

TURKEY 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom, although there are some laws, policies, and constitutional provisions that restrict religious freedom. There were reports of abuses of religious freedom, including the imprisonment of at least one conscientious objector for his religious beliefs. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. In general, members of religious groups that had formal recognition during the Ottoman period, including the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Armenian Protestant, and Jewish communities, reported they had freedom to practice their faiths. The government continued to return or provide compensation for property confiscated from religious community foundations in previous decades. The government did not clarify the legal authority under which the Greek Orthodox Halki seminary could reopen after being closed for more than 40 years. The ban on headscarves remained in effect in government offices and public primary schools, but the government did not enforce it in universities and in some workplaces. Some religious groups faced restrictions registering with the government, owning property, and training their members and clergy. Although religious speech and conversions are legal, some Muslims, Christians, and Bahais faced government restrictions, surveillance, and occasional harassment for alleged proselytizing or providing religious instruction to children.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Christians, Bahais, many non-Sunni Muslims, including the sizeable Alevi population, and members of other religious minority groups faced threats and societal suspicion. Jewish leaders reported some elements of society continued to express anti-Semitic sentiments. Persons wishing to convert from Islam experienced harassment and violence from relatives and neighbors.

Embassy and consulate representatives, as well as visiting U.S. officials, met frequently with government officials and representatives of religious groups to discuss religious freedom, including property restitution issues, religious discrimination, and legal reforms aimed at lifting restrictions on religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

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The Turkish Statistics Institution's 2011 population estimate is 74.7 million. The government estimates 99 percent of the population is Muslim, the majority of which is Hanafi Sunni. Representatives of religious groups state the actual percentage of Muslims is slightly lower.

Academics estimate there are between 15 million and 20 million Alevi, followers of a belief system that incorporates aspects of both Shia and Sunni Islam and draws on the traditions of other religious groups indigenous to the region. Alevi foundation leaders state the number at between 20 million and 25 million.

Other religious groups, mostly concentrated in Istanbul and other large cities, together constitute less than 1 percent of the population. While exact figures are not available, these groups include approximately 500,000 Shiite Jaferi Muslims; 90,000 Armenian Orthodox Christians (of which an estimated 60,000 are citizens and an estimated 30,000 are undocumented immigrants from Armenia); 25,000 Roman Catholics (mostly recent immigrants from Africa and the Philippines); 22,000 Jews; 20,000 Syrian Orthodox (Syriac) Christians; 15,000 Russian Orthodox Christians (mostly recent immigrants from Russia who hold residence permits); 10,000 Bahais; 5,000 Yezidis; 5,000 Jehovah's Witnesses; 7,000 members of other Protestant denominations; 3,000 Iraqi Chaldean Christians; and up to 2,500 Greek Orthodox Christians. There also are small, undetermined numbers of Bulgarian Orthodox, Nestorian, Georgian Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, and Maronite Christians.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom, although some laws, policies, and constitutional provisions restrict religious freedom. The constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of belief, worship, and the private expression of religious ideas. The constitution prohibits discrimination on religious grounds.

Despite these provisions, the government provides favorable and prejudicial treatment to Sunni Islamic groups. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyamet) regulates the operation of more than 85,000 registered mosques and employs more than 117,000 imams, Quran instructors, muezzins, and other religious workers, all of whom are civil servants. Its mandate is to promote the belief, worship, and moral principles of Islam, educate the public about religious issues, and administer

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places of worship. Operating under the prime minister's office and with a president appointed by the prime minister, the Diyanet has five main departments: the High Councils for Religious Affairs, Education, Services, Publications, and Public Relations. The government does not employ religious leaders, instructors, or other staff for other religious groups.

The government donates land for the construction of mosques and in many cases funds their construction through the Diyanet or municipalities. Municipalities pay the utility bills for mosques located within their boundaries. These benefits are uniquely available to Sunni Muslims. The Diyanet Foundation, a quasi-governmental entity, owns many of the mosques around the country.

The government considers Alevism a heterodox Muslim sect and does not financially support religious worship for Alevi Muslims.

