



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Religious Freedom in Turkey

Thursday, June 27, 2019
10:30 AM – 12:00 PM
216 Hart Senate Office Building

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good morning and thank you for attending the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom’s hearing on “Religious Freedom in Turkey.” I would like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us today to offer their expertise and recommendations, and Senator Thom Tillis and his office for providing this room for us.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission monitors the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad, using international standards to do so, and makes policy recommendations to Congress, the President, and the Secretary of State. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this hearing.

Earlier this year, USCIRF issued its 20th Annual Report, marking two decades of the Commission’s work in monitoring freedom of religion or belief and advising the U.S. government. The report documents religious freedom violations and progress during calendar year 2018 in 28 countries. This includes Turkey, where USCIRF noted deteriorating religious freedom conditions.

Turkey has long been home to diverse ethnic and religious communities, including the Armenian Apostolic, Baha’i, Bulgarian Orthodox, Chaldean Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah’s Witness, Jewish, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Syriac Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, and many others. It is also home to the region’s first Atheism Association. However, the government has long exerted undue influence and control over religious communities through its Directorate

Chair Tony Perkins Remarks, Religious Freedom in Turkey

of Religious Affairs, or *Diyanet*, which oversees the practice of Islam, and the General Directorate of Foundations, which manages the activities of all other religious foundations.

The government has increasingly interfered in the internal affairs of religious communities, such as by placing gratuitous conditions on electoral processes for religious leaders. Greek Orthodox metropolitans are required to obtain Turkish citizenship in order to participate in the church's Holy Synod, and, since 2010, the government has prevented the Armenian Apostolic Church from holding elections for the position of patriarch. The government also has refused to recognize the country's largest religious minority, the Alevi, and denies their places of worship, called *cemevis*, any kind of status as such.

While the government has taken some positive steps to address religious property issues, including the restoration and opening of a Bulgarian Orthodox church, permission to build a new Syriac Orthodox church, and the return of 50 property deeds to the Syriac Orthodox community, other problems persist: the government has threatened to convert the Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque and it continues to deny the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary from being reopened.

Let me now turn to my colleague, Vice Chair Gayle Manchin, to discuss Turkey's broader human rights environment and its effect on religious freedom.

###