

TURKEY 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution defines the country as a secular state, provides for freedom of conscience, religious belief, conviction, expression, and worship, and prohibits discrimination based on religious grounds. Religious matters are coordinated and governed by the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) whose mandate is to promote Sunni Islam. The government continued to refuse to recognize the places of worship of Alevi Muslims, despite a ruling by the High Court of Appeals, and refused to exempt Alevi children from compulsory Sunni Islamic instruction. The government did not recognize the right to conscientious objection to military service. Trials continued for the 2014 killing of an Alevi by a policeman and the 2011 death of a Christian soldier at the hands of another soldier. The government continued to prosecute individuals for “openly disrespecting” Islamic beliefs, although convictions in such cases resulted in suspended sentences and one conviction was overturned. The government continued to limit the rights of non-Muslim minorities, especially those it did not recognize as being covered by the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. There was no progress regarding the reopening of Halki Seminary. The government continued to train Sunni Muslim clerics, while restricting other religious groups from training clerics inside the country. It continued to fund the construction of Sunni mosques while restricting land use of other religious groups, although it did compensate an Armenian Church foundation for a portion of a cemetery seized in 1971.

Non-Sunni Muslims faced physical violence and threats. In two separate incidents, unknown gunmen fired at three Alevi leaders. Greek Orthodox, Jewish, and Armenian Apostolic places of worship were vandalized. Over twenty houses owned by Alevi Muslims were vandalized. An openly anti-Semitic “documentary” was televised and posted online by pro-government outlets.

The Ambassador, visiting U.S. officials, and officers from the embassy and consulates continued to stress the need to lift restrictions on religious groups and raised issues of property restitution and specific cases of religious discrimination. The Secretary of State and Deputy Secretary of State, in meetings with government officials in Washington, continued to call for the reopening of the Halki Greek Orthodox seminary. The Ambassador, in meetings with government officials and publicly through local media, reiterated the U.S. position on these issues. The Department of State publicly condemned anti-Semitic statements.

TURKEY

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 79.4 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the Turkish government, 99 percent of the population is Muslim, the majority of which is Hanafi Sunni. Representatives of other religious groups state the actual percentage of Muslims is lower.

Academics estimate there are 15 million to 20 million Alevi Muslims. Alevi foundation leaders report higher numbers, estimating 20 million to 25 million Alevis in the country. The Shia Ja'fari community estimates its numbers at three million.

Other religious groups, mostly concentrated in Istanbul and other large cities, together constitute less than 1 percent of the population. While exact figures are not available, these groups self-report approximately 90,000 Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians (of which an estimated 60,000 are citizens and an estimated 30,000 are undocumented immigrants from Armenia); 25,000 Roman Catholics (including a large number of recent immigrants from Africa and the Philippines); 17,000 Jews; 20,000 Syrian Orthodox Christians (also known as Syriacs or Suriyanis); 15,000 Russian Orthodox Christians (mostly recent immigrants from Russia who hold residence permits); 10,000 Bahais; 22,000 Yezidis (17,000 of whom are refugees who arrived in 2014); 5,000 Jehovah's Witnesses; 7,000 members of Protestant denominations; 3,000 Chaldean Christians; and up to 2,000 Greek Orthodox Christians. There also are small, undetermined numbers of Bulgarian Orthodox, Nestorian, Georgian Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Anglican, and Maronite Christians. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) estimates its membership at approximately 300 individuals. Estimates of the number of atheists vary, but most recent published surveys suggest approximately 2 percent of the population is atheist.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Framework

The constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of conscience, religious belief, conviction, expression, and worship. The constitution prohibits discrimination on religious grounds and prohibits exploitation or abuse of "religion or religious feelings, or things held sacred by religion."

