



Turkey

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, the Government imposes some restrictions on Muslim and other religious groups and on Muslim religious expression in government offices and state-run institutions, including universities.

There was some deterioration in respect for religious freedom during the reporting period. The Government's Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) initiated a public campaign against Christian missionary activity in the country. High-level government officials made statements depicting missionaries as a threat. There was also an increase in anti-Christian media coverage. Threats and vandalism against Christians and church facilities increased.

In addition, some Muslims, Christians, and Baha'is faced some restrictions and occasional harassment for alleged proselytizing or holding unauthorized meetings. The State continued to oppose "Islamic fundamentalism." Authorities continued their broad ban on wearing Muslim religious dress in government facilities, including universities, schools, and workplaces.

The generally tolerant relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom in principle; however, a sharp debate continued over the country's definition of "secularism," the proper role of religion in society, and the potential influence of the country's small minority of Islamists.

According to the general perception, Turkish identity is based on the Turkish language and the Islamic faith. Religious minorities say they are effectively blocked from careers in state institutions, a claim supported in a report by a government human rights body. Christians, Baha'is, and some Muslims faced societal suspicion and mistrust, and more radical Islamist elements continued to express anti-Semitic sentiments. Additionally, persons wishing to convert from Islam to another religion sometimes experienced social harassment and violence from relatives and neighbors.

The U.S. Government frequently discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Embassy representatives met frequently with government officials and representatives of religious groups during the reporting period to discuss issues related to religious freedom, including legal reform aimed at lifting restrictions on religious minorities, and the Government's anti-missionary campaign.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 301,383 square miles, and its population is approximately 70 million. According to the Government, an estimated 99 percent of the population is Muslim, the majority of whom are Sunni. According to the human rights nongovernmental organization (NGO) Mazlum-Der and representatives of various religious minority communities, the actual percentage of Muslims is slightly lower. The Government officially recognizes only three minority religious communities--Greek Orthodox Christians, Armenian Orthodox Christians, and Jews--although other non-Muslim communities exist. The level of religious observance varies throughout the country, in part due to the influence of secular traditions and official restrictions on religious expression in political and social life.

In addition to the country's Sunni Muslim majority, there are an estimated 7-million Alevi, followers of a belief system that incorporates aspects of both Shi'a and Sunni Islam and draws on the traditions of other religions found in Anatolia as well. Some Alevi practice rituals that include men and women worshipping together through oratory, poetry, and dance. The Government considers Alevism a heterodox Muslim sect; however, some Alevi and radical Sunnis maintain Alevi are not Muslims.

In several areas of western Anatolia, there is also a small group of Muslims, sometimes referred to by outsiders as Tahtacilar, some of whose practices include rituals with ancient Turkmen (shamanist) roots; some Sunni groups consider these practices to be un-Islamic.

There are several other religious groups, mostly concentrated in Istanbul and other large cities. While exact membership figures are not available, these religious groups include approximately 65,000 Armenian Orthodox Christians, 23,000 Jews, and fewer

than 2,500 Greek Orthodox Christians. The Government interprets the 1923 Lausanne Treaty as granting special legal minority status exclusively to these three groups, although the treaty text refers broadly to "non-Muslim minorities" without listing specific groups. However, this recognition does not extend to the religious leadership organs; for example, the Ecumenical and Armenian Patriarchates continue to seek recognition of their legal status. There also are approximately 10,000 Baha'is, an estimated 15,000 Syrian Orthodox (Syriac) Christians, 5,000 Yezidis, 3,300 Jehovah's Witnesses, 3,000 Protestants, and small, undetermined numbers of Bulgarian, Chaldean, Nestorian, Georgian, Roman Catholic, and Maronite Christians. The number of Syriac Christians in the southeast was once high; however, under pressure from government authorities and later under the impact of the war against the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), many Syriacs migrated to Istanbul, Western Europe, or North and South America. Over the last several years, small numbers of Syriacs have returned from overseas to the southeast, mostly from Western Europe. In most return cases, older family members have returned while younger ones have remained abroad.

