

TURKEY (TÜRKİYE) 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution defines the country as a secular state. It provides for freedom of conscience, religious belief, conviction, expression, and worship and prohibits discrimination based on religious grounds. The Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), a state institution, governs and coordinates religious matters related to Islam; its mandate is to enable the practice of Islam, provide religious education, and manage religious institutions. The penal code prohibits blasphemy and provides punishment for “provoking people to be rancorous and hostile,” including showing public disrespect for religious beliefs, and it criminalizes “insulting values held sacred by a religion.” Government guidelines issued in June define criteria that enable minority religious foundations to elect their governing boards, with some conditions and restrictions.

According to media reports, an Istanbul court gave a deferred sentence to a flight attendant for his social media photograph that showed him drinking alcohol on the Islamic holy night of Eid al-Qadr (*Kadir* in Turkish). The court case continued of the nine Kurdish imams arrested in 2021 on terrorism-related charges for preaching in their native language. The government continued to limit the rights of non-Muslim religious minorities, especially those not recognized under the government’s interpretation of the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which includes only Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians. The government continued to treat Alevi Islam as a heterodox Muslim “sect,” categorized Alevi worship as cultural rather than religious, and did not recognize Alevi houses of worship. Media outlets and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported continued entry bans and deportations of noncitizen leaders of Protestant congregations. On May 25, a district municipality of Istanbul demolished the Meryem Ana Tomb, despite protests by Alevis, who consider it sacred. The government completed restoration of two Armenian churches, where the Armenian Patriarch presided over Mass. In June, Orthodox Syriacs reopened a church closed since 1915. The Bodrum municipality restored a Jewish cemetery and Izmir municipality continued to renovate several synagogues and Jewish sites as an open-air museum. The government continued to restrict efforts of minority religious groups to train their clergy domestically, and the Greek

Orthodox Halki Seminary remained closed. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, in January, progovernment Turkish media published an article stating that “Jewish influence” was involved in the “Armenian deportation,” a reference to the Armenian genocide following World War I. In July, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism instructed provincial governors to engage with the Alevi community during the holy month of Muharram.

According to media reports, acts of vandalism of places of worship and cemeteries continued. Local media reported that on July 30, the first day of the holy month of Muharram, assailants attacked six Alevi institutions and *cemevis* (Alevi houses of worship) in Ankara. In July, the country’s Jewish Community tweeted unidentified individuals had damaged 36 gravestones in the Jewish cemetery in Hasköy, Istanbul. There were reports of vandalism targeting Christian elements of the Hagia Sophia, which the government reconverted to a mosque in 2020. In April, an *Agos* (Armenian Turkish newspaper) columnist referenced a swastika drawn on the gate of the Bomonti Mihitaryan Armenian school in Istanbul and stated there was a need to improve education on the Holocaust and other genocides committed throughout history. Antisemitic discourse and hate speech continued in social and print media. In May, a Jewish Community website warned that a group was circulating antisemitic messages on social media targeting two hospitals where management reportedly did not permit women staff to wear Islamic headscarves. According to the Jewish website, a Jewish manager was singled out for imposing the reported policy.

In September, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom discussed protection of religious minorities and refugees fleeing religious persecution with government leaders, civil society, and diverse faith communities in Ankara and Istanbul. The U.S. Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials regularly engaged with government officials throughout the year, including at the Diyanet and the Directorate General of Foundations (DGF), to discuss religious freedom issues, including religious education. Embassy and consulate general officials met with a wide range of Islamic religious leaders and religious minority community leaders, including those of the Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox, Protestant, Alevi, Syriac Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Syriac Catholic, Chaldean Catholic, and Baha’i Faith communities, to underscore the importance of religious freedom and interfaith tolerance, as well as to discuss challenges in managing foundation elections, maintaining properties and

communities under pressures of declining populations, and seeking equal recognition and full and equal latitude of activity among all faiths.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 83 million (midyear 2022). According to the Turkish government, 99 percent of the population is Muslim, which, according to the government, includes Alevis. Public opinion surveys published in 2021 by the research and polling firm KONDA Research and Consultancy suggest approximately 88 percent self-identify as Sunni Muslim, 6 percent self-identify as nonbelievers, 4 percent as Alevi, and the remaining 2 percent in the “other” category. Leaders of Alevi foundations estimate Alevi Muslims comprise 25 to 31 percent of the population. The Shia Jafari community estimates its members make up 4 percent of the population.

Non-Muslim religious groups are mostly concentrated in Istanbul and other large cities, as well as in the southeast. Exact figures are not available; however, these groups self-report approximately 90,000 Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians (including migrants from Armenia) and 25,000 Roman Catholics (including migrants from Africa and the Philippines). There are also approximately 25,000 Syrian Orthodox Christians (also known as Syriacs), between 12,000 and 16,000 Jews, and 10,000 Baha’is. Numbers of Eastern Orthodox Christians markedly increased in the country to over 150,000 during the year, largely due to the war in Ukraine leading to an influx of an estimated 60,000 Russians and 40,000 Ukrainians. The Eastern Orthodox population also includes fewer than 2,500 ethnically Greek Orthodox Christians and small, undetermined numbers of Bulgarian Orthodox and Georgian Orthodox Christians.

Estimates of other groups include: 7,000 to 10,000 members of Protestant and evangelical Christian denominations; 5,000 members of Jehovah’s Witnesses; an estimated 2,000-3,500 Armenian Catholics; fewer than 3,000 Chaldean Christians; and fewer than 1,000 Yezidis. There are also small, undetermined numbers of Nestorian, Syriac Catholic, Chaldean Catholic, and Maronite Christians. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) states its membership as 573 individuals.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of conscience, religious belief, conviction, expression, and worship. It stipulates individuals may not be compelled to participate in religious ceremonies or to disclose their religion, and that acts of worship may be conducted freely as long as they are not directed against the “integrity of the state.” The constitution prohibits discrimination on religious grounds and exploitation or abuse of “religion or religious feelings, or things held sacred by religion.” It also prohibits “even partially basing” the order of the state on religious tenets.

