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2020 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 enable the practice of Islam, provide religious education, and manage religious institutions. In January, media reported the Supreme Court of Appeals upheld a 13.5-month sentence against an ethnic Armenian citizen for provoking hostility by criticizing the Prophet Mohammed. The government continued to limit the rights of non-Muslim religious minorities, especially those not recognized under the government's interpretation of the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which includes only Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians. Media and nongovernmental organizations reported an accelerated pace of entry bans and deportations of non-Turkish citizen leaders of Protestant congregations. The government continued to restrict efforts of minority religious groups to train their clergy, and the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary remained closed. Religious minorities again reported difficulties opening or operating houses of worship; resolving land and property disputes and legal challenges of churches whose lands the government previously expropriated; holding governing board elections for their religious foundations; and obtaining exemptions from mandatory religion classes in schools. Religious minorities, particularly members of the Alevi community, again raised challenges to religious content and practices in the public education system. In July, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reconverted Istanbul's Hagia Sophia Museum, originally an Orthodox church that was subsequently converted to a mosque and then a museum, into a mosque and declared it open to Islamic worship. In August, President Erdogan similarly ordered the reconversion of the Kariye (Chora) Museum to a mosque. Construction of the new Syriac Orthodox church in Istanbul continued, according to the Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan Office.

According to a press report, on March 20, relatives found the body of Simoni Diril, the mother of a Catholic Chaldean priest, two months after unidentified persons abducted Diril and her husband. According to media reports, isolated acts of vandalism of places of worship and cemeteries continued. In May, security cameras caught an individual attempting to vandalize an Armenian church in Istanbul. Police detained the suspect, and authorities charged him with vandalism. Other media outlets reported an increase of vandalism of Christian cemeteries, including the destruction in February of 20 gravestones in the Ortakoy Christian Cemetery in Ankara. According to a news report in June, unknown perpetrators vandalized a monument commemorating Alevis killed in 1938. Anti-Semitic discourse and hate speech continued in social media and print press; in March, there were media reports, including by the Jewish publication *Avlaremoz*, of anti-Semitic speech on various social media sites linking the COVID-19 outbreak to Jews.

The U.S. Ambassador, visiting senior U.S. officials, and other embassy and consulate officials continued to emphasize to government officials the importance of respect for religious diversity and equal treatment under the law. U.S. government officials urged the government to lift restrictions on religious groups and make progress on property restitution. Senior U.S. officials, including the Secretary of State, continued to call on the government to allow the reopening of Halki Seminary and to allow for the training of clergy members from all communities in the country. In June, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom called for the government to keep Hagia Sophia's status as a museum. In a tweet on June 25, he stated, "The Hagia Sophia holds enormous spiritual & cultural significance to billions of believers of different faiths around the world. We call on the Govt of #Turkey to maintain it as a @UNESCO World Heritage site & to maintain accessibility to all in its current status as a museum." In July, the Secretary of State urged the government "to maintain Hagia Sophia as a museum, as an exemplar of its commitment to respect the country's faith traditions." In November, during a visit to Istanbul, to promote the United States' "strong stance on religious freedom around the world," the Secretary of State met with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and with Archbishop Paul Russell, the Holy See's representative to the country. The Secretary also visited St. George's Cathedral and the Rustem Pasha Mosque. Embassy and consulate officials met with a wide range of religious minority community leaders, including those of the Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Alevi, Syriac Orthodox, and Chaldean Catholic 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 82.0 million (midyear 2020 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 are 0.2 percent of the population, while the most recent public opinion surveys published in January 2019 by Turkish research firm KONDA suggest approximately 3 percent of the population self-identifies as atheist and 2 percent as nonbelievers.

Leaders of Alevi foundations estimate Alevis comprise 25 to 31 percent of the population; Pew Research Center reporting indicates 5 percent of Muslims state they are Alevis. The Shia Jafari community estimates its members make up 4 percent of the population.

Non-Muslim religious groups are mostly concentrated in Istanbul and other large cities, as well as in the southeast. Exact figures are not available; however, these groups self-report approximately 90,000 Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians (including migrants from Armenia), 25,000 Roman Catholics (including migrants from Africa and the Philippines), and 16,000 Jews. There are also approximately 25,000 Syrian Orthodox Christians (also known as Syriacs), 15,000 Russian Orthodox Christians (mostly immigrants from Russia who hold residence permits), and 10,000 Baha'is.

Estimates of other groups include 7,000-10,000 members of Protestant denominations, 5,000 Jehovah's Witnesses, fewer than 3,000 Chaldean Christians, up to 2,500 Greek Orthodox Christians, and fewer than 1,000 Yezidis. There also are small, undetermined numbers of Bulgarian Orthodox, Nestorian, Georgian Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Chaldean Catholic, and Maronite Christians. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) estimates its membership at 300 individuals.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of conscience, religious belief, conviction, expression, and worship. It stipulates individuals may not be compelled to participate in religious ceremonies or disclose their religion, and acts of worship may be conducted freely as long as they are not directed against the “integrity of the state.” The constitution prohibits discrimination on religious grounds and exploitation or abuse of “religion or religious feelings, or things held sacred by religion,” or “even partially basing” the order of the state on religious tenets.

