

TURKEY

TIER 2

KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, the state of religious freedom in Turkey remained deeply troubling, raising serious concerns that the country's current trajectory will lead to the further deterioration of conditions in the year ahead. The lack of any meaningful progress on the part of the Turkish government to address longstanding religious freedom issues was continued cause for concern. Many serious limitations on the freedom of religion or belief continued, threatening the continued vitality and survival of minority religious communities in the country; in addition, increased demonization and a smear campaign by government entities and progovernment media contributed to a growing climate of fear among religious minority communities. The Turkish government continued to interfere in the internal affairs of religious communities, disallowing patriarchal elections for the Armenian Apostolic Church and maintaining its requirement that Greek Orthodox metropolitans obtain Turkish citizenship in order to participate in the church's Holy Synod. Followers of U.S.-based cleric Fethullah Gülen continued to be dismissed from public service, detained, and arrested in the tens of thousands for alleged complicity in the July 2016 failed coup attempt, or involvement in terrorist activity. The Turkish government has indiscriminately designated those affiliated with Gülen as part of a terrorist organization. Government officials also continued to engage in anti-Semitism in the form of public statements and comments made on social media platforms, while progovernment newspapers and media outlets propagated hate speech directed against

both Christians and Jews. While the state proposed a budget increase of 36 percent for the government body charged with overseeing the exercise of Sunni Islam, other religious groups, including Alevis—whom the government views as a culture rather than a religion—do not receive equal funding. However, due to Turkey's strict interpretation of secularism, no religious community—including Sunni Muslims—can obtain full legal status. Other longstanding religious freedom concerns remain, such as the return of expropriated religious properties and state-mandated religious education for primary and secondary students. Finally, the unjust detainment and trial of Protestant pastor Andrew Brunson, an ordeal that lasted for more than two years and gave way to a rise in hate speech against Christians, concluded in October 2018 with his conviction and immediate release, after significant pressure from the U.S. government. A USCIRF delegation attended Pastor Brunson's hearings in Aliağa, Turkey, in May, July, and October 2018.

Based on these conditions, in 2019 USCIRF again places Turkey on Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). However, USCIRF will continue to monitor religious freedom conditions to determine whether developments worsen and warrant a change in the country's status during the year ahead.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Urge the Turkish government to fully comply with the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) rulings on freedom of religion or belief, including by removing the field for religious affiliation on national ID cards' microchips and recognizing Alevi *cemevleri* as legal places of worship and Alevi *dedeleri* as religious leaders;
- Press the Turkish government to streamline measures that would permit non-Sunni Muslim faith communities to apply for government funding to support the construction, maintenance, and upkeep of their houses of worship;
- Urge the Turkish government to ensure the education curriculum remains inclusive of all of Turkey's religious groups, and allow students to be exempted from religious courses without disclosing their religious and philosophical convictions, as mandated by the ECtHR;
- Press the Turkish government to fulfill private and public commitments that the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary be reopened, and to permit the Armenian Apostolic Church to hold elections for the position of patriarch without state interference; and
- Press the Turkish government to publicly rebuke government officials who make anti-Semitic statements or other derogatory statements about religious communities in Turkey.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Republic of Turkey

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic

POPULATION

81,257,239

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Islam, Armenian Apostolic, Greek Orthodox, and Judaism (the latter three being the Lausanne Treaty-recognized minorities)

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

99.8% Muslim (mostly Sunni, although an estimated 10 million to 25 million are Alevi)

0.2% other, including Armenian Apostolic, Baha'i, Bulgarian Orthodox, Chaldean Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witness, Jewish, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Syriac Catholic, and Syriac Orthodox

*Estimates compiled from the CIA World Factbook

BACKGROUND

The state of human rights and civil liberties in Turkey continued to decline in the wake of the government response to the failed coup attempt of July 2016. In the two years since the coup attempt, the Turkish government has dismissed more than 150,000 public servants, detained and arrested tens of thousands in connection to the coup attempt or alleged links to terrorism, and jailed 68 journalists in connection with their work—the highest number of journalists arrested by any country in 2018, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. The government has also closed down more than 150 media outlets, and the country has seen the majority of independent media increasingly come under the control of progovernment entities. In June 2018, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was reelected in snap presidential and parliamentary elections that accompanied the introduction of expanded executive powers under a new presidential system approved by referendum in April 2017.

