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2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Turkey

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 promote and enable the practice of Islam. 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. Media outlets and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported an accelerated pace of entry bans and deportations of non-Turkish citizen leaders of Protestant congregations. The government did not recognize the right to conscientious objection to military service. In January the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled the government violated the European Convention on Human Rights because it refused to allow Seventh-day Adventists to establish a foundation. In October a court ruled the Ministry of Interior and the eastern city of Malatya, Malatya Governorate, were not liable in a 2007 case involving the killings of three persons in an attack on a Christian publishing house. The Armenian Apostolic Orthodox community elected a new patriarch in December; members of the community and rights organizations criticized government interference in the election process. Minority communities continued to object to the prevention of governing board elections for religious foundations. The government continued to restrict efforts of minority religious groups to train their clergy, and the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary remained closed. Religious minorities again reported difficulties opening or operating houses of worship; resolving land and property disputes and legal challenges of churches whose lands the government previously expropriated; operating or opening houses of worship; and obtaining exemptions from mandatory religion classes in schools. The government did not return any church properties seized in previous decades. Religious minorities, particularly members of the Alevi community, raised challenges to religious content and practices in the public education system. In March President Recep Tayyip Erdogan publicly raised the possibility the status of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul could be changed from a museum to a mosque. With President Erdogan in attendance, the Syriac Orthodox community broke ground in August on a new church in Istanbul, the first newly constructed church since the country became a republic in 1923. In May President Erdogan inaugurated the country's largest mosque, which may accommodate up to

63,000. The government continued to provide security support for religious minority communities and paid for the renovation and restoration of some registered religious properties.

In May a Muslim televangelist associated with a private television station converted a 13-year-old Armenian boy living in Turkey to Islam during a live broadcast without his parents' permission. Members of the Armenian community and members of parliament (MPs) denounced the action. According to media reports, isolated acts of vandalism of places of worship continued to occur. In October unidentified individuals wrote on the door of the home of the president of Bursa's Pir Sultan Abdal Association, an Alevi organization, "It is your time for death." In February an unidentified person or persons sprayed graffiti on the Surp Hreshdagabet Armenian Church in the Balat District of Istanbul with derogatory messages on the door and walls. Anti-Semitic discourse continued in public dialogue, particularly on social media. In July a video posted on social media showed children at an apparent summer camp being led in chants calling for "death to Jews." In January the premier of the film *Cicero* generated controversy and condemnation when the scenery for the premier's red-carpet walk depicted features of a concentration camp, including striped uniforms draped on barbed-wire fencing and guard dogs. Some progovernment news outlets published conspiracy theories involving Jews and blamed Jews for the country's economic difficulties and potential sanctions. In October social media users and media outlets shared photographs of anti-Christian and anti-Semitic posters hung at municipal bus stops in the central Anatolian town of Konya by the local branches of the Anatolian Youth Association and National Youth Foundation. In December the local prosecutor's office in Konya said in a statement it would not pursue prosecution in the case because the act in question did not present "a clear and eminent threat to the public safety."

The Ambassador, visiting senior U.S. officials, and other embassy and consulate officials continued to engage with government officials to emphasize the importance of respect for religious diversity and equal treatment under the law. Embassy and consulate representatives and visiting U.S. government officials urged the government to lift restrictions on religious groups, make progress on property restitution, and address specific cases of religious discrimination. Senior officials continued to call on the government to allow the reopening of Halki Seminary and to allow for the training of clergy members from all communities in the country. Embassy and consulate officials also met with a wide range of religious community leaders, including those of the Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Alevi, and Syriac Orthodox communities, to underscore the importance of religious freedom and interfaith tolerance and to condemn discrimination against members of any religious group.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 81.6 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the government, 99 percent of the population is Muslim, approximately 77.5 percent of which is Hanafi Sunni. Representatives of other religious groups estimate their members represent 0.2 percent of the population, while the most

recent public opinion surveys published in January by Turkish research firm KONDA suggest approximately 3 percent of the population self-identifies as atheist and 2 percent as nonbelievers.

Leaders of Alevi foundations estimate Alevis comprise 25 to 31 percent of the population; Pew Research Center reporting indicates 5 percent of Muslims state they are Alevis. 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); 25,000 Roman Catholics (including migrants from Africa and the Philippines); and 16,000 Jews. There are also approximately 25,000 Syrian Orthodox Christians (also known as Syriacs); 15,000 Russian Orthodox Christians (mostly immigrants from Russia who hold residence permits); and 10,000 Baha'is.

Estimates of other groups include fewer than 1,000 Yezidis; 5,000 Jehovah's Witnesses; 7,000-10,000 members of Protestant denominations; fewer than 3,000 Chaldean Christians; and up to 2,500 Greek Orthodox Christians. There also are small, undetermined numbers of Bulgarian Orthodox, Nestorian, Georgian Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, and Maronite Christians. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) estimates its membership at 300 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 acts of worship may be conducted freely as long as 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” or “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 and promote the belief, practices, and moral principles of Islam, with a primary focus on Sunni Islam; educate the public about religious issues; and administer mosques. The Diyanet operates under the Office of the President, 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 been the case.

There is no separate blasphemy law; the penal code provides punishment for “provoking people to be rancorous and hostile,” including showing public disrespect for religious beliefs. 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.