The constitution establishes the Diyanet, through which the state coordinates Islamic matters. According to the law, the Diyanet's mandate is to enable the belief, practices, and moral principles of Islam, with a primary focus on Sunni Islam; educate the public about religious issues; and administer mosques. The Diyanet operates under the Office of the President, with its head appointed by the President and administered by a 16-person council elected by clerics and university theology faculties. The Diyanet has five main departments, called high councils: Religious Services, Hajj and Umrah Services, Education, Publications, and Public Relations. While the law does not require that all members of the council be Sunni Muslim, in practice this has been the case.

There is no separate blasphemy law, but the penal code provides punishment for “provoking people to be rancorous and hostile,” including showing public disrespect for religious beliefs. The law criminalizes “insulting values held sacred by a religion.” Insulting a religion is punishable by six months to one year in prison.

The penal code prohibits religious clergy from “reproaching or vilifying” the government or the laws of the state while performing their duties. Violations are punishable by prison terms of one month to one year, or three months to two years if the crime involves inciting others to disobey the law.

Although registration with the government is not explicitly mandatory for religious groups to operate, registering a group is required to request legal recognition for places of worship. Gaining legal recognition of a place of worship requires permission from the municipalities for the construction or designation of a new place of worship. It is against the law to hold religious services at a location not recognized by the central government as a place of worship; the government may fine or close the venues of those violating the law.

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

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

Military service is obligatory for males; there is no provision for conscientious objection. A government policy allows individuals to pay a fee of 37,070 Turkish lira (\$5,000) instead of performing full military service; however, they are required to complete a three-week basic training program. Those who oppose mandatory military service on religious grounds may face charges in military and civilian courts and, if convicted, could be subject to prison sentences ranging from two months to two years.

The leadership and administrative structures of religious communities do not have a legal personality, leaving them unable to directly buy or hold title to property or press claims in court. Communities rely on separate foundations or associations governed by individual boards to hold and administer assets and property.

A 1935 law prohibits the establishment of foundations based on the religion or ethnicity of members but grants exemptions to foundations existing before the enactment of the law. Non-Muslim citizens direct these longstanding foundations; 167 continue to exist, the majority of which are associated with the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish communities. In practice, a religious group formed after the 1935 law may successfully apply to register as an association or foundation provided its stated objective is charitable, educational, or cultural rather than religious. There are six Protestant foundations (four existing before the passage of the 1935 foundation law), 36 Protestant associations, and more than 30 representative offices linked with these associations.

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

If a foundation becomes inactive, the government may petition the courts to rule it is no longer operational and transfer its assets to the state. Only a court order may close a foundation of any category, except under a state of emergency, during which the government may close foundations by decree.

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.

Several religious communities have formally registered corresponding associations. Associations must be nonprofit and receive financial support only in the form of donations. To register as an association, a group must submit an application to the provincial governor's office with supporting documentation, including bylaws and a list of founding members. A group must also obtain permission from the Ministry of Interior as part of its application if a foreign association or nonprofit organization is a founding member; if foreigners are founding members of the group, the group must submit copies of its residence permits. If the governorate finds the bylaws unlawful or unconstitutional, the association must change them 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. A court order may close an association, and the Ministry of Interior may temporarily close an association or foundation and apply to a court within 48 hours for a decision on closure. Otherwise, the government may close associations and foundations by decree under a state of emergency. The civil code requires associations not to discriminate on the grounds of religion, ethnicity, or race.

By law prisoners have the right to practice their religion while incarcerated; however, not all prisons have dedicated places of worship. According to the law, prison authorities must allow visitation by clergy members and allow them to offer books and other materials that are part of the prisoner's faith.

The constitution establishes compulsory religious and moral instruction in public and private schools at all levels starting with fourth grade, with content determined by the Ministry of National Education's Department of Religious Instruction, which falls under the authority of the Office of the President. 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, Hindus, Zoroastrians, Confucians, Taoists, and Buddhists, or those who left the religion section blank on their national identity card are rarely granted exemptions from the classes. Middle and high school students may take additional Islamic religious courses as electives for two hours per week during regular school hours.

The government issues chip-enabled national identity cards that contain no visible section to identify religious affiliation. The information on religious affiliation is recorded in the chip and remains visible to authorized public officials as "qualified personal data" and protected as private information. Previously issued national identity cards, which continue in circulation, contain a space for religious identification with the option of leaving the space blank. These older cards included the following religious identities as options: Muslim, Greek Orthodox, non-Orthodox Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, No Religion, or Other. Baha'i, Alevi, Yezidi, and other religious groups with known populations in the country were not options.