The government also continued to detain former chairman of the opposition Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) Selahattin Demirtaş, despite a ruling from the ECtHR in November 2018 that his pretrial detainment was unjustified and that he should be released. In July 2018, 18 religious leaders and representatives from Turkey's Christian and Jewish communities released a joint

declaration denying they live under pressure, raising suspicions that the statement may have been coordinated with, or initiated by, the Turkish government.

Approximately 99.8 percent of Turkey's population is Muslim, the majority of whom identify as Sunni Muslim. By some estimates, between 10 million and 25 million are Alevi, which the Turkish government considers to be Muslim, although some Alevis self-identify as part of a unique non-Muslim culture. Turkey's non-Muslim religious minorities comprise less than 0.2 percent of the overall population, and include members of the Armenian Apostolic, Baha'i, Bulgarian Orthodox, Chaldean Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witness, Jewish, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Syriac Catholic, and Syriac Orthodox communities.

The 1982 Turkish constitution provides for the freedom of belief and worship and the private dissemination of religious ideas, and prohibits discrimination on religious grounds. Nevertheless, the government interprets secularism to require state control over religious communities, including their practices and houses of worship. No religion enjoys full legal status. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) maintains control over the practice of Islam in Turkey; all other religions are under the auspices of the General Directorate of Foundations (*Vakıflar*).

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2018

Education

Despite the implementation in 2018 of a new education curriculum in Turkey’s public schools, the “Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge Course” remains a requirement for primary and secondary school students. Traditionally, non-Muslim students from the Lausanne Treaty communities—Armenian Apostolic, Greek Orthodox, and Jewish—have been allowed exemption from the course due to its focus on Islam. Atheists also have received exemptions within the last year. However, members of some faiths, including Alevis, are routinely denied exemption, despite an ECtHR ruling in 2014 that the course should not be compulsory and that students should not be required to disclose their religious identity. Students and their parents seeking exemption often undergo a lengthy petitioning process, or pursue their claims in court—even if the ruling is favorable, however, it is not always implemented by the school.

State Interference in Internal Religious Affairs

In 2018, the Turkish government continued to interfere in the internal affairs of religious communities, particularly regarding the right of those communities to elect their own leaders. Due to government requirements stipulating that members of the Holy Synod must be Turkish citizens, the Ecumenical Patriarchate is restricted in its ability to nominate members for the Holy Synod, which, in turn, elects the community’s patriarch. While Turkey has approved foreign metropolitans for dual citizenship, the requirement presents an unnecessary burden for the Greek Orthodox community and has been perceived as a means to control the outcome of future elections.

The Armenian Apostolic Church—whose spiritual leader Mesrob Mutafyan died in March 2019, after the reporting period—has been unable to hold elections for the position of patriarch due to an Interior Ministry decision that precluded elections beginning in 2010. When the community began an electoral process

in March 2017, the Istanbul governor’s office intervened, calling the elections “legally impossible” and claiming they might “cause splits in the community.” In February 2018, the Istanbul governor’s office stated in a letter to the Armenian Patriarchate that the necessary conditions for an election had not been met, yet again preventing the process from moving forward.

National Identity Cards

Concerns remain that microchips on national identification cards may contain information regarding the holder’s religious identity, which could lead to discrimination in the workplace and other places where the microchip can be read. The government’s February 2018 opening of population registers that allow access to genealogical records raised similar concerns about a government effort to code minorities such as Armenians, Greeks, and Jews. While the opening of the population registers was welcomed by some as a positive step in acknowledging Turkey’s ethnic and religious diversity, others fear the information could be used for the purpose of discrimination or defamation.

