

# TURKEY 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom, although there are some constitutional provisions, laws, and policies that restrict religious freedom. There were reports of abuses of religious freedom. Members of religious groups that had formal recognition during the Ottoman period, including the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Syriac 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 government lifted the ban on headscarves except for judges, prosecutors, police, and the military. In October Prime Minister Erdogan announced the government would return disputed land to the Mor Gabriel Syriac Orthodox Monastery, but had not done so by year's end. Some religious groups faced restrictions registering with the government, owning property, and training their members and clergy. The government continued to refuse to recognize the Alevi place of worship, the *cemevi*, as a legal place of worship. Although religious speech and conversions are legal, some Muslims, Christians, and Bahais faced government restrictions, surveillance, and harassment for alleged proselytizing. There was a rise in the expression of anti-Semitic sentiments by political leaders and pro-government media outlets. Although the government claims it is possible to obtain a religious worker visa and/or residence permit, it was generally not possible for foreigners to obtain one. Several foreigners, including U.S. citizens, who resided in the country under other visa categories were deported after requesting religious worker residence permits.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Christians, Bahais, non-Sunni Muslims, including the Alevi population, and members of other religious minority groups faced threats and societal suspicion. Jewish leaders expressed growing concern within the Jewish community over the continued expression of anti-Semitic sentiments in the media and by some elements of society. Persons wishing to convert from Islam experienced harassment and violence from relatives and neighbors.

The Secretary of State, the Ambassador, embassy officers, and other U.S. officials met with government officials throughout the year to stress the importance of religious freedom. Embassy and consulate representatives, as well as visiting U.S.

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officials, met frequently with government officials and representatives of religious groups to discuss property restitution issues, specific cases of religious discrimination, and legal reforms aimed at lifting restrictions on religious groups. Vice President Biden, the Secretary of State, and the Ambassador, both privately in meetings with government officials and publicly through the media, called for the reopening of the Greek Orthodox Halki seminary. In April the Secretary of State, speaking to the press following a meeting with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, called on the government to reopen the Halki Seminary without preconditions.

### Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 80.7 million (July 2013 estimate). According to Turkish government estimates, 99 percent of the population is Muslim, the majority of which is Hanafi Sunni. Representatives of other religious groups state the actual percentage of Muslims is slightly lower.

Academics estimate there are 15 million to 20 million Alevis, 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 report higher numbers, estimating 20 million to 25 million Alevis in the country.

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); 21,000 Jews; 20,000 Syrian Orthodox Christians (also known as Syriacs or Suriyanis); 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, Armenian Catholic, and Maronite Christians. There are also an unknown number of atheists; estimates by international and private Turkish polling organizations vary, but most recent published survey results suggest approximately 2 percent of the population is atheist.

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### 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 constitutional provisions, laws, and policies 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. The government, however, provides favorable treatment to Sunni Islamic groups.

The Turkish state coordinates and governs religious matters through the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), which was established in 1924 and is enshrined in the constitution. It regulates the operation of 84,684 registered mosques and employs 103,560 personnel as of 2012, the last date for which data is available. This includes 77,044 imams, Quran instructors, muezzins, and other religious workers, all of whom are civil servants and Sunni Muslims. The Diyanet's mandate is to promote the belief, worship, and moral principles of Sunni Islam, educate the public about religious issues, and administer 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 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. The government does not recognize the leadership or administrative structures of these groups (e.g., the patriarchates) as legal entities, leaving them unable to buy or hold title to property or to press claims in court. The three groups, along with other minority religious communities, are restricted to organizing as independent foundations which hold and control individual religious properties and have separate governing boards.

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

Although registration with the government is not mandatory for religious groups, unregistered religious groups cannot request legal recognition of places of worship.

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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 may earn income through companies and rent-earning properties. Associations have fewer legal rights than foundations at the local level. The process for establishing a foundation is 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.

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 GDF, at which point it is considered fully constituted. A foundation of any category may be closed only by court order. If a foundation becomes inactive, the government can petition the courts to find the foundation no longer operational and transfer all assets to the government. In this manner, the government seized large numbers of properties from minority religious communities between 1936 and 2011.

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

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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 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 Muslim mosques. The Diyanet Foundation, a quasi-governmental entity, owns many of the mosques around the country.

A 2011 decree allows 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 had 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 these lists were not comprehensive, the government 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.

The 2011 decree does not alter the law that made it possible to seize property acquired after 1936, nor does it change the complicated procedure for administering foundation properties that contributed to the seizure of many properties. Additionally, the decree does not cover properties taken from religious institutions or communities that do not have legally recognized foundations, including the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches. The 2011 decree also permits 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.

