

Briefing Memo:

Turkey's continued assault on religious freedom



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The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom upgraded Turkey to Tier 2 (formerly USCIRF’s Watch List) in 2013. This action was motivated by the perceived assessment that “Turkey is moving in a positive direction with regard to religious freedom,” and that there is progress on a number of reforms and policy initiatives that would rectify many longstanding restrictions on Turkey’s religious minorities. Years later, we are still waiting for those reforms and initiatives to take effect. In fact, in 2015, USCIRF expressed concern that the overall landscape for democracy and human rights has “deteriorated significantly with troubling implications for religious freedom or belief.” Turkey continues to deny the full legal status of religious groups and enforces the practice of listing religious affiliation on national ID cards. Anti-Semitism is on the rise, as is societal discrimination toward those who practice a minority religion, and serious religious freedom violations in the Turkish-occupied northern part of Cyprus are still an ongoing problem. In light of this lack of progress on religious freedom, the US should not accept rhetoric and empty promises from Turkey. Rather, it should actively press the issue of religious freedom with the Turkish government and insist on actions that will protect religious minorities, actions which must be consistent with the USCIRF report, international conventions, and the legal decisions of the European Court of Human Rights.

WHO ARE THE RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN TURKEY?

Turkey has a population of 79,414,269. Muslims (mostly Sunni) make up 99.8%, while non-Muslims (Christians and Jews) make up 0.2%. Alevis (an offshoot of Shiite Islam) make up 15-25% of Turkey's population. Non-Muslim minorities include 60,000 Armenian Orthodox Christians, 20,000 Syriac Orthodox Christians, 2,000 Greek Orthodox Christians, 18,000 Jews, 25,000 Roman Catholics, 10,000 Bahais, and 3,000 Protestant Christians, as well as numerically small Christian communities made up of Maronites, Chaldeans, Nestorians, and Georgian and Bulgarian Orthodox.

The Turkish government continues to interpret the 1923 Lausanne Treaty as granting special legal minority status only to three recognized groups: Armenian Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians. The guarantees and protections that are to be afforded under the treaty are not extended to other minority groups. Although Turkey's non-Muslim religious minority communities are small, making up less than 1 percent of Turkey's total population, they are diverse, with historical and cultural significance.

THE STATE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN TURKEY

The USCIRF annual report and the US State Department Religious Freedom Report for 2014 both express great concern for religious freedom in Turkey. The reports detail that

- Senior government officials have made strongly anti-Semitic remarks, especially during the conflict in Gaza
- Trials for the killing of several minority group members continued without progress
- The government continues to limit the rights of non-Muslim minorities, especially those it did not recognize as being covered by the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, and denies full legal status to all religious communities, inhibiting their ability to own property
- The government continues to hold expropriated property belonging to religious minorities
- The government trains Sunni Muslim clerics, while restricting other religious groups from training clergy, and continues to fund the construction of Sunni mosques while restricting land use of other religious groups.
- Despite rulings by the European Court of Human Rights, the government does not recognize Alevi houses of worship (cemevis), and Alevis continue to experience difficulty obtaining exemptions from mandatory religion classes.
- While the Turkish government established a process in 2011 to return properties or pay compensations and some properties have been returned, minorities claim the process is biased, slow, and that compensation is insufficient.

- Since 2008, there has been an ongoing dispute over the Turkish government's attempted seizure of some territory of the 1,600-year-old Mor Gabriel Monastery, the Syriac Patriarch's residence from 1160 to 1932. A case over a large portion of the property is pending before the European Court of Human Rights.
- The government maintains the practice of listing religious affiliation on national identity cards, a practice that exposes non-Muslim minorities to discrimination and harassment.
- The Greek Orthodox Seminary, Halki, remains closed despite US demands and Turkish promises to reopen the school.
- The government also continues to interfere in the selection of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch by requiring that only Turkish citizens can be members of the Greek Orthodox Church's Holy Synod. Turkey also interferes in the selection process of the Armenian Orthodox Patriarch.

Of serious concern, as well, are religious freedom violations in the Turkish occupied northern part of Cyprus. Occupying troops and local authorities deny religious minority communities access to, use, and restoration of places of worship and cemeteries, leading to their gradual deterioration.

Ultimately, Turkey has made no genuine attempts at serious progress on any of these issues in spite of public and private promises and assurances. Religious minorities -- non-Muslim minorities in particular -- continue to face serious impediments to practicing and expressing their beliefs, impediments that have decimated Turkey's Christian and other religious minorities over the years.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Turkey's parliament is in the process of establishing a parliamentary commission with the goal of drafting a new constitution. The United States should insist that the constitution be consistent with international human rights standards on religious freedom, and Turkey should take into account the concerns of its minority communities. Turkey must also:

- Comply with its international obligations by implementing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and complying with decisions made by the European Court of Human Rights.
- Fulfill its public and private promises to reopen the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary, and stop interfering in the internal affairs of all religious communities, allowing them to select their leaders with respect to their internal beliefs and guidelines.
- Publicly denounce officials who make anti-Semitic and derogatory statements toward minorities, and
- End all restrictions on use, access, and restoration of places of worship and cemeteries in the occupied northern part of Cyprus.

Sources:

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HALC Briefing Memo: The U.S. Should Stop Giving Turkey a Pass on Rights Violations Against Christians & Other Religious Minorities: <http://hellenicleaders.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Briefing-Memo-USCIRF-report.pdf>



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