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2017 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) governs and coordinates religious matters related to Islam. Its mandate is to promote and enable the practice of Sunni Islam. A state of emergency instituted in response to the July 2016 coup attempt remained in place throughout the year. The government said the coup attempt was masterminded by self-exiled Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen and his movement, which the government considered a terrorist organization. From July 2016 through the end of the year, police arrested more than 50,000 individuals for alleged ties to the Gulen movement or related groups. During the year the government suspended or dismissed thousands of public officials from state institutions, including more than a thousand Diyanet employees. The government continued to prosecute individuals for “openly disrespecting the religious belief of a group” and continued to limit the rights of non-Muslim minorities, especially those not recognized under the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. The government continued to treat Alevi Islam as a heterodox Muslim “sect,” and continued not to recognize Alevi houses of worship. The government closed two Shia Jaferi television stations based on allegations of spreading “terrorist propaganda.” Religious minorities said they continued to experience difficulties obtaining exemptions from mandatory religion classes in public schools, operating or opening houses of worship, and in addressing land and property disputes. The government restricted minority religious groups’ efforts to train their clergy. The legal challenges of five churches, whose lands the government expropriated in 2016, continued; members of the churches said they still did not have access to their buildings. The government did not recognize the right to conscientious objection to military service. The government continued to provide security support for religious minority communities and paid for the renovation and restoration of some registered religious properties.

Alevis continued to face anonymous threats of violence. Threats of violence by ISIS and other actors against Jews, Protestants, and Sunni Muslims also continued. Anti-Semitic discourse continued, as some progovernment news commentators continued to publish stories seeking to associate the 2016 coup plotters with the Jewish community. These commentators also sought to associate the Orthodox ecumenical patriarch with

the coup attempt. Unidentified assailants vandalized some Protestant, Orthodox, Catholic, and Alevi places of worship, including marking red “X”s on the doors of 13 Alevi homes and attacking a Protestant church in Malatya.

The U.S. Ambassador, visiting senior U.S. officials, and 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 and make progress on property restitution and specific cases of religious discrimination. Embassy 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 discriminatory language against any faith.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 81 million (July 2017 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 approximately 0.3 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. The Shia Jafari community estimates its members make up 4 percent of the population. Some observers, including scholars, journalists, and security officials, estimate there may be as many as four million persons influenced by the movement led by Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, which identifies itself as an Islam-inspired civic, cultural, and educational movement, and which the government holds responsible for the 2016 coup attempt.

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 (of which an estimated 60,000 are citizens and 30,000 are migrants from Armenia without legal residence); 25,000 Roman Catholics (including a large number of recent 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 recent immigrants from Russia who hold residence permits); and 10,000 Bahais. Other groups include fewer than 1,000 Yezidis; 5,000 Jehovah’s Witnesses; 7,000 members of Protestant denominations; 3,000 Chaldean Christians; and up to 2,000 Greek Orthodox Christians. There also are small, undetermined numbers of Bulgarian Orthodox, Nestorian, Georgian Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, and Maronite Christians. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) estimates its membership at approximately 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 that 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 Prime Minister, with a president appointed by the prime minister, and is administered by a 16-person council elected by clerics and university theology faculties. The Diyanet has five main departments: the high councils for 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 imams, priests, rabbis, and other religious leaders from “reproaching or vilifying” the government or the laws of the state while performing their duties. Violations are punishable by prison terms of one month to one year, or three months to two years if the crime involves inciting others to disobey the law. There are legal restrictions against insulting a recognized religion, interfering with a religious group’s services, or defacing its property. Insulting a recognized religion is punishable by six months to one year in prison.

The law prohibits Sufi and other religious-social orders (*tarikats*) and lodges (*cemaats*), although the government generally does not enforce these restrictions.

Although registration with the government is not mandatory for religious groups, it is required in order to request legal recognition for places of worship, which 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. 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 Office of the Prime Minister, regulates the activities and affiliated properties of all charitable foundations and assesses whether they are operating within the stated objectives of their organizational statute. There are several categories of foundations, including 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. A foundation may earn income through companies and rent-earning properties. 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. Only a court order may close a foundation of any category, except under state-of-emergency rule or martial law, during which the government may close foundations by decree. The state of emergency put in place in 2016 remained in effect at year's end.

