

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Turkey remained worrisome, with the perpetuation of restrictive and intrusive governmental policies on religious practice and a marked increase in incidents of vandalism and societal violence against religious minorities. As in previous years, the government continued to unduly interfere in the internal affairs of religious communities by [preventing the election](#) of board members for non-Muslim foundations and [introducing new limitations](#) on the long-delayed election of the Armenian Apostolic Church's patriarch. The Interior Ministry curtailed the candidacies of certain individuals in the latter election despite a May 2019 [Constitutional Court ruling](#) that prior acts of such state interference had violated religious freedom. Alevi, the country's largest religious minority community, remained unable to gain official recognition for their gathering houses (*cemevleri*) as places of worship or to exempt their children from compulsory religious classes, despite European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) rulings finding that these policies violated Alevi's rights.

Religious minorities in Turkey expressed concerns that governmental rhetoric and policies contributed to an increasingly hostile environment and implicitly encouraged acts of societal aggression and violence. Government officials and politicians continued to propagate expressions of [anti-Semitism](#) and hate speech, and no progress was made during the year to repeal Turkey's blasphemy law or to provide an alternative to mandatory military service and permit conscientious objection. Many

longstanding issues concerning religious sites, such as the inability of the Greek Orthodox community to train clergy at the [Halki Seminary](#), remained unresolved. In several instances in 2019, [Armenian](#), [Assyrian](#), and [Greek](#) religious and cultural sites, including numerous cemeteries, faced severe damage or destruction—in some cases because of neglect, but also due to vandalism or state-endorsed construction projects—while [Alevi holy sites](#) in the province of Sivas faced similar threats after the government issued mining permits for the surrounding area. In August 2019, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [attended](#) the foundation-laying ceremony for a Syriac Orthodox church in Istanbul, which has been characterized as the first newly constructed church in the history of the Turkish republic. However, throughout the year, President Erdoğan [called](#) multiple times for the Hagia Sophia, a historic Greek Orthodox basilica that has held legal status as a museum since 1935, to be converted back into a mosque. In November 2019, a Turkish higher court also [issued a decision](#) permitting the Chora (Kariye) Museum, a former Greek Orthodox church, to be converted back into a mosque—thereby possibly [setting a precedent](#) for the similar conversion of the Hagia Sophia.

Throughout the year, the Turkish government continued to dismiss, detain, and arrest individuals affiliated with, or accused of affiliation with, the U.S.-based cleric Fethullah Gülen, for alleged complicity in a July 2016 coup attempt or involvement in terrorist activity.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Turkey on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Raise in all meetings with Turkish government officials and press at the highest levels for the reopening of the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary and for the Turkish government to comply fully with

ECtHR rulings on freedom of religion or belief; and

- Direct the U.S. Embassy in Ankara and Consulates in Istanbul and Adana to track religious communities' efforts to open, regain, renovate, and protect places of worship and other religious sites of spiritual, cultural, or historic importance, and work with the Turkish government to ensure the protection of such sites.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Pass the Defending United States Citizens and Diplomatic Staff from Political Prosecutions Act of 2019 ([S.1075](#)) to defend U.S. citizens and diplomatic staff from political prosecution in Turkey, particularly when they are targeted in connection with religion or belief, and to require the imposition of sanctions on responsible Turkish officials.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom in Turkey](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Urges U.S. Policymakers to Remain Engaged on Religious Freedom in Turkey](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Condemns Erdoğan's Threats to Change Status of Hagia Sophia](#)

Background

According to the [CIA World Factbook](#), the population of Turkey is approximately 82 million, of which 99.8 percent identifies as Muslim; an [estimated](#) 77.5 percent majority adheres to Sunni Islam. Between 10 million and 25 million people identify as Alevi, a community that the Turkish government largely refuses to differentiate from majority Sunni Muslims. The remaining 0.2 percent of the population comprises atheists, Armenian Apostolics, Baha'is, Bulgarian Orthodox, Chaldean Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Syriac Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, and other religious communities.

The [Turkish constitution](#) defines the country as a secular state and guarantees the freedom of conscience, religious belief, and conviction. However, the Turkish government also exercises extensive control over both majority Muslim and non-Muslim religious communities through either the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), which oversees the practice of Islam, or the General Directorate of Foundations (*Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü*), which regulates the activities of other religious communities. Some observers have characterized the Diyanet under President Erdoğan's leadership as "[an instrument of \[his\] party's political and ideological agenda](#)" abroad, employing a fusion of Turkish nationalism and Sunni Islam as a foreign policy tool. Within Turkey, no religious community has been permitted legal personality (recognition as a legal entity). Although discrimination on religious grounds is prohibited, non-Sunni Muslim individuals in particular have reported incidents of discrimination in the workplace.

