

CYPRUS 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

The government of the Republic of Cyprus is the only internationally recognized government on the island, but since 1974 the northern third of Cyprus has been administered by Turkish Cypriots. This area proclaimed itself the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”) in 1983. The United States does not recognize the “TRNC,” nor does any country other than Turkey. A substantial number of Turkish troops remain on the island. A “green line,” or buffer zone (which is over 110 miles long and several miles wide in places) patrolled by the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), separates the two sides. This report is divided into two parts: the Republic of Cyprus and the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. For areas in the north that have different Greek and Turkish names, both are listed (e.g., Kormakitis/Korucam).

REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and protects the freedom to worship, teach, and practice one’s religion. It grants the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and recognizes the Vakf, an Islamic institution that manages sites of worship and property Muslims have donated, as a charitable endowment. Reuters and other press outlets reported that on September 15, the government dropped a disciplinary investigation launched in 2020 against art teacher and headmaster Yiorgos Gavriel after complaints about his work from the Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus and other figures. In a written complaint to the Ministry of Education, the Archbishop said that Gavriel’s depictions of Jesus were “obscene.” Gavriel painted Jesus as a soccer fan; on a motorcycle; naked; and interned in a refugee camp. Muslim community leaders stated the government continued to allow the community access for religious services at only six of the 19 mosques designated as cultural heritage sites, as well as to two other mosques not located on such sites. Of the eight functioning mosques, seven were available for all five daily prayers and six had the necessary bathroom and ablution facilities. Representatives of the Jewish community continued to report authorities performed autopsies on deceased members of the community for deaths that were not suspicious, a practice they said violated Jewish religious beliefs and practice. They stated that despite their continuing efforts to raise the issue with government authorities during the year, it remained unresolved. Two of the functioning mosques under the guardianship of the Ministry of Interior (MOI) continued to

lack bathroom and ablution facilities. The Department of Antiquities continued to limit regular access to the Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque to only two of the five daily prayers, although it routinely granted expanded access during Ramadan and at the request of the imam. The imam said the Department of Antiquities replaced the security guards after his complaint in 2020 that they allowed some non-Muslim tourists to enter the mosque without observing the dress code. Authorities continued to deny permission to perform animal slaughter for food production according to Jewish law. Authorities did not respond to a request pending since 2017 from the Chief Rabbinate of Cyprus to have the right to officiate marriage, death, and divorce certificates.

In March, unknown persons sprayed anti-Turkish graffiti, Greek flags, and crosses on the exterior wall of the Episkopi Mosque in Limassol District. The Orthodox Church of Cyprus called for the withdrawal of the country's entry into the annual Eurovision contest, a song entitled "El Diablo," charging the song made an international mockery of the country's moral foundations by advocating "our surrender to the devil and promoting his worship." Some religious minority groups continued to report societal pressure to engage in public Greek Orthodox religious ceremonies, such as weddings and christenings. Greek Orthodox Christians reported they sometimes faced ostracism from their community if they converted to another religion. Leaders of the main religious groups continued to meet under the framework of the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process (RTCYPP) and advocated for greater religious freedom for faith communities across the island. The RTCYPP, organized under the auspices of the Swedish embassy, is a peacebuilding initiative to encourage and facilitate religious leaders' dialogue and efforts for religious freedom, human rights, and bicomunal reconciliation.

U.S. embassy representatives continued to meet with government officials to discuss various issues, including access to religious sites on either side of the "green line" dividing the country. The Ambassador met with religious leaders to discuss religious freedom restrictions, access to religious sites, and interfaith cooperation. Embassy staff met with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious leaders to discuss topics including access to religious sites island-wide and discrimination against minority religious groups. Embassy officials also visited places of religious significance on both sides of the "green line" and encouraged continued dialogue and cooperation among religious leaders. Embassy staff interacted on several occasions with religious leaders in the country, focusing on religious freedom and encouraging interfaith dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population of the island at 1.3 million (midyear 2021). According to the 2011 census, the most recent, the population of the government-controlled area is 840,000. Of that total, 89.1 percent is Orthodox Christian and 2.9 percent is Roman Catholic, known locally as Latin. Other religious groups include Protestants (2 percent), Muslims (1.8 percent), Buddhists (1 percent), Maronite Catholics (0.5 percent), and Armenian Orthodox (0.3 percent), with small populations of Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Baha'is. The country's chief rabbi estimates the number of Jews at 4,500, most of whom are foreign-born residents. A Jehovah's Witnesses representative estimates the group has 2,600 members. Recent immigrants and migrant workers are predominantly Roman Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and protects the right of individuals to profess their faith and to worship, teach, and practice or observe their religion, individually or collectively, in private or in public, subject to limitations due to considerations of national security or public health, safety, order, and morals or the protection of civil liberties. The constitution specifies all religions whose doctrines or rites are not secret are free and equal before the law. It protects the right to change one's religion and prohibits the use of physical or moral compulsion to make a person change, or prevent a person from changing, his or her religion.

The constitution grants the Autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus (Church of Cyprus) the exclusive right to regulate and administer the Church's internal affairs and property in accordance with its canons and charter. By law, the Church of Cyprus pays taxes only on commercial activities.

The constitution sets guidelines for the Islamic Vakf, which is tax exempt and has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with its laws and principles. According to the constitution, no legislative, executive, or other act may contravene or interfere with the Church of Cyprus or the Vakf. The Vakf, which acts as caretaker of religious properties in the Turkish Cypriot community, operates only in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. The government administers and provides financial support for the physical maintenance of mosques in government-controlled areas.