The penal code prohibits imams, priests, rabbis, and other religious leaders from "reproaching or vilifying" the government or the laws of the state while performing their duties. Violations are punishable by prison terms of one month to one year, or three months to two years if the crime involves inciting others to disobey the law. There are legal restrictions against insulting a recognized religion, interfering with such a religious group's services, or defacing its property.

The government interprets the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which refers broadly and nonspecifically to "non-Muslim minorities," as granting special legal minority status exclusively to three recognized groups: Armenian Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians. However, the government does not grant legal personality to the leadership organs or administrative structures of these groups, leaving them unable to buy or hold title to property or to press claims in court.

The state provides training for Sunni Muslim clerics. Religious groups other than Sunni Muslims do not have schools to train clerics inside the country. The Greek Orthodox Halki seminary on the island of Heybeli closed in 1971 in response to a law that required all private colleges to be affiliated with a state-run university and meet government requirements that did not permit the operation of a seminary within a monastic community. The Greek Orthodox community thereby lost the only educational institution in the country for training its religious leadership. Co-religionists from outside the country assume informal leadership positions in some cases, but according to a mandate from the Istanbul governorate, leaders of the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, and Jewish communities must be citizens.

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Religious groups generally face administrative challenges when seeking to employ foreign religious personnel because there is no visa category for religious workers. The government does not recognize conscientious objection to military service, and those who oppose mandatory military service on religious grounds face charges in military and civilian courts as well as prison sentences.

Although registration with the government is not mandatory for religious groups, unregistered religious groups cannot request legal recognition of places of worship, and holding religious services at a location not recognized as a place of worship is illegal. All organizations, including religious groups, can register as associations or foundations. Religious groups must associate themselves with a charitable or cultural cause in order to register as either type of entity. Religious community foundations are the only religious groups permitted to own real estate.

Associations by definition must be nonprofit and may receive financial support only in the form of donations. A foundation has greater fiscal freedom and may earn income through companies and rent-earning properties. Associations have fewer legal rights than foundations at the local level. However, the process for establishing a foundation is substantially lengthier and more expensive than that for establishing an association.

The General Directorate of Foundations (GDF) regulates the activities and affiliated property of all charitable foundations and assesses whether they are operating within the stated objectives of their organizational statute. There are several categories of foundations, including religious community foundations. Associations have fewer legal rights and protections than foundations at the local level. To register as a foundation, a group of persons or legal entities must agree to dedicate private property to public use. A foundation becomes a legal entity when it is registered in the records of the civil court with jurisdiction for that location. When a court approves the registration of a foundation, it is registered in the central register of the General Directorate of Foundations, at which point it is considered fully constituted. A foundation of any category may be closed only by court orders.

Parliament determines on an annual basis the minimum capital requirement for creating a foundation. Membership in the foundation cannot be limited to any one ethnic or religious group; technically, a foundation to support a specific religion is not possible under the law.

To register as an association, a group must submit a registration application to the provincial governor's office and may immediately begin operating while awaiting confirmation from the governor's office that its bylaws are constitutional.

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Associations can be closed by court orders and are bound by the civil code not to discriminate on the grounds of religion, ethnicity, or race.

The constitution establishes compulsory religious and moral instruction in public primary and secondary schools, with content determined by the Ministry of National Education's Department of Religious Instruction. Members of recognized non-Muslim religious groups are legally exempt from religious instruction.

Only Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish religious community foundations may operate schools under the supervision of the Education Ministry. Other religious groups may not operate schools of their own. The curricula of these schools include information unique to the cultures of the three groups and may be taught in the minority groups' languages. Beginning in the 2012-2013 school year, the government permits Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish students who are not citizens, including children of undocumented Armenian migrants, to enroll in the community schools. However, because these children are legally classified as "visitors" they are ineligible to receive a degree from those schools.

Because the government does not recognize the Syrian Orthodox community as a protected minority under the Lausanne treaty, it is not allowed to operate its own schools as are the Greek, Jewish, and Armenian communities. As a result, Syrian Orthodox children are not able to receive education in neo-Aramaic, the language of their community and church.

