

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	489
Land:	Tyrkiet
Kilde:	US Department of State
Titel:	2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Turkey
Udgivet:	21. juni 2019
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	8. oktober 2019

Document #2011023

USDOS – US Department of State

2018 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 Sunni Islam. The government continued to limit the rights of non-Muslim minorities, especially those not recognized under the government's interpretation of the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which includes only Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians. The government continued to treat Alevi Islam as a heterodox Muslim “sect” and not to recognize Alevi houses of worship (*cemevis*), despite a Supreme Court of Appeals ruling in November that *cemevis* are places of worship. The government did not recognize the right to conscientious objection to military service. Religious minorities reported bureaucratic and administrative impediments to religious freedom remained, including the prevention of governing board elections for religious foundations, which manage many activities of religious communities. The government continued to restrict efforts of minority religious groups to train their clergy, the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary remained closed, and the Diyanet announced plans to construct an Islamic educational center on the same island as the shuttered seminary. Religious minorities reported experiencing difficulties resolving land and property disputes, operating or opening houses of worship, and obtaining exemptions from mandatory religion classes in schools. The legal challenges of churches whose lands the government previously expropriated continued; some members of the churches said they still did not have access to many of their properties. The government provided security support for religious minority communities, returned some previously expropriated properties, including 56 to the Syriac community, and paid for the renovation and restoration of some registered religious properties. Following the July 2016 coup attempt, the government arrested more than 80,000 individuals with alleged ties to Muslim cleric and political figure Fethullah Gulen – whom the government blamed for the attempted putsch – including U.S. citizen and Pastor Andrew Brunson. In October a court in Izmir convicted Brunson of supporting a terrorist group but suspended his sentence, allowing him to depart the country.

Alevis expressed concern about continued anonymous threats of violence and the arrest of members of an Alevi association on charges of supporting a terrorist organization. ISIS and other actors continued to threaten Jews, Protestants, and Muslim groups in the country. Anti-Semitic discourse continued, as some progovernment news commentators published stories and political cartoons seeking to associate the 2016 attempted coup plotters and the economic difficulties of the country with the Jewish community. Anti-Semitic rhetoric, especially on social media, peaked during periods of heightened tension in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, according to social media analysis.

The Charge d’Affaires, visiting senior U.S. officials, and other embassy and consulate officials continued to engage with government officials and 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. Embassy and consulate officials also met with a wide range of religious community leaders, including those of the Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christian, 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 81.3 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the Turkish 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 published surveys suggest approximately 2 percent of the population is atheist.

Alevi foundation leaders estimate Alevis comprise 25 to 31 percent of the population; Pew Research Center reporting indicates five percent of Turkish 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.

Other groups include fewer than 1,000 Yezidis; 5,000 Jehovah’s Witnesses; 7,000 members of Protestant denominations; fewer than 3,000 Chaldean Christians; and up to 2,000 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 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 prohibits 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 religious 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 Affairs, Education, Services, 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 offenses related to “provoking people to be rancorous and hostile,” including showing public disrespect for religious beliefs. The penal code prohibits religious leaders such as imams, priests, and rabbis 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.

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. Those who oppose mandatory military service on religious grounds may face charges in military and civilian courts and, if convicted, are subject to prison sentences ranging from two months to two years.

Although registration with the government is not mandatory for religious groups to operate, it is required to request legal recognition for places of worship. Gaining legal recognition requires permission from the municipalities for the construction 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.

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. These longstanding foundations belong to non-Muslim Turkish citizens; 167 of them continue to exist, the majority of which are associated with the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish communities. A religious group may apply to register as an association or foundation provided its stated objective is charitable, educational, or cultural rather than religious.

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 find the foundation no longer operational and transfer all 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.

