



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: TURKEY

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To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Religious Freedom in Turkey in 2021

Introduction

In 2021 religious freedom conditions in Turkey have remained poor, with Turkish government action, deliberate inaction, and rhetoric continuing to fuel a political environment hostile to religious minorities. The Turkish government has made little effort to address the religious freedom issues consistently raised for years, including granting minority religious communities [legal personality](#) and permission to hold board member [elections](#); [recognizing](#) Alevi houses of worship (*cemevleri*); and [re-opening](#) the Theological School of Halki, a seminary of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Government tolerance of hate speech and acts of violence persisted as the COVID-19 pandemic hatched antisemitic conspiracy theories and new forms of intimidation towards Turkey's Armenian community and others.

In December 2020, Turkey's parliament passed a law that human rights groups [warned](#) would, when implemented, increase control over civil society, including religious groups, by subjecting them to intensified oversight and new limitations for online fundraising. In March 2021, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan revealed a new [Human Rights Action Plan](#) for a freer and "more democratic Turkey," which human rights organizations characterized as a [missed opportunity](#) for genuine reform. The plan includes [promises](#) to revise regulations on elections of board members for non-Muslim foundations, though how it specifically pledges to do so remains to be seen.

This country update provides an overview of religious freedom conditions in Turkey and the hostile climate religious minorities face in 2021. The Turkish President's July 2020 decree—ordering the Hagia Sophia's [conversion](#) into a mosque—epitomized this hostile trajectory, whose ramifications continue to be felt today.

Background: The Hagia Sophia Conversion

On July 10, 2020, President Erdoğan signed a [decree](#) handing control of the Hagia Sophia to Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*). Completed under Emperor Justinian in 537 A.D., the Hagia Sophia served as the most important Basilica of the Byzantine Empire until Sultan Mehmed II conquered Constantinople in the year 1453. Mehmed ordered the cathedral to be converted into a mosque and [endowed](#) it as an Islamic charitable trust a few years later. In 1934, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's government turned the Hagia Sophia into a museum. The decision at that time was a product of secular ideology, domestic politics, and geopolitical considerations, but for Turkey's religious minorities the museum also became a [symbol](#) of religious pluralism and tolerance in the country



The Council of State—Turkey’s *highest administrative court*—ruled last year that the 1934 decision had *no legal basis* as it “constituted a misappropriation of an Islamic charitable trust.” This highly selective reading that justified what many consider a preordained verdict could set dangerous legal precedents for future court cases. At a minimum the annulment—and resulting restoration of the Hagia Sophia to a mosque—violated the spirit of the 1934 decision in the eyes of religious minority community members.

Indeed, Erdoğan’s decree came at a time of deteriorating conditions for religious freedom in Turkey and the discourse surrounding the decision has been steeped in language threatening to religious minorities. Erdoğan *justified* the move as a continuation of Sultan Mehmed’s “spirit of conquest”; members of his ruling coalition *framed it* as “the will of the nation” and *those opposed* as “Byzantines among us.”

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) includes the Hagia Sophia on its World Heritage List and expressed *concern* about the Turkish government’s decision: “[The Hagia Sophia’s] status as a museum reflects the universal nature of its heritage, and makes it a powerful symbol for dialogue.” President Erdoğan’s decree, according to UNESCO, “raises the impact on this change of status on the property’s universal value.”

The ruling in 1934, and the Turkish government’s decision to overturn it, concern less the physical structure of the Hagia Sophia—though there are *significant fears* regarding potential damage—than what

the discourse surrounding the Hagia Sophia’s status has come to represent: namely, what is and what should be the Turkish state’s relationship with Sunni Islam. Implicit in the recent court’s decision is the rejection of Kemalist notions of the secular state (Turkish *laiklik*), which minority religious communities—as well as those with differing interpretations of Sunni Islam, Hanafi jurisprudence, and its relationship with the state—perceived as an imperfect, but nonetheless important, guarantee of religious freedom and human rights.

Halki Seminary

July 29, 2021, *marked* 50 years since the closure of the Theological School of Halki, a seminary of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Eastern Orthodox Church. The shuttering of Halki Seminary means that the Ecumenical Patriarchate has been unable to train and educate clergy for two generations.

His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America *told* the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in May: “For such an institution, which is the center of Orthodoxy all over the world, to be deprived of the possibility of educating clergy and future bishops, means a huge loss, not only for the Patriarchy but also for the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchy.” The Turkish government’s refusal to re-open Halki Seminary prevents the inter-generational transfer of religious tradition and education within the country’s dwindling Greek Orthodox community and is an enforced erosion of Greek Orthodox culture in Turkey.

Legal Personality and Internal Meddling

The Turkish government continues to interfere in the internal affairs of religious minorities and withhold critical recognition of legal personality. Following the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, the Turkish government came to *interpret* the equal rights of non-Muslim minorities as only applicable to Armenian Apostolic, Greek Orthodox, and Jewish communities—but not inclusive of legal status.

