

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST (SWL)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, the government of Turkey (Türkiye) engaged in systematic and ongoing severe violations of religious freedom, consistent with the previous year. At the same time, the administration of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan continued its dialogue with certain historical religious communities, including negotiations with the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church to potentially reopen the Halki Theological School, which closed in 1971 in response to government policies. The government also continued restoring some historical houses of worship, with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism beginning renovations on Cappadocia’s medieval St. George Church as part of a tourism promotion campaign. However, many religious communities did not substantially benefit from such measures, with several—including Alevis, Protestant Christians, and Jehovah’s Witnesses—unable to secure legal recognition as religions or approval to register, build, or restore houses of worship for day-to-day use.

Amid a large-scale government crackdown on political expression in support of opposition leaders, authorities also systematically violated religious freedom by punishing secularist sentiment in state institutions and continuing to enforce Article 216 of the Turkish Penal Code as a de facto law against blasphemy. In January, the Ministry of Defense officially dismissed five new lieutenants and their three superior officers for choosing a secularist oath for their swearing-in ceremony. The government also monitored online activity for perceived insults to Islam and prosecuted religious dissenters under Article 216(3) for “incitement of hatred toward another group based on religious differences.” For example, in June, the Ministry of the Interior arrested and detained at least four employees of the satirical magazine *LeMan* for publishing a cartoon that rioters decried as an alleged caricature of the Prophet Muhammad. Ministry of Justice officials also announced their investigation of the journalists for “publicly insulting religious values.” In September, the İstanbul Chief Public Prosecutor’s Office charged YouTube interviewer Boğaç Soydemir and his guest Enes Akgündüz with “inciting hatred and enmity or insulting a segment of the

public” for reading aloud a viewer-submitted joke relating to the Prophet Muhammad. In contrast to these and other state restrictions on religious expression, in March, Turkey’s top appeals court overturned the conviction of a man who had publicly vowed to kill Jews, Americans, and Kurds.

The national legislature also imposed additional, systematic restrictions on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). In June, the parliament enacted a legislative amendment expanding the authority of the state-controlled Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) to ban the distribution of Qur’an translations it considers inconsistent with Islamic principles. Prison authorities, too, restricted access to Qur’ans, other religious literature, and daily Islamic ablutions for some defendants, such as former detainee Aysu Öztaş Bayram. Alevi advocates continued raising their own [concerns](#) over the scope of the Diyanet, pointing to its almost exclusive emphasis on Sunni Muslim institutions and communities—affording them official recognition as a religion and providing them with public funding and support for which Alevis, as part of a designated “cultural” tradition, remained ineligible.

The government reportedly intensified a multiple-year campaign invoking spurious national security concerns to cut off the legal residency status of at least 375 foreign national Christian clergy, their family members, and other religious workers, to date. Throughout 2025, authorities continued to use immigration codes N-82 and G-87 to designate these clergy and laity as “national security threats,” barring them from renewing their residency status or reentering Turkey after travel abroad. These religious leaders had long resided lawfully in the country, serving Turkish Protestant Christian communities in part due to ongoing government restrictions on domestic Christian clergy training programs and educational institutions. Protestant Christians and Jehovah’s Witnesses reported additional obstacles to their legal recognition and access to houses of worship, with officials thwarting both their applications for new construction and their attempts to [repurpose](#) disused historical churches for their regular worship needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Turkey on the Special Watch List, or SWL, for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
 - Link future U.S. security assistance and bilateral trade policies to improvements of religious freedom in Turkey; and
 - Capitalize on the U.S-Turkey bilateral relationship to stress the importance to FoRB in Turkey of ceasing national security bans on foreign national clergy and easing restrictions on clergy training programs and institutions, registration of religious groups, and access to houses of worship.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Hold hearings on religious freedom in Turkey and send congressional delegations to the country to raise specific issues, including the repression of FoRB in public education, the denial of U.S. clergy from re-entering the country on false security threats, and conditions for refugees in Turkey who have a credible fear of expulsion back to religious persecution in their home countries; and
 - Invoke its legislative authority to conduct an investigation into Turkey’s enforcement of Article 216 of the Penal Code as a de facto blasphemy law to inform future legislation addressing this issue.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Freedom of Religion or Belief in Turkey](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief** [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2

Background

Turkey's distinct legacy of political secularism is a founding principle of the 102-year-old republic, reflected in the constitution's emphasis on the secular nature of the state and its acknowledgment of freedom of religion and conscience. However, both demographic and political trends have contributed to a recent increase in state-sponsored and social marginalization of non-Sunni Muslims. Turkey classifies 99.8 percent of its almost 85 million population as Muslim, including an estimated 10–25 million Alevis—many of whom do not consider themselves Muslim. Ja'fari Shi'a Muslims constitute a tiny minority of the population, and the government regards less than one percent of the population as non-Muslim, including Greek and Syrian Orthodox Christians, Roman and Chaldean Catholic Christians, Armenian Apostolic and Protestant Christians, Baha'is, Jews, Yazidis, and others.

The government maintains formal relationships with some of these religious minorities, partly in interpretation of the 1923 [Treaty of Lausanne](#), which acknowledged "[non-Muslim] minorities" with longstanding ties to the former Ottoman Empire. In 2025, such relations included President Erdoğan's condolences in January to Turkish Jewish communities upon the death of the country's Chief Rabbi Rav Isek Haleva. In November, President Erdoğan welcomed Pope Leo XIV, who visited Turkey for the global celebration of the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. The pontiff met with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I of the Eastern Orthodox Church, as well as other Turkish Christian communities.

Other Government Policies Restricting FoRB

Eastern Orthodox Church members continued to await the results of protracted negotiations between church leaders and the government of Turkey to set a public date for the reopening of the Halki School, 54 years after government policies induced its closure. In the meantime, Eastern Orthodox Christians, like their Protestant and other Christian counterparts, remained ineligible for domestic training, resorting to seminary programs abroad.

In other forms of education, a lack of religious choice and diversity remained a major concern for Christian, Alevi, Shi'a Muslim, and secularist parents. Even as new research revealed a significant decline in the number of Turks who describe themselves as devout and an increase in those who identify as atheists or nonbelievers, public schools continued to require the majority of pupils to take courses in religion, pursuant to the constitution. In light of other state policies blocking [Alevis](#), atheists, [Protestant Christians](#), and others—especially converts from Islam—from obtaining accurate and official documentation of their religious identity, many pupils from these backgrounds faced misidentification as Sunni Muslims and, consequently, compulsory coursework on the tenets of Islam.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2025, the administration of President Donald J. Trump maintained the United States' strategic bilateral relationship with Turkey. However, the administration's pause on foreign assistance in 2025 had an immediate impact on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Turkey, such as the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) that had supported people seeking protection from severe religious persecution in their home countries.

In March, the House Foreign Affairs Europe Subcommittee held a [hearing](#) on Turkey. In June, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Committee held a [hearing](#) on human rights in Turkey, citing USCIRF's 2025 Annual Report recommendation that the United States add Turkey to the Special Watch List.

In September, the administration took several measures to highlight religious freedom in Turkey. Michael J. Rigas, deputy secretary of state for Management and Resources, hosted an [event](#) in honor of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I. The next day, the ecumenical patriarch and President Trump [met](#) and reportedly discussed challenging religious freedom conditions for Christians in Turkey. Later that month, President Trump received President Erdoğan, affirmatively raising the question of the Halki School's potential reopening.