

CYPRUS 2022 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 Türkiye (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 some areas) 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.

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.

The government allowed visitors access to 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 seven had the necessary 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. On May 13, the government lifted restrictions imposed due to COVID-19 on the number of persons allowed to attend religious services. 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 at year’s end. Authorities continued to deny permission

to perform animal slaughter for food production according to Jewish law. Authorities had yet to respond to a request pending since 2017, and renewed in August, from the Chief Rabbinate of Cyprus to authorize the rabbinate to sign marriage, death, and divorce certificates.

In February, the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage (TCCH), one of the bicommunal (Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot) technical committees established as part of the UN-facilitated settlement negotiations process, finished the conservation of Zuhuri Mosque in Larnaca. In August, the TCCH completed the restoration of Orounda Mosque in Nicosia District. In September, the Department of Antiquities began the long-awaited restoration of the Limassol Grand Mosque after the government unexpectedly closed the mosque in 2019. According to media reports, the Government of Qatar donated €1.2 million (\$1.28 million) for the restoration of Limassol Grand Mosque.

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 greater religious freedom for faith communities across the island. The RTCYPP, organized under the auspices of the Swedish embassy in Nicosia, is a peacebuilding initiative to encourage and facilitate religious leaders' dialogue and promote efforts for religious freedom, human rights, and bicommunal reconciliation.

U.S. embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, continued to meet with government officials to discuss issues such as access to religious sites on both sides of the "Green Line." During the year, the Ambassador met with religious leaders to discuss religious freedom restrictions, access to religious sites, and interfaith cooperation. In a meeting with the Chief Rabbi of Cyprus at the Jewish Community Center in Larnaca, the Ambassador discussed government policies that the Jewish community believes infringe or restrict Jewish religious practices. In a meeting with the Minister of Agriculture, Environment, and Rural Development, an embassy representative asked the government to reconsider the blanket prohibition of kosher animal slaughter. Embassy staff met with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious leaders to discuss 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 engaged on numerous 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 2022). According to the 2021 census, the most recent, the population of the government-controlled area is 918,100. Based on statistics from the 2011 census of the government-controlled area, the most recent available, 89.1 percent of the total 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 6,000, most of whom are foreign-born residents. A Jehovah’s Witnesses representative estimates the group has 2,600 members. Recent immigrants 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, their religion.

The constitution grants the 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 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 five religious communities (recognized by the constitution) have the authority to perform marriage ceremonies and may sign marriage certificates. Members of the clergy of other faiths must apply to the Ministry of Interior (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 physician or pathologist, not a member of the clergy, signs death certificates.

According to the law, the Armenian, Maronite, and Latin communities each have an elected representative to parliament who has nonvoting observer status. Members of these communities also may run for any 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 public school regulations, students are not permitted to cover their heads in school. The regulation explicitly states, however, that this prohibition 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. This language allows schools to be flexible and permit students to wear head coverings.

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 (\$10,700), or both.

The law requires animal stunning before slaughter. No religious exemptions are allowed.

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 parents or 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 parents or guardians, or at their own request if over the age of 16.

The Office of the Commissioner for Administration and Protection of Human Rights (informally called the "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 (\$6,400), or both. Those who refuse both military and alternative service, even if objecting on religious grounds, are considered culpable of an offense involving dishonesty or moral turpitude, are disqualified from holding elected public office, and are ineligible for permits to provide private security services.

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

Government Practices

Religious leaders in the government-controlled area said removing obstacles to access to churches, mosques, and monasteries on both sides of the island was their top priority. Imam Shakir Alemdar, a representative of the Muslim community, stated the Department of Antiquities informed him that restoration of the Limassol Great Mosque started in September. The Department of Antiquities closed the mosque in August 2019 without previously informing the Muslim community of the nature of, or timeline for, the restoration. The department conserved and opened Arnavout Mosque in Limassol in 2021 to accommodate the needs of the Muslim community pending completion of the restoration of the Limassol Great Mosque. The MOI reported that it expected the restoration to be completed by 2024. Media reported the government of Qatar donated €1.2 million (\$1.28 million) for the restoration of the mosque.

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 at two other mosques not located on such

sites. Of the eight functioning mosques, seven were available for all five daily prayers and seven had the necessary facilities for ablutions.

