

## Legal framework

Article 24 of the Turkish 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 the grounds of religion, 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 constitution defines Türkiye 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.

Articles 38-44 of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which established the boundaries of modern Türkiye, granted rights and protections to all non-Muslim minorities.<sup>1</sup> However, Türkiye has generally restricted recognition under this treaty to the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Greek Orthodox Church and the Jewish Community, thereby excluding the Chaldean Catholic Church, Protestant Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, the Syriac Catholic Church and the Syriac Orthodox Church from enjoying the articulated protections. In practice, the three included religious communities also face violations.

The Turkish Penal Code came into effect on 1 June 2005 and purports to protect ‘the religious values of a section of the public’ from insult under Article 216. This essentially constitutes a blasphemy law, providing for a sentence of six months to a year for anyone found guilty of openly doing so. However, the law is generally used to target individuals deemed to have insulted Islam in some way, rather than other religions. It has also been used to punish critics of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, or AKP).

Türkiye has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and its Optional Protocols. It is a Member State of the Council of Europe (COE), is party to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and several protocols, is subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), and its policies and practices are monitored by the COE’s Commissioner for Human Rights.

## 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. Although Articles 122 and 216 of the Penal Code criminalise discrimination and incitement to hatred, including on the basis of religion, these provisions are rarely implemented to the fullest extent.

The current government has increasingly conflated religious and national identities by publicly endorsing a move towards a Sunni Muslim identity for Türkiye, 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 hostility and even 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, Baha’is 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.

Religious education classes are compulsory in public schools, and as members of unrecognised religious and belief communities, children from Alevi, atheist and agnostic backgrounds are obliged to take classes that focus solely on Sunni Islam.

Some Christians believe that their community’s situation worsened in the aftermath of the arrest, imprisonment and eventual release of the American pastor Andrew Brunson, who was accused of plotting to overthrow the government. The pastor was released and returned to the United States (US) in October 2018; however, Christians, and particularly converts to Christianity, have continued to be targeted with accusations of a variety of malpractices.<sup>2</sup> 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 Türkiye after they received N-82 designations in their passports. By August 2025 around 385 foreign workers

<sup>1</sup> The Treaty of Lausanne, available at: <https://www.eurel-info.cnrs.fr/spip.php?article1763&lang=en>

<sup>2</sup> CSW, ‘CSW concerned at ongoing expulsion of Christian foreign nationals’, 25 February 2021 <https://www.csw.org.uk/2021/02/25/press/5008/article.htm>

had reportedly had their residence permits revoked or had been barred from re-entering the country.<sup>3</sup> CSW has also received reports that this practice now occurs in Northern Cyprus, amid an increase in anti-Christian sentiment.

In 2021, four expelled foreign Christians launched an appeal at the ECtHR. In a June 2024 decision, the Turkish Constitutional Court ruled that the government did not violate the rights of nine foreign Christians, who were reportedly also considering appealing to the ECtHR.

On 28 January 2024, two masked gunmen invaded Santa Maria Church in Büyükdere, Istanbul, during mass. After initially firing into the air, they shot and killed Tuncer Cihan, who had visited the church regularly since December 2023. In this instance the authorities responded swiftly, arresting two suspects who, according to the Interior Ministry, were Islamic State (IS) affiliates from Russia and Tajikistan, and expressing condolences to the church. The attack was reportedly launched in response to a call from IS to target Christians and Jews.

On 12 February 2026 the European Parliament adopted a resolution strongly condemning the targeted expulsions of foreign Christians and foreign journalists on national security grounds and called on the government to stop using administrative measures that bar individuals from entering or re-entering the country.<sup>4</sup>

In May 2026, in the case of *Mavrikakis and Others v. Turkey*, the ECtHR ruled that Türkiye had violated the rights of two Greek Orthodox priests by preventing them from serving on the boards of religious minority foundations in Istanbul.<sup>5</sup> The court ordered the state to pay 2,000 Euros in compensation to each complainant.

## Places of worship

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

The Alevi community is the country's largest religious minority. There are estimated to be around over 1,500 Alevi houses of worship, known as cemevis, across the country; however, they are not recognised by the Diyanet. This lack of religious status has financial and other implications, including that cemevis do not receive state funding and must pay standard utility and energy bills.

Although Jehovah's Witnesses enjoy legal recognition, their places of worship, or Kingdom Halls, are still not recognised sufficiently as places of worship, despite a 24 May 2016

ECtHR ruling that addressed the strict application of zoning laws that was used to deny recognition.

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 Türkiye annulled the site's museum status. In February 2024 the authorities followed through on a similar effort to convert the Byzantine Chora Church – another UNESCO World Heritage Site in Istanbul – into a mosque, despite protests from Orthodox Christians.

In 2025, as restoration by a joint World Heritage Fund and Turkish team of the Armenian Cathedral of Ani, a World Heritage Site in Kars, was approaching completion, the government announced that it would be reopened as the Fethiye (Conquest) Mosque, reigniting 'longstanding concerns over Turkey's systematic erasure of its Christian heritage'.<sup>6</sup>

On 21 June 2026 President Erdoğan ordered officials to resume talks regarding the reopening of the Orthodox Halki Seminary, which had been forcibly closed by the government in 1971. The reopening of the seminary faces strong opposition from Islamist and nationalist parties, and previous promises regarding its reopening have not been fulfilled.

