

TURKEY: CHALLENGES FACING CHRISTIANS

2016-2020

Middle East Concern
International Christian Concern

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PERSECUTION^{.org}
INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN



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INTRODUCTION

Throughout its history, Turkey has sought to maintain a stature of leadership, a role which includes a responsibility to uphold and promote human rights. However, a framework exists which promotes historical revisionism and represses the legal identities of non-Muslims.

For Christians in Turkey, most religious freedom issues stem from this framework, and they currently stand at a critical juncture. These challenges compound as Turkey swings upon the political fulcrum of Kemalism or Islamism. For this reason, addressing the core framework is key for the sincere and long-term promotion of religious freedom. This report provides case study analysis on how the current framework impacts Christian communities and provides recommendations for respectfully opening a problem-solving dialogue.

Human Rights Watch in its 2020 World Report commented, “Turkey has been experiencing a deepening human rights crisis over the past four years with a dramatic erosion of its rule of law and democracy framework.” This breakdown of democratic values and failure to consistently uphold human rights has led to significant social strain. For Christians, who have a strong allegiance to their homeland, this strain is deeply impactful. Christians are prevented from fully living their faith, and instead are imprisoned behind murky legalism and a culture that attempts to silence their voice and negate their influence in broader Turkish society.

The early Christian Church was born in ancient lands today known as the Republic of Turkey. Formerly these lands were part of the Byzantine Empire, which was the seat of the Eastern Orthodox Church and an important center of Christianity until the invasion of Turks from Central Asia. The subsequent Ottoman Empire was sustained by Islam, rapidly reaching Asia Minor, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.

Under the Ottoman Empire, Christians and Jews had a second-class status. As “people of the book,”¹ they were accorded a degree of protection but had less rights and privileges than Muslims. However, systematic massacres of Armenians began in the 1890’s under the autocratic rule of Sultan Abdulhamid II after Armenians demanded the implementation of reforms agreed to at the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885.

The Ottoman Empire’s demise coincided with a desire for reform and rising Turkish nationalism through the ‘Young Turks’ movement and the establishment of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). Non-Muslims were initially part of this reformist movement, but they came to be seen as an internal security threat and were frequently blamed for economic woes and military failures. This blame eventually culminated in a genocide that left over two million Christians dead, mostly Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians. Survivors faced forced conversion and Turkification, displacement, or deportation.

After the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk led the Turkish army in a war of independence, resulting in the 1923 establishment of the modern Republic of Turkey. As part of this estab-

¹ Originally this status was restricted to Jews, Christians and Sabeans. As more countries came under Islamic rule the status was often extended to other religions, e.g. Zoroastrians, Samaritans, Mandeans and Sikhs.

ishment, Turkey and Greece agreed to a compulsory population exchange. More than a million Christians from Turkey were resettled in Greece, and nearly half a million Muslims from Greece resettled in Turkey.

The same year, the Lausanne Treaty was signed. Articles 37-43 of the treaty stipulate the rights of non-Muslims, but the subsequent Turkish legal system lacks implementing regulations and has failed to grant them adequate legal status. This is a severe handicap that remains today. Additionally, the recognition granted to Christian communities by the treaty is generally interpreted by Turkey to only apply to non-Muslim communities who were recognized in the former Ottoman Empire, including Jews, Greeks, Armenians and, to some extent, Assyrian Christians. Excluded Christian groups include Latin-rite Catholics, and Protestants.

Kemalism was born during this period and introduced sweeping reforms that replaced Turkey's Ottoman Islamic history with a modern, secular nation with limited public display of religion. In a major reform the Arabic alphabet was replaced with the Latin alphabet. This made Ottoman history less accessible and distanced the new republic from past atrocities. It allowed for the development of a new national narrative of the Republic of Turkey. However, this narrative excluded ethnic and religious minorities: Turkey was the country of the Turks. The Kemalist slogan "How happy is the one who says I am a Turk" (Turkish: Ne mutlu Türküm diyene) continues alienating Turkish citizens who are not ethnically Turkish.

Turkey evolved into one of the most stable and developed countries within the Middle East region. The country joined NATO and petitioned for membership within the European Union. Turkey's own domestic political history often swung between the extremes of Kemalist secularism and Ottoman-styled Islamism.

Today, Turkey's beleaguered Christian community numbers approximately 160,000 (including different Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant communities), less than 0.2% of the total population. The Church is no longer bound by ethnicity, and now includes several thousand adherents who are ethnically Turkish (converts from Islam to Christianity). These converts are permitted under Turkish secular law but may be targeted by extremists as "apostates" from Islam and proselytizers of the Christian faith, whether actively so or through the precedent of their conversion.

Both the competing narratives of Kemalism and Islamism underpin a framework which leads to the repression of religious freedom for religious minorities. Unless this framework is reformed, religious freedom abuses will perpetuate regardless of political leadership. These problems have become more visible following the 2016 coup attempt against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who responded by accelerating the implementation of an Islamic-nationalist agenda. This agenda appealed to both the religious and the Turkish nationalist sections of society, but increasingly isolated more moderate and democratic voices.

TURKEY: Challenges Facing Christians 2016-2020 reviews the period between 2016 – 2020. It analyzes how the dynamics of historical revisionism and legal status have impacted Turkey's Christian community, as well as those living in neighboring regional areas under Turkish influence. The report is not a comprehensive catalogue of violations against Christians, but through relevant case-studies found the following themes of religious freedom abuses:

- Emphasis on forming and maintaining the Turkish identity around Islam

- Suppression of legal status for Christians and their institutions
- Historical revisionism as a type of virtue signaling
- Excluding Christians from full acceptance and participation in Turkish society
- Neglecting the place of Christians in the lands, their history, heritage and suffering
- Using intimidation tactics to suppress the cultural and ethnic expression of Christians
- No active promotion of human rights
- Exploitation of the vulnerabilities of Christians
- Abuse of Christians as an international bargaining chip and domestic political leverage

The institutionalized use of religious freedom as a political bargaining chip should prompt caution amongst human rights advocates. Another point of caution is the cultural perception within Turkey of how these issues are discussed within the international community. As in most Middle Eastern cultures, the concepts of honor and shame play an important role within Turkish society.

Through this report, it is our earnest desire to encourage an open dialogue between the international community and Turkey, aimed at restoring trust and relationship. We hope a transparent dialogue will contribute to policies which recognize, uphold, protect, and promote the rights of Christians living in Turkey. It is through these small yet important steps of honoring the other that true reforms can ultimately be brought about.

CHRISTIANS AS POLITICAL LEVERAGE

Turkey conditionally tolerates Christians based on factors which impact domestic and international affairs according to the ruling government's strategy. This precedent became policy under Kemalism following the massacres of ethnic Christians and the population exchange. This imposition of conditions impacts Christian heritage and religious sites, as well as the personal freedoms of individual Christians.

The remnant of the Christian community in Turkey was given a degree of protection in the 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty, as was the Muslim community in Greece. However, it had the unwanted consequence of politicizing the Christian presence, creating an expectation of reciprocal international agreements. Instead of religious liberty being upheld and promoted for its Christian citizens, they are left vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation for political gain. Christian properties, institutions, organizational abilities, leadership trainings, and internal governance are just some broad examples of the state leveraging Christians for political purposes.

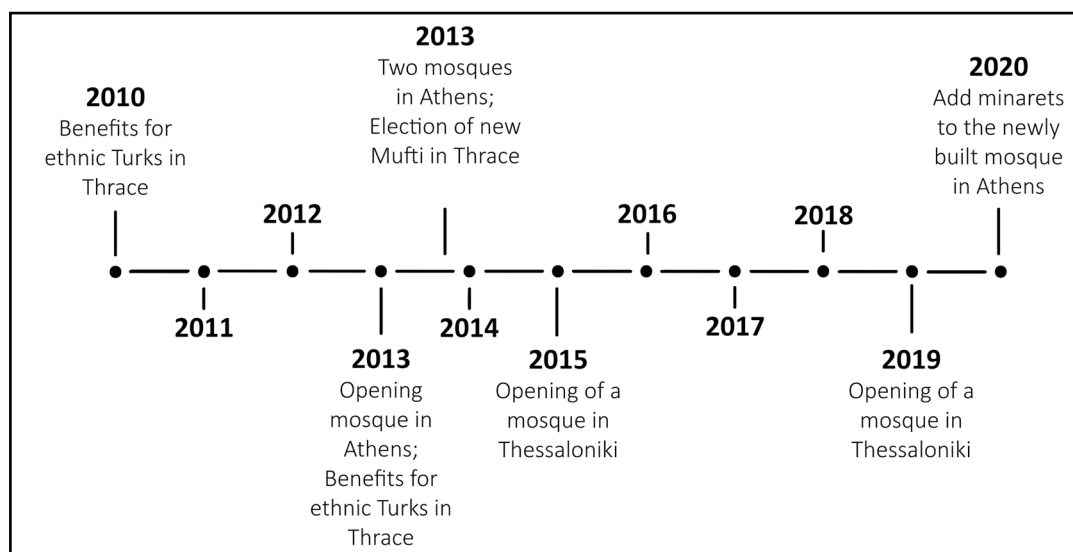
Case study: The Greek Orthodox Seminary of Halki

The Greek Orthodox Holy Trinity Monastery founded a seminary in 1844 on Halki island (Turkish: *Heybeliada*). It later evolved into the main seminary for the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. A 1971 law prohibited privately owned schools of higher education, forcing the seminary's closure. This has effectively prevented the Ecumenical Patriarchate from training their own priests within Turkey.



Halki Seminary, Istanbul. Source: [Orthodox Christian Network](#)

Various international leaders and entities have called for Halki Seminary's reopening. In a speech launching the 2018 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [said](#), "we urge the immediate reopening of the Halki Seminary near Istanbul." However, the Turkish authorities have conditioned its reopening on reciprocal measures from Greece.



