

## Freedom of Religion or Belief in Türkiye

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Let's turn to the issue of **religious freedom, initially at the exclusion of Christians**. The majority of Muslims in Türkiye de facto do not experience religious freedom, despite limited constitutional provisions to the contrary, as they do not have the right to choose their religion or worldview, and do not have the right to choose which version of Islam they want to follow.

Diyanet (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, or the Presidency of Religious Affairs), the government office that oversees all mosques and Muslim teaching and activities, was founded in 1924. Since then, it has controlled even Turkish imams in mosques in countries such as Germany, where imams read sermons on Fridays that were sent to them from Diyanet.

**Sunni Muslim groups** that do not align with Diyanet's official Sunni positions, such as Sufis, the Gülen movement, and Kurdish Muslims, as well as non-Sunni Muslim movements like Alevites and other Shiites, cannot run their own mosques or provide their own religious education in schools. The Alevites, the largest group comprising 10-25% of the population, are denied their own religious identity and forced into Sunni religious education in schools. This is one of the reasons why many Alevites have emigrated to Germany and other European countries. There, Alevites in state schools provide their own religious education, which is independent of the religious education of Sunnis.

The **Jewish population** has fallen from 120,000 in 1948 to just over a tenth of that today. Although the Turkish state officially supports them and synagogues can be renovated, Jews still face public discrimination fueled by Erdogan's statements about the annihilation of Israel, which makes everyday life difficult.

It is very difficult to be an **Atheist** or a follower of a non-theist world view in Türkiye. If it becomes known, people can lose their government jobs or face worse consequences. Surveys show that the percentage of people identifying as atheists or nonbelievers increased from 2% in 2008 to 8% in 2025. Among Gen Z, this percentage rises to 28.5%. Aside from the Alevites, this is the other large group in Türkiye whose right to freedom of religion or belief is denied.

Now, let's turn to the **Christian minorities**. The government estimates that there are about 180,000 Christians in Türkiye, corresponding to approximately 0.2% of the population. However, when the de facto number of Christians living in Türkiye is included, particularly Christian refugees from Iraq and Syria, the estimated Christian population rises to between 220,000 and 370,000, which would account for up to **0.4% of the population**.

After the genocide a century ago, many Armenian families who remained in Türkiye became known as **Crypto-Armenians**. According to research we conducted in 2017, there may be up to one million people who outwardly live as Sunnis but privately maintain their historic Christian identity, passing it from generation to generation.

During World War I, German Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg justified the Ottoman Empire's genocide against the Armenians in several Reichstag sessions with the help of German officers. Although he described the genocide as evil, he claimed that Germany had no choice because it needed allies to win the war. I had the privilege of helping organize the 2015 commemoration at the Berlin Cathedral (Berliner Dom), which marked 100 years since the 1915 massacres and honored the victims of genocides committed against Armenians, Pontic Greeks, and Assyrians in the Ottoman Empire. During the commemoration, German Federal President Joachim Gauck explicitly referenced Bethmann Hollweg and acknowledged Germany's historical responsibility for the genocide, despite

the Turkish government's denial of the term. The suppression of Christians by the so-called Young Turks (Turkish: "Jön Türkler") continued for decades and only began to change to the better under President Erdogan.

Despite all the restrictions on the freedom of religion and belief of Christians in Türkiye, **no one wants to return to the pre-Erdogan era**. Quite diverse different Christian groups still see many improvements under President Erdogan. To understand this, one must understand that most Christians have no hope for improvement if the largest opposition party, the Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP), founded in 1923 as the Kemalist party, comes to power.

Rather, they fear a resurgence of violent, suppressive forms of persecution against religious minorities for not being "Turkish." There is even mistrust against the Kurdish party, as the Kurds were involved in the Armenian genocide alongside the Turks, even though the Kurdish Politian's promise improvements.

