



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# COUNTRY UPDATE: TURKEY (Türkiye)

July 2024

Stephen Schneck  
*Chair*

Eric Ueland  
*Vice Chair*

### Commissioners

Mohamed Elsanousi

Maureen Ferguson

Susie Gelman

Vicky Hartzler

Asif Mahmood

Meir Soloveichik

Erin D. Singshinsuk  
*Executive Director*

### USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

By Susan Bishai, Policy Analyst

## Religious Freedom Conditions in Turkey

### Overview

Recent political and social conditions in Turkey continue to present challenges to religious freedom in the country. Amid Turkey's other significant human rights abuses, including increasing levels of [transnational repression](#), the government has also maintained or advanced policies that disenfranchise or threaten religious minorities in both Turkey and [neighboring countries](#). Nonstate actors also intensified their religiously motivated campaigns of violence.

This country update outlines how Turkish religious nationalism has contributed to these restrictions and explains the violations religious minority communities and secularists in Turkey continue to face. The report also notes attacks by nonstate actors on the basis of religion.

### State Religious Nationalism: Effects on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Minorities

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government continues to both draw upon and fuel an assertive form of religious and ethnic nationalism that positions Turkish national identity as synonymous with a particular framing of Sunni Islam. This ideology's utility as a populist political tool appears to have animated many of the government's restrictions on both religious minorities and secular Turks, whom it perceives as threats to the regime. For example, officials continue to enforce Article 216 of the Turkish Penal Code as a functional blasphemy law against individuals the government views as an impediment to its religious nationalist political narrative. The law criminalizes the open incitement of enmity or hatred toward another group based on social class, race, religion, or sectarian or regional differences. In February 2024, the Beykoz Chief Public Prosecutor's Office invoked Article 216 to detain lawyer [Feyza Altun](#) for her social media post denouncing Shari'a with an expletive. After detaining Altun for one day pursuant to the charge of incitement—which carries a sentence of up to three years in prison—authorities released her under judicial control measures, including an international travel ban and compulsory weekly check-ins with police. In a statement, Altun stressed that she defined Shari'a as a "political regime" and not a religious phenomenon, echoing the 20th century tradition of Turkish secularism and potentially triggering the Erdogan administration's apprehension over expressions of secularist political opposition.



The president also wielded Islamist Turkish nationalism in his 2023 election campaign against Kemal Kiliçdaroglu, a rival who broke political taboos by [announcing](#) his Alevi religious minority background. Although in May 2023 President Erdoğan secured an unprecedented third term as president, in the March 2024 local elections his long-ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) suffered landslide defeats to secular party opponents in major cities.

Despite the administration's historic losses, Turkish nationalist forms of Islamism remain entrenched in government institutions and policies, at the expense of both secular Turks of Sunni background and religious minorities. Official figures estimate that 99 percent or more of Turkey's 84 million population is Muslim, with Sunni Muslims constituting the majority. These figures obscure actual numbers of Alevis, whom the government insists on categorizing as a heterodox sect of Islam. Alevis may number between 10 million and 25 million people. In addition to a small population of Shi'a Muslims, less than half a percent of Turkey's population comprises atheists, Armenian Apostolics, Baha'is, Bulgarian Orthodox, Chaldean Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Russian Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Yazidis, and others.

Religious minorities are especially vulnerable to both state-advanced religious nationalism and discrimination in some state-administered or -approved government programs in Turkey. Recent analyses of humanitarian and government-aided responses to the devastating earthquakes of February 2023 indicate religious and ethnic minorities—such as Alevis, Arab Orthodox,

Assyrians, Protestant Christians, Jews, Nusayris, Kurds, and Roma—"faced incomplete and [inadequate](#) services across multiple areas." Religious minorities suffered the compound crises of the collapse of their houses of worship and the sudden death of community leaders—such as Antakya's Jewish community [president](#) and his wife—further restricting their already limited options for worship and community growth.

### Threats to Religious Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Turkey hosts one of the world's largest populations of international refugees and asylum seekers. These include some members of religious and ethnic groups fleeing religious persecution, such as Uyghur Muslims from China and members of spiritualist communities in Iran. Individuals seeking a protected status once administered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are subject to Turkey's often protracted assessments of their applications for refugee or other international protection status, remaining vulnerable to possible deportation to their countries of origin.

In May 2024, officials in an eastern province of Turkey arrested and detained a UN-registered refugee from Iran who had fled persecution on the basis of his identity as a Gonabadi Sufi Muslim. In June, officials notified the detainee of their intention to deport him, among other Iranian-born refugees, ostensibly because he had traveled between cities within Turkey. The detainee, who has reported Turkish officials' harassment of him on the basis of his Shi'a Sufi Muslim faith, is at risk of severe religious and political persecution in Iran.