Since 2013, the Turkish government has *blocked* religious minority foundations from electing new board members, a move that has slowly reduced their numbers through death and illness, increasing the difficulties of day-to-day functioning and *dividing* communities like the Armenian Apostolic Church in Istanbul. Despite requests from Armenian Patriarch *Mashalyan* and Ecumenical Patriarch *Bartholomew I*, the Turkish government continues to deny legal status to religious minority foundations, crucial for legitimizing board member elections.

The Turkish government's selective interpretation of the Treaty of Lausanne's provisions on minority rights does not include Muslim minorities, creating further issues for these communities. The Alevi community, for example, represents between 10 to 20 percent of the population, but *does not enjoy* legal recognition for its houses of worship and centers for training clergy, or exemption from compulsory religious classes on Sunni Islam in schools.

The Turkish state provides certain subsidies for recognized religious institutions. Yet Ankara continues to ignore a *2016 European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruling* that the government acted in a discriminatory manner when subsidizing electricity bills for Sunni mosques, while refusing Alevi houses of worship (*cemevleri*) the same services. The Turkish court's initial rejection of the Alevi community's case stated that Alevism is a religious movement within Islam, not a separate faith and thus not qualified for state subsidies.

As a result of the ECHR ruling, the Turkish government began subsidizing utility bills for the specific *cemevi*, but not—as the ruling required—Alevi houses of worship generally. Following the court judgment, local Alevi communities have gone to the Turkish courts to seek subsidies for their own *cemevi*, but decisions can take up to one year and court fees are expensive. Few, therefore, have gone to the courts to seek individual approval.

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, Alevi community members report that funding houses of worship has become considerably more difficult, as attendance, and the voluntary collections for utilities it brings, is low.

Education

The official favoritism of Sunni Islam in the education system continues to discriminate against religious minority communities. Imam Hatip schools, for example, are public schools where up to one-quarter of classes are *devoted* to “electives” generally linked to Sunni Islam. Such public schools do not exist for other religious minority communities.

Alevi parents continue to face issues in getting *exemptions* from religious classes for their children, as the state does not consider Alevis a religious minority. State support for public schools and universities with links to Sunni Islam, and religious minorities' inability to create private institutions of higher education for themselves, lays bare the fact that Ankara's refusal to reopen Halki Seminary is based in discriminatory policies rather than legal obstacles.

Other Threats to Religious Minorities

Acts of vandalism and hate speech—including language used to incite violence, questioning a community's right to live in the country, death threats, and threatening rhetoric from government officials—targeting religious minority communities remained common. In January 2021 unknown individuals in Yalova Province *marked* Alevi houses with red paint, evoking memories of past violence. Also in January 2021, AK Party spokesperson Ömer Çelik *criticized* a local German government for recognizing Alevism as a separate religion, stating “attempts to separate Alevism from Islam, to separate Alevism from Turkishness, are not actually to the benefit of our Alevi citizens and brothers, but are the activities ... of a few foreign intelligence services.” The following month, however, Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu showed support for the Alevi community, *declaring* “*cemevis* are places of worship, period.”

Armenian religious heritage sites remain under threat. In early 2021 the Surp Toros Armenian church in Kütahya was *demolished* after coming into the possession of an unknown individual—despite holding protected status. In August bulldozers *destroyed* an Armenian cemetery in Van Province, the same month an Armenian church and cultural center in Malatya *hosted* its first mass following a restoration.

Although many attacks on cemeteries in Turkey appear to be the work of non-state actors, the Turkish government has also been implicated in the [destruction](#) of religious minority burial sites. Moreover, authorities often fail to catch or prosecute non-state actors responsible for these crimes, creating an environment of impunity. Similarly, the Turkish government frequently fails to halt construction projects that threaten cemeteries; for example, in March 2021 the opposition Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) Member of Parliament (MP) Garo Paylan [submitted](#) a parliamentary inquiry to ask why the government had not halted the construction of a state-owned bank over an Armenian and Catholic cemetery in historic downtown Ankara.

In April 2021, in response to Turkish-Armenian MP Garo Paylan's statements on Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day, nationalist MP Ümit Özdağ [threatened](#): "you'll also have a Talat Pasha experience and you should have it." Talat Pasha was the principal architect of the Armenian Genocide. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic and the November 2020 conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh has fueled anti-Armenian [conspiracies](#) and intimidating, anti-Armenian [protests](#).

The pandemic has also fostered an [increase](#) in antisemitism and antisemitic rhetoric in Turkey. In March 2021, the gate of the historical Kasturya Synagogue in Istanbul was [set on fire](#). In May 2021, the U.S. Department of State issued a [press statement](#) strongly condemning President Erdoğan's antisemitic comments regarding the Jewish people, urging the Turkish leader to refrain from incendiary remarks. Also in May, *Shalom Newspaper*, the only Jewish newspaper published in Turkey, was [hacked](#) in an antisemitic incident.

In April a Turkish court [sentenced](#) Syriac Orthodox priest Sefer Bileçen, known as Father Aho, to two years and one month in prison for allegedly providing food and water to members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The case—along with the apparent kidnapping of Simuni and Hurmuz Diril, an elderly Chaldean couple—has deeply [disturbed](#) the Assyrian community. While Simuni's body was found, her husband Hurmuz [remains](#) missing. The Turkish government also continued to [expel](#) or bar the entry into the country of foreign Protestants for posing a purported "national security threat."

