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Turkey

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however, the Government imposes some restrictions on Muslim and other religious groups and on Muslim religious expression in government offices and state-run institutions, including universities.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious belief or practice. Violent attacks and threats against non-Muslims during the reporting period created an atmosphere of pressure and diminished freedom for some non-Muslim communities. Although proselytizing is legal in the country, some Muslims, Christians, and Baha'is faced a few restrictions and occasional harassment for alleged proselytizing or unauthorized meetings. The Government continued to oppose "Islamic fundamentalism." Authorities continued their broad ban on wearing Muslim religious headscarves in government offices, universities, and schools (upheld by the European Court of Human Rights); a 2006 court ruling, some argue, has extended this ban to the private sphere.

Religious minorities said they were effectively blocked from careers in state institutions because of their faith. Christians, Baha'is, and some Muslims faced societal suspicion and mistrust, and more radical Islamist elements continued to express anti-Semitic sentiments. Additionally, persons wishing to convert from Islam to another religion sometimes experienced social harassment and violence from relatives and neighbors.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom matters with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Mission representatives met frequently with government officials and representatives of religious groups during the reporting year 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 72.6 million. According to the Government, 99 percent of the population is Muslim, the majority of which is Sunni. According to the human rights nongovernmental organization (NGO) Mazlum-Der and representatives of various religious minority communities, the actual percentage of Muslims is slightly lower. The Government officially recognizes only three minority religious communities--Greek Orthodox Christians, Armenian Orthodox Christians, and Jews--although other non-Muslim communities exist. The level of religious observance varied throughout the country, in part due to the influence of secular traditions and official restrictions on religious expression in political and social life.

In addition to the country's Sunni Muslim majority, academics estimated there were 15 to 20 million Alevis, followers of a belief system that incorporates aspects of both Shi'a and Sunni Islam and draws on the traditions of other religions indigenous to Anatolia as well. Some Alevis practice rituals that include men and women worshipping together through oratory, poetry, and dance. The Government considers Alevism a heterodox Muslim sect; however, some Alevis and absolutist Sunnis maintain that Alevis 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 65,000 Armenian Orthodox Christians, 23,000 Jews, and up to 4,000 Greek Orthodox Christians. The Government interpreted the 1923 Lausanne Treaty as granting special legal minority status exclusively to these three groups, although the treaty text refers broadly to "non-Muslim minorities" without listing specific groups. However, this recognition does not extend to the religious leadership organs; for example, the Ecumenical (Greek Orthodox) and Armenian Patriarchates continue to seek legal recognition of their status, the absence of which prevents them from having the right to own and transfer property and train religious clergy.

There also are approximately 10,000 Baha'is; an estimated 15,000 Syrian Orthodox (Syriac) Christians; 5,000 Yezidis; 3,300 Jehovah's Witnesses; 3,000 Protestants; and small, undetermined numbers of Bulgarian, Chaldean, Nestorian, Georgian, Roman Catholic, and Maronite Christians. The number of Syriac Christians in the southeast was once high;

however, under pressure from government authorities and later under the impact of the war against the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), many Syrians migrated to Istanbul, Western Europe, or North and South America. Over the last several years, small numbers of Syrians returned from overseas to the southeast, mostly from Western Europe. In most cases, older family members returned while younger ones remained abroad.

Christian organizations estimate there are approximately 1,100 Christian missionaries in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however, the Government imposes some restrictions on Muslims and other religious groups and on Muslim religious expression in government offices, state-run institutions, and universities, usually for the stated reason of preserving the "secular state." The 1982 Constitution establishes the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of belief, freedom of worship, and the private dissemination of religious ideas. However, other constitutional provisions regarding the integrity and existence of the secular state restrict these rights. 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, written into 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 policies of the elected government on the grounds that they threatened the secular state.

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 country's more than 77,500 registered mosques and employing local and provincial imams, who are civil servants. Some groups, particularly Alevis, claimed that Diyanet policies reflected mainstream Sunni Islamic beliefs to the exclusion of other beliefs. However, the Government asserted that the Diyanet treated equally all who requested services.

