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2009 Report on International Religious Freedom - Turkey

[Covers the period from July 1, 2008, to June 30, 2009]

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion; however, constitutional provisions regarding the integrity and existence of the secular state restrict these rights.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period. The Government continued to impose limitations on Islamic and other religious groups and significant restrictions on Islamic religious expression in government offices and state-run institutions, including universities, for the stated reason of preserving the "secular state." Authorities continued their broad ban on wearing Islamic religious headscarves in government offices as well as public schools. The Government also continued to oppose "Islamic extremism." Religious minorities said they were effectively blocked from careers in state institutions because of their faith. Minority religious groups also faced difficulties in worshipping, registering with the Government, and training their followers. Although religious speech and persuasion is legal, some Muslims, Christians, and Baha'is faced some restrictions and occasional harassment for alleged proselytizing.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Threats against non-Muslims created an atmosphere of pressure and diminished freedom for some non-Muslim communities. Many Christians, Baha'is, and heterodox Muslims faced societal suspicion and mistrust, and some elements of society continued to express anti-Semitic sentiments. Additionally, persons wishing to convert from Islam sometimes experienced social harassment and violence from relatives and neighbors.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government and state institutions as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. During the reporting period, embassy and consulate representatives met frequently with government officials and representatives of religious groups to discuss matters related to religious freedom, including legal reform aimed at lifting restrictions on religious minorities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 301,383 square miles and a population of 70.5 million. According to the Government, 99 percent of the population is Muslim, the majority of which is Hanafi Sunni. According to the human rights nongovernmental organization Mazlum-Der and representatives of various religious minority communities, the actual percentage of Muslims is slightly lower.

In addition to the Sunni Muslim majority, academics estimate that there are between 10 million and 20 million Alevi, followers of a belief system that incorporates aspects of both Shi'a and Sunni Islam and draws on the traditions of other religious groups indigenous to Anatolia. The Government considers Alevism a heterodox Muslim sect; some Alevi and Sunni maintain that Alevi are not Muslims.

There are several other religious groups, mostly concentrated in Istanbul and other large cities. While exact membership figures are not available, these religious groups include approximately 500,000 Shi'a Caferi, 65,000 Armenian Orthodox Christians, 23,000 Jews, 15,000 Syrian Orthodox (Syriac) Christians, 10,000 Baha'is, 5,000 Yezidis, 3,300 Jehovah's Witnesses, 3,000 members of various other Protestant sects, and up to 3,000 Greek Orthodox Christians. There are also small, undetermined numbers of Bulgarian, Nestorian, Georgian, Roman Catholic, and Maronite Christians. Among these minority religious communities are a significant number of Iraqi refugees, including 3,000 Chaldean Christians.

The number of Syriac Christians in the southeast was higher before 1990; however, under pressure from government authorities and later under the impact of the war against the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), many Syriacs migrated to Istanbul, western and northern Europe, or North and South America. Over the last several years, small numbers of Syriacs returned from overseas to the southeast, mostly from Europe. In most cases, older family members returned while younger ones remained abroad.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion; however, constitutional provisions regarding the integrity and existence of the secular state restrict these rights. The 1982 Constitution establishes the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of belief, worship, and the private dissemination of religious ideas. The Constitution prohibits discrimination on religious grounds.

Core institutions of the state, including the presidency, armed forces, judiciary, and state bureaucracy, have played the role, implied in the Constitution, of defending the country's tradition of secularism throughout the history of the republic. In some cases, elements of the state have opposed activities of the elected government on grounds that they threatened the secular state (see Restrictions).

Article 219 of the Penal Code prohibits imams, priests, rabbis, or other religious leaders from "reproaching or vilifying" the Government or the laws of the state while performing their duties. Violations are punishable by prison terms of one month to one year, or three months to two years if the crime involves inciting others to disobey the law.

There are legal restrictions against insulting a government-recognized religion, interfering with such a religious group's services, or defacing its property.

The Government observes the religious holidays/periods of Ramazan Bayram and Kurban Bayram as national holidays.