Foundations that believe the amount of compensation received for a property is inadequate may make use of an arbitration system established by the government at the time of the decree in 2011. If the arbitration process proves unsuccessful, foundations may seek redress in the courts.

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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 do not permit the operation of a seminary within a monastic community. Since that time, the Greek Orthodox community has had no 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 Turkish citizens.

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.

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 permitted Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish students who are not citizens, including children of undocumented Armenian migrants and Armenian refugees from Syria, to enroll in the religious community schools. However, because these children are legally classified as "visitors," they are ineligible to receive a diploma from those schools.

A change in 2012 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 (the Law on Amendments to the Primary Education Law, otherwise known as the "4+4+4 Law"). As before, students may choose to attend vocational high schools, including *imam-hatip* (Muslim preacher) vocational high schools. The 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 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 in middle school and high school during regular school hours. The elective

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courses include: Quranic studies, basic religious knowledge (Islam), and the life of the Prophet Muhammad. The law also abolishes all age limits for Quran courses, meaning children under 12 will no longer be banned from taking such courses.

An April decision by the Constitutional Court concerning the constitutionality of the 4+4+4 law reinterprets *laiklik* (Turkish secularism) in the educational context. The court found the law to be constitutional and allows the government a role in providing Islamic religious instruction in the classroom. The decision states that preferential treatment of Islam in public schools is not discriminatory because no rule prevents the Ministry of Education from also providing religion lessons for members of other religions, and because the protections given minority religions in the 1923 Lausanne Treaty are satisfactory. According to the court, the principle of secularism “has not excluded the institutional relationship between the state and the Islamic religion.”

The constitution stipulates that no one shall be compelled to reveal his or her religious beliefs. National identity cards limit identification of one’s religious affiliation as one of the following: Muslim, Greek Orthodox, Christian, Jew, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, no religion, or other. The applicant may also elect to leave the space blank. 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 listed as options.

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 and are subject to prison sentences.

### Government Practices

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.

The Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate continued to seek to reopen the Halki seminary as an institution for religious training. Several high-level government officials expressed support for reopening Halki seminary; however, by year’s end the government had not clarified the legal authority under which the seminary could reopen. In January the government returned 190,000 square meters (47 acres) of property surrounding the Halki Seminary to the Greek Orthodox Agia Triada Foundation, the entity holding title to the monastery and seminary.

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The government brought blasphemy charges against individuals or organizations on several occasions. In April blasphemy charges were filed against blogger Sevan Nisanyan for “publicly vilifying the religious values accepted by a segment of the society” on his blog. Nisanyan wrote that “It is not a hate crime to ridicule an Arab leader who claimed to have contact with God and gained political, financial, and sexual benefits from this.” In May he was sentenced to 13 months and 15 days for insulting the Prophet Muhammad. Nisanyan’s sentence was not suspended as he had a previous 3-month conviction in another blasphemy case. The verdict remained on appeal at year’s end.

In May there was a second hearing in the case of Canan Arin, who had been charged in December 2011 with “insulting the Prophet and the president” after a speech she made at a conference organized by the Antalya Bar Association about child marriages. The prosecutor cited Arin’s speech, in which she said some wives of the Prophet, as well as the wife of Turkish President Gul, were minors when they married. The court suspended the proceedings in line with the judicial package passed in 2012, which postponed investigations and trials for opinions expressed publicly before December 31, 2012, provided the crime is not repeated for three years. Under the terms of the suspension, the case against Arin will be dismissed after that period so long as Arin is not charged with a similar crime.

In September the government convicted internationally-known concert pianist Fazil Say for “insulting religious values” and sentenced him to 10 months in prison. The sentence was suspended for five years, meaning that the pianist will not be sent to prison unless he is convicted of re-offending within that period. The substance of the charge was for “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.

On November 11, police arrested Protestant pastor Orhan Picaklar of the Samsun Agape Church on charges of involvement in prostitution and the human trafficking of refugees. The Alliance of Protestant Churches in Turkey characterized the charges as “a deliberate plot” by local media and city authorities who opposed the church’s existence. They noted local TV channels and newspapers repeatedly accused Picaklar and his congregation of “illegal missionary activities,” saying that the church used bribery and prostitution to deceive young people and convert them to Christianity. The church building was vandalized on several occasions. The pastor received death threats over the telephone and internet, and reportedly was previously kidnapped by men posing as plainclothes policemen.