TURKEY

The Turkish state coordinates and governs religious matters through the Diyanet. The Diyanet's mandate is to promote the belief, practices, and moral principles of Sunni Islam, educate the public about religious issues, and administer places of worship. Operating under the prime minister's office, with a president appointed by the prime minister, and administered by a 16-person council elected by clerics and university theology faculties, the Diyanet has five main departments: the high councils for religious affairs, education, services, publications, and public relations.

Although registration with the government is not mandatory for religious groups, unregistered religious groups cannot request legal recognition for places of worship. Holding religious services at a location not recognized as a place of worship is illegal and may be punished with fines or closure of the venue. A religious group may register as an association or foundation provided it is associated with a charitable or cultural cause. Religious community foundations are the only religious groups permitted to own real estate.

In 1935, the government passed a law prohibiting foundations from being established on the basis of the religion or ethnicity of members. In 1936, hundreds of previously established religious and ethnic foundations were granted an exemption to the 1935 prohibition. Today, 167 of those exempted foundations continue to exist, although the civil code prohibits the creation of new religious or ethnic foundations.

Associations by definition must be nonprofit and may receive financial support only in the form of donations. A foundation may earn income through companies and rent-earning properties. Associations have fewer legal rights than foundations at the local level. The process for establishing a foundation is lengthier and more expensive than that for establishing an association.

The General Directorate of Foundations (GDF) regulates the activities and affiliated property of all charitable foundations and assesses whether they are operating within the stated objectives of their organizational statute. There are several categories of foundations, including religious community foundations.

A foundation of any category may be closed only by court order. If a foundation becomes inactive, the government can petition the courts to find the foundation no longer operational and transfer all assets to the state.

TURKEY

To register as an association, a group must submit a registration application to the provincial governor's office and may immediately begin operating while awaiting confirmation from the governor's office that its bylaws are constitutional. In addition to its bylaws, a group must submit permission from the Ministry of the Interior if a foreign association or nonprofit organization is listed as a founding member, as well as copies of residence permits of foreigners if they are founding members of the group. If the governorate finds the bylaws unlawful or unconstitutional, the association is asked to change the bylaws to meet the legal requirements, and association officials can be fined or punished by law. Associations may be closed by court order and are bound by the civil code not to discriminate on the grounds of religion, ethnicity, or race. According to the civil code, any association created after 1935 may not restrict membership based on religion.

The penal code prohibits imams, priests, rabbis, and other religious leaders from "reproaching or vilifying" the government or the laws of the state while performing their duties. Violations are punishable by prison terms of one month to one year, or three months to two years if the crime involves inciting others to disobey the law. There are legal restrictions against insulting a recognized religion, interfering with a religious group's services, or defacing its property. Insulting a recognized religion is punishable by six months to one year in prison; interfering with a religious group's services is punishable by one to three years in prison; defacing religious property is punishable by three months to one year in prison; and destroying or demolishing religious property is punishable by one to four years in prison.

The constitution establishes compulsory religious and moral instruction in public primary and secondary schools, with content determined by the Ministry of National Education's Department of Religious Instruction.

The law requires 12 years of compulsory education, including elementary, intermediate, and secondary school. Religion classes are compulsory, with two hours per week for students in grades four through eight and one hour per week for students in grades nine through 12. Students who are part of a recognized religious minority may apply for an exemption. Members of recognized non-Muslim religious groups are legally allowed an exemption from religious instruction. No exemptions are allowed for atheists, agnostics, Alevi or non-Sunni Muslims,

TURKEY

Bahais, or Yezidis. Islamic religious courses may also be taken as electives for two hours per week in middle school during regular school hours.

National identity cards contain a space for religious identification, although the constitution stipulates that no one can be compelled to reveal his or her religious belief. The national identity cards provide for the following religious identities: Muslim, Greek Orthodox, Christian, Jew, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, No Religion, or Other. The applicant may also elect to leave the space blank. Bahai, Alevi, and Yezidi, among other groups with known populations in the country, are not listed as options.