Reciprocal demands made by President Erdoğan in exchange for reopening Halki

In 2020, President Erdoğan restated conditions for the reopening of Halki Seminary. He has voiced these demands throughout the past decade. For example, in 2010 Erdoğan gave an interview during which he made reopening conditional on improvements which benefit the ethnic Turkish community in Greece's Thrace. Both goals are laudable, but by connecting them, Erdoğan pursued a policy of reciprocity with foreign entities and failed to uphold the religious liberty of Turkish citizens. This policy exploits Christians in Turkey, and [promotes](#) the view that Christians are “indigenous foreigners” (Turkish: *yerli yabancılar*). Christians would have limited bargaining potential in foreign policy if they were accorded full rights and acceptance as equal citizens. Now that Athens has opened its first mosque in 2020, it awaits to be seen how Turkey will respond.

Case study: American Pastor Andrew Brunson’s Imprisonment



Andrew Brunson at his release in 2018.

Source: [Mustafa Koprulu / EPA](#)

Pursuing a policy of reciprocity neglects fundamental human rights by influencing international negotiations towards a marketplace exchange. As the case of Andrew Brunson shows, this exchange involves bargaining to reach a deal for the perceived benefit of the majority at the expense of minority rights. In this case, the Turkish government leveraged an American evangelical pastor in exchange for concessions from the United States. This experience continues to negatively impact Turkey’s Protestant community.

Andrew Brunson had pastored a small protestant church in Izmir for over 20 years. In October 2016, he and his wife went to renew their residency. They were instead arrested and detained, although Brunson’s wife was released after 13 days. The cause of arrest was unclear, as well as what charges Brunson might face.

Brunson’s arrest was sensationalized in Turkish media, which published a multitude of false accusations linking him to various terror organizations and the CIA. Turkish media pursued its purpose of protecting the Turkish identity, thus making it easy to disparage an American Christian evangelist and sway public opinion against him.

Meanwhile, there was international condemnation of Brunson’s arbitrary arrest and detention. The U.S. entered into negotiations for his release. In August 2017, the Turkish prosecutor charged Brunson with espionage. He further demanded three life sentences, plus another thirty-five years for supposedly aiding the Kurdistan Worker’s Party ([PKK](#)), an internationally recognized terrorist organization.

Brunson was released in 2018 after the U.S. raised tariffs on certain metals and imposed sanctions on two Turkish ministers responsible for Brunson’s detention.

President Erdoğan [noted](#) that America had chosen “a pastor above the strategic relationship between Ankara and Washington.” Such a comment showed that the ruling government saw him in the context of



Headline from Takvim claiming that if the attempted military coup in July 2016 had been successful, Brunson would have become head of the CIA.

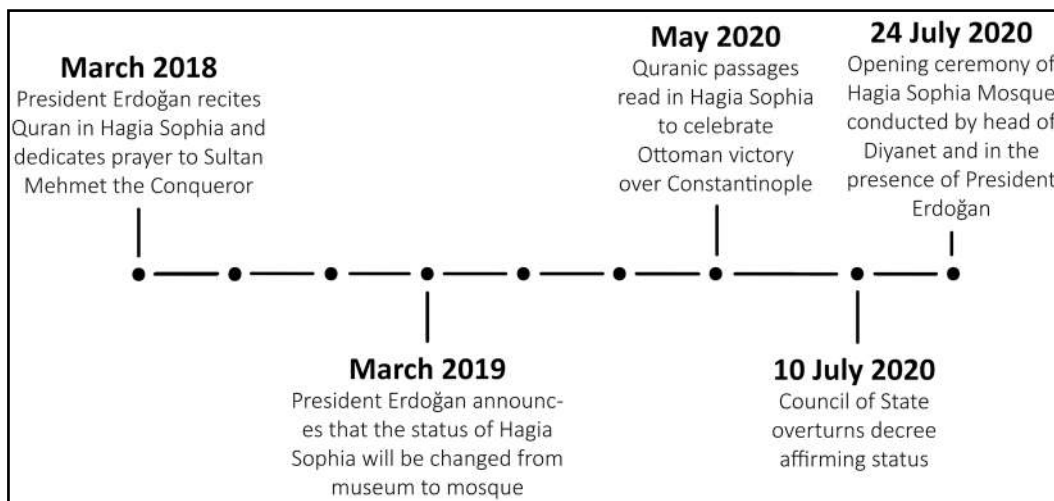
relations between Ankara and Washington, rather than as an individual whose human rights were violated. In personal remarks to Brunson following his release, U.S. President Trump and Senator Lindsay Graham said that he was a victim of hostage diplomacy. There is considerable speculation on the Turkish demands for his release. But there is no doubt that careful planning was employed by Turkey to place Brunson in a suitable position which could press the U.S. for a deal.

Turkey's actions harmed its international reputation by showing a willingness to exploit foreigners. It resulted in severe damage to Turkey's economy and reinforced the social belief that Christians are foreigners who wish Turkey ill-will. Timur Topuz, President of the Istanbul Protestant Church Foundation (IPKV), [said](#) in 2020, "Since the Brunson incident, all Protestant pastors are treated with suspicion." The [expulsion of foreign Christians](#) living in Turkey has increased since the Brunson incident, causing many to believe that the two events are directly connected.

Case study: Hagia Sophia's Conversion from Museum to Mosque

The lack of consideration for religious minorities is further evident in the July 2020 conversion of the ancient Byzantine cathedral of Hagia Sophia into a mosque. In this case, domestic political advantages overrode gains previously achieved by maintaining its status as a UNESCO-recognized museum and symbol of peaceful co-existence in a multi-faith society.

Hagia Sophia was built as the patriarchal cathedral in 537 AD by Justinian I. It has great symbolic significance for the orthodox church, as well as the wider Christian community. After the 1453 conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman armies led by Sultan Mehmet, Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque. In 1934, the Council of Ministers of the recently founded secular Turkish Republic decreed its conversion into a museum.



Modern Timeline of Hagia Sophia Status

On 31 March 2018, President Erdoğan stirred expectation among his support base that Hagia Sophia could become a mosque again by reciting from the Quran during a visit and dedicating his prayer to Sultan Mehmet, the conqueror of Constantinople.

The following March, he announced that he would change the status of Hagia Sophia from museum to

mosque. In May 2020, while celebrating the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, Quranic passages were [again](#) read in Hagia Sophia. Shortly after that, the head of the [Diyanet](#) (Directorate of Religious Affairs), Ali Erbaş, indicated that Hagia Sophia would be equipped to provide Islamic religious services. On 10 July, the Council of State overturned the decree which made Hagia Sophia a museum, declaring that it may be used only as a mosque.

Throughout this series of events, many asked Turkey to respect the country's pluralistic heritage by protecting the secular nature of Hagia Sophia. Concerns were raised about how changing the museum status of Hagia Sophia could impact its designation as an UNESCO World Heritage site. The calls were ignored. UNESCO was not consulted prior to the authorities' decision, and issued a [statement](#) saying it “*deeply regrets the decision of the Turkish authorities.*”

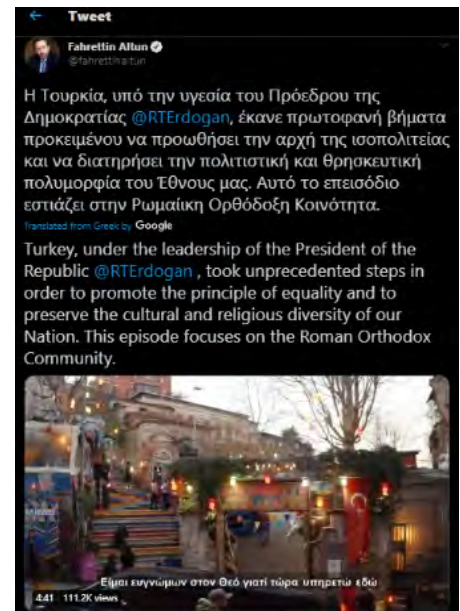
On 24 July 2020 Ali Erbaş spoke at the opening ceremony of Hagia Sophia Mosque. He held a sword as a symbol of Istanbul's conquest. For Turkish religious minorities, the sword is a symbol of their subjugation under Islamic rule. The deeply offensive phrase “*leftovers of the sword*” (Turkish: *kılıç artıkları*) is sometimes applied to ethnic minorities in Turkey, especially Armenians who survived the genocide. Just a few months' prior, President Erdoğan had caused distress amongst Turkish religious minorities by using the phrase “leftovers of the sword” in a public speech in Kayseri, a city with strong Armenian associations. Furthermore, the emphasis on Islamic conquest automatically brands Christians as unequal citizens.

Shortly after the opening ceremony of Hagia Sophia Mosque, the Presidency's Director of Communications, Fahrettin Altun, published an English language video series with Greek subtitles about religious diversity in Turkey. He incorporated interviews from members of different minorities, expressing their support of Turkey and approving its embrace of diversity. The video was prepared six months earlier with the willing participation and good faith of the religious communities. It is yet another example of how the minority presence in Turkey is manipulated and exploited for political purposes.

As these examples demonstrate, Turkey's ruling government shows a desire to build popular support from Islamic nationalists in a way which outweighs respect for the aspirations and rights of religious minorities. Christians are exploited for political gains. Using Christians as political leverage puts into question Turkey's commitment to freedom of religion.

The report recommends the following questions for dialogue:

- How is Turkish society encouraged to see indigenous Christians accepted as equal citizens?
- What mechanisms are in place to ensure that terms and phrases considered insulting and offensive to religious minorities are being discouraged from public speech?
- How does Turkey promote pluralism and diversity in Turkish society (rather than through videos directed towards the international community)?
- Why doesn't Turkey uphold the religious liberty of its own citizens in accordance with international covenants, regardless of any possible reciprocal agreement with Greece or any other nation?



