

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING  
FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF IN TURKEY

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Virtual Hearing

P A R T I C I P A N T S

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Vicky Hartzler, Chair  
Asif Mahmood, Vice Chair  
Maureen Ferguson

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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR HARTZLER: Good morning and welcome to this hearing convened by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to examine the Freedom of Religion or Belief in Turkey.

My name is Vicky Hartzler, Chair of the Commission.

Thank you to all 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 U.S. 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 Turkiye, is a country of special importance from a religious freedom perspective.

For millennia, it has played a key role in multiple religious traditions, and other world religious and cultural heritage sites are in Turkey along with historical houses of worship.

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 vary widely based on their particular historical and cultural affiliation—and to that point, USCIRF recognizes that some communities enjoy relatively cooperative relationships with the government.

Several longstanding historical religious communities that our delegation met last year reported that the administration of President Erdogan has maintained relationships with them and allowed for some aspects of freedom of religion.

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 Diyarbakir 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 Seminary and 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 Turkey's prison authorities denying access to religious literature and daily Islamic ablutions for defendants such as former detainee Aysu Oztas 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 bureaucracies 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 bilateral 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. Please share your remarks.

VICE CHAIR MAHMOOD: 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 religious violations or 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 United States 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 the 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 the local U.S. communities.

We have also recommended that the United States 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 actions from our elected representatives sends a strong message that the people of the United States value freedom of religion or belief, and that we rightly are concerned when our partners, like Turkey, limit this essential right.

I will now return the floor to Chair

Hartzler to introduce the witnesses.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you, Vice Chair Mahmood.

Our hearing today will start with submitted testimony by U.S. Representative Gus Bilirakis.

Representative Bilirakis cares passionately about religious freedom in Turkey, and he is the chair of the International Religious Freedom Caucus in Congress, and he's been good enough to share these remarks today.

So I'm going to read his remarks for him.

[Mr. Bilirakis' submitted remarks as read by Chair Hartzler follow:]

CHAIR HARTZLER: He says:

Chair, commissioners, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the state of religious freedom in Turkey. I (Representative Gus Bilirakis) speak today not only as a member of the Hellenic Caucus or an Orthodox Christian, but as someone deeply concerned for the survival of ancient Christian communities and the principles of

religious liberty that bind us all.

For centuries, Orthodox Christians in what is now Turkey have endured systematic persecution—first under the Ottoman Empire, and now under the Republic of Turkey. Before World War I, roughly two to 2.2 million Greek Orthodox Christians lived in the region. Today, only a few thousand remain.

This is not the result of natural migration. It is the outcome of a century-long campaign of ethnic cleansing, intimidation, and repression—what can only be described as cultural genocide.

At the heart of this struggle is the Ecumenical Patriarchate, led by His All-Holiness Bartholomew, the 268<sup>th</sup> direct successor of the Apostle Andrew.

Founded in 38 AD in what is now Istanbul, the Patriarchate is one of the most ancient continuous Christian institutions in the world, serving as spiritual center for 300 million Orthodox Christians worldwide.

Yet, the Turkish government refuses to

recognize its legal personality or its ecumenical status—denying not only the rights of Orthodox Christians in Turkey, but the religious freedom of millions beyond its borders.

The state has interfered in the election of patriarchs by requiring they be Turkish citizens and claiming veto power over the process.

The closure of the Halki Theological Seminary for more than 50 years has cut off the training of new clergy, threatening the institution's very survival.

Clergy are barred from serving on the governing boards of their own community properties, such as churches, schools, and orphanages.

This policy, combined with societal hostility and the shrinking number of Orthodox Christians—treated as “aliens” in state media and education—has led to closures and confiscations of religious properties.

In the last five years, repression has grown bolder. The conversion of the Hagia Sophia and the Chora Church—both UNESCO World Heritage

sites—from museums into mosques restricts access for Orthodox Christians and other visitors.

This violates Turkey's obligations under international cultural heritage conventions to which the United States is also a signatory.

These acts are not isolated. Turkey's expropriation and destruction of Orthodox cultural heritage violates the spirit of the 2021 U.S.-Turkey Memorandum of Understanding on archaeological and ethnological material.

That agreement, negotiated without input from religious and ethnic minorities, has been twisted to legitimize erasure rather than protect diversity.

Worse still, Turkey has exported these policies beyond its borders: in occupied northern Cyprus, in support of Azerbaijan's destruction of Armenian heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh, and in military operations affecting Christian and Kurdish communities in northern Syria.

The pattern is clear—religious freedom violations at home embolden violations abroad.



By any standard—quantitative, qualitative, violent, or nonviolent—Turkey's record meets the statutory requirements for designations as a Country of Particular Concern under U.S. law.

A CPC designation would acknowledge the reality of Ankara's systemic campaign against religious minorities, and signal that the United States will not ignore the suppression of one of the world's most important Christian institutions.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate is the "canary in the coal mine." If it cannot survive, neither can other Christian communities in Turkey—Armenian Apostolic, Syriac-Assyrian, Catholic, Protestant—nor the Jewish community, nor other ethnic and religious minorities.

Turkey's ability to act with impunity for over a century has emboldened successive governments, whether secularist or Islamist, to continue policies that are lethal to the survival of these communities.

I, Representative Gus Bilirakis—I'm reading his testimony—he says I recognize that in

its 2025 recommendations, USCIRF has called for Turkey to be placed on the Special Watch List. While this acknowledges the seriousness of the violations, I believe the facts and patterns that will be discussed today warrant a stronger response.

Turkey's conduct meets in full the statutory requirements for designation as a Country of Particular Concern. Moving from the Special Watch List to CPC status would send a clearer signal that the United States will not tolerate sustained, state-directed campaigns to erase ancient religious communities and heritage.

Such a step would not only support the survival of the Ecumenical Patriarchate but also affirm America's commitment to protecting religious freedom wherever it is under threat.