The law criminalizes “insulting values held sacred by a religion,” interfering with a religious group’s services, or defacing its property. Insulting a religion is punishable by six months to one year in prison.

Although registration with the government is not mandatory for religious groups to operate, registering the group is required to request legal recognition for places of worship. Gaining legal recognition requires permission from the municipalities for the construction or designation of a new place of worship. It is against the law to hold religious services at a location not recognized by the government as a place of worship; the government may fine or close the venues of those 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 religious-social orders (*tarikats*) and lodges (*cemaats*), although the government generally does 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 of 31,343 Turkish Lira (TL) (\$5,300) 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 military and 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.

A 1935 law prohibits the establishment of foundations based on the religion or ethnicity of members but grants exemptions to foundations existing before the enactment of the law. 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 formed after the 1935 law may successfully apply to register as an association or foundation provided its stated objective is charitable, educational, or cultural rather than religious. According to the

Protestant community, there are six foundations (four existing before the passage of the 1935 foundation law), 36 associations, and more than 30 representative offices linked with these associations.

The General Directorate of Foundations (GDF), under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, regulates the activities and affiliated properties of all foundations, and it assesses whether they are operating within the stated objectives of their organizational statute. There are several categories of foundations, including those religious community foundations existing prior to the 1935 law.

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. The state of emergency instituted in 2016 ended in July 2018, but laws similar to regulations during the state of emergency remain in force.

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.

Associations must be nonprofit and receive financial support only in the form of donations. To register as an association, a group must submit an application 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 the 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 the bylaws 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. Only a court order may close an association, except under a state of emergency, during which the government may close associations as well as foundations by decree. 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 religious groups visitation by clergy members and allow them to offer books and other materials that are part of the prisoner's faith.

The constitution establishes compulsory religious and moral instruction 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 Office of the Presidency. Religion classes are two hours per week for students in grades four through 12. Only students who marked "Christian" or "Jewish" on their national identity cards may apply for an exemption from religion classes. Atheists, agnostics, Alevis, or other non-Sunni Muslims, Baha'is, Yezidis, or those

who left the religion section blank on their national identity card are not exempt 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 continues to issue chip-enabled national identity cards that contain no visible section to identify 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. National identity cards issued in the past, which continue in circulation and only require replacement if the card is damaged, the bearer has changed marriage status, or the individual is no longer recognizable in the photograph, contain a space for religious identification with the option of leaving the space blank. These older cards included the following religious identities as options: Muslim, Greek Orthodox, non-Orthodox Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, No Religion, or Other. Baha’i, Alevi, Yezidi, and other religious groups with known populations in the country were not options.

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 employment decision.

Government Practices

Multiple monitoring organizations and media outlets, including Middle East Concern, International Christian Concern, World Watch Monitor, Mission Network News, and Voice of Martyrs, reported entry bans, denial of residency permit extensions, and deportations for long-time residents affiliated with Protestant churches in the country. On December 2, the Ministry of Interior’s Directorate for Migration Management (DGMM) announced that as of January 1, 2020, the government would deny extension requests to long-term residents for tourist purposes, in the absence of another reason to request a residency permit (i.e. marriage, work, study). Several religious minority ministers, including Christians, conducted religious services while resident in the country on long-term tourist residence permits. While similar measures occurred in previous years, multiple groups said they perceived a significant increase in the number of removals and entry bans during the year.

Multiple reports said these Protestant communities could not train clergy in the country and relied on foreign volunteers to serve them. 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; however, they faced difficulties because they could not operate training facilities in-country. Community sources also said some of the deportations and entry bans during the year targeted foreign-citizen members of the community who had lived legally, as long-term residents, in the country for decades and who had previously not experienced any immigration difficulties. According to community members, these immigration procedures also affected a local community’s ability to raise funds for local churches because foreign clergy members attracted individual donations and support from

church communities in their countries of origin. Some of the individuals with entry bans or resident permit denials requested review of their immigration status through the country's legal system. None of the cases reached conclusion by year's end and could take several years to resolve due to the complexities of and backlog in the judicial system, according to media reports.

According to a report by the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, released and presented to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe on September 19, 63 Jehovah's Witnesses faced prosecution as conscientious objectors, with 44 individuals facing 177 different charges and fines totaling more than \$54,000. The report stated a person may be called for military service multiple times per year and charged as a “draft evader” because there was no form of approved alternative service in the country. The report also stated the Ministry of Defense sent letters to the individual's employer to encourage the termination of his or her employment.

The decision by the Church of Jesus Christ to remove its volunteers and international staff from the country remained in effect throughout the year. In April 2018 the Church cited safety reasons as the reason for the removal. According to local members, some followers stayed away from church because they feared retribution and discrimination. Some said they had lost their jobs, including in the public sector, because of their faith, and they experienced difficulties in finding new employment.

The government continued to treat Alevi Islam as a heterodox Muslim “sect” and not to recognize Alevi houses of worship (*cemevis*), despite a ruling by the Supreme Court of Appeals that *cemevis* are places of worship. In March 2018, the head of Diyanet said mosques were the appropriate places of worship for both Alevis and Sunnis.