A separate government agency, the General Directorate for Foundations (GDF), regulates activities of non-Muslim religious groups and their affiliated churches, monasteries, synagogues, and related religious property. The GDF recognizes 161 "minority foundations," including Greek Orthodox foundations with approximately 61 sites, Armenian Orthodox foundations with approximately 50 sites, and Jewish foundations with 20 sites, as well as Syriac Christian, Chaldean, Bulgarian Orthodox, Georgian, and Maronite foundations. The GDF also regulates Muslim charitable religious foundations, including schools, hospitals, and orphanages. The GDF assesses whether the foundations are operating within the stated objectives of their organizational statute.

In 1936 the Government required all foundations to declare their sources of income. In 1974 amid political tensions over Cyprus, the High Court of Appeals ruled that the minority foundations had no right to acquire properties beyond those listed in the 1936 declarations. The court's ruling launched a process, under which the state seized control of properties acquired after 1936.

Minority religious groups, particularly the Greek and Armenian Orthodox communities, have 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 has expropriated property on the grounds that it is not being utilized. At least two appeals were filed in this regard: the Fener Boys School and the Buyukada Orphanage (the latter closed in 1964). These cases are often appealed to the Council of State ("Danistay") and, if unsuccessful there, to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). Many religious minorities experienced problems operating places of worship due to laws governing foundations.

The law restricting religious property rights was amended in 2002 to permit minority foundations to acquire property; however, the Government continued during the reporting period to apply an article which allows it to expropriate properties in areas where the local non-Muslim population drops significantly or where the foundation is deemed to no longer perform the function for which it was created. There is no specific minimum threshold concerning such a population drop, rather it is left to the discretion of GDF. This is particularly problematic for communities with smaller populations, such as the Greek Orthodox community.

The law allows the 161 religious minority foundations recognized by the GDF to acquire property, and the GDF has approved 364 applications by non-Muslim foundations to acquire legal ownership of properties. However, the legislation does not allow the communities to reclaim the hundreds of properties affiliated with foundations expropriated by the state over the years. Parliament passed a law on November 9, 2006, that permitted the return of expropriated minority properties not already sold to third parties, and made it easier to form foundations. The President partially vetoed the law and stated that nine provisions of the legislation were incompatible with the Constitution, the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, or current law. The law was awaiting parliamentary review by the close of this reporting period. Even before the veto, the final text of the law had disappointed many as it failed to address the issue of restitution and ignored certain properties such as cemeteries and school assets not registered under any foundation. Foundations were unable to acquire legal ownership of properties registered under names of third parties, including properties

registered under the names of saints or archangels, during periods when foundations could not own property in their own name.

Non-Muslim minorities complain that the implementing regulations of the law on foundations have 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. In other words, groups are disallowed from using funds from properties in one part of the country to support communities in other parts of the country. Renovation works by community foundations on properties that are considered historic require a permit from the local board of the protection of historical heritage.

Government authorities do not interfere in matters of doctrine pertaining to non-Muslim religious groups, nor do they restrict the publication or use of religious literature among members of the religion.

There are legal restrictions against insulting any religion recognized by the Government, interfering with that religion's services, or defacing its property.

Alevis freely practiced their beliefs and have 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 100 cem houses in the country, a number that they claimed was insufficient to meet their needs. There was a ground-breaking ceremony in January 2007 for a new cem house and cultural complex in Istanbul's Kadikoy district, with the support of the Kadikoy municipality. Alevis also opened a new cem house in Sivas in June 2007.

Alevis in the Kartal district of Istanbul continued to fight a court battle, which began in 2004, against a decision by local authorities to deny them permission to build a cem house.