[End of Mr. Bilirakis' testimony as read by Chair Hartzler.]

CHAIR HARTZLER: So we thank Representative Bilirakis for submitting that testimony for us today.

Now we will turn to our panel of expert witnesses. We have Pastor Ramazan Arkan. We have Dr. Haydar Baki Dogan; Dr. Soner Cagaptay; and Dr. Thomas Paul Schirrmacher.

To view the panel's biographies, please see the Zoom Chat feature where we will share the link to the page on the USCIRF webpage.

Our first witness is Pastor Ramazan Arkan, chair of the Association of Protestant Churches in Turkey, also known as Turkiye, and Senior Pastor of the Antalya Evangelical Churches.

So, Pastor Arkan, please proceed with your testimony.

MR. ARKAN: Thank you so much for giving me this opportunity to speak to you today.

My name is Ramazan Arkan, and I'm the leader of Association of Protestant Churches in Turkey.

In our country, which has a population of 86 million, there are about 10,000 Protestant Turkish Christians. I'm here representing Turkish churches and many Christian organizations from

around the world, which work in Turkey.

Today, I would like to share with you the problems that Turkish Christians and the churches are currently facing.

The Turkish law with democratic roots guarantees equal rights for all regardless of religious belief, but sadly the Turkish church faces many difficulties and much discrimination.

This affects us both as individuals and as community. Unfortunately, when we try to address these issues with the Turkish authorities, we have most often been ignored because as a Christian, we are religious minority groups.

Let me explain to you some of the challenges that we face as Turkish Christian minorities.

Because of the size of our Christian communities, and due to lack of financial means, many Turkish churches tend to gather in a small storefront throughout the country.

Other churches have rented or purchased their own buildings and have set themselves up as

an official recognized foundation or association.

However, none of those churches are legally recognized as an official place of worship or church. According to official Turkish zoning plan, there are legal places which are allocated for the construction of Christian churches.

When we have asked for permission to build on these sites, we have been denied many times. Additionally, there are historical church buildings which church should have liked to use as meeting place, but the church has not been able to obtain permission to gather and worship in most of those buildings. Many of those locations have been converted into mosques instead.

And the other issues, as a Turkish Christian, we often face false accusation and hate speeches both in society and through the media.

Because of this, we have many challenges in our daily lives. Religious ablution is attached to all Turkish identity records. If the Christian chooses to register themselves as rather than a Muslim, this can lead to serious act of

discrimination in many places such as a school or place of work.

In Turkey, it is also another issue that we are facing in Turkey. It is also forbidden to open a Christian college or Bible schools to provide theological education and training for the Christian clergy.

We are not allowed to award official diplomas for those who want to serve professionally as pastors in churches.

Turkey has been allocated the rights from the other European countries to send imams or Islamic leaders to work in the mosques in their countries. However, as a Turkish church, we have not been legally permitted to bring foreign Protestant clergy from outside of Turkey to serve in our churches.

In Turkey, also being a Christian pastor or member of clergy is not officially recognized as a legal career.

And the most biggest problem that we are facing currently is because of our financial

limitation as well as the legal statute of the Turkish Christian minister, many of the churches in Turkey rely on the volunteers, both Turkish locals and foreign expats.

Since 2019, 176 expats living in Turkey and working alongside with Turkish churches have received the N-82 and G-82 codes. These codes have forced them to leave the country.

N-82 code forbids foreigners to enter the country without special permission from Turkish authorities. None has been given this special permission yet.

These codes label foreign workers as a threat to national security, and they are expelled from Turkey, no longer able to reenter the country.

In total, there have been approximately 385 foreigners living in Turkey and supporting the Turkish churches who have had their resident permits revoked and have not been allowed to reenter the country.

These codes have mostly been appealed to individuals without also noticing and they found

out when they tried to return to Turkey from their home country.

These individuals are then forced to leave Turkey without being able to finalize their service or saying good-bye to their friends or cleaning out their homes and belongings.

Surprisingly, some of those foreigners are even married to Turkish citizens and have children born in the country.

Not only has it destroyed the family and the relationship, it has left a void in the local Christian churches.

Because of the deportation of these foreigner workers, many churches have been unable to provide some of their services. Also, the local church leaders have faced fatigue and frustration and some churches or ministries have been, even had to close all together.

I'm sad to report to you that as Turkish Protestant Church Association, we have regularly documented these problems in several different human rights violations reports. But we have not



seen any positive changes as a result in many years.

And thank you so much for your time and attention today, as well for considering with empathy the situation of the Protestant churches in Turkey.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you very much, Pastor.

It's heartbreaking to hear what is happening to these pastors and these families, and so we will visit maybe more about that during the Q&A session.

But now we're going to welcome testimony from Dr. Haydar Baki Dogan. He's president of the Alevi Foundations Federation.

And so Dr. Dogan, please proceed with your testimony.

DR. DOGAN: Thank you, Chair Hartzler, Vice Chair Mahmood, and commissioners, and speakers.

It is truly an honor to speak for millions of Alevis in Turkey and everywhere, people whose

faith, history, and voices have been sidelined for far too long.

Alevis make up roughly 12 percent of Turkey population. Yet, our faith is often overlooked. I'm not here to lecture about if I were to give at length of what it means to live as an Alevi in today's Turkiye, and why recognition matters so deeply to us.

Alevism is part of the Islamic tradition. But it's a distinct path. It has its root in the traditions and the customs that Turkish people that live in Turkistan brought to Anatolia.

Also, it's rooted in love for the Prophet Muhammad, his family, Ahl a-Bayt, and the Twelve Imams. It's built on equality between men and women, on justice, and on inner spirituality.

Our places of worship are called "Cemevi." We gather for a ceremony called the "Cem," which blends poetry, music, moral teaching, and ritual.

We pray in Turkish, not in Arabic. Men and women pray together, and women can even lead prayers. We fast during the month of Muharrem

instead of Ramadan, remembering the tragedy of Karbala.