Alevis

Alevis constitute the largest religious minority in Turkey. However, the government has long classified Alevis as Muslim and subsequently failed to recognize them as a religious community distinct from majority Sunni Muslims. Despite a February 2015 ruling issued by the ECtHR, the government has yet to take steps to exempt Alevi students from attending compulsory religious

classes that are based primarily on the Sunni understanding of Islam. Alevi leaders have also taken issue with a new curriculum that characterizes Alevi places of worship simply as a place where “rituals and customs are practiced.”

In November 2018, the Supreme Court of Appeals announced a decision in favor of the Alevis’ longstanding struggle to achieve official recognition for their “gathering houses” or *cemevleri* as places of worship. In April 2015, the ECtHR had ruled that Turkey violated

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Alevis' rights by failing to recognize their places of worship and accord them legal status and its corresponding advantages, such as an exemption from the payment of electricity bills. In the decision, the court ruled that *cemevleri* are places of worship and that the government is obligated to pay for their electricity bills as it does for mosques and some other places of worship. At the end of the reporting period, the verdict had not yet been finalized, and it was unclear whether the ruling would bring about a country-wide change in the status of *cemevleri*.

Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism continued in progovernment print and social media. According to a report on hate speech by the Hrant Dink Foundation, a local nongovernmental organization, there were 427 instances of hate speech from January through April 2018 that specifically targeted Jews. News articles and headlines frequently made reference to Jews when referring to the state of Israel and mentioned Jews in negative media coverage related to the state of Turkish-Israeli relations.

Turkish politicians also have continued to make anti-Semitic comments. In August 2018, ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) founding member and former parliamentarian Burhan Kuzu tweeted that Jewish families “managed the world” by printing banknotes and alleged that U.S. presidents Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy were “killed by Zionists.” Although such rhetoric is particularly prevalent in the ruling party, it has also surfaced among the opposition. In August 2018, Republican People’s Party (CHP) presidential candidate Muharrem İnce was accused of making anti-Semitic comments when he criticized President Erdoğan for having received a Jewish courage award, which was presented to him in honor of a Turkish diplomat who saved a number of Jewish families from the Holocaust.

Protestants

The Protestant community continued to be the target of hate speech, with evangelical Christians in particular

demonized in connection with the case of Pastor Brunson. At least 20 foreign Protestant families reportedly were deported or forced to leave Turkey through the denial of visa renewals.

Pastor Brunson, a U.S. citizen who lived in Izmir, Turkey, for 23 years and led a small Protestant congregation, spent more than two years in prison after Turkish authorities unjustly detained him in October 2016. Authorities initially accused Pastor Brunson of being a member of a terrorist organization, until he was indicted in March 2018 for “committing crimes on behalf of a terrorist organization without membership” and “procuring confidential government information for the purpose of political or military espionage.” The indictment accused Pastor Brunson of providing aid to both the Kurdistan

Workers’ Party (PKK) and the Fethullahist Terrorist Organization (FETÖ), and alleged that he sought the fragmentation of the country and formation of an independent state of Kurdistan through the Christianization of Turkey’s ethnic Kurdish

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population. Information in the indictment was provided primarily by a secret witness. While President Erdoğan routinely rebuffed U.S. requests for the release and return of Pastor Brunson, claiming that the decision would ultimately lie with the Turkish judicial system, he nonetheless contradicted himself in September 2017 when he suggested that he would be willing to hand over Pastor Brunson in return for the extradition of Gülen.

Prior to Pastor Brunson’s release, USCIRF advocated on his behalf as part of the Commission’s [Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project](#). In October 2017, USCIRF visited Pastor Brunson while he was imprisoned in Kırıklar Prison—the first nonfamily, nonconsular delegation to meet with him—and attended three of his subsequent court hearings in May, July, and October 2018.

On October 12, 2018, a Turkish court convicted Pastor Brunson of providing aid to a terrorist organization and sentenced him to three years, one month, and 15 days, which the judge counted as time served. That same day, he was subsequently released from house arrest and allowed to return to the United States.