Military service is obligatory but there is no provision for conscientious objection. Those who oppose mandatory military service on religious grounds may face charges in military and civilian courts and are subject to prison sentences ranging from two months to two years.

Government Practices

The government continued to interpret the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which refers broadly to “non-Muslim minorities,” as granting special legal minority status exclusively to three recognized groups: Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians. The government did not recognize the leadership or administrative structures of non-Muslim minorities (e.g., the patriarchates and chief rabbinate) as legal entities, leaving them unable to buy or hold title to property or to press claims in court. The three groups, along with other minority religious communities, organized independent foundations with separate governing boards in order to hold and control individual religious properties. Following the 2013 repeal of a regulation governing the election of foundation board members, the government failed to promulgate new regulations permitting the election of foundation board members, as promised.

The government also continued not to recognize the Ecumenical Patriarchate as the leader of the world’s 300 million Orthodox Christians, consistent with the government’s stance that there was no legal obligation to do so. The government’s position remained that the Ecumenical patriarch was not “ecumenical,” but only the religious leader of the country’s Greek Orthodox minority population. The government continued to permit only Turkish citizens to vote in the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s Holy Synod or be elected patriarch but continued its practice of granting Turkish citizenship to a number of Greek Orthodox metropolitans under

TURKEY

the terms of a 2011 stopgap solution to widen the pool of candidates to become the next patriarch.

The Armenian Apostolic Patriarchate and the Ecumenical Patriarchate continued to seek legal recognition. Their communities operated as conglomerations of individual religious foundations. Because the patriarchates did not have legal personality, associated foundations controlled by individual boards held all the property of the religious communities, and the patriarchates had no legal authority to direct the use of any assets or otherwise govern their communities.

The Istanbul governorate continued to maintain that leaders of the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox, and Jewish communities must be Turkish citizens, although coreligionists from outside the country had assumed informal leadership positions of these groups in some cases.

The government continued to consider Alevism a heterodox Muslim sect and did not financially support religious worship for Alevi Muslims. Alevi leaders said the government failed to meet their demands for religious reforms and expressed concerns about security. Sufi and other religious-social orders (*tarikats*) and lodges (*cemaats*), banned officially since 1925, remained active and widespread as the government did not enforce the ban.

The government continued to limit the rights of non-Muslim minorities, especially those it did not recognize as being covered by the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. Non-Sunni Muslims did not receive the same protections as recognized non-Muslim minorities. The government continued to train Sunni Muslim clerics, while restricting other religious groups from training clergy, and continued to fund the construction of Sunni mosques while restricting land use of other religious groups. The government continued not to recognize Alevi houses of worship (*cemevis*), and Alevis continued to experience difficulty obtaining exemptions from mandatory religion classes.

The trial continued for a policeman indicted in November 2014 for first-degree murder in the May 2014 shooting of Ugur Kurt, an Alevi who was attending a funeral outside a *cemevi* in Istanbul. Kurt was reportedly killed by a bullet fired while police were confronting protestors in Istanbul's Okmeydani neighborhood, which contains a large concentration of Alevis. An evidentiary hearing in October was postponed until February 2016.

TURKEY

The trial of 13 individuals charged with conspiracy to commit a large scale assault against the Izmit Protestant church and to assassinate its pastor in 2013 continued. Police had confiscated weapons and found evidence of prolonged, careful planning for an attack. Based on a charge filed in 2014, the preliminary investigation of a gendarmerie captain and a police officer for their alleged role in the conspiracy continued. The next hearing is scheduled for 2016. At year's end, the 13 suspects had been released on bail.

