

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Turkey (Türkiye) remained consistent with the previous year. The administration of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan maintained relationships with certain historical religious communities and launched restoration of their sacred sites, such as Diyarbakır’s Surp Sarkis Armenian Church. However, several religious groups faced ongoing struggles for legal recognition; construction or administration of houses of worship and other institutions; and legal residency for foreign-born clergy. State actors and institutions including schools continued to emphasize the centrality of Sunni Islam to Turkish national identity, marginalizing non-Sunni Muslims and non-Muslims while targeting secularists and others for expressing criticism of Islam. USCIRF visited Turkey in September to observe religious freedom conditions.

Authorities continued to monitor online activity for commentary they perceived as offensive to Islam, investigating and prosecuting people under Article 216 of the Turkish Penal Code. That law prohibits incitement of hatred toward another group based on religious differences but in effect criminalizes blasphemy against state-approved versions of Islam. In January, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) filed a criminal complaint against Sevan Nişanyan for disparaging on YouTube the Islamic call to prayer. In February, the Beykoz Chief Public Prosecutor’s Office detained Feyza Altun for her social media post denouncing Shari’a. Although the court released her one day later under an international travel ban and police parole, in May it issued a nine-month deferred sentence against her.

In September, the municipality of Istanbul recognized Alevi *cemevis* as houses of worship. However, the Turkish government continued to regard Alevis as Muslim, despite some Alevis’ campaign for recognition as a distinct religion. Protestant Christians and Jehovah’s Witnesses also faced ongoing and systematic restrictions, including barriers to zoning, building, and registering places of worship; bans on training Turkish-born Protestant clergy; lack of burial rights for Protestants of Turkish ethnicity; financial penalties for Jehovah’s Witnesses who practice conscientious objection; and national security bans on foreign national Protestant clergy who have legally resided in Turkey. Authorities reportedly denied

refugee claims of some Iranian converts to Christianity, inaccurately denying that deportation to Iran would pose a threat to their safety.

Jewish, Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, and Armenian Apostolic leaders reported a certain degree of freedom of worship, but even these historical communities faced some challenges. In May, the government reopened Istanbul’s Byzantine-era Chora Church and museum as a mosque. Amid some Muslim nationalists’ objections, the government granted permission for Eastern Orthodox clergy to belatedly celebrate a feast day at the Sümela Monastery, reportedly failing to respond to requests to hold ceremonies at another historic site. Some foreign national clergy experienced delays or obstructions in renewing their residency permits. This further constrained the Eastern Orthodox Church, which has been unable to domestically train clergy since 1971, when a constitutional court ruling in effect pressured some private religious colleges to [close](#)—including the [Halki Theological School](#). On a positive note, following the Minister of Education’s May visit to the School, President Erdoğan met in December with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, who thanked the president for promising to reopen the school. These visits suggested the government may have moved closer to facilitating the reopening of that institution of great spiritual importance and practical necessity for Eastern Orthodox Christians in Turkey and around the world.

Turkey hosted one of the world’s largest populations of refugees, including members of religious minorities fleeing severe persecution, such as Uyghur Muslims from China and Gonabadi Sufis, spiritualists, Baha’is, and Christian converts from Iran. Some refugees reported facing long waits for third country resettlement, inhibitory parameters for refugee distribution within Turkey, and restrictions on their internal freedom of movement, including travel to attend religious services. These factors increased opportunities for authorities to detain and deport refugees; once deported, they face the same religious persecution they originally fled as well as their government’s punishment. In September, Iranian officials caught and detained in Evin Prison a Gonabadi Sufi Muslim refugee, whom Turkish authorities had deported despite credible threats awaiting him in Iran.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Turkey on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
 - Raise in meetings with Turkish government officials obstacles to religious minorities’ access to houses of worship and clergy, such as barriers to continued legal residency and restrictions on clerical institutions including the Theological School of Halki, stressing full compliance with European Court of Human Rights rulings on freedom of religion or belief; and
 - Work with Turkey and other international partners to better protect individuals seeking protection from religious persecution, including cooperating on resettlement programs for those who have fled to Turkey with a credible fear of religious persecution in their home countries.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Elevate in legislation, hearings, and travel delegations to Turkey serious concerns regarding enforcement of Turkish Penal Code Article 216 as a blasphemy law and limitations on religious minorities’ legal status, houses of worship, and access to clergy.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commission Delegation Visit:** Istanbul, Ankara, and Heybeliada in September 2024
- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Turkey](#)