The Government does not recognize conscientious objection to military service, and those who oppose military service on religious grounds face charges in civil court and prison time.

Registration with the government is not mandatory for religious groups; however, unregistered religious groups have no legal standing and can face greater harassment. Any organization, including a religious group, has the opportunity to register as an association or a foundation but not on religious grounds.

While both foundations and associations receive equal protection by law, associations must be nonprofit by definition and can receive money only in the form of donations. A foundation has greater fiscal freedom and can earn income through companies to support the foundation. However, the process for becoming a foundation is substantially lengthier and more expensive. Parliament determines on an annual basis the minimum capital requirement for creating a foundation; in 2009 the minimum was set at approximately \$33,300 (50,000 lira).

There are several official categories of foundations, including minority community foundations, education foundations, and aid foundations. Since 1936, religious groups cannot register as minority community foundations and gain the legal rights held by such foundations. There are 161 religious community foundations that existed during the Ottoman Empire that were grandfathered into the foundation system. New religious groups can apply to register as a "new foundation" (aid or education, for example). To begin the process, applicants must pay a sum, determined by the General Directorate of Foundations (GDF), correspondent to the extent of the foundation's charter. Applicants cannot limit the focus of their activities to one community, e.g., Christians. Religious community foundations are the only religious groups that can own real estate. A foundation of any category can be closed only by a court judgment, which provides some protection for religious community groups who are registered in this way. The foundations law also requires that a Turkish citizen be the administrative leader of any foundation.

For religious communities, becoming an association can take as few as three months with no capital requirement. A group must submit a registration application to the provincial governor's office to become an association and can immediately begin operating while waiting for confirmation from the association decision committee of the governor's office that its bylaws are constitutional. However, an association can also be closed by the provincial governor's office and has fewer legal protections on the local level. Associations are bound by the Civil Code to not discriminate on the grounds of religion, ethnicity, or race. As a result, associations focused on support for one religious group are not permitted.

The GDF regulates activities of all religious groups and their affiliated property. The GDF recognizes 161 "minority community foundations," including Greek Orthodox foundations with approximately 74 sites, Armenian Orthodox foundations with an estimated 48 sites, and Jewish foundations with 12 sites, as well as Syriac Christian, Chaldean, Bulgarian Orthodox, Georgian, and Maronite foundations. The GDF also regulates all charitable religious foundations, both Muslim and non-Muslim. The GDF assesses whether the foundations are operating within the stated objectives of their organizational statute.

In addition, the Government oversees Muslim religious facilities and courses through the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), which is under the authority of the Prime Ministry. The Diyanet is responsible for regulating the operation of the more than 77,500 registered mosques and employing local and provincial imams, who are civil servants.

The Constitution establishes compulsory religious and moral instruction in public primary and secondary schools, with content determined by the Minister of National Education's Department of Religious Instruction. Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish religious groups may operate schools under the supervision of the Education Ministry. The curriculums of these schools include information unique to the cultures of the three groups. The Ministry reportedly verifies if the child's father or mother is from that minority community before the child may enroll. Other non-Muslim minorities do not have schools of their own.

Article 24 of the Constitution provides that no one shall be compelled to reveal his or her religious beliefs. Although religious affiliation is listed on national identity cards, citizens can choose not to include a religion on their identity cards.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period. The Government continued to impose limitations on Muslim and other religious groups and significant restrictions on individuals' Muslim religious expression in government offices and state-run institutions, including universities, for the stated reason of preserving the "secular state."

On July 30, 2008, in a suit brought against the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) by the Chief Prosecutor in March 2008, the Constitutional Court found the AKP guilty of serving as a center for antisecularist activities in violation of the Constitution. Six judges voted to ban the party; however, the Constitution requires that at least seven judges vote in favor of banning for a party to be closed. The 11-member court instead agreed to halve the party's state funding.