In January, the Diyarbakir Military Court held the first hearing in a new trial for the 2011 death of Sevag Balikci, a Christian of both Turkish and Armenian descent who was killed while serving in the Turkish Army. Another soldier had been convicted on the lesser charge of involuntary manslaughter. In 2013, the Diyarbakir court had not found Balikci to be the victim of intentional homicide or a hate crime and sentenced the defendant to 53 months' imprisonment with credit for time served in pretrial detention, leaving him approximately three years to continue serving in prison. The Diyarbakir court's finding did not satisfy the victim's family, which appealed the verdict. In January, citing procedural errors, the Military Court of Appeals vacated the judgment and remanded the case to the Diyarbakir criminal court. The Diyarbakir court held a preliminary hearing in September; the next hearing was scheduled for 2016. The defendant remained in jail pending further judicial action.

The trial of Canan Arin for "openly disrespecting the religious belief of a group," which involved a reported insult to the Prophet Mohammad, continued to be suspended for the duration of the year. Arin had been charged in 2011 after a speech she made at a conference about child marriage, but the court suspended the proceedings in 2013, provided the crime was not repeated for three years. The case against Arin will be dismissed in 2016 as long as she is not charged before then with a similar crime.

In October, the Higher Court of Appeals reversed internationally known concert pianist Fazil Say's 2013 conviction and suspended sentence of 10 months in prison for "openly disrespecting the religious belief of a group," which involved posting lines attributed to poet Omar Khayyam on a social media site. The court said his posting constituted freedom of expression.

The 10-month and seven-month suspended sentences for two individuals and suspended court cases of an additional 37 individuals charged in 2014 with "disrespecting religious beliefs of a group" for their posts on the satiric online

TURKEY

collaborative site Eksi Sozluk continued. The cases were suspended for three years, meaning the defendants will not face jail time provided they do not commit the same crime before 2017.

The state continued to provide training for Sunni Muslim clerics while restricting other religious groups from training clerics inside the country, including through requirements imposed by the Higher Education Board. The lack of monastic seminaries within the country meant that the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox Patriarchates were unable to train their clerics. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, leader of the Greek Orthodox Church, called again in October for the government to allow the reopening of the Halki Seminary on the island of Heybeli, closed in 1971 in response to a law that required all private colleges for religious training to be affiliated with a state-run university and prohibited the operation of a seminary within a monastic community.

Many prosecutors and police reportedly continued to regard certain public religious speech and religious activism with suspicion, such as proselytism by Protestant evangelicals and Mormons. Anti-missionary rhetoric remained in required school textbooks.

Many state buildings, including universities, maintained mesjids (small mosques) in which Muslims could pray. The government continued to deny Alevis the right to establish similar places of worship in government buildings, and government buildings did not contain places of worship for non-Muslims.

The government continued to donate land for the construction of mosques and continued funding their construction through the Diyanet or municipalities. Municipalities continued to pay the utility bills for mosques located within their boundaries. These benefits remained uniquely available to Sunni Muslim mosques, with other religious institutions paying their own utility bills, except in some opposition-controlled municipalities that recognized Alevi places of worship and paid their utility bills. The Diyanet Foundation, a quasi-governmental entity, continued to own many of the mosques around the country.

The majority of Protestants met in unregistered locations for worship services. The government reportedly recognized only 15 Protestant churches as official places of worship throughout the country, including several chapels run by foreign diplomatic missions. Protestant groups reportedly used approximately 40 rented buildings and more than 100 residences for unregistered worship services. In

TURKEY

December the government permitted the opening of a new Protestant church in Sanliurfa. The Protestant Divine Light Church is housed in a renovated bakery and expected to serve the city's Protestant Christian population of approximately 500.

Many local officials continued to impose zoning standards on churches, such as minimum space requirements, that they did not impose on mosques. Local officials required Protestant groups to purchase 27,000 square feet of land (approximately 0.6 acre) to construct churches, even for small congregations. Officials did not apply this requirement to Sunni Muslims, who were permitted to build mesjids in malls, airports, and other spaces.