Background

Turkey's [population](#) is almost 85 million, at least 99 percent of whom are Muslims, although the government's classification of between 10 million and 25 million Alevi as Muslims skews these statistics. Among Muslims, the vast majority are Sunni while Shi'a Muslims represent a tiny minority. Less than one percent of the population is non-Muslim, such as Greek and Syriac Orthodox Christians, Roman and Chaldean Catholic Christians, Armenian Apostolic and Protestant Christians, Baha'is, Jews, Yazidis, and others. Of Turkey's 452 non-Muslim places of worship, 205 belonged to non-historical groups such as Protestants, Catholics, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Turkey's historical legacy of pronounced secularism, distinct among countries in the Middle East region, has contributed to a relatively large number of secularists with Sunni Muslim or Alevi backgrounds. The constitution reflects this heritage, referring to the state's secular nature and acknowledging freedom of religion and conscience. However, the government administers many aspects of religious life via the Diyanet and the Directorate General of Foundations. The government offered Alevi *cemevi* utilities and other support via the Ministry of Culture and Tourism over the objections of some activists, who claimed Sunni Muslim institutions received higher funding, support, and recognition under the Diyanet.

Religious Freedom Challenges in Education

Fifty-five schools served Jews and Greek, Armenian, and Assyrian Christians. Despite the constitution's characterization of the country as secular, the same article guaranteeing freedom of religion or conscience also requires the state to provide "instruction in religious culture and morals" via "compulsory" school lessons. While the courses included material on world religions, they often reportedly emphasized state interpretations of Sunni Islam—contrary to the government's "supra-sectarian" educational policy, which aims to empirically present religions, avoiding prioritization of any one sect. Secularists, Alevi, Protestant Christians, and other communities raised additional complaints over ostensibly "elective" courses (e.g., music, sports) in which instruction often explicitly invoked Sunni Islam.

In April, the Ministry of National Education announced its new "Education System for the Century of Turkey," the latest of several overhauls to primary and secondary school curricula. Some of the resulting revisions reportedly invoked religious concepts, sparking controversy among a variety of stakeholders. Some Alevi groups expressed concern over misrepresentations of their tradition, while education and women's unions denounced the curriculum for its alleged imposition of religiously justified systems and norms.

In addition to the continued closure of the Eastern Orthodox Halki seminary, the government also limited training and education for Protestant Christian clergy, forcing many Turkish Christian communities to rely on foreign-born clergy and laity. The government continued its multi-year crackdown on the legal residency of at least

100 long-term resident or expatriate Protestant Christians in Turkey and northern Cyprus. Authorities continued to assign restrictive immigration codes (N-82 and G-87) to Christian clergy and their families, designating them as national security risks. In February, the Constitutional Court [ruled](#) that immigration authorities had not violated Protestant Christians' religious freedom by targeting legal resident pastors and other religious leaders for reentry bans, cancellation of residence permits, and deportation.

Nonstate Actors

Nonstate actors, including Turkish perpetrators of hate crimes as well as foreign-born and Turkish members of violent transnational jihadist groups, also posed a persistent threat to religious minority communities. In January, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) claimed responsibility for an attack on the Santa Maria Roman Catholic Church in Istanbul, in which suspected members of the group's Khorasan branch (ISIS-K) fatally shot a congregation member during Sunday Mass. In December, a gunman shouted messages of religious intolerance in his New Year's Eve attack on Istanbul's Kurtuluş Protestant Association Church, reportedly prompting authorities' swift arrest and investigation. While Jewish communities in Istanbul and Ankara expressed appreciation for police protection at their services, political leaders' incendiary rhetoric about Israel, including Holocaust distortion, have drawn upon historical antisemitic narratives, contributing to an atmosphere of popular sentiment against Jews.

Key U.S. Policy

Throughout 2024, the administration of then President Joseph R. Biden encouraged Turkey to facilitate the reopening of the Halki Theological School. In March, then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan jointly presided over the seventh meeting of the U.S.-Türkiye Strategic Mechanism.

Congress took bipartisan action to monitor Turkey's [stances](#) within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and to track the country's [restrictions](#) on the freedom of expression and other rights of journalists, political opponents, and members of the public. In April, the House of Representatives' Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission held a [hearing](#) on human rights in Turkey, featuring [testimony](#) on Turkey's religious freedom violations. Those violations included Turkey's increasing military encroachment, both direct and through local proxies, into parts of north and east Syria and northern Iraq, purportedly in pursuit of Kurdish terrorists but to the detriment of vulnerable religious minority communities in both areas.

With Turkey's cooperation, the U.S. Department of State implemented the first phases of Welcome Corps, a pilot program for privately sponsored refugee resettlement that included individuals who fled to Turkey from religious persecution in their home countries.