According to labor law, private- and public-sector employers may not discriminate against employees based on religion. Employees may seek legal action against an employer through the Labor Court. If an employee can prove a violation occurred, the employee may be entitled to compensation of up to four months of salary in addition to the reversal of the employment decision.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

According to media, in January, the Supreme Court of Appeals upheld a 13.5-month sentence against Sevan Nisanyan, a self-exiled ethnic Armenian citizen of Turkey, for publishing "offensive" words against the Prophet Muhammad that could provoke hostility. While referencing the country's penal code, the court further justified its decision by citing a 2005 European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruling in the case of publishing company I.A.

versus the Government of Turkey, stating that religious statements that could be viewed as a “cheap attack” should be avoided. One member of the court opposed the sentence, stating that while Nisanyan’s writing humiliated Muslims, there was no concrete evidence that breaches of public peace had occurred.

According to media reports, Cemil Kelik, a religious culture and ethics teacher at a high school in Istanbul, continued to teach after authorities reinstated him in a remote city in May. In 2019, Kelik was fired after comparing the morals of atheists and deists to those of “self-professed” Muslims and saying headscarves were not obligatory in Islam.

On May 20, police detained and arrested Banu Ozdemir, a former official from the main opposition Republican People’s Party, and charged her with “insult and inciting hatred among the people” after she retweeted a video of a mosque in Izmir that had been hacked to play the Italian leftist revolutionary song “Bella Ciao” from its speakers. The prosecutor requested three years’ imprisonment and released Ozdemir. The court acquitted her in December.

On July 16, the opposition daily newspaper *Sozcu* reported police arrested Muhammed Cevdet S. in Istanbul for insult and inciting hatred among the people by sharing social media posts that included caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad. There were no further developments at the end of the year.

In January, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), police arrested and charged with membership in a terrorist organization a Syriac Orthodox priest, Father Sefer Bilecen (also known as Father Aho) and two other Syriacs, reportedly for offering bread and water in 2018 to members of the designated terrorist organization Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), who visited the 1,500-year-old Mor Yakub Monastery in Mardin Province. The next hearing was scheduled for January 2021.

The government continued to interpret the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which refers broadly to “non-Muslim minorities,” as granting special legal minority status exclusively to three recognized groups: Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians. The government did not recognize the leadership or administrative structures of non-Muslim minorities, such as the Armenian Apostolic Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, 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.

In January 2019, the ECtHR ruled the government had violated the European Convention on Human Rights, which provides for freedom of assembly and association, because it refused to allow Seventh-day Adventists to establish a foundation. The court ruling required the government to pay six members of the congregation in Istanbul a total compensation of 8,724 euros (\$10,700). Compensation could include legal assistance and legal and court registration fees; by year’s end there was no information available nor indication on whether the government had compensated the six individuals, and no disclosure of any government payments.

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

In June, the Istanbul Protestant Church Foundation issued a press statement saying it was “increasingly difficult for foreign Protestant clergy serving in Turkey to be resident.” According to the Protestant Church Association headquartered in Ankara, it did not attempt to register any church during the year. Both groups reported no progress on registration requests made in previous years.

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

In June 2019, a local court in Bursa approved an application by the Protestant community in Bursa to start a foundation. At year’s end, the government still had not responded to a request by the Protestant foundation to allow long-term use of a church renovated in 2018 using government funding. Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Turkish Protestant congregations continued to share the building, owned by the GDF for more than 10 years.

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

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

Sunnis. On January 13, the municipal council of Izmir granted seven Alevi *cemevis* the status of house of worship. On January 16, an Istanbul municipal council assembly approved the provision of free services to *cemevis* in line with other municipality and government treatment of other places of worship.

In November, a parliamentarian from the opposition Peoples’ Democratic Party addressed an inquiry to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, reporting that Alevi residents of Hardal village in Sivas Province opposed government plans to convert a historic mansion containing Alevi inscriptions and belonging to an Alevi association into a mosque. The ministry did not respond to the inquiry by year’s end.

The GDF continued its restoration of the Surp Giragos Armenian and Mar Petyun Chaldean Churches, both in Sur District, Diyarbakir. During the year, the government again did not pay restitution and compensation to the religious groups for the expropriation of property damaged in fighting with the PKK.

During the year, the government did not return properties seized in previous decades; it last returned 56 properties in 2018 to the Syriac community. Representatives from various communities said they continued to pursue property returns through the appropriate legal and government channels. 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 report these unresolved claims were an issue for their communities. Due to their legal status, recognized religious foundations were eligible to receive compensation for their seized properties, but religious institutions and communities without legally recognized foundations were not.

Religious communities, particularly Alevis, continued to raise concerns regarding several of the government’s education policies. At year’s end, the government continued not to comply with a 2013 ECtHR ruling that found the government’s compulsory religion courses in public schools violated educational freedom. The ECtHR denied the government’s appeal of the ruling in 2015 and upheld the Alevi community’s legal claim that the government-mandated courses promoted Sunni Islam and were contrary to Alevi religious convictions. Authorities added material on Alevism to the religious course curriculum in 2011 after the ECtHR decision, but Alevi groups stated the material was inadequate, and in some cases, incorrect. They also continued to call on the government to implement the ECtHR decisions.