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 a registration application to the provincial governor's office and may immediately begin operating while awaiting confirmation from the governor's office that its bylaws are constitutional. In addition to its bylaws, if a foreign association or nonprofit organization is listed as a founding member, a group must obtain and submit, as part of its application, permission from the Ministry of the Interior; 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. Only a court order may close an association, except under a state of emergency and martial law, 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.

Interfering with a religious group's services is punishable by one to three years in prison; defacing religious property is punishable by three months to one year in prison; and destroying or demolishing religious property is punishable by one to four years in prison. Because it is illegal to hold religious services in places not registered as places of worship, in practice, these legal proscriptions apply only to registered religious groups.

The constitution establishes compulsory religious and moral instruction in public primary, middle, and high schools, with content determined by the Ministry of National Education's Department of Religious Instruction. 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, Bahais, Yezidis, or those

who left the religion section blank on their national identity card may not be exempted. 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 race, religion, ethnicity, color, gender, disabilities, or political views. 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 restitution of rights.

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.

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 Muslim *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 give permission for religious groups to offer books and other materials that are a part of the prisoner's faith.

National identity cards contain a space for religious identification, although individuals may choose to leave the space blank. The cards include the following religious identities as options: Muslim, Greek Orthodox, non-Orthodox Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, No Religion, or Other. Bahai, Alevi, and Yezidi, among other groups with known populations in the country, are not options. Members of these groups may choose any of the available options, or leave the space blank.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, with one reservation regarding Article 27, which states that 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

Summary paragraph: Since the July 2016 coup attempt, the government dismissed or suspended from state institutions more than 100,000 government officials, including more than 4,000 Diyanet staff, for alleged links with the Gulen movement, which the government continued to hold responsible for the attempted coup. According to the Ministry of Interior, authorities arrested more than 50,000 individuals since the coup

attempt on alleged terror-related grounds. The government also continued to detain some foreign citizens for what it stated were potential links to the Gulen movement. In August an Izmir judge added charges to the original December 2016 indictment of a U.S. citizen Protestant pastor detained since October 2016. The government continued to limit the rights of non-Muslim minorities, especially those it did not recognize as covered under the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. It continued to consider Alevism a heterodox Muslim group and continued not to recognize Alevi houses of worship (*cemevis*). As part of a broader shutdown by government decree of organizations for allegedly spreading terrorist propaganda, the government closed two Shia Jaferi-owned television stations in January. The decrees did not specify the nature of the “terrorist propaganda.” Alevis expressed concern about security and said the government failed to meet their demands for religious reforms. In July the Ministry of National Education implemented an extensive revision of the school curriculum, which secular individuals and other citizens said increased the Sunni Muslim content in the textbooks and undermined the country’s secular education system. Non-Sunni Muslims did not receive the same protections as recognized non-Muslim minorities, although both experienced difficulty operating or opening houses of worship, challenging land and other property claims, or obtaining exemptions from mandatory religion classes. The government continued to train Sunni Muslim clerics, while restricting other religious groups from training their clergy, and continued to fund the construction of Sunni mosques while restricting land use of other religious groups. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of the Greek Orthodox Church continued to call on the government to allow the Halki Seminary to reopen as an independent institution to train Greek Orthodox clerics in the country.

Following the attempted July 2016 coup, the government declared a three-month state of emergency, which it renewed in October for the fifth time. The government ascribed responsibility for the coup attempt to self-exiled Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen and his movement, which identifies itself as an Islam-inspired civic, cultural and education movement, although the government considers it a terrorist organization. Since the coup attempt, police arrested more than 50,000 individuals, many for allegedly having ties to the Gulen movement. During the year the government suspended thousands of public officials, including more than 1,000 Diyanet employees. The government reinstated some public employees by state of emergency decree; several hundred were from the Diyanet.

