



## Turkey Still Imposes Restrictions on Religious Freedom, Report Says

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ANKARA -- The U.S. State Department announced that the Turkish government generally respects the freedom of religion but still imposes some restrictions on Muslim and other religious groups and on Muslim religious expression in government and state-run institutions, including universities.

"There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion," the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor said in a report titled "International Religious Freedom Report 2007" released on Sept. 14 in Washington D.C.

"There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious belief or practice. Violent attacks and threats against non-Muslims during the reporting period created an atmosphere of pressure and diminished freedom for some non-Muslim communities. Although proselytizing is legal in the country, some Muslims, Christians, and Bahais faced a few restrictions and occasional harassment for alleged proselytizing or unauthorized meetings," the report said.

The report put into the spotlight problems of religious minorities arguing that they were effectively blocked from careers in state institutions because of their faith. "Christians, Bahais, 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," it said.

The report underlined that apart from its 99 percent Muslim population Turkey hosts approximately 65,000 Armenian Orthodox Christians, 23,000 Jews, and up to 4,000 Greek Orthodox Christians. There also are approximately 10,000 Bahais; 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, according to the State's Department's report.

It also said that there are 1,100 Christian missionaries in the country, according to estimates.

Criticizing the status of the foundations:

The report criticized Turkey for not responding to the needs of non-Muslim religious groups with an appropriate law. It said an amendment introduced to Parliament to lift the ban on non-Muslim groups to get their properties back was vetoed by the president and Parliament did not take it up in its agenda again.

"Even before the veto, the final text of the law had disappointed many as it failed to address the issue of restitution and ignored certain properties such as cemeteries and school assets not registered under any foundation. Foundations were 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."

The report emphasized that implementing regulations of the law on foundations have led to interference in the election of foundation boards, the treatment of charitable community foundations as business corporations for tax purposes, the freezing of revenue from real estate transactions, and a ban on transferring surplus income from one foundation to another.

The Alevis:

The report mentions the situation of Alevis an Islamic minority sect. Representatives of Alevi organizations maintained that they often faced obstacles when attempting to establish cem houses (places of gathering). They said there were approximately 100 cem houses in the country; a number they claimed was insufficient to meet their needs," the report said.

It added that Alevi children have the same compulsory religious education as all Muslims, and many Alevis alleged discrimination in the government's failure to include any of their doctrines or beliefs in religious instruction classes in public schools.

Churches face challenges

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"Churches operating in the country generally face administrative challenges to employ foreign church personnel, apart from the Catholic Church and congregations linked to the diplomatic community," the report said.

## Missionary activities:

According to the report, police arrested four street evangelists in Istanbul for "missionary activity," disturbing the peace, and insulting Islam, late April in 2007. Similarly, the members of Jehovah's Witnesses reported continuing official harassment.

"The authorities continued to monitor the activities of Eastern Orthodox churches but generally did not interfere with their religious activities; however, significant restrictions were placed on the administration of the churches. The government does not recognize the ecumenical status of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, acknowledging him only as the head of the country's Greek Orthodox community," the report said.

The ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul continued to seek to reopen the Halki seminary on the island of Heybeli in the Sea of Marmara, the report said.

## Nationalist sentiments:

The report also touched on the killings of a German protestant in Malatya and said: "There were reports of religiously motivated killings during the reporting period.

On April 18, 2007, three members of a Protestant church in Malatya, including a German citizen, were tortured and killed in the office of a company that publishes books on Christianity. The suspects of the killings had notes on their persons claiming, "we did it for our religion. May this be a lesson to the enemies of religion."

"Death threats against Christian American citizens continue to be a concern. For example, Christian American citizens living in the country received religion-based death threats via letters and voicemails, stating that if they did not return to America they would be killed," the report said.

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