In December the Armenian community elected Bishop Sahak Masalyan as the 85th Armenian Apostolic Patriarch of Istanbul. Some members of the community said in public statements and social media posts that the government's involvement in the process and the community's decision not to oppose the state-issued election regulations undermined the legitimacy of the process. In September the Ministry of Interior issued regulations governing the election of a new patriarch following the death of Mesrob II Mutafyan in March. According to public statements and media reports, multiple Church officials and rights groups widely criticized the regulations, stating they infringed on the community's religious freedom by limiting eligible candidates to bishops currently serving within the patriarchate. The regulations also lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 and expanded the number of elected delegates from 89 to 120, which Church officials said they regarded as positive steps. In July the Constitutional Court published its ruling that the Istanbul governor's decision to block the patriarchal elections in 2018 violated the right of religious freedom for the community. In February of that year, the Istanbul governor's office denied a 2017 application by the Armenian Patriarchate to hold patriarchal elections, stating the patriarchate had not met the required conditions for an election since the patriarch had not passed away or resigned.

The government continued to provide training for Sunni Muslim clerics while restricting other religious groups from training clergy inside the country. Because of a lack of seminaries within the country, the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox Patriarchates remained unable to train clergy. Protestant churches also reported an inability to train clergy in the country made their communities dependent on foreign clergy. Local Protestant church representatives raised concerns that the government's reported accelerated deportation of foreign clergy members hurt their community's ability to instruct local clergy unable to travel abroad for training.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I again called on the government to allow the Halki Seminary to reopen as an independent institution to enable training of Greek Orthodox clergy in the country. A 1971 Constitutional Court ruling prohibited the operation of private institutions of higher education and led to the seminary's closure. Amendments to the constitution in 1982 allowed for the establishment of private institutions of higher education but also placed significant restrictions on the institutions, and the seminary was not permitted to reopen and operate under its traditions. According to the ecumenical patriarch, the continued closure interrupted a tradition of instruction dating back centuries to the historical roots of the school as a monastery. In July 2018, the Diyanet announced plans to open an Islamic educational center on the same island as the shuttered seminary. At year's end, the Diyanet had not taken further steps to advance the project.

According to media reports, several imams criticized the Diyanet for becoming increasingly politicized after those imams were dismissed from their posts, reportedly for not supporting the government. In statements to media, multiple former employees said the Diyanet did not apply its regulations fairly. The justification provided for the dismissals was a “breach of guidelines,” applicable to all imams, including neither praising nor criticizing political parties; however, some of the dismissed imams said the sanctions were not applied to those supporting the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). According to media reports, an imam lost his position after accepting an invitation to lead a prayer for an opposition party before the local elections on March 31.

In October the Diyanet established a radio and television commission tasked with reviewing products prepared by the Diyanet itself or public institutions, agencies or production companies.

The government continued to interpret the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which refers broadly to “non-Muslim minorities,” as granting special legal minority status exclusively to three recognized groups: Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians. The government did not recognize the leadership or administrative structures of non-Muslim minorities, such as the Armenian Apostolic and the Ecumenical Patriarchates and Chief Rabbinate, as legal entities, leaving them unable to buy or hold title to property or to press claims in court. These three groups, along with other minority religious communities, had to rely on independent foundations they previously organized, overseen by separate governing boards, to hold and control individual religious properties.

Members of religious communities reported the inability to hold elections for the governing boards of their foundations remained an impediment to managing their affairs. They said when board members died, retired, or left the country, foundation boards had a more difficult time fulfilling their duties and ran the risk of eventually not functioning without new members. If they reached the point of no longer functioning, the government could then declare the foundation defunct and transfer its properties and other assets to the state.

In March the Directorate General of Foundations issued a decree allowing foundations to appoint members to their governing boards but did not issue new regulations to permit elections, which had been pending since 2013. The Freedom of Belief Initiative, a human rights project of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, said the action was contrary to the traditions of foundations in the country, describing it as further interference in the rights of religious communities. Some foundations stated they would not make use of the new order and instead would await new regulations to hold elections for their governing boards. According to local religious community representatives, without the ability to hold new elections, governing boards risked losing the ability to manage the activities and properties of their communities, and foundations could become inactive without newly elected leadership.

The trial of 13 individuals charged with conspiracy to commit a large-scale assault on an Izmit Protestant church and kill its pastor in 2013 continued throughout the year.

In January the ECHR ruled the government violated the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees freedom of assembly and association, because it refused to allow Seventh-day Adventists to establish a foundation. The court ruling required the government to pay six members of the congregation in Istanbul a total compensation of 8,724 euros (\$9,800). Compensation could include legal assistance and legal and court registration fees; by year's end there was no information available on whether the government had compensated the six individuals and no disclosure of any government payments.

According to media reports, in May a court released Uighur activist Abdulkadir Yapcan after nearly three years in detention, but he remained under judicial controls that limited his movements to his neighborhood in Istanbul. The deportation case against him continued at year's end. In 2003 China listed Yapcan as one of its 11 most-wanted terrorists and accused him of supporting violence and founding a terrorist organization. Uighur activists and rights organizations, however, said the extradition request was punishment for his political positions. His defense attorney said China did not produce any evidence to substantiate its claims despite previous promises to do so, according to public statements to local media after the May hearing. In 2016 the ECHR ruled against removing Yapcan from Turkey during the ongoing court case due to concerns about his safety and potential refoulement to China should he be deported to a third country. In August media reports quoted Interior Minister Soylu stating, “We do not send anyone back to China if they face persecution.”