In May 2006 authorities in the Sultanbeyli municipality of Istanbul reportedly banned the construction of a cem house on the grounds that the Pir Sultan Abdal Association, an Alevi group, had not acquired the necessary construction permits. Association officials said the local mayor and his staff had attended the groundbreaking ceremony and had promised not to interfere with the project; however, the municipality reportedly filed a case against the association after it proceeded with construction following the ban. The case continued at the end of the reporting period.

The Diyanet covers the utility costs of registered mosques, but not of cem houses and other places of worship that are not officially recognized.

Alevi children have 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. Alevis currently have more than 4,000 court cases against the Ministry of Education regarding this alleged discrimination. The Government revealed in January 2007 its new religious course curriculum which was to include instruction on Alevism, but many Alevis believed the materials were inadequate and, in some cases false. Alevis also charged a bias in the Diyanet, which does not allocate specific funds for Alevi activities or religious leadership. Practically, the Diyanet budget is reserved for the Sunni community.

The constitution establishes compulsory religious and moral instruction in primary and secondary schools. Religious minorities are exempted. However, a few religious minorities--such as Protestants--faced difficulty obtaining exemptions, particularly if their identification cards did not list a religion other than Islam. The Government claims that the religion courses cover the range of world religions; however, religious minorities asserted the courses reflect Sunni Islamic doctrine, which they maintained explains why non-Muslims are exempt.

In January 2004 an Alevi parent filed suit in the European Court of Human Rights, charging that the mandatory religion courses violate religious freedom; the case of Zengin v. Turkey is ongoing.

In November 2006 an Istanbul court announced its ruling in favor of an Alevi father who requested that his son be exempt from the religion courses at school; however, the Istanbul Governor's office appealed the decision and the case was still under Council of State (highest administrative court) review at the close of the reporting period. Six similar cases were filed in different parts of the country and remained ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

Officially recognized religious minorities may operate schools under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. The curriculum of these schools includes Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish instruction. Such schools are required to appoint a Muslim as deputy principal; reportedly, these deputies have more authority than their nominal supervisors. Additionally, regulations have made it somewhat difficult for non-Muslims to register and attend these schools. The Ministry of National Education reportedly checks to make sure that the child's father or (as of 2006) mother is from the minority community before the child may enroll. Moreover, non-Muslim minorities that are not officially recognized do not have schools of their own.

The Caferis, the country's principal Shi'a community, numbering between 500 thousand and 1 million (concentrated

mostly in eastern Turkey and Istanbul), do not face restrictions on their religious freedoms. They build and operate their own mosques and appoint their own imams; however, as with the Alevis, their places of worship have no legal status and receive no support from the Diyanet.

Churches operating in the country generally face administrative challenges to employ foreign church personnel, apart from the Catholic Church and congregations linked to the diplomatic community. These administrative challenges, plus restrictions on training religious leaders and difficulties getting visas, have led to decreases in the Christian communities.

The Government has also increased efforts to comply with ECHR decisions. As a signatory to the Council of Europe's Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the country is subject to the court's jurisdiction. Two relatively recent cases filed by the Association of Protestant Churches are *Zekai Tanyar and Others v. Turkey* and *Altinkaynak and Others v. Turkey*. *Tanyar* involves the inability to register churches and other places of worship and problems of lack of registration and legal status. *Altinkaynak* involves a complaint regarding the zoning of property as a place of worship.

In January 2007 the ECHR ruled in favor of the Fener Greek Orthodox High School Foundation concerning two of its properties expropriated in 1996. The verdict held that the Government violated the foundation's rights to property and ordered the return of the property or the payment of 910,000 Euro in compensation.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion; however, state policy imposes some restrictions on religious groups and on religious expression in government offices and state-run institutions, including universities.

Secularists in the military, judiciary, and other branches of the bureaucracy continued to speak out against what they label as Islamic fundamentalism. These groups view religious fundamentalism as a threat to the secular state. The National Security Council categorizes religious fundamentalism as a threat to public safety. President Sezer delivered a speech in April 2007 in which he repeated concerns that separatism and religious fundamentalism are threats facing the country. The President stated that the "fundamentalist threat has been following the Republic as a sinister shadow since its establishment."