In addition to the Church of Cyprus and Islam, the constitution recognizes three other religious groups: Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, and Latins (Latin Rite Roman Catholics). These groups' institutions are tax exempt and eligible for government subsidies for cultural and educational matters, including to cover costs to operate their own schools, for school fees of group members attending private schools, and for activities to preserve their cultural identity.

Religious groups not recognized in the constitution must register with the government as nonprofit organizations to engage in financial transactions and maintain bank accounts. To register, a religious group must submit, through an attorney, an application to the Registrar of Companies under the Ministry of Energy, Commerce, and Industry stating its purpose and providing the names of its directors. Religious groups registered as nonprofit organizations are treated the same as other nonprofit organizations. They are tax exempt, must provide annual reports to the government, and are not eligible for government subsidies.

The clergy of the Greek Orthodox, the Muslim, and the three Christian communities recognized by the constitution (Armenian, Maronite, and Latin) serve as automatically authorized marriage officers and may sign marriage certificates. Members of the clergy of other faiths must apply to the MOI for authorization to perform marriages. The list of authorized marriage officers is published in the Official Gazette. Divorce requires a court decision. A state doctor or pathologist, not a member of the clergy, signs any death certificates.

According to the law, the Armenian, Maronite, and Latin communities each have an elected representative to the parliament who has nonvoting observer status. Members of these communities also may run for one of the 56 seats that have voting rights in the body.

The government has formal processes by which religious groups may apply to use restored religious heritage sites for religious purposes.

According to a public school regulation, students are not permitted to cover their heads in school. The regulation explicitly states, however, that it should be implemented without discriminating against a student's religion, race, color, gender, or any political or other convictions of the student or the parents.

The law criminalizes incitement to hatred and violence based on race, color, religion, genealogical origin, national or ethnic origin, or sexual orientation. Such

acts are punishable by up to five years' imprisonment, a fine of up to 10,000 euros (\$11,300), or both.

The law requires stunning animals before slaughter. No religious exemptions are granted.

The government requires Greek Orthodox religious instruction and attendance at religious services before major Greek Orthodox religious holidays in public primary and secondary schools. The Ministry of Education (MOE) may excuse primary school students of other religious groups from attending religious services and instruction at the request of their guardians, but Greek Orthodox children in primary school may not opt out. The MOE may excuse secondary school students from religious instruction on grounds of religion or conscience and may excuse them from attending religious services on any grounds at the request of their guardians or at their own request if over the age of 16.

The Office of the Commissioner for Administration and Protection of Human Rights (ombudsman) is an independent state institution responsible for protecting citizens' rights and human rights in general. The ombudsman may investigate complaints made against any public service agency or official for actions that violate human rights, including freedom of religion, or contravene the laws or rules of proper administration. The ombudsman makes recommendations to correct wrongdoings but is unable to enforce them.

Conscientious objectors on religious grounds are exempt from active military duty and from reservist service in the National Guard but must complete alternative service. The two options available for conscientious objectors are unarmed military service, which is a maximum of four months longer than the normal 14-month service, or social service, which is a maximum of eight months longer than normal service but requires fewer hours of work per day. The penalty for refusing military or alternative service is up to three years' imprisonment, a fine of up to 6,000 euros (\$6,800), or both. Those who refuse both military and alternative service, even if objecting on religious grounds, are considered in violation of an offense involving dishonesty or moral turpitude, and are disqualified from holding elected public office, and ineligible for permits to provide private security services.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Reuters and other press outlets reported that on September 15, the government dropped a disciplinary investigation launched in 2020 against Nicosia public high school art teacher and headmaster Yiorgos Gavriel after complaints about his work from Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Cyprus Chrysostomos II and other religious and government figures. In a written complaint to the Ministry of Education, the Archbishop said Gavriel's depictions of Jesus were "offensive" and "obscene." Gavriel depicted Jesus in his paintings as a soccer fan; on a motorcycle; naked; and interned in a refugee camp. The government announced it was ending the investigation after a public outcry and expressions of support for Gavriel from members of parliament.

Although requests for access to churches, mosques, and monasteries declined due to government-imposed COVID-19 mitigation measures, religious leaders on both sides of the island said this issue remained a top priority. As of year's end, the MOI had not responded to a letter from Imam Alemdar, the representative of the Mufti of Cyprus, regarding the Department of Antiquities' August 2019 closure of the Limassol Great Mosque for restoration. The Department of Antiquities took the action without previously informing the Muslim community of the nature of, or timeline for, the restoration. The MOI reported in October that the Department of Public Works, in cooperation with the Department of Antiquities, was in the process of finalizing the designs for the restoration of the mosque and said it expected the restoration to be completed by 2024.

Muslim community leaders stated the government continued to allow the community access for religious services at only six of the 19 mosques located on cultural heritage sites as well as at two other mosques not located on such sites. Of the eight functioning mosques, seven were available for all five daily prayers and six had the necessary facilities for ablutions. The government again failed to respond to the Muslim community's longstanding request for permission to make improvements at the functioning mosques, and there was no change from previous years in either the number of open mosques or the number of ablution and bathroom facilities available at those mosques. The Bayraktar and Dhali Mosques had no ablution facilities and no bathrooms.

According to Alemdar, the functioning mosque in Paphos was too small for the size of the Muslim congregation, holding approximately 100 worshippers, compared with an estimated Muslim population of approximately 5,000 in the area. He said the Department of Antiquities did not approve his request to allow the use of the recently restored Grand Mosque of Paphos. In 2019, the MOI said installing

facilities at Dhali Mosque was difficult due to limited space near the mosque but that it planned to identify a suitable location and develop new plans.