The government continued not to recognize Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I as the leader of the world’s approximately 300 million Orthodox Christians, consistent with the government’s stance that there was no legal obligation for it to do so. The government’s position remained that the ecumenical patriarch was only the religious leader of the country’s Greek Orthodox minority population. The government continued to permit only Turkish citizens to vote in the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s Holy Synod or be elected patriarch but 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 Istanbul Governorate, which represents the central government in that city, continued to maintain that leaders of the Greek Orthodox (Ecumenical Patriarchate), Armenian Apostolic Orthodox, and Jewish communities must be Turkish citizens.

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

Multiple Protestant church representatives continued to report bureaucratic difficulties in registering places of worship. Church representatives said they had to continue meeting in unregistered locations for worship services. According to Protestant group representatives, local officials continued to impose zoning standards on churches, including minimum space requirements not imposed on mosques. Officials did not apply this requirement to Sunni Muslim congregations, which they permitted to build worship facilities in malls, airports, and other smaller spaces. Additionally, some Protestant churches reported local authorities did not allow them to display crosses on the exterior of their buildings.

In October a court ruled the Ministry of Interior and governorate of the eastern city of Malatya, Malatya Governorate, were not liable in a 2007 case involving the killings of three persons in an attack on a Christian publishing house in the city. Previously, a court had fined the two government agencies as part of a longstanding case. The lawyer of the victims’ families said they would appeal the October ruling. According to their lawyer, if the ruling held, the families would have to return compensation totaling 900,000 TL (\$151,000) with interest to the ministry and the governorate.

In February an Istanbul court acquitted Berna Lacin on charges of insulting religious values, sometimes referred to locally as “blasphemy charges.” The charges stemmed from Lacin’s 2018 post on Twitter about the alleged number of rapes in Medina, Saudi Arabia. The tweet was in response to calls by the Grand Union Party, families of victims, and some newspapers to reinstate capital punishment for child abuse crimes following a wave of molestation reports in media. “If capital punishment was a solution, the city of Medina would not be breaking records in rape cases,” Lacin said in her post. In the indictment, the prosecutor said Lacin insulted people’s religious values and went beyond what was permissible under the law governing freedom of expression.

In February the ECHR rejected the country’s appeal to reduce the 54,400-euro (\$61,100) compensation it was obligated to pay the Alevi Cem Foundation. The Cem Foundation took the government to the ECHR in 2010 for discrimination for not paying the electric

bills of Alevi places of worship, a service provided for mosques. The government appealed for a fee reduction to 23,300 euros (\$26,200). In November 2018 the Supreme Court of Appeals ruled *cemevis* are places of worship and therefore should receive the same benefits as Sunni mosques, including being exempt from paying utility bills. Alevi organizations continued to call on the government to comply with the ruling throughout the year.

In February the GDF announced restoration plans for, and began work on, the Surp Giragos Armenian and Mar Petyun Chaldean Churches, both in Surp District, Diyarbakir. The Kursunlu Mosque reopened in March following the completion of structural renovations. Religious communities challenged the government’s 2016 expropriation of their properties damaged in clashes between government security forces and the U.S. government-designated terrorist group Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK). The government expropriated those properties for its stated goal of “post-conflict reconstruction.” In September 2016, the GDF began restoring the expropriated Armenian Catholic Church; the restoration continued through year’s end, and the church was not accessible for public use. During the year, the government again did not pay restitution and compensation to the religious groups for the expropriation of property damaged in fighting with the PKK.

During the year, the government did not return properties seized in previous decades; it returned 56 properties to the Syriac community in 2018. Representatives from various communities said they continued to pursue property returns through the appropriate legal and government channels. From 2011, when the compensation law was passed, through 2013, when the period for submitting compensation applications expired, the GDF received 1,560 applications from religious minority foundations that sought compensation for seized properties. Because the period for submitting new applications expired in 2013, no new applications were filed during the year. In previous years, the GDF returned 333 properties and paid compensation for 21 additional properties. The GDF had rejected the other applications pending from 2011; it said the applications did not meet the criteria as outlined in the 2011 compensation law. The Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Jewish, Syrian Orthodox, Bulgarian Orthodox, Georgian Orthodox, Chaldean, and Armenian Protestant communities, which had previously submitted applications for the return of properties, continued to say these unresolved claims were an issue for their communities. Due to their legal status, recognized religious foundations were eligible to receive compensation for their seized properties, but religious institutions and communities without legally recognized foundations were not.

According to media reports, in June the Ovacik District Governorate sent a letter to the *muhtars* (village leaders) of eight villages in the district ordering them to evacuate as soon as possible due to the villages “being in a natural disaster zone.” The district is home to many Alevis and their religious sites. According to media reports, the villages were scheduled for removal because the government had awarded a Canadian-Turkish mining consortium rights to conduct exploratory mining in Munzur National Park – a spiritual area for the Alevis containing many holy sites. The letter did not specify when the villages were to be evacuated; as of December there was no public update on the case.

In March President Erdogan raised the possibility that the status of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul could be changed from a museum to a mosque during a televised interview, adding that the name could change to Ayasophia Mosque. The government took no action following the president’s comments.