Some foreign citizens, including several individuals with ties to Christian groups, faced detention, problems with residency permits, or denial of entry to the country under the state of emergency. Some Protestant community sources said they did not believe the government was specifically targeting foreign missionaries or those linked to Christian groups. In October the government added additional charges to the case of a U.S. citizen Protestant pastor, who at year’s end remained in pretrial detention in connection with charges including membership in the movement associated with Fethullah Gulen (labeled by the government as the “Fethullah Terrorist Organization” or “FETO”), espionage, and attempting to overthrow the government. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan publicly linked the pastor’s case to the extradition of Fethullah Gulen from the United States. The government asserted that it was not holding the pastor because of his religious work. Most observers in the country said the case was political in nature;

some U.S.-based organizations said the pastor’s detention was related to his work as a Christian minister. The pastor’s was one of several cases of U.S. citizens detained under the state of emergency; the other cases did not involve religious leaders.

In May and October a court in Atasehir, a suburb of Istanbul, held hearings on the charge of “willful and malicious injury” for a man who attacked two Jehovah’s Witnesses with a baseball bat in December 2016, severely injuring a 17-year-old Witness. A judge postponed the case; the next hearing was scheduled for January 2018.

According to the Protestant community in Bursa, the government provided police protection for its place of worship in the city following reported threats from ISIS or associated groups.

In April police intervened to stop the Furkan Foundation’s celebration of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday in Adana. According to police, the Furkan Foundation, a Sunni group that is self-described as a social and religious civil society group, lacked the required permits. Police used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the crowd and detained more than 200 individuals.

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, with separate governing boards, in order to hold and control individual religious properties. The foundations remained unable to hold elections to renew the membership of their governing boards because the government, despite promises to do so, had still not promulgated new regulations to replace those repealed in 2013 that would have allowed the election of foundation board members.

The government continued not to recognize the ecumenical patriarch as the leader of the world’s 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 not “ecumenical,” but 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 March the Istanbul governor’s office suspended a decision by the Spiritual Assembly of the Armenian Patriarchate to elect a trustee to start the process for the election of a new patriarch. Incumbent Patriarch Mesrob II remained unable to perform his duties because of his medical condition, and an acting patriarch continued to fill the position. Some members of the community criticized the governorship’s notification as interference in the internal affairs of the church. Patriarchate sources said the government later recognized the March election to elect a trustee. In July the elected trustee applied to the government to hold the patriarchal election in December. At year’s end, the community had not received a response from the government about how to proceed with the patriarchal election.

A majority of Protestant churches reported facing 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 five foundations (four existing before 1936), 36 associations, and more than 30 representative offices linked with these associations.

In January the government announced that female gendarmes would be allowed to wear headscarves under their hats and caps. In February the government extended the change to include all military units.

In January the government shut down two Shia Jaferi-owned television stations for allegedly spreading “terrorist propaganda.” The closure decrees did not specify the nature of the “terrorist propaganda.” Jaferi organizations, a member of parliament, and others publicly criticized the decision.

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 December a judge postponed the next hearing until May 2018 pending the result of an investigation of two local security officials allegedly involved in the plot. A judge had previously released all the suspects pending trial.

The state continued to provide training for Sunni Muslim clerics while restricting other religious groups from training clerics inside the country. The lack of monastic seminaries within the country meant that the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox Patriarchates were unable to train their clerics. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, leader of the Greek Orthodox Church, 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 some Protestants, many prosecutors and police continued to regard certain public religious speech and religious activism with suspicion, including proselytism by evangelical Protestants. In April then-Deputy Prime Minister Veysi Kaynak said missionary activities should be prohibited and described proselytization as an activity against the country's unity. Proselytization remained legal at year's end.

In May 2016 the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that Turkey had violated the religious freedom of Jehovah's Witnesses in Izmir and Mersin by refusing to provide them appropriate places of worship, a ruling the government did not implement during the year.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, 29 different municipalities denied 91 requests made by Jehovah's Witnesses to obtain a religious facility location on municipal zoning maps. Local governments did not permit zoning for any Kingdom Halls in the country.

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, whom they permitted to build small mosques in malls, airports, and other spaces. The Protestant groups said they had not applied for permits to build any new churches during the year, in part because of the zoning requirements.