The Syrian Orthodox community continued to seek permission to build a second church in Istanbul to accommodate its growing population. In September the Regional Board for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage provisionally approved a proposal by the Syriac Church Foundation to build a second church on land offered by the Istanbul Municipality. The community to date had only one church in Istanbul to serve an estimated local population of 17,000 to 20,000. The Syrian Orthodox community did not request government funding for construction of the church, which the government regularly granted to Muslim communities for mosque construction. Instead, the community requested only that the municipality provide free land for the building site and was prepared to finance the construction itself. The Syriac Church Foundation was awaiting a final decision at year's end.

Although Alevi groups were able to build new *cemevis*, the government continued to decline to provide financial support from the Diyanet, a move Alevi groups considered discriminatory. Alevi leaders reported there were approximately 2,500 to 3,000 Alevi *cemevis* in the country, an insufficient number to meet their needs.

In August the Supreme Court of Appeals affirmed a lower court's decision that *cemevis* are places of worship and should be exempt from paying utility bills. The lower court had held that *cemevis* had been known as places of worship for Alevis for hundreds of years, and a charter referring to *cemevis* as places of worship was not in contravention of the constitution or prohibited by law. At the end of the year, the government had not legally recognized *cemevis* as places of worship although several municipalities led by the opposition Republican People's Party recognized *cemevis* and waived utility bills.

Since 2011, the GDF had received 1,560 applications from religious minority foundations which had applied for compensation for properties seized by the

TURKEY

government in previous decades. Since 2011, the GDF has returned 590 properties, although no properties were returned during the year. The 970 applications pending from 2011 were rejected because they did not meet the criteria as outlined in the 2011 compensation law. Since the time period for submitting compensation applications expired, no new applications were submitted during the year. Applications for the return of properties were previously received from the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Jewish, Syrian Orthodox, Bulgarian Orthodox, Georgian Orthodox, Chaldean, and Armenian Protestant communities. Religious institutions and communities that did not have legally recognized foundations were not able to seek compensation for seized properties.

In October, the Istanbul Court of First Instance ordered the Istanbul Municipality to pay the Surp Agop Armenian Church Foundation 111.85 million liras (\$38 million) for a roughly one-acre parcel of land seized by the government in 1971. The parcel formed part of a 10-acre cemetery that was returned to the foundation in 2012 without the one-acre parcel because it contained roads and passages associated with a nearby metro station. At year's end, no appeal had been filed.

In October the government brokered a deal in which a private property owner gave the Gedikpasa Armenian Protestant Church Foundation the deed to Camp Armen, a roughly two-acre plot in Istanbul's Tuzla neighborhood housing an abandoned orphanage where slain ethnic Armenian journalist Hrant Dink stayed as a child. Camp Armen garnered international attention when activists and politicians intervened to halt the owner's planned demolition of the property and the site became a rallying point for sit-ins by those seeking to protect Dink's legacy. In August three volunteer "guards" were attacked near the property by unidentified assailants. The property owner reportedly returned the camp after the government offered to pay for expropriation of part of the land, which had been seized in 1971 under a law banning religious foundations from acquiring real estate.

In October the High Court finalized the return of more than 100 acres of property to the Dayrulzafaran Monastery in the southeastern district of Mardin. The land was returned by the government in 2013 but had been pending an appeal.

A case remained pending at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) to determine ownership of some parcels of land around the Mor Gabriel Syriac Orthodox Monastery that remained in dispute. The land dispute had begun in 2008, when the Under-secretariat of the Treasury, the Department of Forestry, and

TURKEY

nearby villages initiated a series of court cases against the monastery to seize the land.

On April 27, the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia (based in Lebanon) filed a lawsuit with the Constitutional Court to recover the centuries-old headquarters of the Catholicosate of Sis, in the Kozan District of Adana Province. The lawsuit alleges that the headquarters, once a center of Armenian Christian life, was wrongly seized one hundred years ago and should be returned.

In March, following a 5.75 million lira (\$2 million) restoration undertaken by the GDF, the government re-opened the historic Edirne Synagogue and permitted the building to be used for religious celebrations.