And our spiritual leaders of Dede are respected elders who trace their ancestry directly to the Twelve Imams. They guide us in a moral and spiritual matters, not in state of law.

These differences from Sunni Islam are fundamental, but in the eyes of the state, Alevism is still treated as folklore or cultural heritage rather than faith.

This has consequences. Our Cemevis are not legally recognized as houses of worship. Our children are forced into mandatory Sunni-focused religion classes. Our spiritual leaders have no legal standing, and court rulings even from the European Court of Human Rights calling for equal treatment have often been ignored.

Some steps have been taken. In 2022, the government created the Alevi-Bektashi Culture and Cemevi Presidency, providing some funding, but it remains under the Ministry of Culture, not part of the country's official religious framework.

This keeps us in a cultural heritage box rather than acknowledging Alevis as a leading faith community. We also formally demand from the government that legal protection of Cemevis, as official houses of worship, equivalent to other religious institutions.

We must be able to practice our faith in Cemevis freely. In practice, we do, but this freedom should be guaranteed by law, and public servant status for personnel serving in Cemevis.

Also, recognition and public status for Alevi spiritual leaders, Dede and Baba, as official spiritual authorities.

Also, equal access to public employment for Alevis, based on merit and impartiality, without faith-based discrimination.

Alevis should be protected from bias in public institutions and public spaces.

Then the reform of religious education. Mandatory courses should be optional. Alevism must be accurately represented and inclusive elective courses should properly convey the faith.

Theology faculties should include dedicated programs, and all students should learn about Alevi beliefs and tradition.

Finally, hate crimes. Systemic hate speech and discrimination against Alevis should be clearly recognized as crimes with strong penalties to deter them. Prejudice against Alevis has existed for centuries, and they continue today.

These measures would increase understanding, visibility, and respect for Alevism while promoting fairness and equality across society.

Our community continues to face the consequences of non-recognition of Cemevis, biased religious education, and barriers to equal representation in public institutions. Addressing these issues is not just about fairness; it's essential of building a just and inclusive society.

Alevis are not just a part of Turkey's past. We are part of its living present. We have carried the traditional Turkish culture to Anatolia with Alevi belief. We have helped shape the

culture, music and moral traditions of the land.

And we will continue to do so if we are allowed to live in dignity and freedom.

With genuine political will, these changes are possible. Recognition will strengthen Turkey's social fabric, not weaken it. Recognition is not a gift; it's a right. And it's time it was granted.

Thank you for listening.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you very much for your testimony.

Our next witness is Dr. Soner Cagaptay, Beyer Family Senior Fellow and Director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute of Near East Policy.

So, Dr. Cagaptay, please proceed with your testimony.

DR. CAGAPTAY: Thank you, Chair Hartzler, Vice Chair Mahmood, and honorable commissioners, for the opportunity to testify today.

I have been asked to discuss Turkey's importance to the U.S. as a key NATO ally and Turkish foreign policy today.

In the past two decades, Turkey's foreign policy has undergone a dramatic shift under the rule of the country's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, moving away from its earlier Eurocentric focus.

There are many ways to interpret this shift from the role of religion, i.e., Islam, to the political career of Erdogan.

However, I think there's a more dramatic dynamic at play here, one that is informed by shifts in country's demographics and global identity.

About a hundred years ago, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, Ataturk established Turkey as a secular European republic.

Before its collapse at the end of World War I, the Ottoman Empire was a tri-continental entity. However, the main commercial, political and cultural centers of the Empire laid in Europe.

It's not an accident that Ataturk and his followers, later known as Kemalists, come from

European territories of the Ottoman Empire.

But following the collapse of the Empire, modern Turkey constituted not in core European territories, but in core Anatolian territories.

Notwithstanding this fact, Ataturk, Kemalists and millions of Turkish citizens who had been recently expelled from Europe during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire held on to ideas of European statecraft and social life.

Accordingly, Ataturk expelled Islam from the private, into the private sphere and picked a singularly European identity for Turkey in global politics.

Ataturk's followers after Turkey became a multiparty democracy in 1950 perpetuated this legacy. However, with the passing of the century, the connection that Turkey's citizens had to Europe became more tenuous.

Whereas, in the 1920s, at the time of the establishment of the Republic, citizens with European roots constituted half of Turkey's population, by the end of the century, native



Anatolians had become a vast majority.

The Anatolians are more pious and they see the world through an Anatolian and not exclusively European lens.

I believe that President Erdogan embodies this trend more than being responsible for it. Whereas Ataturk came from European parts of the Ottoman Empire and saw the world through a European lens, Erdogan, who is Anatolian, of course views the world through an Anatolian lens.

This means that today's Turkey has multiple identities, and it no more has emotional attachments as deep as in the past to Europe.

Turkey is also a Eurasian country and a Middle Eastern country. This is not to say that Turkey does not consider itself as part of Europe or the West. After all, Turkey's attempts through the Ottoman Empire to become part of the West go to earlier attempts in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to become a European society.

These attempts are as old as the French Revolution itself. So Turkey remains European and

Western, but now it has other identities. In fact, none of these identities are exclusive.

Turkey is a European country. And it is the only European state that also borders Iran. Turkey is a Middle Eastern country, and it's the only Middle Eastern country that is also a Black Sea power.

And Turkey is a Eurasian country, and it's the only Eurasian power that's also a NATO ally. All these have significant policy implications for the U.S.

Turkey is also a swing state and a middle power having built significant diplomatic, institutional and military capacity globally, but again considering the class of middle powers, this is the only middle power that is also a NATO ally, which makes it quite consequential for the U.S.

I believe that the United States should acknowledge the multiplicity of Turkey's new global alignments, and it can deal with Turkey the way it deals with other middle powers: engaging with Turkey in areas of cooperation, but not expecting

full alignment on all global issues.

In this regard, I think great power competition perhaps provides the best area for cooperation.

