continued dialogue among religious leaders and reciprocal visits to places of religious significance on both sides of the “green line.”

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population of the island at 1.2 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2011 census, the population of the government-controlled area was 840,000. Of that total, 89.1 percent is Greek Orthodox Christian and 1.8 percent Muslim. Other religious groups include Roman Catholics (2.9 percent), Protestants (2 percent), Buddhists (1 percent), Maronite Catholics (0.5 percent), and Armenian Orthodox (0.3 percent), with small populations of Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Baha’is. Recent immigrants and migrant workers are predominantly Roman Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist. The country’s chief rabbi estimates the number of Jews at 3,000, most of whom are foreign born. A Jehovah’s Witnesses representative estimates the group has 2,600 members.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and protects the right of individuals to profess their faith and to worship, teach, and practice or observe their religion, individually or collectively, in private or in public, subject to limitations due to considerations of national security or public health, safety, order, and morals, or the protection of civil liberties. The constitution specifies all

religions whose doctrines or rites are not secret are free and equal before the law. It protects the right to change one's religion and prohibits the use of physical or moral compulsion to make a person change, or prevent a person from changing, his or her religion. The ombudsman is an independent state institution responsible for protecting citizens' rights and human rights in general. The ombudsman has the power to investigate complaints made against any public service or official for actions that violate human rights, including freedom of religion, or contravene the laws or rules of proper administration. The ombudsman makes recommendations to correct wrongdoings but cannot enforce them.

The constitution grants the Autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus (Church of Cyprus) the exclusive right to regulate and administer the Church's internal affairs and property in accordance with its canons and charter. By law, the Church of Cyprus pays taxes only on commercial activities.

The constitution sets guidelines for the Vakf, which is tax exempt and has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with its laws and principles. According to the constitution, no legislative, executive, or other act may contravene or interfere with the Church of Cyprus or the Vakf. The Vakf, which acts as caretaker of religious properties in the Turkish Cypriot community, operates only in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. The government administers and provides financial support to mosques in government-controlled areas.

Besides the Church of Cyprus and Islam, the constitution recognizes three other religious groups: Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, and Latins (Roman Catholics). Their institutions are tax exempt and eligible for government subsidies for cultural and educational matters, including to cover costs to operate their own schools, for school fees of group members attending private schools, and for activities to preserve their cultural identity.

Religious groups not recognized in the constitution must register with the government as nonprofit organizations in order to engage in financial transactions and maintain bank accounts. To register, a religious group must submit through an attorney an application to the Registrar of Companies under the Ministry of Energy, Commerce, Industry, and Tourism, stating its purpose and providing the names of its directors. Religious groups registered as nonprofit organizations are treated the same as other nonprofit organizations; they are tax exempt, must provide annual reports to the government, and are not eligible for government subsidies.

The law requires animals to be stunned before slaughter.

The government requires Greek Orthodox religious instruction and attendance at religious services before major holidays in public primary and secondary schools. The MOE may excuse primary school students of other religious groups from attending religious services and instruction at the request of their guardians, but Greek Orthodox children in primary school may not opt out. The MOE may excuse secondary school students from religious instruction on grounds of religion or conscience, and may excuse them from attending religious services on any grounds at the request of their guardians, or at their own request if over the age of 16.

Conscientious objectors on religious grounds are exempt from active military duty and from reservist service in the National Guard but must complete alternative service. The two options available for conscientious objectors are unarmed military service, which is a maximum of four months longer than the normal 14-month service, or social service, which is a maximum of eight months longer than normal service but requires fewer hours of work per day. The penalty for refusing military or alternative service is up to three years' imprisonment, a fine of up to 6,000 euros (\$6,900), or both. Those who refuse both military and alternative service, even if objecting on religious grounds, are considered to have committed an offense involving dishonesty or moral turpitude and are disqualified from holding elected public office and ineligible for permits to provide private security services.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Muslim community leaders stated the government continued to allow the community access for religious services to only six of 19 mosques located on cultural heritage sites, as well as to two other mosques not located on such sites. Of the eight functioning mosques, seven were available for all five daily prayers, and six had the necessary facilities for ablutions. The government again failed to respond to the Muslim community's long-standing request for permission to make improvements at the functioning mosques, and there was no change from previous years in either the number of open mosques or the number of ablution and bathroom facilities available at those mosques. Bayraktar and Dhali Mosques had no ablution facilities and no bathrooms, and the government again removed