The government failed to respond to the Muslim community's longstanding request for permission to make improvements at some of the functioning mosques. According to Imam 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. The lack of space prevented adherents, especially women, from attending the prayers. Authorities denied Imam Alemdar's request to use the mosque in the village of Kato Arodhes in Paphos District for the Ramadan period.

During the year, Dhali Mosque continued to operate without ablution facilities or bathrooms; it was the only one of the eight functioning mosques lacking such facilities. 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. In December 2021, the MOI reported that the only available space for the construction of facilities at the mosque was behind the uninhabited house intended for the mosque's imam. MOI inspectors reportedly found the house structurally unsafe and decided not to 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.

Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque, considered the most historically important Islamic religious site in the country because of its ties to a companion of the Prophet Muhammad, 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, which permitted access to the mosque for only two of the five daily prayer times during most of the year. The imam reported the mosque remained open until midnight only during Ramadan. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, a limited number of persons attended communal prayers during Ramadan and services were recorded and uploaded on YouTube. According to the Department of Antiquities and the mosque's imam, the imam 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. The imam said the authorities routinely granted permission for extended hours.

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. Jewish representatives stated that despite continuing efforts to raise the issue with government authorities during the year, it remained unresolved. The Jewish community reported that they resorted to courts to prevent autopsies that conflicted with their religious beliefs. According to the law, the state pathologist determines which deaths require autopsies.

Jewish representatives 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. A Muslim community representative reported the community did not face difficulties accessing halal meat.

Jewish representatives said the government continued not to respond to their longstanding request, first made in 2017 and most recently renewed in August, to grant the Chief Rabbinate of Cyprus the right to sign official documents, including marriage, death, and divorce certificates, as an authorized party. The Jewish community reported that, during the year, it submitted up-to-date documentation asked for by the government in order to re-examine the request. A response was pending at year's end.

A Jehovah's Witnesses representative said that some local government authorities did not allow Jehovah's Witnesses to bury their adherents in some municipal cemeteries, which were often managed by local Greek Orthodox churches. During the year, the Municipality of Tseri denied permission for the burial of a Jehovah's Witness at their municipal cemetery. Jehovah's Witnesses representatives submitted a complaint to the ombudsman's office. A response was pending at year's end. The MOI did not respond to a Jehovah's Witnesses request submitted in 2019 for assistance with the municipalities.

According to a Muslim community representative, the lack of available spaces for Islamic burials was resolved after the Muslim community cleaned up overgrown vegetation at the Larnaca Turkish cemetery and used available space at the Paphos Turkish cemetery. In 2020, the Ministry of Interior denied the request of Imam Alemdar to use Vakf property near the Hala Sultan Mosque as a 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.

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.

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. Individuals who were attacked in public places wore kippahs or tzitzit. On one occasion, someone threw an empty bottle onto the car of the Chief Rabbi. Witnesses reported some of the incidents to the police. Authorities reported no arrests, according to Jewish community representatives.

The Catholic NGO Caritas, which provides services to asylum seeker and refugees of all faiths, reported that discrimination against Muslim children in schools declined compared with previous years. Moreover, they stated schools offered increased diversity awareness and language training during the year.

The NGOs Caritas and Action for Equality, Support, Antiracism (KISA) reported that women wearing hijabs often faced societal pressure to forgo Islamic dress. Though the ROC does not have any laws that restrict wearing Islamic attire in private firms and educational institutions, media outlets often report confusion about the right of a students to wear hijabs in school. In February, a Limassol

court adjudicated that a father and stepmother assaulted their 14-year-old Muslim daughter for removing her headscarf during school hours. The father stated his daughter removed her headscarf due to pressure to conform to Western standards at the school. Officials relocated the couple's children to the care of the Social Welfare Service.

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 celebrate 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.

In February, the TCCH finished the conservation of Zuhuri Mosque in Larnaca. In August, the TCCH completed the restoration of Orounda Mosque in Nicosia District.

The leaders of the five main religious groups on the island continued to meet regularly and to engage with political leaders within the framework of the RTCYPP to discuss religious freedom on the island. The RTCYPP organized regular meetings of religious leaders, facilitated interreligious communication and cooperation, and maintained an office in the Buffer Zone in Nicosia.