Turkey has both significant capacity moving away from its European focus earlier in Africa, Central Asia, and Southeast Europe, both hard and soft power.

United States can and should partner with Turkey in great power competition in these noted areas against Chinese and Russian influence.

Looking at Turkey's more immediate neighborhood, Turkey, which considering President Trump's agenda to end the wars, Turkey, which has effectively ended the war in Syria, continues to stabilize this country.

This is an area, another area of U.S.-Turkish cooperation with significant implications for U.S. citizens and, of course, citizens of NATO allies, considering the threats from Syria in the past.

Another country bordering Turkey, Ukraine,

provides further area for cooperation. Here Turkey has played a swing state role. It has kept channels of communication with Russia and Ukraine alike.

So when and if we have a ceasefire, Turkey could not only host peace talks, but also could help bring another war to an end and stabilize one more country with significant implications for U.S.

Considering this mostly positive trajectory of U.S.-Turkish ties, I see problems in the future of Turkish-Israeli relations, especially considering that the two countries are in unabated strategic competition in Syria.

In this regard, President Erdogan [sic], who has great rapport with President Erdogan and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, should consider stepping in to impose a détente between the two countries in Syria.

In fact, the rapport between President Trump and President Erdogan is the greatest asset in bilateral U.S.-Turkish ties today. This rapport between the principals has allowed them to reset

past issues and could also introduce new areas of cooperation including military sales and other cooperation with Turkey.

The rapport between the two presidents and communication should be supplemented by stronger and deeper dialogue between the two countries' public institutions, government agencies, policymakers, and legislators.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you for your testimony.

Our final witness is Dr. Thomas Paul Schirrmacher, President of both the International Institute for Religious Freedom and the International Council of the International Society for Human rights.

Dr. Schirrmacher, please proceed with your testimony.

DR. SCHIRRMACHER: Thank you very much. I greet you from [?] where I just met the president

of the Republic and had the chance to talk to some of the patriarchs here, two of which, of whom are of Armenian descent from Turkey. So we did talk about our topic a lot.

What I say is mainly based on research in the country and on statistical questions. So let's start out with the matter of religious freedom at the exclusion of Christians.

I want to state that the majority of Muslims in Turkey de facto do not experience religious freedom despite constitutional provisions to do the contrary, as they do not have the right to choose their religion or world view, and especially they do not have the right to choose which version of Islam they want to follow.

This is true for Sunni Muslim groups. Please be reminded that most of the Kurdish Muslims are Sunnis and follow a different version of Islam.

This is true for non-Muslim, for non-Sunni movements. We heard about the Alevis already, but this is true for other Shiites too.

Oh, I should mention the Gulen movement,

the Sufis, a lot of Sunni movements that don't have the freedom to live their version of Islam in Turkey.

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

An interesting topic is that it is very difficult to be an atheist, a follower of a non-theist world view in Turkey. If it becomes known, people can lose their government jobs or face worst consequences.

Surveys show that the percentage of people identifying as atheists or non-believers increased from about two percent in 2008 to eight percent in 2025.

And most interesting among the Gen Z, this percentage is up to 28.2 percent, which means that besides the Alevis, this is the second-largest

group in Turkey that doesn't really have the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Now let's turn to the Christian minorities. The government estimates that there are about 180,000 Christians in Turkey if that would be 0.2 percent. The reality, of course, is if you include all the refugees, people living from the Armenian side that de facto live on the Turkish side, we talk about 220 to 370,000 Christians in the country, which would be 0.4 percent.

And, of course, you deserve freedom of religion or belief no matter whether you have a passport of the country or not. It's a human right.

After the genocide a century ago, many Armenian families who remained in Turkey and started and became known as Crypto-Armenians, and we did a lot of research on this in 2017 and came up with about one million people in Turkey outwardly live as if they would be Sunnis, but privately still maintain their historic Christian identity.



This is a huge topic for freedom of religion or belief, which is totally under the radar. Despite all the restrictions on the freedom of religion and belief of Christians in Turkey, I would like to underline that no one wants to return to the pre-Erdogan era.

Quite diverse Christian groups tell us again and again that they see many improvements under President Erdogan.

The reasons for the discriminations pre-Erdogan were totally different ones. But there is no real hope for a lot of Christians if the largest opposing party, the CHP, founded in 1923 as a Kemalist party, would come to power.

They probably would discriminate a lot of Christian minorities but for totally different reasons than the government of President Erdogan does it.

Other than being proud to host the seat of the non-Western Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church, which even the Ottoman Empire protected for centuries, and which explicitly is

recognized in the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923 as staying in Turkey and not moving like other patriarchates had to do to other countries, is denied the full legal existence and dishonored by treating it as a minor local bishop of a suburb, a small area of Istanbul.

That is not even denying the legal existing. This is, I mean you really could read, if you see how he is treated, and as you all have mentioned already, the Ecumenical Patriarchate is the second-oldest institution in the history of this world or perhaps even the oldest. The other one is the Roman Catholic Church itself.

And that means it's older than, in the legal existence that it can prove older than 1,700 or 1,800 years.

The present Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, an old friend of mine, enthroned in 1991, has been a lighthouse for decades. I have to underline this.

Number one, speaking up for human rights, religious freedom and peace through inter-religious

dialogue and ecumenical relations. And he's doing this despite, two, having almost no funding because of the political situation, and, three, having no political backing from the state.

So he in his role, he only has his immense moral authority, not only from history but from his character and what he actually has done, and I really have to recommend him that in the midst of all the discrimination and the dishonoring he experienced, he has been a champion of Turkey, of freedom of religion in Turkey and of inter-religious dialogue.

And the Armenian Apostolic Church has been very much dominated by the state through forbidding the election of a Patriarch for years, and then finally when it took place, the election was closely controlled.

The same principle is true for the Orthodox Church, but as the Ecumenical Patriarch is in office for so long, there hasn't been the need for an election.