temporary bathrooms installed during Ramadan at Dhali Mosque. Although the government approved architectural plans for ablution and bathroom facilities at Dhali Mosque in 2016, construction had still not begun by year's end. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) stated the local imam did not approve the plans and instead requested that ablution facilities be built at his nearby house. A survey found structural problems in the house that prevented construction, and the MOI continued to evaluate alternatives at year's end. The Ministry of Communications and Works' Department of Antiquities reported it provided bathroom facilities at a distance of approximately 330 feet from Bayraktar Mosque. Authorities said the mosque was part of the medieval Venetian wall of the city, making it impossible to install sewage pipes.

Authorities closed Kato Paphos Mosque, which was the only functioning mosque in the city of Paphos and served approximately 1,500 Muslims, from October 2017 to May due to a construction project to upgrade the surrounding area. According to the ombudsman, the Department of Antiquities rejected the local Muslim community's request to use the nearby Grand Mosque as an alternative because it lacked hygiene facilities and because of scheduled restoration works. After examining a complaint submitted by the executive coordinator of the RTCYPP, the ombudsman on May 11 called on the minister of interior, the mayor of Paphos, and the director of the Department of Antiquities to take immediate action to provide a suitable place of worship. Authorities reopened the mosque on May 15 to allow the community to use the mosque for Ramadan, and it remained open during the rest of the year.

The only one of the eight functioning mosques not open for all five daily prayers was Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque, the most important Islamic religious site in the country. The Department of Antiquities continued to keep it open during standard museum hours only, limiting access to the mosque to two of the five daily prayer times. The mosque's imam had to ask permission of the MOI and Department of Antiquities to keep the mosque open after 5 p.m. in the autumn/winter months and after 7:30 p.m. in the spring/summer months; the imam said the authorities routinely granted permission.

The government continued to waive visa requirements for the movement of non-Turkish Cypriot pilgrims south across the "green line" to visit Hala Sultan Tekke to conduct prayers and services on special occasions. To cross the "green line" without identification checks to visit religious sites, Turkish Cypriots and foreign nationals residing in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots were required to submit requests to UNFICYP, which then facilitated the approval process with the

government. On June 20, 884 pilgrims crossed into the government-controlled area for a pilgrimage to Hala Sultan Tekke on Eid al-Fitr. On August 28, police escorted approximately 300 Turkish Cypriots, Turks, and other foreign nationals to Hala Sultan Tekke for prayers on Eid al-Adha. On November 20, 655 pilgrims crossed into the government-controlled area to attend prayers at Hala Sultan Tekke on Mawlid al-Nabi.

On June 11, in response to a request facilitated by the RTCYPP, the government allowed Mufti of Cyprus Atalay to attend an iftar with the Muslim community at Kato Paphos Mosque. It marked the first time in more than four decades the mufti visited and prayed with the Muslim community of Paphos during Ramadan.

A representative of the Buddhist community reported it no longer encountered difficulties operating a place of worship in an apartment in Nicosia. A 2015 criminal case against a Buddhist priest for unlicensed alterations and additions to a building in Pera that the community had previously used as a temple was resolved during the year; the priest complied with the building regulations and in June paid three fines of 250 euros (\$290) each. A Buddhist community representative said two of the fines were for unlicensed alterations to the building made by the previous owner, a Cypriot national, who was never prosecuted.

Representatives of the Jewish community reported authorities continued to perform autopsies on deceased members of the community for deaths that were not suspicious, a practice they said violated Jewish religious beliefs. They stated that, despite raising the issue repeatedly with the relevant government authorities, the issue remained unresolved. Jewish representatives also said local Department of Veterinary Services officials initially prevented them from performing religious animal slaughter, despite granting exemptions from the requirement to stun animals before slaughter in previous years. A Department of Veterinary Services official said the department no longer granted exemptions for religious slaughter. A Jewish community representative said, after engaging local government officials, the officials ultimately allowed the community to perform the slaughter without prior stunning. The Muslim community said it had not encountered problems in carrying out ritual slaughter.