A change during the year in the law governing compulsory education now requires 12 years of education divided into four years of elementary, four years of intermediate, and four years of secondary school. As before, students may choose to attend vocational high schools, including "imam-hatip" (Muslim preacher) vocational high schools. The new law creates imam-hatip schools at the intermediate level, enabling students to attend after the first four years of elementary school instead of after eight years as was previously the case; this change effectively reduces the age at which a religious-track education becomes available. Additional religious courses can now be taken as electives for two hours per week for each grade in regular schools. The new law also abolishes all age limits for Quran courses.

Although the constitution stipulates that no one shall be compelled to reveal his or her religious beliefs, there is a space in which to note one's religious affiliation on

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national identity cards. A few religious groups, such as Bahais, Alevis, and Yezidis, are unable to state their religious identity on national identity cards because their groups are not included among the available options. Despite a 2006 regulation allowing persons to leave the religious identity section of their identity cards blank or change the religious identity section by written application, the government restricts applicants' choice of religion. Applicants must either leave the religious identity section blank or choose from the following: Muslim, Greek Orthodox, Christian, Jew, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, no religion, or other.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: three days at the end of Ramadan (Ramazan Bayrami) and four days for the feast of the sacrifice (Kurban Bayrami).

Government Practices

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom, including the imprisonment of a conscientious objector for refusing to serve in the military due to his religious beliefs. The government imposed numerous restrictions that affected members of religious groups. Local government officials did not enforce constitutional guarantees on freedom of religion for members of minority religious groups. Conscientious objectors to military service continued to experience difficulties. According to Jehovah's Witnesses officials, members faced prosecution and fines for their refusal to serve in the military forces. One objector, Baris Gormez, had been charged 13 times for "disobedience of orders" since 2007. In February Gormez was acquitted by Isparta Military Court and released from prison. The prosecutor appealed the decision, and at year's end the case was before the Military Court of Appeals. Gormez also had a case stemming from his status as a conscientious objector pending before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). In January another Jehovah's Witness, Fethi Demirtas, won a decision in the ECHR against the government for violating the right to a fair trial and freedom of religion, conscience, and thought. In May the United Nations Human Rights Committee, upon application by two other Jehovah's Witnesses, Cenk Atasoy and Arda Sarkut, found that the government had violated Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by denying them conscientious objector status. In May Turkish national Ugur Bilkay requested asylum in Italy based on his religious objection to military service.

The government continued to impose significant restrictions on religious expression, including Muslim expression, in government offices and state-run institutions for the stated reason of preserving the "secular state." However, many

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state buildings, including universities, maintained mesjids (small mosques) in which Muslims could pray. The government denied a request from an Alevi member of parliament to establish a small Alevi place of worship in the parliament building, which had a mesjid.

Mystical Sufi and other religious-social orders (tarikats) and lodges (cemaats), banned officially since 1925, remained active and widespread. The government did not enforce this ban.

Some religious groups reported difficulties opening, maintaining, and operating houses of worship. Although a 2003 amendment to the law permits cultural associations as well as foundations to establish legal places of worship, authorities have approved only one new Christian church as a place of worship since the founding of the republic in 1923.

The majority of Protestants met in unregistered places of worship. The government reportedly recognized only 15 Protestant churches as official places of worship throughout the country, including several chapels run by foreign diplomatic missions. Protestant groups reportedly used approximately 40 rented buildings and more than 100 residences for unregistered worship services. Several Protestant churches reported difficulties obtaining permission to modify rented space and to use public space for community activities, as other civil groups were allowed to do. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that by year's end they had made 46 unsuccessful attempts in 27 different municipalities to register Kingdom Halls as places of worship. On occasion, police broke up worship services in unregistered locations. Some lay leaders reported multiple arrests.

Many local officials continued to impose zoning standards on churches, such as minimum space requirements, that they did not impose on mosques. In numerous instances, local officials required Protestant groups to purchase 27,000 square feet of land (approximately 0.6 acres) to construct churches, even for very small congregations. Officials did not apply this requirement to Sunni Muslims, who were permitted to build smaller mesjids in malls, airports, and other spaces.

The Syrian Orthodox community continued to seek a second church in Istanbul to accommodate its growing population. The community had one church in Istanbul to serve an estimated local population of 17,000 to 20,000. In 2011, President Gul and Prime Minister Erdogan publicly endorsed a second church. While the Syrian Orthodox community did not request government funding for construction as mosques receive, it did request that the municipality provide free land upon which

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to build, as was provided for mosques. At year's end, the municipality had not designated land on which to build.