Progovernment newspaper *Yeni Safak* reported in November that the Council of State (the highest administrative court) ruled a former church and mosque now serving as the Chora Museum should be returned to its status as a mosque, sparking concerns in the global Christian community that this decision could pave the way for similar changes to the status of the Hagia Sophia. The museum, famed for its mosaics and frescos depicting Christian imagery, was originally constructed and repeatedly renovated as the Greek Orthodox Church of the Holy Savior in the fifth century and then converted into the Kariye Mosque in 1511 before becoming a museum in 1945. According to the *Yeni Safak* report, the Council of State determined the 1945 decision to designate the structure as a museum was illegal because it violated the charter of the foundation that owned the then-mosque; the charter stated the building would serve indefinitely as a mosque. *Yeni Safak* said the decision moved to the cabinet for action; no changes to the museum’s status were reported at year’s end.

Religious communities, particularly Alevis, continued to raise concerns about several of the government’s education policies. At year’s end, the government continued not to comply with a 2013 ECHR ruling that found the government’s 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 2011 after the ECHR decision, but Alevi groups stated the material was inadequate, and in some cases, incorrect. In February various Alevi organizations issued a joint statement: “Alevis respect all religions ... but will keep their distance from those who ignore, limit or attempt to transform Alevism.” They also called on the government to implement the ECHR decisions.

Non-Sunni Muslims and secular 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 identification cards listed their religion as Muslim. The government said the compulsory instruction covered a range of world religions, but some religious groups, including Alevis and members of Christian denominations, stated the courses largely reflected Hanafi Sunni Islamic doctrine and contained negative and incorrect information about other religious groups, such as some educational texts referring to Alevi beliefs as mysticism. In February the Konya Regional Administrative Court ruled the changes made in the compulsory religion course curriculum did not eliminate violations to educational freedom as ruled by the ECHR in 2013. In June the Istanbul 12th Regional Administrative Court accepted an Alevi parent’s appeal for his son’s exclusion from the compulsory religious course.

Members of other minority religious groups, including Protestants, said they continued to have difficulty obtaining exemptions from religion classes. Some rights groups said that because schools provided no alternative for students exempted from the compulsory religious instruction, those students stood out and as a result could face additional social stigma.

In March the Council of State ruled to end a three-year agreement between the Ministry of National Education and the Islamic Hizmet Foundation to provide “moral values” education in schools. The state council ruled the 2017 agreement contradicted a provision of the constitution that requires the conduct of education in state schools be performed by public sector employees. In September the ministry issued a new regulation enabling international organizations and NGOs to organize social activities in schools. In 2018 the teachers union Egitim-Sen applied to the Council of State, which hears cases seeking to change administrative policies of the government, to end the moral values education protocol, and stated conducting such programs during school hours would force students to attend regardless of religious affiliation.

According to media reports and public statements, in January administrators of an Istanbul public high school reprimanded with letters to their files 12 students for participating in a December 2018 demonstration where they stated “Islamist students supported by school principals” pressured them to attend “religious conversations” in their spare time. Egitim-Is, an education sector union, criticized the school administration and said the government had handed over secular schools to religious groups.

According to media reports, in January a religious culture and ethics teacher at a high school in Istanbul, Cemil Kilic, was suspended from duty reportedly after making public comments favorably comparing the morals of atheists and deists to those of “self-professed” Muslims and saying headscarves were not obligatory in Islam. In May he was allowed to resume his duties in the central province of Nigde while awaiting the ruling of a disciplinary committee. According to media reports, Kilic faced possible dismissal pending the outcome of the committee’s deliberations.

In January a headmaster in Ankara distributed a leaflet and issued a warning against teachers who wore high heels, stating it was against Islam. The main opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP), demanded the headmaster’s removal from office. The headmaster subsequently issued an apology to the teachers.

In August Egitim-Sen stated only one of every five students was learning in gender-segregated classrooms. Egitim-Sen said this violated the rights of children living under a secular constitution and it contradicted the 2018 National Education Ministry regulation allowing separate classrooms for girls and boys in multiprogram (offering regular, technical, and vocation programs) high schools. Officials of the Ministry of Education denied allegations the regulation was a step towards creating single-gender classrooms in all schools. Multiprogram schools continued to bring regular, technical, and vocational high schools together in less populated areas where the requirement for the minimum number of students for each program could not be met.

The Mental Health Professionals’ Platform in February criticized the continuing assignment of Diyanet employees to university dormitories as an example of greater religious influence on the education system. It stated social services should not be provided by individuals without the appropriate professional background. In 2017 the Diyanet announced a plan to expand and make permanent a pilot program launched in 2016 to assign Diyanet employees, including imams, to university dormitories operated by the government in every province. The Diyanet stated the officials would provide “moral guidance” to address the “moral values” problems in the dorms and provide the Diyanet’s provincial muftis with performance reviews every six months.

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

The government continued to permit Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish religious community foundations 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 a diploma 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. According to members of the Syriac Orthodox community, which has operated a preschool since 2014, the community was still unable to open additional schools for financial reasons. The government did not grant permission to other religious groups to operate schools.

Parents of some students again criticized the practice of converting some nonreligious public schools into *imam hatip* religious schools. Sources said this created a hurdle for those preferring to attend secular public schools because the number of *imam hatip* middle schools increased by more than one hundred and the number of students by nearly 40,000 for the 2018-2019 academic year, according to official statistics. These sources rejected government claims that demand drove the increase, and they said limited options often compelled nonreligious families to send students to the religious schools. The country’s 2019 investment program in the general budget included the government’s associated priorities, with 460 million TL (\$77.42 million) allocated for new *imam hatip* schools, compared with TL 30 million (\$5.05 million) for new science schools.