Jewish representatives said the government had not responded to their long-standing request to grant the Chief Rabbinate of Cyprus the right to officiate documents such as marriage, death, and divorce certificates.

A Jehovah's Witnesses representative said the community was not allowed to bury its dead in municipal cemeteries, which were often managed by local Greek Orthodox churches. The representative also said local police fined some of its members for "peddling without a license" for distributing free pamphlets in Ayia Napa. He said the community had been unsuccessful in resolving the issue with municipal authorities, and that he had written letters to the minister of interior, the chief of police, Ayia Napa municipality, and the ombudsman about the incidents. The MOI responded in December that, provided there was space available, municipalities were legally bound to provide burial space in municipal cemeteries regardless of the deceased person's religion. The chief of police replied the Ayia Napa incidents were under the purview of municipal police, and Ayia Napa municipality had not responded by year's end. The ombudsman was examining the case at year's end.

The Cyprus Humanists Association stated the MOE and public schools took actions that discriminated against atheist students. In January the MOE posted a presentation on its official website advising rejection of atheism and describing atheists as materialistic and immoral. By April the MOE had removed the presentation from its website. The Cyprus Humanists Association also reported in December 2017 that a public primary school invited Greek Orthodox priests to hear confessions of students during school time. The association submitted a complaint to the ombudsman about the incidents, but there was no information available as to whether the ombudsman had examined the complaint.

The military continued to require recruits to take part in a common prayer led by Church of Cyprus clergy during swearing-in ceremonies. Recruits of other faiths, atheists, and those who did not wish to take the oath for reasons of conscience could refrain from raising their hand during the ceremony. They instead recited a pledge of allegiance at a separate gathering.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

Caritas reported three 10-year-old students in Paphos pushed a Muslim student of the same age off a veranda in January, resulting in injuries that required multiple hospital visits for treatment. The victim's mother filed a complaint with the local MOE office, which did not take any action. The victim's mother did not file a complaint with police. According to Caritas, in December the Cypriot father of

another student threatened the 14-year-old sister of the first victim and pushed her to the ground while on the school grounds. The school manager refused to file a police complaint, saying the alleged perpetrator was dangerous, and advised the victim's mother against filing a police report to avoid creating problems. The victim's mother reported the attack to police, who reportedly had not taken action by year's end. Caritas also said students discriminated against Muslim students, teasing and excluding girls who wore hijabs, calling them names, and pressuring them to eat pork.

Representatives of the Jewish community reported instances of anti-Semitic threats and harassment. The Jewish community said that, on three occasions in August and October, Muslim men verbally abused members of the Jewish community in Larnaca with anti-Semitic slurs and death threats. The victims had not filed complaints with police at year's end. The Jewish community also cited an incident in which an elementary school student, whose father is Palestinian, verbally harassed a Jewish student with anti-Semitic language in May. The school principal reportedly spoke with the student, who apologized.

Members of minority religious groups continued to report societal pressures to participate in public religious ceremonies. For example, children of various religious minorities said they faced social pressure to attend religious ceremonies at school.

Some Greek Orthodox adherents who converted to other faiths, including Islam, reportedly continued to hide their conversion from family and friends due to fear of social ostracism.

During the year the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage (TCCH), one of the bicomunal working groups set up as part of the UN-facilitated settlement negotiations process, completed the restoration of Camii-Kebir Mosque in Paphos. The project was scheduled to be inaugurated in early 2019. The TCCH restored religious sites for purposes of cultural preservation, and restored sites were not necessarily available for use by religious groups. In November 2017, the TCCH completed the restoration of the mosques of Ayios Nicolaos (Aynikola) and Ayios Yiannis (Ayianni) in Paphos district. Neither building functioned as an active mosque after the restoration.