Non-Sunni Muslims faced difficulty obtaining exemptions from compulsory religious instruction in primary and secondary schools, particularly if their identification cards listed "Muslim." Members of other minority religious groups, including members of the Syrian Orthodox community and Protestants, also had difficulty obtaining exemptions. The government claimed the compulsory instruction covered the range of world religions, but religious groups asserted that the courses largely reflected Hanafi Sunni Islamic doctrine and contained negative and sometimes incorrect information about other religious groups.

Many Alevis alleged discrimination in the government's failure to include any of their distinct doctrines or beliefs in the compulsory religious education curriculum for Muslim students. A 2007 ECHR decision allowed an Alevi parent to request that his daughter be exempted from her school's compulsory religious instruction, but Alevis reported that school officials routinely ignored this right. Alevis had more than 20 unresolved discrimination cases against the Ministry of Education pending in court. Authorities added material on Alevism to the religious course curriculum after the ECHR decision, but many Alevis stated that this material was inadequate and, in some cases, incorrect. Alevi leaders reported that teachers sometimes slapped children attempting to opt out of classes or singled them out for mistreatment by other students.

Because non-Turkish citizens may not receive degrees from licensed community schools, many Armenian immigrant parents remained reluctant to enroll their children in these schools and opted instead for unlicensed "basement" schools organized on the same model as schools in Armenia and whose degrees were accepted upon transfer back to Armenia. The government tolerated, but did not approve, these schools.

In general, members of religious groups formally recognized during the Ottoman period, including the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Armenian Protestant, and Jewish communities, reported they had freedom to practice their faith. However, the government placed significant restrictions on the administration of their churches and synagogues, such as the requirement that leaders of the Armenian Apostolic, Greek Orthodox, and Jewish communities be citizens.

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Many prosecutors and police continued to regard religious speech and religious activism with suspicion. Protestant evangelical churches and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), which engaged in proselytizing, reported significant government interference, including surveillance and arbitrary police action. Anti-missionary rhetoric remained in required school textbooks, and police occasionally reported students who met with Christian missionaries to their families or to university authorities.

Many foreign Protestants, Mormons, and religious workers from other minority religious groups reported they were unable to obtain or renew residence permits. Some religious workers whose residence permits were not renewed, including individuals who had lived in the country for years, were forced to leave. In response to inquiries, government officials stated that a religious worker residence permit existed, but could not explain how one could be obtained.

The government brought blasphemy charges against individuals or organizations on several occasions. In June prosecutors charged concert pianist Fazil Say with insulting religious values and fomenting hatred and enmity among the public for sending tweets on his Twitter account referring to a poem by 11th-century Persian poet Omar Khayyam and describing “heaven’s promise of rivers of wine” as a tavern and comparing the poem’s promise of virgins in the afterlife to a brothel. Say also tweeted about a muezzin who recited the evening call for prayer in 22 seconds, questioning whether he was in a rush to reunite with his lover or go drink raki. The charges carry a penalty of up to 18 months in prison.

The Higher Education Council continued to refrain from enforcing the ban on headscarves in universities. This policy did not extend to primary and secondary schools, and the ban remained in force for civil servants in public buildings, although some government offices unofficially allowed employees to wear headscarves. On November 27, the Ministry of Education announced new regulations, to take effect in 2013, abolishing school uniforms and permitting the wearing of headscarves by female students in elective Quran classes and at “imam-hatip” schools.

Alevis stated they often faced obstacles when attempting to establish cemevis (places of worship). Those constructed had no legal status as places of worship and received no financial support from the Diyanet. Alevi leaders reported there were approximately 2,500 to 3,000 cemevis in the country, an insufficient number to meet their needs; they stated that if their communities had the same number of

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cemevis per capita as Sunni Muslims had mosques, there would be more than 40,000 cemevis in the country.