Many public buildings, including universities, continued to maintain small mosques. In June 2017, the Ministry of National Education issued a regulation requiring every new school to have an Islamic prayer room. The government continued to deny Alevis the right to establish similar places of worship in government buildings that did not contain places of worship for non-Sunnis. Alevi leaders reported the approximately 2,500 to 3,000 *cemevis* in the country were insufficient to meet demand. The government continued to state that Diyanet-funded mosques were available to Alevis and all Muslims, regardless of their school of religious thought.

In January several Alevi foundations requested the end of an ongoing program that takes school children ages six to 13 to local mosques for religious instruction during their two-week winter break. In 2018 the Ministry of National Education signed a contract with Server Youth and Sports Club for 50,000 children drawn from each of the 81 provinces to participate in the voluntary program. Alevi representatives said they objected to the program because students not participating could be “singled out” for not participating and as being different from the other students.

In November an IYI Party MP commented on a government official’s family’s “excessive” display of wealth on social media, posting “There is a group of people that have become rich due to their undeserved income and live luxuriously; we call them Protestant Muslims. These people have become Jews, mentally.” The post received widespread criticism from social media users and members of the Jewish community.

According to media reports, in February the Prophet Lovers Foundation (*Peygamber Sevdalıları Vakfı*), a group based in the southeast of the country, received permission to conduct religious examinations in public schools. One exam answer stated the concept of Jews and Christians going to heaven was a “poisonous idea.”

The government continued not to authorize clergy of religious groups designated as non-Islamic or heterodox Islam, including Alevi leaders (*dedes*), to register and officiate at marriages on behalf of the state. Imams received this authority in November 2017. Some critics continued to state the law solely addressed the demands of some within the Sunni Muslim majority and not the needs of other religious groups.

The Diyanet regulated the operation of all registered mosques. It paid the salaries of 107,206 Sunni personnel at the end of 2018, the most recent year for which data were available, compared with 109,332 in 2017. The government did not pay the salaries of religious leaders, instructors, or other staff belonging to other religious groups.

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 88,681 mosques in the country in 2018, compared with 88,021 Diyanet-operated mosques in 2107. In May President Erdogan inaugurated the largest mosque in the country. Located in Istanbul, it can accommodate 63,000. Although Alevi groups were able to build some new *cemevis*, the government continued to decline to provide financial support for their construction and maintenance in most cases.

In August leaders of the Syriac Orthodox community broke ground on the St. Ephrem (Mor Efrem) Church in Istanbul during a ceremony attended by President Erdogan and representatives of other religious communities. Once completed, it will be the first newly constructed church since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923. To date, the approximately 18,000-member Syriac Orthodox community in Istanbul has used churches of other communities, in addition to its one current church, to hold services. Erdogan said the church would add “new richness” to the city and stated, “Our region

has been the heart of religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity,” according to media reports. Community representatives said the project would not have been possible without the public support of the president.

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, and the House of the Virgin Mary, near Selcuk. The Ecumenical Patriarchate again cancelled an annual service at Sumela Monastery, near Trabzon, because of its continuing restoration. A portion of the Sumela Monastery reopened to visitors in May after renovations were completed on part of the complex, but large portions continued under renovation.

In April a court sentenced the chairperson of Alperen Ocaklari Foundation to one year in prison for inciting public hatred and animosity during a 2017 protest in front of the Neve Shalom Synagogue in Istanbul. During the incident, a group hurled rocks at the synagogue, kicked its doors, and threatened members of the Jewish community. The protest was a reaction to the placement of metal detectors by Israel in front of Al Aqsa Mosque, according to the members of the protesting group.

In June a local court in Bursa approved the application by the Protestant community in Bursa to start a foundation. At year’s end the government still had not responded to a request by the Protestant foundation to allow long-term use of a church renovated in 2018 using government funding. Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Turkish Protestant congregations continued to share the building, owned by the GDF for more than 10 years.

The government continued to provide incarcerated Sunni Muslims with *mesjids* (small mosques) and Sunni preachers in larger prisons. Alevis and non-Muslims did not have clerics from their own faiths serving in prisons; however, clergy of other faiths were permitted to enter prisons with the permission of the public prosecutor to minister to their adherents as long as doing so was not considered a threat to a facility’s security.

For the second year in a row, the annual Mass at the historic Armenian Akdamar Church near Van in the east of the country was officiated by the then-acting Armenian patriarch. Authorities canceled annual services between 2015-2017, citing security concerns arising from clashes between the military and the PKK.

Government funding for daily and weekly newspapers published by minority communities increased from a total of TL 200,000 (\$33,700) in 2018 to 250,000 TL (\$42,100) during the year.

Jewish citizens again expressed concern about anti-Semitism and security threats. According to members of the community, the government continued to coordinate with them on security issues. They said the government measures were helpful and the government was responsive to requests for security.

In December the Gaziantep Synagogue, located in the southeast of the country, reopened for a Hanukkah celebration after remaining closed for 40 years due to the shrinking size of the congregation. The synagogue was used as a cultural center by Gaziantep University until reopening for special occasions following renovations by the GDF.

