

U.S. Department of State
Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999:
Turkey

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TURKEY

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution establishes Turkey as a secular state and provides for freedom of belief, freedom of worship, and the private dissemination of religious ideas, and the Government generally observed these provisions in practice. However, it imposed some restrictions on religious minorities and on religious expression in government offices and state-run institutions, including universities.

The Government oversees religious facilities and education through its Directorate of Religious Affairs. Religious officials, including imams, are civil servants, and the operation of the country's more than 70,000 mosques is regulated by the Directorate of Religious Affairs. Religious minorities, established under the Lausanne Treaty in 1923, and their affiliated churches, monasteries, and religious schools are regulated by a separate government agency, the Office of Foundations (Vakiflar Genel Mudurlugu). The "Vakiflar," an institution dating back to the Ottoman Empire, must approve the operation of churches, monasteries, synagogues, schools, and charitable religious foundations, such as hospitals and orphanages.

About 99 percent of the population are Muslim, primarily Sunni. In addition to the country's Sunni majority, there are an estimated 12 million Alawis (an offshoot of Shi'a Islam), who freely practice their faith and build "Cem Houses" (Alawi places of worship).

Most religious minorities are concentrated in Istanbul. While exact population figures are not available, these include an estimated 50,000 Armenian Orthodox Christians, 25,000 Jews, and roughly 3,000 Greek Orthodox adherents. Additionally, there are an estimated 15,000 Syrian Orthodox (Syriac) Christians and a small, undetermined number of Chaldeans, Nestorians, and Maronite Christians. The number of Christians in the southeast has been declining as the younger generation, especially among Syriacs, leave the area to live in Istanbul, Europe, or North America.

During the period covered by this report (between January 1998 and June 30, 1999), the military and judiciary, with support from the country's secular elite, continued to wage a private and public campaign against Islamic fundamentalism, which they view as a threat to the secular republic. In accordance with the National Security Council's 1997 18-point program against fundamentalism, in June and July 1998 Parliament passed three pieces of legislation: an amendment to the law governing the Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet), which makes it responsible for the administration of all mosques; an amendment to the Law on Zoning Regulations, under which the Directorate must autho-

size construction of new mosques; and an amendment to the Law on Assembly and Public Gatherings, which forbids the wearing of uniforms and masks by demonstrators. The campaign against Islamists broadened in 1998 to include some devout politicians in mainstream conservative parties and religiously observant Muslim businessmen. In June 1999, the National Security Council urged the new Government to offer no concessions in the fight against the perceived threat of radical Islam.

Prominent Islamist political leaders, including former Istanbul mayor Recep Tayyip Erdogan, have been sentenced to jail for threatening the unity of the State and banned from politics. Erdogan's 10-month sentence was upheld in September 1998, and he was jailed from March to July 1999.

Some Alawis allege discrimination in the form of failure to include any Alawi doctrines or beliefs in religious instruction classes. Alawis charge a Sunni bias in the Religious Affairs Directorate and claim that the Directorate tends to view the Alawis as a cultural rather than a religious group. However, some Sunni Islamic political activists charge that the secular State favors and is under the influence of the Alawis. In May 1998, President Suleyman Demirel attended the opening ceremonies of a major Cem House in Ankara. The Government periodically allocates funds to the Alawi community as well as funding Sunni activities. However, there are no government-salaried Alawi religious leaders, in contrast to Sunni religious leaders. Nonetheless, in December 1997 the Government allocated \$15 million (TL 3 trillion) to the Alawi community.

Tarikats (Sufi religious orders) and other mystical Sunni Islamic, quasi-religious, and social orders were banned in the 1920's but largely were tolerated until recently. However, in 1997 the National Security Council, a half-military, half-civilian body entrusted in part with responsibility "for protecting the state against any foreign or domestic threat to its interests," called for strict enforcement of the ban against Tarikats as part of its campaign against Islamic fundamentalism. Some Tarikats faced legal action in previous years for their vocal public demonstrations. However, despite the expressions of concern by official bodies such as the National Security Council, prominent political and social leaders are associated with Tarikats.

Under the law, religious services may take place only in designated places of worship. Non-Muslim religious services often take place in nondesignated places of worship. The Roman Catholic Church in Ankara, for example, is confined to diplomatic property but has not sought property to construct a church recently.