But if an election comes, it surely will

be as closely controlled as the Armenian one.

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

In my longer statement, you will find the details; you will find the numbers.

What can we do? In general, engage in a broad dialogue with Diyanet, which is the Presidency of Religious Affairs, by faith-based actors worldwide. They have a lot of experience in this and I ask you to urge religious leaders from all over the world to visit Turkey and talk directly with the Presidency.

Number two, visit the leaders of institutions of minority religions in Turkey as often as possible.

As your Commission has done it, but we should urge other groups as well, just to visit them. The pure fact that they are visited makes a difference.

And then, of course, what should we promote or ask Turkey itself to do? All churches, non-Sunni Muslim religious groups and religious minorities should be granted legal status.

That is a bottom line that comes up again and again in everyday life. Without legal status, a religious organization or group or movement or whatever hardly can live in the country today.

And then the Ecumenical Patriarch should be granted legal status and full recognition of his historic and international role and allowed to do that.

And, finally, we should call for the full implementation of the very good Law of Return of 2011, which includes the return or compensation for all expropriation of non-Muslim and Muslim foundations where the state took their belongings or land, whatever.

The law itself, the Turkish law itself, says that all this should be given back, and it never has been implemented.

I have some more ideas what we could do,

but you can find them in my longer version.

Thank you very much.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you very much for your testimony. I appreciate it, not only the oversight, but also the "what should we do," and now is that time where we have some questions that we'd like to ask and kind of see what your expertise is and help in some of the situations.

So I guess I'll start with a question for any of our witnesses. So USCIRF's last hearing on religious freedom in Turkey was in 2018, and so I'm curious, have you seen any signs of improvement in freedom of religion or belief in Turkey in the years since then?

And if yes, can you identify any potential sources of those improvements? For example, is it the improvement from the Turkish government or do you see improvement in local communities or external events, actors, and what policies or other actions might the U.S. government adopt and meaningfully support freedom of religion or belief in Turkey?

How can the United States engage with our NATO partner Turkey and President Erdogan to try to encourage him to open up some of this freedom of religion and belief?

So I will open it up to any of our witnesses or all if you just kind of raise your hand, and I'll call on you if you'd like to respond.

Okay. We'll start with Dr. Schirrmacher.

DR. SCHIRRMACHER: Well, I mentioned already having, knowing the head of Diyanet and having worked with them, there still is a great openness to meet, to talk, for dialogue.

But that should be, that should be politicians, governments, but especially also religious leaders and others. We really should show interest in Turkey to the best of what we can do.

It goes down to we have urged, for example, when it comes to tourism, we have urged people directly to say we want to visit churches and worship services on Sunday when we are visiting

Turkey.

It's a tourist country, and they have tried to find solutions for this, yeah, but my experience is that all too often Turkey thinks that no one is interested in what they do when it comes to religion because they deal with secular countries. For them, NATO is just a bunch of secular countries, and they don't care about religion.

And I find that I have spoken with the Turkish government. Each time I tell them you totally misunderstand this. If I take Germany, we have millions of very secular people, but they are outraged if other people force you to believe what you have to believe. Yeah.

So they don't go to church for themselves, but they love freedom of religion or belief, and they know what it means if they don't have it. They know that they can be secular and non-believers because we have freedom of religion or belief, and so the moment they hear that the government is telling people what they have to



believe, and this really reaches into Germany.

I mean all our Turkish imams, which is 95 percent of all imams are paid by Turkey, and on Fridays read sermons that come from Ankara, yeah, so we are, we are somewhere in the middle of this.

And I think, what my experience is there's many, many people in Turkey in top positions who are willing to hear, are willing to meet. I know countries where it is nearly impossible to talk to the top leaders on those topics. That's different in Turkey. We just need to send people there to talk.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Okay. No, that's very interesting, very helpful. I certainly think the tourist aspect is important because I know, and certainly in the Christian community, there's many tours following the footsteps of Paul.

There's many religious beliefs there that have the cultural sites so this is something maybe we could bring up in discussions.

Thank you.

I know Pastor Arkan, you had your hand up.

You want to respond, give some advice?

MR. ARKAN: I think one of the biggest thing is that I can advise, Protestant representative should be invited for the official meetings and open the channels of dialogue and must be established because there is lots of situation or the problems that we have, we are facing, I believe that we can talk, we can solve these issues with the dialogue.

But there is no dialogue that we are, receive. You know, we've been ignored. I think one of the biggest things is also that there should be more investigation for the people who are getting codes because these families, you know, they are really suffering a lot spiritually and emotionally and financially.

We don't know who is giving the list to governments for those people, but they have no idea who are they. You know, there should be more investigation about those people because most of those people who got a code, like they don't even have any traffic, you know, penalties or tickets.

I mean there is no way that they can be the threat for our national security because these are the families that they have kids, they have lives that those lives and their businesses and their relationship is destroyed.

I think if there is a clear investigation for those people, you know, government also will see that there is nothing like that. And I think there should be more investigation for that before they give the code for the people.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Yeah. Well, your testimony really was shocking that there is 176 expatriates who have received codes forcing them to leave; 384 residencies revoked. They're not allowed to return.

MR. ARKAN: Yes.

CHAIR HARTZLER: So maybe they leave on sabbatical, and they come back in the airport is my understanding, and they're not allowed through the airport because all of a sudden there's a code.

And so they have to leave. They have to go back home or somewhere leaving, their wife and

kids are still in Turkey. This is, I just have a quick question, and I'm going to turn it over to our Vice Chair.

But as far as the wives and the children, are they allowed to leave then when this happens, and the husband, the pastor, isn't allowed back in?

MR. ARKAN: The thing is, sometimes when they're coded, they coded for husband and wife together or sometimes they just give the code for husband or wife because they know that if they coded one of them, they have to leave the country because they can't live separated in the different countries in which it's going to affect their family unions.