A then-AKP MP denounced in a social media post the red carpet premier of the film *Cicero*, which depicted detailed features of a concentration camp, stating “There can be no explanation” for using “one of the most tragic and calamitous crimes in the history of humanity as material for entertainment at a film gala.”

Ankara University hosted an event to commemorate Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 24, in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Foreign Ministry issued a statement commemorating the victims and underlined the service of Turkish diplomats who aided Jewish victims of persecution by providing Turkish passports and identity documents to help them flee the tragedy. The deputy foreign minister for EU affairs, members of the diplomatic corps, Chief Rabbi of Turkey Ishak Haleva, other leaders of the Jewish community, and high school students took part in the event. In February the government for the fifth year in a row commemorated the nearly 800 Jewish refugees who died aboard the *Struma*, a ship that sank off the coast of Istanbul in 1942. The governor of Istanbul, Chief Rabbi Haleva, other members of the Jewish community, and members of the diplomatic community attended the commemoration.

In April and September President Erdogan again sent messages to the Jewish community celebrating Passover and Rosh Hashanah. The messages described Turkey as a symbol of “love and tolerance” and recognized “diversity as the most important wealth that strengthens unity and solidarity.” In December the Jewish community celebrated Hanukkah with a ceremony at Galata Tower Square in Istanbul’s Beyoglu neighborhood. President Erdogan extended his congratulations and best wishes for wellbeing and happiness to mark the beginning of the Festival of Lights. He said in a written statement, “It is of great importance for us to ensure each and every one of our citizens’ liberty to practice their faith.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In May a Muslim televangelist, Nihat Hatipoglu, converted a 13-year-old Armenian Christian boy to Islam during a live broadcast on private television channel ATV without the permission of his parents. Members of the Armenian community denounced the act as a forced conversion and violation of the Lausanne Treaty. Then-acting Armenian Apostolic patriarch Atesyan also issued a statement and personally expressed his concerns to the chairman of the Diyanet. MPs of the ruling AKP and opposition People’s Democratic Party (HDP) criticized the conversion, and Turkish Armenian HDP MP Garo Paylan filed an official complaint with the radio and television oversight body.

In October unidentified individuals wrote on the door of the home of the president of Bursa’s Pir Sultan Abdal Association, an Alevi organization, “It is your time for death.” Police launched a criminal investigation into the incident. The investigation continued through the end of the year.

Some converts to Christian Protestant groups from Islam or from Christian Orthodoxy reported social shunning within their family, among friends, and at their workplaces following their contacts’ discovery of the conversion, according to local community members.

The premier of the film *Cicero* in January generated controversy and condemnation when the scenery for the premier’s red carpet walk depicted features of a concentration camp, including striped uniforms draped on barbed-wire fencing and guard dogs. The local Jewish community, columnists, a then-AKP MP, and social media users denounced the display as disgraceful. The filmmakers subsequently apologized.

Some progovernment news outlets published conspiracy theories involving Jews and blamed Jews for the country’s economic difficulties and potential sanctions.

During the campaign for Istanbul mayor, altered images of opposition CHP Party candidate Ekrem Imamoglu showing him shaking hands with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and meeting with a group of Orthodox Jews appeared on social media in an effort to discredit him, according to commentators. Disparaging comments and statements calling Imamoglu a “friend of Zionism” accompanied the images.

Anti-Semitic rhetoric continued in print media and on social media throughout the year. According to a Hrant Dink Foundation project on hate speech, there were 430 published instances of anti-Jewish rhetoric in the press between January and August depicting Jews as violent, conspiratorial, and a threat to the country, compared with 899 published instances during the same period in 2018. A reader’s letter published in the newspaper *Yeni Akit* stated Jewish residents in Istanbul trained street dogs to bite Muslims and repeated historic accusations of blood libel. Some commentators criticized the letter as ridiculous, and Mustafa Yeneroglu, an MP formerly with the ruling AKP party, denounced the content as “the language of the Nazis,” according to multiple media reports.

In January anti-Semitic comments surfaced on social media following an increase in gas and electric bills, with some users reacting by asking, “What have we done to get such a bill; did we burn Jews?” The editor-in-chief of *Shalom*, a Jewish community newspaper, called the comments a despicable example of racism and a reaction of sick minds. He added that such forms of anti-Semitism were increasingly common on social media and asked legal authorities to intervene.

In October social media users and media outlets shared photographs of anti-Christian and anti-Semitic posters hung at municipal bus stops in the central Anatolian town of Konya by the local branches of the Anatolian Youth Association and National Youth Foundation. The posters cited a Quranic verse that appeared to advise Muslims not to befriend Christians and Jews. The images also included a crucifix and Star of David with

what appeared to be droplets of blood. Social media users from all three faiths criticized the posters as insulting to religious minorities, misrepresenting the message of the Quran, and undermining the dignity of the nation. The private advertising company leasing the billboards said the associations changed the content of the posters before printing them. It replaced the images with Turkish flags shortly after the concerns appeared on social media. The Anatolian Youth Association described the situation as a misunderstanding and said it was investigating the incident. In December the local prosecutor’s office in Konya said in a statement it would not pursue prosecution in the case because the act in question did not present “a clear and eminent threat to the public safety.”