On February 7, the RTCYPP leadership briefed Foreign Minister Ioannis Kasoulides on the joint peace efforts of the religious leaders of Cyprus and discussed religious freedom-related challenges. On February 13, Maronite, Greek Orthodox and Muslim religious leaders attended a reception hosted by the Maronite Archbishop of Cyprus for the feast of Saint Maroun, the patron saint of the Maronite Church. On February 21, the religious leaders and representatives of the five religious groups recognized in the constitution met with recently appointed Special Representative of the UN Secretary General in Cyprus Colin Stewart to brief him on the activities of the RTCYPP and discussed the role of the United Nations in facilitating access to religious sites on both sides of the island. On February 22, the leaders and representatives of the five religious groups met

with the visiting Vice President of the European Commission, Margaritis Schinas. On March 15, the religious leaders briefed a group of ambassadors and heads of diplomatic missions on their efforts to advance religious freedom and protect places of worship. In August, the RTCYPP organized a visit of the five religious leaders and representatives to the Pavilion of Friendship operated by the Roman Catholic community of Sant'Egidio outside the island's largest reception center of asylum seekers to provide meals and activities for residents of the center. In November, the RTCYPP coordinated the attendance of the religious leaders participating in the RTCYPP at the funeral of the Archbishop of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus Chrysostomos II.

The RTCYPP continued its project of offering 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.

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 both sides of the "Green Line" and reducing discrimination against minority religious communities. The Ambassador made a request to the Minister of Agriculture, Rural Development, and Environment on behalf of Jewish community leaders to permit kosher animal slaughter.

The Ambassador met with numerous religious leaders, including the Archbishop of the Maronite Church of Cyprus, several Orthodox Church of Cyprus metropolitan bishops, the newly elected Archbishop of the Church of Cyprus, and the Chief Rabbi of Cyprus. Topics of these discussions included interfaith cooperation, lifting restrictions on access to religious sites on either side of the island, concerns expressed by members of religious minorities about their inability to exercise their right to religious freedom in their desired locations, 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 February 28, the Ambassador visited the recently renovated Zouhourri/Zuhuri Tekke Mosque in Larnaca and discussed the imam's concerns over the government's treatment of the mosque as a monument controlled by the Department of Antiquities rather than a religious site used and controlled by the Muslim community. The imam amplified photographs of the Ambassador's visit to the mosque via social media. The Ambassador also met with the Chief Rabbi of Cyprus at the Jewish Community Center in Larnaca and discussed with him government policies that the Jewish community believes infringe or restrict Jewish religious practices. The Ambassador raised these issues in meetings with senior members of the government.

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 raised the question of the restrictions on the opening hours of Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque and the continued lack of facilities at Dhali Mosque in their interactions with the Ministry of Interior and the Department of Antiquities. During a visit to the Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque, embassy staff also raised the issue of the limited hours of operation of the mosque, as well as the condition of the Larnaca Turkish Cemetery, with the resident imam of the mosque. 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 the country, focusing on religious freedom and encouraging interfaith dialogue.

THE AREA ADMINISTERED BY TURKISH CYPRIOTS

Executive Summary

Turkish Cypriots have administered the northern part of Cyprus since 1974 and proclaimed it the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”) in 1983. The United States does not recognize the “TRNC,” nor does any country other than Türkiye (Turkey). The TRNC “constitution” is the basis for the “laws” that govern the area administered by Turkish Cypriot authorities.

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.

During the year, the “Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)” stated it approved 107 out of 173 requests to hold Greek Cypriot religious services between January and December, compared with 37 of 66 requests in 2021. The “MFA” said, “60 of the requests that were submitted through the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) and another five requests through other channels could not be facilitated as they fell outside the pre-determined criteria.” One request was withdrawn during the period. Turkish Cypriot “officials” reported they routinely denied requests from Greek Cypriot religious leaders who appeared in the media brandishing weapons or who have openly delivered public messages “full of hatred, intolerance, and enmity toward the [Turkish Cypriot] people.” They said they also denied some requests due to “unsafe physical and structural conditions” of the churches.

Turkish-Speaking Protestant Association (TSPA) representatives continued to report police surveillance of their activities. According to Greek Orthodox representatives, Turkish Cypriot police monitored their church services. They reported that plainclothes police officers present during worship services checked priests’ identification and monitored the congregation.