Christian organizations estimate there are approximately 1,100 Christian missionaries in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, the Government imposes some restrictions on Muslim and other religious groups and on Muslim religious expression in government offices and state-run institutions, including universities, usually for the stated reason of preserving the "secular state." The Constitution establishes the country as a "secular state" and provides for freedom of belief, freedom of worship, and the private dissemination of religious ideas. However, other constitutional provisions regarding the integrity and existence of the secular state restrict these rights. The Constitution prohibits discrimination on religious grounds. Core institutions of the State, including the Presidency, armed forces, judiciary, and state bureaucracy, have played the role of defending traditional Turkish secularism throughout the history of the Republic. In some cases, elements of the State have opposed policies of the elected government on the grounds that they threatened the secular state.

The Government oversees Muslim religious facilities and education through the Diyanet, which is under the authority of the Prime Ministry. The Diyanet has responsibility for regulating the operation of the country's 75,000 registered mosques and employing local and provincial imams, who are civil servants. Some groups, particularly Alevis, claim that the Diyanet reflects mainstream Sunni Islamic beliefs to the exclusion of other beliefs; however, the Government asserts that the Diyanet treats equally all who request services.

A separate government agency, the General Directorate for Foundations (Vakiflar Genel Mudurlugu), regulates some activities of "non-Muslim" religious groups and their affiliated churches, monasteries, synagogues, and related religious property. There are 161 "minority foundations" recognized by the Vakiflar, including Greek Orthodox foundations with approximately 70 sites, Armenian Orthodox foundations with approximately 50 sites, and Jewish foundations with 20 sites, as well as Syrian Christian, Chaldean, Bulgarian Orthodox, Georgian, and Maronite foundations. The Vakiflar also regulates Muslim charitable religious foundations, including schools, hospitals, and orphanages.

In 1936, the Government required all foundations to declare their sources of income. In 1974, amid political tensions over Cyprus, the High Court of Appeals ruled that the minority foundations had no right to acquire properties beyond those listed in the 1936 declarations.

The Court's ruling launched a process, continuing today, under which the State has seized control of properties acquired after 1936. The law also allows the State to expropriate properties in areas where the local "non-Muslim" population drops significantly. Minority religious groups, particularly the Greek and Armenian Orthodox communities, have lost numerous properties to the State in the past and continue to fight ongoing efforts by the State to expropriate properties.

The law allows the 161 religious minority foundations recognized by the Vakiflar to acquire property, and the Vakiflar has approved 340 applications by "non-Muslim" foundations to acquire legal ownership of properties. However, the legislation does not allow the communities to reclaim the hundreds of properties affiliated with foundations expropriated by the State over the years. Foundations have also been unable to acquire legal ownership of properties registered under names of third parties, including properties registered under the names of saints or archangels, during periods when foundations could not own property in their own name.

Government authorities do not interfere in matters of doctrine pertaining to "non-Muslim" religions, nor do they restrict the publication or use of religious literature among members of the religion.

There are legal restrictions against insulting any religion recognized by the Government, interfering with that religion's services, or debasing its property.

Alevis freely practice their beliefs and build "Cem houses" (places of gathering), although Cem houses have no legal status as places of worship. Alevis in the Kartal district of Istanbul continued to fight a court battle against a decision by local authorities to deny them permission to build a Cem house. In January, Alevis in the Cankaya district of Ankara applied to acquire property to

open a Cem house. Municipal authorities consulted the Diyanet, which issued a letter stating that Alevis in Cankaya did not need a Cem house because they could worship at a local mosque. Also in January, the Diyanet issued a letter to authorities in the Sultanbeyli district of Istanbul stating that Cem houses violate Islamic principles and Turkish law.

Many Alevis allege discrimination in the Government's failure to include any of their doctrines or beliefs in religious instruction classes in public schools. They also charge a bias in the Diyanet, which does not allocate specific funds for Alevi activities or religious leadership.

The Constitution establishes compulsory religious and moral instruction in primary and secondary schools. Religious minorities are exempted. However, some religious minorities—such as Protestants—face difficulty obtaining exemptions, particularly if their identification cards do not list a religion other than Islam. The Government claims the religion courses cover the range of world religions; however, religious minorities say the courses reflect Sunni Islamic doctrine, which, they maintain, explains why "non-Muslims" are exempt.

An Alevi parent in January 2004 filed suit in the European Court of Human Rights charging that the mandatory religion courses violate religious freedom; the case was ongoing at the end of the period covered by this report. In a June 2004 report, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance recommended that the Government either make the courses optional or revise the content so that they genuinely and fairly cover all religions.