The leaders of the main religious groups on the island continued to meet regularly and visit places of worship on both sides of the buffer zone. On June 19, the RTCYPP released a joint video statement featuring the country's main religious

leaders appealing for inclusion, understanding, and support for refugees and asylum seekers to mark World Refugee Day. A joint project of religious leaders through the RTCYPP offering Greek and Turkish language classes for members of the Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Armenian Orthodox, Maronite, and Latin Catholic communities continued; participants included priests, imams, nuns, and laypersons who worked for faith-based organizations.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy representatives continued to meet frequently with government officials – from the Ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Justice, as well as the Department of Antiquities and the Office of the Ombudsman – to discuss religious freedom issues, such as access to religious sites on either side of the “green line” dividing the country.

The Ambassador discussed restrictions on access to religious sites and interfaith dialogue with Church of Cyprus Archbishop Chrysostomos. In June the Ambassador met with interfaith leaders taking Greek and Turkish language classes organized by the RTCYPP and held at the Home for Cooperation in the buffer zone. The Ambassador also met with the Swedish Ambassador to discuss ways of promoting religious freedom on the island and support the efforts of the RTCYPP to encourage cooperation among religious leaders.

Embassy staff continued to discuss religious freedom issues, including religious-based discrimination, with NGOs Caritas and Movement for Equality, Support, Anti-Racism. They met with representatives of the Armenian Orthodox, Baha’i, Buddhist, Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Maronite, Roman Catholic, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Muslim communities to hear their concerns about access to and the condition of religious sites and cemeteries, incidents of religious-based harassment and discrimination, societal attitudes toward minority religions, and obstacles to religious freedom. Embassy officials supported religious leaders’ ongoing dialogue and encouraged the continuing reciprocal visits of Christian and Muslim leaders to places of worship on both sides of the “green line.”

THE AREA ADMINISTERED BY TURKISH CYPRIOTS

Executive Summary

The Turkish Cypriot “constitution” refers to the “state” as secular and provides for freedom of religious faith and worship consistent with public order and morals. It

prohibits forced participation in worship and religious services and stipulates religious education may be conducted only under “state” supervision. The “constitution” grants the Islamic Vakf the exclusive right to regulate its internal affairs. The “government” began allowing mosques to teach summer religious education classes without its prior approval and said it would allow secondary school students to opt out of Sunni Islam classes. There were reports of detention of persons with alleged ties to the so-called “Fethullah Gulen Terrorist Organization (FETO).” Authorities improved access to Greek Orthodox religious sites. The “Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)” said it approved 118 of 153 total requests to hold religious services during the year. Greek Orthodox, Maronite, and Turkish-Speaking Protestant Association (TSPA) representatives continued to report police surveillance of their activities.

The TSPA said Turkish Cypriots who converted to other faiths experienced societal criticism. The TCCH reported it completed restoration of 10 religious sites. Religious leaders such as Mufti of Cyprus Atalay and Archbishop of the Church of Cyprus Chrysostomos met throughout the year and arranged visits to places of worship across the “green line.” The RTCYPP published a letter with statements from Mufti Atalay and Greek Orthodox Bishop of Neapolis Porfyrios calling on Turkish Cypriot authorities to return icons stored in the Kyrenia Castle to the Greek Orthodox community.

In March the U.S. Ambassador met with Mufti of Cyprus Atalay, who was also head of the “Religious Affairs Department,” to discuss interfaith dialogue and access to religious sites. U.S. embassy officials met with representatives at the “presidency” and “MFA” to discuss unrestricted access to religious sites. In November the Ambassador attended a Maronite celebration at St. George Church in Kormakitis/Korucam. Embassy officials continued to meet with leaders from Sunni and Alevi Muslim, Armenian and Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Roman Catholic, and Protestant communities to discuss freedom of worship, access to religious sites, and instances of religious-based discrimination.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to 2011 census information from the Turkish Cypriot authorities, which was the most recent data available, the population of the area administered by Turkish Cypriots is 286,000. The census contains no data on religious affiliation. Sociologists estimate as much as 97 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, of whom 500 are members of the Naqshbandi Sufi order. According to the Alevi Culture Association, an estimated 10,000 immigrants of Turkish, Kurdish, and