The TSPA said Turkish Cypriots who converted from Islam to other faiths often experienced societal pressure, abuse, insult, public criticism, and workplace discrimination. The former Mufti of Cyprus, Talip Atalay, and the then Archbishop of the Church of Cyprus, Chrysostomos II, frequently engaged in events and discussion with religious leaders across the island. Local sources reported that

the Mufti of Cyprus, Ahmet Ünsal, who assumed the role in July 2021, was not open to engagement and cooperation, and, in accord with his stated intention, has not participated in TRCYPP activities.

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 encourage access to religious sites. Embassy officials met with representatives of the “MFA” and the Vakf to discuss more streamlined access to religious sites. Embassy officials continued to meet with leaders from the Sunni, Alevi, Armenian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Roman Catholic, and Protestant communities to discuss access to religious sites and instances of religious-based discrimination. The Ambassador hosted an iftar in April for prominent members of the Turkish Cypriot community that highlighted the U.S. commitment to advancing freedom of religion and interfaith dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to a statement from the “Statistics Council,” as of October 2022, the population of the area administered by Turkish Cypriots is estimated to be 391,000. There is no data on religious affiliation. Sociologists estimate as much as 97 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. The Alevi Culture Association estimates there are approximately 10,000 Alevis, most of whom are immigrants, and their descendants of Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab origin. The TSPA estimates there are 1,000 Turkish-speaking Protestants. The government of the Republic of Cyprus estimates that 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 2022-23 academic year, there were approximately 94,000 foreign students from more than 140 countries enrolled at universities in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. Of these, 50 percent were Muslims with Turkish citizenship.

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

Legal Framework

The Turkish Cypriot “constitution” states the area 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 explicitly recognize 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, without advance notification or permission, conduct liturgies led by two priests designated by the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus at three designated functional churches on the Karpas Peninsula: Agia Triada Church in Agia Triada/Sipahi, Agia Triada Church in Rizokarpaso/Dipkarpaz, and Agios Synesios Church in Rizokarpaso/Dipkarpaz. According to the “MFA,” Greek Orthodox

priests who come from government-controlled area to attend religious services at these churches must provide advance notification or apply for permission.

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 Kampyli/Hisarkoy.

Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox priests 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 with prior approval.

The “MFA” reported it uses specific criteria to evaluate requests for Greek Cypriot religious services to be held at religious sites in Turkish Cypriot-administered areas. For an application to be considered, the day of the requested service must be a designated religious holiday (Christmas, Easter, or the church’s name day, sometimes referred to as its feast day). The church or monastery must be structurally sound and not located in a military zone, with exceptions for some Maronite churches. The building must not have a dual use, for example, as a museum, there should be no dispute from local Turkish Cypriot residents over use of the property, and Turkish Cypriot police must be available to provide security.

Permission is also necessary for priests other than those who are 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 at least 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 functions as a “civil authority” and represents Islam in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. Whereas the Vakf manages Muslim-donated property as an endowment for

charitable purposes, the “Religious Affairs Department” oversees how imams conduct prayers and approves the Friday sermon in mosques.

The “Offenses Against Religion” section in the “TRNC Criminal Code,” criminalizes (as a misdemeanor) acts by “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 of people.”

Religious groups do not have to register with authorities as associations to assemble or worship, but only associations registered with the “MOI” have the right to engage in commercial activity and maintain bank accounts. Religious and nonreligious groups have the same registration process, and they must 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 cannot 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” sets the curriculum, which is based on a textbook commissioned by the Ministry of Education in Turkey. Students under grade six who are non-Muslim are required to “listen” to religious instruction but are graded without examination. 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 until the age of 39. The penalty for refusing to complete mandatory military service is up to three years’ imprisonment, a fine of up to 10,800 Turkish lira (\$580), or both.

“Government” Practices

The “MFA” reported that despite the rule requiring applications for Greek Cypriot religious services at least 10 days in advance, it granted two requests that were submitted seven days prior to the services. The UNFICYP office responsible for facilitating these requests said applicants for Greek Cypriot religious services often complained the “MFA” approved applications only a few days before the requested service, causing organizers to cancel due to the last-minute notice.