Screenshot of an video produced by Turkey extolling its religious freedom

MIXED MESSAGING ON LEGAL STATUS

Many problems faced by Turkey's Christian population originate from mixed messaging regarding the legal status of non-Muslim communities. The Treaty of Lausanne was incomplete at best with regards to religious freedom, and Turkey has not addressed those legal status gaps the treaty imposed on Christians. Without a legal framework specifically and consistently addressing the rights of all non-Muslim communities, Christian communities are regulated according to the whims of governmental officials, exposing them to exploitation and political leverage.

Disparity between inadequate legal status under Turkish national law and Turkey's obligations to international legal provisions safeguarding freedoms creates a conflicted and frustrating legal status for religious minorities.

The consequences of lacking a legal status are profound. It impacts the ability of Christians to corporately worship and reduces opportunities for leadership training. It facilitates governmental micro-management of internal church affairs. It hinders churches from acquiring and maintaining property.

The only options available to churches in Turkey to obtain legal status are the poor substitutes of registering as a foundation or association. Traditionally, a religious foundation (Turkish: *vakıf*) is a pious endowment of property and gives a building, such as a church, a protected legal status provided the foundation can maintain its membership, conduct elections etc. A foundation does not give a religious community a suitable legal status because it only concerns a church's financial or property assets. Registration under the alternative framework of an association (Turkish: *dernek*) also does not allow for recognition as a church. It puts the church and its activities into the same category as a sports or social club, even though the functions and needs of a church are different.

Many traditional Christian communities have properties registered under foundations, which are managed by the Directorate General of Foundations (Turkish: *Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü*, or *VGM*). Founded in 1920, the VGM evolved into a mechanism that allowed the Turkish state to appropriate church properties by petitioning the courts to transfer the asset to the state whenever a foundation became inactive.

Since 2013 the government has failed to provide election regulations for non-Muslim community foundations, [hindering](#) them from exercising their right to elect new board members. Because the government insists community foundation elections cannot take place without a government-drafted regulation, the normal active functioning of these foundations is inhibited. They are therefore prevented from reclaiming properties assigned to a third party, and their existing assets are put at risk.

Reclaiming appropriated historic church buildings is a lengthy and expensive legal process. If no challenge is made, these buildings are claimed by the state and reconfigured in line with the state's agenda, often without reference to the Christian community.

Protestant churches have only recently been able to obtain legal status through establishing a foundation, and thus many continue to meet informally or as an association. However, without adequate provisions for legal status, they lack formal recognition and are exposed to public suspicion and arbitrary treatment by the authorities. The vagueness about their legal status becomes problematic in the event of criminal action, as it leaves the Christian community- and indeed the local authorities- unsure about their legal rights and status, contributing to a reluctance about reporting abuses.

Case Study: Bolu Protestant Church Closure

The Bolu Provincial Police Department conducted a raid against a local church on 21 March 2019 on the basis that it was unauthorized. The raid interrupted a baptism ceremony. The congregation was composed of approximately 50 Iranian Christian asylum seekers, as well as some Iraqi and Syrian Christians. They gathered for worship in an apartment complex across from the Tabaklar District Maternity and Children’s Hospital.

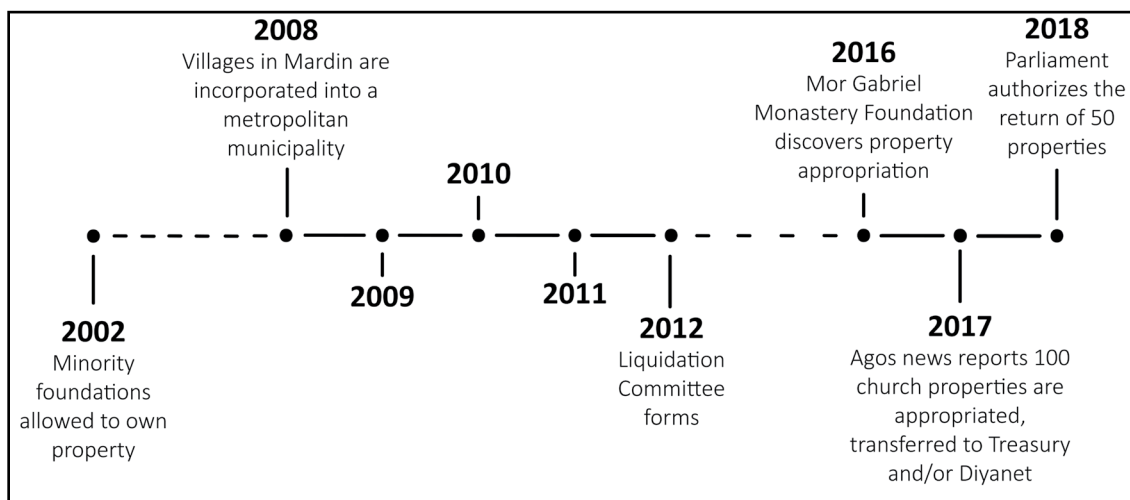
The pastor requested to open the church in that location by applying to the police department and Bolu Municipality. The Municipality’s officials [said](#) they had no clear legal responsibilities for such a process. The police department subsequently sealed the church following the raid. Prior to sealing the church, the police photographed the space.

The Bolu Municipality’s specific comment about lacking clear legal responsibilities on how to proceed with the application demonstrates exactly why a lack of legal status creates an environment where inequality can thrive. The police’s subsequent behavior, both in the timing and methodology of the raid, was nothing less than a show of force. Rather than clarifying their questions about legal responsibilities, officials instead abdicated their role and used intimidation tactics to restrict the congregation’s religious freedom. Since the church had no official legal status, their options for appealing this process were extremely limited. Indeed, there was no effective appeal, and the Bolu Church would eventually pursue worship at a different location.

Case Study: Mardin Orthodox Church Property Seizures

A 2017 investigative report by the independent news site Agos found that approximately 100 church properties in the province of Mardin were appropriated by the State Treasury, with the ownership of some being transferred to the Diyanet (Directorate of Religious Affairs). The impacted properties included church buildings, monasteries, and cemeteries (the latter being transferred to the Mardin Municipality).

It transpired that Mardin’s land registry had been updated in 2008. Following the redrawing of boundaries, a liquidation committee was formed which would redistribute the properties of “institutions whose legal entity had expired.” During this process, the Mor Gabriel Monastery Foundation discovered that this situation impacted them, and they opened a court case to recover the properties. The liquidation committee



Timeline of Mardin church property seizures

rejected their appeal in May 2016. At the time, it was believed only a few dozen church properties were affected.

None of the Christian communities were previously informed of this appropriation. The Diyanet's head denied the report, stating that this news was [meant](#) to defame Turkey. The Mardin Governorate created a commission in July 2017 addressing the dispute, but the appropriation was not acknowledged until that November. The commission would eventually state that a legal amendment was necessary to solve the issue.

In March 2018, Turkey's Parliament passed an omnibus bill which included measures authorizing the return of some properties to their original owners. Fifty of the official property deeds were formally transferred back to the churches. The others remain contested.

The burden was placed on churches to monitor municipality decisions and evaluate their impact, rather than the authorities assessing and publicizing such evaluations. The au-

thorities have a responsibility of taking human rights into consideration as they pursue policy decisions. Without a legal status which recognizes the church as such, Christians are automatically outside of such consideration.

When the property appropriation was revealed, the authorities' immediate reaction was denial. The Christian community's appeal was rejected without communicating the problem's scope. When this was finally discovered, the authorities at the highest institutional level denied the problem.

Accusations were also made faulting the Christians for raising the issue. Such an approach cultivates a culture of silence among Christians about rights violations and encourages punitive social responses when they speak about these issues. Since the church lacks legal status, their platform for responding to such accusations is narrowed.

Another issue was the lack of legal clarity. Churches, operating as foundations, were not allowed to acquire property before 2002, thus it was common practice for individuals to hold property titles on behalf of the church. Problems arose if those individuals died or moved to another location. Although the law would change, it did not address the ways churches resolved this situation before 2002. Registering the title deeds in the name of the relevant foundation is a multi-year process and was not pursued with every church property, given the overwhelming nature of both this process and the number of individual applications.

Turkey has still not addressed this issue. The government's solution to the Mardin seizures was authorizing the return of some properties, rather than creating legislation which would directly solve these underlying issues. Thus, Turkey missed an opportunity to make systemic changes that would secure Christian properties, and instead maintains the system which allows for additional church property seizures.



Example of state-run news denying reports of confiscated properties

Recently the Turkish government, urged by the European Union, [recalled](#) Turkish Assyrians from exile in Europe to their ancestral homelands in the region surrounding Mardin. Those who responded to the call did not necessarily find a warm welcome: farmlands had been confiscated through a land law that allowed untitled land to be confiscated by the state and sold to a third party. They often found themselves



The new Syriac Orthodox Church of Mor Ephrem to be completed in 2021. Source: [Daily Sabah](#)

squeezed between the PKK and the Turkish military. This problem continues today. In January 2020, the resident priest of Mor Yakup monastery in Mardin, Sefer (Aho) Bilecen was arrested and charged with “membership of a terrorist organization” after giving provisions to PKK militants. In his [testimony](#) at a court hearing in November 2020 the Syriac monk did not deny having given food and water, but he denied knowing that the people were PKK’s militants. He continues to face criminal procedure with another hearing scheduled for January 2021.

Although the Turkish government neglected or exacerbated issues faced by the Syriac community in southeastern Turkey, it was quick to publicize the construction of Mor Ephrem, a new Syriac Orthodox church built in Istanbul. President Erdoğan lay the foundation stone on 3 August 2019, [saying](#), “*Like all their other issues, meeting the worshipping needs of the Assyrian community, the ancient children of our geography, is the duty of the state of the Republic of Turkey.*”

The founding of Mor Ephrem, billed as the first church built in Turkey since the republic’s founding, is certainly a positive step. But it also illustrates how the Turkish authorities apply the “carrot and stick” approach in their control over religious minorities.

This approach is further compounded by a lack of religious diversity within Turkey’s government. Other nations in the region, including Iran, Iraq and Egypt, have guaranteed representation for their Christian community. Several nations also have state officials appointed to deal with church affairs. These deputies or officials engage with the government and raise awareness of issues that disproportionately affect the Christian community.

