

Legal framework

Article 24 of the constitution upholds the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), stating that “everyone has the freedom of conscience, religious belief and conviction.” It prohibits discrimination on religious grounds, and states that “No one shall be allowed to exploit or abuse religion or religious feelings, or things held sacred by religion, in any manner whatsoever, for the purpose of personal or political interest or influence.”

Article 2 of the Turkish constitution defines Turkey as a secular state, but the country is currently caught between its secular and Islamic identities. A significant deterioration in human rights occurred in the aftermath of the attempted military coup of July 2016. Since then, thousands of journalists, academics, activists, writers, teachers, judges and thinkers have been arrested and accused of being ‘traitors and collaborators against national interests’. Others have been forced to adopt lower profiles and live in anticipation of being arrested, or to seek asylum in another country.

Hostility towards religious minorities

Despite constitutional protections, and some positive steps taken by the government in recent years, religious minorities are increasingly vulnerable to hate speech, discrimination and intolerance.

The current government has increasingly conflated religious and national identities by publicly endorsing a move towards a Sunni Muslim identity for Turkey, including by showing partiality towards Sunni Islam within the policy of the Diyanet (the Presidency/Directorate of Religious Affairs). The promotion of ultra-nationalism has contributed to a rise in discrimination and hate speech that encourages violence towards non-Sunni religious communities. Such incitement is visible in a variety of sectors ranging from education, the workplace and religious practice, to day-to-day administrative procedures.

Alevi Muslims, Bahai’s and Christians, particularly those who have converted from Islam, face daily societal pressures. Hate speech and occasional hate crimes targeting religious minorities have continued, including attacks on places of worship and even murder in extreme cases, with perpetrators generally enjoying impunity.

There has been a surge in the expression of anti-Christian sentiments in pro-government media, and there are increasing reports of incidents of bullying and intimidation of Christian students in schools. Educational books can fuel societal hostility against, and distrust of, religious minorities. For example, textbooks denigrate missionary activity and describe it as a means of dividing the nation.

Some Christians believe that the situation has worsened in the aftermath of the arrest, imprisonment and eventual release of American Pastor Andrew Brunson, who was accused of plotting to overthrow the government. The pastor was released and returned to the US in October 2018; however, Christians, and particularly converts to Christianity,

have [continued to be targeted](#) with accusations of a variety of malpractices. In some cases, claims have explicitly sought to falsely associate Christians with Pastor Brunson.

Recent years have also seen a concerning uptick in the forced expulsion of foreign Christian workers and other individuals resident in Turkey after they received N-82 designations in their passports. In 2019, 35 Christian workers received deportation orders, and a further 16 were expelled in 2020. As of August 2021, at least 75 workers had received such orders, and CSW has also received reports of the practice having spread to Northern Cyprus amid an increase in anti-Christian sentiment.

Places of worship

While plans for new mosques are authorised by officials, religious minorities – particularly Alevis, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Christians – continue to face restrictions on the construction of new houses of worship.

In 2016 the Transfer, Liquidation and Redistribution Committee of Mardin Governorate transferred numerous churches, monasteries, cemeteries and other assets belonging to the Syriac community in Mardin province to the Treasury. The churches, monasteries and cemeteries were subsequently transferred to the Diyanet.

The Orthodox Halki Seminary, which was forcibly closed by the government in 1971, remains shut, despite promises that it would be reopened. The reopening of the seminary faces strong opposition from Islamist and nationalist parties.

On 10 July 2020 President Erdoğan announced the government’s decision to turn the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul into a mosque after the highest administrative court in Turkey annulled the site’s museum status.

Situation of refugees and asylum seekers

In 2019 CSW reported that the situation of Iranian Christian asylum seekers residing in Turkey lacks clarity as their cases are handled directly by the Turkish authorities and not by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). As a result, refugees do not enjoy the full protection of the UNHCR and are vulnerable to intimidation and exploitation by the police and employers. Many refugees work 16 hours per day for half the average earnings of a Turkish employee.

Iranian and Syrian refugees express desperation and frustration at their current situation. Exploitation at workplaces and bullying at schools are common complaints, with many refugees reportedly obliged to hide their faith in order to keep their jobs, while others were sacked once their employers discovered they were Christians. In some cities, such as Konya, even Turkish Christians have been forced to leave due to the level of societal hostility towards them.

Recommendations

To the government of Turkey:

- Respect, protect and fulfil the provisions articulated in the national constitution guaranteeing freedom of belief, worship and the private expression of religious ideas.
- Address hate speech and discrimination against religious minorities, thereby discouraging impunity.
- Return all property confiscated from religious minority communities.
- Ensure that Iranian and Syrian Christian refugees are afforded the full protection of the UNHCR, and take steps to end discrimination against refugees in employment and other settings.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Monitor reports of hostility towards religious or belief minorities, raising concerns bilaterally at every opportunity, and call on the government of Turkey to guarantee the right to freedom of religion or belief for all, in accordance with Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which the state is party.
- Call on the UNHCR to work closely with Turkey to ensure that asylum seekers from religious minority communities are afforded their full rights and protections in accordance with international law.
- Urge all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to address the vulnerabilities and violations faced by religious or belief communities in Turkey in their reporting and communications.

To the government of the United States of America:

- The State Department should continue to closely monitor FoRB in Turkey and include the country on the Special Watch List, as recommended by the US Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).
- The Ambassador for International Religious Freedom and USCIRF should request an invitation to visit Turkey with unhindered access to all parts of the country.
- Deny US travel visas to Turkish government officials directly responsible for FoRB violations.

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