The MOI reported in December that the only available space for the construction of the facilities at Dhali Mosque was behind the uninhabited house intended for the mosque's imam. MOI inspectors reportedly found the house structurally unsafe and decided to not proceed with construction because use of the facilities would require passage through the house. The MOI was preparing a study for the stabilization of the house at year's end.

In 2020, the Department of Antiquities and Imam Alemdar agreed on plans for the installation of bathrooms and ablution facilities at the Bayraktar Mosque. Alemdar reported the Department of Antiquities informed him the plans had been submitted in 2020 to the MOI to initiate the project. Construction, however, had not begun by year's end.

Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque, the most historically important Islamic religious site in the country because of its ties to a companion of the Prophet Muhammed, continued to be the only one of the eight functioning mosques not regularly open for all five daily prayers. The Department of Antiquities classified the mosque as an "ancient monument" and continued to keep it open only for standard museum hours, limiting access to the mosque to two of the five daily prayer times during most of the year. The imam reported the mosque remained open 24 hours daily only during Ramadan. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, only a few persons attended communal prayers. Ramadan services were recorded and uploaded on YouTube. According to the Department of Antiquities and the mosque's imam, the imam still had to obtain permission from the MOI and Department of Antiquities to keep the mosque open after 5 p.m. in the autumn and winter months and after 7:30 p.m. in the spring and summer months. According to local observers, the imam said the authorities routinely granted permission.

The imam of Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque reported to local observers that the Department of Antiquities replaced the security guards stationed at the complex following his complaint that guards sometimes did not require visitors to wear appropriate clothing when entering the mosque. The new guards enforced the dress code.

In August, the *Cyprus Mail* reported a group of individuals gathered outside the Nicosia district court in support of Metropolitan of Morphou Neophytos, whom authorities had charged with "prompting people to attend an illegal gathering."

The bishop was present to defend himself for violating coronavirus decrees and for holding a church service on Epiphany during the government-mandated lockdown. His lawyer said Neophytos was not allowed into the courtroom, which the lawyer said was in defiance of articles of the constitution specifying the right to be present. His hearing resumed on September 24. The court did not allow Neophytos to enter the courtroom because he refused to wear a mask, a requirement per government regulations, and he was therefore represented by his lawyer. On October 4, Neophytos, arguing that his constitutional right to be present had been violated, appealed to the Supreme Court to declare the hearing null and void. The appeal was pending before the Supreme Court at year's end.

In previous years, the government waived visa requirements for the movement of non-Turkish Cypriot pilgrims crossing the "green line" into the south to visit the Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque to conduct prayers and services on special occasions. The United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) facilitated these movements. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, no such requests were submitted during the year.

Representatives of the Jewish community continued to report that authorities performed autopsies on deceased members of the community for deaths that were not suspicious, a practice they said violated Jewish religious beliefs and practice. Representatives stated that despite continuing efforts to raise the issue with government authorities during the year, it remained unresolved. According to the law, the state pathologist determines which deaths require autopsies.

Jewish representatives again reported that Department of Veterinary Services officials denied exemptions from the requirement to stun animals before slaughter following a 2019 department decision to no longer grant exemptions for religious slaughter. The Jewish community reported it was able to import kosher meat from other European Union (EU) countries at a significantly higher cost than if it were locally available.

In April 2020, the Council of Ministers submitted to the House of Representatives a bill allowing kosher and halal slaughter of animals, i.e., without stunning. The government withdrew the bill the same month following strong reactions by animal rights activists. The leadership of the Jewish community reported sending letters on the issue to all members of the House of Representatives, the president of the Agriculture Committee, and the president of the Chamber of Commerce. In December 2020, the EU Court of Justice ruled EU member states may impose a

requirement to stun animals prior to slaughter and that such a requirement did not infringe on the rights of religious groups.

Jewish representatives again said the government continued not to respond to their longstanding request to grant the Chief Rabbinate of Cyprus the right to sign official documents, including marriage, death, and divorce certificates, as an authorized party.

A Jehovah's Witnesses representative said that some local government authorities still did not allow Jehovah's Witnesses to bury their adherents in some municipal cemeteries, which were often managed by local Greek Orthodox churches. The MOI did not respond to a request submitted in 2019 for assistance with the municipalities.

Imam Alemdar said the Larnaca Turkish cemetery was completely full and new land for Islamic burials was required. In February 2020, he sent a letter to the MOI requesting that a Vakf property near Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque be made available as a cemetery. According to local observers, the representative of the mufti said an MOI official denied the request that same month, saying there was space for burials in the existing cemetery.

The military continued to require recruits to take part in a common prayer led by Church of Cyprus clergy during swearing-in ceremonies. Recruits of other faiths, atheists, and those who did not wish to take the oath for reasons of conscience could refrain from raising their hand during the ceremony. They instead recited a pledge of allegiance at a separate gathering.

Pope Francis made an official visit December 2-4 and President Nicos Anastasiades hosted a reception in his honor that included senior government officials, civil society, and members of the diplomatic corps. The President and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Annita Demetriou, participated in an open-air Mass led by the Pope at a Nicosia sports stadium that was reportedly attended by 10,000 people.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity often overlap, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

Media reported a group of Greek Orthodox people staged a protest outside the stadium holding Greek flags and banners saying, “The Pope is persona non grata,” “Pope out of Cyprus,” and “Cyprus is Orthodox.” At a separate event, Pope Francis led a prayer at the Catholic Church of Holy Cross in Nicosia with dozens of migrants and asylum seekers in attendance. The entire visit appeared live on national television. Press coverage was widespread and predominantly positive.