Non-Sunni Muslims and nonpracticing Muslims said they continued to face difficulty obtaining exemptions from compulsory religious instruction in primary and secondary schools and often had to choose from electives dealing with different aspects of Sunni Islam, particularly if their identification cards listed their religion as Muslim. The government said the compulsory instruction covered a range of world religions, but some religious groups, including Alevis and members of Christian denominations, stated the courses largely reflected Hanafi Sunni Islamic doctrine and contained negative and incorrect information about other religious groups, such as some educational texts referring to Alevi beliefs as mysticism. In February 2019, the Konya Regional Administrative Court ruled the changes made in the compulsory religion course curriculum did not eliminate violations to educational freedom, as ruled by the ECtHR in 2013. In June 2019, the Istanbul 12th Regional Administrative Court accepted an Alevi parent’s appeal for his son’s exclusion from the compulsory religious course. The case was still pending at year’s end.

According to the Diyanet, it had 128,534 employees at year’s end, with women constituting 18 percent of its workforce. The Diyanet expanded its program launched in 2016 to assign Diyanet employees, including imams, to university dormitories operated by the government in every province. On September 9, the Diyanet appointed 922 additional employees to public university dormitories. The Diyanet stated the officials would provide “moral guidance” to address the “moral values” problems in the dorms and provide the Diyanet’s provincial muftis with performance reviews every six months.

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

The government continued to permit Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish religious community foundations to operate schools under the supervision of the Ministry of National Education. Children of undocumented Armenian migrants and Armenian refugees from Syria could also attend. Because the government continued to classify legal migrant and refugee children as “visitors,” they were ineligible to receive diplomas 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 a representative of the Syriac Orthodox community, the community continued to operate a preschool, but there were not enough older students to warrant creating a kindergarten-through-grade 12 school.

In February, media reported parents petitioned to stop the conversion of Ismail Tarman Middle School into an *imam hatip* school, a vocational religious school intended in principle to train government employed imams. The parents successfully argued that five imam hatip schools were available in their district and won four court decisions in their favor to prevent the conversion. The Ministry of National Education, however, did not adhere to the court decisions of two local administrative and two regional administrative courts, and the school continued to operate as an imam hatip school through year’s end. According to media, some parents of students criticized the practice of converting

some nonreligious public schools into imam hatip religious schools. The country’s 2020 investment program in the general budget included the government’s associated priorities, with 460 million lira (\$61.96 million) allocated for new imam hatip schools, compared with 30 million lira (\$4.04 million) for new science schools.

Many public buildings, including universities, continued to maintain small mosques. In 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.

Several Alevi foundations again requested the end of a continuing program that takes school children ages six to 13 to local mosques for religious instruction during their two-week winter break. The voluntary Ministry of National Education program begun in 2018 for 50,000 children drawn from each of the 81 provinces continued for a third year, with approximately 10,000 children participating during the year. Alevi representatives said they objected to the program because students not participating could be “singled out” for not participating and as being different from the other students.

On January 12, *BirGun*, a newspaper associated with the political opposition, reported the Ministry of Education started a pilot program introducing Islamic religious classes to preschool students in three provinces. According to media, these classes taught children to associate positive adjectives to images displaying adherence to Islamic tradition, such as women wearing the hijab, while negative adjectives were associated with uncovered women. The government responded that the examples cited were not comprehensive and not representative of the material.

According to media, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I in July again called on the government to allow the Halki Seminary to reopen as an independent institution to enable training of Greek Orthodox clergy in the country, stating the continued closure interrupted a tradition of instruction dating back centuries to the historical roots of the school as a monastery. A 1971 Constitutional Court ruling prohibited the operation of private institutions of higher education and led to the seminary’s closure. Amendments to the constitution in 1982 allowed for the establishment of private institutions of higher education but also placed significant restrictions on the institutions, and the seminary was not permitted to reopen and operate under its traditions and preferences.

In September, *Sozcu* reported that the Diyanet had acquired an historic tuberculosis hospital on the same island as the shuttered Halki Seminary with plans to open an Islamic educational center.

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

Multiple reports continued to state these Protestant communities could not train clergy in the country and therefore relied on foreign volunteers to serve them in leadership capacities. Local Protestant communities stated they aimed to develop indigenous Turkish leaders in their congregations because it was becoming increasingly difficult to rely on foreign volunteers; however, they faced difficulties because they could not operate training facilities in-country. Community sources also said some of the deportations and entry bans during the year targeted foreign-citizen members of the community who had lived legally as long-term residents in the country for decades and who previously had not experienced any immigration difficulties. On June 16, the Istanbul Protestant Church Foundation issued a press release stating, “It is with great sadness we must inform you that since 2019, it has been made increasingly difficult for foreign Protestant clergy serving in Turkey to be resident in our country.” According to community members, these immigration procedures also affected a local community’s ability to raise funds for local churches because foreign clergy members attracted individual donations and support from church communities in their countries of origin. Some individuals with entry bans or resident permit denials requested review of their immigration status through the country’s legal system. None of the cases reached conclusion by year’s end and could take several years to resolve due to the complexities of, and backlog in, the judicial system, according to media reports.