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In January police in Izmit charged 13 people with conspiracy to commit a large-scale assault against the Izmit Protestant Church and to assassinate its pastor. Police confiscated weapons and found evidence of prolonged, careful planning, including photographs of persons entering and leaving the church and diagrams of both the church and the pastor's residence. The case continued at year's end, with one suspect remaining in custody.

In March the Diyarbakir Military Court investigating the 2011 death of Armenian-Turkish soldier Sevag Balikci convicted another soldier of involuntary manslaughter. The court sentenced the defendant to 53 months imprisonment with credit for time served in pre-trial detention, leaving him approximately three years to continue serving in prison. Although Balikci had been killed on April 24 (Easter Sunday), which was also the anniversary of the start of the mass killing of Armenians in 1915, the court did not find Balikci to be the victim of intentional homicide or a hate crime. The Balikci family appealed the finding, and the case continued at year's end. The government denied the Balikci family's separate petition for the government to award their son the legal status of "martyr," a status given to those killed while defending the country or during military service and affording survivors of the deceased government benefits. The family said that the government refused to grant Balikci "martyr" status because he was a Christian Armenian.

In May the Supreme Court of Appeals overturned the ruling in the January 2012 trial of those accused of involvement in the 2007 murder of Armenian-Turkish journalist Hrant Dink, a Christian. The Supreme Court of Appeals found the evidence insufficient to support charges of "belonging to a terrorist organization." Beginning in September, the defendants were retried solely on the issue of whether they were involved in "organized crime." The trial continued at year's end.

In May police arrested a man in relation to an alleged plot to assassinate the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch. State prosecutors had received an anonymous letter about a plan to assassinate the Ecumenical Patriarch on May 29, the anniversary of the Ottoman conquest of present-day Istanbul.

In June the Second Criminal Court of Iskenderun convicted Murat Altun of the 2006 murder of Roman Catholic priest Luigi Padovese, ruling that the murder was an individual act with no links to "cults or organizations."

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According to Jehovah's Witnesses officials, the group's members faced prosecution and fines for their refusal to serve in the military forces. One objector, Baris Gormez, was acquitted by Isparta Military Court and released from prison in 2012, but the prosecutor appealed the decision, and the case was still before the Military Court of Appeals at the end of the year. Gormez also had a case stemming from his status as a conscientious objector pending before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). Another objector, Inan Suver, was released from prison in 2012 after time served in pre-trial detention, but the imposition of another sentence for refusing to perform military service remained pending at the end of the year.

In June and July, in response to the Gezi Park anti-government protests, Prime Minister Erdogan and several senior government officials repeatedly and publicly blamed "shadowy" international groups for the unrest, including claimed involvement by an "international Jewish conspiracy," the "interest-rate lobby," and "the Rothschilds." In July Deputy Prime Minister Besir Atalay blamed the "Jewish diaspora" for the unrest. These statements by senior political leaders were accompanied by anti-Semitic reports and commentaries in media outlets friendly to the government. The chief rabbi and the Jewish community lay board issued a joint press release condemning statements blaming Jewish groups for the unrest.

Following the September 30 release of the government's democratization package, thousands of Alevis protested in Istanbul on November 3, calling for recognition of their houses of worship and the removal of compulsory religion courses at schools. Alevi leaders said the government failed to meet their demands for religious reforms and stated that Prime Minister Erdogan's democratization package included few reforms for the Alevis, other than renaming a state university after a historical Alevi figure. Many Alevis complained of discrimination and violence.

In August local media reported that the government maintained a population registry with "ancestry codes" for Turkish citizens of Greek, Armenian, and Jewish ancestry, denoting their religion, name, and "sect." In acknowledging the system, the interior ministry said the information about religious identity came from Ottoman records, which the ministry used to identify members of religious minorities eligible under the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 to attend minority schools. The government also said it no longer collected information about religious or racial identity.

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The government did not implement the 2010 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, and there were reports of local officials refusing to permit changes. 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 impose significant restrictions on religious expression, including expression by Muslims, in government offices and state-run institutions for the stated reason of preserving the “secular state.” Many state buildings including universities, maintained *mesjids* (small mosques) in which Muslims could pray, however. The government continued to deny Alevis the right to establish small places of worship in government buildings.

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.

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. The government placed significant restrictions, however, on the administration of their churches and synagogues, such as the requirement that leaders of the Armenian Apostolic, Greek Orthodox, and Jewish communities be Turkish citizens.

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) that 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 university authorities or the students’ families.