Also in April 2007, subsequent to the nomination of the ruling party's presidential candidate, the Turkish General Staff on its website warned of the dangers of "fundamentalism" and declared its determination to defend the secular state.

According to human rights NGO Mazlum-Der and other groups, a few government ministries have dismissed or barred from promotion civil servants suspected of anti-state 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 they were concerned could indicate disloyalty to the secular state.

According to Mazlum-Der, the military charged soldiers with lack of discipline for activities that included performing Muslim prayers or being married to women who wore headscarves. According to the military, officers and noncommissioned officers were periodically dismissed for ignoring repeated warnings from superior officers and maintaining ties to what the military considered Islamic fundamentalist organizations. In November 2006 the Government reported 37 military dismissals of which it claimed 2 were associated with religious extremism. An additional 17 were reportedly expelled in August 2006 for unspecified disciplinary reasons.

Mystical Sufi and other religious-social orders (tarikats) and lodges (cemaats) have been banned officially since the mid 1920s; however, tarikats and cemaats remain active and widespread. Some prominent political and social leaders continue to associate with tarikats, cemaats, and other Islamic communities.

In late April 2007 police arrested four street evangelists in Istanbul for "missionary activity," disturbing the peace, and insulting Islam. The arrested included a U.S. citizen, one Korean, and two Turks. The American was released 48 hours after his arrest, although he reported a state prosecutor visited neither him nor the Korean. The claim of insulting Islam was based on a book the evangelists were giving out, which explained that Christians cannot accept the Qur'an because it contradicts some of the teachings of the New Testament. The prosecutor ultimately charged the evangelists with a single misdemeanor of disturbing the peace.

Jehovah's Witnesses continued to engage in a legal battle over their efforts to form an association. In April 2006 an Istanbul court rejected a lawsuit to cancel the Jehovah's Witnesses' newly formed association. Pending the prosecutor's subsequent appeal, the Jehovah's Witnesses may not conduct meetings as an association. In December 2006 the Jehovah's Witnesses filed a request to expedite the case with the Court of Appeals. The request was still pending at the end of the reporting period.

Members of Jehovah's Witnesses reported continuing official harassment of their worship services because they were not members of an officially recognized religion. Police arrested 25-year-old member Feti Demirtas and sent him to prison on 9 occasions for conscientiously objecting to military service, as his religion requires. According to Jehovah's Witness officials, harassment of their members included arrests, court hearings, verbal and physical abuse, and psychiatric evaluations.

Religious minorities report 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 do not own property recognized by the GDF, often take place on diplomatic property or in private apartments. Police occasionally bar Christians from holding services in private apartments, and prosecutors have opened cases against Christians for holding unauthorized gatherings.

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 1 month to 1 year, or 3 months to 2 years if the crime involves inciting others to disobey the law.

The 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. High-level government leaders often assert publicly that use of the term "ecumenical" in reference to the Patriarch violates the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. However, government officials privately acknowledge that Lausanne does not address the issue. On June 26, 2007, the Higher Court of Appeals ("Yargitay") reiterated the Government's public position despite ruling in favor of the Patriarchate in a case brought against it by a defrocked Bulgarian Orthodox priest.

The Government has also long maintained that only citizens of the country can be members of the Church's Holy Synod and participate in patriarchal elections, despite the Ecumenical Patriarch's appeal to allow non-Turkish prelates. However, the Government did not formally respond to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew's 2004 appointment of 6 noncitizen metropolitans to the Holy Synod, representing the first appointment of noncitizens to the body in the 80 year history of the country.