In June at a memorial service in Istanbul for former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi, the crowd chanted anti-Semitic slogans. President Erdogan attended the service.

Several Christian and Jewish places of worship experienced acts of vandalism and received threats, according to local observers and the Freedom of Belief Initiative. In January three assailants reportedly threw a “sound” grenade at the door of the Mardin Protestant Church. The suspects were detained and released after making statements to police.

In February an unidentified person or persons sprayed graffiti on the doors and walls of the Surp Hreshdagabet Armenian Church in the Balat District, Istanbul that included derogatory messages. A representative of community foundations to the GDF, Moris Levi, said in a statement that police had opened an investigation and received security camera footage of the incident. HDP MP Garo Paylan condemned the attack. According to the community, the perpetrators had not been found by year’s end.

According to media reports, in March a person attempted to vandalize the Beth Israel Synagogue in Izmir with a Molotov cocktail. The synagogue was not damaged in the incident. Police arrested and charged the individual for attempting to damage a place of worship. He stated his intention was to “protest Israel,” according to multiple media reports. Representatives of the Jewish community expressed gratitude to the Izmir Security Directorate for what they said was its swift response and sensitivity to the community’s security needs.

In January a small group of protestors demanded the status of the Hagia Sophia change from a museum to a mosque following the social media posting of a woman dancing inside the structure. Police prevented the group from entering the structure, and museum officials said they would investigate the incident. The investigation continued at year’s end.

In February hundreds of persons gathered in front of the Hagia Sophia for Friday prayers in an event organized by the Platform on Unity in Idea and Struggle, which advocates for the Hagia Sophia’s conversion into a mosque.

Despite the law permitting teaching and spreading religious beliefs, church officials and rights groups indicated these types of activities were widely viewed with suspicion and occasionally led to societal stigmatization.

Muslim, Jewish, and Christian religious leaders again joined representatives from various municipalities in Istanbul and the minister of culture and tourism for a public interfaith iftar in May. Organized by the representative of community foundations to the GDF with the support of all religious minority communities and hosted this year by the Syriac Catholic community, the event was described by organizers as an opportunity for communities that have shared the same lands for thousands of years to share their tables as friends.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador, Charge d’Affaires, other embassy and consulate officials, and visiting U.S. officials regularly engaged with government officials throughout the year, including at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Diyanet, and GDF. They underscored the importance of religious freedom, interfaith tolerance, and condemning hateful or discriminatory language directed at any religious groups.

U.S. officials also provided overviews of the 2018 International Religious Freedom report in private meetings with government officials. They offered to hear from government representatives specific claims of potential religious freedom issues raised by local religious communities and how best to collaborate between the governments of the two countries to protect and respect religious freedom.

U.S. government officials urged the government to implement reforms aimed at lifting restrictions on religious groups, raised the issue of property restitution and restoration, and discussed specific cases of religious discrimination.

Senior U.S. government officials continued to publicly, and privately with government officials, express their understanding of the Hagia Sophia as a site of extraordinary significance, and to support its preservation in a manner that respects its complex multireligious history. They underscored the importance of the issue with government officials and emphasized that the Hagia Sophia is a symbol of peaceful coexistence, meaningful dialogue, and respect among religions. Embassy staff continued to press for the restitution of church properties expropriated in Diyarbakir and Mardin.

The Secretary of State and other senior U.S. government officials continued to urge government officials to reopen the Greek Orthodox seminary in Halki and allow all religious communities to train clergy in the country. In May the Charge d’Affaires and the Istanbul Consul General visited Halki to demonstrate ongoing interest in the reopening of the seminary. In October staff of the consulate general in Istanbul joined representatives from 24 other missions and the foreign ministry to visit Halki with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I. In April the Charge d’Affaires attended Easter services at the Greek Orthodox Cathedral of St. George to show support for religious minorities.

In March embassy officials met with the leaders of a recently renovated Greek Orthodox Church in Antalya to learn more about the community's concerns and aspirations for its growing congregation, and to express the U.S. government's interest in promoting religious freedom in the country.

In September the Principal Officer of the consulate in Adana attended the annual Mass at the historic Armenian Akdamar Church near Van in the east of the country, officiated by the acting Armenian patriarch, to emphasize U.S. government support for religious minorities in the country.

In April the Istanbul Consul General traveled to the city of Edirne to visit Muslim, Jewish, Christian, and Baha'i historic sites and demonstrate the U.S. government's commitment to religious freedom. In May senior embassy officials hosted a Jewish community leader at the embassy to learn firsthand about the community's views and concerns.

In January a senior embassy official attended a Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony at Ankara University with senior host government officials and the leadership of the country's Jewish community. Local media provided positive coverage of the event.

Senior U.S. embassy and consulate officials regularly engaged with a wide range of religious community leaders to hear and address their concerns, visit their places of worship, and promote interreligious dialogue. Officials from the embassy and consulates met with members of the Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christian, Armenian Protestant, Armenian Catholic, Protestant, Alevi, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Roman Catholic, Chaldean, Church of Jesus Christ, and Baha'i Faith communities, among others, throughout the country. The embassy and consulates utilized Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to emphasize the importance of the inclusion of religious minorities, including messages under hashtags such as #DiniOzgurluk (religious freedom) on designated days that recognized and underscored the U.S. government commitment to religious freedom and human rights.

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