

Turkey



Discrimination / Worsened ↓

Religion

Population

Area

- Muslims : **98.3%**
- Agnostics : **1.1%**
- Others : **0.6%**

79,622,000

783,562 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The Turkish constitution^[1] defines the country as a secular state. It guarantees freedom of conscience, religious belief, conviction, expression and worship. Article 24 prohibits discrimination on religious grounds and exploitation or abuse of “religious feelings, or things held sacred by religion.”

The Turkish state coordinates and governs religious matters through the Directorate (or Presidency) of the Religious Affairs (Diyanet), established in 1924 under article 136 of the constitution as a successor to the highest religious authority (Shayk al-Islam) after the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate. Operating under the Prime Minister’s office, the Directorate promotes the teaching and practices of Sunni Islam. For 2018, the Turkish government allocated US\$2 billion from the state budget to the directorate , awarding it more money than 12 other ministries and most state institutions^[2]

National identity cards contain a space for religious identification, although the constitution stipulates that no one can be compelled to reveal his or her religious belief.^[3]

Religious groups are not required to register with the authorities but the places of worship of unregistered groups are not recognised by the state.^[4]

Under the constitution, Sunni Islamic religious instruction is mandatory in state-main-tained primary and secondary schools. Only students self-identified as “Christian” or “Jewish” on their national identity cards may apply for an exemption from these classes. The government continues to refuse to exempt ‘Alevi or other children from compulsory Sunni Islamic instruction.^[5]

The government interprets restrictively the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which refers to “non-Muslim minorities”, as granting special legal minority status exclusively to three recognised groups: Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, Greek

Orthodox Christians and Jews. Despite this special status, they, like other minority groups such as Catholics, Syriacs, Protestants, 'Alevi, etc.), have no legal identity: they cannot buy or own properties or seek legal redress. Currently these groups are able to hold on to their property through separate foundations.^[6]

There are no reliable data about the religious minority groups.^[7]

In its International Religious Freedom Report for 2016, the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor of the US Department of State paints a more detailed image of the little-known, non-Muslim presence in Turkey. The report states that minority groups give figures showing that there are 90,000 Armenian Apostolic Christians (of which about 60,000 are Turkish citizens and the rest illegal immigrants from Armenia), 25,000 Roman Catholics (including many recent immigrants from Africa and the Philippines), 25,000 Syrian Orthodox, 15,000 Russian Orthodox, 7,000 Protestants, 22,000 Yezidis (most of whom came as refugees in 2014), 17,000 Jews, 10,000 Bahais, 5,000 Jehovah's Witnesses.^[8]

The report states: "Estimates of the number of atheists vary, but most recent published surveys suggest approximately 2 percent of the population is atheist."^[9]

Waves of migrants fleeing the Syrian civil war have affected Turkey's religious demography. Since 2014 thousands of Arabic-speaking Catholic (mainly Chaldeans, Syriacs) and Orthodox Christians have entered the country. The total number of refugees entering Turkey is estimated at about 3.5 million as of the first quarter of 2018.^[10] Settled in 81 Turkish cities, these refugees must remain where they registered in order to receive government financial aid. They are permitted to work, but only where they registered. The exact number of the non-Muslim refugees in cities is unknown. Christian refugees struggle to maintain their faith as most churches are in Istanbul and in a few other large cities. The small minority of Arabic-speaking Christian ministers are obliged to travel from city to city, renting (sometimes at very high prices) spaces to celebrate multiple baptisms, confirmations and weddings, often on the same day.

The state only allows the training of Sunni clerics while restricting it for other religious groups. The lack of Christian seminaries in Turkey prevents the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox Patriarchates from educating the next generation of clerics.

