

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Turkey continued to follow a troubling trajectory. In July, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan issued a decree [converting](#) back into a mosque the famous Hagia Sophia, a former church that had been serving as a museum, in a move that many denounced as divisive and hostile to Turkey’s religious minorities. While the government [took similar steps](#) to reopen as a mosque another former church, the Chora Museum, it reportedly [paused](#) those efforts. The government furthermore made little to no effort to address many longstanding religious freedom issues and it ignored the continued targeting and vandalism of religious minority properties throughout the country. Despite repeated [requests](#) by religious minority communities for permission to hold board member elections for non-Muslim foundations, the government did not permit those elections during the year. Similarly, the government disregarded [calls](#) for the reopening of the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary and continued to [deny](#) legal personality to all religious communities. Members of the ruling party and its coalition partner [rejected](#) efforts to recognize Alevi gathering houses (*cemevleri*) as places of worship, and the government declined to resolve other religious freedom concerns for Alevis and other communities, such as their objection to compulsory religious courses and other educational policies. Although officials made a point to [meet](#) with some religious minority community leaders, the government appeared to take no subsequent action following that meeting to address those communities’ concerns. In December, Turkey’s parliament passed a law that human rights groups [warned](#) would increase governmental control over civil society, including religious groups, by [subjecting](#) them to intensified oversight and new limitations on online fundraising.

Many religious minorities continued to feel [threatened](#) in connection with incidents perpetrated by nonstate actors or due to direct pressure from the state. [Alevi](#), [Armenian](#), and [Protestant](#) communities and organizations reported receiving death threats, whereas Jews [described](#) an increase in antisemitism largely linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. Assyrians remained deeply [disturbed](#) by the detention and trial of Syriac Orthodox priest Sefer Bileçen (aka Father Aho) for allegedly providing food and water to Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) members, and by the apparent kidnapping of an elderly Chaldean couple—one of whom was later found dead. The Turkish government continued to [expel](#) or bar the entry into the country of foreign Protestants for posing a purported “national security threat.” Throughout the year, authorities brought politically motivated charges of blasphemy against individuals and groups, while others in official positions utilized rhetoric [characterized](#) as hate speech that denigrated nonreligious individuals and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community.

Religious sites—including places of worship and cemeteries—were subject to vandalism, damage, and, in some cases, destruction, which the government regularly fails to prevent or punish. In January, unknown individuals [broke into](#) the Pir Sultan *cemevi* in Istanbul and [graffitied](#) the interior with threatening messages. In May, an individual [attempted to set fire](#) to an Armenian church for “bringing the coronavirus,” and that same month, another person [scaled](#) the gate of another Armenian church and tore down its cross. In other instances, unknown actors [destroyed](#) a Yazidi cemetery in Mardin Province and [damaged](#) a Catholic cemetery in Trabzon. Local officials in Bursa [demolished](#) a Greek Orthodox church after many years of neglect.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Turkey on the U.S. Department of State’s Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Raise in all meetings with Turkish government officials and press at the highest levels for the reopening of the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary and for full compliance with European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) rulings on freedom of religion or belief;
- Direct the U.S. Embassy in Ankara and Consulates in Istanbul and Adana to track religious communities’ efforts to open, regain, renovate, and protect places of worship and other religious sites of spiritual, cultural, or historic importance, and work with the Turkish government to ensure the protection of such sites; and
- Require a thorough review regarding the inclusion of objects that constitute the religious and cultural heritage of religious and ethnic minority communities—previously or currently residing within the territory of the Republic of Turkey—in any designated list of materials subject to import restrictions under a bilateral cultural property agreement between the United States and Turkey, and support cultural and educational exchanges that highlight the histories and contributions of those communities.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Incorporate consideration of Turkey’s treatment of religious minorities and broader human rights issues into its continued evaluation of the U.S.-Turkey bilateral relationship, for example by passing S. Res. 755 requesting information on the government of Turkey’s human rights practices pursuant to section 502B(c) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation on Religious Freedom in Turkey](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Decries Decision to Change Status of the Hagia Sophia](#)
- **Op-Ed:** [U.S. Leaders Must Stand against Turkey’s Atrocities in Northern Syria](#) (in *Newsweek*)
- **Annual Report Chapter on Syria:** For information on religious freedom violations by Turkey and Turkish-backed forces in the areas they occupy in Syria.

Background

The U.S. government [estimates](#) that Turkey's population is approximately 82.5 million, of which 99.8 percent is Muslim; an [estimated](#) 77.5 percent majority adheres to Sunni Islam. Between 10 million and 25 million people identify as Alevi, a community that the government largely refuses to differentiate from majority Sunni Muslims. The remaining 0.2 percent comprises atheists, Armenian Apostolics, Baha'is, Bulgarian Orthodox, Chaldean Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Russian Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Yazidis, and other religious communities.