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 by definition must be nonprofit and may 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. In addition to its bylaws, a group must obtain and submit permission from the Ministry of the Interior as part of its application if a foreign association or nonprofit organization is listed as a founding member; if foreigners are founding members of the group, the group must submit copies of their 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 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 religions in prison; however, not all prisons have dedicated places of worship. The government provides Sunni Muslims *mesjids* (small mosques) in larger prisons and provides Sunni preachers; Alevis and non-Muslims do not have clerics from their own faiths serving in prisons. According to the law, prison authorities must allow religious groups to offer books and other materials that are a part of the prisoner's faith.

The constitution establishes compulsory religious and moral instruction in public and private primary, middle, and high schools, with content determined by the Ministry of National Education's Department of Religious Instruction, which as of July 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.

According to the 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.

New national identity cards, which the government began distributing at year's end, contain no specific section to identify religious affiliation. National identity cards issued in the past, which continue in circulation, contained a space for religious identification with the option of leaving the space blank. These old 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.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, with one reservation regarding Article 27, which states individuals belonging to ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities "shall not be denied the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language." The reservation asserts the right "to interpret and apply the provisions of Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in accordance with the related provisions and rules of the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey and the Treaty of Lausanne of 24 July 1923 and its Appendixes."

Government Practices

A state of emergency instituted after the July 2016 coup attempt ended in July, although parliament passed a law codifying many of the expanded powers shortly afterward. The government continued to blame the coup attempt on Muslim cleric and political figure Fethullah Gulen and his followers, whom it designated the “Fethullah Terror Organization.” Since the coup attempt, police arrested more than 80,000 individuals for allegedly having ties to the Gulen movement, according to a statement by Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu in April.

The government also continued to detain foreign citizens in relation to the coup attempt, including U.S. citizen and Christian pastor Andrew Brunson. On October 12, the Second Heavy Penal Court of Izmir convicted Brunson on charges of support for a terrorist group and sentenced him to just over three years. Initially detained in October 2016, Brunson remained in detention until his release to house arrest on July 25 as his trial continued. In July the public prosecutor broadened the investigation in the case to include Brunson’s wife and 65 additional individuals, including other U.S. citizens. The indictment referenced “Christianization” activities related to his alleged crimes. The court suspended his sentence to time served and lifted his travel ban, thereby allowing him to leave the country after nearly two years in custody. Brunson immediately departed the country. Brunson was one of several U.S. citizens detained under the state of emergency; the other cases did not involve religious figures.

The indictment of Brunson included The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the list of religious groups that allegedly participated in conspiracies against the state. In April The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints stated that for safety reasons it would remove its volunteers and international staff from the country, a policy Church leadership said continued through the end of the year.

Alevi groups expressed concerns about detentions of their members, which the groups said were arbitrary. In March authorities in Erzincan detained 16 members of the Alevi Pir Sultan Abdal Cultural Association, including the vice chairman, on charges of providing support to a terrorist organization. Local representatives of the association said they were detained because of their work to protect and promote the Alevi faith. A court later ordered the arrest of eight of them, including the vice chair. In August a court indicted all 16 individuals for “inciting hatred among the public” and “membership in a terrorist organization.” In December 12 of the 17 defendants were convicted and sentenced to between two and six and one-half years in prison.

In July authorities denied the request of former Republican People’s Party (CHP) Member of Parliament, Eren Erdem, to see an Alevi cleric (*dede*) while in Silivri prison, where he remained detained at year’s end on terrorism charges. Erdem’s lawyer said the decision was a violation of his client’s right to have weekly access to a cleric. The next hearing was scheduled for January 2019.

The trial of 13 individuals charged with conspiracy to commit a large-scale assault on an Izmit Protestant church and assassinate its pastor in 2013 continued throughout the year. In November a judge again postponed the next hearing until March 2019 pending the result of an investigation of two local security officials allegedly involved.

In July an Istanbul criminal court accepted an indictment from the Chief Prosecutor's Office bringing charges of insulting religious values, sometimes referred to locally as “blasphemy charges,” against actress Berna Lacin for her post on Twitter about the alleged number of rapes in Medina. 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 is permissible under the freedom of expression. Following the first hearing in November, the court postponed the trial until February 2019.