Members of the Greek Orthodox community said the legal restrictions particularly threatened the survival of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul because, with no more than 4,000 Greek Orthodox remaining in the country, the community was becoming too small to provide enough Turkish citizen prelate candidates to maintain the institution.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul continued to seek to reopen the Halki seminary on the island of Heybeli in the Sea of Marmara. The Government closed the seminary in 1971 when the Patriarchate chose not to comply with a state requirement for all private institutions of higher learning to nationalize; the Patriarchate found it impossible to comply. Government officials have reportedly not responded to formal communications from the Greek Orthodox Church regarding the re-opening of Halki Seminary and resolutions to other concerns affecting the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

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. Co-religionists 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.

In April 2005 the Ecumenical Patriarchate filed an appeal with the ECHR concerning the GDF's expropriation of the Bûyükada Orphanage on the Prince's Islands that had belonged to the Patriarchate. On June 12, 2007, the ECHR announced its decision to hear the case.

In March 2007 the Yedikule Surp Pirgic Armenian Hospital Foundation in Istanbul dropped an ECHR claim when the Government agreed to return two properties and pay approximately \$20,000 (15,000 Euro) compensation for court expenses to the foundation. The Treasury had attempted to sell one of the properties in March 2005 to a private company, but the Finance Ministry blocked the sale. The ECHR continued proceedings related to the appeal by the Armenian Orthodox community of the 1999 expropriation of two other foundation properties.

No law explicitly prohibits proselytizing or religious conversions; however, many prosecutors and police regarded proselytizing and religious activism with suspicion. Police occasionally prevented Christians from handing out religious literature. The Government reported 157 conversions, including 92 to Islam and 63 from Islam to a different religion. Proselytizing is often considered socially unacceptable; Christians performing missionary work were occasionally beaten and insulted. If the proselytizers are foreigners, they may be deported, but generally they are able to reenter the country. Police officers may report students who meet with Christian missionaries to their families or to university authorities.

Authorities continued to enforce a long-term ban on the wearing of headscarves at universities and by civil servants in public buildings. 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. University students who wear head coverings at public universities are officially not permitted to register for classes, although some faculty members permit students to wear head coverings in class.

Many secularists accuse Islamists of using advocacy for wearing the headscarf as a political tool and fear that efforts to repeal the headscarf ban will lead to pressure against women who choose not to wear a head covering. In 2005 the ECHR ruled that Turkish universities have the right to ban the headscarf.

In February 2006 the Council of State ruled in favor of a decision by education authorities to revoke the promotion of an Ankara teacher to a military compound-based nursery school principal position on the grounds that the teacher regularly wore an Islamic headscarf outside of school. Some journalists and religious rights advocates asserted that the court's decision effectively expanded the headscarf ban into the private sphere. The court, however, maintained that the teacher had violated the principle of secularism in education by wearing the headscarf while traveling to and from school.

In May 2006 attorney Alparslan Arslan opened fire in the Council of State court responsible for the February 2006 ruling, killing Judge Mustafa Yucel Ozbilgin and injuring four other judges. His case was ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

In April 2007 four suspects were arrested after an armed assailant was caught preparing for an attack against the president of the Higher Board of Education. The assailant reportedly planned the attack because he was angry with the decisions and statements of the Board president. Some Islamists see the Board as responsible for the headscarf ban in universities.

A 1997 law made eight years of secular education compulsory. After completing the eight years, 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 grades 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, not to train them as imams.

In May 2007 the Council of State ruled as illegal a 2005 regulation issued by the Education Ministry, which would have allowed imam hatip students to earn degrees from regular high schools by taking distance learning courses.

Only the Diyanet is authorized to provide religion courses outside of school, although clandestine private courses do exist. Students who complete the first five years of primary school may enroll in Diyanet Qur'an classes on weekends and during summer vacation. Many Qur'an courses function unofficially. Only children 12 and older may legally register for official Qur'an courses, and Mazlum-Der reported that law enforcement authorities often raided illegal courses for younger children.

Restoration or construction may be carried out in 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 have impeded repairs to religious facilities, especially in the case of Syriac and Armenian Orthodox properties.