Turkey has the second largest parliamentary body in the Middle East-North Africa region, but there is no constitutional requirement for Christian representation and no appointed representative for the Christian community. Although some Christians have nevertheless managed to achieve a position within parliament, they often face harassment. For instance, Garo Paylan is a rare example of an Armenian Member of Parliament. But he has faced multiple politically motivated criminal probes which seek his removal because of his outspokenness on human rights issues.

Inadequate representation of religious minorities within the institutions of government makes the spiritual leaders of recognized minorities the political representatives for their communities. This inevitably encourages the Turkish government to interfere in church appointments and elections.

Although the political engagement of the spiritual head of a religious minority can lead to complications, at least a mechanism exists to address the concerns of those communities. Religious communities not recognized by the state are generally unable to participate in high-level discussions to voice their concerns. For example, on 29 November 2020 senior Turkish officials [met](#) with the heads of the Greek, Armenian,

Assyrian, and Jewish communities to discuss minority issues, but representatives of the Catholic and Protestant communities were notably absent from the meeting.

Case Study: The Armenian Patriarch Election

The Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople (Istanbul) is the spiritual, symbolic, and administrative headquarters of Turkey's Armenian Apostolic community. This includes the Turkish-Armenian diaspora. The position of patriarch thus serves an important function in the life of the church.

The previous Patriarch, Mesrob II Mutafyan, suffered from multiple health issues and was unable to perform his duties for 12 years. The patriarchate wished to replace him, but this was prevented by state authorities on the basis that he was still alive, although he was incapacitated.

The search for a replacement should be an internal matter for the Armenian Apostolic Church, but the process was subjected to control by the state authorities, who grant or withhold permissions for

elections and appointments within the church. It was this interference which caused discord and fracturing among the Armenian community, derailing the election from the outset.

Initially, Archbishop Ateshyan was appointed Patriarchal Vicar-General to undertake the duties of the incapacitated patriarch. In 2016, the Clerical Council officially retired Mutafyan. The Armenian community anticipated the establishment of provisions for a new patriarchal election.

In March 2017, an election took place to appoint a *Locum Tenens* (temporary replacement) to oversee the election process for the new patriarch. Karekin Bekchian, an archbishop based in Germany, won the election. Ateshyan subsequently produced a letter from the Istanbul Governorate sent earlier that day stating that the election was not legally possible and affirming that the Patriarchal Vicar-General was still "on duty."

Nevertheless, Bekchian was invited to Istanbul for the assumption of his duties. Ateshyan, however, refused to step aside until forced by the Clerical Council. During this time, the Turkish State rejected communication with Bekchian and instead interacted through the heads of the Armenian foundations. Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu invited them to a meeting in February 2018, along with the governor of Istanbul, the chief of police and other high officials. By pointedly excluding clerics from this gathering, a wedge was driven between the church and the foundations controlling church assets.

Soylu said that a ruling by the Turkish Council of Ministers on 29 June 2010 had decreed that "until Mutafyan died, Aram Ateshyan would remain as the Patriarchal Vicar-General." An editorial by Agos stated, "The AK Party (AKP) government has openly intervened in the traditions of the church and told them that



Clockwise, from top left: Mesrob II Mutafyan, 84th Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople; Sahak II Mashalyan, 85th Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople; Aram Ateshyan, temporary Patriarchal Vicar-General; Karekin Bekchian, 2017 winner of Patriarchal election

Photo Credits: AFP; Mert Inan/Milliyet; Armenpress; Civilnet

they cannot elect their own Patriarch.”

According to Dr. Mine Yildirim, an expert on freedom of religion in Turkey, *“No uniform legal framework applies to the election of religious leaders in Turkey, which leaves some communities vulnerable. The state [interferes](#) the most in the elections for leaders of the non-Muslim communities as viewed by the state as being protected under the 1923 Lausanne Treaty (Armenians, Jews and Greeks and to some extent and more recently, Syriacs).”*

As a result of the state intervention, Bekchiyan resigned and returned to Germany. A new patriarch, Archbishop Sahak Mashalyan, was finally elected and installed in December 2019 after Mutafyan had died the previous spring. However, the Armenian community suffered through state interference in the election.

The report recommends the following questions for dialogue:

- What steps has Turkey taken to ensure that local municipalities are informed about how to address legal ambiguities concerning church recognition?
- What legal steps has Turkey taken to create a framework that gives a legal identity to churches beyond that of foundation or association?
- What provisions is the government putting in place to ensure that issues pertaining to the wider Christian community are visible and being properly dealt with?
- When does the government intend to draft regulations for community foundations to be able to hold elections?
- How can the Catholic and Protestant communities be included in dialogue between the religious minorities and state officials?

CHRISTIANITY ERASED FROM THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY

From 1914 to 1923, the Christian population of modern Turkey [decreased](#) from 20-25% to less than 2%. Millions of native Armenian, Greek, and Assyrian Christians were forcibly deported, massacred or displaced during the First World War (1914-1918) and the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1923). The compulsory population exchange between Turkey and Greece furthered religious demographic change. The few members of religious minorities who remained received limited protection under the Lausanne Peace Treaty.

The remnant of indigenous Christians and a considerable number of historical churches (often under threat of demolition or appropriated by the state) are the witnesses to these once thriving Christian communities.

There are various initiatives which map and record this cultural heritage, including through the Hrant Dink Foundation and the Association for the Protection of Cultural Heritage (KMKD), founded by Osman Kavala. However, protecting the historical artifacts associated with non-Muslim communities is an ongoing challenge.

There are also initiatives promoting reconciliatory dialogue between Turks and the relatives of survivors who fled the genocide. Since that discourse raises awareness of issues that conflict with the Turkish nationalistic narrative which denies a genocide took place, such projects are viewed with suspicion by the state.

Civil activists who promote the protection of cultural heritage, encourage dialogue about the genocide, and promote diversity in Turkish society, are targeted by ultra-nationalist elements within the Turkish state and society.



“Millions of our Christian subjects who were ruthlessly driven en masse from their homes and massacred.” - Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Los Angeles Examiner, 1926. Photo: Steemit.com

Case study: Philanthropist Osman Kavala’s Imprisonment

Osman Kavala (63) was born into a family of tobacco merchants who had moved to Turkey from Greece as part of the 1923 population exchange. He was educated at the prestigious Robert College in Istanbul and became a successful businessman. After the 1999 earthquake in Istanbul, he left business and devoted himself to civil action. He established and funded numerous organizations and associations which showed his support for minority rights, cultural diversity and heritage, and reconciliatory dialogue. His devotion to democratic and pluralistic values had significant impact on a particular section of Turkish society who was open to considering opinions that did not suit the nationalist agenda.



Osman Kavala. Source: Bianet

Osman Kavala often encouraged dialogue about the Armenian Genocide. Following the 2007 murder of Armenian journalist Hrant Dink by a Turkish nationalist, Kavala increased efforts for reconciliation between ethnic Turks and Armenians, mainly through his Anadolu Kültür Foundation. At a 2016 panel in Diyarbakir, Kavala [explained](#) that Turks needed to understand that reconciliation with Armenians was more than acknowledgement. It also involves *“making Turkey a more civilized and democratic*

state” for all.

Kavala’s support and influence regarding the protection of non-Muslim cultural sites, the recognition of diversity in Turkish society and his encouragement for dialogue following the genocide of Christians, drew the ire of nationalistic elements within the government. In October 2017 he was arrested and charged with anti-government crimes under [Articles 309 and 328](#) of the Turkish penal code.

This year, Kavala was twice acquitted of these charges, but was promptly rearrested. In a March 2020 ruling, the European Court of Human Rights requested his immediate release, saying, *“the measures taken against him pursued an ulterior purpose, namely to reduce him to silence as an NGO activist and human-rights defender, to dissuade other persons from engaging in such activities and to paralyze civil society in the country.”*

Osman Kavala remains detained in [Silivri Prison](#). The prosecutor is seeking aggravated life imprisonment, alleging in the indictment that Kavala’s Anadolu Kültür association [was](#) *“analyzing the social and cultural attributes of the society of Turkey for intelligence purposes and carrying out activities to provoke people into animosity and hatred, considering the people’s differences of language, race, religion, sect, region and so on.”*

Case Study: Christian Immovable Properties Under Threat

The state showcases some historical church buildings for the purpose of tourism. This provides a source of income benefiting the state, but not the church. Examples include Sumela Monastery in Trabzon and the Armenian Church on Aghtamar Island.

Just days after facing international criticism over [converting Hagia Sophia](#) into a mosque, Turkey responded with a positive story: the authorities announced the reopening of Sumela Monastery after its closure for restoration. Erdoğan made it clear that the timing was intended to prove that there is no threat to Christian properties, [stating](#), *“If we were a nation targeting the symbols of other beliefs, the Sumela Monastery which we have had for the last five centuries, would be gone forever.”* Immediately, local media reported that the monastery’s iconography was vandalized during the restoration process. A Twitter user proudly [confessed](#) to engaging in this *“worthy duty”* of damaging the Christian imagery.



Vandalism to fresco in Sumela Monastery, Trabzon, August 2020. Source: Greek City Times

The Church of the Holy Cross on Aghtamar (Turkish: *Akdamar*) Island, has its own government [website](#) advertising the church, its history and architecture. The website fails to state that the church was converted to a museum in 2007. [Despite](#) opposition from Turkish nationalists, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism [grants](#) the Armenian community permission to hold a religious service there once a year, and a cross is allowed to remain on top of the church.

