

## **Challenges to Religious Freedom among Religious Minorities in Turkey**

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I am honored to have the opportunity to provide this briefing on the state of religious minorities in Turkey under the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) government based on my research. I appreciate USIRC hosting a congressional hearing on Turkey, especially at this important juncture when the country's social and political tensions are heightened to a worrying degree. As the party has consolidated its executive power, becoming increasingly authoritarian both in terms of personalistic concentration of authority with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan its disrespect for the rule of law in the 2010s, this period also bears witness to increasing societal polarization. Particularly with the party's decreasing ability to rely on tangible growth measures in an era of looming economic crisis, AKP officials and certainly Erdoğan himself engage in Us vs. Them rhetoric to whip up nationalist sentiment and blame problems ranging from inflation to opposition mobilization on "Others."

My research on the content of the AKP's understanding of Turkey's national identity – that is, the stuff of what it means to be Turkish according to its supporters – helps to delineate who these Others are, why they are the targets of exclusion/discrimination/retribution behavior, and how these behaviors manifest themselves. For the purposes of this briefing, I will outline the content of what I term the AKP's Ottoman Islamist version of Turkishness and who this excludes. As my colleagues focus on the formal and institutional mechanisms – laws, regulations, government actions such as property seizures – of discrimination, I will briefly outline informal and discursive ways in which those who are not part of the Ottoman Islamist Us/Ingroup (Others) are targeted. Finally, drawing from the "inside-out identity contestation" I develop in my book, I discuss how the foreign policy initiatives prescribed by Ottoman Islamism have blowback effects on Others back home. I use the case of the AKP's aggressive and hostile rhetoric toward Israel in the 2010s and the anti-Semitism it stoked against Turkish Jews as an example.

The AKP's Ottoman Islamism is one of four proposals for Turkey's national identity that I extracted through research; the others included Republican Nationalism,

Western Liberalism, and Pan-Turkic Nationalism. The content of Ottoman Islamism includes not just being a Muslim as many discuss in the case of Turkey, but being a *pious Sunni* Muslim. In addition to being devout in belief and practice, including daily prayer (*namaz*) and abstinence from alcohol consumption, the constitutive norm of piety prescribes clear standards of moral (*ahlaki*) behavior. My research also indicates that this understanding of Turkishness includes a respect for patriarchal authority and a belief that Turkey's role should be that of Sunni Muslim leader in its region – particularly protector of Palestinians – as legitimized by its Ottoman sultanate and caliphate legacies. Those in Turkey who do not belong to the category of pious Sunni Muslim and do not respect the behaviors this identity prescribes are Others. I emphasize that this is not just a categorical distinction, but one with significant and visceral affective power: those outside the Ingroup are not just Others, but lesser and immoral Others. Alevi in particular – although they as a group debate whether Alevism is a Shiite version of Islam, a religion other than Islam, or not a religion at all but a culture – as well as other non-Sunnis in Turkey such as Caferis are often seen as heretics by Ottoman Islamists.

The discrimination towards Others such as Alevi and Caferis often takes forms that are difficult to measure, even difficult to identify, but that are nonetheless in need of identification and rectification. As my colleagues focus on formal measures targeted in large part toward Christian populations, I focus here on informal and discursive measures towards Alevi but emphasize that similarly abusive rhetoric and violence is used toward non-Muslims groups as well. By informal and discursive measures I mean non-institutionalized discriminatory behavior including speech acts (comments by AKP leaders), violence (attacks carried out by AKP loyalists against Others deemed not to “know their place”), and symbolic representations.

As an example of both violence and symbolic representation, the naming of third Istanbul bridge the “Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge” lauded the acts of an Ottoman sultan famous for slaughtering Alevi. Further, on a test in a religion class in Van in 2015, four pictures were presented underneath the question: “In which of the images below are the actions of prayer (*namazdaki hareketler*) wrongly represented?” Three of the images depicted a drawing of a boy performing the *namaz* according to standard practice, while one of the images is a photograph of Ali İsmail Korkmaz, an Alevi participant in the Gezi

Park protests who was beaten to death by police in Eskişehir. Korkmaz is represented in the textbook as disrespecting the principles of Sunni Islam for being an Alevi, as well as for challenging the authority of the AKP government by protesting. In considering how government repression during Gezi overlapped across “Other” boundaries in addition to religion, it is worth noting that women and LGBTQs were also specifically targeted during Gezi and after in line with the patriarchal nature of this authority. In a very telling speech act, Erdoğan made disparaging innuendoes toward CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu’s Alevism at campaign events during the general election in 2011, announcing: “We know Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu is ... an Alevi” (*Biliyoruz ki Sayın Kılıçdaroğlu bir ... Alevidir*) and then waiting for the crowd’s jeering response.

In addition to these informal and discriminatory behaviors at the domestic level, the foreign policy behavior prescribed by an Ottoman Islamist understanding of Turkishness also creates negative effects for those who are not pious Sunni Muslims. There is evidence of this in the Greek and Armenian cases, but here I want to highlight the effects of the AKP’s increasingly hostile foreign policy rhetoric toward Israel on Turkish Jews back home. Turkey was the first Muslim-majority state to recognize Israel as a state in 1949 under the Republican Nationalist CHP and maintained close economic, diplomatic, and security ties for over fifty years despite hiccups, including Israel’s worries over Turkey’s fidelity upon its signing of the Baghdad Pact (1955) and the temporary downgrading of relations in the wake of the Suez crisis (1956). As Ottoman Islamism prescribes a view of Israelis as oppressors of fellow Muslim Palestinians, however, Israel became an explicit target of animosity during the AKP’s second and third terms, culminating in an effective severing of diplomatic relations.