State Interference in Religious Affairs

The Turkish government remained involved—and in certain cases directly interfered—in the selection processes for leadership positions of many religious groups. As the Directorate of Religious Affairs is responsible for the appointment of all imams throughout the country, Muslim communities lacked the means to select their own religious leaders independently. Some imams who declined or failed to adhere to the Directorate of Religious Affairs' guidelines were reportedly [dismissed](#) from their positions. The government also continued to block the election of new board members to Turkey's non-Muslim foundations by failing to provide the necessary regulations to allow for an election, as has been the case [since 2013](#).

After the [passing](#) of Armenian Patriarch Mesrob Mutafyan in March 2019, the Armenian Apostolic community undertook preparations to hold a long-sought election for the position of patriarch. Patriarch Mutafyan had been unable to fulfill his duties since 2008 due to illness, leading the community beginning in 2010 to petition the Turkish government to hold elections for his replacement. The government [blocked](#) all attempts in the intervening years to hold an election, and it interfered again in September 2019 when the Interior Ministry introduced a [new regulation](#) barring the candidacies of any otherwise eligible individuals if they were serving abroad. The community finally [elected](#) a new patriarch in December 2019.

Societal Persecution and Violence against Religious Minorities

Throughout 2019, members of Turkey's various religious and ethnic minority communities faced both threats of violence and actual

violence, including at least two killings. In May, 86-year-old Zafir Pinari, a Greek man, was found [murdered](#) in his home on the island of Gökçeada. In November, Christian missionary and South Korean citizen Jinwook Kim was [stabbed to death](#) in the streets of the southeastern city of Diyarbakır. In Istanbul, an Armenian citizen was [stabbed](#) at her front door two months after a message arranged in the shape of a cross was posted on the wall of her home, containing profanity and referring to the residents as "infidels." In multiple incidents in 2019, Alevi homes were similarly vandalized with graffiti and threatening messages, and in November, burglars [broke into](#) the home of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I. In March, an unidentified individual threw [a Molotov cocktail](#) at the Beth Israel Synagogue in Izmir; according to reports, local authorities apprehended the individual and charged them with "damaging places of worship."

Blasphemy Charges

Turkey has [occasionally](#) charged individuals for blasphemy under article 216 (3) of the Penal Code, which punishes "openly insulting the religious values held by a segment of society." In May 2019, Turkish actress Berna Laçın was [acquitted](#) of blasphemy charges brought against her the previous year in connection with social media posts; however, authorities then appealed her acquittal, which was later [upheld](#) after the end of the reporting period, in January 2020. Similarly, officials [detained](#) two local staffers of the U.S. Consulate in Adana in November 2019 for "mocking Islamic values" in a video posted on social media. Although authorities launched an investigation, they reportedly released the two individuals shortly after their arrest.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Turkey maintain close relations as strategic allies and as members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However, as in the previous year, the bilateral relationship remained strained in 2019. On October 6, 2019, President Donald J. Trump [announced](#) the withdrawal of U.S. forces from northern Syria, making way for a Turkish military operation into the region. Following Turkey's unilateral invasion into Syria, and amid concerns of war crimes and a possible ISIS resurgence, President Trump issued an executive order ([E.O. 13894](#)) to sanction Turkish officials contributing to the deteriorating situation in Syria, increase tariffs on Turkish steel, and [suspend](#) trade negotiations. The U.S. Department of the Treasury subsequently [designated](#) two Turkish ministries and three ministers under the E.O. That same month, Vice President Michael R. Pence and Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo [visited](#) Ankara to negotiate a 120-hour [ceasefire](#) in Syria that expressly committed the two governments to protect religious and ethnic minorities. In November 2019, President Erdoğan visited the White House to meet with [President Trump](#) and some [members of the U.S. Senate](#) to discuss Syria, including the security of Christian minorities along the Syrian-Turkish border.

In June 2019, [Secretary Pompeo](#) and Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom [Samuel D. Brownback](#) urged the Turkish government to reopen the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary. In January 2020, shortly after the reporting period, Ambassador Brownback [traveled](#) to Turkey to meet with Patriarch Bartholomew to discuss religious freedom issues.