Some members of the military, judiciary, and other branches of the bureaucracy continued to wage campaigns against what they label as Islamic fundamentalism. These groups view religious fundamentalism as a threat to the secular state. The National Security Council and Turkish General Staff categorize religious fundamentalism as a threat to public safety. According to Turkish human rights organization Mazlum-Der and other groups, a few government ministries dismissed or barred from promotion civil servants suspected of antistate or Islamist activities. Reports by Mazlum-Der, the media, and others indicated that the military periodically dismissed religiously observant Muslims from military service. Such dismissals were based on behavior that military officials believed identified these individuals as Islamic fundamentalists, which officials believed could indicate disloyalty to the secular state. There also were reports of non-Muslim religious leaders being identified and portrayed as threats to national security during military training.

According to Mazlum-Der, the military charged soldiers with lack of discipline for activities that included performing Islamic prayers or being married to women who wore headscarves. According to the military, officers and noncommissioned officers were dismissed periodically for ignoring repeated warnings from superior officers and for maintaining ties to what the military considered Islamic fundamentalist organizations. In August 2008 the Government reported no military dismissals, while in its December 2008 session it issued 24 dismissals, five of which pertained to alleged Islamic fundamentalism.

Mystical Sufi and other religious-social orders (tarikats) and lodges (cemaats), banned officially since the mid-1920s, remained active and widespread. Some prominent political and social leaders continued to associate with tarikats, cemaats, and other Islamic organizations.

Three applications on the issue of conscientious objection were pending with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) at the end of the reporting period.

The Government interprets the 1923 Lausanne Treaty as granting special legal minority status exclusively to three recognized groups – Armenian Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians – although the treaty text refers broadly to "non-Muslim minorities" without listing specific groups. This recognition does not extend to the religious leadership organs. The Armenian and Ecumenical Greek Orthodox Patriarchates continued to seek legal recognition of their status as patriarchates rather than foundations, the absence of which prevents them from having the right to own and transfer property. Additionally, because the Government requires all places of learning to be under the control of the Education Ministry, the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox chose not to train their ministry in the country.

In 1974 the High Court of Appeals ruled that minority foundations had no right to acquire properties beyond those listed in their 1936 declarations, and the state seized control of properties acquired after 1936. An amended foundations law governing religious minority property rights, which became effective in February 2008, facilitates the return of minority foundation properties expropriated as a result of the 1974 ruling; however,

the law does not account for properties that have been sold to third parties or to those expropriated when the associated foundations have been taken under government control, which, due to the Greek community's small population, applies to the majority of expropriated Greek Orthodox properties. The law also does not rescind the authority of the GDF to expropriate property. Officials claimed that the amended foundations law should make it easier for non-Muslim communities to manage and establish new foundations. The opposition Republican People's Party's March 2008 appeal of nine articles of the law had not been taken up by the Constitutional Court by the end of the reporting period.

The amended law allows the 161 religious minority foundations recognized by the GDF to acquire property, but it does not allow the communities to reclaim the hundreds of properties affiliated with foundations expropriated by the state over the years. The GDF reported that after the foundations law went into effect in February 2008, based on provisional Article 7, a total of 18 foundations applied to register 152 pieces of real estate by May 2009. The application window was to remain open until August 2009.

Non-Muslim minorities complained that the implementing regulations of the foundations law has led to interference in the elections of foundation boards, the treatment of charitable community foundations as business corporations for tax purposes, the freezing of revenue from real estate transactions, and a ban on transferring surplus income from one foundation to another. Groups are disallowed from using funds from foundation properties in one part of the country to support foundations in other areas. However, according to the amended law, religious community foundations can receive financial grants from individuals and institutions domestically or internationally and can provide such grants to similar foundations and associations either in or outside the country.

In February 2009 the ECHR ruled in a case filed in 2008 that a Protestant church in Izmir had the right to legal status as an association; the Government complied with the ruling. Another case filed at the same time by a member of the Protestant group Alliance of Turkey, involving a complaint regarding the zoning of property as a place of worship, was pending at the end of the reporting period.

In September 2008 Yeni Dogus Church in Manisa was ordered by the governorship to halt its allegedly illegal activities. The group subsequently registered as an association and was not closed by the governorship.