Religious communities continued to challenge the government's 2016 expropriation of their properties damaged in clashes between government security forces and the terrorist group Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK). The government expropriated those properties for their stated goal of "post-conflict reconstruction." By the end of the year, the government had not returned or completed repairs on any of the properties, including the historic and ancient Sur District of Diyarbakir Province, Kursunlu Mosque, Hasirli Mosque, Surp Giragos Armenian Church, Mar Petyun Chaldean Church, Syriac Protestant Church, and the Armenian Catholic Church. 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. Additionally, at year's end the government had not paid restitution and compensation to the religious groups for the expropriation of property damaged in fighting with the PKK. In September 2016 the GDF began restoring the expropriated Armenian Catholic Church; by the end of the year, the restoration was not complete, and the church was not accessible for public use. The government said the Ministry of Culture would coordinate the restoration of some properties, and the GDF would restore properties it owned; however, no restorations occurred by the end of the year.

The government did not return any additional properties it had seized in previous decades by year's end. Since 2011 the GDF received 1,560 applications from religious minority foundations that had applied for compensation for seized properties. The GDF returned 333 properties and paid compensation for 21 additional properties. The GDF rejected the other applications pending from 2011; it said the applications did not meet the criteria as outlined in the 2011 compensation law. The period for submitting compensation applications expired in 2013, and therefore no religious foundations submitted new applications during the year. 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. Recognized religious foundations were able to receive compensation for their seized properties, but religious institutions and communities without legally recognized foundations were not.

In June a Mardin court denied appeals from the Syriac Mor Gabriel Foundation regarding the Treasury's ownership of expropriated Syriac community properties, including churches, graveyards, and village homes not registered to a Syriac foundation. Current law does not allow the Syriac community to transfer such community-owned (unregistered) properties from the Treasury to a religious foundation. The government offered to transfer the religious properties to the GDF and to give the Syriac community long-term leases, but the community rejected the proposal and was seeking a legal framework that would give it full ownership. A Syriac member of parliament in July called for the government to adopt policies to protect citizens of different faiths.

Citing zoning law violations, the municipal government in the Sultangazi District of Istanbul announced in April it would demolish a *cemevi* because it had not been registered properly as a place of worship in the district's zoning plans. Two days later, however, the Ministry of Interior cancelled the decision.

The government continued to provide land for the construction of Sunni mosques and fund their construction through municipalities. According to the Diyanet, the number of mosques increased from 87,381 in 2016 to more than 90,000 during the year. Although Alevi groups were able to build new *cemevis*, the government continued to decline to provide financial support for their construction. In August President Erdogan presided over the official opening of Istanbul's historic mosque of Hamidiye after its restoration by the GDF.

Throughout the month of Ramadan, for the third 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. 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.

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 December the Constitutional Court rejected an objection by a local court to a provision of the law banning political activities and statements by imams. The court ruled that imams, muftis, and other Diyanet personnel remain prohibited from engaging in political activities, including praising or criticizing a political party.

In March a local court ruling in Antalya granted the daughter of an atheist family an exemption from compulsory religion classes after the family filed an objection.

In December the Ministry of National Education signed a three-year protocol with the Islamist Hizmet Foundation to provide “moral values” education during regular school hours. A teacher’s union, 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 a religious *tarikat*. The union applied to the Council of State for cancellation of the protocol.

At year’s end the government continued not to comply with a 2013 ruling by the ECHR that found the government’s compulsory religion courses in public schools violated educational freedom. The ECHR had 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 its religious convictions. Authorities added material on Alevism to the religious course curriculum in 2011 after the ECHR decision, but many Alevis stated the material was inadequate and, in some cases, incorrect. Construction began in March 2015 on an Alevi school in Istanbul’s Kucukcekmece district. Then- Minister of National Education Nabi Avci said the government would build the school in cooperation with the nongovernmental organization Helping Hands Foundation as a venue for teaching Alevi-Bektashi beliefs. According to the government, construction of the school’s main and annex buildings continued at year’s end.