The constitution establishes the Diyanet, through which the state coordinates Islamic matters. According to the law, the Diyanet’s mandate is to enable the beliefs, practices, and moral principles of Islam, with a primary focus on Sunni Islam; educate the public about religious issues; and administer mosques. By law, its duties include writing the sermon delivered in all mosques across the country and at Diyanet-staffed mosques abroad each Friday. The Diyanet operates under the presidency, with its head appointed by the President and administered by a 16-person council elected by clerics and university theology faculties. The Diyanet has five main departments, called high councils: religious services, hajj and umrah services, education, publications, and public relations. While the law does not require that all members of the council be Sunni Muslim, in practice this has been the case.

The penal code prohibits blasphemy and provides punishment for “provoking people to be rancorous and hostile,” including showing public disrespect for religious beliefs, and it criminalizes “insulting values held sacred by a religion.” Insulting a religion is punishable by six months to one year in prison.

The penal code prohibits religious clergy from “reproaching or vilifying” the government or the laws of the state while performing their duties. Violations are punishable by prison terms of one month to one year, or three months to two years if the crime involves inciting others to disobey the law.

Although registration with the government is not explicitly mandatory for religious groups to operate, registering a group is required to request legal

recognition for places of worship. Gaining legal recognition of a place of worship requires permission from the municipalities for the construction or designation of a new place of worship. It is against the law to hold religious services at a location not recognized by the central government as a place of worship; the government may fine or close the venues of those violating the law.

Interfering with the service of a religious group is punishable by one to three years in prison; defacing religious property is punishable by three months to one year in prison; and destroying or demolishing religious property is punishable by one to four years in prison. Because it is illegal to hold religious services in places not registered as places of worship, in practice, these legal proscriptions apply only to recognized religious groups.

The law prohibits Sufi and other religious-social orders (*tarikats*) and lodges (*tekke* or *zaviye*), although the government generally does not enforce these restrictions.

Military service is obligatory for males; there is no provision for conscientious objection. A government policy allows individuals to pay a fee of 80,064 Turkish lira (\$4,300) instead of performing full military service; however, they are required to complete a three-week basic training program. Those who oppose mandatory military service on religious grounds may face charges in military and civilian courts and, if convicted, could be subject to prison sentences ranging from two months to two years.

The leadership and administrative structures of religious communities do not have a legal personality, leaving them unable to directly buy or hold title to property or press claims in court. Communities rely on separate foundations or associations governed by individual boards to hold and administer assets and property.

A 1935 law prohibits the establishment of foundations based on the religion or ethnicity of members but grants exemptions to foundations existing before the enactment of the law. Non-Muslim citizens direct these longstanding foundations; 167 continue to exist, the majority of which are associated with the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish communities. In practice, a religious group formed after 1935 may successfully apply to register as an association or foundation provided its stated objective is charitable, educational,

or cultural rather than religious. There are 13 Protestant foundations (four existing before the passage of the 1935 foundation law), 33 Protestant associations, and more than 73 representative offices linked with these associations.

The DGF, under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, regulates the activities and affiliated properties of all foundations, and it assesses whether they are operating within the stated objectives of their organizational charter. There are several categories of foundations, including religious community foundations existing prior to the 1935 law.

Government guidelines published in June enable religious minority foundations to conduct elections for members of their governing boards. The guidelines apply to 163 of the 167 foundations represented by the DGF and run by Greek Orthodox, Armenian, Jewish, Syriac, Chaldean, Bulgarian Georgian, and Maronite communities. According to the guidelines, the foundations must conduct elections at least once every five years to elect boards with seven members (or an alternative odd number of members, minimum three and maximum 11). Voters must be members of the same minority communities as the foundations whose boards they are electing. Candidates must be citizens over 18 years of age, literate, and without certain types of criminal offenses on their records. Within Istanbul, minority communities with fewer than 15 foundations may hold elections on a provincial basis, while communities with more than 15 foundations must split their voting into three electoral districts. Elections must be overseen and administered by electoral committees chosen by the current board and approved by the DGF; these committees may include a maximum of two members from the current board, who must be community members but not candidates.

If a foundation becomes inactive, the government may petition the courts to rule that it is no longer operational and transfer its assets to the state. Only a court order may close a foundation of any category, except under a state of emergency, during which the government may close foundations by decree.

A foundation may earn income through companies and rent-earning properties, as well as from donations. The process for establishing a foundation is lengthier

and more expensive than that for establishing an association, but associations have fewer legal rights than foundations at the local level.

Several religious communities have formally registered corresponding associations. Associations must be nonprofit and receive financial support only in the form of donations. To register as an association, a group must apply to the provincial governor's office with supporting documentation, including bylaws and a list of founding members. A group must also obtain permission from the Ministry of Interior as part of its application if a foreign association or nonprofit organization is a founding member; if foreigners are founding members of the group, the group must submit copies of its residence permits. If the governorate finds the bylaws unlawful or unconstitutional, the association must change them to meet the legal requirements. Under the law, the governorate may fine or otherwise punish association officials for actions deemed to violate the organization's bylaws. A court order may close an association, and the Ministry of Interior may temporarily close an association or foundation and apply to a court within 48 hours for a decision on closure. Otherwise, the government may close associations and foundations by decree under a state of emergency. The civil code requires associations not to discriminate on the grounds of religion, ethnicity, or race.