Christian refugees and asylum seekers who have fled religious persecution in their home countries suffer the double risk of repression within Turkey and potential deportation to countries where they face religious persecution. Iran-born converts from Islam to Christianity—including clergy members—have encountered increasing Turkish government restrictions on freedom of worship as well as the threat of detention and deportation. For example, in January 2024, authorities [arrested](#) and detained Mojtaba Keshavarz Ahmadi, an Iranian convert from Shi'a Islam to Christianity who for the past 10 years has awaited a refugee status determination. Turkish authorities invoked an oft-cited basis for their detention of refugees and asylum seekers: unauthorized travel between cities or regions within Turkey. Ahmadi remains in a deportation camp in western Turkey, at risk of imminent removal to Iran.

## Alevis

Alevi religious beliefs encompass elements of both Shi'a and Sunni Islam—including Sufism or Islamic mysticism—as well as Alevi-specific religious rites and houses of worship called *cemevi*. Among Alevis, religious and ethnic self-identification may vary across Turkish, Kurdish, Muslim, religious Alevi, secular Alevi, and other axes. In recent years, Alevis and largely Sunni Muslim Kurds may constitute the largest and potentially most politically viable threats to the supremacy of the Sunni Hanafi Islamism at the heart of the current political regime. These groups' large numbers, perceived deviations from standard Turkish expressions of both religious and ethnic or cultural identity, and reputed receptivity to secularism or leftist political ideologies may contribute to ruling parties' attempts to politically marginalize them. As such, Alevi and Kurdish political representation has remained circumscribed in part by the pervasiveness of Sunni Turkish religious ethnonationalism in both government and society.

Alevis share some ongoing religious freedom concerns—such as the prominence of mandatory religious education courses in national schools—with other Turkish religious minorities and [secularists](#) or atheists of Sunni Muslim background. Additionally, since local elections in March 2024, Alevi political advocates have renewed longstanding calls for the Turkish government to significantly reduce the budget and primacy within the government of the Diyanet, or Directorate of Religious Affairs. Some Alevi and Kurdish activists have pointed to the government's use of the Diyanet as a mechanism for Sunni Muslims to retain power, arguing that the government should

not use the Diyanet to financially subsidize any religious ideology or demographic. Alevi concerns over budget allocations reflect a broader, persistent objection to the Turkish government's longstanding refusal to grant Alevism recognition as a religion. Accordingly, Alevi community liaisons expressed dissatisfaction over the Ministry of Culture's announcement in April 2024 that it would pay the lighting bills of *cemevis*. Funding through this ministry, in contrast to the Diyanet, reinforces the government's continued opposition to recognition of Alevis as a faith community.

## Christians

Turkey's small Christian demographic is diverse, encompassing members of ethnically linked traditional churches such as Armenian, Syriac, and Greek Orthodox; Turkish converts from Islam to Christianity, often Protestantism; and foreign-born Christians of varying backgrounds, including some U.S. Protestant clergy as well as refugees fleeing religious persecution from other countries, such as Iran.

The government's restrictions on many newer Christian communities reflect its heightened concern over perceived threats to its security and political dominance. Accordingly, the government often targets those Christian communities catering to converts from Islam or with ties to Western institutions or religious leaders. Restrictions include denial of legal recognition for denominations and their houses of worship; refusal to authorize religious schools and clergy training programs; and detention, deportation, and reentry bans on foreign-born Christians, especially those suspected of engaging in proselytization.

In part because of official obstacles to training and education for Christian clergy, many Protestant Christian Turkish communities include foreign-born clergy and other religious workers. Community advocates have determined that since January 2019 and as of early 2024, the Turkish government has targeted over 100 long-term resident or expatriate Protestant Christians in Turkey and Turkish-controlled Northern Cyprus, affecting potentially hundreds of family members, including some Turkish citizen spouses and children.

For example, authorities continue to assign restrictive immigration codes such as N82 and G87 to Christian clergy and their family members, designating them as risks to national security. Some international legal observers have suggested the government's actions do not align with a 2015 Turkish Council of State decision

finding that missionary activity or proselytizing are neither crimes nor threats against national security. In February 2024, the Turkish Constitutional Court [ruled](#) that immigration authorities had not violated Protestant Christians' freedom of religion by targeting legal resident pastors and other religious leaders for reentry bans, cancelation of residence permits, and deportation. Community advocates report that these restrictions on spurious national security grounds have further burdened Turkish Christian congregations, depriving them of clergy and other critical staff.

