

Document #2031308

USDOS – US Department of State

2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Cyprus - The Area Administered by Turkish Cypriots

Since 1974, the southern part of Cyprus has been under the control of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus. The northern part, administered by Turkish Cypriots, proclaimed itself the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”) in 1983. The United States does not recognize the “TRNC,” nor does any country other than Turkey. A substantial number of Turkish troops remain on the island. A “green line,” or buffer zone (which is over 110 miles long and several miles wide in places) patrolled by the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), separates the two parts. This report is divided into two parts: the Republic of Cyprus and the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. For areas in the north that have different Greek and Turkish names, both are listed (e.g., Kormakitis/Korucam).

Executive Summary

The Turkish Cypriot “constitution” refers to the “state” as secular and provides for freedom of religious faith and worship consistent with public order and morals. It prohibits forced participation in worship and religious services and stipulates religious education may be conducted only under “state” supervision. The “constitution” grants the Vakf the exclusive right to regulate its internal affairs. Turkish Cypriot authorities continued to grant improved access to Greek Orthodox religious sites compared with previous years. The “Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)” said during the year it approved 156 of 203 total requests to hold religious services during the year, compared with 118 of 153 requests in 2018. Turkish-Speaking Protestant Associations (TSPA) representatives continued to report police surveillance of their activities.

The TSPA said Turkish Cypriots who converted to other faiths often experienced societal criticism. The TCCH reported completing restoration of three more religious sites – two archeological sites that have basilicas and a minaret of a mosque – and said the restoration of five churches continued at year’s end. Mufti of Cyprus Atalay and Church of Cyprus Archbishop Chrysostomos II met throughout the year and arranged visits to places of worship across the buffer zone. In February the leaders of the Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Maronite Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, and Roman Catholic communities renewed their plea for the restoration of St. James Church and St. George Church, two Greek Orthodox churches located in the buffer zone.

In May the U.S. Ambassador met with Mufti of Cyprus Atalay, who was also head of the “Religious Affairs Department,” to discuss cooperation among religious leaders and access to religious sites. Embassy officials met with representatives at the “MFA” and the Vakf to discuss unrestricted access to religious sites. In September embassy officials attended a Greek Orthodox worship service at Panagia Lysi Church, the first service held in the church since 1974. Embassy officials continued to meet with leaders from Sunni and Alevi Muslim, Armenian and Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Roman Catholic, and Protestant communities to discuss access to religious sites and instances of religious-based discrimination.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to 2011 census information from the Turkish Cypriot authorities, the most recent data available, the population of the area administered by Turkish Cypriots is 286,000. The census contains no data on religious affiliation. Sociologists estimate as much as 97 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. The Alevi Culture Association estimates that approximately 10,000 immigrants of Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab origin and their descendants are Alevi Muslims. The TSPA estimates there are 1,000 Turkish-speaking Protestants. The government of the Republic of Cyprus estimates 314 members of the Church of Cyprus and 69 Maronite Catholics reside in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. According to sociologists, other groups include Russian Orthodox, Anglicans, Baha’is, Jews, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. According to “Ministry of Education (MOE)” statistics for the 2017-18 academic year, there were slightly more than 90,000 foreign students

enrolled at universities in the area administered by the Turkish Cypriots. Of these, 61 percent were Muslim Turks, and the rest were predominantly Christians and Muslims from more than 140 different countries.

Section II. Status of “Government” Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The Turkish Cypriot “constitution” states the territory is a “secular republic” and provides for freedom of conscience and religious faith and unrestricted worship and religious ceremonies, provided they do not contravene public order or morals. It prohibits forced prayer, forced attendance at religious services, condemnation based on religious beliefs, and compelling individuals to disclose their religious beliefs. It stipulates religious education requires “state” approval and may only be conducted under “state” supervision, but the “law” allows summer religious knowledge courses to be taught in mosques without “MOE” approval. The “law” does not recognize exclusively any specific religion, and individuals cannot “exploit or abuse” religion to establish, even partially, a “state” based on religious precepts or for political or personal gain.

According to the “constitution,” the Vakf has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with Vakf laws and principles. Although the “constitution” states the Vakf shall be exempt from all taxation, its commercial operations are subject to applicable taxes. The “constitution” does not explicitly recognize religious groups other than the Vakf. According to the “constitution,” Turkish Cypriot authorities shall help the Vakf in the execution of Islamic religious services and in meeting the expenses of such services. No other religious organization is tax exempt or receives subsidies from Turkish Cypriot authorities.

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

Turkish Cypriot “regulations” stipulate Greek Orthodox residents may conduct liturgies or masses led by two priests designated by the Orthodox Church at three designated functional churches in the Karpas Peninsula without advance notification or permission: Agia Triada Church in Agia Triada/Sipahi, Agia Triada Church in Rizokarpaso/Dipkarpaz, and Agios Synesios Church in Rizokarpaso/Dipkarpaz. According to the “MFA,” Maronite Catholic residents may hold liturgies or masses led by Maronite-designated clergy without seeking permission at three designated functional Maronite churches: Agios Georgios Church in Kormakitis/Korucam, Timios Stavros Church in Karpasia/Karpasa, and Panagia Church in Kampyli/Hisarkoy.

Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox worshippers must submit applications to the authorities for permission to hold religious services at churches or monasteries other than these six designated churches, including at restored religious heritage sites. For the authorities to consider an application the date should be of significance to that religious group; the church or monastery must be structurally sound; it must not be located in a military zone, with exceptions for some Maronite churches; it must not have a dual use, for example, as a museum; there should be no complaints from local Turkish Cypriot residents; and police must be available to provide security. Permission is also necessary for priests other than those officially pre-designated to conduct services. Specific permission is required for individuals who do not reside in the Turkish Cypriot-administered area, including members of the Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox Churches, to participate. UNFICYP coordinates these applications, which religious groups must submit 10 days before the date of the requested service.

The mufti heads the “Religious Affairs Department,” which represents Islam in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and functions as a civil authority. Whereas the Vakf manages Muslim-donated property as an endowment for charitable purposes, the “Religious Affairs Department” oversees how imams conduct prayers and deliver Friday sermons in mosques.

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

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

There are no provisions or “laws” allowing conscientious objection to mandatory military service, which requires a 12-15-month initial service period and one-day annual reserve duty. The penalty for refusing to complete mandatory military service is up to three years’ imprisonment, a fine of up to 10,800 Turkish lira (\$1,800), or both. “Government” Practices

“Government” Practices

Three Greek Orthodox churches, Apostolos Andreas, St. Barnabas, and St. Mamas Churches, were again open for prayers throughout the year, as they had been in previous years, but Turkish Cypriot authorities continued to require advance notification for religious services there. While St. Mamas and St. Barnabas Churches functioned as museums and were only open during working hours, the Greek Orthodox priest held the key to Apostolos Andreas Monastery, according to the “MFA.” According to the “MFA,” services took place for the first time since 1974 at four Greek Orthodox churches during the year. The four churches were Panayia Eleousa Church in Trypimeni/Tirmen Famagusta Area; Ayia Paraskevi in Angastina/Aslankoy Famagusta; Ayios Theodoros Church in Lapithos/Lapta; and Panayia in Lysi/Akdogan.

According to statistics reported by the “MFA,” authorities continued to grant improved access to Greek Orthodox places of worship compared with previous years. UNFICYP reported the “MFA” approved 83 of 129 requests it received to facilitate religious services at churches in the northern part of the island during the year, compared with 90 approvals of 123 requests in 2018. The “MFA” reported it approved 156 out of 203 total requests (including both UNFICYP-facilitated requests and requests submitted directly to the “MFA”) to hold religious services during the year, compared with 118 approvals of 153 requests in 2018. A Greek Orthodox Church representative said Turkish Cypriot authorities continued to deny access requests without explanation, stating the list of criteria a request must meet is “self-explanatory.” Orthodox representatives continued to report the “MFA” sometimes approved applications with insufficient time before the dates of requested religious services, resulting in cancellations or low attendance. Armenian Orthodox leaders said they had not submitted religious access requests during the year partly out of frustration with delayed approvals in prior years. A Greek Orthodox representative stated 63 religious sites remained inaccessible due to being located within Turkish military zones or the buffer zone.

In April Turkish Cypriot authorities again allowed Greek Orthodox worshippers to hold Good Friday church services at St. George Exorinos Church in Famagusta.

A Maronite community representative said the Turkish military continued to restrict access to the Church of Archangelos Michael in the village of Asomatos/Ozhan. Maronite representatives continued to report being required to submit a list of persons planning to attend Sunday services by the preceding Tuesday. The “MFA” said this was because the Church of Archangelos Michael is located within a military zone. The “MFA” said it required only advance notification, not a request for access, to hold Sunday services and that no one was refused admittance during the year. According to the “MFA,” the Turkish military again allowed Maronites to celebrate Mass in Ayia Marina on July 17, the name day of Ayia Marina, and denied Maronites access to the Church of Marki near Kormakitis/Korucam. A Maronite representative said Turkish Cypriot authorities allowed services at Panagia Church in Kampyli/Hisarkoy without prior permission only on August 15 for the Assumption of the Virgin observation.

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

The TSPA reported police continued to monitor its activities, asking specific questions about TSPA members and ceremonies. According to the TSPA, in April police interrupted a training for young pastors organized by TSPA at a hotel in Koma Yialou/Kumyali, questioning and intimidating participants.

According to the Alevi Culture Association, the first phase of construction on an Alevi house of worship (*cemevi*) and cultural complex was completed in July. The association said the six million Turkish lira (\$1 million) provided by the “government” for the internal design and construction of the building was insufficient for connecting electricity and water to the complex, establishing a morgue and kitchen, and finishing the external design. The Alevi Culture Association continued to say it perceived favoritism in “state” funding toward the Sunni Muslim population through financing of mosque construction and administration.