By law, prisoners have the right to practice their religion while incarcerated; however, not all prisons have dedicated places of worship. According to the law, prison authorities must allow visitation by clergy members of registered religions and allow them to offer books and other materials that are part of the prisoner's faith, provided the prisoner is a member of a registered religion.

The constitution establishes compulsory religious and moral instruction in public and private schools at all levels starting with fourth grade, with content determined by the Ministry of National Education's Department of Religious Instruction, which falls under the authority of the presidency. Religion classes are two hours per week for students in grades four through 12. Only students who marked Christian or Jewish on their national identity cards may apply for an exemption from religion classes. Atheists, agnostics, Alevis, those whom the government considers other non-Sunni Muslims, Baha'is, Yezidis, Hindus, Zoroastrians, Confucians, Taoists, Buddhists, or those who left the religion section blank on their national identity card are rarely granted exemptions from the

classes. Middle and high school students may take additional Islamic religious courses as electives for two hours per week during regular school hours.

The government issues chip-enabled national identity cards that contain no visible identification of religious affiliation. The information on religious affiliation is recorded in the chip and remains visible to authorized public officials as “qualified personal data” and protected as private information. Older national identity cards that are still in use contain a space for religious identification with the option of leaving the space blank. The new cards include the same options for religious identities as the older cards: Muslim, Greek Orthodox, non-Orthodox Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, Tengri, “no religion,” or “other/unknown.” Baha’is, Alevis, Yezidis, and other religious groups with known populations in the country are not options, requiring individuals of other religions or no religion to leave the category blank or to state “other/unknown.”

According to labor law, private and public sector employers may not discriminate against employees based on religion. Employees may seek legal action against an employer through the labor court. If an employee can prove a violation occurred, the employee may be entitled to compensation of up to four months of salary, in addition to the reversal of the employment decision.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, with one reservation regarding article 27, which states individuals belonging to ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities “shall not be denied the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language.” The reservation asserts the right “to interpret and apply the provisions of article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in accordance with the related provisions and rules of the Constitution of the Republic of Türkiye and the Treaty of Lausanne of 24 July 1923 and its Appendixes.”

Government Practices

On September 13, citing lack of evidence, the Second High Criminal Court in Kocaeli dropped the cases of 13 individuals charged with a 2013 conspiracy to commit a large-scale assault on an Izmit Protestant church and kill its pastor.

Church sources said the assault involved members of the security forces, and on September 19, church members appealed the court's decision. There was no further development by year's end.

According to media reports, on March 20, police used batons, plastic bullets, and pepper spray to disperse a demonstration by members of the Furkan Foundation, a Sunni Muslim religious group known for its antigovernment stance and advocacy of separation of religion and politics. According to Furkan Foundation members, a 15-year-old child was among those injured and had to be hospitalized for bleeding on the brain. Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu condemned police use of "disproportionate force" and announced an investigation of police actions during the demonstration. The results of the investigation were not announced as of year's end.

The case of Syriac Orthodox priest Father Bilecen (also known as Father Aho) remained pending on appeal at the end of the year. In July 2021, a court sentenced Aho to 25 months in prison for "aiding a terrorist organization." Authorities in Mardin Province arrested Aho and two other Syriacs in 2018 for providing bread and water to members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) terrorist organization visiting the Mor Yakub Monastery. According to Aho, he provided food and water because his religion "commanded" him to help others. He stated he acted "out of my belief, not out of help to any organization."

The case of nine Kurdish Sunni imams arrested in 2021 continued through the end of the year. According to media reports, prosecutors sought to close the organization to which the nine imams belong, the Religious Scholars Solidarity Association (DIAYDER). The government charged them with terrorism-related offenses; the DIAYDER's president remained under arrest and three others were required to report regularly to local police (a condition known as judicial control). The five remaining defendants continued to face charges, but authorities did not restrict their movements. Media outlets reported the imams had deviated from the mandatory Diyanet-approved Friday sermon (*khutbah* in Arabic, *hütbe* in Turkish) and had delivered the sermon in Kurdish. The law, however, does not forbid preaching in Kurdish.

The country continued to host a large diaspora community of ethnic Uyghur Muslims from China. Some community members said they continued to face threats and pressure from the People's Republic of China (PRC) remotely via social

media, and they said they feared the PRC would seek the forcible repatriation of some Uyghur Muslims; however, they knew of no cases of deportations. Uyghur community members continued to express concern regarding an extradition treaty the government signed with the PRC in December 2020, which lawmakers had not debated or ratified as of year's end. According to media reports, human rights defenders, and government statements, the government showed a willingness to protect Uyghur Muslims in the country, did not deport any Uyghurs to the PRC during the year, and consistently reiterated this policy. In September, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan told the UN General Assembly, "We are sensitive about the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms of the Muslim Uyghur Turks in a way that will not harm China's territorial integrity, the 'One China' understanding, and sovereignty rights."

According to media reports, on October 10, the İstanbul Second Court of First Instance convicted a flight attendant (referred to in press by his initials O.T.) of "publicly insulting religious values." The court gave him a suspended sentence of three months and 22 days. On Eid al-Qadr, which fell on April 27, O.T. posted to his private Instagram account a photograph of himself and friends drinking raki, an alcoholic drink, with the caption, "Qadr night is special, and may Allah accept." When the post leaked and went viral, his employer, Pegasus Airlines, demanded his resignation. In May, the prosecutor summoned O.T. for questioning and the court put him under judicial control for four months, during which he had to report to police on a regular basis. On June 17, the prosecutor presented an indictment and asked for a sentence of up to 18 months.

According to media outlets, on October 4, an Izmir court ordered the arrest of two persons who posted on social media their burning of a Quran while drinking alcohol on September 26. Although the individuals deleted their post shortly afterward, the video went viral and media outlets picked it up on October 3. Police detained both persons the next day, and they were required to testify at the prosecutor's office. Both stated the incident occurred while they were inebriated, and they did not remember committing the act. The individuals appeared before the court on the charge of inciting hatred and societal enmity, and local police subsequently arrested them following court orders. They remained in jail at year's end pending indictment and further trial.