Monitoring organizations and media outlets, including Middle East Concern, International Christian Concern, World Watch Monitor, Mission Network News, and Voice of Martyrs, continued to report entry bans, denial of residency permit extensions, and deportations for long-time residents affiliated with Protestant churches in the country. In December 2019, the Ministry of Interior’s Directorate for Migration Management announced that as of January 1, the government would deny extension requests to long-term residents for tourist purposes in the absence of another reason to request a residency permit (i.e., marriage, work, study). Observers reported that through July, there were 54 pending immigration court cases, including residency permit denials and entry bans, of which 19 were new cases. Recipients of bans and denials most frequently cited security codes that denoted “activities against national security” and “work permit activities against national security.” Several religious minority ministers conducted religious services while resident in the country on long-term tourist residence permits. While similar measures occurred in previous years, multiple groups said they perceived a significant increase in the number of removals and entry bans during the year.

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

The government continued not to recognize Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I as the leader of the world’s approximately 300 million Orthodox Christians, consistent with the government’s stance that there was no legal obligation for it to do so. The government’s position remained that the Ecumenical Patriarch was only the religious leader of the country’s Greek Orthodox minority population. The government continued to permit only Turkish citizens to vote in the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s Holy Synod or be elected patriarch but continued its practice of granting citizenship to Greek Orthodox metropolitans under the terms of the government’s 2011 stopgap solution intended to widen the pool of candidates eligible to become the next patriarch. The Istanbul Governorate, which represents the central government in that city, continued to maintain that leaders of the Greek Orthodox (Ecumenical Patriarchate), Armenian Apostolic Orthodox, and Jewish communities must be Turkish citizens.

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

The government paid partial compensation to the Alevi Cem Foundation in Turkish lira, based on the 2017 euro exchange rate, amounting to 39,010 euros (\$47,900) after the ECtHR rejected the country’s appeal to reduce the 54,400-euro (\$66,700) compensation it was obligated to pay the Alevi Cem Foundation in February 2019. The Cem Foundation filed a court case to receive the remainder of compensation and interest. The case continued at year’s end. The Cem Foundation took the government to the ECtHR in 2010 for discrimination for not paying the electric bills of Alevi places of worship, a service provided for mosques. The government appealed for a fee reduction to 23,300 euros (\$28,600). In November 2018, the Supreme Court of Appeals ruled *cemevis* are places of worship and therefore should receive the same benefits as Sunni mosques, including being exempt from paying utility bills. Alevi organizations continued to call on the government to comply with the ruling.

The Diyanet regulated the operation of all registered mosques. It paid the salaries of 128,469 Sunni personnel at the end of the year, compared with 104,814 in 2019. The government did not pay the salaries of religious leaders, instructors, or other staff belonging to other religious groups.

On July 24, the government changed the status of Hagia Sophia, which had become a mosque in 1453 and then a museum in 1935, back again to a mosque, and the Ayasofya Mosque held its first Islamic prayer since 1935. In July, President Erdogan said, “Like all our mosques, its [Hagia Sophia’s] doors will be open to everyone – Muslim or non-Muslim. As the world’s common heritage, Hagia Sophia with its new status will keep on embracing everyone in a more sincere way.” Ibrahim Kalin, the presidential spokesperson, said the country would preserve the Christian icons in the building. In a televised address to the nation in July, President Erdogan said, “I underline that we will open Hagia Sophia to worship as a mosque by preserving its character of humanity’s common cultural heritage,” and he added, “It is Turkey’s sovereign right to decide for which purpose Hagia Sofia will be used.”

Following the government’s announced plan to reconvert Hagia Sophia to serve as a mosque, on June 30, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I stated, “The conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque will disappoint millions of Christians around the world,” and he called for Hagia Sophia to remain a museum. A June 25 *Washington Post* article cited the Ecumenical Patriarch as saying the intended reversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque left him “saddened and shaken.” On June 20, a group of Turkish Catholic bishops stated they “would like Hagia Sophia to remain a museum.” In a tweet on June 13, Armenian patriarch Sahak Masalyan endorsed the idea of restoring Hagia Sophia’s status as a place of worship, advocating that there also be a space for Christians to pray. After inaugural prayers on July 24, Hagia Sophia no longer required an entrance fee and remained accessible to all visitors.

On July 28, UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed and UN Special Rapporteur for Cultural Rights Karima Bennouna wrote a joint letter to President Erdogan expressing concern that “the transformation of the Hagia Sofia may set a precedent for the future change in status of other sites, which will have an overall negative impact on cultural rights and religious harmony,” and that the transformation of the Hagia Sophia from a museum to a mosque “may violate the right of people of diverse religions and backgrounds, and nonreligious people, to benefit from access to, and use of, the sites.” The letter also requested the government explain any measures it would take “to preserve the historical and cultural traces of religious minorities, to promote tolerance and understanding of religious and cultural diversity, including in the past, and to promote the equality of all persons, including members of religious minorities.”