At year's end, the second appeal of a lower court's dismissal of a complaint to shut down the Cankaya Cemevi Building Association awaited a final verdict by the country's highest court, the General Assembly of the Court of Cassation. The Ankara Governor's Office Provincial Directorate in charge of associations had filed a complaint against the building association for refusing to remove a description from its charter referring to cemevis as houses of worship. In November 2011 the lower court found, pursuant to the constitution's guarantee of freedom of religion and precedents from the ECHR, that Alevis were entitled to designate their own houses of worship. However, in July the Supreme Court of Appeals overturned the lower court's decision, ruling that no places other than mosques and mesjids could be considered places of worship under the law, which allows only "mosques or mesjids" approved by the Diyanet to be classified as legitimate places of worship. Following that decision, the Supreme Court of Appeals sent the case back to the lower court to act on the original complaint, requesting that the Cankaya Cemevi Building Association be closed. In November the lower court reaffirmed its original verdict; the judge's decision stated that for hundreds of years cemevis had been known as places of worship for Alevis and that the charter's reference to cemevis as places of worship was not in contravention of the constitution or prohibited by law. The prosecutor appealed the lower court's decision.

In January, following municipalities' denial of requests by some Alevi foundations that they pay utility bills for cemevis as they do for mosques, the Alevi Cem Foundation filed a petition with the ECHR seeking legal recognition of cemevis as houses of worship entitled to equal treatment under the law. The suit was pending at year's end.

The Armenian Orthodox and Ecumenical Greek Orthodox communities continued to seek legal recognition of their patriarchates, which operated as conglomerations of religious community foundations. Without legal personality, the patriarchates did not have the right to own and transfer property; associated foundations held property on their behalf. Because of Higher Education Board requirements, the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox patriarchates were unable to train their clerics in monastic seminaries within the country.

The Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate continued to seek to reopen the Halki seminary as an institution for religious training. Several high-level officials expressed support for reopening Halki, including Diyanet President Mehmet Gormez in his first meeting with the Ecumenical Patriarch in July. However, by

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year's end, the government had not clarified the legal authority under which the seminary could reopen.

The government continued not to recognize the status of the Ecumenical Patriarchate as the leader of the world's 300 million Orthodox Christians. The government's position remained that the Ecumenical Patriarch was not "ecumenical," but only the religious leader of the country's Greek Orthodox minority population. The government continued to permit only citizens to vote in the Church's Holy Synod or be elected Patriarch. Because of significant decline in the Greek Orthodox population, there were only a handful of candidates eligible to become the next Ecumenical Patriarch. The government eventually granted citizenship to 20 of the 26 Greek Orthodox metropolitans who applied to become Turkish citizens under the terms of a stop-gap 2011 solution offered by the government to widen the pool from which to select the next patriarch. At year's end, it was unclear whether the remaining candidates would be reconsidered for citizenship or whether the government would agree to offer the same process in the future.

In November the General Assembly of the Court of Cassation ruled against Mor Gabriel, a 1,600-year-old Syriac monastery in Midyat, in a case challenging the monastery's ownership of parcels of land inside and outside the monastery walls. Beginning in 2008, the Undersecretariat of the Treasury, the Department of Forestry, and nearby villages initiated a series of court cases against the monastery. Local courts decided in favor of the monastery in two cases and against it in a third. A fourth case remained pending. When the Department of Forestry appealed the cases that the monastery had won, evidence favorable to the foundation's claim of ownership was reportedly lost in the transfer of the case. In June the Court of Cassation ruled against Mor Gabriel, and in November the General Assembly of the Court of Cassation rejected the monastery's appeal. The monastery has the option of applying to the Constitutional Court and ultimately to the ECHR.

Foundations reported they were frequently rebuffed in efforts to acquire and restore ruined churches, especially if restoration would restore the building to use as a church as opposed to a museum or cultural center. The Protestant Church of Istanbul reported it had been attempting for seven years to obtain permission to restore and use a former Roman Catholic chapel that was seized by the Treasury Department after the chapel's foundation became inactive. The authorities continued to decline permission to restore the chapel. Authorities enforced regulations specifying that restoration or construction carried out on buildings and

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monuments considered “ancient” could take place only with authorization of the regional board for the protection of cultural and national wealth.