Religious minorities reported difficulties opening, maintaining, and operating houses of worship. Under the law, religious services may take place only in designated places of worship. Municipal codes mandate that only the Government can designate a place of worship, and if a religion has no legal standing in the country, it may not be eligible for a designated site. Non-Muslim religious services, especially for religious groups that did not own property recognized by the GDF, often took place on diplomatic property or in private apartments.

In early 2009 court decisions based on zoning laws against the use of two Jehovah's Witnesses places of worship (kingdom halls) were rescinded in the appeals process. Two other kingdom halls continued to appeal court decisions restricting worship due to zoning laws.

Alevis freely practiced their beliefs and built "cem" houses (places of gathering), although these have no legal status as places of worship and are often referred to as "cultural centers." Representatives of Alevi organizations maintained that they often faced obstacles when attempting to establish cem houses. They said there were approximately one hundred cem houses in the country, a number that they claimed was insufficient to meet their needs. Alevis also charged there was bias in the Diyanet, which did not allocate specific funds for Alevi activities or religious leadership. In effect, the Diyanet budget is reserved for the Sunni community, covering the salaries of imams and other costs. The Government does not pay for the cost of utilities of cem houses or facilities not recognized by the Government as places of worship. However,

two municipalities ruled that Alevi cem houses are considered places of worship, a legal classification that requires the local government to pay their utilities. On September 3, 2008, the Kusadasi municipal assembly voted unanimously to consider a cem house as a place of worship. In October 2008 the Tunceli municipal assembly voted unanimously to provide this status to cem houses in the province. Both assemblies included members from major parties, who voted also to cover the utilities of the cem houses, as the Diyanet does for mosques, as part of efforts to improve relations with the Alevi community.

Authorities continued to monitor the activities of Eastern Orthodox churches but generally did not interfere with their religious activities; however, significant restrictions were placed on the administration of the churches. The Government does not recognize the ecumenical status of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, acknowledging him only as the head of the country's Greek Orthodox community. Government officials privately acknowledged that the 1923 Lausanne Treaty does not address the issue of the Patriarch's status, and in a January 2008 speech to Parliament, Prime Minister Erdogan reportedly stated that "ecumenicity" was for the Church to address and not an issue in which the state should interfere.

The Caferis, the country's principal Shi'a community of Azeri-Iranian origin and concentrated mostly in the east and in Istanbul, did not face restrictions on their religious freedoms. They could build and operate their own mosques and appoint their own imams, but as with the Alevis, their places of worship had no legal status and received no financial support from the Diyanet.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul continued to seek to reopen the Halki seminary on the island of Heybeli in the Sea of Marmara. The seminary was closed in 1971 after the Patriarchate, to avoid the seminary being administered by the state, chose not to comply with a state requirement to nationalize.

The state provides training for Sunni Islamic clergy; religious communities outside the Sunni Islamic mainstream cannot legally train new clergy in the country for eventual leadership. Coreligionists from outside the country were permitted to assume leadership positions in some cases, but in general all religious community leaders, including patriarchs and chief rabbis, must be citizens.

The law makes eight years of secular education compulsory, after which students may pursue study at imam hatip (Islamic preacher) high schools, which cover both the standard high school curriculum and Islamic theology and practice. Imam hatip schools are classified as vocational, and graduates of vocational schools face an automatic reduction in their university entrance exam scores if they apply for university programs outside their field of high school specialization. This reduction effectively bars most imam hatip graduates from enrolling in university programs other than theology. Many pious citizens criticized the religious instruction provided in the regular schools as inadequate. Most families who enrolled their children in imam hatip schools did so to expose them to more extensive religious education rather than to train them as imams.

Religious minorities are exempted legally from compulsory religious and moral instruction in primary and secondary schools. The Government claimed that the compulsory instruction covers the range of world religions, but religious minorities asserted that the courses reflect Hanafi Sunni Islamic doctrine and that antimissionary rhetoric remained in compulsory school textbooks. A few religious minorities, such as Protestants and Syriac Orthodox, faced difficulty obtaining exemptions, particularly if their identification cards did not list a religion other than Islam.