Officially recognized religious minorities may operate schools under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. Such schools are required to appoint a Muslim as deputy principal; reportedly these deputies have more authority than their nominal supervisors. The curriculum of these schools includes Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish instruction. In May 2004, the Education Ministry stated that children with "non-Muslim" mothers could attend minority schools; previously, only those with "non-Muslim" fathers were permitted.

The Caferis, the country's principal Shi'a community numbering between 500,000 and 1 million (concentrated mostly in eastern Turkey and Istanbul), do not face restrictions on their religious freedoms. They are free to build and operate their own mosques and to appoint their own imams; however, as with the Alevis, the Diyanet does not allocate funds for this purpose. The Caferis claim to have faced discrimination and repression in the past, but such incidents reportedly have been rare in recent years.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion; however, state policy imposes some restrictions on religious groups and on religious expression in government offices and state-run institutions, including universities.

"Secularists" in the military, judiciary, and other branches of the bureaucracy continued to wage campaigns against what they label as proponents of "Islamic fundamentalism." These groups view "religious fundamentalism," which they do not define clearly, but which they assert is an attempt to impose the rule of Shari'a law in all civil and criminal matters, as a threat to the "secular State." The National Security Council (NSC) categorizes religious fundamentalism as a threat to public safety.

According to Mazlum-Der and other groups, some government ministries have dismissed or barred from promotion civil servants suspected of anti-state or Islamist activities. Reports by Mazlum-Der, the media, and others indicated that the military sometimes dismisses religiously observant Muslims from military service. Such dismissals were based on behavior that military officials believed identified these individuals as Islamic fundamentalists, which they were concerned could indicate disloyalty to the secular State.

According to Mazlum-Der, the military charged individuals with lack of discipline for activities that included performing Muslim prayers or being married to women who wore headscarves. According to the military, officers and NCOs were sometimes dismissed for maintaining ties to Islamic fundamentalist organizations, despite repeated warnings from superior officers.

In February, a military court reportedly dismissed the deputy commander of the Jandarma Command in Ardahan for worshipping at a mosque while wearing his uniform.

Mystical Sufi and other religious-social orders (tarikats) and lodges (cemaats) have been banned officially since the mid-1920s; however, tarikats and cemaats remain active and widespread. Some prominent political and social leaders continue to associate with tarikats, cemaats, and other Islamic communities.

Under the law, religious services may take place only in designated places of worship. Municipal codes mandate that only the Government can designate a place of worship, and if a religion has no legal standing in the country, it may not be eligible for a designated site. "Non-Muslim" religious services, especially for religious groups that do not own property recognized by the Vakiflar, often take place on diplomatic property or in private apartments. Police occasionally bar Christians from holding services in private apartments, and prosecutors have opened cases against Christians for holding unauthorized gatherings.

Members of the St. Paul Union Church Association continued to try to purchase an abandoned church building in Antalya. The Foreign Ministry has been reviewing the purchase agreement since 2001.

In September 2004, Bodrum police closed a Protestant church and confiscated its signs under orders from the Governor. Authorities reopened the church several days later.

Protestants in Tarsus claimed they were subject to repeated threats and harassment, including from individual law enforcement officials and municipal officials, during the reporting period.

In May, the High Board of Radio and Television ordered a program of the Christian station Radyo Shema off the air for one episode as punishment for a broadcast it deemed "discriminatory." Christians affiliated with the station said the broadcast featured only passages read directly from the Bible. In June, the High Court of Appeals reportedly annulled the decision to sanction the station.

In September 2004, Parliament adopted a law prohibiting imams, priests, rabbis, or 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 1 month to 1 year, or 3 months to 2 years if the crime involves inciting others to disobey the law.

The authorities continue to monitor the activities of Eastern Orthodox churches but generally do not interfere with their activities. The Government does not recognize the ecumenical status of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, acknowledging him only as the head of the country's dwindling Greek Orthodox community. High-level government leaders often assert publicly that use of the term "ecumenical" in reference to the Patriarch violates the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. However, government officials privately acknowledge that Lausanne does not address the issue.

As a result, the Government has long maintained that only citizens of the country can be members of the Church's Holy Synod and participate in Patriarchal elections. Members of the Greek Orthodox community said these restrictions threaten the survival of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul, because, with fewer than 2,500 Greek Orthodox left in the country, the community is becoming too small to maintain the institution.