Religious affiliation is listed on national identity cards, despite 1982 Constitutional Article 24 which provides that no one shall be compelled to reveal religious beliefs. A few religious groups, such as the Baha'i, are unable to state their religious affiliation on their cards because they are not included among the options; they have made their concerns known to the Government. In April 2006 Parliament adopted legislation allowing persons to leave the religion section of their identity cards blank or change the religious designation by written application. However, the Government reportedly continued to restrict applicants' choice of religion; members of the Baha'i community said government officials had told them that, despite the new law, they would still not be able to list their religion on the cards.

There were reports that local officials harassed some 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. In 2005 an Alevi citizen filed a case with the ECHR seeking the deletion of the religious affiliation section on national identity cards. A decision in the case was still pending at the end of the reporting period.

In October 2004 the Government's Human Rights Consultation Board issued a report on minorities, which stated that non-Muslims were effectively barred from careers in state institutions, such as the armed forces, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Police, and the National Intelligence Agency. Professors Baskin Oran and Ibrahim

Kaboglu faced criminal charges for their roles as principal authors of the report. An Ankara court acquitted them in May 2006. Members of minority religious communities confirmed the report's conclusions. They said non-Muslim citizens were viewed as foreigners and were therefore considered unqualified to represent the state.

In February 2007 2 of the 74 defendants charged in connection with the November 2003 terrorist bombings of 2 synagogues, the British Consulate and a bank were sentenced to "heavy" (no chance of parole) life in prison; 5 were sentenced to life in prison; 41 received 3 to 18 year sentences; and 26 were acquitted.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

After the April 18, 2007, killings in Malatya of three Christians, Turkish victim Ugur Yuksel was denied a Christian burial and given an Islamic/Alevitic burial instead. Turkish victim Necati Aydin was buried in a Protestant churchyard in Izmir. The Governor of Malatya was initially hesitant to permit the burial of the German victim in Malatya. He told the German victim's widow that no Christian should be buried in Turkish soil. However, after negotiations between German Government and Turkish Government officials, the victim was buried in a private Armenian cemetery in Malatya.

In October 2006 a prosecutor pressed criminal charges against two (Muslim) converts to Christianity for violating Article 301 ("insulting Turkishness"), inciting hatred against Islam, and secretly compiling data on private citizens for a Bible correspondence course. If convicted, the men could be sentenced to six months to three years in prison. On the basis of reports that defendants were approaching grade and high school students in Silivri and attempting to convert them to Christianity, police searched one man's home, then went to the mens' office and confiscated two computers, as well as books and papers. The three plaintiffs claimed that the Christians called Islam a "primitive and fabricated religion" and described Turks as a "cursed people." The accused denied all charges. The case continued at the end of the reporting period.

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 the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In March 2007 the Government held a ceremony to reopen the 10th century Armenian Holy Cross Church on Akdamar Island as a memorial museum after a long restoration process that it had funded. By the end of the reporting period, the Government was still considering a request by the Armenian Patriarchate in Istanbul to allow the placement of a cross on the building.

In August 2006 the Istanbul Protestant Church finalized the legal procedure for officially registering its building as a "place of worship." This was the first time that the Government had approved a request for such status in the zoning plan.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice. Some violent attacks and threats against non-Muslims during the reporting period created an atmosphere of pressure and diminished freedom for some non-Muslims. Public debates ensued over the Government's response to these attacks and threats. Religious pluralism was widely viewed as a threat to Islam and to "national unity." A few Muslims, Christians, Baha'is, and members of other religious communities faced societal suspicion and mistrust.

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. A variety of newspapers and television shows regularly published and broadcast anti-Christian messages, and at least one municipality distributed anti-missionary publications. Anti-missionary and anti-Christian rhetoric appears to have continued among government officials and national media sources such as Hurriyet and Millyet. Government ministers, such as Mehmet Aydin, Minister of State in charge of religious affairs, called missionaries "separatist and destructive."