In July the Ministry of National Education implemented an extensive revision of the school curriculum, which some secular individuals, Alevis and other citizens widely criticized for increasing the Sunni Muslim content in the textbooks while cutting 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. Details on the early implementation of the new curriculum were limited. In September Alevi groups and secularists protested the new education curriculum in various cities and called for a “scientific” and secular education system. Alevis criticized the new curriculum as more sectarian than the previous one.

In September 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 would answer to the Diyanet’s provincial mufti, with performance reviews every six months. Many self-described secular citizens criticized the plan, saying that it gave religion greater influence over the education system.

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 the Syriac Orthodox community, stated the courses largely reflected Hanafi Sunni Islamic doctrine and contained negative and incorrect information about other religious groups. Some Alevis stated that schools taught Alevi students incorrect information about their own faith, which parents had to correct at home.

In September an Alevi foundation issued a public statement criticizing a second-grade textbook that described an Alevi religious ritual as a “folk dance.”

Members of other minority religious groups, including Protestants, also said they had 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 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 legally classified 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. The three communities continued to finance most of the cost of these schools; the government financed classes taught in Turkish. The Syriac Orthodox community, which has operated a preschool since 2014, was still unable to open additional schools. The government did not permit other religious groups to operate schools.

The government limited the number of students admitted to public secondary schools and assigned tens of thousands of students to state-run “*imam hatip*” religious schools based on their entrance exam scores or proximity. The government continued to convert many nonreligious public schools to *imam hatip* schools, citing demand, and students reported this created a geographic hurdle for those who preferred to attend

secular public schools. Enrollment in the *imam hatip* schools increased to 1.2 million students, up from approximately one million in 2015. Since the 2016 coup attempt, the government has closed at least 1,284 private schools, many affiliated with the movement led by Fethullah Gulen, on “antiterror” grounds. The government converted some of these private schools to *imam hatip* schools.

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.” According to a 2015 poll, 66 percent of respondents held a negative view of missionaries and missionary activity of any kind.

Many public buildings, including universities, maintained small mosques in which Muslims could pray. In June the Ministry of National Education issued a new regulation requiring every new school to have a *mescit*, 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 there was an insufficient number of *cemevis* in the country to meet demand, stating that approximately 2,500 to 3,000 existed. The government continued to state that Diyanet-funded mosques were available to Alevis and all Muslims, regardless of their school of religious thought.

At year’s end the government still had not legally recognized *cemevis* as places of worship. The Supreme Court of Appeals had affirmed a lower court’s decision in August 2015 that *cemevis* are places of worship and should receive the same benefits that Sunni mosques receive, such as being exempt from paying utility bills. 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 utility bills. Alevis issued public statements calling on the government to comply with the Supreme Court ruling. In June the ECHR fined the government 54,000 euros (\$64,800) for refusing to pay the utility bills of a *cemevi* in Istanbul. In July the Council of State ruled in favor of another *cemevi* in Istanbul, compelling the Diyanet to pay its electricity bills. The government did not implement this ruling nationwide by year’s end.

Responding to a question by opposition parliamentarians, Minister of National Education Ismet Yilmaz announced in June that an academic suspended from his university for insulting and threatening Alevis on his social media accounts was reinstated and reassigned to a different public university.

In November the government passed a law authorizing provincial and district-level muftis and their designees to register and officiate at marriages on behalf of the state. The government stated the new law would make the marriage and marriage registration process more efficient, and supporters said the legislation would reduce illegal unregistered religious marriages. Secularists said the law violated the constitution’s principle of secularism, while women’s organizations stated it would

increase child marriages. The law did not give the same authority to clerics of other religions, leading some critics to argue 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 112,725 religious personnel at the end of 2016, the last year for which data was available, compared with 117,378 in 2015. 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 had been no action on this issue.

As of August, 68 Jehovah’s Witnesses faced prosecution as conscientious objectors to military service. Jehovah’s Witnesses officials stated the government subjected Witness conscientious objectors “to unending call-ups for military duty, repeated fines, and threats of imprisonment.”