According to local press reports, the Turkish government provided much of the aid to fund construction of Sunni Muslim mosques.

In July the “Ministry of Education” announced a protocol was signed with Turkey to open the Religious Anatolia High School within the premises of Hala Sultan Religious High School, a public school. Secular Turkish Cypriot groups criticized the protocol, stating it imposed Islam on secular Turkish Cypriots. In August the Secondary Education Teacher’s Union criticized the Hala Sultan Religious High School administration and the “Ministry of Education” for organizing a competition with prizes for students who could recite the hadith.

The “Religious Affairs Department” continued to appoint and fund all 205 imams at the 210 Sunni mosques in the northern part of the island.

A representative of the Church of Cyprus again stated some religious sites, to which Church officials had little or no access, were deteriorating. Since 1974 the Church of Cyprus has been unable to access St. James Church in the buffer zone. In February the already damaged church partially collapsed amid heavy rains.

Greek Orthodox religious groups continued to state authorities placed religious items, including icons, in storage rooms or displayed them in museums, against the wishes of the communities to whom they were sacred. In January local press reported the international NGO Walk of Truth recovered four fragments of religious frescoes removed from churches in the north after 1974 and returned them to the Republic of Cyprus. Two of the frescoes were identified as belonging to Panayia Absinthiotissa Church and Monastery in Sychari/Asagi Taskent.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The TSPA continued to report societal discrimination toward Protestants, including denial of access to venues to hold religious events and verbal harassment. For example, in April a TSPA representative said local authorities in Karavas/Alsancak canceled a previously approved Easter celebration on the day of the event. The TSPA said Turkish Cypriots who converted to other faiths, particularly Christianity, faced societal criticism. The TSPA stated a Turkish Cypriot security forces member stopped attending church services due to pressure from colleagues in the military.

Muslim and Orthodox religious leaders continued to promote religious tolerance by meeting and arranging pilgrimages for their congregations to places of worship across the “green line,” including Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque in the Republic of Cyprus and St. Barnabas in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots.

On February 14, the leaders of the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Muslim, Maronite Catholic, and Roman Catholic communities issued a joint statement calling for the restoration of the Church of Saint James and the Church of Saint George located in the buffer zone in Nicosia, renewing a joint plea they made in 2014. On March 19, representatives of each of the five religious communities visited the partially collapsed Greek Orthodox Church of Saint James in the buffer zone in Nicosia.

The TCCH reported it had completed restoration of two religious heritage sites: the Basilica of Agia Triada and the Agios Philon archeological site (site of a Byzantine church and early Christian episcopal complex). Neither was functioning as an active place of worship following the restoration, and no religious group requested to use either site for religious purposes during the year. The TCCH continued restoring another five religious sites. The TCCH and the UN Development Program Partnership for the Future continued restoration work on the Greek Orthodox Apostolos Andreas Monastery in the Karpas Peninsula, a popular destination for pilgrims. The TCCH reported the tendering process for the second phase of the restoration had been completed; it anticipated work to commence by the end of the year.

In March local press reported three individuals stole a 300-kilogram (660-pound) church bell from the nine-meter (30-foot) tower of the recently renovated St. Panteleimon Monastery in Myrtou/Camlibel. According to press reports, police arrested three suspects and found the bell in a barn belonging to one of the suspects in Avlona/Gayretkoy village. The suspects were released on bail pending trial, which had not begun as of year’s end.

In May police arrested the caretaker of Selimiye Mosque (formerly Agia Sophia Cathedral) and three of his colleagues, who were reportedly attempting to sell two church bells and five chandeliers that were kept in the mosque’s storage room. The “Religious Affairs Department” announced it had suspended the personnel involved in the theft and recovered all the items; the police investigation continued at year’s end.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In May the Ambassador met with Mufti of Cyprus Atalay, head of the “Religious Affairs Department,” to encourage cooperation among faith communities and discuss ways to expand access to religious sites on both sides of the island. Embassy representatives continued to meet with Turkish Cypriot authorities at the “MFA” and the Vakf to discuss access to religious sites and the ability to hold religious services at sites without restrictions.

On September 8, embassy officials attended a Greek Orthodox service, the first service since 1974, at the Panagia Lysi Church. Embassy officials discussed issues pertaining to religious freedom, including instances of societal discrimination within the Turkish Cypriot community, with representatives of the Armenian Orthodox, Alevi Muslim, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Protestant, and Sunni Muslim communities. Embassy officials frequently discussed with Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox leaders concerns about restricted access to churches and other religious sites in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots.

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

ecoi.net summary:



Northern Cyprus: Annual
report on religious freedom
(covering 2019)

Country:

Cyprus

Source:

[USDOS – US Department of
State](#)

Original link:

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/cyprus/area-administered-by-turkish-cypriots/>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

10 June 2020

Document ID:

2031308

Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and
Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien
T (Telefon) +43 1 589 00 583
F (Fax) +43 1 589 00 589
info@ecoi.net

Contact
Imprint & Disclaimer
F.A.Q.
Data Protection Notice

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.