In January the governor's office in Adana, with the approval of the Interior Ministry, temporarily banned the activities of Furkan Foundation, a Sunni organization that describes itself as a social and religious civil society group. Police arrested 45 members of the foundation, including its president, on charges that included founding a criminal organization and supporting terror. In July authorities issued a decree permanently closing the foundation on national security grounds. The case continued at year's end.

In December, following a 2017 government regulation allowing female military personnel to wear headscarves, the Council of State, the country's highest administrative court, rejected a petition calling for the reinstatement of the ban.

In September the military implemented a one-time paid deferment option that closed November 3 under which individuals born before January 1, 1994 could pay a fee instead of performing full military service; however these individuals must complete 21 days of basic military training.

During the year, 68 Jehovah's Witnesses faced prosecution as conscientious objectors to military service. Jehovah's Witnesses officials stated the government continued to subject conscientious objectors from their community “to unending call-ups for military duty, repeated fines, and threats of imprisonment.”

Some Protestants and other minority community members expressed concern that some indictments submitted by prosecutors and inquiries by police officials indicated certain religious public speech and activism, including proselytism, were regarded with suspicion. Some of these groups said they subsequently decided to conduct fewer public engagements to avoid anticipated pressure from authorities. Proselytization remained legal at year's end.

In May some students and parents in Viransehir District of Urfa complained a school principal had threatened female students they would fail their classes unless they covered their hair. The Ministry of Education started an investigation of the case, which continued at year's end.

In February the broadcast sector regulatory body Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTUK) fined TV8, a private station, more than one million Turkish lira (TL) (\$189,000) for broadcasting a song performed during a talent show that contained lyrics referring to

God as “Father.” The report prepared by the council members said the lyrics were against the fundamentals of Muslim faith and claimed referring to God as “Father” was a Christian and Jewish tradition.

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 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 said the inability to hold elections for foundation governing boards remained an impediment to managing their affairs. In 2013, the government repealed regulations dealing with the election of foundation board members, which prohibited subsequent elections from taking place. Without the ability to hold new elections, governing boards lose the capacity to manage the activities and properties of the community and run the risk of the foundations becoming inactive without newly elected leadership.

The government continued not to recognize the ecumenical patriarch 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 to widen the pool of candidates to become the next patriarch. The Istanbul Governorate, which represents the central government in Istanbul, continued to maintain that leaders of the Greek Orthodox (Ecumenical Patriarchate), Armenian Apostolic Orthodox, and Jewish communities must be Turkish citizens, although coreligionists from outside the country in some cases had assumed informal leadership positions in these groups.

The Armenian Apostolic Patriarchate and the Ecumenical Patriarchate continued to seek legal recognition, and their communities operated as conglomerations of individual religious foundations. Because the patriarchates did not have legal personality, associated foundations controlled by individual boards held all the property of the religious communities, and the patriarchates had no legal authority to direct the use of any assets or otherwise govern their communities.

In February the Istanbul governor’s office denied a 2017 application by the elected trustee of the Armenian Patriarchate to hold a patriarchal election, stating the patriarchate had not met the required conditions for an election. The governor’s office also said it considered all decisions by the trustee null and barred any election as long as the incumbent patriarch was alive. Incumbent Patriarch Mesrob II remained unable to perform his duties since 2008, because of his medical condition, and an acting

patriarch continued to fill the position. In July President of the Spiritual Assembly of the Armenian Patriarchate Bishop Sahak Masalyan wrote a letter to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan requesting help in overcoming bureaucratic hurdles to holding the patriarchal election. There was no response by the year's end.

A majority of Protestant churches continued to report bureaucratic difficulties in registering as places of worship. Consequently, they continued to be registered as church associations and had to meet in unregistered locations for worship services. According to the Protestant community, there were six foundations (four existing before the passage of a foundation law in 1935), 36 associations, and more than 30 representative offices linked with these associations.