On June 7, media outlets reported that the provincial disciplinary committee in Antalya expelled three high school students for a video they posted on social media in which they played soccer with a Quran in place of a ball.

According to media reports in October, a court charged pop singer Gülşen Çolakoğlu with “inciting hatred and enmity” after she joked during a concert in April that the “perversion” of one of her musicians was due to his education in a religious school. According to news reports, authorities apprehended the singer at her İstanbul home in August after a video from the concert began circulating on social media, with a hashtag calling for her arrest. She was jailed for five days and later spent 15 days under house arrest, although she had apologized for any offense that she may have caused to religious school graduates. She faced up to three years in prison on the incitement charge. The case was ongoing at year’s end.

According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses annual report, although members of the group enjoyed relative freedom of worship, they continued to face two longstanding obstacles impeding their freedom of worship. The report said the government did not recognize conscientious objection to military service, making no provision for alternative civilian service “of a nonpunitive nature.” According to the report, during the year, some local courts ruled in favor of some Jehovah’s Witnesses detained or fined for “evasion of military service.” The report stated that Mehmet Can Ekin was charged with “enlistment evasion” on four separate occasions. Although he continued to serve a sentence for three of those charges, he was acquitted on the fourth charge in January. The same month, a court annulled a fine for “evasion of military service” imposed on another Jehovah’s Witnesses member, Ersin Mordoğan. In March 2022, a court acquitted another member, Barış Kalaycı, of the same charges.

The government continued to interpret the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which refers broadly to “non-Muslim minorities,” as granting special legal minority status exclusively to three recognized groups: Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians. The government continued not to recognize the leadership or administrative structures of non-Muslim minorities such as the Armenian Apostolic Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, and the Chief Rabbinate, as legal entities, leaving them unable to buy or hold title to property or to press claims in court. These

three groups, along with other minority religious communities, had to rely on independent foundations that they had previously organized, which were overseen by separate governing boards, to hold and control each religious property.

According to representatives from the affected foundations, the inability to elect board members since 2013, when the government annulled the previous regulation, inhibited the maintenance and administration of foundations, which oversaw properties and collected rent. Some representatives said that when members died, retired, or emigrated, boards ran the risk of not functioning without new members, and they expressed concern that the government could then declare a foundation with no board defunct and transfer its properties and other assets to the state. While community leaders described the June guidelines enabling religious minority foundations to conduct elections for members of their governing boards as a welcome step, they were critical of extra requirements and restrictions placed on religious minority foundations that were not placed on foundations not associated with religious minorities. In accordance with the guidelines, community leaders reported they were on track to complete all 163 stipulated foundation elections by year end. Four remaining foundations that manage Greek and Armenian community hospitals, for example Surp Agop, Balikli, and Surp Pirgic Hospitals in Istanbul, were administratively under the Ministry of Health and not subject to the DGF regulations; they awaited separate regulations, expected in 2023.

Multiple Protestant church representatives continued to report bureaucratic difficulties in registering places of worship. Church representatives said they were obliged to continue meeting in unregistered locations for worship services because local officials did not approve registration applications and continued to impose zoning standards on churches, including minimum space requirements of at least 10,764 square feet, a requirement generally not imposed on mosques. Officials did not apply this requirement to Sunni Muslim congregations, which they permitted to build worship facilities in malls, airports, and other smaller spaces. Additionally, some Protestant churches reported local authorities did not allow them to display crosses on the exterior of their buildings.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses annual report, Jehovah's Witnesses could not obtain and register appropriate places of worship because their proposed

places of worship did not meet all the rigorous municipal zoning law requirements.

According to media sources, during the year, Burhanettin Mumcuoğlu successfully registered as a follower of Tengri, an ancient Turkic shamanic tradition. The Civil Registry had declined his initial 2020 request, stating Tengri was not on the list of recognized religions. Subsequently filing suit, Mumcuoğlu said the denial violated the principle of secularism. Despite Mumcuoğlu having won the suit, the Civil Registry asked the Ministry of Justice and the Diyanet for opinions. While the Diyanet in February said Tengri was not a specific religion, the ministry agreed with the court's decision, enabling Mumcuoğlu to have his religion recorded as Tengri on his national identity card.

The Armenian Apostolic Patriarchate and the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate continued to seek legal recognition, and their communities operated as conglomerations of individual religious foundations.

The government continued to treat Alevi Islam as a heterodox Muslim "sect" and categorized Alevi worship as cultural rather than religious. Accordingly, the government did not recognize cemevis as places of worship, despite a 2018 ruling by the Supreme Court of Appeals. In March 2018, the head of the Diyanet had said mosques were the appropriate places of worship for both Alevis and Sunnis.

Because religion and politics are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize some incidents as being solely based on religious identity. According to media reports, in July, the mufti of Edremit instructed the imams of three Edremit mosques not to perform funeral prayers for a relative of U.S.-based preacher Fethullah Gülen. The Turkish government considered Gülen to have been responsible for the 2016 coup attempt.

The government continued to permit annual and other commemorative religious worship services at religiously significant Christian sites previously converted to state museums, such as St. Peter's Church in Antakya, St. Nicholas' Church near Demre, St. Paul Church near Isparta, the Church of the Holy Cross on Akdamar Island, and the House of the Virgin Mary near Selçuk. According to minority communities, this was often a pragmatic option at sites where local congregations were no longer large enough to sustain full-time clergy and staff.

The government continued in larger prisons to provide incarcerated Sunni Muslims with *mesjids* (small mosques) and Sunni preachers. The government did not provide clergy in prisons for non-Sunni religious groups; however, their clergy could visit and minister to adherents with the permission of the public prosecutor.

