

The Turkish government's limitations on freedom of religion or belief threaten the continued vitality and survival of minority religious communities in Turkey. State secularism significantly restricts religious freedom, especially for religious minorities including the Greek, Armenian, and Syrian Orthodox Churches; Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches; and the Jewish community, but also for the Sunni Muslim majority and minority Alevi which some view as a unique sect of Islam. USCIRF continues to place Turkey on its Watch List in 2011, having first so designated Turkey in 2009.

### **BACKGROUND**

Turkey has a democratic government, with an energetic civil society and media. Under the 1923 founding constitution, the Republic of Turkey is a secular state that protects the freedom of belief and worship. However, due to Turkish secular ideology, Turkish leaders have adopted policies that subject religion to state control and remove the public influence of religion, including expressions of personal belief. The Turkish government's formal, longstanding efforts to control religion by imposing suffocating regulations and denying full legal status to religious institutions has resulted in serious religious freedom violations.

The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by Prime Minister Erdoğan, promotes a platform that favors accession to the EU and the democratic integration of Islam into public life. In 2010, as part of its EU accession process, Turkey adopted some reforms relevant to religious freedom. Although the Turkish government has arrested those suspected of violent hate crimes

linked to religion, prolonged trials highlight judicial weakness on religious freedom violations. Following the June 2011 parliamentary election, Turkey's parliament is expected to draft the country's first civilian-written constitution that may improve religious freedom protections. The AKP faces continuing opposition from the "deep state," comprised of the judiciary, military, and entrenched supporters of traditional Turkish secularism, whose guiding principle is defined by excluding religion from public life.

USCIRF traveled to Turkey in February 2011 and met with government officials, including the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister for European Union Affairs and Chief Negotiator for EU Accession, the President of the *Diyanet* (Directorate of Religious Affairs), and the Director General of the *Vakiflar* (Directorate of Foundations), the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church, the Patriarchs of the Syriac and Armenian Orthodox Churches, the Chief Rabbi, representatives of the Alevis, Protestants, Jehovah Witnesses, and Mormons, journalists, and civil society leaders.

### RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS

Turkish society is coming to grips with religious and ethnic diversity, but questions remain about the government's willingness and ability to recognize such diversity in law and practice. The government continues to control the practice of Islam and places significant restrictions on religious minorities. Furthermore, the alleged involvement of state and military officials in the Ergenekon conspiracy, which included alleged plans to assassinate minority religious leaders and to bomb mosques, is also of serious concern.

**Restrictions on the Practice of Islam:** Turkey does not officially permit the individual or

communal practice of Islam outside of government-regulated institutions. The *Diyamet*

, which reports to the Prime Minister and is funded in the national budget, officially allows the propagation of only the Hanafi Sunni school of Islam, oversees 85,000 Hanafi Sunni mosques, pays imams' salaries, and employs a Mufti in every province who must report back monthly.

Only recently were imams allowed to write and deliver their own sermons without interference from the Diyanet, although it continues to suggest sermon topics.

**Restrictions on Religious Minorities:** Turkey provides religious minorities with limited and varying legal opportunities to own property, conduct religious services, and open schools, hospitals, and other institutions, and regularly interferes in the internal governance of all non-Muslim religious minorities. Further, local officials often use zoning laws and purported security concerns to restrict these groups' ability to open and maintain houses of worship. The closure of the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary almost 40 years ago and the continuing efforts to confiscate land surrounding the Syriac Mor Gabriel Monastery, have led to a reduction in the size of these communities by denying them the right to train clergy. In addition, the government does not officially accord the ecclesiastical title of "ecumenical" to the Ecumenical Patriarch, and has interfered in the selection procedure of the Armenian Patriarchate's religious leadership. However, in early July 2011, the first Syriac church in 90 years opened in Turkey, as well as a Syriac cultural and religious center.

**Restrictions on Alevi:** The Alevi are Turkey's largest religious minority community. Some Alevi identify as Shi'a Muslim, while others reject Islam and view themselves as a unique culture. The Alevi are seeking to resolve with the government five key issues: legal status for Alevi houses of worship; the abolishment of compulsory religious education classes; the end to the building of Hanafi Sunni Mosques in Alevi villages; the return of confiscated Alevi properties; and the establishment of a museum at the Madimak Hotel in Sivas where Alevi were killed in a 1993 arson attack.

**The Jewish Community and Anti-Semitism:** The Jewish community reported that their status in Turkey is better than that of Jews in other majority Muslim countries. Nevertheless, al-Qaeda linked terrorists attacked a synagogue in 2003, other violent attacks have occurred on Jewish property, and anti-Semitism has increased in some sectors of Turkish media and society. In February 2011, Jewish community leaders stated that popular perception of their community is “directly linked to events in the Mideast.”