In May President Erdogan promised to grant legal status for Alevi *cemevis* as part of his election platform for the presidential elections, but he took no steps to do so after winning re-election on June 24. At year's end, the government still had not legally recognized *cemevis* as places of worship.

In November the Supreme Court of Appeals ruled that *cemevis* are places of worship and therefore they should receive the same benefits as Sunni mosques, such as being exempt from paying utility bills. In a similar case in 2015, the Supreme Court gave the same judgment. Since then, Alevis have called on the government to comply with the ruling. A European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) decision in 2014 serves as the basis for court decisions in favor of recognition for individual *cemevis*. Alevi representatives, however, said they remained concerned about the lack of a comprehensive solution and the fact the government had not implemented this ruling nationwide by year's end. Most municipalities continued to waive utility bills only for Sunni Muslim mosques. Several municipalities led by the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), however, recognized *cemevis* and waived their utility bills. In March the head of the Diyanet stated mosques were the places of worship for both Alevis and Sunnis.

According to Protestant groups, many local officials continued to impose zoning standards on churches, such as minimum space requirements, that they did not impose on mosques. Local officials required Protestant groups to purchase 2,500 square meters of land (27,000 square feet) to construct churches, even for small congregations. Officials did not apply this requirement to Sunni Muslim congregations, which they permitted to build mosques in malls, airports, and other smaller spaces. The Protestant groups said they again had not applied for permits to build any new churches during the year, in part because of the zoning requirements.

By year's end, the government had not addressed the May 2016 ECHR ruling that Turkey had violated the religious freedom of Jehovah's Witnesses in Izmir and Mersin by refusing to provide them appropriate places of worship and thereby directly interfered with the community's freedom of religion.

According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, five municipalities denied requests made by Jehovah’s Witnesses to obtain a religious facility location on municipal zoning maps throughout the year. Thirty-four different municipalities had denied 96 requests in recent years. Local governments did not permit zoning for any Kingdom Halls in the country.

Religious communities continued to challenge 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. For the second straight year, the government had not returned or completed repairs on any of the properties in the historic and ancient Sur District of Diyarbakir Province, including the Kursunlu Mosque; Hasirli Mosque; Surp Giragos Armenian Church; Mar Petyun Chaldean Church; Protestant Church; and the Armenian Catholic Church. Of these two Islamic and four Christian sites, the government began restoration of one of the Christian sites. In September 2016, the GDF began restoring the expropriated Armenian Catholic Church; the restoration remained in progress at the end of the year, and the church was not accessible for public use. The government said the Ministry of Culture would coordinate the restoration of some properties held by the government, and the GDF would restore properties it owned; however, no additional restorations occurred by the end of the year. In April the Council of State, the top administrative court, issued an interim decision to suspend the expropriation of Surp Giragos Armenian Church. The church remained closed and these cases continued at year’s end. During the year, the government did not pay restitution and compensation to the religious groups for the expropriation of property damaged in fighting with the PKK.

In May the government returned 56 properties in Mardin to the Syriac community through an omnibus bill passed by parliament. According to media reports, the properties were among 110 Syriac properties turned over to government entities in 2014 amid changes to the zoning plans that went into effect without the knowledge of the community. Following the decision, the Mor Gabriel Foundation received the returned properties, and its chair, Kuryakos Ergun, explained to media outlets that while the decision brought joy to the community, there were still disputes over additional monasteries, churches, cemeteries, and their adjacent land.

The government did not return any additional properties it had seized in previous decades by year’s end. 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, submitted from 2011 until 2013 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.

Throughout the month of Ramadan, for the fourth year the government’s religious television channel Diyanet TV broadcast a daily recitation of Quranic verses from the Hagia Sophia, which was secularized and transformed into a museum in 1935. The Hagia Sophia was an Orthodox church and cathedral of the Byzantine Empire from 537-1453, and a mosque from 1453-1931. In June then head of the Diyanet Mehmet Gormez gave a special interview from the Hagia Sophia while the Muslim call to prayer was broadcast from its minarets. In September the Constitutional Court rejected on procedural grounds an appeal from a private association to allow regular Muslim prayers to take place in the Hagia Sophia.