And one of the things like all these, like people who got coded, they are all from different nationalities, and mostly Americans, but they are all from the different nationalities, and they are facing these difficulties when they are coming back to country.

And they don't give time for them to close up all their belongings or things like that. They

are struggling a lot also being separated from their family or their loved ones.

CHAIR HARTZLER: It seems like--

DR. CAGAPTAY: Pastor, may I step in also? Thank you.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Yes, sure.

DR. CAGAPTAY: All right.

I just wanted to respond to the kind of policy side of your question: what can and ought to be done? I think that considering the significant rapport between the two principals, Presidents Erdogan and Trump, and also noting that before the end of the year, either President Erdogan will visit Washington or President Trump Ankara, the Commission and others who want to promote religious freedoms in Turkey could lean on to this relationship.

If this is part of the presidential dialogue, I think you could see progress.

But, similarly, there's also considering and noting the really positive trajectory in the relationship with vast areas of cooperation, Turkey

being so consequential, I am also detecting a new willingness across government agencies, public institutions and legislatures to deepen the relationship, reset past differences.

And I think that, you know, U.S. Congress and Turkey's Grand National Assembly can also have a dialogue on a multiplicity of issues, including religious freedoms, to make things better.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you. That's encouraging.

Vice Chair Mahmood, I'll turn to you for some questions.

VICE CHAIR MAHMOOD: Thank you so much. Really very informative testimony, and I acknowledge that Turkey has a unique perspective because I believe Turkey is one of the Muslim countries which has shown over a period of time to be a little bit more secular and accepting of communities, and at least a role model for other Muslim countries.

But at the same time, there are huge concerns about religious persecution or

restrictions, and I'm hoping that we can continue working on those issues and bring it to a level where Turkey can be a role model for the rest of the Islamic world because when you talk about other countries who are Muslim countries, like Nigeria and Pakistan and many other countries, it is really a silver lining.

My first, I have two questions. Because of time, I won't ask too many questions. My first one is for Dr. Haydar Baki. Dr. Haydar, your very concise statement is really very informative, a bunch of information, and I think a segment of the population, you are either the largest minority or even after Sunnis, even you are not a minority at this point, you're the largest segment of population.

Your beliefs or your practices are in much more accord with the old Turkey when it was more secular and when it was more inclusive, and I have two questions.

Number one to you is how much effect the religious restrictions have made in the last 50

years on Alevi group? Has your population grown, stayed steady, or it has gone down like many of the minorities, as we see the Christians and Jews and other segments of Christians have gone down significantly?

Whereas you obviously believe in Prophet and believe in Ali and follow a lot of those things. So is it affecting you?

And number two, your significant number of people or population, percentage of population, you should have lot more representation. When I say representation, it means elected representation. Because in any democracy, elected representation makes a power you can execute to get your rights and rights of others.

Would it help you to be accepted as a separate entity which you are obviously trying or stay a part of the thing and get more political power?

What are the challenges? The challenges are more religion basis or cultural basis or both? And how can we be more specific on your issues



because I believe we can work harder and we can do more work with your particular group so that you can be a role model or you can be a voice for Christians and Jews and Baha'is and other communities there?

So I know my question is a little longer, but I just wanted to express for everybody to say thank you.

I will wait for your response. You are muted. You are muted.

DR. DOGAN: Okay. Thank you for the question.

First of all, the first question, the population of Alevi people, there are, compared to 15 years ago, it's the same. It's the same as the normal Turkish population growth. We are the same.

Therefore, we can say that there is pressure and discrimination against the Alevi people and that's why people, they are changing their beliefs to other beliefs. We can say that because the Alevis is one of the beliefs that for centuries they have suffered a lot.

They have suffered a lot, but they didn't give any, any compromise for their belief. That's why it's not going to make any difference. Doesn't matter what kind of pressure or what kind of obstacles that they bring to us.

And the second question about the Alevis being a power and Alevis, why they are not so represented in political arena, actually the CHP, the people Republican's Party, they are mostly one of the party that the Alevi people support, and much of the, not much of, but many, representatives in the parliament, they are Alevi, and they are origin of Alevi, and also the HDP, now it's DEM, the Kurdish nationalist party, they also have some representatives from Alevi people, but then look at the AKP, the party that President Erdogan leads, right now I think they are about 300 or 300 parliaments, members in parliament, but none of them is Alevi.

Can you imagine that they have 300 parliaments, but none of them—there's a big discrimination against Alevi community in this AKP,

and also not only in the political arena. They will look at the governors of the cities. Then look at the, also some rectors at the university.

They will look at the other government officials. Then, the Alevis, they are discriminated severely, so hard.

But what we demand actually of the Minister in Turkish and International Law, Article 10 of the Turkish Constitution, there is equality before the law, and also Article 24 is the freedom of religion and conscience, but none of them has been implemented, and it's not implemented.

That's why what we can do, we need to advocate for full legal recognition of Alevis and then Cemevis and our legal point actually here, and the monitoring and reporting on Turkey's compliance with religious freedom commitments is also very important.

We find that it's a really big deal, and also try to have the dialogues with all religious groups in Turkey also is important.

And the supporting the Alevi civil

societal organizations and the diaspora, also there's a big diaspora in Europe too, and it's also the diaspora communities working for rights and reform, and also working with them are important, but as I say, actually we have a constitution and everything. We have articles. We have all rights, everything is constitutional, but our constitution are not being implemented by the government. That's the problem.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you very much.

I want to give Dr. Schirmacher an opportunity to jump in here.

DR. SCHIRRMACHER: Yeah. I would like to add a perspective from Germany. I'm from Germany, as you know.

We have, we have more than half a million Alevis that move to Germany. Some of them, of course, to find work, but when I speak to them, for the majority, it has been the matter of religious education, yeah.

They cannot educate the children according to their beliefs. In Germany, we have religious

education in school, but it is run by the religious communities, but so it is you have it in school. It's public. It's paid by the state, but it's run according to the rules of the religions.

