

KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Turkey remained largely the same as in the previous year, although government officials increasingly engaged in rhetoric that targeted or ostracized religious minorities. The Turkish government continued to deny legal status to religious communities, refused to recognize the places of worship of certain religious minorities, and prohibited the reopening of the Theological School of Halki and other religious educational institutions crucial to the continued existence of several religious traditions in the country. The government also did not recognize the right to conscientious objection and fined some individuals who refused to carry out compulsory military service due to their beliefs.

Alevis, who make up Turkey’s largest religious minority community, continued to lack official recognition and [faced](#) widespread discrimination. Many Alevis [viewed](#) government overtures—such as President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s late 2022 announcement of the creation of a state-run Alevi-Bektaşî Culture and Cemevi Directorate—as either a political gesture to gain votes ahead of elections or an effort to co-opt and assimilate Alevism. In the course of campaigning, President Erdoğan [lashed out](#) at main opposition party leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who had released on social media a video in which he [discussed](#) his own identity as an Alevi. Alevis, along with members of other religious minority communities, continued to object to religion courses required for students grades four through 12 that disproportionately focused on Sunni Islam.

The Turkish government detained individuals throughout the year for allegedly insulting Islam and in some cases prosecuted them for committing blasphemy under Article 216(3) of the Turkish Penal Code. In October 2023, a man [received](#) 7.5 months in prison for “insult[ing] the religious values of a section of the public” when he posted to social media a photo showing alcohol inside a mosque. That same month, authorities detained three 16-year-olds on charges of insulting religious values on social media. In

July, police [detained](#) and then released a man who purportedly made fun of *namaz* (prayer) in a video that he posted to social media. In yet another case of official censorship, in February, a court banned theologian İhsan Eliaçık’s translation of the Qur’an because it “contain[ed] elements that are objectionable in terms of the fundamental qualities of Islam.” Likewise, in May, the Istanbul governor for the second year in a row [prohibited](#) an event to commemorate the 1915 Armenian Genocide.

Many religious communities remained concerned by instances of societal violence, intolerant rhetoric, and discrimination. In November, unknown assailants [murdered](#) nonagenarian Syriac Gevriye Akgüç in the courtyard of his home in the southeastern province of Mardin. Designated terrorist organizations like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) reportedly [planned](#) to carry out attacks on churches and synagogues during the year that Turkish police prevented. In August 2023, the nongovernmental organization Freedom of Belief Initiative (*İnanç Özgürlüğü Girişimi*) [found](#) that most religion-based hate crimes in the country targeted Alevis and Christians, including Armenian Apostolics, Armenian Catholics, and Syriac Orthodox. Members of some religious and ethnic minority communities who fled persecution in other countries to seek refuge in Turkey remained concerned that Turkish authorities could deport them.

The year also [saw](#) an alarming rise in antisemitism. In October, local Justice and Development Party (AKP) council member Süleyman Sezen [praised](#) Adolf Hitler and spoke of the day when “Jews are cleansed from the earth.” In the same month, progovernment media outlets [employed](#) antisemitic language, a bookshop in Istanbul [posted](#) a sign that said “Jews not allowed,” and an unidentified vandal [graffitied](#) the Etz Hayim Synagogue in Izmir. In December, President Erdoğan also [compared](#) Israel’s leadership and military campaign in Gaza to Hitler and the Nazis.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Turkey on the 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 Theological School of Halki (Halki Seminary) and for full compliance with European Court of Human Rights rulings on freedom of religion or belief; and
 - Track and comprehensively document in the U.S. Department of State’s International Religious Freedom Report religious communities’ efforts to open, regain, renovate, and protect places of worship and other religious sites of spiritual, cultural, or historical importance; include information on the vandalization, damage, and destruction of such sites; and work with the Turkish government to ensure their protection.
- 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, including in the context of proposed legislation.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Special Report:** [An Examination of Threats to Religious Sites in Turkey](#)
- **Event:** [Threats to Religious Sites in Turkey](#)

Background

The population of Turkey is [estimated](#) at approximately 83.5 million. The overwhelming majority—at slightly more than 99 percent—reportedly identifies as Muslim. Most Muslims in Turkey are Sunni and follow the Hanafi school of Islamic thought, but this figure includes Alevi, who number between 10 million and 25 million and constitute the country's largest religious minority. There is also a small population of Shi'a Muslims. The remaining 0.2 percent of the population 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 others.