In one memorable example, Erdoğan’s berating of Israeli president Shimon Peres for Israel’s attacks against Palestinians during the 2008–2009 Gaza War—“you know well how to kill”—before storming off the stage at the 2009 World Economic Forum was met with jubilation by supporters, who proclaimed him the “*Fatih* of Davos” for his willingness to stand up to Israel and his support for the Palestinian cause. The choice of *fatih* (conqueror) here is telling in its invocation of Ottoman imagery, particularly of Fatih Sultan Mehmet’s conquering of Istanbul to wrest the city from the (Christian) infidel, in support of Erdoğan’s actions. As one ministerial official put it, Palestinians

love Erdoğan because of his “anti-Israeli stance . . . his image of being a strong Muslim leader, not a Turkish leader.” His Ottoman Islamist Turkish supporters love him for this too, fueling the use of fiery rhetoric with inflammatory consequences at home as well as abroad.

Erdoğan has wielded his rhetorical criticism of Israel on visits throughout the Muslim world—particularly following the 2010 raid on the Gaza-bound Turkish flotilla *Mavi Marmara*, in which nine Turkish activists were killed—which in turn increases his legitimacy as defender of Turkey’s Muslim brothers back home. As one journalist noted in an interview, Erdoğan’s (waxing and waning) popularity in the Arab street is a result of his anti-Israeli stance, “not any Ottoman history,” hinting at the limits of Ottoman Islamism’s popularity in terms of other foreign policy issues in the region. Arguably hoping to benefit again from Turkey’s self-declared role as the protector of Muslims and enemy of those who would persecute them, Erdoğan exponentially strengthened his criticism of Israel in response to the attacks launched on Gaza in July 2014 and during the run-up to his bid to become Turkey’s first popularly elected president the following month. In a sense, Erdoğan had already set the parameters for acceptable delegitimization of Israelis and Jews several months earlier when he assaulted a protester demanding justice for the victims of the May 2014 mining disaster in Soma by slapping him and then appearing to use a strongly anti-Semitic epithet.

Anti-Semitism is by no means new to Turkey; however, the expression of animosity toward Jews appears to have become newly acceptable and more frequently cited in the public sphere by some supporters of Ottoman Islamism under AKP rule. In 2012 the Turkish Jewish community made repeated requests to remove a Biomen Shampoo advertisement depicting Hitler shouting at men not to use women’s shampoo. Racist rhetoric manifesting a virulently acrimonious relational meaning with Jews and the state of Israel increased following the onset of the 2014 Israel-Gaza War. A Facebook group page with the name “We are Ottoman Grandchildren for Stubbornness’ Sake” includes a photo of a dog urinating on an Israeli flag, posted on July 11, 2014. The page also displays a photo of a *Daily Telegraph* headline stating “The Turkish Empire Is Coming,” with a comment posted underneath that reads “God willing, with God’s

permission we will be liberated from rule by the Jews and we will advance on the path of my ancestor!”

In terms of speech acts in media coverage, the pro-AKP newspaper *Yeni Akit*'s July 19, 2014, crossword puzzle included a photograph of Hitler with the written clue “We are searching for you.” Further, after singer Yıldız Tilbe tweeted multiple anti-Semitic statements, including “May God be pleased with Hitler, he even did little to [Jews]” and “Muslims will bring about these Jews’ end,” then-AKP mayor of Ankara Melih Gökçek retweeted several of Tilbe’s tweets. One of Gökçek’s retweets included the comment “a query full of intelligence from Tilbe,” leaving no question as to his approval of the singer’s support for Hitler. His support, in turn, was reported positively by pro-AKP newspaper *Yeni Şafak*, which cited the number of Palestinian deaths framed around the question of why the world was keeping silent with no criticism of the reference to Hitler.

This virulent anti-Semitism was stoked again following the 15 July 2016 coup attempt, which many of Erdoğan’s supporters blamed on Jews among their various conspiracy theories. Once again, Turkey’s indigenous Jewish population was deemed not only an Other but a hated fifth column. The culmination of these racist actions and representations has led to mass emigration of Turkish Jews; in 2017 alone, prompted by social media threats related to the coup attempt, 400 Jews emigrated to Israel. From a pre-putsch population of about 22,000, Turkey’s Jewish population is now around 18,000. Nesim Güveniş, deputy chairman of the Association of Turkish Jews in Israel, made a poignant comment that echoes the sentiments of other non-Sunni Muslim populations in Turkey: “We are uncomfortable with being ‘othered.’” In looking not just at formal rules and regulations, but also at informal and discursive acts of violence and discrimination against those who fall outside of Ottoman Islamism’s Ingroup, we see that Alevis, Caferis, Jews, Christians, Protestants, atheists, and others in Turkey are denied the freedom not just to worship or not worship, but also simply to exist as an accepted and equal member of Turkey’s society.