Although Pastor Brunson's release was a much-welcomed positive development, it should be noted that it only came about following immense pressure from the highest levels of the U.S. government on Turkey to release him. That the Turkish court still found him guilty of supporting a terrorist organization only serves to perpetuate the grave injustice done against him.

In January 2019, after the reporting period, the ECtHR announced a decision in favor of the Foundation of Seventh-day Adventists, ruling that Turkey had violated the right to assembly of church members by not allowing the foundation to register. Turkey had prohibited the foundation from registering on the grounds that a foundation cannot be formed only to serve the members of a particular community.

Other Christian Minorities

Jehovah's Witnesses continued to be denied the right to conscientious objection to military service and face prosecution, fines, and imprisonment for the exercise of their beliefs. In 2018, 66 Jehovah's Witnesses faced prosecution. Because of longstanding government pressure exerted on employers, many Jehovah's Witnesses also lose their jobs for refusing to enlist in the military.

In April 2018, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reassigned its volunteers in Turkey to other regions due to a "prolonged period of heightened political tensions" in the country. Throughout 2018, the Church and its members were smeared in progovernment media outlets following accusations made in the indictment against Pastor Brunson that members were operating in the country as agents under the guise of missionaries.

Sunni Muslims

Followers of U.S.-based cleric Gülen have faced increased persecution by the government. In the two years since the failed coup attempt in 2016, the Turkish government has embarked on a purge of those affiliated with Gülen, resulting in the dismissal, detainment, and arrest of tens of

thousands of individuals. The government continued to allege that Gülen and his followers were behind the plot to overthrow the government, although only a small minority has been charged with participation in the coup attempt. The government labeled Gülen and his followers a terrorist organization in May 2016, and refers to them as the Fethullahist Terrorist Organization (FETÖ).

Religious Minority Properties

Religious minorities continued to seek the return of properties expropriated by the government. The Armenian Patriarchate has been seeking the return of the Sanasaryan Han in Istanbul—a property previously used for the education of Armenian children—that the government seized in 1935. The Greek Orthodox Foundation on Bozcaada Island has also yet to receive the title deeds for 11 properties, despite a September 2014 decision rendered by the Council of Foundations to transfer the deeds.

The Greek Orthodox Theological School of Halki, also known as Halki Seminary, has been closed and unable to educate or train clergy since 1971. The Turkish government closed the seminary in accordance with a constitutional decision that banned the operation of private institutions of higher learning, a decision that served to effectively force the closure of religious and theological schools in the country. Although the Turkish government and officials have at times expressed support for reopening the seminary, no concrete steps have been taken. In April 2018, Greek Orthodox Patriarch Dimitri Bartholomew met with President Erdoğan to discuss the reopening of Halki Seminary. Turkish media reported that President Erdoğan would take the request to reopen the seminary into consideration and that Patriarch Bartholomew was optimistic the semi-

nary could reopen for the academic year by September 2018; at the end of the reporting period, it remained closed.

In January 2018, President Erdoğan and Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov attended the opening ceremony of

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the Bulgarian Orthodox St. Stephen Church in Istanbul, following the completion of its seven-year restoration. The restoration was funded jointly by both the Turkish and Bulgarian governments and, pursuant to a “principle of reciprocity,” was accompanied by the Bulgarian government similarly allowing for the restoration of a mosque in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. In May 2018, the government returned the deeds to 50 properties, including that of the Mor Gabriel Monastery, to the Syriac Orthodox Church in Mardin following a protracted legal dispute brought about by municipal land reforms beginning in 2008. According to Deputy Prime Minister Hakan Çavuşoğlu, the seizure and transfer of the Syriac Orthodox properties to the Treasury, and then to the Diyanet, was a “misunderstanding,” although religious officials perceived the move as a purposeful attack on the Syriac Orthodox Church. In July 2018, the Council of Foundations took positive steps to allocate a number of religious properties to their respective foundations at no cost, including the Sacre Coeur Church to the Syriac Catholic Church and the Mar Yuhanna Church in Hatay to a Greek Orthodox foundation. Finally, in January 2019, local authorities in Istanbul issued a permit allowing the Syriac Orthodox Church to build what has been characterized as the first newly constructed church in the history of the Turkish republic. While this was a long-awaited positive development, it came after years of efforts on the part of the Syriac Orthodox Church to secure permission to construct a new church. Moreover, it follows a multi-year dispute after authorities announced that the new church would be built on land that previously served as a cemetery for the Roman Catholic Church.