According to media reports on May 25, Istanbul's Esenler District municipality demolished the Meryem Ana Tomb, despite protests by Alevis who considered it sacred. The tomb stood on state property, and local authorities razed it to construct a new public school complex.

The Byzantine-era Orthodox church of Hagia Sophia (known locally as Ayasofya) continued to serve as a mosque; the government reconverted it from a museum to a mosque in 2020. The fifth century Chora Church (referred to as Kariye), scheduled for reconversion from museum to mosque in 2020, remained under restoration at year's end.

During the year, media reported multiple incidents of vandalism in the Hagia Sophia, including accounts in April, June, and December of unknown individuals peeling wood and paint from its imperial gate. The gate, which Byzantines said was made of the wood from Noah's ark, was part of a 6th-century cathedral constructed by Emperor Justinian and was decorated with relics from Jerusalem's Holy Sepulchre. Curtains permanently cover mosaics depicting Christian religious themes, including the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ. In early May, reports circulated on social media of damage to a historic marble font in Hagia Sophia, with claims it was being used as a rack for shoes removed upon entry to mosques. The Istanbul Directorate of Tourism and Culture denied the claims and said the picture of the font surrounded by shoes was from a period prior to the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque. In May, Mahir Polat, former head of the Cultural Heritage Department and appointed deputy secretary general for reconstruction, studies, and projects in 2020, posted photos of damage on social media, describing it as "insulting the sanctity and historical value of Hagia Sophia" and asking, "154 cameras, 69 security and tourism police don't they see this?" On May 30, media outlets reported that police detained TELE 1 correspondent Engin Açar and Art History Association President Şerif Yaşar, who came to Hagia Sophia to investigate claims of damage to the font and elsewhere within the historic

space. Authorities detained the two on the grounds they were filming without permission.

According to media outlets, the DGF completed its restoration of the Surp Giragos Armenian and Mar Petyun Chaldean Churches, both in Sur District, Diyarbakır. Surp Giragos, 645 years old and said to be the largest Armenian church in the Middle East, had been damaged during PKK attacks in 2015. The Minister of Culture attended the May 7 reopening, and the Armenian Patriarch presided over the first services on May 8, joined by Armenian Orthodox worshippers from around the country. On May 10, the Armenian Patriarch presided over the first services in 20 years in Mardin's Surp Kerok Church, restored in 2004.

The government again granted the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate permission to hold annual services at the 4th-century Sümela Monastery in Trabzon. In February, the Greek Foreign Ministry characterized as “desecration” social media images of a band playing electronic dance music at the site. The government again did not permit the Patriarchate to hold annual services at St. Nicholas Monastery in Cappadocia.

Renovations continued on the newly reopened Jewish Cultural Heritage Project in Izmir, a cluster of nine historic synagogues (Bikur Holim, Bet Hillel, Portekiz, Etz Hayim, Hevra, Şalom, Algazi, Forasteros, and Sinyora) in the Kemeraltı old market district that combined to form an open-air museum along the lines of Jewish quarters in other European cities. Beginning in 2014, a sequence of restoration projects transformed several of the old buildings into cultural hubs and performance spaces, with work underway on the remainder. In its various stages, the project received funding from the municipal government, foreign governments, and from the Izmir Jewish Community Foundation.

On January 4, a ceremony in central Bodrum commemorated the municipality's restoration of the neglected Jewish cemetery. The site, previously marked as a graveyard for “foreigners,” was renamed to reflect the Ottoman citizenship of Jews buried there. With support from the city, project volunteers fenced the cemetery and closed it with an iron gate, delivering keys to the mayor and chief rabbi.

On November 15, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled in favor of the Greek Orthodox community on the return of a plot of land in the Istanbul district of Arnavutköy (known as Megalo Revma in Greek). Representatives from various communities said the bulk of property claims had been settled over the last decade, mostly to the communities' satisfaction, although a few remaining cases were still progressing slowly through legal and government channels.

Many public buildings, including universities, continued to maintain small mosques. In 2017, the Ministry of National Education issued a regulation requiring every new school to have an Islamic prayer room. The government continued to deny Alevis the right to establish similar places of worship in government buildings. Alevi leaders reported the approximately 2,500 to 3,000 cemevis in the country were insufficient to meet demand. The government continued to state that Diyanet-funded mosques were available to Alevis and all Muslims, regardless of their school of religious thought.

Religious communities, particularly Alevi Muslims, continued to raise concerns regarding several of the government's education policies. The government continued not to comply with a 2013 ECHR ruling that found the compulsory religion courses in public schools violated educational freedom. The ECHR denied the government's appeal of the ruling in 2015 and upheld the Alevi community's legal claim that the government-mandated courses promoted Sunni Islam and were contrary to Alevi religious convictions. Authorities added material on Alevism to the religious course curriculum in 2013 after the ECHR decision, but Alevi groups stated the material was inadequate and, in some cases, incorrect, and that teachers often ignored it. They continued to call on the government to implement the ECHR decision.

Non-Sunni Muslims and nonpracticing Muslims said they continued to face difficulty obtaining exemptions from compulsory religious instruction in primary and secondary schools and often had to choose from electives dealing with different aspects of Sunni Islam, particularly if their new identification cards listed their religion as Muslim. Reportedly, because only Christian and Jewish children could opt out of the religion course, teachers assumed all other students were Muslim and thus required to take the course. The government said the compulsory instruction covered a range of world religions, but some religious groups, including Alevis and members of Christian denominations, stated the

courses largely reflected Hanafi Sunni Islamic doctrine and contained negative and incorrect information about other religious groups, such as some educational texts referring to Alevi beliefs as mysticism.