Alevi children receive the same compulsory religious education as all Muslims, and many Alevis alleged discrimination in the Government's failure to include any of their doctrines or beliefs in religious instruction classes in public schools. During the reporting period, Alevis had nearly 20 court cases against the Ministry of Education regarding alleged discrimination. Materials for the proposed new religious course curriculum that includes instruction on Alevism were believed by many Alevis to be inadequate and, in

some cases, false.

Only the Diyanet is authorized to provide religion courses outside of school, although clandestine private courses existed. Students who complete the first five years of primary school and are more than 12 years old may enroll in Diyanet Qur'an classes on weekends and during summer vacation, although many other Qur'an courses functioned unofficially. Mazlum-Der reported that law enforcement authorities often raided illegal courses for younger children.

The Government long has maintained that only Turkish citizens can be members of the Greek Orthodox Church's Holy Synod and participate in patriarchal elections, despite the Ecumenical Patriarch's appeal to allow non-Turkish prelates. Members of the Greek Orthodox community claimed that the legal restrictions particularly threatened the survival of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul, because with no more than 3,000 Greek Orthodox remaining in the country, the community was becoming too small to provide enough citizen prelate candidates to maintain the institution. The Government, however, did not formally respond to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I's 2004 appointment of six noncitizen metropolitans to the Holy Synod, representing the first appointment of noncitizens to the body in the 80-year history of the country.

Religious groups generally faced administrative challenges when employing foreign religious personnel, as did other entities when employing foreign personnel. These administrative challenges, plus restrictions on training religious leaders and difficulties obtaining visas, have led to decreases in the number of recognized Christian communities. In December 2008, however, the Government provided year-long work permits to non-Turkish clerics working at the Ecumenical Greek Patriarchate. Noncitizen clerics had previously used tourist visas, requiring them to depart the country every three months.

During the Malatya trial hearings (see Section III), retired general Veli Kucuk testified that Christian missionary and Islamic extremist activities were treated the same by state institutions, and Jandarma intelligence official Erkan Yilmaz confirmed that the Jandarma equates missionary activities with terrorism.

No law explicitly prohibits religious speech or religious conversions; nevertheless, many prosecutors and police regarded religious speech and religious activism with suspicion. Christians engaged in religious advocacy were occasionally threatened or pressured by government and state officials. If the advocates were foreigners, they were at times deported, but generally they were able to reenter the country. In April 2009 at least two foreign Christian families in Izmit volunteering with a church reportedly left the country under pressure from the Ministry of Interior for not obtaining the "proper permits." Police officers occasionally reported students who met with Christian missionaries to their families or to university authorities.

Authorities continued to enforce the long-standing ban on the wearing of headscarves by civil servants in public buildings and by students in universities. Women who wear headscarves and persons who actively show support for those who defy the ban have been disciplined or have lost their jobs in the public sector as nurses and teachers. At the same time, there were unconfirmed reports that employees in governmental ministries faced discrimination because they were not considered by their supervisors to be sufficiently observant of Islamic religious practices.

A few religious groups, such as the Baha'i, were unable to state their religious affiliation on their national identity cards because their religion was not included among the options. Despite a 2006 regulation allowing persons to leave the religion section of their identity cards blank or change the religious designation by written application, the Government continued to restrict applicants' choice of religion. Applicants must choose Muslim, Greek Orthodox, Christian, Jew, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, Religionless, Other, or Unknown as their religious affiliation.

There were reports that local officials harassed persons who converted from Islam to

another religion when they sought to amend their cards. Some non-Muslims maintained that listing religious affiliation on the cards exposed them to discrimination and harassment.

Restoration or construction may be carried out on buildings and monuments considered "ancient" only with authorization of the regional board on the protection of cultural and national wealth. Bureaucratic procedures and considerations relating to historic preservation in the past impeded repairs to religious facilities, especially in the case of Syriac and Armenian Orthodox properties.