In March 2004, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I appointed six non-Turkish-citizen metropolitans to the Holy Synod, representing the first time in the 80-year history of the country that noncitizens had been appointed to the body. Government officials said they were conducting a legal analysis of the appointments.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul continues to seek to reopen the Halki seminary on the island of Heybeli in the Sea of Marmara. The Government closed the seminary in 1971, when the State nationalized all private institutions of higher learning. Under existing restrictions, religious communities other than Sunni Muslims cannot legally train new clergy in the country for eventual leadership. Coreligionists from outside the country have been permitted to assume leadership positions in some cases, but in general all religious community leaders, including Patriarchs and Chief Rabbis, must be citizens.

In November 2004, the High Court of Appeals upheld the Vakiflar's February 2004 expropriation of an orphanage on the Prince's Islands that had belonged to the Ecumenical Patriarchate. In April, the Patriarchate filed an appeal with the European Court of Human Rights.

The Armenian Orthodox community continued a legal battle against the Government's expropriation of properties belonging to the Yedikule Surp Pirgic Armenian Hospital Foundation in Istanbul. In March, the Treasury attempted to sell a building expropriated from the foundation to a private company, but the Finance Ministry blocked the sale. The European Court of Human Rights continued proceedings related to the appeal by the Armenian Orthodox community of the 1999 expropriation of two other foundation properties.

No law explicitly prohibits proselytizing or religious conversions; however, many prosecutors and police regard proselytizing and religious activism with suspicion. Police occasionally bar Christians from handing out religious literature. Proselytizing is often considered socially unacceptable; Christians performing missionary work are sometimes beaten and insulted. If the proselytizers are foreigners, they may be deported, but generally they are able to reenter the country. Police officers may report students who meet with Christian missionaries to their families or to university authorities.

The Government waged a public campaign against Christian missionary activity. The Diyanet drafted an anti-missionary sermon and distributed it to imams. The sermon, delivered in mosques across the country in March, depicted missionaries as part of a plot by foreign powers to "steal the beliefs of our young people and children." The sermon also implied that Christians are polytheists.

State Minister Mehmet Aydin, who oversees the Diyanet, issued a written statement in response to a question in January from a parliamentarian about missionaries. In the statement, Aydin calls missionary activity "separatist and destructive" and claims that, "history, as well as contemporary developments, have demonstrated that missionary activities are not an innocent act of communicating one's religion or exercising religious freedom, but a highly planned movement with political motives." Aydin also advised citizens to report missionary activity to authorities.

Interior Minister Abdulkadir Aksu issued a similarly argued statement, in which he reported that 344 persons had informed authorities that they had changed their religion between 1997 and 2004; 338 converted from Islam to Christianity and 6 from

Islam to Judaism.

In June, three Selcuk University faculty members spoke at a conference in Adana on "Armenian Issues and Missionary Activities." The speakers reportedly depicted both Armenians and missionaries as threats, with one faculty member warning the audience that missionaries seek to "divide Turkey."

Also in June, the Diyanet published a book on missionaries in which the author states that "missionaries and the Crusades are related." The author further claims that Muslims throughout history have never tried to convert "non-Muslims" and have only explained their beliefs "in an honest fashion," whereas Christian missionaries have used "all means, including the use of sheer force." The Diyanet distributed the book free of charge to parliamentarians and students.

By the end of the reporting period, there was no verdict in the trial proceedings in the case of three members of the Nationalist Movement Party who severely beat Yakup Cindilli, a convert to Christianity, for distributing New Testaments in Bursa Province in 2003.

Authorities continued to enforce a long-term ban on the wearing of headscarves at universities and by civil servants in public buildings. Women who wear headscarves and persons who actively show support for those who defy the ban have been disciplined or have lost their jobs in the public sector as nurses and teachers. Students who wear head coverings are officially not permitted to register for classes, although some faculty members permit students to wear head coverings in class.

Many secularists accuse Islamists of using advocacy for wearing the headscarf as a political tool and say they fear that efforts to repeal the headscarf ban will lead to pressure against women who choose not to wear a head covering.

Opponents of the headscarf ban staged a number of nonviolent protests against the policy during the reporting period. In May, an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 persons attended an Ankara demonstration against the headscarf ban.