The government did not implement the 2011 ECHR ruling that suggested omitting reference to religion on national identity cards. The ruling was in response to a case brought by an Alevi man who wished to list “Alevi” as his religion. Some local officials reportedly harassed persons who converted from Islam to another religion when they sought to amend their identity cards. Some non-Muslims maintained that listing their religious affiliation on the cards exposed them to discrimination and harassment. Many religious groups complained that by not including a religious identity or listing an identity other than Muslim, individuals were precluded from obtaining jobs in the state bureaucracy or government and discriminated against in the private sector.

The government continued to permit annual religious worship services at religiously significant sites previously converted to state museums, such as the Sumela Monastery near Trabzon, Akdamar Church near Van, St. Peter’s Church in Antakya, St. Nicholas’ Church near Demre, and the House of the Virgin Mary near Selcuk. Some municipal and minority religious group leaders called for these sites to be opened to worship without restrictions, and for other sites to be considered for religious services as well.

In July President Abdullah Gul hosted the leaders of minority religious foundations in Istanbul. Greek, Syriac, Armenian, Jewish, and Bulgarian foundation representatives attended.

In September high-level government officials participated in a conference held in Istanbul titled “Arab Awakening and Peace in the Middle East: Muslim and Christian Perspectives.” Conference organizers acknowledged that Jews were not invited or welcome to participate.

The municipality of Diyarbakir contributed a third of the funding for the renovation of St. Giragos Church, at one time the largest Armenian Orthodox church in the country, which was abandoned and partially destroyed in 1915. Following completion of the restoration, a mass was held at the church in November for the first time in 97 years. Several municipalities around the country initiated plans to convert former churches, which had been abandoned or used as commercial venues, to cultural centers or museums with an emphasis on the religious significance of the building.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

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In a February session held behind closed doors, the Ecumenical Patriarch addressed the parliament's Constitutional Reconciliation Sub-Committee, which was responsible for drafting a new constitution. This was the first time in the history of the republic that a leader of a religious minority group addressed the parliament. Subsequently, representatives of the Syrian Orthodox community also testified before the sub-committee.

The government continued to implement a 2011 decree allowing a one-year period for religious minority foundations to apply for the return of, or compensation for, properties seized by the government in previous decades. Between 1936 and 2011, the government seized thousands of properties belonging to Christian and Jewish religious foundations. A 1936 law required that religious foundations compile and officially register lists of all properties owned. Although it was widely recognized at the time that these lists were not comprehensive, the government then began seizing unlisted properties from religious foundations. A 1974 High Court of Appeals ruling interpreting the 1936 law stated it had been illegal for religious foundations to acquire any new property after 1936, enabling the government to seize without compensation religious foundation properties acquired between 1936 and 1974.

By August, the GDF had received approximately 1,560 applications for the return of seized properties from the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Jewish, Syrian Orthodox, Bulgarian Orthodox, Georgian Orthodox, Chaldean, and Armenian Protestant communities. By year's end, the GDF had reviewed approximately 200 of the applications and returned 71 properties to religious community foundations, made offers of compensation for 15 properties, declined 19 applications for lack of evidence, and returned the remaining applications for the correction of technical problems. The government established an arbitration system for foundations that believed the amount of compensation received for a property was inadequate. If the arbitration process is unsuccessful, foundations will have access to the courts for redress.

The decree did not alter the law that made it possible to seize property acquired after 1936, nor did it change the complicated procedure for administering foundation properties that contributed to the seizure of many properties. Additionally, the decree did not cover properties taken from religious institutions or communities that do not have legally recognized foundations, including the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches.

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The 2011 decree also permitted the formation of new religious community foundations as well as the reopening of foundations that had previously been closed and whose assets the GDF had confiscated. The GDF approved new or reactivated foundations for the Jewish community in Izmir, the Armenian Orthodox community in Istanbul, and the Greek Orthodox community in Istanbul. Prior to the 2011 decree, the government had approved only one new religious community foundation since the founding of the republic—the Istanbul Protestant Church Foundation in 2003.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, and practice. Many members of the public viewed religious pluralism as a threat to Islam and to “national unity.” Non-Sunni Muslims, Christians, Bahais, and members of other minority religious groups faced threats and societal suspicion, and Jewish leaders reported some elements of society continued to express anti-Semitic sentiments. Because ethnicity and religion were often inextricably linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance.