According to news reports, in April, the Constitutional Court ruled that compulsory religion classes violated freedom of religion, upholding the two ECHR rulings that criticized the government on the principle and content of compulsory religious education. The court's verdict followed a prolonged legal challenge by Huseyin El, who tried to withdraw his daughter from compulsory religious education classes more than a decade ago because their content was not in line with his religious and philosophical beliefs. The school principal insisted that Nazlı Şirin El, a fourth grader at the time, should take the course because only Christian and Jewish citizens could be exempt, and El was Alevi. Her father challenged the concept of compulsory religious courses and reiterated his right to stop his child from attending them. "We argued that forcing a parent to reveal or document his faith is also a violation of constitutional article 24, which says no one can be forced to reveal religious beliefs and convictions," his lawyer Esra Başbakkal told *Al-Monitor*.

On July 28, *Al-Monitor* reported that the Constitutional Court awarded 20,000 lira (\$1,100) to an atheist student whose high school had denied his application for exemption from ethics and religious culture classes. The court declared that the scope of the class went beyond a general teaching of ethics and religious culture and imposed certain religious teachings. The court also overruled a previous 2017 Council of State decision that found those classes constitutional.

The government continued to expand and fund Islamic *imam hatip* education, a vocational religious school to train government-employed imams. At year's end, there were 3,451 imam hatip middle schools (18.2 percent of all middle schools), compared with 1,131 such schools in 2013, accounting for 13.8 percent of middle school pupils. At the high school level, 1,693 schools were imam hatip (13.2 percent of all schools), compared with 442 in 2004; the share of high school students grew from 2.4 percent in 2004 to 10.4 percent at year's end.

Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish religious community foundations continued to operate schools under the supervision of the Ministry of National Education. Children of undocumented Armenian migrants and Armenian

refugees from Syria could also attend. Because the government continued to classify legal migrant and refugee children as “visitors,” they were ineligible to receive diplomas from these schools. The curricula of these schools included information unique to the cultures of the three groups and teachable in the minority groups’ languages.

The government continued to provide funding for public, private, and religious schools teaching Islam. It did not do so for minority religious schools the government recognized under the Lausanne Treaty, except for paying the salaries of teachers who taught subjects required to be in Turkish, such as Turkish literature. The minority religious communities funded all the schools’ other expenses through donations, including from church foundations and alumni.

According to media reports, in April, President Erdoğan inaugurated Ayasofya Fatih Medresesi, thereby reestablishing Istanbul’s historic religious school under the Ottoman Empire and located next to the Ayasofya Mosque. Erdoğan said the madrassah would again be an education center, operated by the Fatih Sultan Mehmet University. “Ayasofya Fatih Medresesi, which has been instrumental in the training of countless scholars for nearly four and a half centuries, will serve as an education center from now on. I hope that tomorrow’s scholars, intellectuals, scientists, and researchers will be trained here,” the President said.

On June 14, an Istanbul court canceled the transfer to the Diyanet of a derelict hospital building and its surrounding lands, which the Diyanet had planned to convert to an Islamic educational center on the same island (Heybeliada) as the Halki Seminary, which remained closed. The court based its verdict on the Diyanet’s lack of consultations with the Ministry of Culture about the suitability of its plans to repurpose the properties.

The government continued to provide training for Sunni Muslim clerics while restricting other religious groups from training clergy inside the country. The Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox Patriarchates remained unable to conduct formal theological training within the country.

Multiple reports continued to state Protestant communities could not train clergy in the country and therefore relied on foreign volunteers to serve in leadership capacities. Local Protestant communities stated they aimed to develop

indigenous Turkish leaders in their congregations because it was becoming increasingly difficult to rely on foreign volunteers. Several Protestant clergies, including evangelical Christian pastors, conducted religious services while resident in the country on long-term tourist residence permits.

According to media reports, on April 19, Interior Minister Soylu told reporters the government would prohibit Syrian refugees from visiting Syria for Eid al-Adha (*Bayram* in Turkish) celebrations in early May. Media outlets reported it was not clear why the government made the decision; in previous years, Syrians were permitted to visit their home country during religious occasions.

Protestant community sources continued to say the government targeted their members with deportations and entry bans, including those who had lived legally as long-term residents in the country for decades without previous immigration difficulties. According to community members, these immigration procedures also affected a local community's ability to raise funds for local churches because foreign clergy members attracted individual donations and support from church communities in their countries of origin. Some individuals with entry bans or residence permit denials requested a review of their immigration status through the country's legal system. During the year, several individuals succeeded in their legal appeals to have residence permits reinstated. Some cases were pending appeal at the Constitutional Court, and two also pending at the ECHR.

The World Evangelical Alliance continued to express concerns about the situation of evangelical Christians in the country, including members being subject to deportations and reentry bans.

The Istanbul Protestant Church Foundation reported that the government denied residence permits to 10 American and two Korean Protestants during the year, while it also denied routine citizenship applications of multiple foreign Protestants married to Turkish citizens. According to the foundation, the government tagged the resident identity cards of two community members with the code "N82," designating them as risks to national security, thereby making them subject to deportation and ineligible to reenter the country.

The case continued of a foreign pastor who, along with the NGO Alliance Defending Freedom International (ADF), filed an application with the ECHR

accusing the government of religious persecution for the pastor's 2018 deportation and subsequent reentry ban for publicly evangelizing in the streets of Istanbul. According to media and the ADF, the pastor was not allowed to reenter the country in 2018, where he had lived for 19 years. Quoting the NGO Open Doors, ADF said reports indicated the government had expelled 60 or more foreign Christian missionaries and their families from the country since 2020. Private sources put the number of expulsions at more than 100.