Even as a museum, a church building may be perceived by Turkish nationalists as an obstacle to complete conquest and domination, as has been noted previously with the re-registration of the iconic and symbolic

Byzantine Cathedral of [Hagia Sophia](#), which reopened as a mosque in July 2020, One month after the conversion of Hagia Sophia, the Church of the Holy Savior in Chora, Istanbul, underwent a similar conversion, reverting from a museum to a mosque. Dr. Tuğba Tanyeri Erdemir, Research Associate at the University of Pittsburg in the Department of Anthropology [commented](#) in an interview with the Greek Current that the conversions were *“a symbol of domination and it changes the position of the Turkish State from a protector and custodian of heritage to something that dominates over heritage.”*

Once a church building is appropriated by the state, it may be either assigned to an Islamic foundation or given a secular function. The local Christian community is rarely permitted access to the building for purposes of worship. In Kayseri, for example, Surp Asdvadzadzin Armenian Church was [converted](#) into a library and reopened in January 2020 after a \$2 million restoration project. Local Christians, mainly refugees, have no alternative suitable meeting space.



The desecration of an Armenian cemetery in August 2020. Source: [Kronos News](#)

Meanwhile, Christian heritage sites often suffer neglect, vandalism, or the onslaught of treasure hunters. This usually occurs in the more rural areas where it is less obvious. In August 2020, the desecration of an Armenian cemetery belonging to the Holy Savior and Karasun Manug Church Foundation in Ankara, was [reported](#). In an attempt to find gold (for example, gold teeth), robbers had opened the graves and scattered the bones. Istanbul deputy and vice chairman of the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA), Mustafa Yeneroğlu, issued a statement on the incident [saying](#), *“Preserving the memory of all those who lived in these lands is among our most important responsibilities to the next generations.”* However, these types of incidents are common because of a persistent myth that Christians left behind their wealth following the genocide.



St. Georgios Church before 2013. Source: [Southfront.org](#)



St. Georgios Church September 2020. Source: [Greek City Times](#)

Turkey’s Christian heritage is also under threat in urban areas. In September 2020, St. Georgios Greek Orthodox Church was demolished after years of neglect from an Islamic foundation responsible for its upkeep. The church was previously restored and transformed into a cultural center by Bursa’s Nilüfer Municipality, but in 2013 it was transferred to an Islamic Foundation after a legal [challenge](#) made by the Regional Directorate of Foundations.

Sometimes the threats facing Christian cultural heritage are much subtler. In 2019, Turkey officially requested the United States to block the importation of Turkish art and ethnographic items dating from the

prehistoric period through 1923. Such an approach effectively claimed Turkish government ownership over cultural objects from the region's entire history. Cultural Property News [commented](#) on the request, saying:

“Claims of state ownership of objects of religious heritage belonging to religious minorities, seizures of religious properties and the conversion of former churches to mosques are symptoms of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government’s increasing pressure on Jewish, Christian, and other minority communities.”

The report recommends the following questions for dialogue:

- What steps are being taken to ensure that the rich and diverse cultural heritage of Turkey is recognized and valued by Turkish society and accepted as part of the collective memory in Turkey, e.g. through school education and media?
- Why are civil activists seeking to raise awareness of Turkey’s religious diversity and multi-ethnic culture obstructed in their efforts and even penalized, rather than encouraged?
- Are any steps being taken to protect church properties considered at-risk because of neglect? A full inventory of at-risk churches is found on the [website](#) of KMKD.

FORMING THE TURKISH IDENTITY THROUGH EDUCATION

The formation of a distinct Turkish identity is not only considered a social responsibility, but also a legal obligation. Article 301 of the Penal Code criminalizes “denigrating Turkishness,” a crime which by necessity implies that there is a social standard for Turkishness. Thus, it becomes important for the maintenance of this identity, both as ethnic Turks and as Muslims. The constitutional responsibility for education comes under Turkey’s Ministry of National Education, but also is influenced by the Diyanet and Turkey’s media system.

Turkey’s national media system is either state owned or closely monitored by the authorities. These companies maintain close, sometimes even familial, ties with governing leadership. It is common for conglomerate companies to maintain ownership of media outlets, who frequently produce content reaffirming different aspects of the Turkish identity. Hate speech towards Christians, especially ethnic Greek or Armenian Christians, is [common](#). This content ensures that the social standard for Turkishness is maintained amongst the country’s adult community.



An example of a [conglomerate company](#) with media holdings also influencing the education sector.

orchestras and sports teams, as well as publishing educational materials for children, amongst others. In this way, those conglomerates who maintain the social standard of Turkishness in adults are also shaping that identity in upcoming generations.

On the other hand, Turkey’s national educational system is a parred back version of the media content produced by these conglomerate companies. Hate speech, discrimination, and incitement to violence towards Christians is heavily implied, rather than overtly discussed on the national stage.

Turkey has a highly diverse religious history and culture that is overlooked in the nation’s curriculum. Diversity is also typically discouraged by teachers and peers. Historically, Turkey’s education policy balances uneasily between Kemalist secularism and Islamic nationalism, neither of which promote diversity and inclusion.

Children form an estimated quarter of Turkey’s total population, a [demographic](#) which the ruling government has sought to form into a “pious generation.” Since 1982, Islamic Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge classes have been a mandatory part of the curriculum. However, under [AKP](#) rule, the reach of the

However, these conglomerate companies also maintain a significant amount of influence within Turkey’s educational sector. An analysis of Turkey’s 8 largest conglomerates with media holdings showed that 7 featured educational activities on their website (the 8th company barely maintained a website). These activities included scholarship sponsorship, building their own educational institutions, youth activities such as

believe that if you aren't Muslim, you're an enemy. When you ask people's religion here, some people will say I'm a Turk. Because people believe that if you're a Turk, then you have to be Muslim."

Case Study: Identity Suppression

If the school leadership displays hostility towards Christianity, it discourages Christian students from revealing and living out their religious identity. This leads to fear of discovery and creates an atmosphere of disorientation and instability, threatening the educational development of students. Should students publicly live their faith identity, then they risk their future.

Ayşe is an 18-year-old student living in eastern Turkey. She says that her teachers *"told me that I should not raise the subject of my faith in school and share my identity with anyone. The threats are disciplinary punishments that I will not deserve, like throwing me out of school. There are teachers who turn Christianity into hate speech. (They say) Christianity is a changed, distorted religion, a belief where human killing is free (without consequence)."*

Case Study: Micro-aggression

Brief exchanges which communicate hostility can have negative long-term psychological impact, particularly in children. These stressors can also accumulate into significant health problems, particularly if they remain ongoing for long periods of time. Yet, micro-aggressions are a regular occurrence for Turkey's Christians.

Kerem is a 14-year-old student living in eastern Turkey. He says of his teachers and classmates, *"When they first learned that I was a Christian, they did not accept me. They did not speak, thinking that it was a sin to talk to me. They believe in things that are not true about Christians. It is often difficult to deal with. I attend (Islamic) religious classes because I still haven't changed the place of religion on my identity. My religious teachers wanted me to attend classes because their purpose was to return me to Islam."*

Case Study: Incitement of Violence



Yeniçağ's print [headline](#) on August 26, 2018 states that *"Armenians should be expelled from the lands they occupy."*

The incitement of violence stems from allowing other behaviors, such as micro-aggressions, to flourish. Turkey has the added element of teaching history and religion in such a way that encourages aggressive behavior to protect Turkey from perceived "threats" from non-Turkish, non-Islamic entities. Perpetrators of hateful or violent actions against Christians or their churches may go unpunished or even be celebrated by some nationalistic elements.

A pastor living in southern Turkey shared about his daughter's experience. *"My daughter was in a social*



Yeni Akit [headline](#) attacking a columnist who wrote that terrorism in the Middle East is Islamic, not Christian.

studies class. (The instructor) was teaching that what the crusades couldn't do, the missionaries are now trying to do. 'They're working on getting our land,' she said. So then, there were three middle school students who during the break beat my daughter to the point of being unconscious and needing to be taken to the hospital. For the next year and a half, my daughter had weekly fainting spells."

The neglect to rigorously refute hate speech against religious minorities has led to an expectation that violent actions against Christians and other minority members will be treated with impunity. One of the suspects accused of torturing, robbing and murdering 86-year old Greek-Turkish citizen Zafiris Pinaris in May 2019 [indicated](#) in a telephone recording after the crime that promises (of impunity?) had been given that had not been kept.

The impression that violators of the rights of Christians could act with impunity was addressed in a report on human rights violations published by the Association of Protestant Churches (TeK): *"In 2019, it was observed that members of the Protestant community became more reluctant to complain to the security forces or report incidents due to hate-speech and perpetrators going unpunished, to being unable to get a satisfactory result from investigations by authorities, and due to the perpetrators usually remaining unidentified."* The same report lists hate crimes and speech, verbal and physical attacks against Protestant Christians reported during 2019.

The report recommends the following questions for dialogue:

- What kind of training is required for teachers that facilitates the promotion of religious diversity?
- What steps are being taken to form the next generation with respect for freedom of conscience?
- How can diverse religious views be integrated into the education system?
- What steps are taken to encourage public promotion of religious freedom and condemnation of hate speech?
- Are any steps taken to teach religious pluralism amongst Turkey's thought leaders?

DEPORTATION OF PROTESTANTS

The different expressions of Christianity are challenging for many Turks, who are more familiar with the historic expressions of Christianity through the traditional churches. Indeed, much of early church history as recorded in the New Testament occurs within the borders of modern Turkey. Protestantism, however, is viewed with suspicion because it originated outside of Turkey. Nevertheless, Protestantism has grown deep roots within Turkey to the extent that there are over [170 churches](#) and an estimated 5,000 Turkish Protestants within the country.

Protestantism in Turkey grew from the work of 19th century Christian evangelists establishing hospitals and schools throughout the Ottoman Empire. The genocide at the turn of the century included the violent deportation of the country's Christians and significant historical revisionism, solidifying the cultural idea that Christianity is a foreign construct.

The rise of Kemalism in conjunction with the founding of modern Turkey birthed a rise of Turkish nationalism which regarded evangelistic work as foreign interference and a threat to national security. This narrative that evangelists are foreign agents, rather than men and women peacefully living out their religion, has remained unchanged throughout the modern era. Nevertheless, expatriate Protestant Christians continued serving the Turkish population, often through education fields. They risked deportation if they were suspected of missionary work.