Minister of European Union Affairs Volkan Bozkir attended a memorial service led by acting Armenian Patriarch Archbishop Aram Atesyan at the Armenian Patriarchate in Istanbul to commemorate the events of 1915, in which one and a half million Armenians perished. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu issued statements offering condolences to the grandchildren of these “Ottoman Armenians.”

The government permitted religious services at the Mardin Protestant Church in Artuklu, which was reopened after 60 years following extensive renovations paid for by the church foundation. The government continued to permit annual and other commemorative religious worship services at religiously significant sites previously converted to state museums, such as the Sumela Monastery near Trabzon, St. Peter’s Church in Antakya, St. Nicholas’ Church near Demre, and the House of the Virgin Mary near Selcuk, although the government cancelled the service at Akdemar Church near Van for security reasons. Some municipal and minority religious group leaders called for these sites to be opened to worship without restrictions.

For the second consecutive year, the government held an event to commemorate Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27. The event, which included participation by high-level government officials, was held in Ankara for the first time.

The government continued not to implement a 2013 ruling by the ECHR which found that the government’s compulsory religion courses in public schools violated educational freedoms, even though the ECHR denied the government’s appeal of

TURKEY

the ruling. The ECHR ruled in favor of the Alevi community, which had argued that the courses promoted Sunni Islam, which was contrary to their religious convictions.

Although authorities added material on Alevism to the religious course curriculum after the ECHR decision, many Alevis stated this material was inadequate and, in some cases, incorrect. In March National Education Minister Nabi Avci said the government would partner with the Helping Hands Foundation to support construction of an Alevi school to teach Alevi-Bektashi beliefs. At the end of the year, the school had not yet opened. Alevis had many unresolved discrimination cases against the Ministry of National Education pending in courts at the end of the year.

Non-Sunni Muslims said they faced difficulty obtaining exemptions from compulsory religious instruction in primary and secondary schools, particularly if their identification cards listed their religion as “Muslim.” Members of other minority religious groups, including Protestants, also said they had difficulty obtaining exemptions. The government said that the compulsory instruction covered the range of world religions, but religious groups, especially Alevis and members of the Syriac Orthodox community, stated that the courses largely reflected Hanafi Sunni Islamic doctrine and contained negative and incorrect information about other religious groups. While the government allowed non-Muslims to select other electives to fulfill their required coursework for graduation, non-Sunni Muslims reported they often were only allowed to choose from electives concerning different aspects of Sunni Islam. In February the National Education Ministry’s Directorate General of Religious Education wrote a memorandum to provincial governors ordering all children except those whose ID cards listed Christianity or Judaism, including those whose ID cards listed no religious affiliation, to be enrolled in the mandatory religion classes.

Although the minister of education announced in October 2014 that students who attended non-Muslim minority community schools would be permitted to take elective courses in their religion, the courses had not yet been offered as of the end of the year.

The Armenian community worked with the Ministry of National Education on including questions on Armenian Orthodox Christianity for Armenian Orthodox students in a national religion exam required for high school entrance. This follows the introduction in 2014 of questions on Judaism for Jewish students

TURKEY

taking the entrance exam. The government reported that 218 Armenian Orthodox students and 43 Jewish students answered religious questions for non-Muslims.

By year's end, the Ministry of National Education had not issued a ruling on the 2013 petition by the Syriac community to open a primary school in Mardin. One GDF-approved Greek school, closed in 1964 and re-opened in 2011, continued to operate on the island of Gokceada (known as Imvros in Greek).

The government continued to permit the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish religious community foundations to operate schools under the supervision of the education ministry, and also allowed children of their noncitizen coreligionists, including children of undocumented Armenian migrants and Armenian refugees from Syria, to enroll in them. However, because these children were legally classified as "visitors," they were ineligible to receive a diploma from those schools. The curricula of these schools included information unique to the cultures of the three groups and could be taught in the minority groups' languages. The government did not permit other religious groups to operate schools.