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The Armenian Apostolic Patriarchate and the Ecumenical Patriarchate continued to seek legal recognition. Their communities operated as conglomerations of individual religious foundations. Because the patriarchates did not have legal personality, associated foundations controlled by individual boards held all the property of the religious communities, and the patriarchates had no legal authority to direct the use of any assets or otherwise govern their communities. 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 government continued not to recognize the status of the Ecumenical Patriarchate as the leader of the world's 300 million Orthodox Christians, consistent with its stance there was no legal obligation to do so. 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 Ecumenical Patriarchate'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. In 2011, the government announced it would grant citizenship to Greek Orthodox metropolitans who applied to become Turkish citizens under the terms of a stop-gap solution offered by the government to widen the pool from which to select the next Patriarch. At year's end 24 of 26 applicants had been granted Turkish citizenship.

The government continued to implement the 2011 decree allowing religious minority foundations to apply for the return of, or compensation for, properties seized by the government in previous decades.

The GDF received 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 1,298 of the applications and returned 307 properties to religious community foundations, made offers of compensation for 21 properties, declined 970 applications for lack of evidence or because they were found to be duplicative, or returned them for the correction of technical problems.

The GDF approved a reactivated foundation for the Greek Orthodox community on the island of Gokceada (known as Imvros in Greek), allowing the community to re-open a Greek school in September for the first time since 1964. Prior to the 2011 decree, the government had approved only one new religious community

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foundation since the founding of the republic: the Istanbul Protestant Church Foundation in 2003.

In October Prime Minister Erdogan announced that the government would return disputed land to the Mor Gabriel Syriac Orthodox Monastery. The General Directorate for Foundations subsequently ruled that the Mor Gabriel Foundation owned the disputed property and could petition for deeds to be issued from the local deed registry. On December 6, representatives from the General Directorate of Land Registry and Cadastre visited the site and met with foundation members. The foundation subsequently submitted the petition, which remained pending at year's end. The parcels of land inside and outside the monastery walls had been the subject of legal battles since 2008, when the Undersecretariat of the Treasury, the Department of Forestry, and nearby villages initiated a series of court cases against the monastery.

Some religious groups reported difficulties opening, maintaining, and operating houses of worship. Although a 2003 amendment to the law allowed cultural associations as well as foundations to establish legal places of worship, authorities have approved only one new Christian church as a legal 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. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, the government did not approve a single place of worship for their religious group, in spite of 46 registration attempts in 27 different municipalities. They reported that as a result they ceased applying to register official places of worship.

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 small congregations. Officials did not apply this requirement to Sunni Muslims, who were permitted to build smaller *mesjids* in malls, airports, and other spaces.

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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 Muslim communities received government funding for construction of places of worship, the Syrian Orthodox community did not request similar government funding. Instead, the community requested that the municipality provide free land for the construction of a place of worship, just as the municipality had provided for mosques. At year's end the municipality had not designated land on which to build.

Alevis continued to face obstacles when attempting to establish *cemevis*. 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 *cemevis* per capita as Sunni Muslims had mosques, there would be more than 40,000 *cemevis* in the country. Some Alevi foundations argued the Diyanet should be reformed so that support would be available to all religious groups or, alternatively, that it be funded in such a way that allowed non-Sunni Muslims to opt out of supporting the Diyanet. Other Alevis argued that the Diyanet should be abolished altogether.

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.

Alevis continued to petition the courts to have *cemevis* legally recognized as places of worship. While the lower court had determined, in November 2011, that Alevis were entitled to designate their own houses of worship, the Supreme Court of Appeals overturned that decision in July 2012, ruling that no places other than mosques and *mesjids* could be considered Muslim places of worship under the law. The Supreme Court of Appeals returned the case to the lower court, which reaffirmed its original verdict in November 2012. 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

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the lower court's refusal to change its decision to the Supreme Court of Appeals, and the case remained pending at year's end.

The Alevi Cem Foundation appealed to the ECHR for legal recognition of *cemevis* as houses of worship entitled to equal treatment under the law. Filed in January 2012, the petition was still pending at year's end.

Foundations reported they were frequently rebuffed in efforts to acquire and restore ruined churches, especially if restoration would return a 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 eight 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 regional board that must grant permission for the restoration of cultural assets considered "ancient" failed to act on the Protestant Church of Istanbul's petition to restore and use the chapel.

The government continued to permit annual and other commemorative 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 September the government declined a request by the Ecumenical Patriarchate for permission to conduct a religious service at the restored Taxiarchis Church museum in Ayvalik.

The government initiated plans in several municipalities around the country 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.

Certain Islamic groups continued to advocate transforming some former Orthodox churches into mosques. In a case that attracted widespread international media coverage, the Hagia Sophia of Trabzon, a 12th century Byzantine church which had been operating as a museum for the past 50 years, was converted into a mosque in July, following a court decision to transfer it from the Ministry of Culture to the Directorate for Foundations.