Minority religions not recognized under the Lausanne Treaty may not acquire additional property for churches (beyond those predating the establishment of modern Turkey). However, in September 1998, the International Protestant Church opened a new facility in Ankara. Religions recognized under the Lausanne Treaty can obtain more property if there is a community need, but if they cannot maintain existing property, it may revert to the Office of Foundations. Government authorities do not interfere on matters of doctrine pertaining to minority religions, nor do they restrict the publication or use of religious literature. While the Government does not recognize the ecumenical nature of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, it acknowledges him as head of the Turkish Greek Orthodox community and does not interfere with his travels or other ecumenical activities.

Bureaucratic procedures and considerations relating to historic preservation at times have impeded repairs to religious facilities. Restoration or construction may be carried out in buildings and monu-

ments considered to be "ancient" only with authorization of the Regional Board on the Protection of Cultural and National Wealth. In October 1997, individuals associated with the Armenian Orthodox Church were granted permission to restore an existing church in the Diyarbakir region. The project is contingent on securing financial assistance for the restoration.

In February 1998, the Syriac Christian community and government officials reached an understanding that the Syriacs could resume renovation of the Dayrul Umur monastery in Midyat in compliance with government standards for preservation of historical sites. Authorities had halted the renovation in 1997. In April 1999, the Syriac Christians received written government approval of their technical plans for the renovation, and renovation started subsequently and is well under way.

Under the law, religious buildings that become "extinct" (because of prolonged absence of clergy or lay persons to staff local religious councils or for lack of adherents) revert to government possession. Some non-Muslim minorities, particularly the Greek Orthodox community and, to a lesser extent, the Jewish community, the Armenian Orthodox community, and the shrinking Syriac Christian community have lost the use of houses of worship and other facilities. If such minorities can demonstrate a renewed community need, they may apply legally to recover such properties.

The Syriac Christians also were ordered to terminate their Aramaic language classes in October 1997 on the grounds that they lacked proper authorization from the Education Ministry. Subsequently, the classes were permitted to resume.

The authorities monitor the activities of Eastern Orthodox Churches and their affiliated operations. The Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul consistently has expressed interest in reopening the seminary on the Island on Halki in the Sea of Marmara. The seminary has been closed since 1971 when the State nationalized most private institutions of higher learning. Under current restrictions, including a citizenship requirement, religious communities remain unable to train new clergy for eventual leadership. Coreligionists from outside the country have been permitted to assume leadership positions. Following the death of the Armenian Patriarch, Karekin II, in March 1998, regional authorities and Istanbul police officials responsible for "minorities" delayed and unsuccessfully sought to influence the outcome of the elections for a new Patriarch. The Armenian community elected a new Patriarch in November 1998.

There are no known estimates on the number and religious affiliation of foreign missionaries in the country. Many prosecutors regard proselytizing and religious activism on the part of evangelical Christians, and particularly Islamists, with suspicion, especially when such activities are deemed to have political overtones. There is no law that explicitly prohibits proselytizing or religious conversions; however, police sometimes arrest proselytizers for disturbing the peace. Courts usually dismiss such charges. If the proselytizers are foreigners, they may be deported, but generally they are able to reenter the country easily.

Although the country is secular, religious and moral instruction in state primary and secondary schools is compulsory for Muslims. Upon written verification of their non-Muslim background, minorities considered by the Government to be covered by the 1923 Lausanne Treaty (Greek, Armenian, and Jewish) are exempted by law from Muslim religious instruction. Syriac Christians, whom the

Government does not consider to be an official Lausanne Treaty minority, are not exempted. Non-Muslim students who wish to attend such courses may do so with parental consent.

In accordance with a 1997 law, which made 8 years of secular education compulsory, new enrollments in the first 8 years of the Islamic imam-Hatip schools (in existence since 1950) were stopped, although children already in those classes were allowed to finish their grades. The imam-Hatip schools were very popular among conservative and Islamist Turks as an alternative to secular public education. Under the law, students may pursue study at imam-Hatip high schools upon completion of 8 years in the secular public schools. Christian religious minorities hold their own classes, as well. There are no restrictions on private religious classes outside of school hours. Students who complete 5 years of primary school may enroll in Koran classes on weekends and summer vacations.