In August 2008 three muhtars (the lowest level of nonpartisan elected official with limited authority) in Midyat filed a criminal complaint with a local prosecutor against the Syriac Mor Gabriel Monastery, alleging it illegally appropriated territory by building a wall. On May 22, 2009, a local court ruled in favor of the monastery regarding the claims of three local villages. The Department of Forestry and Department of Treasury filed separate cases, accusing the monastery of occupying government-owned forest land and Treasury Department land. Official photographs from the 1950s documented the provincial administrative board's approval of the monastery's borders. The monastery does not have legal status and is represented by a foundation established during the Ottoman Empire. The five local court cases related to forest lands and Treasury Department lands continued at the end of the reporting period.

On July 8, 2008, the ECHR ruled that the country had violated the Ecumenical Patriarchate's property rights to a former orphanage on Buyukada Island. The ECHR process for determining whether the Patriarchate would receive monetary compensation or the return of the land continued at the end of the reporting period.

Minority religious groups, particularly the Greek and Armenian Orthodox communities, lost numerous properties to the state in the past and continued to fight ongoing efforts by the state to expropriate properties. In many cases the Government had taken control of minority foundations and expropriated associated properties on the grounds that the foundations were not operating in accordance with their charters or that the non-Muslim communities they supported had insufficient populations to sustain the foundations. Such expropriations were frequently appealed to the Danistay (Council of State) and, if unsuccessful there, to the ECHR. Many religious minorities experienced problems operating places of worship due to laws governing foundations.

On December 16, 2008, the ECHR issued judgments against the Government for violating the property rights of two Armenian foundations – the Samatya Surp Kevork Armenian Church, School, and Cemetery Foundation and the Yedikule Surp Pirgic Armenian Hospital Foundation – in cases pertaining to properties they formerly owned.

The Buyukada Court of First Instance was reviewing the Greek Orthodox Church's complaint that in November 2007 Ministry of Environment and Forestry officials damaged a building on the compound of a Greek Orthodox church on Heybeli Island while it was being restored. The Church faced a separate case brought by the Ministry for conducting restoration without written permission; the case continued at the end of the reporting period.

Syriac residents of Bardakci village who fled in the mid-1980s found upon their return after 2005 that one of the village's two Syriac churches had been converted into a mosque without the Syriac community having been consulted. By mid-2009 construction of a new mosque was underway, and local government authorities assured Syriac leaders that as soon as the new mosque was completed, the converted church would be returned to the Syriac community as a place of worship. Some returning Syriacs claimed that government authorities reclassified properties while the Syriacs were out of the country in ways that caused them to lose some of their land.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On December 12, 2008, police in Rize detained several South Africans and charged them

with missionary activities. The prosecutor released them without charge.

Due to the Jehovah's Witnesses' stance as conscientious objectors to military service, members continued to face difficulties. According to Jehovah's Witnesses officials, at the end of the reporting period, two members remained in prison for conscientious objection. One of the objectors, Baris Gormez, had been charged six times for "disobedience of orders" and had been in prison since 2007.

In November 2008 a court convicted four suspects, including one village guard, to a total of 60 years' imprisonment for the November 2007 kidnapping of Syriac priest Edip Daniel Savci in Midyat. Three other suspects were acquitted.

On May 28, 2009, court proceedings continued in the 2006 case against two Muslim converts to Christianity charged with "insulting Turkishness," in violation of Article 301 of the Penal Code, inciting hatred against Islam, and secretly compiling data on private citizens for a Bible correspondence course. The court called five witnesses to appear at the next hearing, set for October 15, 2009.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Threats against non-Muslims during the reporting period created an atmosphere of pressure and diminished freedom for some non-Muslim communities. Religious pluralism was widely viewed as a threat to Islam and to "national unity." Muslims, Christians, Jews, Baha'is, and members of other religious communities faced societal suspicion and mistrust.

The trial of five suspects involved in the 2007 alleged torture and killing of three members of a Protestant church in Malatya continued at the close of the reporting period. In May 2009 Emre Gunaydin continued to deny accusations made by the other suspects that he was the leader in the attacks. There were allegations that local political officers, members of the special military forces, and regional members of the country's nationalist political party were involved, which authorities denied. However, in December 2007 the Interior Ministry also opened a judicial investigation into the alleged collusion of public officials in these murders. Prosecuting lawyers requested that the case be tied to the Ergenekon indictment, in which 86 persons were indicted for planning to incite a revolt against the Government.