During the early 21st century, expatriates found it easier to settle within Turkey. They could buy properties, open businesses, easily obtain residency, and some even joined Turkish families through marriage. Today, most Protestant churches in Turkey have at least several expatriate Christians in attendance, who often voluntarily serve in church leadership.

Occasionally, the Turkish Interior Ministry would terminate the residency of a foreign Christian on grounds of upholding public order. However, following [Andrew Brunson's release in 2018](#), it became apparent that the ministry had initiated a new policy to expel and ban expatriate Protestant Christians. The expulsions violate a multitude of basic freedoms that Turkey has guaranteed to uphold as a signatory to the [ICCPR](#) and the European Convention on Human Rights ([ECHR](#)). The violations may vary from case to case, but transgressions against the articles of the ICCPR are summarized in the table below.

Case Study: The N-82 Code Procedure

The expulsion of expatriate Christians is a decision made by the Ministry of Interior in cooperation with Turkish Intelligence (MIT). This cooperation is known through the application of the N-82 code, which creates [restrictions](#) that oblige "foreigners to obtain prior permission to enter Turkey. However, this permission is almost never given in practice. This situation is effectively an entry ban to the country. In this case, the foreigner cannot enter the country without opening a court case cancelling the code."



Hans Jurgen Louven, German citizen, found out about his entry ban when a N-82 code was written on his plane ticket in August 2019. Source: [World Watch Monitor](#)

ICCPR Guarantee	N-82 Violation
Article 12 Freedom of movement and residence	Many N-82 recipients own property in Turkey, which they are unable to access once this code is applied
Article 13 Protection of aliens against expulsion unless there are compelling reasons of national security by law	No N-82 recipient stands accused of criminal activity by law. In no case has Turkey provided a reason for the designation
Article 14 The right to a fair and impartial court hearing	Attorneys are not permitted access to files submitted by Turkish Intelligence and therefore cannot effectively represent their clients
Article 18 Freedom of Religion or Belief	N-82 recipients have varied backgrounds and only share a common Evangelical Christian faith. This implies that they are targeted because of their faith
Article 23 The duty of the state to protect the family unit	The N-82 order has forced many families temporarily apart. In some cases, the foreign spouse of a Turkish citizen was issued the N-82

How the N-82 designation violates guarantees by the ICCPR

Typically, the expatriate Christian is informed that there is an N-82 code against them when they either leave the country or attempt reentering. Sometimes the code is discovered when they attempt to renew residency, at which point their application is denied and they are given 10 days to voluntarily exit Turkey. In which case they are faced with the additional challenge of contesting the code from outside the country.

If they wish to contest the code, they must first apply to Turkish Immigration requesting the code's removal. When that is denied, they can file an administrative court case. Depending on the lawyer, the legal costs incurred vary from \$800- \$3,500 USD. This fee will cover the case proceeding to the local and then the regional administrative court.

In each case, the N-82 code is based on the submission of a confidential file from MİT accusing the expatriate Christian of threatening national security. The attorneys representing these individuals are nearly always denied access to the MİT files. This effectively prohibits due process by obstructing Christians from knowing the content of the charges which led to their receipt of the N-82 code and therefore unable to prepare an appropriate defense.

So far, local and regional administrative courts have upheld the N-82 code in every case, which then proceeds to the Constitutional Court. At this stage, the legal costs are nearly \$2,000 USD per case. If the cases are rejected by the high court, they can proceed to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).

At least 63 expatriate Christians received the N-82 code since the beginning of 2019. Although not all N-82 recipients have filed cases, the total cost of legal action is a considerable burden to the Protestant community. When the number of family members is taken into account, over 150 members of the Protestant community have been expelled from Turkey by this means.

The loss of large numbers of expatriate Christians is a heavy burden for Turkey's Protestant community. The recipients of the codes were often voluntarily serving a local church, sometimes through a leadership position. They contributed financially to the church and provided other types of support through regular attendance and commitment. The harm and cost to local Protestant churches has been significant, particularly considering how many Turkish converts from Islam are ostracized by their own society and thus form strong bonds with foreigners attending the church. The sudden departure of these foreigners through the N-82 codes has caused a sense of deep loss and insecurity among Turkish converts. They fear that a reduced foreign presence in the Protestant churches may expose them to greater risk from nationalistic elements.

The forced expulsion of Christians from Turkey is certainly not a new phenomenon. The similarities with the 20th century expulsion of Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians is disturbing. It shows that these attitudes remain embodied in the Turkish state apparatus to the extent that the Interior Ministry can label expatriate pastors, evangelists, and ordinary church members as security threats, and enforce their deportation in violation of their human rights.



Joy Subaşıgüller, recipient of a N-82 code, with husband Pastor Lütfü and their three children married in 2013 and now have three small children, who are Turkish citizens. Lütfü pastors an Ankara Protestant church.

Case Study: Deportation's Impact on Families – Joy Subaşıgüller

The upheaval of deportation involves the trauma of enforced separation from family, friends and loved ones. The injustice and lack of any clear explanation for the termination of residency and issuance of the N-82 code is confusing. Meanwhile, the financial burden of legal costs and the frustration of pursuing the case through the courts adds another layer of exhaustion. For every individual and family, the issuance of the N-82 code has been a painful experience.

The situation of Joy Subaşıgüller (age 39) highlights this challenge. She met her future husband Lütfü while pursuing a master's program at Ankara's Bilent University. They married in 2013 and now have three small children, who are Turkish citizens. Lütfü pastors an Ankara Protestant church.

Joy has lived in Turkey for 10 years and renewed her residency every two years through the Turkish Immigration Department without any difficulty. Yet in May 2020, her residency application was denied. The following month she was informed that she was issued an N-82 code as a threat to national security and given 10 days to leave the country. The rationale for the code was stated as "other reasons" (Turkish: *diğer nedenler*). The family was shocked.

Pastor Lütfü shared in an [interview](#) that they were unaware of any investigation conducted by the Turkish authorities. He noted that many recipients of the N-82 code appeared to have been selected because of

their role in church ministry, or because they attended a church convention or children's camp. He pointed out that since the authorities refuse to grant permission for the training of clergy, local churches often rely upon the services of expatriate Christians.

Joy undertakes few activities in their local church since she is breastfeeding and a stay-at-home mother. She expressed concern that her N-82 code also forces her Turkish husband and children to leave the country. She said, *"Turkey is my home. I love Turkey and the Turkish people very much. My family has strong ties with Turkish friends here, especially with Lütfü's family who would be devastated if we had to permanently relocate to another country."*

In the same interview, Pastor Lütfü mentioned that they are aware of two other couples in a similar situation where the N-82 compromised family unity. He pointed to a situation in Istanbul of a foreign Protestant married to a Turkish woman who received the N-82 code, forcing him to leave the country. In Ankara another recipient was a European Protestant married to a Turkish man.

Speaking of their own situation, he said that the family has appealed to the office of the President and Foreign Ministry but have received no response. They are contesting the N-82 code in the courts but have already lost their stay of execution of the order, forcing Joy to leave the country.

The daughter of a German citizen facing a similar issue, Hans Jürgen Louven, said in an interview with [World Watch Monitor](#), *"I do have hope Dad can come back home, but it will probably take some time. Our neighbors couldn't understand why he had to leave. They said he is the most honest and beautiful person they know. They were really ashamed of their country doing this injustice to us."*

Carlos Madrigal, a Spanish citizen and leader of the Istanbul Protestant Church, said, *"According to the court, the intelligence agency has a classified file on me that even my lawyer has been unable to review. According to this file, I am considered a threat to public order and security, despite the fact that there is no legal complaint or court action against me."*

The report recommends the following questions for dialogue:

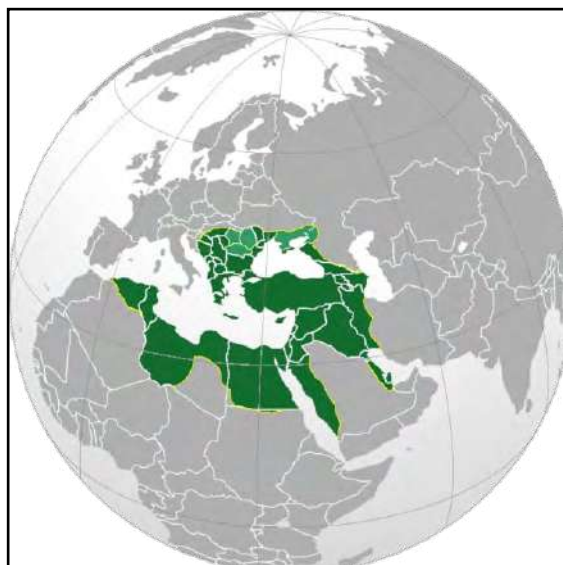
- Why are expatriate Protestant Christians, who have not been accused of breaking any law and have been living peacefully in Turkey for many years, being regarded as threats to national security?
- Why are the files from Turkish Intelligence (MIT) submitted as the basis for issuing the N-82 codes being kept confidential, without even the attorneys being granted access?
- All expatriate resident in Turkey regularly pass through security checks when applying for residency, buying property etc. Why does the Interior Ministry invalidate the previous checks and what criteria are being applied to assess foreign residents as security threats?

TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY AND ITS IMPACT ON CHRISTIANS

Turkey's assertive foreign policy is evident through its military presence in [multiple](#) Middle East & North Africa (MENA) countries, as well as its significant social impact in the region.

Following its rise to power in 2002, Turkey's ruling AK Party (AKP) sought wide support from various population sectors. Foreign policies were built around the concept of "zero problems with neighbors" (Turkish: *komşularla sıfır sorun*). As such, Turkey did not greatly involve itself with bordering countries and even pursued membership within the European Union.