Religious communities, particularly Alevis, raised 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 the community’s 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 December a group of students at a public high school in Istanbul’s Kadikoy District protested their school administration for being pressured by “Islamist students supported by school principals” to attend “religious conversations” in their spare time. The school administration started an investigation of students who participated in the protests according to media reports. Egitim-Is, an education sector union, criticized the school administration and contended the government handed secular schools over to religious groups.

Some secular individuals, Alevis, and others continued to criticize the Ministry of National Education’s extensive July 2017 revision of the school curriculum. The criticisms focused on increased Sunni Muslim content in the textbooks and cuts to some material on reforms enacted by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the secularist founder of the Republic of Turkey. The new curriculum included the Islamic concept of *jihad* in textbooks and omitted the theory of evolution, among other changes. In September Alevi associations and foundations in Izmir protested compulsory religion classes and issued a press statement that criticized the education policies for ignoring Alevi citizens.

In January the Diyanet issued a memorandum to its local directorates for Sunni preachers to provide seminars for middle school students on “moral values,” including martyrdom. With the approval of the governor’s office, five schools in Canakkale were included in the program.

The teachers' union Egitim-Sen applied to the Council of State, which hears cases seeking to change administrative policies of the government, to end a “moral values” education protocol. The council did not rule on the request by year's end. In December 2017, the Ministry of National Education signed a three-year protocol with the Islamist Hizmet Foundation to provide “moral values” education across the country during regular school hours. Egitim-Sen stated that holding such programs during school hours would force students to attend and criticized the ministry for allegedly devolving its duties to an organization with links to an illegal religious group. In January a group of parents in Izmir's Buca District petitioned to obtain information on the courses provided by the foundation and said students were given Quran classes and not “moral values” education. In response, the school canceled the classes the same month.

Some school textbooks continued to contain language critical of missionaries. One recommended eighth-grade textbook entitled *History of the Turkish Republic Reforms and Atatürkism* listed missionary activities in a section titled “National Threats.”

In September the National Education Ministry issued a regulation allowing separate classrooms for girls and boys in multi-program high schools. Egitim-Sen and secularist groups criticized the decision as undermining secular education in the country. Officials from the Ministry of Education denied allegations the change was a step towards creating single gender classrooms in all schools. Multi-program schools bring regular, technical, and vocational high schools together in less populated areas where the requirement for the minimum number of students for each program cannot be met.

Secular education proponents continued to criticize publicly the assignment of Diyanet employees to university dormitories as an example of greater religious influence on the education system. In September 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 mufti with performance reviews every six months.

Non-Sunni 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 concerning 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 the Alevi beliefs as mysticism.

Members of other minority religious groups, including Protestants, also said they continued to have difficulty obtaining exemptions from religion classes. Some sources 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.

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 the 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 legally classify migrant and refugee children as “visitors,” however, 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 due to financial reasons. The government did not grant permission to other religious groups to operate schools.

The government continued to limit the number of students admitted to public secondary schools and assigned tens of thousands of students to state-run “*imam hatip*” religious schools based in part on their entrance exam scores, proximity, and other admissions factors. The government continued to convert many nonreligious public schools to *imam hatip* schools, citing demand, and students and families reported this created a geographic hurdle for those who preferred to attend secular public schools. Enrollment in the *imam hatip* schools increased to more than 1.3 million students, up from approximately one million in 2015. Since the 2016 coup attempt, the government has closed at least 1,065 private schools, many affiliated with the Gulen movement or related groups, on antiterror grounds. The government converted some of these private schools to *imam hatip* schools.

Many public buildings, including universities, maintained small mosques in which Muslims could pray. 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 the Ministry of National Education allowed distribution in schools of a book containing text from an Islamic association that insulted Jews and Alevis. The book described Alevis as atheists and asked students “not to become like Jews.”