Vandals spray painted Greek nationalist graffiti consisting of Greek flags, crosses, nationalist slogans, and threats on the Episkopi Mosque in Limassol on March 25, the 200th anniversary of the Greek uprising against the Ottoman Empire. The building, originally a Byzantine church dating to the sixteenth century, later became a mosque during the Ottoman period. The graffiti included letters and symbols meaning “Jesus Christ Conquers.” On the same day, government spokesperson Kyriakos Koushos issued a written statement saying the Republic of Cyprus “strongly and unreservedly condemns the actions of some brainless people who under the pretext of so-called patriotism, insult religious sites and the meaning and ideals of patriotism.” The Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus did not issue a public condemnation or comment. “TRNC President” Ersin Tatar, the “MFA,” and the “Prime Minister’s” office separately released statements condemning the attack. Tatar stated, “With only days to go prior to the 5+1 UN informal meeting to be held in Geneva, Switzerland, Greek Cypriot provocations have once again intensified.” Chairman of the Turkish Cypriot People’s Party (HP) Kudret Ozersay also called the incident a provocation, adding, “If the same place is attacked twice, sometimes three times in a row, it is because the Greek Cypriot political leadership does not identify and punish those responsible.”

The Episkopi community council immediately cleaned the wall and the community chairman publicly condemned the incident. The police said they examined footage from closed-circuit television and searched the residence and the car of a suspect looking for evidence linking him to attack. The Supreme Court denied a request by the suspect to invalidate a search warrant. However, the police investigation did not identify the individuals responsible. Human rights defenders and representatives of the Muslim community stated on social media they did not believe there would be a serious investigation and named the lack of law enforcement action for previous incidents as the primary reason for repeated acts of mosque vandalization in the country. Episkopi mayor Lefkios Prodromou told *Politis Radio* this was the third time that such a “reprehensible” incident had occurred at the mosque. Speaking to the newspaper *Phileleftheros* on March 26, Prodromou said he asked the local police chief to provide a visible police presence at the mosque on April 1 to prevent a repeat attack on Greek Cypriot National Day.

Imam Alemdar said the incident marked a “worrying and growing trend” of hate speech in the country. He added that authorities never fully investigated or prosecuted previous culprits and that security concerns would persist for mosques throughout the country until those responsible for such acts were held accountable.

The Orthodox Church of Cyprus called for the withdrawal of the country’s entry into the annual Eurovision contest, a song entitled “El Diablo,” charging the song made an international mockery of the country’s moral foundations by advocating “our surrender to the devil and promoting his worship.” The Holy Synod, the Church’s highest decision-making body, said in a statement the song “essentially praises the fatalistic submission of humans to the devil’s authority” and urged the state broadcaster to replace it with one that expressed the country’s history, culture, and traditions. The Church’s statement came a few days after authorities charged a man with uttering threats and causing a disturbance when he entered the grounds of the public broadcaster and condemned the song as blasphemous and an affront to Christianity.

Representatives of the Jewish community reported an increase in instances of antisemitic verbal harassment in public places, threats on social media and against Jewish students at schools, vandalism of menorahs and Israeli flags, and antisemitic and pro-Nazi graffiti outside schools attended by Jewish students. They reported a physical attack against a 15-year-old Jewish student in Limassol by a group of Palestinian students. Individuals who were attacked in public places wore kippahs or tzitzit. Some of the incidents were reported to the police. Authorities reported no arrests, according to Jewish community representatives.

The Catholic NGO Caritas reported that discrimination against Muslim children in schools declined compared with previous years and stated increased diversity awareness and language training during the year contributed.

The NGOs Caritas and Action for Equality, Support, Antiracism (KISA) said women wearing the hijab often faced difficulties finding employment. According to Caritas, in October 2019, a Somali woman filed a complaint with the ombudsman based on a hotel’s refusal to employ her because she was wearing a hijab. Her case remained under review at year’s end.

Members of minority religious groups continued to report societal pressures to participate in the public religious ceremonies of majority groups. For example, children of various religious minorities said they faced social pressure to attend Greek Orthodox religious ceremonies at school. Armenian Orthodox

representatives continued to say community members who married Greek Orthodox individuals received pressure from their spouse's family members to have a Greek Orthodox wedding and follow Greek Orthodox rituals. Similarly, Armenian Orthodox army recruits reportedly continued to feel peer pressure to take the oath administered by a Greek Orthodox priest.

Some Greek Orthodox adherents who converted to other faiths reportedly continued to hide their conversion from family and friends due to fear of social ostracism.

In June, the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage (TCCH), one of the bicomunal (Greek- and Turkish-Cypriot) technical committees established as part of the UN-facilitated settlement negotiations process, finished the conservation of two Muslim cemeteries in Mandria/Yeşilova and in Kalo Khorio/Vuda. In March, the TCCH launched tender processes for the restoration of mosques in the villages of Orounda, Maroni, Kalo Khorio/Vuda, Lefkara, Alektora, Avdimou/Evdim, and Tera. In February, the TCCH launched conservation works at Zouhour Mosque in Larnaca.

The leaders of the main religious groups on the island continued to meet regularly, in-person and online, within the framework of the RTCYPP. On June 7, Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Armenian, Maronite, and Roman Catholic leaders met in person for the first time since June 2020 to demonstrate what they said was their commitment to standing together for religious freedom and to advocating for others' religious rights.