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Religious groups faced administrative challenges when seeking to employ foreign religious personnel because the government generally did not approve visas and residence permits for religious workers.

Many foreign Mormons, other Protestants 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.

Non-Sunni Muslims faced difficulty obtaining exemptions from compulsory religious instruction in primary and secondary schools, particularly if their identification cards listed their religion as “Muslim.” Members of other minority religious groups, including members of the Syrian Orthodox community and Protestants, also had difficulty obtaining exemptions. The government said that 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 incorrect information about other religious groups. With the 2012 changes to the education system, the government allowed non-Muslims to select other electives to fulfill their required coursework for graduation. Non-Sunnis reported, however, they often were only allowed to choose from electives concerning different aspects of Sunni Islam.

Alevis reported the government did not 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 school officials routinely ignored this right. Alevis had many 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 this material was inadequate and, in some cases, incorrect. Alevi leaders reported teachers sometimes physically mistreated children attempting to opt out of classes or singled them out for mistreatment by other students.

Based on complaints from the Syriac Orthodox Community, the Ministry of Education agreed to remove negative stereotypes of the Syriac Christian community from the tenth grade history curriculum.

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In September the Ankara 13th Administrative Appeals Court ruled that the Syriac community could open a pre-school in Istanbul. Per the ruling of the court, the Syriac community should be recognized as a “Lausanne minority” and allowed to open schools to serve its community, with some instruction permissible in the native neo-Aramaic language of the community. In October the Syriac community petitioned the Ministry of Education to open a primary school for its community in the Mardin area. At year’s end there had been no ruling on the petition for the Mardin school.

Because non-Turkish citizens could 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.

### **Government Inaction**

Although the ECHR has consistently ruled against Turkey for failure to establish conscientious objector status for those with religious and philosophical objections to military service, no reforms were introduced to recognize the right of conscientious objection or to prevent the criminal prosecution of conscientious objectors for their refusal to perform military service.

### **Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom**

In October the government lifted the ban on headscarves for civil servants that had been in effect since the founding of the Turkish republic in 1923. The ban on wearing of headscarves remained in force solely for judges, police, and the military, professions which continued to maintain their strict rules about forms of attire. The traditional ban on wearing headscarves in parliament was also lifted, with several female members attending sessions of parliament in October wearing headscarves for the first time. The media saw the lifting of the ban as a major development, which was greeted favorably by several religious freedom and women’s groups.

### **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 people viewed religious pluralism as a threat

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to Islam and “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.

Jewish leaders expressed growing concern and unease in the Jewish community. Many attributed anti-Semitic graffiti and threats to events in the Middle East and anti-Semitic rhetoric by Prime Minister Erdogan and other government officials. Local authorities continued to work with community leaders and synagogue officials to protect Jewish places of worship. A variety of newspapers, commercials, and television shows continued to carry anti-Semitic messages, and anti-Semitic literature was common in bookstores.

On June 2, Alevi activists protested the naming of the third Bosphorus bridge in Istanbul after Sultan Yavuz Selim, who massacred thousands of Alevis in 1514. Alevi leaders called the naming of the bridge after Selim offensive to their community.

In September three Alevi and three Sunni businessmen conducted a ground-breaking ceremony in Ankara for a religious/cultural complex which included, for the first time, a mosque and a *cemevi* side by side. Fethullah Gulen, a well-known Sunni theologian, and several prominent Alevi organizations endorsed this effort. The group announced plans for additional projects in Istanbul, Izmir, and Gaziantep provinces. Eleven Alevi foundations in Turkey and abroad, however, released a statement against the construction, rejecting it as a “project of assimilation.”

### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Secretary of State, the 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 and to clarify the process by which religious worker visas or residence permits were granted.

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The Vice President and the Secretary of State in meetings in Washington with government officials continued to call for the reopening of the Greek Orthodox seminary in Halki. The Ambassador, in private meetings with government officials and publicly through local media, reiterated the U.S. position. In April the Secretary of State met with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I at the patriarchate and afterwards spoke to the press, calling on the government to reopen the Halki Seminary without preconditions.

The Ambassador, embassy and consulate general representatives maintained close relations with “traditional” and emerging religious groups, meeting frequently with them, individually and collectively, to discuss religious freedom concerns and promote interreligious dialogue. Embassy and consulate general personnel hosted or attended events during Ramadan and Jewish and Christian holidays, and on Holocaust Remembrance Day.