Additionally, nationalist sentiments sometimes contained anti-Christian or anti-Semitic overtones. Jewish community members reported a significant rise of anti-Semitic language in newspapers and websites in the past few years, as well as increased societal antagonism and discrimination during the July-August 2006 conflict involving Israel and Lebanon. There were growing numbers of media stories about Israeli and U.S. misdeeds in Iraq and pieces containing

anti-Semitic stereotyping. Jewish leaders in the country believed the anti-Semitism is directly related to events in the Middle East, and Jewish community members reported that they are held responsible for these events.

There were reports of religiously motivated killings during the reporting period.

On April 18, 2007, three members of a Protestant church in Malatya, including a German citizen, were tortured and killed in the office of a company that publishes books on Christianity. The suspects of the killings had notes on their persons claiming, "We did it for our religion. May this be a lesson to the enemies of religion."

Four suspects were caught as they were trying to leave the building while another jumped out of a window and was hospitalized. Five out of eleven suspects detained after the killings remained in custody at the end of the reporting period. Some reports suggest the publishing house and the victims received death threats for a year before the killings, but the local police did not provide protection. Apparently the suspects had spent months gaining the trust of the victims under the guise of an interest in the Christian faith.

In October 2006 a local court convicted and sentenced a 16-year-old to life in prison with no chance of parole for the February 2006 assassination of Catholic Priest Andrea Santoro while he was praying in church after Mass in Trabzon. The sentence was later reduced to 18 years' and 10 months' in prison because the assailant was under the age of 18.

There were multiple religiously motivated attacks on persons during the reporting period. On May 28, 2007, two Georgian priests touring the country were beaten in Artvin because they were believed to be missionaries. In February 2007 two persons fired guns in the air after a memorial service commemorating the 40th day following the Hrant Dink assassination. The suspects were arrested shortly after the incident and reportedly claimed they intended to target Armenian Patriarch Mesrob II, who presided over the ceremony.

In December 2006 the pastor of an Eskisehir church in the municipality of Tepebashi was severely beaten in a park. The church did not file a report or complaint because they did not want to "damage the image of the city." In September 2006 an American missionary and a team of five street evangelists were physically attacked but received only minor injuries. Local police helped the Christians receive treatment at a nearby hospital.

On July 2, 2006, a schizophrenic, Atilla Nuran, stabbed a French Catholic priest in Samsun. After questioning, the police brought Nuran before a criminal court, and he was committed to a psychiatric hospital for examination. Nuran had visited the priest's church since 1998 and claimed the church was trying to Christianize Muslim youth. Since then, the church's lawyer has won court cases against Nuran for libeling the church.

In March 2006 an assailant entered a Catholic Church in Mersin, threatening church members with a knife and shouting anti-Christian statements. Police arrived at the scene and arrested the assailant. Although the church did not press charges, the assailant is serving a six-year prison sentence after being convicted by a court for stealing a cell phone from the church.

In February 2006 a group of young men beat and threatened to kill a Catholic friar in Izmir. The attackers shouted anti-Christian slogans and said they wanted to "clean Turkey of non-Muslims." By the end of the reporting period, authorities had not opened a case against the suspects.

In January 2006 five assailants severely beat Protestant church leader Kamil Kiroglu in Adana. One attacker wielded a knife and threatened to kill Kiroglu unless he renounced Christianity. The Government did not investigate the incident or make any arrests, and Kiroglu did not press charges.

There were also multiple religiously motivated attacks on property during the reporting period. Three attacks were reported against the Eskisehir church in the municipality of Tepebasi in May 2007. On May 19, the church was attacked with a Molotov cocktail bomb. The prior (second) incident occurred while the police watching the building had left to assist an incident elsewhere in the city. The church asked the Government for protection and claims that the Government is not taking their request seriously. In early May 2007 there was an attempted arson, but the fire was noticed early and damage was minimal.

On April 21, 2007, the International Protestant Church in Ankara was firebombed with Molotov cocktails. Local police investigated the attack promptly. In March 2007 a hand grenade was thrown into the courtyard of the President of the Syriac Churches Foundation in Mardin's Midyat district. The police started an investigation, but there were no reports of arrests following the incident.