On average, only one Christian is murdered each year because of their faith, with all major Christian denominations affected over the years, including Catholics, Protestants and old Oriental churches, - e.g. Gevrye Akgüc, a 92 years old Assyrian Christian in November 2023 in the southeastern province of Mardin - The combination of negative media reports, hate speech of all kinds, the desecration of churches, and the unsolved problem of legal registration leads to constant fear. In addition to direct restrictions, the negative comments and actions of Erdogan's religious and ethnic nationalism, as well as Islamist tendencies - which are particularly evident during election campaigns - have devastating consequences for the everyday lives of religious minorities.

For details since 2021, see the Violence Incident Database of our International Institute for Religious Freedom. This lists three killings, four damaged churches and one closed church, as well as five arrested pastors. <https://irf.global/vid/>

Rather than being proud to host the seat of the non-Western **Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church**, which the Ottoman Empire protected for centuries and which was explicitly recognized in the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, Türkiye is denying its full legal existence and dishonors it by treating it as a minor local bishop of a small Istanbul neighborhood. The Ecumenical Patriarchate is probably the second oldest institution in history, second only to the Roman Catholic Church.

When I first met with Turkish government officials in the 1980s, they were concerned that the Ecumenical Patriarchate could become a state like the Vatican and claim part of their country. However, the Patriarch has proven that he loves his country and is not interested in becoming a politician. Türkiye should be thankful that he has not moved the patriarchate to a safer country, as other churches have done. Using the historic term "Constantinople" is not a threat. The term "Istanbul" comes from it anyway, and it is used daily in explanations to tourists. Yet, in 2020, Türkiye changed the Hagia Sophia into a mosque and has not reopened the Orthodox Halki Theological Seminary, despite repeated government promises over the years to do so.

The present Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, enthroned in 1991, has been a light- house for decades, (1) speaking up for human rights, religious freedom, and peace through inter-religious dialogue and pushing for global ecumenical relations, despite (2) having almost no funding and (3) having no political backing from the state - just the opposite. He has immense moral authority as the second most senior Christian figure for 1,700 years and a great record of speaking up for others.

The **Armenian Apostolic Church** is dominated by the state. Elections for a patriarch were forbidden for years, and the one that finally took place was closely controlled.

The same is true for the Orthodox Church, except that the current Ecumenical Patriarch has been in office for a very long time.

Both historic churches and newer Protestant groups are suffering from the combined effects of theological education being forbidden in Türkiye and foreigners being hindered from working as clergy.

Many clergy members who are married to Turkish women and have lived in Türkiye for a long time are now being denied reentry, forcing their families to leave the country. The same applies to Turkish clergy members who are married to non-Turkish spouses, who are denied reentry. Between 2019 and 2024, 15 Protestant clergy members were denied reentry, forcing 250 spouses and children - mostly Turkish nationals under the age of 18 - to leave the country.

Even those historic churches, which have a privileged status under the 1923 Lausanne Treaty (which officially protects Armenians, Orthodox Christians, Greek Orthodox Christians, and Jews), have no legal identity in Türkiye and cannot own land. The same is true for the three Roman Catholic dioceses.

### **What should we do?**

+ Engage in a broad dialogue with Diyanet (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, or the Presidency of Religious Affairs) by faith-based actors worldwide.

+ Visit the leaders of institutions of minorities religious in Türkiye as often as possible.

### **What we should we promote or ask Türkiye to do?**

+ All churches, non-Sunni Muslim religious groups, and religious minorities should be granted legal status.

+ The Ecumenical Patriarch should be granted legal status and full recognition of his historic and international role.

+ Full implementation of the 2011 Law of Return is necessary, which includes return or compensation for the expropriation of non-Muslim foundations.

+ Permission to train clergy within Türkiye, particularly the reopening of the Halki Theological Seminary of the Orthodox Church and the Holy Cross Seminary of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

+ End the expropriation of Syrian Orthodox monasteries in Tur Abdin.

+ Implementation of the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights concerning matters of faith.