Persons in official positions have utilized rhetoric characterized as hate speech to denigrate [nonreligious individuals](#). The Turkish government has prosecuted members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community under [blasphemy laws](#),

[arresting](#) or putting under house arrest students for creating artwork that depicted the Kaaba with LGBTI flags. Interior Minister Süleyman Soyulu then [tweeted](#): "four LGBT deviants at Boğaziçi were arrested for disrespect to the grand Kaaba." Twitter [marked](#) his tweet as hateful. A few months later the head of Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs, Ali Erbaş, [suggested](#) the government curtail social media use to conform with "Islamic values."

Northern Syria and Iraq

The Turkish occupation of territory across northern Syria remains a serious threat—not only to the [vulnerable religious and ethnic minority populations](#) of that area—including Yazidis, Christians, and Kurds—but also to the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). The AANES is a multiethnic and religiously diverse governing coalition affiliated with both the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), which has endorsed principles of religious freedom and pluralism, and with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the SDC's U.S.-allied military branch. However, the Turkish government and military [make no distinction](#) between the AANES and the U.S.-designated terrorist group the [PKK](#). In this sense, Turkey points to the origins of the AANES in Syria's Kurdish-led opposition—ignoring its evolution as an independent entity—and to former ties between the PKK and the People's Protection Units (YPG), which is part of the SDF. Turkey's incessant shelling of civilian areas in AANES/SDF areas across northern Syria, and the potential for expansion of its occupation, present a [direct threat](#) to religious and ethnic minorities in those towns. On August 19, 2021, the Turkish military conducted [airstrikes](#) on a makeshift hospital in the predominantly-Yazidi Sinjar region of northern Iraq, resulting in the deaths of civilians and medical staff.

In September 2021, members of Syria's Christian community expressed [concern](#) over escalating Turkish military attacks in the northeast of the country. Attacks on the Christian-majority town of [Tel Tamer](#) targeted civilian infrastructure and prompted many residents to flee.

Turkey also continued its backing of various armed groups opposing the Syrian government, sometimes collectively called [Turkish-supported opposition groups](#) (TSOs). Turkey and TSOs have continued to attack and displace communities with large religious minority populations. In August 2021, the U.S. government responded by [issuing sanctions](#) against militant Islamist groups including TSOs such as [Ahrar al-Sharqiya](#).

Turkey's ongoing support of Islamist factions of the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (TFSA)—also known as the Syrian National Army (SNA)—has enabled the TSFA to commit [atrocities](#) such as the kidnapping and torture of religious minorities, including [Yazidi women](#), and the defacement and destruction of their shrines.

Status of Refugees Who Fled Religious Persecution to Turkey

The Uyghur community in Turkey, estimated to be around [50 thousand](#), fears that an extradition treaty between Beijing and Ankara will result in the deportation of Uyghurs who [fled persecution](#) from the People's Republic of China (PRC). President Erdoğan visited China in 2017 and signed an extradition treaty, which the PRC's National People's Congress [ratified](#) in December 2020. The Turkish parliament [has yet to ratify](#) the treaty, despite intense pressure and increased economic investment from Beijing.

With four million refugees and asylum seekers living in the country, Turkey is the [largest host](#) of refugees in the world; Turkish society and government, therefore, deserve significant praise. Indeed, despite a lack of infrastructure, the government has gone to great lengths to support refugees (though there are signs that [anti-immigrant sentiment](#) is on the rise). Still, Uyghurs and others have reason to worry, as Ankara has a history of deporting refugees and asylum seekers back to conflict zones or likely persecution. Turkey has [detained](#) and sent Syrian refugees and activists to Idlib; deported at least four [Uyghur refugees](#) to China in 2019; returned thousands of [Afghans](#) fleeing conflict and Taliban persecution in 2018; and secretly expelled [two asylum seekers](#) back to Uzbekistan in 2017, where they faced [torture](#).

Members of persecuted religious minorities from Iran, who have sought refuge in Turkey, reportedly continue to receive threats from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Followers of spiritual leader [Dr. Mohammad Ali Taheri](#) and the Erfan-e Halgheh movement, for example, report receiving messages from the IRGC threatening violence against their families. Turkish police and security services, however, have expressed little interest in investigating these threats or providing protection.

Conclusion

In its 2021 Annual Report, USCIRF recommended that the U.S. Department of State include Turkey on its Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). President Erdoğan continues to employ religious rhetoric and symbols to consolidate political power, to the detriment of religious tolerance and the safety and well-being of religious minorities. In turn, government policies further empower one interpretation of Sunni Islam over religious pluralism. As a result, conditions for religious freedom in Turkey have maintained a disappointing trajectory in 2021.

Religious minority communities face a constant battle to retain and pass on their cultural and religious heritage. The Turkish government has the power, however, to stem and even reverse this tide. Allowing the Halki Seminary to reopen, granting legal recognition to religious minority organizations, and providing funding and subsidies to all religious organizations can breathe new life into Turkey's already vibrant and diverse societies.



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