Greek Cypriot newspaper *Alithia* reported that Turkish Cypriot authorities rejected the Metropolis of Constantia and Famagusta’s direct request to the “MFA” to conduct church services, stating that the requests are normally submitted through the United Nations.

According to statistics reported by the “MFA,” authorities continued to grant access to Greek Orthodox places of worship. UNFICYP reported the “MFA” approved 49 of 107 requests it received to facilitate religious services at churches in the northern part of the island between August and December. In 2021, UNFICYP reported 15 approvals of 18 requests. The “MFA” reported it approved 107 of 173 total requests (including both UNFICYP-facilitated requests and requests submitted directly to the “MFA”) to hold religious services, compared with 37 of 66 total requests in 2021. The “MFA” reported denying 65 requests because they could not be facilitated, as they fell outside the predetermined criteria. Applicants withdrew one request during the period.

Three Greek Orthodox churches – Apostolos Andreas, St. Barnabas, and St. Mamas – remained 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, officials permitted individuals to pray at the churches during those hours.

In a March 23 trial, the Iskele District Court withdrew charges of illegally importing literature that was seized from a U.S. citizen pastor’s home. At year’s end, the pastor still faced charges in Famagusta District Court related to the importation of Christian literature confiscated from his business in 2021 as well as for providing unauthorized training in barista skills and wine appreciation. A hearing on the case was scheduled for April 2023.

On January 9, officials had informed the U.S. citizen pastor whose home and business police raided in January 2021 that his court hearing scheduled for the following day on charges of illegally importing Bibles and other religious literature would be postponed to February 16, giving no reason for the postponement. The pastor faced additional charges at another hearing scheduled for January 27 on charges of illegally importing Christian material and producing wine without a license. The “customs” department initially granted a license in 2019 to the pastor to operate a coffee shop located in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. Later in the year, municipal “authorities” revoked the license. In the January 2021 raid of the pastor’s home and business, police seized Bibles and Christian literature in various languages. Police also alleged the pastor’s business, including a cafe, operated and sold wine without a license. The Turkish Cypriot newspaper *Kibris Postasi* published an article January 2021 linking him to an American pastor imprisoned in Turkey for two years on charges of espionage. After the raid “police” detained the pastor for 11 hours then released him on a 160,000 Turkish lira (\$8,600) bond and confiscated his passport. Authorities charged the pastor with illegally importing Christian materials, fined him 5,000 Turkish lira (\$270), and required him to apply for court permission to travel.

A Greek Orthodox representative reported that 72 religious sites remained inaccessible due to their location within established Turkish military zones or in the UN-monitored 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 reported 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 is located in a military zone. The “MFA” clarified that for Maronite services, it only required advance notification, not a request for access, to hold Sunday services and reported that no worshipers were refused admittance during the year. According to the “MFA,” the Turkish military allowed Maronites to celebrate Mass in Ayia Marina in July but denied Maronites access to the Church of Marki near Kormakitis/Korucam. The “MFA” claimed the request was denied due to the church’s location in a military zone and that the physical and structural condition of the church rendered it unsafe to hold religious services.

Public employees complained to their union that Halil Talaykurt, “Chairman” of the “Prime Ministry Supervisory Board,” forcibly took them to mosques and religious lessons during working hours. The religious lessons included lectures by Mufti Ünsal which, according to media sources, included derogatory remarks about Christianity and Judaism. Opposition parties stated the practice was a violation of the secular nature of the “TRNC.” Talaykurt denied pressuring his staff to attend and asserted that he authorized administrative leave for employees who wanted to attend the lessons, as he would also have done for other professional development activities, such as language instruction.

Several local sources reported that unlike his predecessor, the Mufti of Cyprus, Ahmet Ünsal, who assumed the role in July 2021, was not open to interfaith engagement or bicommunal cooperation. They said he did not participate in interfaith dialogue with other religious leaders on the island or in the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process, leading to concern among other religious leaders about the decline in interfaith dialogue on the island.

The rabbi presiding over the Jewish community in Turkish Cypriot-administered areas reported “officials” had established a small Jewish cemetery in the Turkish Cypriot-controlled areas. The cemetery was established in response to problems transporting deceased members of his congregation to Jewish cemeteries in the government-controlled area during the COVID-19 period.