The trial of those accused of involvement in the 2007 murder of Armenian-Turkish journalist Hrant Dink, a Christian, ended in January. One defendant was sentenced to life imprisonment for “instigating murder.” Three others received sentences ranging from two months to 10 years. All defendants were acquitted of the serious charge of “membership in an armed organization,” as the court found insufficient evidence of “organized crime.”

The trial of the accused murderer of Roman Catholic Bishop Luigi Padovese in a 2010 attack in Iskenderun continued at year’s end.

Prosecutors substantially broadened the scope of the investigation of suspects involved in the 2007 torture and killing of three members of a Protestant church (a German national and two Turkish converts) who were publishing Bibles and other religious materials in Malatya. Prosecutors attempted to connect the murders to the activities of suspected coup-plotters in the mass prosecution known as “Ergenekon.” In the Ergenekon prosecution, military and intelligence officers were accused of trying to use the sensational murders of Christians to give the appearance that the Justice and Development (AK) Party government was unwilling or unable to stop the activities of religious radicals and Islamic terrorists, thereby creating public support for a military coup. Several noncommissioned

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officers, as well as the retired colonel who was the former gendarmerie regiment commander in Malatya, testified that prior to the murders, authorities monitored the missionaries and the handful of Christians in Malatya 24 hours a day. The case continued at year's end.

The military investigation into the 2011 murder of Armenian-Turkish soldier Sevag Balikci by another soldier, allegedly for celebrating Easter, continued at year's end.

Threats against non-Sunni Muslims created an atmosphere of intimidation for some members of minority religious groups. In July an angry mob threw stones at the home and burned down the stables of an Alevi family in the village of Surgu in Malatya, after the family allegedly asked a Ramadan drummer not to wake them for the meal before sunrise. After the incident, prosecutors indicted both the Alevi family and the Sunni mob. Prosecutors asked for a sentence of 14 years imprisonment for family members for allegedly inciting the mob to burn down their own stables, and they asked for 10 years for the drummer and a maximum of six and a half years for 48 "protestors." In October prosecutors filed another case against the Alevi family for "aspersion," requesting 15 years' imprisonment for allegedly giving the wrong date for the attack in their first statement. Both cases continued at year's end.

Jewish leaders expressed concern about anti-Semitism. Many attributed occurrences of anti-Semitic graffiti and threats to events in the Middle East. Local authorities continued to work with community leaders and synagogue officials to protect Jewish places of worship.

In March local and international Jewish groups, including the Anti-Defamation League, criticized a cosmetics company for featuring Adolph Hitler in a shampoo commercial that ran on state television. The company defended the commercial but stopped airing it.

Some Protestant pastors and congregants reported receiving threatening telephone calls or messages during the year, and some Protestant churches reported vandalism and damage. Several Protestant pastors, some Protestant church legal advisors, and several Protestant churches across the country received heightened police protection due to threats. On Easter morning, three men accosted a Protestant lay minister in Istanbul after he caught them inside his church. As they beat him, the men reportedly insulted Christianity and threatened him if he refused to leave, stating he had no right to be in a Muslim neighborhood.

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Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The secretary of state, ambassador, embassy officers, and other U.S. officials met with government officials throughout the year to stress the importance of religious freedom, including legal reforms aimed at lifting restrictions on religious groups, property restitution, and specific cases of religious discrimination. Embassy officials issued public statements drawing attention to religious discrimination. U.S. consular officials met with government counterparts to discuss barriers encountered by U.S. citizens attempting to obtain visas as religious workers.

The secretary of state and the ambassador, in private meetings with government officials and publicly through local media, called for the reopening of the Greek Orthodox Halki seminary. In August the assistant secretary for European and Eurasian affairs, the consul general in Istanbul, and several other U.S. officials toured Halki and met with its abbot. Afterwards, these officials held a press conference calling on the government to reopen the seminary without preconditions.

The ambassador, consulate representatives in Istanbul and Adana, and staff at all three posts maintained close relations with “traditional” and emerging religious groups. The ambassador and other embassy and consular personnel met frequently with the leaders of religious groups and hosted or attended events including iftars during Ramadan, Jewish and Christian holidays, and Holocaust Remembrance Day. The embassy met regularly with religious leaders, individually and collectively, to discuss religious freedom concerns and promote interreligious dialogue.