On May 2, the Mufti of Cyprus, on the RTCYPP website and on his Facebook and Twitter accounts, extended Easter greetings to the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus and all Christians celebrating Easter. On May 12, Christian religious leaders similarly issued a joint greeting to the Mufti of Cyprus and all Muslim faithful, wishing them a blessed Eid al-Fitr on the RTCYPP website and social media accounts. The RTCYPP organizes regular meetings of religious leaders and facilitates interreligious communication and cooperation, and maintains an office in the buffer zone in Nicosia.

The RTCYPP continued its joint project of offering religious leaders Greek and Turkish language classes for priests, imams, nuns, and laypersons in the Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Armenian Orthodox, Maronite, and Roman Catholic communities who worked for faith-based organizations. Classes continued online when in-person gatherings were not possible due to COVID-19-related restrictions.

In June, the RTCYPP expanded its Greek language classes to include 20 new students from the Muftiate of Cyprus, 10 women and 10 men, including imams and teachers of religious education.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives met with government officials from the Ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Justice to discuss religious freedom issues, including encouraging greater access to religious sites on either side of the “green line” and reducing discrimination against minority religious communities.

The Ambassador met with numerous religious leaders, including the Archbishop of the Maronite Church of Cyprus and several Orthodox Church of Cyprus metropolitan bishops. These discussions included interfaith cooperation, changes to the restrictions on access to religious sites on either side of the island, concerns expressed by members of religious minorities about their ability to exercise their right to religious freedom, and discrimination for religious reasons by state institutions or society. In February, the Ambassador met with the executive director of the RTCYPP to coordinate action in support of religious freedom.

On July 27, the Ambassador visited Koprulu Mosque in Limassol, which was vandalized in 2020, and discussed religious freedom issues with the mosque’s imam. In March, following the defacement of the Episkopi Mosque, the Ambassador tweeted, “The U.S. Embassy strongly condemns the vandalism on the Episkopi Mosque. Freedom of worship is a fundamental value, and we echo the condemnation from religious leaders and the Government of the Republic of Cyprus.”

Embassy staff continued to discuss religious freedom issues, including religious-based discrimination, with Caritas, the Cyprus Refugee Council, and KISA. They used social media to promote religious freedom and to engage representatives of the Armenian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah’s Witness, Jewish, Maronite, Muslim, and Roman Catholic communities on their concerns about access to, and the condition of, religious sites and cemeteries, incidents of religious-based harassment and discrimination, societal attitudes toward minority religious groups, and obstacles to religious freedom.

Embassy staff visited Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque and discussed the mosque’s limited hours of operation and the condition of the Larnaca Turkish Cemetery with the resident imam. Embassy officials supported religious leaders’ continuing

dialogue within the RTCYPP and encouraged continuing reciprocal visits of religious leaders to places of worship on both sides of the “green line.” Embassy staff interacted regularly with religious leaders in country, focusing on religious freedom and encouraging interfaith dialogue.

THE AREA ADMINISTERED BY TURKISH CYPRIOTS

Executive Summary

The Turkish Cypriot “constitution” refers to the “state” as secular and provides for freedom of religious faith and worship consistent with public order and morals. It prohibits forced participation in worship and religious services and stipulates religious education may be conducted only under “state” supervision. Although the “constitution” grants the Vakf the right to regulate its internal affairs, it is subordinate to the “Prime Minister’s” office and not an independent organization. Turkish Cypriot authorities continued to grant access to Greek Orthodox religious sites, although visits declined due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The “Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)” said during the year it approved 37 of 66 requests to hold religious services between July-October 2021, compared with 26 of 33 requests in 2020. The “MFA” said, “18 could not be facilitated as they fell outside the pre-determined criteria.” Turkish-Speaking Protestant Associations (TSPA) representatives continued to report police surveillance of their activities, although the surveillance was somewhat reduced, primarily due to a reduction in church activities as a result of the pandemic. According to Greek Orthodox representatives, police monitored their church services. They reported plainclothes police officers present during services checked priests’ identification and monitored the congregation.

The TSPA said Turkish Cypriots who converted to other faiths often experienced abuse, insult, criticism in society, and workplace discrimination. The TCCH reported completing conservation and structural support to five churches and the walls of Nicosia’s historic city center. Mufti of Cyprus Talip Atalay and Church of Cyprus Archbishop Chrysostomos II and their representatives continued to meet throughout the year until Atalay was removed from his position in July. During a July weekend days before Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s visit to the area administered by Turkish Cypriots, then “TRNC Prime Minister” Ersan Saner named Ahmet Unsal to succeed Atalay as the Mufti of Cyprus.

The Ambassador and embassy officials continued engagement with the office of the Mufti of Cyprus, who was also head of the “Religious Affairs Department,” to

discuss cooperation among religious leaders and access to religious sites. Embassy officials met with representatives of the “MFA” and the Vakf to discuss unrestricted access to religious sites. Embassy officials continued to meet with leaders from the Sunni and Alevi Muslim, Armenian and Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Roman Catholic, and Protestant communities to discuss access to religious sites and instances of religious-based discrimination.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to a statement from the “Statistics Council,” as of August 2021, the population of the area administered by Turkish Cypriots is 382,836. The census contains no data on religious affiliation. Sociologists estimate as much as 97 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. The Alevi Culture Association estimates approximately 10,000 immigrants of Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab origin and their descendants are Alevi Muslims. The TSPA estimates there are 1,000 Turkish-speaking Protestants. The government of the Republic of Cyprus estimates 290 members of the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus and 48 Maronite Catholics reside in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. According to sociologists, other groups include the Russian Orthodox, Anglican, Baha’i, Jewish, and Jehovah’s Witness communities. According to “Ministry of Education (MOE)” statistics for the 2020-21 academic year, there were approximately 94,381 foreign students enrolled at universities in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. Of these, 60 percent were Muslim Turks and the rest were predominantly Christians and Muslims from more than 140 countries.