In March, the High Court of Appeals upheld the conviction and 20-month prison sentence of Mehmet Sevket Eygi for writing against the headscarf ban. The court in its ruling argued that freedom of speech is subordinate to the protection of public order in democracies, and it maintained that Eygi's criticism of the headscarf ban and its supporters constituted "hatred and animosity."

In May, Constitutional Court President Mustafa Bumin and Speaker of Parliament Bulent Arinc engaged in a sharp, public dispute over the headscarf ban. Bumin asserted in a speech that the Constitutional Court would annul any parliamentary legislation aimed at lifting the ban; Arinc replied that Parliament has the authority to close the Court.

A 1997 law made 8 years of secular education compulsory. After completing the 8 years, students may pursue study at imam hatip (Islamic preacher) high schools, which cover both the standard high school curriculum and Islamic theology and practice. Imam hatip schools are classified as vocational, and graduates of vocational schools face an automatic reduction in their university entrance exam grades if they apply for university programs outside their field of high school specialization. This reduction effectively bars imam hatip graduates from enrolling in university programs other than theology. Many pious Turks criticize the religious instruction provided in the regular schools as inadequate. Most families who enroll their children in imam hatip schools do so to expose them to more extensive religious education, not to train them as imams.

Only the Diyanet is authorized to provide religion courses outside of school, although clandestine private courses do exist. Students who complete 5 years of primary school may enroll in Diyanet Qur'an classes on weekends and during summer vacation. Many Qur'an courses function unofficially. Only children 12 and older legally may register for official Qur'an courses, and Mazlum-Der reports that police often raid illegal courses for younger children. According to Mazlum-Der, in 2 separate incidents in March, law enforcement authorities raided a Qur'an course in Kabala, Mardin Province, detaining 30 persons, and a course in Tarakli, Sakarya Province, detaining 3 persons.

In June, Parliament adopted a law reducing the prison term for those convicted of operating illegal educational courses and allowing courts to issue fines instead of prison sentences. The law would apply to illegal Qur'an courses.

In September 2004, members of the Jehovah's Witnesses requested legal recognition as a religious association. They were informed that association status could be given, but it would remain illegal for anyone who was not part of the association to attend religious meetings. The Jehovah's Witnesses, unable to accept these terms, did not submit their request.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported continuing official harassment of their worship services because they are not members of an officially recognized religion. In June, authorities sealed a Kingdom Hall (place of worship) used by members of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Akcay, Balikesir Province.

Restoration or construction may be carried out in buildings and monuments considered "ancient" only with authorization of the regional board on the protection of cultural and national wealth. Bureaucratic procedures and considerations relating to historic preservation in the past have impeded repairs to religious facilities, especially in the case of Syrian Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox properties. Groups are prohibited from using funds from their properties in one part of the country to support their existing population in another part of the country.

Religious affiliation is listed on national identity cards. Some religious groups, such as the Baha'i, are unable to state their religion on their cards because their religion is not included among the options; they have made their concerns known to the Government. There were reports that authorities have become more flexible regarding the religious affiliation that may be listed. In September 2004, an Ankara court approved the application of a family requesting permission to leave the religion portion of their children's identity cards blank until they reach 18 years of age.

There were reports that local officials harassed some persons who converted from Islam to another religion when they sought to amend their cards. Some "non-Muslims" maintained that listing religious affiliation on the cards exposes them to discrimination and harassment.

In October 2004, the Government's Human Rights Consultation Board issued a report on minorities, which stated that "non-Muslims" are effectively barred from careers in state institutions such as the armed forces, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Police, and the National Intelligence Agency. Without refuting its findings, a number of government officials harshly criticized the report, and Ankara prosecutors opened an investigation against the report's principal authors. There were no developments in the investigation at the end of the reporting period. Members of minority religious communities confirmed the report's conclusions. They said "non-Muslim" citizens are viewed as foreigners, and are therefore considered unqualified to represent the state.

In March, the High Court of Appeals upheld an Istanbul court's June 2003 acquittal of 13 Ahmadi Muslims charged under the Anti-Terrorism Law.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States.

Abuses By Terrorist Organizations

There were no reports of abuse targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the reporting period.

At the end of the reporting period, court proceedings continued in the Istanbul trial of 69 suspects charged in connection with the November 2003 terrorist bombings of two synagogues, the British Consulate, and a bank.