Arab origin and their descendants are Alevi Muslims. The TSPA estimates there are 1,000 Turkish-speaking Protestants. The government of the Republic of Cyprus estimated 320 members of the Church of Cyprus and 73 Maronite Catholics resided in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. According to sociologists, other groups include Russian Orthodox, Anglicans, Baha'is, Jews, and Jehovah's Witnesses. According to "Ministry of Education (MOE)" statistics for the 2016-17 academic year, there were slightly more than 90,000 foreign students enrolled at universities in the area administered by the Turkish Cypriots. Of these, 61 percent were Muslim Turks, and the rest were predominantly Christians and Muslims from more than 140 different countries.

Section II. Status of "Government" Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The Turkish Cypriot "constitution" states the territory is a "secular republic" and provides for freedom of conscience and religious faith and unrestricted worship and religious ceremonies, provided they do not contravene public order or morals. It prohibits forced prayer, forced attendance at religious services, condemnation based on religious beliefs, and compelling individuals to disclose their religious beliefs. It stipulates religious education may only be conducted under "state" supervision. In November 2017, "parliament" amended the "law" to allow summer religious knowledge courses to be taught in mosques without "MOE" approval. The "law" does not recognize any specific religion, and individuals cannot "exploit or abuse" religion to establish, even partially, a "state" based on religious precepts or for political or personal gain. The Vakf has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with Vakf laws and principles. Although the "constitution" states the Vakf shall be exempt from all taxation, its commercial operations are subject to applicable taxes. According to the "constitution," the Turkish Cypriot authorities shall help the Vakf in the execution of Islamic religious services and in meeting the expenses of such services. No other religious organization is tax exempt or receives subsidies from Turkish Cypriot authorities.

The 1975 Vienna III Agreement covers the treatment of Greek Cypriots and Maronite Catholics living in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and the treatment of Turkish Cypriots living in the government-controlled area. Among other provisions, the agreement provides for facilities for religious worship for Greek Cypriots, stating they are free to stay and "will be given every help to lead a normal life, including facilities for education and for the practice of their religion."

Turkish Cypriot “regulations” stipulate Greek Orthodox residents may conduct liturgies or masses led by two priests designated by the Orthodox Church at three designated functional churches in the Karpas Peninsula without seeking permission: Agia Triada Church in Agia Triada/Sipahi, Agia Triada Church in Rizokarpaz/Dipkarpaz, and Agios Synesios in Rizokarpaz/Dipkarpaz. According to the “MFA,” Maronite residents may hold liturgies or masses led by Maronite-designated clergy without seeking permission at three designated functional Maronite churches: Agios Georgios Church in Kormakitis/Korucam, Timios Stavros Church in Karpasia/Karpasa, and Panagia Church in Kamyli/Hisarkoy. A Maronite representative, however, said Turkish Cypriot authorities allowed services at Panagia Church without prior permission only on August 15.

Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox worshippers must submit applications to the authorities for permission to hold religious services at churches or monasteries other than these six designated churches. For the authorities to consider an application the date should be of significance to that religious group; the church or monastery must be structurally sound; it must not be located in a military zone; and it must not have a dual use, for example, as a museum. Permission is also necessary for priests other than those officially predesignated to conduct services. Specific permission is required for Cypriots who do not reside in the Turkish Cypriot-administered area, such as members of the Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox Churches, to participate. UNFICYP coordinates these applications, which religious groups must submit 10 days before the date of the requested service.

The “Religious Affairs Department” represents Islam in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. Whereas the Vakf manages Muslim-donated land as an endowment for charitable purposes, the “Religious Affairs Department” oversees how imams conduct prayers and deliver sermons in mosques.

Religious groups are not required to register with authorities as associations in order to assemble or worship, but only associations registered with the “Ministry of Interior (MOI)” have the right to engage in commercial activity and maintain bank accounts. Religious groups and nonreligious groups have the same registration process and are required to submit the founders’ names and photocopies of their identification cards to the “MOI,” along with a copy of the association’s rules and regulations. Associations do not receive tax-exempt status or any “government” benefits or subsidies. Religious groups are not permitted to register as associations

if the stated purpose of the association is to provide religious education to their members.

