



Freedom of Religion or Belief in Turkey

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Opening remarks as prepared for delivery

Vicky Hartzler, USCIRF Chair

Good morning, and welcome to this hearing convened by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to examine Freedom of Religion or Belief in Turkey. My name is Vicky Hartzler, Chair of the Commission. Thank you to our distinguished witnesses for taking the time to join us today.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. legislative branch agency. The U.S. Congress created USCIRF through the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. Our legislative mandate is to use international legal standards and conventions to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad—and to make related policy recommendations to the Secretary of State, the President, the Congress, and other

parts of the U.S. government. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing.

The Commission remains concerned over systematic and ongoing restrictions of freedom of religion or belief in Turkey. Last September, Vice Chair Asif Mahmood and I were pleased to lead a USCIRF delegation to that country, where we observed religious freedom conditions and met with religious leaders, civil society members, and government officials. Turkey, or Türkiye, is a country of special importance from a religious freedom perspective. For millennia, it has played a key role in multiple religious traditions, reflected in the immense depth and breadth of historical houses of worship and other world religious and cultural heritage sites in Turkey. Additionally, it pioneered one of the world's most comprehensive secular state models while also producing some of the leading institutions and scholars of global Sunni Islam.

Yet, in recent years, many people in Turkey have faced increasing restrictions on their ability to practice their religion or embrace secularism, to adequately administer their religious affairs, or to express views that do not align with the government's interpretation of Islam.

Currently, multiple religious communities in Turkey face challenges that can widely vary based on their particular historical and cultural affiliation—and to that point, USCIRF recognizes that some communities enjoy relatively cooperative relations with the government. Several longstanding historical religious communities that our delegation met last year reported that the administration of President Erdoğan has maintained relationships with them and allowed for some aspects of freedom of worship. Our delegation visited the Mor Efrem Syriac Orthodox Christian Church in Istanbul, which President Erdogan inaugurated in 2023. This impressive structure is the first and only Christian house of worship built since Turkey became a republic over 100 years ago. Also, in 2024, the government helped launch the restoration of the Surp Sarkis Armenian Christian church in Diyarbakır and provided security for Jewish communities’ religious services in Istanbul and Ankara. And top officials, including the president, continue to meet with Eastern Orthodox Church leaders—such as the Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew I—who hope to soon reopen the Halki Theological School, after 55 years of government-induced closure.

However, many people of varying religious backgrounds, or no religion at all, face significant challenges. USCIRF has received reports of some stark examples, such as Turkish prison authorities denying access to religious literature and daily Islamic

ablutions for defendants such as former detainee Aysu Öztaş Bayram. Other religious freedom restrictions that our delegation observed on our country visit last year are more subtle—often administrative in nature. They relate to the government’s classification of religious groups; its limitations on the residency of foreign national clergy; and the complex bureaucracy surrounding religious communities’ management of their own affairs and attempts to register, build, or renovate houses of worship. Public schools and other state institutions have also continued to emphasize the centrality of Sunni Islam to Turkish national identity, marginalizing students from non-Muslim, non-Sunni, or secularist family identities.

We know that Turkey, as a core NATO member and a key player in both the European and Middle Eastern regional spheres, has expressed a commitment to multilateral forms of engagement and regulation. As such, it has an obligation under international standards to ensure freedom of religion or belief for all people within Turkey. USCIRF’s hearing today will present recommendations for ways the United States can better advance its own commitment to religious freedom through its strategic engagement with Turkey.

I turn now to our Vice Chair Asif Mahmood.

Asif Mahmood, USCIRF Vice Chair

Thank you, Chair Hartzler.

I join Chair Hartzler in expressing appreciation for the opportunity to travel last year to Turkey and meet with representatives of several religious communities as well as government officials. As she noted, many people in Turkey of various religious backgrounds, or no religion, face challenges that the government has advanced through systematic and ongoing means. Based on this assessment, USCIRF's 2025 Annual Report renewed our recommendation for the United States to name Turkey to the Special Watch List for countries that engage in or tolerate severe violations of religious freedom.

In our Annual Report, we offer specific policy recommendations to both the administration and Congress on how the United States can support religious freedom in Turkey. For example, we urge the administration to create the opportunity during meetings with Turkish government officials to raise the United States' concerns over several religious freedom issues. The U.S. government

should use such diplomatic channels to highlight the struggles of Alevis, Jehovah's Witnesses, evangelical Protestant Christians, and other religious minorities in obtaining legal status as religions and in securing approvals for their houses of worship. Likewise, we call on the State Department and White House to share with Turkish officials their concerns over restrictions on the entry or continued legal residency of foreign national clergy. USCIRF is especially alarmed by the Ministry of the Interior's accelerating and unwarranted use of national security "codes" to end the long-term legal residency of foreign Protestant Christian pastors and other religious workers who serve the needs of Turkish Christian communities.

Turkey hosts one of the world's largest refugee populations, including people fleeing religious persecution in their home countries—such as Uyghur Muslims from China and Baha'is, Gonabadi Sufi Muslims, and converts to Christianity from Iran. Accordingly, USCIRF recommends that the United States work with Turkey and other international partners on resettlement programs for refugees who live in credible fear of religious persecution in their home countries. There is a high potential for success, for example, of privately sponsored resettlement programs for refugees who have a support base within local U.S. communities.

We have also recommended that the U.S. Congress elevate religious freedom as a key issue that Members highlight in legislation, hearings, and travel delegations. They should draw particular attention to the Turkish government's enforcement of Article 2016 of the Turkish Penal Code, which prohibits the incitement of sectarian hatred and the "degradation" of communities' religious values. The government has used it in practice as a blasphemy law, prosecuting several people who publicly criticize or question state-approved interpretations of Islam. Congress must also highlight other laws and processes in Turkey that limit religious minorities' legal status, houses of worship, and access to clergy. Such action from our elected representatives sends a strong message that the people of the United States value freedom of religion or belief, and that we are rightly concerned when our partners—like Turkey—limit this essential right.

I will now return the floor to Chair Hartzler to introduce the witnesses.