In May 2009 one of the attorneys representing the families of the Malatya victims reported that while threats against him continued, the level had diminished significantly.

On December 29, 2008, an Izmir court sentenced Ramazan Bay, who injured priest Adriano Francini in December 2007 in Izmir, to five years' imprisonment but later reduced it to four years and two months for good behavior. The court also sentenced Bay to an extra five months and a fine of \$250 (375 lira) for carrying a switchblade.

In March 2009 unknown individuals broke into the Kadikoy International Church but did not cause damage. Police led a brief investigation with no findings.

In the first half of 2009, two Greek Orthodox cemeteries in Istanbul and one in Izmir suffered extensive damage due to vandalism. On June 29, officials from the Greek Embassy estimated that nearly 60 percent of Istanbul's Edirnekapi cemetery was destroyed. In March 2009 national police were assigned to protect a cemetery in Balikli, Istanbul, after some reported incidents of vandalism in February. No additional incidents

in Balikli were reported by the end of the reporting period.

Jews and Christians from most denominations freely practiced their religions and reported little discrimination in daily life; however, citizens who converted from Islam to another religion often experienced some form of social harassment or pressure from family and neighbors. Proselytizing on behalf of non-Muslim religious groups was socially unacceptable and sometimes dangerous.

Nationalist sentiments sometimes contained anti-Christian or anti-Semitic overtones. Jewish community members reported that the significant rise of anti-Semitism that began in the summer of 2006 continued through the reporting period. Boycotts of Jewish businesses and government-sponsored events following the Israeli offensive in Gaza in December 2008 and January 2009 heightened anti-Semitic sentiments, according to the community leaders. Some businesses in Eskisehir posted notices to prevent "Jews, Armenians, and dogs" from entering. Jewish leaders in the country believed the anti-Semitism was directly related to events in the Middle East, and Jewish community members reported that they were held responsible for these events.

In December 2008 the leader of the Yalova Christian community filed a complaint with the Yalova Security Directorate when posters advertising a conference to be held by a radical nationalist youth group at the provincial Public Training Centre were found depicting Christians as snakes wearing crosses. Upon investigation the police found the posters to be displayed without permission, and police and municipal officials removed some. The conference, however, retained permission to be held in the public venue.

Six Protestant pastors, some church legal advisors, and several churches across the country receive heightened police protection due to threats.

In contrast with the previous reporting period, there were no attacks or death threats against Radio Shema, a Christian radio station in Ankara.

Members of the secular establishment and other groups feared the influence of Islamism and rejected the involvement of Islam in politics.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government and state institutions as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Ambassador and other diplomatic officials, including staff of the consulate general in Istanbul and the consulate in Adana, maintained close relations with the Muslim majority and other religious groups. The Ambassador and other officials also continued to urge the Government to permit the reopening of the Halki seminary on Heybeli Island.

On April 6, 2009, President Obama addressed Parliament and emphasized the U.S. interest in seeing Halki seminary reopened in recognition of the importance of religious freedom. On April 7, President Obama met with leaders of religious communities, including the Ecumenical Patriarch, Chief Rabbi, Armenian Archbishop, Syrian Orthodox Metropolitan, and Mufti of Istanbul.

The Ambassador regularly discussed government policy regarding Islam and other religious groups as well as specific cases of religious discrimination and other topics concerning religious freedom in private meetings with cabinet members. The Ambassador met with Diyanet President Ali Bardakoglu on January 8, 2009, to discuss the work of the Diyanet. Other embassy and consulate officers held similar meetings with government officials. Diplomats from the Embassy and consulates met regularly with representatives of various religious groups. These meetings covered a range of topics, including problems faced by non-Muslim groups and the debate over the role of Islam in the country.

The consulate general in Istanbul provided security training for minority religious

communities as a part of its overall security strategy.