The government continued to provide training for Sunni Muslim clerics while restricting other religious groups from training clerics inside the country. Because of the lack of monastic seminaries within the country, the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox Patriarchates remained unable to train clerics. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I repeatedly called on the government to allow the Halki Seminary to re-open as an

independent institution to enable training of Greek Orthodox clerics in the country. A 1971 Constitutional Court ruling prohibited the operation of private institutions of higher education and led to the seminary's closure. 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 the Diyanet announced plans to open an Islamic educational center on the same island as the shuttered seminary.

The government continued not to authorize clerics of religious groups designated as non-Islamic to register and officiate at marriages on behalf of the state. Imams received this authority in November 2017. Some critics continued to state that the law ignored the needs of other religious groups by solely addressing the demands of some within the Sunni Muslim majority.

The Diyanet regulated the operation of all registered mosques. It paid the salaries of 109,332 Sunni personnel at the end of 2017, the most recent year for which data was available, compared with 112,725 in 2016. The government did not pay the salaries of religious leaders, instructors, or other staff belonging to other religious groups. In January 2016 the Ombudsman Institution responded to an appeal by the Boyacikoy Surp Yerits Mangants Armenian Church Foundation, issuing an advisory opinion that the Diyanet should pay priests' salaries. The chief ombudsman said he supported “eliminating unjust treatment by amending relevant regulations.” By year's end there still had been no action on this issue.

The government continued to provide land for the construction of Sunni mosques and fund their construction through municipalities. According to the Diyanet's most recent published statistics, early in the year, there were 88,021 mosques in the country. Although Alevi groups were able to build new *cemevis*, the government continued to decline to provide financial support for their construction.

In April Diyanet President Ali Erbas described deism as heresy in an interview and said no Turkish citizen would follow such a “heretical and superstitious” philosophy.

In September a teacher in Arnavutkoy district of Istanbul said a meal prepared by an Alevi could not be eaten. Upon complaints by Alevi students and associations, the Education Directorate dismissed the teacher the same month.

The government continued to permit annual and other commemorative religious worship services at religiously significant 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 and held the ceremony at an alternative site. In September the acting Armenian patriarch led a Mass at the historic Armenian Ahtamar Church near Van. The minister of tourism and culture also attended. Authorities had canceled annual services starting in 2015 due to security concerns caused by clashes between the Turkish military and the PKK.

In July the assembly of the GDF passed a decision that allowed allocation of places of worship under GDF ownership to different religious minorities free of charge. With the decision, previously expropriated churches and synagogues could be reopened for use by religious minorities. Following passage of the resolution, Sacre Coeur, a Jesuit church built in 1910 in Istanbul, was allocated for use of the Syriac Catholic community. Mar Yuhanna Church in Hatay, formerly a Syriac church that was no longer in use, was also allocated for use of the Greek Orthodox Church Foundation in Hatay. The GDF renovated and reopened Mar Yuhanna in 2017.

Renovations concluded in May on a church in Bursa. In April 2017, then Deputy Prime Minister Veysi Kaynak announced government funds would renovate the church. The church remained open for religious services during the renovation. Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Turkish Protestant congregations continued to share the building, owned by the GDF for more than 10 years. In June a local court in Bursa approved the application by the Protestant community in Bursa to start a foundation. In September the foundation applied to the GDF for long-term use of the church, which all denominations would continue to use. At year's end the government had not responded to its request.

Government funding for dailies and weeklies published by minority communities increased from 150,000 Turkish Lira (TL) (\$28,400) in 2017 to TL 200,000 (\$37,900) in 2018.

According to media reports, multiple government officials made anti-Semitic statements during a pro-Palestinian rally in May, including drawing parallels between the Israeli government and Hitler. In November President Erdogan referred to the head of Open Society Foundations George Soros as “the famous Hungarian Jew,” adding, “This is a man who was assigned to divide nations and shatter them.” In August Muharrem Ince, CHP's presidential candidate in the June elections, posted a tweet criticizing Erdogan and the ruling party, “You are the ones whose services have earned you the Jewish Courage Prize and who deem the award worthy of yourselves,” alluding to Erdogan's 2005 receipt of the Courage to Care Award from the Anti-Defamation League. Ince later apologized.