Both traditional churches and newer congregations face ongoing struggles to protect and preserve their churches' religious sites and properties. Some of these sites are vulnerable to religiously motivated vandalism and other [attacks](#), especially in strongholds of Islamist Turkish nationalism. Protestant liaisons report some congregations resorting to covert worship and other means to avoid further attacks or government restrictions. Although some traditional churches such as Greek Orthodox may enjoy a legal recognition that the government does not extend to all Christian denominations, dwindling populations have rendered historic church preservation a matter of urgency for those communities.

Orthodox communities remain deeply distressed by the Turkish government's controversial 2020 decree—couched in President Erdoğan's Islamist [nationalist](#) rhetoric—reactivating the Byzantine-era Sophia Hagia basilica and museum as a mosque. Likewise, the government's "reactivation" in May 2024 of Istanbul's historic [Church of Saint Savior in Chora](#) and museum as the Kariye Mosque has prompted an outcry from Christians in Turkey, the international Orthodox community, and cultural heritage preservationists. Community advocates have noted that the structure's relatively small space for worshipers and the abundance of mosques in the city render its use as a mosque a largely

symbolic act for the administration to style itself as an inheritor of Ottoman Islamist power.

On a positive note, government officials made some public overtures to certain religious minority communities. In April 2024, President Erdoğan offered his annual condolences to Christian Armenian-ancestry citizens for their community's loss of life during World War I. In May, the president reportedly [stated](#) that his administration was "working to reopen the Theological School of Halki," which the Turkish government has kept shuttered for several decades. In June, Minister of Education Yusuf Tekin visited the [school](#), an institution that many Eastern Orthodox communities consider essential to the future flourishing of their clergy and churches throughout the world. The minister's reported comment that he "would like to see the Halki Theological School [re]open," coupled with President Erdoğan's related statements, may rekindle the hope of Orthodox Christians in Turkey that the government will make long-awaited reforms in relation to this matter of both domestic and international import.

## Jews

Approximately [14,300](#) Jews live in Turkey. The majority of the population resides in Istanbul, which has 26 synagogues currently active. Smaller communities also exist in Izmir, Bursa, and Antakya. Since Hamas's October 7, 2023 attacks on Israel and the ensuing conflict in Gaza, Turkish officials, including President Erdoğan and others in the public eye, have made [statements](#) fueling anti-Jewish sentiment in Turkey. In May 2024, among a series of remarks on the war in Gaza, President Erdoğan reportedly asserted that Israel has planned a post-Hamas conflict takeover of Turkish territory. Such comments evoke antisemitic Turkish narratives fearing Jewish dominance in Anatolia. The president's remarks have contributed to some Turkish Jews' increasing fear of persecution within the country.



## Nonstate Actors

In addition to Turkish government-enacted restrictions on freedom of religion or belief, nonstate actors with religiously motivated ideologies also pose a serious threat to the Turkish population. Branches of the self-declared Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have in recent years attracted a growing membership in Turkey, including foreign-born and transnational jihadists.

On January 24, gunmen entered the Santa Maria Roman Catholic Church in Istanbul, where Sunday Mass was underway, and opened fire in an attack that killed one person. Reports later identified the victim as a man of Alevi background who had regularly attended Mass with his uncle, a convert to Christianity. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack, *stating* it had “attacked a gathering of Christian unbelievers during their polytheistic ceremony” in response to a January 4th ISIS *call* for “attacks against Jews and Christians worldwide by any means possible ... without distinguishing between civilian and military apostates.” As the *first* successful

ISIS attack in seven years within Turkey, the shooting reflects the growing influence of ISIS’s Central Asia- and Afghanistan-based Khorasan branch (ISIS-K). In response, the Turkish government *accelerated* its anti-ISIS campaign in which authorities over the course of 10 months arrested, detained, or investigated over 3,000 people—including many of Central Asian nationality or background—with alleged links to the terrorist group.

## Conclusion

Recent political and social conditions in Turkey reflect the government’s continued restrictions on religious freedom. In its *2024 Annual Report*, USCIRF recommended that the U.S. Department of State place Turkey on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The chapter also outlines a number of steps the U.S. government can take to address religious freedom issues in Turkey.

## Professional Staff

**Michael Ardovino**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Susan Bishai**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Mollie Blum**  
*Researcher*

**Elizabeth K. Cassidy**  
*Senior Strategic Advisor*

**Mingzhi Chen**  
*Supervisory Policy Advisor*

**Patrick Greenwalt**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Sema Hasan**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Thomas Kraemer**  
*Chief Administrative Officer*

**Veronica McCarthy**  
*Public Affairs Associate*

**Hilary Miller**  
*Researcher*

**Nora Morton**  
*Operations Specialist*

**Dylan Schexnaydre**  
*Researcher*

**Jamie Staley**  
*Acting Director of Research and Policy*

**Scott Weiner**  
*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**Luke Wilson**  
*Researcher*

**Nathan Wineinger**  
*Chief of Public Affairs*

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.