Section II. Status of “Government” Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The Turkish Cypriot “constitution” states the territory is a “secular republic” and provides for freedom of conscience and religious faith and unrestricted worship and religious ceremonies, provided they do not contravene public order or morals. It prohibits forced prayer, forced attendance at religious services, insulting others’ religious beliefs, and compelling individuals to disclose their religious beliefs. It stipulates religious education requires “state” approval and may only be conducted under “state” supervision, but the “law” allows summer religious knowledge courses to be taught in mosques without “MOE” approval. The “law” does not recognize exclusively any specific religion, and individuals cannot “exploit or abuse” religion to establish, even partially, a “state” based on religious precepts or for political or personal gain.

According to the “constitution,” the Vakf has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with Vakf laws and principles. Although the “constitution” states the Vakf shall be exempt from all taxation, its commercial operations are subject to applicable taxes. The “constitution” does not explicitly recognize religious groups other than the Vakf. According to the “constitution,” Turkish Cypriot authorities shall help the Vakf in the execution of Islamic religious services and in meeting the expenses of such services. No other religious organization is tax-exempt or receives subsidies from Turkish Cypriot authorities.

The 1975 Vienna III Agreement covers the treatment of Greek Cypriots and Maronite Catholics living in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and the treatment of Turkish Cypriots living in the government-controlled area. Among other provisions, the agreement provides for facilities for religious worship for Greek Cypriots. The agreement states they are free to stay and “will be given every help to lead a normal life, including facilities for education and for the practice of their religion.”

Turkish Cypriot “regulations” stipulate Greek Orthodox residents may conduct liturgies led by two priests designated by the Orthodox Church at three designated functional churches on the Karpas Peninsula with advance notification or permission: Agia Triada Church in Agia Triada/Sipahi, Agia Triada Church in Rizokarpaso/Dipkarpaz, and Agios Synesios Church in Rizokarpaso/Dipkarpaz. According to the “MFA,” Maronite Catholic residents may hold liturgies or masses led by Maronite-designated clergy without seeking permission at three designated functional Maronite churches: Agios Georgios Church in Kormakitis/Korucam, Timios Stavros Church in Karpasia/Karpasa, and Panagia Church in Kamyli/Hisarkoy.

Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox worshippers must submit applications to authorities for permission to hold religious services at churches or monasteries other than the six designated churches, including at restored religious heritage sites. Although the “MFA” reported 78 churches open for religious services in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots, these churches were only available for religious services upon “government” approval. The “MFA” continued to evaluate requests for religious services based on certain criteria.

For authorities to consider an application, the day of the requested service must be a religious day (Christmas, Easter, the church's name day – sometimes referred to as its feast day) and should be of significance to that religious group. The church or monastery must be structurally sound and not be located in a military zone, with exceptions for some Maronite churches. It must not have a dual use, for example, as a museum, and there should be no complaints from local Turkish Cypriot residents, and police must be available to provide security.

Permission is also necessary for priests other than those who were officially pre-designated to conduct services. Specific permission is required for individuals who do not reside in the Turkish Cypriot-administered area, including members of the Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox Churches, to participate. UNFICYP coordinates these applications, which religious groups must submit 10 days before the date of the requested service.

The “government”-appointed Mufti of Cyprus heads the “Religious Affairs Department” in the “Prime Minister’s Office,” which represents Islam in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and functions as a civil authority. Whereas the Vakf manages Muslim-donated property as an endowment for charitable purposes, the “Religious Affairs Department” oversees how imams conduct prayers and deliver Friday sermons in mosques.

Under the section “Offenses Against Religion” in the “TRNC Criminal Code,” any person who, with the intention of insulting the religion of any person, or knowing that any destruction, harm or defilement of any person will be an insult to their religion, destroys, damages or pollutes a place of worship or any property considered sacred by a certain group people, commits a minor offense.

Religious groups are not required to register with authorities as associations to assemble or worship, but only associations registered with the “Ministry of Interior (MOI)” have the right to engage in commercial activity and maintain bank accounts. Religious and nonreligious groups have the same registration process, and they are required to submit the founders’ names and photocopies of their identification cards to the “MOI” along with a copy of the association’s rules and regulations. Associations do not receive tax-exempt status or any “government” benefits or subsidies. Religious groups are not permitted to register as associations if the stated purpose of the association is to provide religious education to its members.

There is mandatory religious instruction in grades four through eight in all schools, public and private. These classes focus primarily on Sunni Islam but also include sessions on comparative religion. The “MOE” chooses the curriculum, which is based on a textbook commissioned by the Ministry of Education in Turkey. Students may opt out of mandatory religion courses in grades six through eight. At the high school level, religion classes are optional.

There are no provisions or “laws” allowing conscientious objection to mandatory military service, which requires a 12- to 15-month initial service period and one-day annual reserve duty. The penalty for refusing to complete mandatory military service is up to three years’ imprisonment, a fine of up to 10,800 Turkish lira (\$830), or both.

“Government” Practices

The “MFA” reported that despite the rule to submit religious service applications at least 10 days in advance for religious services, it granted three that were requested seven days in advance of the service. The UNFICYP office responsible for facilitating these requests said Greek Cypriot religious service applicants often complained “MFA” approvals were granted a few days before the requested service, causing organizers to cancel.