The government limited the number of students admitted to public secondary schools, assigning tens of thousands of students to state-run religious schools, known as "imam *hatip*" schools. Enrollment in the imam *hatip* schools increased to approximately one million students, up from just 63,000 in 2003. Critics, including secular-minded parents, expressed concern that the government was favoring religion over secularism in education policy.

In February police in Izmir reportedly used water cannons to break up a demonstration against state-mandated instruction in Islam, including at imam *hatip* schools. Boycotts of these schools were reported to be organized across the country by a teachers' union and Alevi community associations.

The Diyanet regulated the operation of 86,101 registered mosques and paid the salaries of 119,743 religious personnel as civil servants at the end of 2014, the last year for which data was available. The government did not pay the salaries of religious leaders, instructors, or other staff belonging to other religious groups.

No reforms were introduced to recognize the right of conscientious objection, to prevent the criminal prosecution of conscientious objectors for refusal to perform military service, or to provide for alternative government service. In February Mehmet Tarhan was sentenced to one year and three months' imprisonment by the

TURKEY

Sivas Military Court for his refusal to serve in the military. His sentence was later commuted to a fine. In April Baris Gormez was acquitted by the Isparta Military Court which recognized his right to conscientious objection based on a 2011 decision by the ECHR that found forced military service to be a violation of Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Under the constitution, the terms of international conventions prevail over national laws. At year's end, the case was eligible for appeal but none had been filed.

According to officials of the Jehovah's Witnesses, members faced prosecution and fines for their refusal to serve in the country's military forces.

Some non-Muslims stated that listing their religious affiliation on national identity cards exposed them to discrimination and harassment. Members of many religious groups continued to state that by not including a religious identity or listing an identity other than Muslim on applications for employment, they or coreligionists were precluded from obtaining government jobs and were discriminated against in the private sector.

In March the Second General-Jurisdiction Criminal Court in Golbasi ordered the website of the Atheism Association blocked after the court found the website violated Article 216 of the Turkish Penal Code by "openly disrespecting the religious belief of a group." Seven members of the Atheism Association faced charges for violating Article 216 for messages they posted online. At year's end, the website was accessible and individual appeals of the charges were filed with the Constitutional Court.

In February the government commemorated the nearly 800 Jewish refugees who died aboard the *Struma* when it sank off the coast of Istanbul in 1942. Then-Minister of Culture and Tourism Omer Celik attended the commemoration and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement. In December the Republican People's Party-affiliated Besiktas Municipality of Istanbul hosted, for the first time, a public menorah lighting before a crowd of several hundred. The ceremony was led by the Chief Rabbi of Turkey with participation by government representatives and members of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Christians and non-Sunni Muslims faced threats of violence and vandalism of property. Anti-Semitic propaganda continued to target the Jewish community.

TURKEY

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

In August unidentified gunmen opened fire on Alevi-Bektashi Federation President Baki Duzgun and Alevi Culture Associations President Dogan Demir's vehicle while they were on route to a meeting entitled "Alevis Seek Peace" in Ankara. No casualties were reported. This attack came less than a week after Zeynel Odaba from the Sultangazi Pirsultan Abdal Culture Association was attacked in an armed assault in Istanbul on August 5.

In June an individual who claimed to be taking "revenge for Al Aqsa Mosque" threw a Molotov cocktail at the Hagia Triada Greek Orthodox Church in Kadikoy, causing a small fire. Bystanders helped extinguish the fire and rebuked the vandal, who was detained by police.

In May in Adiyaman, and in June in Kocaeli, more than 20 houses of Alevis were marked with "X" symbols. Alevis stated they interpreted the "X" symbols as warnings and said that similar markings appeared on houses of Alevis ahead of the 1978 violent attacks in Kahramanmaras in which close to 100 Alevis were killed.