Several human rights monitors and members of the Islamist Virtue Party (Fazilet) complained that the Government increasingly enforced a 50-year-old ban on the wearing of religious head garments in government offices and other state-run facilities. According to these groups, some women who wear head coverings have lost their jobs in the public sector as nurses and teachers. Others were not allowed to register for fall 1998 semester classes at universities, and 47 professors and university administrators were dismissed for wearing or supporting the wearing of head garments. The military regularly dismisses from the service individuals whose official files reflect participation in Islamist fundamentalist activities. The European Court of Human Rights upheld one such dismissal in 1998; other cases are pending.

In October 1998, approximately 140,000 persons protested the ban on wearing headscarves in universities by linking hands to form a human chain in more than 25 provinces and several townships countrywide. Interior Minister Kutlu Aktas said that 267 protesters had been detained. A May 1999 demonstration protesting Inonu University's ban on headscarves drew thousands of protesters and turned violent, resulting in more than 200 arrests; several police officers were injured.

In June 1999, 75 defendants went on trial in Malatya State Security Court for protesting Inonu University's ban on headscarves: 51 defendants, including 4 women, faced the death penalty on charges of attempting to change the constitutional order by force; 54 of the 75 defendants, including some who face the death penalty, are free pending the outcome of the trial, which is set to resume in late July. The charges stem from the riots in May 1999.

The case of Merve Kavakci, a newly elected Member of Parliament (M.P.) from the Fazilet (Virtue) Party who sought unsuccessfully to be sworn in to Parliament on May 2, 1999 wearing an Islamist-style headscarf, highlighted the ongoing dispute over the ban on religious-style clothing in official settings. Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, President Demirel, and the National Security Council criticized her actions as a challenge to the secular State. The mainstream press was also critical, but Islamist-oriented media defended her actions. The personal controversy over Kavakci's right to wear a headscarf in Parliament ceased to be an issue after Kavakci was stripped of Turkish citizenship in an administrative decision that held that she had violated the country's citizenship law; she subsequently lost her parliamentary privileges, although not her elective office since Parliament has not voted to remove her. The case remains open to legal review and the general issue of headscarves in Parliament remains unresolved.

In January 1998, the Constitutional Court closed the Islamist Refah (Welfare) Party for violation of the secular nature of the Republic (Articles 68 and 69 of the Constitution and the Political Parties Law) and banned six of its leaders from politics for 5 years. In May 1999, the Government filed an indictment seeking closure of the Islamist Fazilet Party for promoting antiseccular activity and for representing the ideologies of the banned Refah Party. The indictment also calls for banning Fazilet's leaders from politics for 5 years and stripping its 110 M.P.'s of their seats in Parliament. The case is pending before the Constitutional Court.

Although religious affiliation is listed on national identity cards, there is no official discrimination.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of persons who were detained or imprisoned solely for their religious beliefs.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Jews and numerous Christian denominations freely practice their religions and report little discrimination in daily life. However, extremist groups or individuals target minority communities from time to time.

There are no legal prohibitions against religious conversion. Nonetheless, individuals contemplating conversion often face family and community pressures, and proselytizing remains socially unacceptable. Some members of religious minorities claim they have limited career prospects in government or military service as a result of their religious affiliation.

In 1998 there was one reported attack on Greek Orthodox properties in Istanbul, a city with 10 million residents. In January 1998, there was an arson attack on the Orthodox shrine, now a museum, at Saint Therapon. The custodian was killed and artifacts were stolen. Police protection increased after the 1998 attack, and investigations were conducted, but the perpetrators have not yet been arrested or charged. There also have not yet been any arrests in the December 1997 bombing of the Orthodox Patriarchate in Istanbul. Many religious minority members, along with many in the secular political majority of Muslims, fear the possibility of rising Islamic extremism and the involvement of even moderate Islam in politics. Islamist journals frequently publish anti-Semitic material.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

Supporting respect for religious freedom is an integral part of the U.S. Embassy's activities. Embassy officials, including staff of the U.S. Consulate General in Istanbul and the U.S. Consulate in Adana, enjoy close relations with the Ecumenical Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, the Armenian Orthodox Patriarchate, and other religious minorities. Embassy officers also remain in close contact with local nongovernmental organizations that monitor freedom of religion.

Additionally, embassy and consulate staff members monitor and report on incidents of detention and deportation of foreigners found proselytizing.

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