According to statistics reported by the “MFA,” authorities continued to grant access to Greek Orthodox places of worship. UNFICYP reported the “MFA” approved 21 of 38 requests it received to facilitate religious services at churches in the northern part of the island between August and December. In 2020, UNFICYP reported 15 approvals of 18 requests. The “MFA” reported it approved 37 of 66 total requests (including both UNFICYP-facilitated requests and requests submitted directly to the “MFA”) to hold religious services, compared with 26 of 31 total requests in 2020. The “MFA” also reported 18 requests were denied because they could not be facilitated, as they fell outside the predetermined criteria.

Three Greek Orthodox churches, Apostolos Andreas, St. Barnabas, and St. Mamas, were again open for individual prayers throughout the year, but Turkish Cypriot authorities continued to require advance notification for religious services. While St. Mamas and St. Barnabas Churches functioned as museums and were only open during working hours, individuals could still pray at the churches during those hours. The “MFA” reported that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, no additional Greek Orthodox churches were reopened for services for the first time since 1974.

According to a church representative and media reports, on January 27, authorities raided the home and business of an expatriate American pastor living in the “TRNC,” seizing Bibles and Christian literature in various languages. Police said the pastor’s business, including a cafe, operated without a license. *Kibris Postasi*, a daily newspaper, published an article linking him to another American pastor who had been imprisoned in Turkey for two years on charges of espionage. After detaining him for 11 hours, the “government” released the pastor on a 160,000 Turkish lira (\$12,300) bond and confiscated his passport. They charged him in March with illegally importing Christian materials. Authorities assessed a fine against the pastor of 5,000 Turkish lira (\$390). He was required to apply for court permission to travel. At year’s end, he awaited trial.

The TSPA reported police continued to monitor its activities, asking specific questions about TSPA members and ceremonies. The TSPA said there was less monitoring during the year due to a reduction in church activities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

A Greek Orthodox representative stated 72 religious sites remained inaccessible due to their being located within Turkish military zones or the buffer zone.

A Maronite community representative said the Turkish military continued to restrict access to the Church of Archangelos Michael in the village of Asomatos/Ozhan. Maronite representatives continued to report being required to submit by the preceding Tuesday a list of persons planning to attend Sunday services. The “MFA” said this was because the Church of Archangelos Michael is located within a military zone. The “MFA” said it required only advance notification, not a request for access, to hold Sunday services and that no one was refused admittance during the year. According to the “MFA,” the Turkish military again allowed Maronites to celebrate Mass in Ayia Marina in July and denied Maronites access to the Church of Marki near Kormakitis/Korucam. The “MFA” reported that the physical and structural condition of the Church of Marki was not safe to hold a religious service and that the church was located in a military zone.

As a result of a UN Development Program- and TCCH-facilitated tender, restoration and maintenance work began at the Armenian Sourp Magar Monastery during the year. Although completion had been expected during the year, technical problems that emerged between the contractor and the UNDP cancelled the project.

The TCCH reported that during the year it completed 16 projects, including the restoration of two archeological sites, two cemeteries, two fountains, and 10 conservation and support projects at various religious sites.

In March, the TCCH announced completion of conservation efforts at the Afendrika archaeological site in Karpaz. The site, situated in the ancient settlement known as Urania, includes Panagia Church, Asomatos Church and Agios Georgios Church. The committee carried out conservation work at these sites with technical support from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and EU financing. As part of the conservation work, the committee cleared the site of shrubbery, strengthened the structures, and opened water drainage for improved rainwater management. In June, the TCCH announced the completion of conservation work on Panagia Church and its perimeter wall.

During the year, the TCCH also announced the completion of conservation work at Agios Artemon Church in Afentaia/Gaziköy; Panagia Church and its perimeter wall in Askeia/Pasakoy; and the St. Epiphanos, Kampanopetra, and St. Barnabas basilicas at the Salamis archeological site.

In July, the TCCH announced a contract had been signed for conservation work at the church of Agios Synesios in Karpaz and that mobilization of the construction site had begun. The conservation work is expected to last nine months and be completed in the first quarter of 2022.

The TCCH also continued restoring other religious sites. It and the UNDP Partnership for the Future also continued restoration work on the Greek Orthodox Apostolos Andreas Monastery on the Karpas Peninsula, a popular destination for pilgrims. The TCCH reported preparations for initiating the tendering process for the second phase of the restoration.

According to local press reports, the Turkish government provided significant support to Sunni Islamic activities in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. Such programs supplied iPads and bicycles as rewards to youth for participating in Islamic activities and funded community programs and iftars during Ramadan. According to press reports and the Turkish Cypriot Human Rights Foundation, the Turkish “embassy” distributed 5,000 bicycles to children for attending online religious courses and praying twice a day at a mosque. The program brochure, a photo of which was published in *Yeniduzen*, reportedly said, “Come to the mosque, get your bicycle.” Human rights activists called the program an “imposition of religion” and a “manipulation of children.”

Secular Turkish Cypriot groups and teachers unions continued to criticize a protocol with Turkey announced by the “MOE” in 2019 that opened a Turkish Anatolia Religious High School program within the premises of Hala Sultan Religious High School, a public school. They said the protocol imposed Islam on secular Turkish Cypriots. The Secondary Education Teachers Union reported the administration of the Hala Sultan Religious High School and the “MOE” enrolled 200 students in the school without the usually required entrance exams.

The Alevi Culture Association reported Alevi children were subject to mandatory Sunni Islam religious instruction at school and could not opt out.