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.

The leader of the Turkish Protestant Association indicated police or plainclothes officers monitored its activities, regularly visited churches used by the group, and asked its members questions about their activities and beliefs.

The TCCH reported that during the year it completed six projects to restore or preserve religious sites in the Turkish Cypriot administered areas and that it was supervising seven additional projects at religious sites in Turkish Cypriot-administered areas.

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. Conservation work ended in December.

With the support of UNDP funding, the TCCH also continued its restoration work on the Greek Orthodox Apostolos Andreas Monastery on the Karpas Peninsula, the most popular destination in Turkish Cypriot-administered areas for Greek Orthodox pilgrims. The TCCH reported the next step would be to issue the tender for the restoration project's second phase. The TCCH also reported that, due to global inflation and an increase in construction costs, it faced a funding shortfall for its restoration and conservation plan for sites throughout the island.

The newspaper *Diyalog* reported that the Greek Orthodox cemetery in the Turkish Cypriot-administered area, in Minarelikoy/Neo Khorio, was in ruins and that graves had collapsed. Local citizens said they were sad to see the cemetery in such a condition and were ready to provide funding to improve it.

According to local press reports and other local sources, the Turkish government provided significant support to Sunni Islamic activities in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. According to the 2022 Turkey-“TRNC” economic protocol, “Religious services will be included in the main duty and control area of the ‘state,’ and the ‘Religious Affairs Department’ will be reorganized within the legal entity of the ‘state.’ Religious services will be carried out in a way that has the authority to supervise and control all religious activity.”

According to local press reports and local embassy sources, the Turkish government continued to provide funding support for Sunni Islamic education throughout the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. Some initiatives offered iPads and bicycles to youth as rewards for participating in Islamic education activities or programs. Local press reported the Turkish “embassy” distributed toys to children who participated in online religious courses and prayed at least twice a day at a mosque. Human rights activists called such programs an “imposition of religion” and a “manipulation of children.”

During the year, secular Turkish Cypriot groups and teachers’ unions continued to criticize a 2019 education protocol with Turkey that established a Turkish Anatolia Religious High School program in the Hala Sultan Religious High School, a public

school. Critics said the protocol imposed Islam on secular Turkish Cypriots and brought an Islam-focused curricula to the school, disregarding the secularism of the Turkish Cypriot community and its education system. The Secondary Education Teachers Union reported that with the support of the “MOE,” school officials permitted 200 students to enroll in the prestigious high school without taking required entrance exams.

The Alevi Culture Association reported Alevi children continued to receive mandatory Sunni Islamic religious instruction at public and private schools and could not opt out.

During the year, the “Religious Affairs Department” continued to appoint and fund all 225 imams at the 210 Sunni mosques in Turkish Cypriot-administered areas.

Greek Orthodox religious groups continued to report Turkish Cypriot 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. The religious groups continued to ask for the return of the items to the Church of Cyprus.

Since May, the budget of the “Religious Affairs Department” increased from 52,534,000 Turkish lira (\$2.8 million) to 102,220,320 Turkish lira (\$5.4 million).

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.

During the year, advocacy by the Rabbi presiding over Jewish community members in the Turkish Cypriot areas of the island resulted in a local farmer facilitating kosher slaughter of chickens.

Officials did not allow the Rabbi presiding over the Jewish community in Turkish Cypriot-administered areas to enter the island via the Larnaca Airport, as stipulated by a December 2021 notice furnished to him. The Rabbi indicated the prohibition to entry via the Republic of Cyprus was a continued inconvenience to travel and access to services only available in the government-administered areas.

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, Alevi, Armenian Orthodox, 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. On October 19, the Ambassador met the Head of Religious Affairs and Mufti of Cyprus, Ahmet Ünsal, to reiterate U.S. support for religious freedom, encourage Ünsal’s participation in RTCYPP activities, and stress the importance of interfaith cooperation for the Cyprus peace process and building trust between the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities.

In April, the Ambassador hosted an iftar for prominent members of the Turkish Cypriot community. The event brought together a diverse set of Turkish Cypriot religious and political leaders, many of whom hold different views on interfaith and bicomunal cooperation and the role of Islam in society.

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