## Situation of refugees and asylum seekers

The situation of Iranian Christian asylum seekers residing in Türkiye 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 regularly experience exploitation at workplaces and bullying at schools, with many reportedly obliged to hide their faith in order to keep their jobs. Others have been 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.

## Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression (and of assembly) is increasingly restricted through stringent internet censorship, prosecutions, revocation of licenses, broadcast suspensions, and the blocking of the social media accounts of journalists, media organisations, civil society organisations and human rights defenders under Article 8/A of Law No. 5651 on

3 USCIRF, 'Hearing on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Turkey', 20 August 2025 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LufSUPeXp40&t=998s>

4 Official Journal of the European Union, European Parliament resolution on the targeted expulsions of foreign journalists and foreign Christians in Türkiye under national security pretexts (2026/2613(RSP)), 12 February 2026 [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=OJ:C\\_202603765](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=OJ:C_202603765)

5 Stockholm Center for Freedom, 'ECtHR faults Turkey for barring Orthodox priests from foundation boards', 29 May 2026 <https://stockholmcf.org/ecthr-faults-turkey-for-barring-orthodox-priests-from-foundation-boards/>

6 Cultural Property News, 'Turkey Declares Ancient Armenian Cathedral of Ani is Mosque', 10 July 2025 <https://culturalpropertynews.org/turkey-declares-armenian-cathedral-mosque/>

Regulating Broadcasting in the Internet and Fighting Against Crimes Committed through Internet Broadcasting.<sup>7</sup>

Article 217/A of the Penal Code, also known as the disinformation or censorship law, criminalises ‘publicly disseminating misleading information’ regarding the country’s internal or external security, public order, or general health. While the article penalises the sharing of misleading information with prison terms and fines, it does not clearly define this, neither does it specify what kind of information constitutes a threat to national security or public order, causing many to self-censor.

On 14 June 2024 then-30-year-old agnostic and secularist content creator Diamond Tema took part in a YouTube debate about shari’a law with another Turkish social media content creator, Asrin Tok. During the discussion, Mr Tema read a text describing the Prophet Mohammed’s marriage and consummation of the marriage to his final wife, Aisha, when she was six and nine years old respectively, from the Sahih al-Bukhari hadith collection. He stated that he believed such actions were immoral and incompatible with human rights. He asked Asrin Tok if he believed that the text was accurate and for his views on its morality. He also criticised the ruling AKP Party, the Republican People’s Party, Good Party, and other opposition parties for what he called their Islamist leanings.

Three days later, on 17 June, Mr Tema relocated to Albania after receiving death threats and warnings that he would likely be arrested if he remained in Türkiye. The following day a warrant was issued for his arrest for violating Article 216 of the Criminal Code.

## Recommendations

### To the government of Türkiye:

- Respect, protect and fulfil the provisions articulated in the national constitution guaranteeing freedom of belief, worship and the private expression of religious ideas.
- Respect, protect and fulfil the right to FoRB for all religious and belief minority communities, ensuring they enjoy recognition in law and in practice, that houses of worship are recognised, and that heritage sites are maintained and protected.
- Return all property confiscated from religious and belief minority communities.

- Address hate speech and discrimination against religious and belief minorities, thereby discouraging impunity.
- Review, revise or repeal restrictive laws, and end practices that infringe unduly on the freedoms of expression, assembly, association and the press; end the judicial harassment of journalists and the media, and safeguard digital and online expression.
- Align domestic legislation with international and regional human rights standards, implement the rulings of the ECtHR, and ensure national courts adhere to its case law and binding judgments.
- Ensure that Iranian and Syrian Christian refugees are afforded the full protection of the UNHCR, take steps to end discrimination against refugees and asylum seekers in employment and other settings, and respect the principle of non-refoulement.

### To the United Nations and Member States:

- Monitor reports of hostility towards religious and belief minorities, raising concerns bilaterally at every opportunity, and call on the government of Türkiye to guarantee the right to FoRB for all, in accordance with Article 18 of the ICCPR, to which the state is party.
- Call on the UNHCR to work closely with Türkiye to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers from religious and belief minority communities are afforded their full rights and protections in accordance with international law, and are not subject to refoulement.
- Urge all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to address the vulnerabilities and violations faced by religious and belief communities in Türkiye in their reporting and communications.
- Utilise the Universal Periodic Review process, Human Rights Council sessions and other key international human rights instruments and forums to raise FoRB violations in Türkiye and to offer recommendations to advance the right to FoRB.
- Urge the government of Türkiye, at every appropriate opportunity, to implement the recommendations highlighted in the section above ‘To the government of Türkiye’.

<sup>7</sup> Civil Rights Defenders, Turkey: Ensure peaceful assembly, free speech during protests, 28 March 2025 <https://crd.org/2025/03/28/turkey-ensure-peaceful-assembly-free-speech-during-protests/>

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