Some non-Muslims stated that listing their religious affiliation on national identity cards exposed them to discrimination and harassment. Members of many religious groups continued to assert they were precluded from obtaining government jobs and faced discrimination in the private sector for either not listing a religious affiliation or listing a non-Muslim religion on their identity cards.

In February the government started to distribute new national identity cards that recorded the religious affiliation of an individual in a chip in the card, visible only when scanned by a computer. In February 2016 then-Interior Minister Efkan Ala announced that recording religious affiliation in the chip would be optional.

In Nusaybin, the Syriac community restored three of the seven Syriac churches damaged or destroyed over several years during government clashes with the PKK. Two of the seven churches were completely destroyed during the clashes; renovation work on the two others continued at year’s end. In November Deputy Prime Minister Hakan Cavusoglu stated the government was working on a plan to transfer Syriac churches to the Syriac foundations in the Taskoy (Arbo) village of Mardin, noting the law would also facilitate the transfer of properties under the Mor Gabriel Foundation in Mardin. The churches in Taskoy, Mardin include Mor Dimet, Mor Salito, Meryem Ana, Mor Gevargis, Mor Batlo, Mor Simuni, and Mor Semun.

In April then-Deputy Prime Minister Veysi Kaynak announced government funds would renovate a church in Bursa, and the building would reopen for religious services. German Catholic, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Turkish Protestant congregations have shared the building, which the General Directorate of Foundations has owned for more than 10 years.

Ankara University hosted an event to commemorate Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27. Then-Deputy Prime Minister Tugrul Turkes 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* when it sank off the coast of Istanbul in 1942. The Governor of Istanbul attended the commemoration, and the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed condolences.

Muslim, Jewish, and Christian religious leaders joined representatives from various municipalities in Istanbul for a public interfaith iftar in June.

In November Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew presided over the reopening ceremony of the Aya Yorgi Greek Orthodox Church in Istanbul's Edirnekapi district following the church's three years of restoration by the GDF. Istanbul Governor Vasip Sahin and GDF Director General Adnan Ertem attended the reopening ceremony.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Members of the Jewish community continued to express concern about anti-Semitism and increased threats of violence throughout the country. The government responded to specific threats of violence by ISIS against Jewish schools by implementing enhanced security measures. Jewish community members said the government measures were helpful.

In July nearly 100 members of *Alperen Hearths* protested outside Neve Salom Synagogue in Istanbul in response to security measures Israel had implemented at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount in Jerusalem following a July 14 attack that killed two Israeli police officers. *Alperen Hearths* describes itself as an educational and cultural foundation and with ideological ties to the Islamist nationalist Great Unity Party. Sources reported no police presence during the protest. *Alperen Hearths* Istanbul Chair Kursat Mican accused the Israeli government of blocking Palestinians' freedom of worship and threatened the Jewish community: "If you prevent our freedom of worship there, then we will prevent your freedom of worship here and you will not be able to enter here." Protesters threw stones and kicked the synagogue's doors before voluntarily dispersing. The Jewish community called for the authorities to take necessary security measures. Several days after the attack, high-ranking government officials called community representatives to demonstrate support for the community.

In August two individuals prayed inside the Hagia Sophia to protest Israeli security measures at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. "This is a mosque, not a museum," the individuals said. Security guards removed them from the compound after the prayer.

Following a January ISIS attack on Istanbul’s Reina nightclub, a commentator on progovernment television station Kanal A said Alevi leaders would be killed first in the event of a civil war in the country. Alevi groups viewed the comments as a threat; the commentator later apologized on social media.

The Syriac Orthodox community continued to seek 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. The two communities had not reached agreement by year’s end.

Anti-Semitic rhetoric periodically continued in some print media and on social media throughout the year. In January columnist Yusuf Kaplan in the progovernment newspaper *Yeni Safak* claimed the country had been under “Jewish influence” for the last two centuries and described the alleged effect as a “tumor.” In January a columnist in the Islamist *Yeni Soz* daily claimed ISIS, Al-Qaida, PKK, “FETO,” and other similar groups were products of an alliance between the “devil and the Jews.” In March one columnist in the Islamist *Milat* daily claimed the Second World War was started in order to establish the state of Israel, and said the war was a “war of independence” for Jews. In May a columnist in the progovernment *Star* daily claimed “the evangelicals and the Jews” were supporting the PKK. The same columnist claimed “FETO” was an evangelical movement disguised as Islam. In July a *Yeni Soz* article claimed the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex movement was financed by “Satanist Jews.”