After a 2018 Council of State ruling deferred to the Cabinet the decision to reopen Chora Museum as a mosque, the Office of the President announced on August 21 the museum would be reopened as a mosque on October 30. The opening was deferred and did not occur by the end of the year because of continuing restoration. The museum, famed for its mosaics and frescos depicting Christian imagery, was originally constructed and repeatedly renovated as the Greek Orthodox Church of the Holy Savior in the fifth century and then converted into the Kariye Mosque in 1511 before becoming a museum in 1945. According to the progovernment *Yeni Safak* media outlet, the Council of

State determined the 1945 decision to designate the structure as a museum was illegal because it violated the charter of the foundation that owned the then-mosque; the charter stated the building would serve indefinitely as a mosque. Many local Muslims stated they welcomed President Erdogan’s decision to reconvert the museum into a mosque.

The government continued to permit annual and other commemorative religious worship services at religiously significant Christian sites previously converted to state museums, such as St. Peter’s Church in Antakya, St. Nicholas’ Church near Demre, St. Paul Church near Isparta, Church of the Holy Cross on Akdamar Island, and the House of the Virgin Mary, near Selcuk. The government granted the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate permission to hold its annual August 15 service at the Sumela Monastery Museum near Trabzon for the first time since suspending services in 2015 for restoration.

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

The country continued to host a large diaspora community of ethnic Uyghur Chinese Muslims. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) continued to seek the forcible repatriation of some Uyghur Muslims from Turkey; however, local Uyghur community sources said they knew of no cases of deportations of Uyghurs to the PRC during the year. Government officials, including Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, reaffirmed their commitment not to return Uyghurs to China. On December 31, Foreign Minister Cavusoglu stated, “Until now, there have been requests for returns from China related to Uyghurs in Turkey. And you know Turkey hasn’t taken steps like this.”

Turkish human rights associations and multiple news sources reported on July 2 that Ankara police disbanded a demonstration organized by the Democratic Alevi Association in remembrance of the 1993 arson attack on Hotel Madimak in Sivas, which killed 33 Alevi intellectuals and two hotel staff. According to the Turkish Human Rights Association, police detained and later released seven demonstrators.

According to media reports, the governor’s office of Tunceli Province began to develop Munzur Springs, an Alevi place of worship in eastern Tunceli, as a recreational and commercial area. On September 22, excavation teams began construction on the site. “We consider this undertaking an attack on our places of worship and urge officials to revert this error,” said Dersim Research Center, an organization devoted to protecting the Munzur Springs, in an official statement. In July, authorities granted permission for hunting a limited number of mountain goats in eastern Tunceli despite public outcry against it. Endemic to the Munzur Valley National Park, mountain goats are considered sacred among local residents, according to representatives of the Dersim Center. According to media reports, in June 2019, the Ovacik District Governorate sent a letter to the *muhtars* (village leaders) of eight villages in the district ordering them to evacuate as soon as possible due to the villages “being in a natural disaster zone.” The district is home to many Alevis and their religious sites. According to media reports, the villages were scheduled for removal because the government had awarded a Canadian-Turkish mining consortium rights to conduct exploratory mining in Munzur National Park – a spiritual area for the Alevis containing many holy sites. The letter did not specify when the villages were to be evacuated; as of year’s end, there was no public update on the case.

The government continued to provide land for the construction of Sunni mosques and to fund their construction through municipalities. According to the Diyanet’s most recent published statistics, there were 89,259 mosques in the country in 2019, compared with 88,681 Diyanet-operated mosques in 2018. Although Alevi groups were able to build some new cemevis, the government continued to decline to provide financial support for their construction and maintenance, with some instances of municipalities providing this support.

Construction of the new Syriac Orthodox church, St. Ephrem (Mor Efrem), in Istanbul continued, with completion expected in 2021. Once completed, it will be the first newly constructed church since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923. To date, the approximately 18,000-member Syriac Orthodox community in Istanbul has used churches of other communities, in addition to its one current church, to hold services.

According to news reports, for the third year in a row, the annual Mass took place at the historic Armenian Akdamar Church near Van, in the east of the country, this time officiated by the newly elected Armenian patriarch. Authorities canceled annual services between 2015 and 2017, citing security concerns arising from clashes between the military and the PKK.

Government funding for daily and weekly newspapers published by minority religious communities remained pending at year’s end. In 2019, the government allocated a total of 250,000 lira (\$33,700) for minority publications.

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

In December, President Erdogan issued a statement wishing a Happy Hanukkah to the country’s Jewish citizens and “the entire Jewish community around the world.” He emphasized that everyone should be able to “practice their beliefs and traditions freely without any discrimination, regardless of their religion, language, or ethnic origin.” Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu met with the Chief Rabbi and other Jewish community leaders via video conference to wish them Happy Hanukkah.