The government did not formally acknowledge Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I's status as leader of the world's approximately 300 million Orthodox Christians, although individual political leaders and government departments appeared to recognize it informally. The government's official position remained that the Ecumenical Patriarch was the religious leader only of the country's Greek Orthodox minority. According to a leader of the ethnic Greek community, this approach adhered to the 2010 Venice Commission ruling that the government was not obliged to use the Patriarch's full title, which includes "Ecumenical," but that it also must not prohibit or hinder its use by others.

The government continued to permit only Turkish citizens to vote in the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Holy Synod or to be elected patriarch and continued its practice of granting citizenship to Greek Orthodox metropolitans under the terms of the government's 2011 stopgap solution intended to widen the pool of candidates eligible to become the next patriarch. The government continued to maintain that leaders of the Greek Orthodox (Ecumenical Patriarchate), Armenian Apostolic Orthodox, and Jewish communities must be Turkish citizens.

In June, the European Parliament issued a report regarding the status of religious freedom in the country. The report highlighted the challenges of the Greek Orthodox community and called on authorities to enable minority religious communities to obtain legal personality and education rights. According to a European Parliament report released in October, there had been a "massive reduction" in the number of Christians in the country. ADF estimated that Christians accounted for 0.2 percent of the country's population, having dwindled from 20 percent of the population 100 years ago. Historically, according to sources, this shrinkage was due to the cumulative result of a raft of 20th-century punitive policies targeting religious minorities – forced population exchanges and expulsions, a punitive "wealth tax," property seizures, and pogroms – as well as

intermarriage and assimilation and outward migration in search of better economic opportunities.

The Diyanet continued to regulate the operation of and compose the mandatory Friday sermon given in all registered mosques, and it paid the salaries of Sunni personnel. The government continued to provide land for the construction of Sunni mosques and to fund their construction through municipalities. According to the Diyanet's most recent published statistics, there were 89,817 Diyanet-operated mosques in the country at the end of 2021, compared with 89,445 Diyanet-operated mosques at year end in 2020.

On October 7, at a gathering of Alevi groups, the President unveiled an initiative for the creation of an "Alevi-Bektaşî culture and cemevi presidency" within the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. A November 9, 2022, decree formally established the new body with two functions: sponsoring research and conferences on Alevi culture and providing material and administrative support to cemevis. The latter function included funding the salaries of cemevi leaders and operating costs such as utilities. Alevi groups welcomed the financial support, which placed them on an equal footing with Diyanet funding to mosques, for which they have petitioned the Supreme Court of Appeals and the ECHR. Alevis, however, said they rejected the government's characterization of Alevi worship as a cultural practice, and they emphasized their longstanding efforts to gain recognition as a religion.

During the year, the government allocated 300,000 lira (\$16,000) for religious minority publications, including newspapers, compared with 350,000 lira (\$19,000) in 2020.

Jewish citizens continued to express concern about antisemitism and security threats. According to members of the community, the government continued to coordinate with them on security issues. They said the government measures were helpful and the government was responsive to requests for security.

The January appointment of Judge Kenan Yaşar to the Supreme Constitutional Court prompted Twitter users, including prominent Jewish figures, to remind their followers of his 2012 tweet: "Jews are such people that can set the world on fire to cook two eggs."

In a March interview with media outlet *Sabah*, Interior Minister Soylu stated an influential businessman with Jewish roots and his followers were the murderers of children in Ukraine and Syria.

According to the *Jerusalem Post*, Turkish progovernment media published an article on January 31, alleging that “Jewish influence behind the scenes” was involved in the “Armenian deportation,” referring to the Armenian genocide during World War I.

Following a lawsuit for “inciting hatred and enmity in the public” that the Atheism Association filed in 2021 against Diyanet President Ali Erbas, the prosecutor did not indict him during the year. In 2021, during a meeting in Diyarbakır with Muslim NGOs, Erbaş said, “Let’s protect our children from ideologies other than Islam and various organizations and structures that promote disbelieving, atheism, deism, and Zoroastrianism.”

On April 26, President Erdoğan hosted leaders of diverse religious communities at an iftar dinner at the presidential palace.

In December, Erdoğan issued a statement wishing a Happy Hanukkah to “all the Jewish people, especially our Jewish citizens,” and said, “Our Jewish citizens, with whom we live together in a strong sense of unity, solidarity and belonging, are an inseparable part of our society.” Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu issued a statement on social media sending his best wishes for a Happy Hanukkah “to all those who celebrate” in Istanbul.

In February, the government for the seventh consecutive year commemorated the nearly 800 Jewish refugees who died aboard the *Struma*, a ship that sank off the coast of Istanbul in 1942. The governor of Istanbul, Chief Rabbi Ishak Haleva, other members of the Jewish community, and members of the diplomatic community attended the commemoration.

In July, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism instructed provincial governors to engage with the Alevi community during Muharram beginning on July 29. The ministry proposed that provincial and local officials visit Alevi constituents and

participate in ceremonial meals to build bridges with the Alevi community and underscore the month's profound significance for all Muslims.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In January, the Islamic-focused National Defense Movement criticized pop singer Sezen Aksu for using lyrics that offended Islam, and a group of 20 National Defense Movement members protested in front of the singer's home in Beykoz, Istanbul. "Some pseudo artists have been racing with each other to belittle our national and spiritual values and insult religion under the guise of art," said National Defense Movement chair Murat Şahin.

There were continued media reports of vandalism of places of worship and cemeteries. In March, a court acquitted three men charged in 2021 with "insulting religious values" after they videotaped themselves dancing atop the gates of the Surp Tavakor Armenian Church in Istanbul and damaged the gate's crucifix. The three defendants said they were drunk during the incident and meant no disrespect to the church.