Ankara University hosted an event to commemorate Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 25, in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Ambassador Volkan Bozkir, chairman of the parliamentary foreign relations commission, attended. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also issued a written statement commemorating the event. In February the government again 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, MFA representatives, Chief Rabbi Ishak Haleva, other members of the Jewish community, and members of the diplomatic community attended the commemoration. Speakers at the commemoration emphasized the importance of not forgetting such tragedies to preventing future atrocities.

Muslim, Jewish, and Christian religious leaders again joined representatives from various municipalities in Istanbul for a public interfaith iftar in June and exchanged messages of coexistence and tolerance.

In January President Erdogan presided over the reopening ceremony of the Sveti Stefan Bulgarian Orthodox Church after a seven-year restoration with funding mainly from the Istanbul Municipality. Then Prime Minister Binali Yildirim and Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov also attended the ceremony.

In April the governor of Batman District opened Mor Aho Syriac Orthodox Monastery in Gercus District for cultural site visits after two years of renovation.

In September President Erdogan sent a message to the Jewish community celebrating Rosh Hashanah and said “religious diversity is part of Turkey’s wealth.” In December the Jewish community celebrated the conclusion of Hanukkah with a ceremony at a public park in Istanbul’s Nisantasi neighborhood in which members of the community, local officials, and members of the diplomatic community took turns lighting a menorah. President Erdogan also released a statement noting the country had always attached great importance “to our citizens living together in peace without facing any discrimination...and to the freedom of religion and faith,” and wished the community peace on the holiday.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Alevis expressed concern about continued anonymous threats of violence and the arrest of members of an Alevi association on charges of supporting a terrorist organization. ISIS and other actors continued to threaten Jews, Protestants, and Muslim groups in the country. Some progovernment news commentators published stories and political cartoons seeking to associate the 2016 attempted coup plotters and the economic difficulties of the country with the Jewish community.

Members of the Jewish community continued to express concern about anti-Semitism and threats of violence throughout the country, although there were no incidents of violence reported during the year. According to the community, the government continued to provide the community with extensive security against a possible attack by ISIS, based on previous threats and attacks. Jewish community members said the government measures were helpful and that the government was responsive to requests for security.

Anti-Semitic rhetoric, especially on social media, peaked during periods of heightened tension in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. According to a 2018 report on hate speech by the civil-rights organization, Hrant Dink Foundation, there were 427 published instances of anti-Semitic rhetoric between January and April. The foundation’s hate speech monitoring project consistently reported anti-Semitic statements and commentary in media during the year that attributed conspiratorial plots, negative characteristics, and “fascist beliefs” to Jews and other groups.

In January a columnist in daily *Dirilis Postasi* argued that the Middle East was a victim of “Jewish and Christian terror.” In March a columnist in the progovernment *Takvim* daily claimed “crusader Christians and Zionist Jews” were in an alliance to undermine Turkey’s progress. In June a columnist in a local newspaper in Ankara called for boycotting “all Jewish goods” to undermine the economy of Israel.

Several Christian places of worship experienced acts of vandalism and received threats. In February a group of attackers threw a smoke bomb into the courtyard of Santa Maria Catholic Church in Trabzon. Police detained five individuals following the occurrence and released them after taking statements. In March a man fired a gun at the same church. Police took him into custody after he fled the scene.

In April local press quoting police sources reported that an individual suffering from mental disorders vandalized the Surp Takavor Armenian Church in Istanbul’s Kadikoy District. Vandals dumped garbage in front of the church’s main gate and wrote “This country is ours.” on the walls. The Kadikoy municipality issued a written statement condemning the occurrence and reported that the gate was cleaned by municipal workers.