**Conscientious Objectors:** Turkish law does not include a provision for alternative military service for conscientious objectors. Four conscientious objectors, and three other Turkish Jehovah’s Witnesses, have a pending case at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). In July 2011, the ECtHR unequivocally declared in a case regarding Armenia that conscientious objection to military service is protected under Article 9 (“Freedom of thought, conscience and religion”) of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. This decision should have a positive impact for the seven Turks.

**Religious Dress:** Turkish secularism bans religious dress, including headscarves, in state buildings, including public and private universities, the parliament, courts, and schools. Legally, only the titular head of any religious group may wear religious garb in public facilities. Non-Muslim clerics face more stringent restrictions on clerical dress than do Muslim clerics.

**National Identity Cards:** Religious affiliation is listed on Turkish national identity cards, but some religions are not on the official list of options. A 2006 law allowed individuals to leave the religion section blank, but the government still restricts applicants’ choice of religion. Individuals who leave the option blank encounter difficulties in opting out of Islamic religion classes.

**The Ergenekon Conspiracy and Violence Against Religious Minorities:** Turkish authorities have taken action against the Ergenekon conspiracy, an underground, ultra-nationalist movement with ties to the military, security forces, the judiciary, and secularist political elites. Allegedly, Ergenekon plotters planned to overthrow the AKP and have been implicated in planning and carrying out violence against religious minorities. By March 2010, Turkish courts had charged nearly 200 alleged Ergenekon members, including police and army officials, businessmen, academics, politicians, journalists, and organized crime figures. Some claim that current government officials are themselves engaged in political manipulation of the Ergenekon investigation, pointing out that many of the detainees are prominent critics of Prime Minister Erdoğan's government and individuals who support strict secularism. In late July 2011, the top four military leaders resigned citing Prime Minister Erdoğan's rejection of military promotions for several individuals. Prime Minister Erdoğan rejected the promotions on the grounds that those individuals being recommended for promotions are either in jail or are currently being investigated in the conspiracy plot, which again included violence against religious minorities.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY**

Turkey is a strategic partner and NATO ally, and its proximity to Iraq and Iran has elevated its importance in U.S. foreign policy. While the U.S. continues to support Turkish accession to the EU and has encouraged Turkey to continue the reforms necessary to complete the membership process, the U.S. also has criticized domestic limitations on human rights and religious freedom. The U.S. promotes policies to protect freedom of religion, including allowing the free functioning of non-Muslim religious institutions and the return of expropriated minority properties. Every U.S. president since President Carter has called for Turkey to re-open the Greek Orthodox Theological School of Halki under the auspices of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The U.S. government also cooperates with Turkey to assist in the advancement of freedom of expression, respect for individual human rights, civil society, and promotion of ethnic diversity.

The U.S. government should:

- Urge Turkey to comply with its international commitments regarding freedom of religion or belief;
- Encourage the Turkish government to end the longstanding denial of full legal recognition for religious communities and permit religious minorities to train religious clergy in Turkey, including by reopening the Greek Orthodox Theological Seminary of Halki;
- Encourage the government to allow women the freedom to express their religious views through their dress; and
- Urge Turkey to end the prohibition on religious minorities wearing religious dress in public.

## **NORTHERN CYPRUS**

H. Res 1631, which passed the House of Representatives in September 2010, called on USCIRF to “investigate and make recommendations on violations of religious freedom in the areas of northern Cyprus under control of the Turkish military.” USCIRF travelled to Cyprus in February, 2011 and met with political authorities, religious leaders, and representatives from civil society and religious minority communities. Authorities in northern Cyprus harass religious minorities through arbitrary regulations. The delegation found three main concerns during their visit: 1) the inability of Orthodox Christians, other religious communities, and religious clergy to access and hold services at their places of worship and cemeteries in the north; 2) the disrepair of churches and cemeteries, through purposeful desecration and negligence, and issues relating to the preservation of religious heritage; and 3) the lack of schools and opportunities for young people in the north, which has led to an exodus of Greek Cypriots and other religious minorities.

The United States does not officially recognize the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.” However, the U.S. government discusses religious freedom with Turkish Cypriot authorities and supports international efforts to reunify the island. USCIRF urges the U.S. government to insist that the Republic of Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot authorities abandon all restrictions on Christians and Jews regarding access, use, and restoration of places of worship and cemeteries, cease the ongoing desecration of these religious sites and items, and end limitations on freedom of belief and worship.

**Please see USCIRF’s 2011 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Turkey and Northern Cyprus.**