The constitution [describes](#) the country as *laik*, or secular, and protects in theory the freedom of conscience, religious belief, and conviction. Nonetheless, the government plays an increasingly active role in overseeing various aspects of religious affairs through official bodies such as the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and the General Directorate of Foundations (*Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü*).

Government Promotion of Islam

In 2023, the Turkish government increasingly implemented policies that sought to privilege and promote its interpretation of Sunni Islam and to discourage attitudes or practices that it characterized as “perversions against moral values.” During the year, the Diyanet began to [move forward](#) with a cooperation protocol it had signed with the Ministry of National Education and the Ministry of Youth and Sports to allow Diyanet personnel to educate students on “values,” arrange meetings with parents, and organize religious events and activities. Another aspect of the project [appointed](#) imams to elementary and secondary schools to serve as “spiritual counselors,” which many parents, politicians, and others objected to as violating the constitution. In July, the European Parliament [expressed concern](#) with “the increasing weight of the Islamist agenda in law-making and in many spheres of the administration, including through an extension of the influence of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) in the education system.” In late November, the government indicated it would likely further increase the budget of the Diyanet for the following year by an estimated 151 percent.

Religious Sites

Throughout 2023, several religious communities encountered obstacles related to opening, regaining, and protecting their places of worship and other religious sites. Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses in many cases remained unable to secure official recognition for their churches and Kingdom Halls, respectively, as places of worship. This lack of status put religious communities that used unrecognized buildings for worship at risk of site closures or fines. In July, local authorities in the central Anatolian city of Konya closed a Kingdom Hall that had opened a few months earlier after receiving complaints from neighbors. Other religious communities continued to seek the return

of properties that the government had forcibly expropriated from them in preceding decades. Those efforts were often protracted, as even when the government recognized such properties were wrongly seized, it did not immediately return them. For instance, although the Constitutional Court [ruled](#) in January that the government had wrongly registered to the Ministry of Treasury and Finance multiple properties—including churches and cemeteries—belonging to two Armenian foundations, foundation representatives nonetheless had to pursue the return of those properties through other courts.

Some places of worship also received threats or experienced attacks throughout the year. In early November, a man [assaulted](#) the pastor of a Protestant church during a service in the city of Eskişehir. Later that month, two individuals [broke into](#) the same church, attacked the pastor and others with him, demanded to know whether those within the church were Jewish or Israeli, and threatened to “set them on fire” if they called the police.

In a positive development, President Erdoğan in October [inaugurated](#) the Mor Ephrem Syriac Orthodox Church in Istanbul, which is widely considered the first church to be officially constructed in the history of the Turkish Republic. The government also announced it would [repair](#) the St. George Greek Orthodox Church in Antakya after it was damaged by an earthquake.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Turkey consider each other close allies and partnered on a range of issues, including defense cooperation, Euro-Atlantic security, bilateral trade, and continued support for Ukraine. During the year, high-level representatives met for the [fourth](#) and [fifth](#) iterations of the U.S.-Türkiye Strategic Mechanism Dialogue to discuss—among other subjects—modernizing Turkey's F-16 fleet, advancing Finland and Sweden's applications to join the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO), and maintaining stability in the Mediterranean. U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken traveled to Turkey in [February](#) to express U.S. support for the country in the wake of devastating earthquakes and in [November](#) to discuss the situation in Israel following Hamas's October 7 terrorist attack. In FY 2023, the U.S. government obligated over \$93 million for [programs](#) in Turkey.

Over the course of the year, the U.S. Department of State generally did not publicly raise religious freedom or broader human rights concerns in Turkey. Although both the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom [Rashad Hussain](#) and the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism Ambassador [Deborah E. Lipstadt](#) met with President Erdoğan in September as part of a roundtable discussion, public reporting did not indicate whether either ambassador raised the Turkish government's religious freedom violations.

Congress closely followed developments in the U.S.-Turkey bilateral relationship and frequently raised regional geopolitical matters involving Turkey. As part of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedoms Project, Representative Jamie B. Raskin (D-MD) [advocated](#) on behalf of imprisoned opposition politician Selahattin Demirtaş.