In October representatives of the Turkish Orthodox Church, a small nationalist organization not recognized by any of the other autocephalous Orthodox Churches, filed an official complaint against Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and members of the Synod following their decision to grant autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. In its complaint, the Turkish Orthodox Church stated that the autocephaly decision “incited hatred and enmity among the public, abused their religious authority, involved activity against fundamental national interests, and provoked war against the country.” The prosecutor office did not take action on the complaint at year’s end.

In July TV8 blurred the crucifix necklace of a U.S. singer when her picture appeared on the screen. Many social media users and some newspapers criticized the channel for being disrespectful.

In July a columnist in the *Turkiye* daily stated in his column that non-Sunnis were heretics and they would burn in hell. Also in July another columnist for the *Star* daily said non-Sunni scholars in theology faculties were “heretics” and should not be part of the faculty.

In June the Syriac Orthodox community reached an agreement with the Roman Catholic community to build a second church in Istanbul to accommodate its growing population. The Syriac Orthodox community to date had only one church in Istanbul to serve an estimated local population of 17,000 to 20,000. Because the land offered by the Istanbul municipality to the Syriac Church Foundation to build a second church previously belonged to the Roman Catholic Church, the Regional Board for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage required a written agreement between the two communities before the project could proceed.

Various nationalist Islamic groups continued to advocate for transforming some former Orthodox churches, including Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia museum, into mosques. In May approximately 2,500 individuals gathered outside Hagia Sophia to participate in the morning prayer in celebration of the anniversary of the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul, an annual gathering organized by the Islamist Anatolian Youth Association. After the prayer, the group called for reopening the museum as a mosque. The campaigns intensified after the Hagia Sophia of Trabzon, a 12th-century Byzantine church that had been operating as a museum for the previous 50 years, was converted into a mosque in 2013.

In June the Jewish community again hosted an iftar at the Grand Edirne Synagogue for hundreds of participants, including Muslims and Christians. On June 6, then Deputy Prime Minister Hakan Cavusoglu attended a joint iftar dinner hosted by the religious minority communities in Istanbul. Speakers at the iftar underlined Turkey’s history of coexistence and referred to pluralism as “richness.”

According to Turkish polling firm Konda, 40 percent of respondents in a poll conducted during the year accepted the idea of having a son or daughter-in-law of a different religion, compared with 30 percent in 2008.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, Charge d’Affaires, other U.S. embassy and consulate officials, and other 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. Among other issues, they 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 view the Hagia Sophia as a site of extraordinary significance and to support its preservation in a manner that respects its complex history. They raised the issue with government officials and emphasized that the Hagia Sophia is a symbol of peaceful coexistence, meaningful dialogue, and respect among religions. Senior U.S. officials and official visitors urged the rapid restitution of church properties expropriated in Diyarbakir and Mardin and expressed appreciation for those returned.

The President, Vice President, and the Secretary of State publicly called for the immediate release of Andrew Brunson on multiple occasions. In August the U.S. government imposed Global Magnitsky sanctions on the ministers of interior and of justice for playing leading roles in the organizations responsible for the arrest and detention of Brunson; those sanctions were lifted in November following Brunson’s release. Senior U.S. government officials, the Charge d’Affaires, and embassy staff visited Brunson while in detention and under house arrest.

The Secretary of State and other senior U.S. government officials continued to urge

government officials to reopen the Greek Orthodox seminary in Halki.

In January the Charge d’Affaires attended a Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony at Ankara University with senior government officials and the leadership of the country’s Jewish community, which was well received in local media.

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, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Baha’i Faith communities, among others, throughout the country. The embassy and consulates utilized Twitter and Facebook to emphasize the importance of inclusion of religious minorities, including messages under hashtags such as #DiniÖzgürlükGünü and #ReligiousFreedomDaysEveryday on designated days for recognizing and underscoring U.S. commitment to religious freedom and human rights.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2018)



Country:

Turkey

Source:

[USDOS – US Department of State](#) [\(/en/source/11558.html\)](#)

Original link:

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/turkey/> (<https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/turkey/>)

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

21 June 2019

Document ID:

2011023

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