The “Religious Affairs Department” continued to appoint and fund all 225 imams at the 210 Sunni mosques in the northern part of the island. “TRNC Prime Minister” Saner informed Mufti of Cyprus Atalay July 17 that he would be replaced as “Head of Religious Affairs” and Mufti of Cyprus effective immediately. While Atalay had exceeded the official but previously unenforced limit of 10 years in office (two five-year terms), local media commentators and other sources said they were surprised by the abrupt timing. Since it came immediately before Kurban Bayram (Eid al-Adha) and the July visit by Turkish President Erdogan, many observers assessed the change was politically motivated. Then “TRNC Prime Minister” Saner named Ahmet Unsal to succeed Atalay as Cyprus’s Mufti.

A representative of the Church of Cyprus again stated that some religious sites to which Church officials had little or no access were deteriorating.

Greek Orthodox religious groups continued to report authorities placed religious items, including icons, in storage rooms or displayed them in museums, against the wishes of the communities to whom they were sacred.

According to Greek Orthodox representatives, police monitored their church services. They reported plainclothes police officers were present during services, checking priests’ identification and monitoring the congregation.

In March, the Kurdish community living in the area administrated by Turkish Cypriots, together with leftist unions and left-wing political parties, including the main opposition Republican Turkish Party and “MPs,” gathered at the Kyrenia Gate in north Nicosia to celebrate Nowruz (the arrival of spring and new year in Kurdish culture). Press reported participation was low due to the COVID-19

pandemic, but there was a “very heavy police presence” at the event. Kurds lit a Nowruz fire and gathered around it singing songs. There were no incidents at the event.

On April 15, the Turkish Cypriot “Constitutional Court” ruled Quran lessons organized by the “Department of Religious Affairs” at mosques were unconstitutional, overturning legislation that gave authority to the “Department” to organize such courses. According to the decision, the “Department’s” organizing Quran courses without the approval of the “Ministry of Education” had violated the “constitutional” provision on secularism of the “state.” Head of the Turkish Cypriot Bar Association Hasan Esendagli said the court’s decision was a turning point and that it was the first time the “Constitutional Court” examined whether a law regarding religious belief and practice was permitted under the country’s secular constitution. He said the overturned “law” had been problematic, since it granted limitless powers to the “Department,” which is comprised of a group of religious figures. Turkish President Erdogan (along with other Turkish officials including the Vice President) criticized the decision, saying, “It is impossible for us to accept this. The head of the Constitutional Court should learn secularism.” Making a call to the head of the Constitutional Court to correct the mistake, Erdogan said, “North Cyprus is not France. They have to adopt the practices in Turkey. ...otherwise, the steps we will take will be different.”

On April 19, Turkish Cypriot lawyers staged a demonstration to protest Erdogan’s remarks. Speaking at the protest, Esendagli said Turkish officials, including the Turkish President himself, had either spoken without knowing the details of the verdict or had deliberately distorted the facts. Chief Justice Narin Ferdi Sefik and several other Supreme Court judges supported the protest, saluting the lawyers from the court building.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity often overlap, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

A video posted April 7 on YouTube showed an electronic music event recorded on March 20 on the grounds of the Saint Magar Armenian Monastery, the only Armenian monastery in Cyprus. According to the RTCYPP, the video stirred negative reaction online among the Armenian community and news outlets. In a RTCYPP-released joint statement, the five constitutionally recognized religious

leaders of Cyprus condemned what they termed the monastery's misuse and called for protection of all places of worship against vandalism, misuse, and desecration.

The TSPA continued to report societal discrimination, including verbal harassment, toward Protestants. The TSPA again said Turkish Cypriots who converted to other faiths, particularly Christianity, faced societal criticism and feared losing their jobs. The TSPA continued to report many members preferred to remain silent about their faiths and beliefs. The TSPA also reported police continued to closely monitor its activities and occasionally visited representatives to inquire about church activities and attendance levels.

During the year, there were few pilgrimages and meetings across the "green line" due to pandemic mitigation measures.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The embassy promoted religious freedom on social media and met with representatives of the "MFA" and the Vakf to discuss unrestricted access to religious sites. Embassy officials continued to meet with leaders from the Sunni and Alevi Muslim, Armenian and Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Roman Catholic, and Protestant communities to discuss access to religious sites and instances of religious-based discrimination.

Embassy officials continued to engage with the office of the Mufti of Cyprus, who also heads the "Religious Affairs Department," to discuss cooperation among religious leaders and access to religious sites.

The Ambassador hosted an iftar on May 10 for Mufti of Cyprus Talip Atalay and other prominent members of the Turkish Cypriot community, which highlighted the U.S. commitment to advancing freedom of religion and interfaith dialogue and reinforced the Secretary of State's April 12 message that the United States is committed to strong relationships with Muslim communities around the world.

The Ambassador met the Head of Religious Affairs and Mufti of Cyprus, Ahmet Unsal, on October 19 to reiterate U.S. support for religious freedom, encourage Unsal's participation in the religious leaders' dialogue, and stress the importance of interfaith cooperation for the Cyprus peace process and building trust between the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities.

Following the posting to YouTube in April of the “techno party” at the Saint Magar Armenian Orthodox Monastery, the Ambassador stated publicly her deep dismay about the incident and expressed support for religious leaders’ call that all places of worship across Cyprus be protected. She issued a statement that the embassy “strongly condemns the misuse” of the monastery, and “Freedom of worship is a fundamental value, and we echo the call from religious leaders that all places of worship, in use or not, be protected against misuse, vandalism, and desecration.”

All references to place names within this report are for reference purposes only and are meant to convey meaning. They should not be interpreted as implying or indicating any political recognition or change in longstanding U.S. policy.