Hagia Sophia

The historic Hagia Sophia, a Greek Orthodox basilica that was converted into a mosque in the 15th century, has held legal status as a museum since 1935. However, some Muslims continued to call for it to be converted back into a mosque and opened for prayer. In Septem-

ber 2018, the Constitutional Court of Turkey rejected on technical grounds a request filed by a private association to open the museum for worship, stating that an association cannot submit an application as an individual. The court did not examine the request. In March 2018, President Erdoğan recited a Muslim prayer in the Hagia Sophia on the occasion of an art festival opening, resulting in protests against the Turkish government’s “religious use” of the museum. On March 27, 2019, after the reporting period, President Erdoğan announced that the Hagia Sophia would be converted to a mosque, repeating similar previous pronouncements over the years that were never followed by action.

Women and Religious Freedom

In January 2018, a religious glossary on the Diyanet’s official website suggested that girls as young as age nine and boys as young as age 12 could be married in accordance with Islamic law (Turkey’s legal age for marriage is 18, with exceptions at age 17 with parental consent). After public outcry, the Diyanet removed the glossary

entries and denied having endorsed child marriage, issuing a statement that the Diyanet had always supported a minimum age of 17 for girls and 18 for boys to marry. A January 2018 media report stated that in early 2017, 115 underage girls received pregnancy-re-

lated treatment in an Istanbul hospital. According to hospital records, 38 of the girls became pregnant before the age of 15.

U.S. POLICY

Turkey is a strategic partner of the United States, a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and host to a U.S. airbase in İncirlik. Nevertheless, during the year, relations between the two countries became increasingly strained, in large part due to the continued detention of U.S. citizens Pastor Brunson and Serkan Gölge, a National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) scientist charged with involvement in the coup attempt, as well as that of three

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Turkish nationals who worked at U.S. Consulates. [President Donald J. Trump](#), Vice President Michael R. Pence, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, and numerous members of Congress repeatedly called for Pastor Brunson's release. In August 2018, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) Turkish Minister of Justice Abdulhamit Gül and Turkish Minister of the Interior Süleyman Soylu for their complicity in Pastor Brunson's detainment. That same month, President Trump announced the doubling of tariff rates on steel and aluminum imports from Turkey, which led to a significant loss in the value of the Turkish lira and sent shockwaves through the Turkish economy. Since Pastor Brunson's release in October 2018, relations have seen some improvement. In November 2018, the sanctions on Minister Gül and Minister Soylu were lifted.

In addition to the detainments mentioned above, concerns persist about Turkey's intention to purchase Russia's S-400 missile system—which is incompatible

with NATO systems—prompting Congress in August 2018 to temporarily halt the sale of F-35 jets to Turkey. The Turkish government also opposes U.S. support for Kurdish groups combating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Syria, particularly the People's Protection Units (YPG), which Turkey claims is a terrorist organization affiliated with the PKK. The United States has [designated](#) the PKK as a terrorist organization since 1997, but has not done so for the YPG. Additionally, Turkish officials continue to press for the extradition of Gülen and others in connection with allegations of their responsibility for the failed coup attempt.

Since 2011, the United States has provided funding for refugees in Turkey through the United Nations (UN) refugee agency, the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Turkey is hosting at least 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees from various religious faiths who fled to Turkey to escape persecution by the Bashar al-Assad regime and ISIS.