According to World Watch Monitor, 15 Turkish Protestant congregations and their leaders were targeted since late August by death threats sent to their Facebook accounts, email, websites, and mobile telephones. According to the World Watch Monitor, one pastor who received messages said, "They are saying things like they had been waiting for us to return to Islam, and that we are responsible for other Muslims turning to Christ, that our time is up and that Allah will give them our heads."

The Association for Atheism filed four legal complaints for hate speech and threatening messages directed at atheists. At year's end, two of the complaints, including a personal threat by the chair of the Sharia Association against the chair of the Atheism Association, were being investigated.

In October a group of approximately 20 individuals threw stones near the Armenian Surp Asdvadzadzin Patriarch Church in Istanbul's Kumkapi neighborhood. Acting Armenian Patriarch Aram Atesyan said it was unclear whether the stones were directed at the church or at the nearby police station. At year's end, the police investigation was ongoing. Also in October, vandals

TURKEY

targeted an Armenian Catholic Church in the Sur District of Diyarbakir, breaking its doors and removing its sign.

Mastermind, an anti-Semitic “documentary” film, was broadcast repeatedly on private television channels and posted on the websites of several pro-government media outlets, starting in March. An adviser to Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu appeared in the film, and said President Erdogan was responsible for bringing unfavorable “facts” about Jews to the public’s attention. The film paints the Jews as the country’s biggest enemy.

According to news reports, in March a substitute teacher in Tokat Province told her seventh-grade students they “deserve rape” and other mistreatment for not wearing headscarves. After parents complained, the principal spoke to the teacher. She said her remarks were misunderstood and that she had apologized. One parent filed a complaint and the teacher may be subject to an administrative investigation by the Education Ministry’s Education Directorate in Tokat.

Various Islamic groups continued to advocate transforming some former Orthodox churches into mosques, especially after the Hagia Sophia of Trabzon, a 12th-century Byzantine church which had been operating as a museum for the past 50 years, was converted into a mosque in 2013.

After the Great Edirne Synagogue reopened earlier in the year, the Jewish community hosted an iftar in honor of Ramadan for hundreds of participants, including Muslims and Christians. Community representatives stated this was a continuation of a 15-year tradition in Istanbul.

In September a Greek Orthodox Church in Istanbul hosted Greek and Armenian communities in a memorial service for the victims of the Istanbul pogrom, which targeted non-Muslim minorities in 1955. The Universal Federation of Istanbul Greeks reportedly asked the government to officially condemn the pogrom and other discrimination against non-Muslims.

Media reported that leaders of the Christian and Muslim communities in Mersin gathered together on September 24, the Muslim Feast of Sacrifice, to pray for all the dead, regardless of their religions, in the Mersin City Cemetery.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

TURKEY

The President, Secretary of State, and Ambassador engaged with government officials throughout the year to address religious freedom issues and stress the importance the United States places on interfaith tolerance, religious freedom, and condemning anti-Semitism.

The Secretary of State and Deputy Secretary of State, in meetings with government officials in Washington, continued to call for the reopening of the Greek Orthodox seminary in Halki. The Ambassador, in meetings with government officials and publicly through local media, reiterated the U.S. position on this issue. The Department of State publicly condemned anti-Semitic statements.

The Ambassador, visiting U.S. officials, and embassy and consulate officers urged the government to implement reforms aimed at lifting restrictions on religious groups and also raised property restitution and specific cases of religious discrimination. Embassy officials issued public statements drawing attention to religious discrimination.

During his visit, the Special Representative to Muslim Communities encouraged the government to promote religious freedom. He expressed concern for the lack of legal recognition for Alevi places of worship.

The Ambassador, embassy, and consulate representatives maintained close relations with “traditional” and recently established religious groups, meeting frequently with them – individually and collectively – to discuss religious freedom concerns and promote interreligious dialogue. Embassy and consulate personnel hosted or attended events dedicated to religious tolerance during Muslim, Jewish and Christian holidays, and on Holocaust Remembrance Day.