In April and September, President Erdogan again sent messages to the Jewish community celebrating Passover and Rosh Hashanah. The messages described cultural and social diversity and the symbol of “a culture of love and tolerance” as the country’s most important asset.

Renovations continued on the Etz Hayim Synagogue in Izmir, scheduled to reopen in early 2021 as both a synagogue and a museum. According to Izmir Jewish community leaders, the synagogue would form part of a “Jewish Museum” project to include several other Jewish sites nearby, some of which still required reconstruction. The project received funding from the municipal government and through international grants.

Ankara University and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs co-organized a Holocaust Remembrance Day event at the public university on January 31, with the participation of local Jewish community leaders, diplomats, government officials, academics, and students. Minister of Culture and Tourism Mehmet Ersoy was the government’s keynote speaker. Joined by the university’s rector, government speakers highlighted the country’s history of helping Jews escape Nazi persecution and its status as a cosponsor of the 2005 UN resolution designating January 27 as International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Chief Rabbi of Turkey Ishak Haleva, other leaders of the Jewish community, and high school students took part in the event. In February, the government for the fifth consecutive year commemorated the nearly 800 Jewish refugees who died aboard the *Struma*, a ship that sank off the coast of Istanbul in 1942. The governor of Istanbul, Chief Rabbi Haleva, other members of the Jewish community, and members of the diplomatic community attended the commemoration.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to a press report, on March 20, the body of Simoni Diril, the mother of a Chaldean Catholic priest, was located two months after unidentified persons abducted Diril and her husband, Hurmuz Diril, who was still missing. Diril’s body was found near her village in southeastern Sirnak Province. According to CSW, the couple had received threats from Turkish and Kurdish residents. According to one witness, members of the PKK abducted the couple, while others said government-affiliated groups were responsible for the abduction. According to media reports, police continued to investigate the abductions, as well as the killing of Simoni Diril, through year’s end. In March, CSW Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas urged authorities to expedite efforts to secure Humuz Diril’s release, as well as “take extra measures to protect the Christian minority, and tackle hate speech, anti-Christina sentiments, and all forms of religious discrimination in Turkey.”

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

On August 15, progovernment news site *A Haber* released an editorial entitled, “Who is Joe Biden, is he a Jew?” The news site published the editorial in response to Biden’s December 2019 statements about the country in an interview published by *The New York Times*.

News outlet *An Haber Ajansi* reported that on June 18, an Istanbul prosecutor rejected a complaint of hate speech filed by the president of Arnavutkoy Alevi Cemevi, Yuksel Yildiz. Yildiz filed the complaint in 2018 after a middle school teacher from the public Arnavutkoy Cumhuriyet Middle School said food prepared by Alevis should not be eaten, and he continued to explain that if one has eaten from the hand of an Alevi, one should consult an imam. The accused religious studies teacher admitted making these statements, and the school dismissed him. The prosecutor, however, rejected the legal complaint because the teacher’s actions did not “present a clear and imminent threat to public safety.”

On September 28, independent news website *Duvar* reported that a car convoy staged a rally in support of Azerbaijan in front of the Armenian Apostolic Patriarchate, in Istanbul’s Kumkapi District. The convoy occurred after the outbreak of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan around Nagorno-Karabakh in September.

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

According to media reports, isolated acts of vandalism of places of worship and cemeteries continued, including a growing number of instances of vandalism of Christian cemeteries, while no instances were reported in 2019. In February, media outlets reported 20 of 72 gravestones in the Ortakoy Christian Cemetery in Ankara were destroyed. Another incident occurred in Trabzon, where a grave was destroyed in the cemetery of the Santa Maria Church. In May, security cameras caught an individual attempting to vandalize an Armenian church in Istanbul. Police detained the suspect, and authorities charged him with vandalism. According to a news report in June, unknown perpetrators vandalized a monument commemorating Alevis killed in 1938. In May, according to media reports, an unidentified man tore the cross from the gate of the Armenian Surp Krikor Lusaravic Church in Kuzguncuk District, Istanbul. Police reportedly opened an investigation of the incident.

Some news outlets published conspiracy theories involving Jews and blamed Jews for the country’s economic difficulties and the genesis and spread of COVID-19. In an article appearing in the Jewish publication *Avlaremoz* (Judeo-Spanish for “Let’s talk”), members of the Jewish community expressed concern

regarding the proliferation of pandemic conspiracies blaming Jews. In March, Nesi Altaras, an *Avlaremoz* editor, told the *Jerusalem Post*, “The pandemic has just fueled the fire of pre-existing Turkish antisemitism and conspiracy theories about Jews.”

Anti-Semitic rhetoric continued in print media and on social media throughout the year. According to a Hrant Dink Foundation project on hate speech released in December 2019, there were 430 published instances in 2019 of hate speech depicting Jews as violent, conspiratorial, and a threat to the country, compared with the 899 published instances in 2018. The foundation did not release a report for 2020. A reader’s letter published in the newspaper *Yeni Akit* stated Jewish residents in Istanbul trained street dogs to bite Muslims and repeated historic accusations of blood libel. Some commentators criticized the letter as ridiculous, and Mustafa Yeneroglu, a parliamentarian formerly with the ruling AKP party, denounced the content as “the language of the Nazis,” according to multiple media reports.