According to local media, on July 30, the first full day of Muharram, assailants attacked six Alevi institutions and cemevis in Ankara. One individual was injured as an assailant threw chairs at the Şah-i Mardan Cemevi, and another individual was injured during a knife attack at the Turkmen Alevi Bektaşî Foundation. Unidentified individuals threw stones at doors and windows of various Alevi organizations. Police apprehended a suspect shortly after the attacks, and authorities investigated the attacks as terrorism. Multiple politicians, from the ruling party and the opposition, as well as Diyanet President Erbaş, condemned the attacks, while opposition leaders called the incidents a "clear and planned provocation." In a statement after the attacks, Democratic Alevi Associations President Mustafa Karabudak stated, "These attacks are directly related to the political power's marginalization of Alevis, ignoring their beliefs and making politics over them. Political power is responsible for these attacks."

On July 15, the country's Jewish Community tweeted that some individuals identified as under the age of 18 had damaged 36 gravestones overnight at the Jewish cemetery in Hasköy, Istanbul. In November, four of the youths were

charged with damaging a total of 81 tombstones and faced potential prison sentences of six months to two years.

In April, an *Agos* columnist referred to a swastika drawn on the gate of the Bomonti Mihitaryan Armenian school in Istanbul and stated there was a need to improve education on the Holocaust and other genocides committed throughout history.

Some news outlets published conspiracy theories involving Jews. On May 14, a Jewish community website warned that a group calling itself the Ebabiller Platform was circulating antisemitic messages on social media. The messages targeted two hospitals within the Liv medical group, where hospital management had reportedly forbidden female staff to wear Islamic headscarves. Attributing the alleged ban to an executive of “Jewish origin and Israeli nationality” who managed those two sites, the messages said “we will not allow” the historical struggle for head coverings to be undermined, and “we will not stop, we will not be silent” until “necessary measures” were taken.

According to media reports, in April, Palestinian Muslim scholar Mraweh Nassar, the secretary-general of the Jerusalem Committee of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, said on Turkish television that Jews started the war in Ukraine to establish a new Jewish state there and “are now saying that the Temple and biblical Jerusalem are located in Ukraine and not in Palestine.” Nassar also denied the Holocaust and said Jews were responsible for it. He made the comments on Channel 9, an Arabic-language cable channel broadcast in the country and affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood.

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ said they were treated with suspicion in the press and on social media, which they said wrongly associated them with conspiracy theories. As reported by other Protestant groups, some followers avoided church services for fear of attracting suspicion and social discrimination.

On February 9, media sources reported the arrest of an individual in Kocaeli Province for having insulted Alevis on social media. Authorities charged him with inciting hatred and animosity. On February 18, media outlets reported that a Hatay high school suspended its music teacher for insulting Alevi students. The teacher, referred to by the initials B.K., asked if there were any Christians or Alevis

in the classroom, asserted those students were “different from us,” and used a crude slang expression (“candle goes out”) to imply that cemevi mixed-gender gatherings were indecent.

In June 2021, representatives of the Jewish community filed a criminal complaint against the head of a health and social services business for tweeting that individuals who were protesting at Boğaziçi University because of Erdogan’s appointment of a new university rector without involvement of the university, “are all dishonest.... You are all traitors.... You are all Jews.” The case continued at year’s end.

According to Jewish community representatives, confronting hateful discourse through print and social media was the most effective way to combat antisemitism. They said antisemitic messages and hate speech in social and print media were pervasive and often went unquestioned. They added that societal hostility toward Jews sometimes manifested itself in acts of vandalism directed at Jewish places of worship and cemeteries.

Construction of a new Syriac Orthodox church, Mor Efrem, in Istanbul continued and was scheduled to be completed early in 2023. It will be the first wholly new church (not a rebuild) since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923. The approximately 18,000-member Syriac Orthodox community in Istanbul continued to use churches of other communities, in addition to its one existing historic church, to hold services.

On June 5, after partial restoration by its community foundation, the Syriac Orthodox Mor Gevargis Church in Mardin, which had been closed since 1915, reopened with a Mass led by the metropolitan bishop of Mardin and Diyarbakır.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

On September 12-13, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met in Ankara and Istanbul with government leaders, civil society groups, and diverse religious communities. During his meetings with government officials, he discussed the country’s support for refugees fleeing religious persecution and concerns raised by minority religious groups. In a meeting with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, he reiterated U.S. government support for

reopening Halki Seminary and urged the government to give permission for training Greek Orthodox clergy there. In his meetings with religious leaders, the Ambassador at Large also discussed the restoration and reopening of historical properties, the issuance of long-awaited regulations for minority foundation board elections, legal recognition for Alevis, continuing deportations of Protestants, and equal access to public funding for minority schools and facilities.

The Ambassador, other embassy and consulate general officials, and visiting U.S. officials regularly engaged with government officials throughout the year, including at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to discuss religious freedom issues, including religious education. They underscored the importance of religious freedom, interfaith tolerance, and equal treatment under the law, and of condemning hateful or discriminatory language directed at any religious group. They sought government representatives' responses to specific religious freedom concerns raised by local religious communities and explored how best to collaborate between the governments of the two countries to protect and respect religious freedom.

Senior embassy and consulate general officials regularly engaged with a wide range of religious community leaders to hear and address their concerns, including regarding religious foundation elections, education, maintaining properties and communities under pressures of declining populations, and seeking equal recognition and full and equal latitude of activity among all faiths, and to promote interreligious dialogue. Officials from the embassy and consulates general engaged with members of Sunni Muslim, Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christian, Armenian Protestant, Armenian Catholic, Protestant, Alevi, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Roman Catholic, Chaldean Catholic, Baha'i Faith, and Church of Jesus Christ religious groups, among others, throughout the country and throughout the year.

The embassy and consulates general regularly posted messages on social media marking visits to religious counterparts, annual holidays, and occasions of religious celebration to reinforce U.S. policies of religious freedom, tolerance, and diversity.