The Greek Orthodox Theological Seminary was closed in 1971. The Turkish government claims that the reason of this is the failure of the Greek government to guarantee reciprocal the religious freedom of its Turkish Muslim minority.^[11]

Turkey's Jewish community is able to practise its religion freely. Synagogues receive ongoing security protection from the government. Anti-Semitism, especially in print and social media, remains an issue in Turkey. However, Turkey is the only majority Muslim country that actively contributes to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.^[12]

Incidents

The Armenian Orthodox Community is the largest Christian group of Turkey. With 60,000 members, this Church is trying to resolve internal leadership problems which in turn have consequences for the legal recognition of the Church in Turkey.^[13] The titular Patriarch of the Church, Mesrob II Mutafyan, fell ill in 2008 and remains in a 'vegetative state' in a hospital in Istanbul. The Ecclesial Assembly elected Archbishop Bekçiyani, then Primate of Armenians in Germany, as locum tenens of the Patriarchate on 15th March 2017, directing him to organise the elections. However, the Turkish Government refuses to recognise the patriarchal elections, as the current patriarch is alive. Archbishop Bekçiyani left the country on 13th February 2018.^[14]

Andrew Brunson, the pastor of the İzmir Resurrection Church who has lived in Turkey for more than two decades, has been held since 7th October 2016 on charges of working with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) which is considered a terrorist organisation by NATO, the US and the UE. Brunson's trial is one of several legal cases straining US-Turkish relations.^[15] According to Brunson's lawyer, Ismail Cem Halavurt, the clergyman from North Carolina was arrested because of his religious beliefs. "There is evidence that shows Brunson was arrested due to his faith," Halavurt told a

news agency just before the trial began in April 2018. Instead, Brunson's religious role was "classified as aiding terror organisations".^[16] Brunson was charged with helping an armed terrorist organisation and "obtaining confidential government information for political and military espionage". The trial continues.^[17] On 8th February 2018 the European Parliament urged Turkey to release Pastor Brunson.^[18]

During the Christmas season there was an increase in hate speech directed toward certain Protestant Churches in Turkey, with media reporting about particular places of worship and therefore scaring the faithful who planned to attend the ceremonies.^[19]

Between November and December 2017, windows were broken and graffiti in the Malatya Kurtulus Church, the Balikesir Church and the Istanbul Kadikoy International Church

In March 2017, death threats were sent to Radio Shema, the Christian broadcasters in Ankara. Since then, the station and its director have received greater protection from the police.

| Prospects for freedom of religion

In April 2018, the Turkish government called a snap election for 24th June 2018. This election will take place under a state of emergency in place since an attempted coup d'état in July 2016. During this time, Turkey has seen mass arrests, arbitrary sacking and other abuses. Some 160,000 people have been detained and a similar number of civil servants dismissed since the failed putsch. Opposition media outlets have been shut down and many journalists have been imprisoned. This environment of intolerance, fear and instability affects Turkey's religious minorities. Indeed, religious minorities suffer particularly; Christian groups, for example, are shrinking and Christianity is on the verge of disappearing.

The constitution of 1981 establishes secularism as a central principle defining the relationship between the Turkish state and Islam, as well as other religions. Although theoretically it provides protection, "Turkish-style secularism" has been very coercive vis-à-vis non-Muslims. Turkey's ruling (Islamist) Justice and Development Party wants to debate the concept of Turkish-style secularism in order to "free" Islam from Kemalism (the secularist ideas and principles of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder and first president of the Turkish Republic). Paradoxically, minorities might benefit from this flexibility in terms of greater juridical recognition and protection for their assets. However, non-Muslims fear this could only be a display intended for the international community.

It is hard to deny that Turkey is moving towards autocracy, and this may well result in a roll back of the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Turkish society has been increasingly subject to Islamic influences, some of which are self-evidently intolerant of non-Muslims. Churches and synagogues are regularly threatened; non-Muslims find it increasingly difficult to express their faith in public.

| Endnotes / Sources

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[5] ?bid.

[6] ?bid.

[7] ?bid.

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[9] ?bid.

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[13] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, op. cit.

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[15] 'Turkish court rules US pastor will remain in custody amid coup trial', The Guardian, 16th April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/16/andrew-brunson-turkey-coup-links-denial-erdogan>, (accessed 19th April 2018).

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[18] 'Turkey: European Parliament urges Turkey to guarantee religious freedom and to release Pastor Andrew Brunson', Human Rights Without Frontiers, <http://hrwf.eu/turkey-european-parliament-urges-turkey-to-guarantee-religious-freedom-and-to-release-pastor-andrew-brunson/>, (accessed 20th April 2018).

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