On January 28, 2007, vandals attacked the building of the Agape Church Foundation in Samsun, shattering the windows with rocks and spray painting street signs early Sunday morning. The pastor said a note was left inside the church, but police refused to show it to him, claiming it "wasn't important." The police chief refused to include the note in the official investigation. Four days before the attack, the Black Sea online site Kuzeyhaber published a column praising efforts to stop the spread of Christianity in Samsun.

On November 4, 2006, the Odemis Protestant Church in Izmir was attacked with Molotov Cocktails, following repeated stone throwing and harassment in the weeks before.

There were instances of citizens disrupting church services. In May 2006 a group of nationalist and leftist protestors attempted to disrupt a Greek Orthodox Christian mass at a historical church in Bergama. In April 2006 a group of young men entered the Syriac compound in Diyarbakir and shouted threats at church members. Police refused to send patrols to the neighborhood of the church until a few days later, when the church's Easter ceremonies were held.

Death threats against Christian American citizens continue to be a concern. For example, Christian American citizens living in the country received religion-based death threats via letters and voicemails, stating that if they did not return to America they would be killed.

Despite the widespread condemnation of the Malatya killings, threats and incidents of attempted violence against Protestants continue to be documented. Two pastors, one in Diyarbakir and one in Samsun, expressed fears they were being targeted for harassment and might be killed. The pastor of a church in Samsun has received many death threats in the past few years. During the period covered by the report, he received a threat claiming, "it will be worse than Malatya" if he does not leave. He also received two death threats by e-mail on January 28, 2007, the day his church was attacked. One was signed by the Turkish Vengeance Brigade. One email threatened to kill him and another cursed his congregation. Prior to this, the church suffered a dozen stoning attacks and weekly e-mail threats.

Other demonstrations of religious discrimination and hatred were documented. In the May 2007 deposition of accused Malatya killer Emre Gunaydin, he told police investigators his original purpose was to frighten the victims from spreading propaganda but that he had become angry when they said, "in the end, everyone will worship Jesus" and could not control his actions. He also revealed that he planned to kill a different Christian. A newspaper editor published the deposition, including the intended victim's name, stating that local security police gave him a copy.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom matters with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The Ambassador and other mission officials, including staff of the U.S. Consulate General in Istanbul and the U.S. Consulate in Adana, enjoyed close relations with the Muslim majority and other religious groups. The U.S. Embassy continued to urge the Government to permit the reopening of the Halki seminary on Heybeli Island.

In November 2006 the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom visited Istanbul and Ankara and met with senior government officials, leaders of religious minority communities, political parties, NGOs, business organizations and intellectuals to discuss religious freedom in the country.

Also in November 2006 the Ambassador and Consul General attended numerous interfaith events associated with Pope Benedict XVI's visit to the country.

The Ambassador discussed religious freedom regularly in private meetings with cabinet members. These discussions touched on both government policy regarding Islam and other religions and specific cases of alleged religious discrimination. The Ambassador met with Diyanet President Ali Bardakoglu and with religious minority leaders including Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, Chief Rabbi Isak Haleva, and Armenian Orthodox Patriarch Mesrob II to show support for religious freedom and to discuss concerns affecting their respective communities.

Other embassy and consulate officers held similar meetings with government officials. Following the Malatya killings, officials met with the Governor of Istanbul to ensure local safety concerns were addressed. Diplomats from the Embassy and Consulates met regularly with representatives of the 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 Istanbul Consul General hosted an event in honor of Alliance of Civilization leaders and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom attended by religious freedom experts in various fields.

The Embassy's human rights officer gave a speech promoting religious tolerance during a Baha'i hosted International Religious Freedom Day event.

The mission utilizes the International Visitor Program to introduce professionals in various fields to the United States and American counterparts. Religious topics are included among these programs.

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