However, the AKP increasingly lost public support as time progressed, and they were forced to rely on their religious core base and appeal to the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) for support in a coalition known as the People's Alliance (Turkish: *Cumhur İttifakı*), established in 2018. National and regional policies were messaged through hard-line nationalist and Islamic oratory. As part of this trend, nostalgia for the era of the Ottoman Empire



The Ottoman Empire. Source: [Wikimedia](#)

has been encouraged through rhetoric produced by government leaders, as well as through the performing arts and other types of media. Foreign policies were thus increasingly expressed through nationalistic and imperialistic narratives.

For example, in February 2018 President Erdoğan [stated](#), "Those who think that we have erased from our hearts the lands from which we withdrew in tears a hundred years ago are wrong. We say at every opportunity we have that Syria, Iraq and other places in the geography [map] in our hearts are no different from our own homeland. We are struggling so that a foreign flag will not be waved anywhere where adhan [Islamic call to prayer in mosques] is recited. The things we have done so far [pale in comparison to the] even greater attempts and attacks [we are planning for] the coming days, inshallah [Allah willing]."

Following the 2016 coup attempt, Turkey's foreign policies embraced a military component that has at times been messaged as a national security issue, often connected to Kurdish insurgencies in neighboring countries. Since Turkey is a member of both NATO and the Council of Europe, as well as an ICCPR signatory, Turkish military authorities have international legal obligations to uphold human rights, including religious freedom. However, international observers frequently report human rights abuses against ethnic and religious communities committed by Turkish soldiers and mercenaries employed by Turkey, some of whom previously fought with extremist groups engaging in different regional conflicts.

These activities have exacerbated existing challenges faced by these communities, impacting the welfare and security of regional Christians. Since these activities exist within a military context, mutual accusations of religious freedom violations are rife, but all participants have an obligation of protecting human rights both during the conflict and its aftermath.

The Syrian Civil War: Deepening Conflict

One month after the 2016 coup attempt, Turkey embarked on its first military operation in Syria. Turkey has since conducted a total of three major military operations in Syria: Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch, and Operation Peace Spring. While these operations have political and military aims (weakening the presence of armed Kurdish forces on Turkish borders and restricting the flow of Syrian refugees entering Turkey), they have proven traumatic for local Christian populations. Turkey's relationship with extremist militias, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and deployment of fighters, some of whom previously fought with the Islamic State (ISIS), as well as other extremist factions, has led to concerns for the vulnerability of religious minorities under their control. The Rojava Information Center [maintains](#) a database of former ISIS members currently serving in Turkish-backed forces.

Operation Olive Branch in 2018 was messaged as having good intentions of upholding international law. A Diyanet [sermon](#) preached in every mosque in Turkey compared the military campaign with jihad, insisting that *"Jihad is against persecution and cruelty, it is the effort of a nation to defend the law. The goal is to uphold justice and spread peace on the Earth, tranquility, justice and goodness."*

However, many international observers reported that both the Turkish military and associated forces had failed to uphold international law. The invasion of the city of Afrin is one example.

Afrin was targeted because it is a geographically key Kurdish population center. According to the [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#), over 300,000 Kurdish citizens were displaced by September 2018. This included some Kurdish Christians- all converts from Islam.



Turkey hosts a gathering that includes militia members. Source: Ras al-Ayin Mahalli Meclisi Telegram Channel

group Failaq al-Sham [arrested](#) a Kurdish Christian convert on apostasy charges. He had refused to hand over his property so that the group could build an Islamic school.



A Turkish-backed HTS militant in Syria displaying the insignia of ISIS. Source: [Ebaa News](#) (Official HTS News)

Today, Turkey retains administrative control over Afrin and other captured cities through paid militia members, as well as some Turkish forces. Most local Christians—including Kurdish, Assyrian, and Armenian—have fled. The few who remain feel threatened on account of both their ethnicity and their faith.

For the Assyrian and Armenian communities, who have practiced their Christian faith in northern Syria for decades, there is little appetite to return home following displacement so long as the status quo maintains conflict. For Kurdish Christian communities, they face challenges related to their conversion from Islam. In July 2020, for example, the Turkish-backed

The Caucasus: Echoes of Historical Suffering for Turkish Armenians

Azerbaijan is a Turkic country who maintains close diplomatic relations with Turkey. On 27 September 2020, Azerbaijan initiated a new round of fighting in the ongoing conflict over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, which has a predominantly ethnic Armenian population who declared their own republic in the region (referred to by Armenians as Artsakh). Turkey supported Azerbaijan, promising active military support if needed which included recruiting and deploying mercenaries from Syria.

This conflict excited Turkey's ultra-nationalists with a pan-Turkic agenda towards the cultural and political unification of all Turkic peoples. These ultra-nationalists often held pro-Azeri demonstrations in significant locations with Armenian associations.

This atmosphere reminded many of Istanbul's Turkish-Armenian communities of the climate of hatred that preceded the 1955 Istanbul pogrom against religious minorities. A lawmaker and member of Turkey's Human Rights Committee, Ömer Faruk Gergerlioğlu, [asked](#) whether permissions granted to the Turkish nationalists protesting in Kumkapı, the location of the Armenian Patriarchate, were precursors to another pogrom.

Azerbaijani-Turkish flag demonstrations in Turkish cities that formerly had a strong Armenian presence before the genocide were particularly provocative. For example, in the city of [Sanlıurfa](#), fire crews initiated the flag demonstration. This city was home to a concentration camp during the Armenian genocide.

The expression of Turkish nationalism has led to a surge in hate speech against Armenians. According to journalist [Aris Nalci](#), *"the Armenian community in Turkey once again feels under threat."*

Many within Turkey's Armenian community asked the authorities for some type of statement which would ease these tensions. In October 2020, President Erdoğan and other high-ranking officials attended the funeral of Turkish-Armenian lawmaker Markar Esayan. Armenian Patriarch Sahak [addressed](#) the president saying, *"Your sharing of our pain in an Armenian church during these heated days of the Karabakh conflict contains meaningful messages."*



[Video footage](#) of an Azeri flag demonstration surrounding the Armenian Patriarchate in Kumkapı (Istanbul)

The Libyan Civil War: Exchanging Barbs Over Genocide

The theater of the Libyan Civil War involves multiple countries each pursuing their own particular interest. Foreign mercenaries are frequently used by these countries, including Turkey. The U.S. [estimates](#) that Turkey sent at least 5,000 Syrian mercenaries into Libya, although the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights

[estimates](#) that the number is 15,800.

The mercenaries deployed by Turkey provide support to Libya's Government of National Accord, who is fighting the Libyan National Army (LNA). The LNA also relies upon foreign mercenaries for military support. Turkey's method of interventionism in Libya has facilitated the tactic of using genocide accusations to internationally discredit the other.

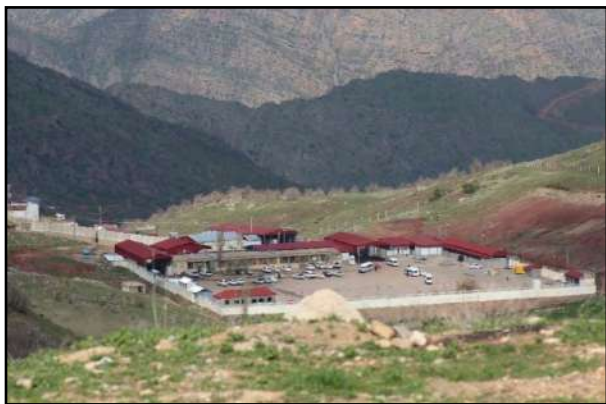
This tactic was first employed in 2019, following months of increased military involvement by Turkey. The LNA responded to the intervention by recognizing the Armenian Genocide, despite Libya having no Armenian community. This action was repeated the following year. Their statements made it clear that their recognition of the Armenian Genocide was an attempt to draw attention towards Turkey's current military activities in Libya. The 2020 [statement](#) read, "Turkey's criminal actions against the Armenian people by burning, the deliberate killing, forced deportation, and other ugly acts contrary to all divine laws is a crime against humanity and it must be recognized."

"Perhaps what it carried out yesterday by bombarding the city of Tarhuna [Libya] with missiles and drones, killing children, the elderly and women, destroying humanitarian convoys, food and medical aid, fuel tanks, bringing in mercenaries and supporting terrorists are other crimes added to a chain of Turkish crimes against people and confirms to the whole world the extent of Erdoğan's arrogance and his disregard for all international laws and norms," continued the statement.

Turkey's response was swift. The High Advisory Board of the Turkish Presidency gathered and [discussed](#) comprehensive steps "so as to prevent the Armenian lobby that plays politics with the events of 1915 in order to defame Turkey and our nation and also the propaganda made by countries through unrealistic allegations that manipulate the issue with political calculations."

This was accompanied by Turkish state-run media accusing the LNA of committing genocide amongst their own communities. Responsive headlines included 190 bodies found in mass graves by Haftar, Libya's GNA says ([Daily Sabah](#)) and Libya's warlord uses gangs-for-hire, rogue mercenaries ([Anadolu Agency](#)).

This commentary occurred during the anniversary months commemorating the 20th century genocide and instigated the type of nationalism in Turkey which views indigenous Christian communities with suspicion. It thus increased the risk for Armenian and other genocide victims to commemorate their own history.



The Turkish-Iraqi border, near the Assyrian village of Barwar. Photo taken shortly after airstrikes had resulted in local crop fires. Source: ICC, c. 2018

Iraq: Displacement of Christian Communities

Turkish military incursions targeting the PKK in northern Iraq began nearly three decades ago. However, since the collapse of a 2015 cease-fire agreement and the 2016 coup attempt, these operations are a near daily occurrence. A [map](#) released this year by Turkey's Directorate of Communications showed 37 "military points" established in northern Iraq. These military points are used for surveillance and are located 25 miles deep inside Iraq's borders. They also help guide airstrikes against the PKK.

These operations have received international censure for indiscriminately targeting civilians, even when there

is no proven PKK presence within a village. According to a [2020 Parliamentary Inquiry](#) conducted by Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government, 504 villages have emptied since the start of Turkey's military incursions. Some local activists estimate that at least 150 of these villages are Assyrian Christian, with the number considerably higher when considering other factors (such as the PKK initiating Christian displacement).