On March 18, *Ahval* reported that Fatih Erbakan, the head of the Renewed Prosperity Party, said on March 6, “While there is no hard proof, Zionism could very well be behind the coronavirus.” A video also circulated online showing bus passengers blaming the spread of COVID-19 on Jews and Israel.

On May 11, the self-described conservative magazine *Gerçek Hayat* published an editorial showing a diagram that listed the Turkish Chief Rabbi, the Ecumenical Patriarch, and the Armenian Apostolic Patriarch as “servants of the Fethullah Gulen organization,” considered a terrorist group by the government. The editors stated that key minority religious community leaders, including Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Chief Rabbi Haleva, the former Armenian Patriarch, and Pope John Paul II, were “coconspirators” of the “Fethullahist Terrorist Organization.” Several religious leaders condemned these statements, warning the statements could incite violence and the desecration of religious sites.

In September, progovernment daily newspaper *Sabah* published an opinion piece criticizing the U.S.-led Abraham Accords between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. The article included several anti-Semitic characterizations, including stating the deal was “masterminded by those who have omnipotent control across the globe.”

In February, the Pew Research Center published findings on attitudes towards democratic principles, such as regular elections, free speech, and free civil society, as well as religious freedom, in 34 countries, based on interviews it conducted in its *Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey*. According to the findings, 82 percent of Turkish respondents considered religious freedom to be “very important,” ranking it among the highest of their priorities for democratic principles among the nine tested.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

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

U.S. officials also reinforced religious freedom issues, including religious education, in private meetings with government officials. They sought government representatives’ responses to specific claims of religious freedom concerns raised by local religious communities and explored how best to collaborate between the governments of the two countries to protect and respect religious freedom.

On June 25, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom called on the government to maintain Hagia Sophia as a museum, stating on Twitter, “The Hagia Sophia holds enormous spiritual & cultural significance to billions of believers of different faiths around the world. We call on the Govt of #Turkey to maintain it as a @UNESCO World Heritage site & to maintain accessibility to all in its current status as a museum.” On July 1, the Department of State issued a press release stating it was “disappointed by the decision to change the status of the Hagia Sophia,” and looked forward “to hearing plans . . . it remains accessible without impediment for all.” On July 24, following a meeting of the President and Vice President with head of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America Archbishop Elpidophoros concerning the reconversion of Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque, the Vice President tweeted, “America will stand firm with the Greek Orthodox Church in the call for Hagia Sophia to remain accessible as a source of inspiration and reflection for every person of every faith.”

U.S. government officials urged the government to implement reforms aimed at lifting restrictions on religious groups and raised the issue of property restitution and restoration. Embassy staff continued to press for the restitution of church properties expropriated in Diyarbakir and Mardin.

The Secretary of State and other senior U.S. government officials continued to urge government officials to reopen the Greek Orthodox seminary in Halki and allow all religious communities to train clergy in the country. On July 30, the Ambassador and Istanbul Consul General visited Halki to demonstrate continued interest in the reopening of the seminary. In January, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom visited the Ecumenical Patriarchate and Halki.

On June 24, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom recognized Turkey for calling out the PRC for its repression of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang. Embassy officials at the highest level met with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials during the year to discuss the country’s continued support for Uyghurs in the face of Chinese pressure.

During a November trip to Istanbul, the Secretary of State met with religious leaders, including Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and Archbishop Paul Russell, the Holy See’s envoy to Turkey. He also visited St. George’s Cathedral and the Rustem Pasha Mosque.

On December 1 and 3, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom virtually convened international prominent faith leaders from Islam, Christianity, and Judaism for the second meeting of the Abrahamic Faiths Initiative focused on countering hate speech, protecting holy sites, and engaging the public. Representatives from the country’s religious community attended.

In August, the Ambassador traveled to the city of Edirne to visit Muslim and Jewish historic sites and to demonstrate the U.S. government’s commitment to religious freedom.

On January 31, the Ambassador attended a Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony at Ankara University with senior host government officials and the leadership of the country’s Jewish community.

Due to COVID-19 and subsequent country and mission restrictions, senior U.S. embassy and consulate general officials had limited physical engagement with religious community contacts and places of worship, but they regularly engaged virtually and to the extent possible in person with a wide range of religious community leaders to hear and address their concerns and promote interreligious dialogue. Officials from the embassy and consulates general engaged with members of the Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christian, Armenian Protestant, Armenian Catholic, Protestant, Alevi, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Roman Catholic, Chaldean Catholic, and Church of Jesus Christ religions, among others, throughout the country. The embassy and consulates general used Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to emphasize the importance of the inclusion of religious minorities, including messages under hashtags such as #DiniOzgurluk (religious freedom), on designated days that recognized and underscored the U.S. government commitment to religious freedom and human rights.

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