The [constitution](#) defines the country as a secular state and guarantees the freedom of conscience, religious belief, and conviction. However, the government also exercises extensive control over both majority Muslim and non-Muslim religious communities through either the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), which oversees the practice of Islam, or the General Directorate of Foundations (*Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü*), which regulates other religious communities.

The Turkish government has become increasingly repressive since a [July 2016 coup attempt](#), detaining numerous journalists and perceived political opponents, including a [reported](#) 292,000 individuals affiliated with—or accused of affiliation with—the U.S.-based cleric Fethullah Gülen. Turkey also remained actively engaged in or supported numerous military operations beyond its borders throughout 2020. At the end of the year, members of Turkey's significant Uyghur diaspora community remained [concerned](#) about possible deportation to China, as the Chinese Communist Party [pursued](#) the adoption of a bilateral extradition treaty with Turkey.

Government Antisemitism and Rhetoric against Minorities

Throughout the year, government rhetoric at various levels increasingly [targeted](#) religious minorities and nonreligious individuals and promoted a "conquest mentality" that not only ostracized those communities but also risked encouraging hate crimes against them. For example, in November, *Diyanet* President Ali Erbaş [stated](#) during an opening ceremony for a mosque that "all manner of evil can be expected from those who don't believe in the afterlife," prompting Turkey's Atheism Association to open a criminal complaint for "targeting nonbelievers." In a January speech [considered](#) one of the most antisemitic incidents of the year, President Erdoğan [lashed out](#) at Muslim majority countries that normalized relations with Israel and celebrated it with "those with kippahs on their heads."

In July, after [recent hints](#) and [multiple threats](#) to do so, President Erdoğan signed a decree [converting](#) the Hagia Sophia back into a mosque after a court revoked the historic site's status as a museum. During the first Friday prayers held at the former Greek Orthodox cathedral, *Diyanet* President Erbaş held aloft a sword as a "symbol of

conquest" that many [decried](#) for the marginalizing message it sent to Turkey's religious minorities.

Politically Motivated Blasphemy Charges

Authorities continued to threaten or pursue blasphemy charges under Article 216(3) of the Penal Code, which penalizes "openly insulting the religious values held by a segment of society." In April, authorities [took into custody](#) former editor Hakan Aygün for social media posts in which he used religious wordplay to criticize President Erdoğan's COVID-19 fundraising campaign; his trial was ongoing at the end of the reporting period. That same month, the Ankara Prosecutor's Office [launched a retaliatory investigation](#) into the Ankara Bar Association for characterizing anti-LGBTI statements by *Diyanet* President Erbaş as hate speech. Following an incident in May in which hackers [played](#) the song "Bella Ciao" from the minarets of mosques in Izmir, local authorities detained a handful of people for "insulting religious values" by sharing and "[praising](#)" videos of the episode on social media. Among those [detained](#) was former opposition party politician Banu Özdemir, who had tweeted about the incident. During the year, authorities also [investigated](#) and [prosecuted](#) journalist Enver Aysever for posting online a caricature that mocked religious figures.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Turkey are allies as members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and [cooperate](#) on international security concerns. Despite this cooperation, however, several issues continued to plague the bilateral relationship, including U.S. concerns regarding Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system. Such concerns prompted Members of Congress to [adopt](#) legislation requiring the imposition of sanctions against Turkey under the [Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act](#) (CAATSA), and in December, the United States [sanctioned](#) Turkey's Presidency of Defense Industries.

The U.S. government regularly raised religious freedom matters in Turkey and frequently engaged with representatives of Turkey's religious minorities. In July, then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo [urged](#) Turkey to maintain the Hagia Sophia as a museum. Following the government's decision to convert the site into a mosque, then Vice President Michael R. Pence [reiterated](#) a call for it to remain accessible to all. In October, head of the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs Ambassador Phillip T. Reeker [traveled](#) to Turkey and [met](#) with Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I. In November, then Secretary Pompeo also [visited](#) Turkey to discuss religious freedom; he [met](#) Patriarch Bartholomew, [toured](#) the Rüstem Paşa Mosque, and [discussed](#) regional interfaith peace efforts with Archbishop Paul Fitzpatrick Russell, Apostolic Nuncio to Turkey. After the reporting period, in January 2021, the United States and Turkey [signed](#) a bilateral cultural property agreement to curb the looting and trafficking of cultural property.