Iraq's Christian community is predominately Assyrian, many of whose ancestors fled the Ottoman-era genocide. They also suffered and were displaced under the recent ISIS genocide. Compounding historical traumas have limited their quality of life. The Turkish-PKK conflict creates further limitations, while also causing a direct threat to human life.

There is much frustration among Iraqi Christians about the impact of this ongoing conflict on daily life, whether by Turkish military operations or by the PKK's guerrilla tactics. Most Christians in this area are farmers and have no ability to protect themselves from either party. As one Christian stated, *"the PKK's presence here brings Turkey."*

As a NATO member, Turkey has an obligation of ensuring that their military operations have minimal impact on non-combatants. However, Turkey has not responded to international condemnation regarding indiscriminate airstrikes. Locals report no efforts made by Turkey to cultivate an understanding of village dynamics, including how villagers can face duress from the PKK for non-compliance.

One Iraqi Assyrian whose home was targeted by an airstrike explains, *"the PKK is trying to show a good picture. The only problem we have is that when the PKK comes near our villages, there are airstrikes because Turkey attacks them. In our village, people don't know where Turkey will target. So, we don't know where to go."*

Another Iraqi Assyrian adds that, *"in the morning, the Turkish forces come. 'Why are you helping the PKK? Why do you feed them?' You cannot say to the person forcing you, 'No! I won't give you food!' So the result of this is in the end, they remove that person. They are trying to shove us all of the way out."*



A Christian home near Zakho targeted by a Turkish airstrike. Source: AAS, c. 2019

Turkey fighting in northern Iraq entangles local Christians between two competing military groups. If Iraq's Christians are to have any future, then it is essential that Turkey shows leadership in pursuing human rights for ethnic and religious minorities.

The report recommends the following questions for dialogue:

- What steps has Turkey taken to ensure that members of its military and affiliated individuals are trained in protecting human rights and following international obligations?
- How does Turkey screen individuals wishing to affiliate with their military activities to ensure that extremists are ineligible?
- How can the Turkish military ensure that non-combatants, including those from the Christian communities, are protected when caught between the demands of competing factions?

SUMMARY

The following points summarize the main challenges for Christians in Turkey:

- The failure of the Turkish state to provide an adequate legal framework. This leaves Christian communities exposed and vulnerable to political manipulation and exploitation. The Christian community is also legally challenged when it comes to defending church property against confiscation, reclaiming lost property, as well as when establishing a new meeting place for a church congregation.
- The lack of legal status for Christian communities means that although they can be tolerated through the “good will” of the state, they are not given equal citizenship rights to ensure their permanent presence and enable them to flourish within Turkey.
- The pervasive Turkish Nationalist-Sunni Islamic narrative promoted by the state in education and public speaking (through the Diyanet, media, and society at large) automatically sidelines alternative views and beliefs, leading to the societal discrimination of minorities, including Christians.
- Turkey’s recent military activities in the surrounding region have impacted the security of its Christian communities through tensions arising from nationalistic rhetoric and provocative actions. This exacerbates the sense of alienation from mainstream Turkish society.
- Discriminatory sentiments within broader Turkish society are seen in the prevalence of hate speech and acts of vandalism, sometimes extending to extremist threats and violent acts against religious minorities.
- The state aims to control the history and cultural heritage of religious minorities, leading to exploitation of assets or their eventual destruction.
- Expatriate Protestant religious workers are perceived as a “threat to national security” by the Turkish authorities and expelled from the country. Since these Christians are not charged with any criminal activity, their legal Christian activities do not conflict with Turkish law, but rather with the prevailing Turkish Nationalist-Sunni Islamic agenda.

Turkey has an obligation under national and international law to uphold Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). The authorities must provide a legal framework to accommodate its religious minorities and develop a national narrative that promotes social cohesion. Given the new executive powers of Turkey’s president, the position holds the necessary authority to make needed changes to the legal framework which protects religious minorities. This obligation for religious freedom extends to those territories under Turkish military control.

APPENDIX 1: TERMS GLOSSARY

AKP – (AK Parti) Justice and Development Party, the ruling party in Turkey since 2002 under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

Association (Turkish: *dernek*) – a group with a particular, usually secular, purpose, but many Protestant churches in Turkey have been registered as associations in their search for legal status

Assyrian – an ethnic people group, whose homeland in Turkey is a region known as Tur Abdin, with Mardin as the chief city. In this report, Assyrian and Syriac are used interchangeably.

Byzantine Empire - also referred to as the Eastern Roman Empire, or Byzantium, was the continuation of the Roman Empire in its eastern provinces during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, when its capital city was Constantinople

Committee of Union and Progress (CUP- İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti) – a political organization aligned with the Young Turks, calling for democratisation and reform in the Ottoman Empire

Diyanet (Directorate of Religious Affairs) – a state institution to manage and promote the Turkish state's approved interpretation of Sunni Islam

Directorate General of Foundations (VGM – Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü) – a Turkish governmental institution that oversees religious foundations

European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) – a court of the Council of Europe responsible for evaluating applications according to the European Convention on Human Rights. Turkey is a state party

Foundation (Turkish: *vakıf*) – an entity for managing a pious endowment belonging to a religious community, such as a church or community school

Free Syrian Army (FSA), also known as Syrian National Army (SNA) – a military group opposed to the government of Bashar al-Assad, cooperating closely with Turkish military, some of whose factions are militant Islamists

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) – an active Sunni Islamist militant group involved in the Syrian Civil War

Imam Hatip schools – religious vocational schools with a low entrance threshold providing secondary education

Immovable Properties – land property with associated structures

Islamic State (IS or ISIS) – also known by its Arabic acronym Daesh, is a militant Islamist group that follows a jihadist doctrine of Sunni Islam

Kültürel Mirası Koruma Derneği (KMKD) – Association for the Protection of Cultural Heritage

Libyan National Army (LNA)- a Libyan national force under the command of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, fighting against the Government of National Accord

MHP (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi) Nationalist Movement Party – a far-right, ultranationalist political party

that formed a coalition with the AKP in the People's Alliance (Turkish: *Cumhur İttifakı*), enabling Erdoğan to remain in power

Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı (MIT) – Turkish National Intelligence Agency

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – a military alliance of 30 North American and European nations, established in 1949

Ottoman Empire – a Turkish state founded in the late 13th Century and at its largest extent incorporating south-east Europe, Anatolia, much of the Near East and North Africa. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire coincided with the founding of the modern Republic of Turkey in 1923.

PKK – Kurdistan Workers' Party (Kurdish: Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê) – a Kurdish militant organization fighting for autonomy and active in south-east Turkey and north Iraq

Population Exchange – the 1923 agreement between Turkey and Greece that resulted in the expulsion of approximately 1.5 million orthodox Christians from Turkey and 500,000 Muslims from Greece and consequent loss of religious diversity

Syriac – See *Assyrian*

Syrian National Army (SNA) also known as Free Syrian Army (FSA) – a Turkish-backed military organization opposing the government of Bashir al-Assad in Syria

Temsil Edilen Kiliseler (TeK) – Association of Protestant Churches (in Turkey), member body of World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) in Turkey

APPENDIX 2: RELEVANT LEGAL PROVISIONS

Domestic Penal Code:

Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code makes it illegal to insult Turkey, the Turkish nation, Turkish government institutions, and Turkish national heroes. It carries criminal sentences ranging between six months and three years.

Article 309 of the Turkish Penal Code references offenses against the constitutional order and violations can carry sentences up to life imprisonment.

Article 328 of the Turkish Penal Code regards political and military espionage. It can include a sentence ranging from 15 years to life imprisonment.

Full text of the Penal Code of Turkey – European Commission for Democracy Through Law ([Venice Commission](#))

International Obligations:

European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) – This convention protects the human rights of every person living in a country that belongs to the Council of Europe. Turkey has been a candidate for European Membership since 1999, with negotiations commencing in 2005. Full text can be found [here](#).

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) – This covenant commits signatories to respect the civil and political rights of those living within their respected countries. Turkey signed the ICCPR in 2000. Full text can be found [here](#).

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) – This covenant commits signatories to protect the economic, social, and cultural rights of those living within their respected countries. It includes fair and just conditions of work, as well as adequate standards of living. Turkey signed CESCR in 2000. Full text can be found [here](#).

Lausanne Peace Treaty (1923) – This treaty ended the conflict that existed between the Ottoman Empire, the French Republic, British Empire, Italy, Japan, Greece, and Romania which existed since the onset of World War I. It also defined the borders of the modern Republic of Turkey. Full text can be found [here](#).

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – A western military alliance meant to provide collective security amongst member states. Turkey officially joined NATO in 1952.

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) – A security oriented organization whose mandate includes arms control, human rights promotion, press freedom, and fair elections. Turkey signed the Helsinki Final Act in 1975 and is a participating state.

United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) – establishes those human rights which are fundamental and commits signatories to their protection. Turkey ratified the UDHR in 2004 Full text can be found [here](#).

APPENDIX 3: ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED SOURCES

“The Collective Dimension of Freedom of Religion – A case Study on Turkey” by [Mine Yildirim](#)

2019 Human Rights Violations – [Protestan Kiliseler Derneği](#)

Hate Speech and Discriminatory Discourse in the Media 2019 Report – [Hrant Dink Foundation](#)

Human Rights Watch World Report 2020 – [Turkey chapter](#)

[Letter](#) of UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief regarding alleged discrimination faced by the Protestant Christian minority in Turkey

European Commission Staff Working Document Turkey 2020 [Report](#)

United States 2019 [Report](#) on International Religious Freedom

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2020 Turkey [Report](#)

Database: Former ISIS Members Now Part of Turkish-Backed Forces in Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad – [Rojava Information Center](#)

Turkey Article 301: How the law on “Turkishness” is an insult to free expression – [Amnesty International](#)



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