There is mandatory religious instruction in grades four through eight in all schools, public and private. These classes focus primarily on Sunni Islam but also include sessions on comparative religion. The “MOE” chooses the curriculum, which is based on a textbook commissioned by the Ministry of Education in Turkey. In September the “MOE” announced it would allow students to opt out of mandatory religion courses in grades six through eight, in response to a 2017 report by the “ombudsman.” At the high school level, religion classes are optional.

There are no provisions or “laws” allowing conscientious objection to mandatory military service, which requires a 12-15-month initial service period and one-day annual reserve duty.

“Government” Practices

There were reports of detention of persons with alleged ties to “FETO” and the deportation to Turkey of Turkish citizens purportedly affiliated with “FETO.”

Authorities granted improved access to Greek Orthodox places of worship compared to the previous year. Contrary to reports in earlier years, Apostolos Andreas, St. Barnabas, and St. Mamas Churches required advanced notification to conduct religious services. The three churches, however, were open for prayers throughout the year, as they had been in previous years. During the year services took place for the first time since 1974 at 10 Greek Orthodox churches, according to the “MFA.”

UNFICYP reported the “MFA” approved 90 of 123 requests it received to facilitate religious services at churches in the northern part of the island during the year, compared with 67 approvals of 112 requests in 2017. The “MFA” reported it approved 118 of 153 total requests (including both UNFICYP-facilitated requests and requests submitted directly to the “MFA”) to hold religious services during the year, compared with 83 approvals of 133 requests in 2017. A Greek Orthodox Church representative said Turkish Cypriot authorities typically denied access requests without explanation. Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox representatives said the “MFA” frequently approved applications with insufficient time before the dates of requested religious services, resulting in cancellations. A Greek Orthodox representative stated 63 religious sites remained inaccessible due to being located within Turkish military zones or the buffer zone.

Heavy police escorts continued to accompany visiting Greek Orthodox and Maronite worshippers. Turkish Cypriot authorities said the escorts were to provide security; Greek Orthodox and Maronite officials expressed concern they also surveilled worshippers.

In April after a two-year restriction, Turkish Cypriot authorities allowed Greek Orthodox Church members to hold Good Friday church services at St. George Church in Famagusta.

In June Greek Cypriots received permission to hold a two-day religious ceremony at St. Barnabas Monastery. Local press reported large crowds at the Mass and extensive security measures around the monastery, which a Greek Orthodox official said ensured the service took place without incident.

According to a representative of the Maronite community, the Turkish military increased restrictions on access to Maronite churches located within Turkish military zones. Maronite representatives reported that, since January, they had been required to submit a list of persons planning to attend Sunday services by the preceding Tuesday, and the Turkish military had refused access to some members. Previously the Maronite community had not had to seek permission to hold Sunday services at the Maronite Church of Archangelos Michael in the village of Asomatos/Ozhan, which was located within a Turkish military zone. The Turkish military again allowed Maronites to celebrate Mass once a year in the Church of Ayia Marina and denied Maronites access to the Church of Marki near Kormakitis/Korucam.

Armenian Orthodox representatives said limitations on access imposed by Turkish Cypriot authorities prevented them from fully renovating and maintaining the Sourp Magar Monastery.

The TSPA again reported police visited the association on a monthly basis and that some of its members were afraid to attend religious services due to police monitoring; TSPA representatives visited homes where members held services instead. The TSPA reported police requested a list of attendees at a prayer service held with Greek Cypriot Protestants in the buffer zone. The TSPA reported it successfully opened an office in Famagusta after authorities prevented it from doing so the previous two years.

The Alevi Culture Association said the “government” provided six million Turkish lira (\$1.14 million) to build a *cemevi* (house of worship) and Alevi cultural

complex outside Nicosia. Construction began in August, and the association expected it to be completed by July 2019. The Alevi Culture Association continued to say it perceived favoritism in “state” funding toward the Sunni Muslim population through financing of mosque construction and administration.