In an incident that arose out of the bombings, a court case was opened in September 2004 against the 17-year-old son of one of the alleged perpetrators and two journalists on anti-Semitism charges. The charges stemmed from an interview with the daily *Milliyet* in which the youth said, "The attacks did not touch the hearts of the members of my family because the target was Jews," and, "If Muslims hadn't been killed, we would have been happy. We don't like Jews." Two *Milliyet* journalists were charged with providing a platform for incitement against members of another religion. Trial proceedings in the cases continued at the end of the reporting period.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In September 2004, the Governor and Jandarma officials in Sirnak Province evicted members of a civil defense force known as the village guards who were preventing a group of Syriac Christians from returning to their homes. The Syriacs, who fled due to the PKK conflict, returned and found 20 village guards occupying their homes in the village of Sarikoy. The Sirnak Governor cut off electricity to the village, and Jandarma officers evacuated the village and disarmed the village guards. The Syriacs reportedly paid local authorities \$93,700 for the relocation effort.

Also in September, Parliament adopted a law that prohibits forcing persons to declare or change their religious, political, or philosophical beliefs or preventing them from expressing or spreading such beliefs. The law specifically prohibits the use of force or threats to prevent persons from gathering for worship or religious ceremonies. Violations of the law are punishable with 1 to 3 years in prison.

In November 2004, a local board charged with protecting cultural and historic sites approved the application of the Diyarbakir Evangelical Church to have its property zoned as a place of worship, reversing its May 2004 ruling against the Church.

Local authorities for the first time allowed the Syriac community to hold a Syriac New Year celebration. Members of the Syriac community said more than 3,000 visitors from Europe, Iraq, and Syria attended the event, held April 1 in Midyat, Mardin Province.

In June, the Council of State, a high administrative appeals court, ruled that the Batikent Protestant Church in Ankara is entitled to receive water from the municipality at no cost. The court determined that the municipality had been violating the principle of equality by supplying free water to mosques but not churches. A lower court had rejected the church's request for free water.

In June, members of the Baha'i community received written notification that they would be permitted to renovate a sacred property in Edirne.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The officially tolerant relationship among religions in society contributes to religious freedom; however, some Muslims, Christians, Baha'is, and other religious communities face societal suspicion and mistrust. Jews and Christians from most denominations freely practice their religions and report little discrimination in daily life. However, citizens who convert from Islam to another religion often experience some form of social harassment or pressure from family and neighbors. Proselytizing on behalf of "non-Muslim" religions is socially unacceptable and sometimes dangerous. A variety of newspapers and television shows regularly publish and broadcast anti-Christian messages, and government officials have asserted that missionary activity is not covered under the concept of religious freedom.

Religious pluralism is widely viewed as a threat to Islam and to "national unity." Nationalist sentiments sometimes contain anti-Christian or anti-Semitic overtones.

In September 2004, an estimated 1,000 protestors gathered outside the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul and burned an effigy of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I. The protest was organized by the youth wing of the Nationalist Movement Party, whose leaders accused the Patriarch of interfering in internal politics by commenting on religious reform and the country's EU candidacy. In October 2004, unknown persons threw a homemade bomb over the wall of the Patriarchate; the bomb blew out several windows and damaged the roof of the cathedral. Police provided protection for the Christian religious leaders following these incidents.

In November 2004, three assailants broke into the office of an expatriate Protestant in Gaziantep, threatened him with a gun and knife, bound and gagged him, and told him he had to leave the country because of his religious activities.

Also in November 2004, approximately 40 members of an extreme nationalist organization raided a Christian music concert in Tarsus.

There was a significant increase in anti-Christian media coverage following the distribution of Bibles in December 2004 by missionaries in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. ATV, for example, broadcast a report in January mixing coverage of a Protestant church with footage of a sex cult. In May, the Islamist daily Yeni Safak published an interview with a person who claimed missionaries were using hypnosis to convert Muslims. The negative publicity coincided with the Government's anti-missionary campaign, and was followed by an increase in threats against Christians and attacks on churches.

In December 2004, unknown individuals set fire to a wall outside the Izmit Protestant Church. In February, assailants threw a Molotov cocktail into the upper floor of the church.

In January, a group of 60 to 70 nationalists gathered outside Dirilis Protestant Church in Istanbul, chanted slogans, vandalized the premises, and beat the landlord when he confronted them. Police subsequently refused to provide protection for the church on the grounds that the property is not an officially registered place of worship. Police later detained three suspects believed to have participated in the protest.