And the Alevis have their own religious education in school parallel to the Sunnis' religious education. And this is a very prominent reason for Alevis to move to Germany and to add to what you say, we have more member, more Alevi members in parliament and in the government—we have a minister that is Alevi—from Alevi background, than Turkey. Yeah.

Germany, it's perhaps half a percent of the population are Alevis, yeah, and because they come and they are in Germany, the Alevis are proponents of freedom of religion or belief.

They do not only ask for their own freedom of religion, but because they know what they are talking about, they push, push for the whole country, and I think you have mentioned the diaspora, that a dialogue with them and what this can bring back to the home country. I think that

can be very relevant.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Very, very interesting.  
Thank you for that perspective.

We now turn to--

DR. CAGAPTAY: Chair Hartzler, may I also  
step in?

CHAIR HARTZLER: Oh, sure.

DR. CAGAPTAY: Thank you very much.

Regarding the issue of religious education  
in Turkey, I was born and raised in Turkey, and I  
think this is an ongoing debate.

Right now there is compulsory religious  
education in public school system where Islam is  
taught. Non-Muslims are allowed to opt out of this  
class. So that's an onerous burden in my view.

And now Sunni Muslims cannot opt out,  
which is a bigger and more simple and direct  
burden.

I think to avoid and bypass these burdens,  
a change could be made very easily. Instead of  
opting out, parents and students can opt into  
religious classes in schools so they can choose to

go instead of the current regulation where they have to opt out or are not allowed to opt out. The fix could be as quick as that.

Thank you very much.

CHAIR HARTZLER: When we were there, I understood though that even though you opt out of the official Sunni class, there really wasn't the elective option. So you still basically had to so you want to respond to that?

DR. DOGAN: I would like to add something here about the mandatory religious classes in Turkey.

Right now, for example, as Alevi people, if you don't want to attend the mandatory Alevi, mandatory religious classes, the Alevi people, they should prove that they are not Muslim.

If they prove that they are Muslim, they are not Muslim, then they are excluded from the mandatory classes.

So I, to your point, to the question that Vice President Mahmood, just because of that, the Alevi population might sink.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Okay. Thank you.

Real quickly, Dr. Cagaptay, and then we'll go back to Vice Chair Mahmood.

DR. CAGAPTAY: I already asked my question. Thank you, chair.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Very good. Thank you.

Yes, Vice Chair Mahmood.

VICE CHAIR MAHMOOD: Madam Chair, if you just allow me, I am just going to ask a very brief question because I have a very keen interest in this. That's why I know there's a time constraint, and Commissioner Ferguson is here too.

This is, and I don't want any detail, just specific answer on this thing so that we don't take too much time.

I have a really strong interest since we visited Turkey, and we were personally there in Halki Seminary, what is--this is a question for Dr. Thomas, but anybody can jump in.

What is the status of opening it because when we were there almost six months ago or longer, about nine months ago, they said it's going to



happen very soon. What is that status of opening that?

And I personally believe the opening of Halki Seminary is not only a great thing for the people of Christian faith to get people from in the country and out of the country to get trained and taught, but also it's a really huge opportunity for Turkey.

And what can you people or we can do to make Turkish government understand that this is really something of utmost importance, and they should do a rapid transition of opening it and supporting it in any possible way?

DR. SCHIRRMACHER: Well, I mean the promise to reopen Halki is very old--yeah. It has been promised again and again, and I know that the churches in Turkey, including the Ecumenical Patriarch, are quite convinced that it's serious this time, that they have been promised it will be open.

I'm a bit more cautious because I've been instrumental in getting Halki into the report of

the European Union. Ten times it was very top of the list as something the European Union was asking for and nothing changed.

The reality, of course, is the main thing is a symbolic question. Yeah. Why? The problem of education, of training clergy, is a problem of all churches, not only of the Orthodox churches.

Yeah. And if they would open Halki and nothing else would happen, it would be a solution for the very small Orthodox churches. It would not be a solution for the Armenian Orthodox Churches, and other churches would not be, even not for the Catholic Church and the Protestant churches.

Yeah. Now the Protestant churches have their, have found their ways to train pastors in a more unofficial way for them. It's a little more easier. Yeah.

So, but it's no question. Before this official symbolic act takes place that Halki will be open, the government surely will not allow other smaller groups which do not have such a symbolic public building or do not need the building. I

mean for Protestants, they, of course, don't have an old tradition like this. They would be fine.

So it's truly a symbolic thing. It has gone very far. I was included in this, but a lot of people invested a lot of money to renovate Halki. Halki is—you have probably seen it. Yeah.

I mean it's waiting for being used now. Yeah. It's a fully renovated building. We did seminars. We got even Protestant pastors to meet in the building and have one-day seminars, and it was allowed—yeah—because we wanted to—the Ecumenical Patriarchate to open it, yeah, and show that the symbol Halki is connected to the training of all the churches.

I mean no religious community can survive in the long run if it's forbidden to train the clergy in the country. That's true, by the way, for the Alevis too, who do not have a specific system in place, but Alevis need people who can study the history and pass it on to the next, as we have it in Germany, where they can just develop what they want.

We have a very functioning system of training, yeah. So I think it's rightly to push for this because it goes far beyond the Orthodox Church.

And the challenge will be if it really will be open, will it then be only open to nationals or as any theological training worldwide, will it be open even for others, from other countries who can come there?

I think that will be a challenge, and it will be very important to communicate to Turkey that in a country, if people come and want to study theology, be trained as priests in the specific country, that is more than just someone who wants to visit a country or even enter the country.

That really is an identification with the culture and loving a country. Yeah.

VICE CHAIR MAHMOOD: Thank you.

DR. SCHIRRMACHER: I mean you know that the Armenian Apostolic Church also has their seminary and waiting for it being opened.