A new and popular Turkish television series, “The Last Emperor,” raised concern among some in the Jewish community due to its anti-Semitic storyline, which portrayed Jews as the most evil characters. According to some press reports, the March episode provoked a surge in anti-Semitic messaging on social media.

In April on two occasions unidentified vandals damaged Alevi tombs and shrines in a Hatay cemetery. In November sources in Hatay said the government was trying to improve the security of minority religious sites and helping to clean up after acts of vandalism.

Various self-defined Islamist groups continued to threaten and vandalize Christian places of worship. In September an unidentified group threw stones at the Armenian Surp Tateos Church in the Narlikapi neighborhood of Istanbul, breaking windows. Some witnesses said the attackers shouted anti-Armenian slogans while a baptismal ceremony took place inside.

In September the president of the Surp Giragos Armenian Church Foundation said unidentified looters had burglarized the church in Diyarbakir multiple times, despite a continuing curfew in the area.

Various nationalist Islamic groups continued to advocate transforming some former Orthodox churches, including Istanbul's Hagia Sophia museum, into mosques, drawing criticism from some Christian groups. The Hagia Sophia was an Orthodox church from 537-1453 and a mosque from 1453-1931. 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 May thousands participated in a morning Islamic prayer outside Istanbul's Hagia Sophia. The Islamist nationalist Anatolian Youth Association organized the event within the context of the government's celebration of the 564th anniversary of the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul.

In December, following the U.S. government recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, AKP Member of Parliament Samil Tayyar on Twitter requested the reopening of Hagia Sophia as a mosque in response: “If you say so, let Hagia Sophia be opened to prayers. We should start holding Friday prayers at Hagia Sophia.” A few days later, a group from *Alperen Hearths* read out a call to prayer inside Hagia Sophia and started to pray. Group members said they were protesting the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital by the U.S. government. Police detained the protesters and later released them.

On November 22, unidentified individuals in Malatya painted red “X” marks on the front doors of 13 Alevis family homes; family members said they perceived the marks as a threat. Alevis reported the occurrence to police, who opened an investigation. Alevis then held a protest march in Malatya. In December unidentified individuals painted a red cross on the wall of an Alevi house in Manisa. The resident reported the occurrence to police, who erased the mark. Prosecutors investigated the case, but there were no further reports or actions by year's end.

On November 24, an individual threw a brick through the office window of the Association of Kurtulus (Salvation) Church, a Protestant church in Malatya. The suspect fled the scene, but police caught him later that night and released him the next day. Two attacks targeting the church took place earlier in the year.

In June the Jewish community again hosted an iftar at the Grand Edirne Synagogue for hundreds of participants, including Muslims and Christians.

In February the military held an official funeral ceremony on Gokceada (Imbros) island for a deceased Greek Orthodox veteran of the Korean War.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador, 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, to underscore 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. officials continued to raise with government officials Hagia Sophia’s extraordinary significance as a symbol of peaceful coexistence and meaningful dialogue and respect among religions. Senior U.S. officials and visitors similarly urged the rapid restitution of church properties expropriated in Diyarbakir and Mardin.

On August 15, the Secretary of State called for the release of the American pastor. The pastor’s case was one of several involving U.S. citizens detained under the state of emergency. The other cases did not involve individuals with ties to religious Christian groups. The U.S. government continued to criticize these detentions as unjustified.

The Secretary of State, Deputy Secretary of State, and other senior U.S. officials continued to urge government officials to reopen the Greek Orthodox seminary in Halki.

In January the Ambassador attended a Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony at Ankara University with senior government officials and the leadership of the country’s Jewish community.

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, Latter Day Saints, and Bahai Faith communities, among others, throughout the country. The embassy and consulates utilized Twitter and Facebook to emphasize the importance of inclusion of religious minorities.

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