In April, unknown assailants detonated percussion bombs outside the Protestant Fellowship office in Gaziantep and in front of the home of a Fellowship member. Fellowship members also received threatening letters.

In April, unknown assailants smashed the windows of the International Protestant Church of Ankara and threw two Molotov cocktails into the building, damaging the carpet and walls. The church was empty at the time. One month before the attack, the church received an email from a group threatening to kill Christians.

In April, Syrians who had recently returned from abroad to the village of Sari discovered an explosive device in an orchard where they were planning to re-start cultivation. In June, a landmine exploded in the village of Harabele as a car carrying a Syriac bishop and two others passed by. No one was injured in the explosion. The vehicle passengers were working to assist the return of Syrians from abroad. No suspects were identified in either case. Members of the Syriac community said the bomb incidents discouraged Syrians abroad from returning to the country.

Members of the Syriac community said local villagers, particularly village guards, often occupied the homes of Syrians who fled the country, refusing to leave when Syrians attempted to return. The village guards are a civil defense force of approximately 58,000, mostly in the southeast. They are reputed to be the least disciplined of the security forces and are often accused of drug trafficking, rape, corruption, theft, and other human rights abuses.

According to the Syriac community, more than 50 unoccupied Syriac homes have been destroyed in the village of Bardakci, Mardin Province, since 2000. The majority of the village's Syriac residents fled the region in the mid-1980s. One of the village's two Syriac churches has been converted into a mosque, without consulting with the Syriac community.

In May, unknown individuals painted a red swastika on the apartment door of a Protestant pastor in Izmit and left a threatening

letter.

Also in May, a Christian couple in Kayseri received two e-mails from an unknown party threatening to kill them because of their religious faith.

During the reporting period, Adolf Hitler's "Mein Kampf" climbed to the top 10 on the bestseller lists of some of the country's major bookstore chains. In February, the Islamist daily Vakit published crude cartoons depicting German Interior Minister Otto Schily covered with Swastikas and Stars of David. The cartoons were published in protest of the German Government's decision to close the paper's European edition for its articles denying the Holocaust.

Trial proceedings continued in the appeal of Kerim Akbas, who was convicted in 2004 for TV broadcasts inciting violence against Christians.

Members of the secular establishment fear the influence of Islamism and reject the involvement of even moderate Islam in politics.

During the observance of Ramadan in October-November 2004, there were reportedly several incidents of university students attacking students who were not fasting in accordance with Islamic tradition. In October, the rector of Gaziosmanpasa University in Tokat opened an investigation against 10 students and a faculty member in connection with such attacks. In November 2004, police intervened after fasting students at Ankara University attacked nonfasting students, according to press reports.

Iftar dinners, evening events tied to the daily breaking of the Ramadan fast, often involve invitations to religious and secular leaders of various faiths. Iftars hosted by diplomats, as well as business and religious leaders, may include invitations to people of other faiths as a sign of openness and hospitality.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Ambassador and other Mission officials, including staff of the U.S. Consulate General in Istanbul and the U.S. Consulate in Adana, enjoy close relations with the Muslim majority and other religious groups. The U.S. Embassy continues to urge the Government to enable the reopening of the Halki seminary on Heybeli Island. In December 2004, the Archons of the Order of St. Andrew, an American group that actively supports the Ecumenical Patriarchate, visited Istanbul and Ankara with the support of the Mission. The Ambassador accompanied the Archons to a meeting with Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul to encourage an agreement on the reopening of Halki and a resolution of the issue of properties seized by the Government from religious minority communities.

In June, President Bush met with Prime Minister Erdogan and discussed the importance of maintaining the tradition of religious freedom, including urging the reopening of Halki.

The Ambassador discussed religious freedom regularly in private meetings with Cabinet members. These discussions touched on both government policy regarding Islam and other religions, and specific cases of alleged religious discrimination. Other Embassy officers held similar meetings with government officials. Diplomats from the Embassy and Consulates hosted Iftars and met regularly with representatives of the various religious groups. These meetings covered a range of topics, including the Government's anti-missionary campaign, problems faced by "non-Muslim" groups, and the debate over the role of Islam in the country.

The Mission uses the International Visitor Program to introduce professionals in various fields to the United States and American counterparts. Religious issues are included among these programs.

Released on November 8, 2005

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)