As I said, all the other, the Catholic

Church and the Protestant churches don't have a historic building where they say we wanted to get in.

But this, the situation that more and more foreign clergy is forbidden or even clergy married to foreign couples, yeah, this is very, very urgent.

I wanted to add this when we spoke about this matter of, I mean I'm thinking this is a specific plan that if you have a Turkish priest and a Protestant Church, and you deny his wife and children to reenter the country because they don't have a Turkish passport, I mean that's a specific plan to get a Turkish national who is pastoring a church out of the country.

VICE CHAIR MAHMOOD: Thank you so much.

The chair has more people to ask questions so we just--

CHAIR HARTZLER: Yes.

VICE CHAIR MAHMOOD: Thank you. Thank you very much. Please.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Yes, thank you so much,

Vice Chair Mahmood, and thank you for your patience, Commissioner Ferguson. We appreciate and look forward to your question.

COMMISSIONER FERGUSON: Great. Thank you.

So my question is about the historical religious sites and houses of worship, which are, of course, such an important part of Turkey's cultural and economic landscape and history.

But, of course, there is this history of the Turkish government's conversion of the former Byzantine era churches, museums into active mosques, which has, you know, caused a lot of concern over preservation of these religious heritage sites.

So I'm wondering if any of our witnesses would like to comment on that or give some examples of how these conversions have threatened not just the cultural heritage preservation, but also, you know, affected religious freedom?

And also if any of our witnesses would, any of our other witnesses would like to weigh in on the question of the Halki Theological School

because I think that's such an important question.

And I'm curious if any of the other witnesses have a view on how likely is that to actually happen?

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you. Great question.

If you'll just raise your hand, we will go ahead and I'll call on you. Those were some great questions.

Dr. Cagaptay.

DR. CAGAPTAY: Thank you, Chair Hartzler and Commissioner Ferguson.

Considering the conversion of former churches, later museums, later mosques, later museums, now into churches again, I would specifically think of Hagia Sophia and others. The Ottomans were quite progressive in terms of religious freedoms.

It is not correct that they persecuted Orthodox Christians or others. In fact, the survival of Orthodox Christianity under the Ottoman Empire probably happened because of the fact that

this was an era of religious wars in Europe, Catholic versus others, and Orthodox populations found a safe haven inside the Ottoman Empire.

The Ottomans were progressive, not egalitarian in the way we understand them. So they did not destroy houses of worship of the Orthodox Church, but they converted them into mosques.

That's not something I would approve. Ataturk then converted the Hagia Sophia into a museum, opened it to become kind of the cultural patrimony of the entire humanity, and recently Hagia Sophia has been converted back into a mosque.

I find this slightly regressive in the context of Turkish history given the trend line, hoping that this conversion, of course, does not negatively affect the building's heritage. It's part of the humanity's cultural common heritage dating back 1,500 years.

But I just wanted to put this into context of the Ottoman relationship with Orthodox Christians, and it was quite tolerant, progressive for its egalitarian in the way we understand it.



And Hagia Sophia and other structures survived because the Ottomans embraced them as monuments from former empires and civilizations that I think we should hold on to these legacies and make sure that they're passed on to the next generations.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you.

Dr. Schirrmacher. You're muted, Dr. Schirrmacher.

DR. SCHIRRMACHER: I would like to add that for those for not only the Hagia Sophia, but also, you know, there are other churches that I underline that are churches that cannot be used in the moment, but are just standing around.

I think there is a very positive element from the fact that Turkey is a country that is very open to tourism. Yeah.

I would urge tourist groups to specifically mention we would like to see this and this. Yeah.

When we go, we regularly ask for the Hagia Sophia. We ask officially the government and say

we are a Christian group. We would like to worship at a central place of Christian history; what can you offer us? Yeah.

So they do not offer us normally the Hagia Sophia, but a place nearby, but they get the message people are still interested.

The same is true for some of the churches one cannot use. We request we want to see this. We can visit the church. Some of them still a museum, yeah, but we request we would like to have a, have a kind of worship affair possibilities; what can you offer us? Yeah.

I think that this is a very positive message. They need to know that this is not just a political question, but there are Christians around. I'm talking to Christians now. Christians around the world who see this as their heritage as central focus points of a very, very old history and don't want to make big politics, but they want to come there and pray and ask the government what peaceful way can you offer us to do this.

Yeah. I think this is a very important

way for at least ten churches I know in the moment that are in the stage of museum or you cannot even enter them, that they realize there are people around the world who know about this, those buildings, and in the moment, it looks they are very, very hesitant to go on to change more museums or even churches into mosques.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you.

Yes, Pastor Arkan.

MR. ARKAN: I just wanted to add one thing, and I'm living in a city that very tourist, a touristy city, and we have like five historical church buildings in the city, and two of them actually very important, but used as like mosques now, and actually Turkey is trying to be part of the European Union or trying to be more open with Europe.

I think this is one of the ways the Turkish government can show that this country is welcoming people, you know, from other countries.

If they open these places for more worship for the Christians and this is one of the way to

show people that Turkey has religious freedom.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you. Very good.  
Very good.

Commissioner Ferguson, do you have any  
more questions?

COMMISSIONER FERGUSON: No.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Okay. Very good. Well,  
thank you.

As we near the end here of our time  
together, I just want to give the opportunity to  
all our witnesses, if you have one more thing that  
you wanted to add regarding religious freedom in  
Turkey, you're certainly welcome. Do we have any  
additional comments anyone wants to make? Okay.

Well, we have talked about a lot of  
important things here, and certainly at USCIRF, we  
are supportive of the people of Turkey, and we want  
to see them have the greatest religious freedom as  
possible. This has been very instructive.

I want to thank all of our witnesses today  
for sharing your insights. I want to thank  
everyone who watched and know this will be on our

website if you wanted to watch it later.

So thank you again for participating, and  
I now call this hearing adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:54 a.m. EDT, the hearing  
was adjourned.]