In January a group of teachers at Hala Sultan Religious High School filed a complaint with the “MOE” stating vocational teachers from Turkey were putting religious pressure on students, including by encouraging students to attend prayers at the mosque and promoting religious camps in Turkey. The “MOE” assigned an inspector to investigate the claims, but a union representative said the “MOE” had not announced the findings of the investigation.

In June several parents objected to the “MOE director’s” decision not to sign Hala Sultan Religious High School student diplomas that included photos of students wearing headscarves in accordance with “MOE regulations.” According to a teachers’ union representative, the “MOE director” ultimately signed the diplomas and the teacher-parent association at Hala Sultan Religious High School subsequently held a second diploma ceremony for the affected students.

The “Religious Affairs Department” continued to appoint and fund imams at the 192 Sunni mosques in the northern part of the island.

A representative of the Church of Cyprus again stated some religious sites, to which Church officials had little or no access, were deteriorating. In August local press reported Ayia Pareskevi Church located in the open area of Maras/Varosha collapsed due to neglect.

Greek Orthodox religious groups continued to complain authorities placed religious items, including icons, in storage rooms or displayed them in museums, against the wishes of the communities to whom they were sacred. In October local press reported that Greek Orthodox icons stored in the Kyrenia Castle were deteriorating due to improper preservation.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The TCCH reported it had completed restoration of 10 religious sites and was restoring another two sites. The TCCH and the UN Development Program Partnership for the Future continued restoration work at the Greek Orthodox Apostolos Andreas Monastery in the Karpas Peninsula, a popular destination for pilgrims. After an initial delay in the technical designs, the tender for the second

phase of the project, including the restoration of the small chapel, surrounding buildings, and environmental landscaping, closed in October and restoration was expected to begin in early 2019.

In October the TCCH visited the Kyrenia Castle and assessed the icons there were generally in good condition, but it announced it would seek funding to install a climate control system to better preserve them.

In October local press reported the Vakf helped clean a Greek Orthodox cemetery in Iskele/Trikomo. Press also reported the Iskele “Municipality” would establish another cemetery for non-Muslim residents in the region.

The TSPA continued to report societal discrimination toward Protestants, including denial of access to venues to hold religious events and verbal harassment. The TSPA said Turkish Cypriots who converted to other faiths, particularly Christianity, faced societal criticism. The TSPA reported its members received social pressure not to attend a November prayer service with Greek Cypriots in the buffer zone.

Muslim and Orthodox religious leaders continued to promote religious tolerance by meeting and arranging pilgrimages for their congregations to places of worship across the “green line,” such as Hala Sultan Tekke in the Republic of Cyprus and St. Barnabas in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. In October the RTCYPP published a letter with statements from the Mufti of Cyprus and the Greek Orthodox Bishop of Neapolis calling on Turkish Cypriot authorities to return icons stored in the Kyrenia Castle to the Greek Orthodox community.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In March the U.S. Ambassador met with Mufti of Cyprus Atalay to encourage interfaith dialogue and discuss access to religious sites on both sides of the island. U.S. embassy representatives continued to meet with Turkish Cypriot authorities at the “Presidency” and the “MFA” to discuss access to religious sites and the ability to hold religious services at sites without restrictions.

In November the Ambassador attended a celebration with the Maronite community at St. George Church in Kormakitis/Korucam. Embassy officials also discussed issues pertaining to religious freedom, including access to sites of worship and instances of societal discrimination within the Turkish Cypriot community, with representatives of the Armenian Orthodox, Alevi Muslim, Latin Catholic, Greek

Orthodox, Maronite, Protestant, and Sunni Muslim communities. For example, embassy officials frequently discussed with Greek Orthodox leaders concerns about the restrictions Turkish Cypriot authorities placed on church ceremonies conducted in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots.

All references to place names within this report are for reference purposes only and are meant to convey meaning. They should not be interpreted as implying or indicating any political recognition or change in long-standing U.S. policy.