

turkey

PERSECUTION 101




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Democratic backsliding and the rise of authoritarianism in Turkey has furthered hostility toward the country's tiny religious minority communities

Despite centuries of Christian history, modern-day Türkiye has grown increasingly unfriendly to its tiny Christian community and to other religious groups scattered throughout the country. From headliner events like the decision to convert the Hagia Sophia, a church dating back to the 400s AD, into a mosque to smaller acts of persecution like expelling missionaries, Türkiye is exerting steady pressure on religious minorities and making the country a less safe place for them to live. Blasphemy laws criminalize minority religious theology and are used to harass and intimidate those seen as critical of the government.





QUICK FACTS



Type of Government

Presidential
Republic



Head of Government

President Recep
Tayyip Erdogan



Total Population

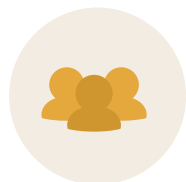
Approx. 83.59 million



Religious Demography

99.8% Muslim - 83.42 mil
0.2% Other - 167,000*

*Official government numbers. This statistic has been credibly challenged by other research that indicates the percentage of religious minorities is actually much higher.



Ethnic Demography

75% Turkish
19% Kurdish
6% Other minorities



TYPES OF PERSECUTION

Regulation of Religious Affairs

The Turkish government heavily regulates the internal affairs of religious groups in the country, interfering in church leadership decisions and restricting the establishment of religious seminaries and schools.

Blasphemy Laws

Turkey actively enforces its blasphemy law, often against political opponents.

Visa Bans

Turkey regularly cancels the visas of missionaries to Türkiye, effectively expelling them from the country.



ICC IN TURKEY

ICC has long worked to support the Christian church in Turkey, connecting with individual pastors and congregations and providing support where needed to bolster the persecuted community. While the details of this work cannot be shared publicly, some of ICC's advocacy efforts on behalf of Turkish believers are less sensitive and have included efforts to bring awareness to the overall situation and help individuals facing persecution, including beleaguered priests and exiled missionaries.

When a devastating earthquake hit Turkey and Syria in 2023, people from every part of society were impacted. However, Christians faced a particularly difficult time accessing relief services in the aftermath of the earthquake. ICC was able to minister to these communities and has provided follow-up training for pastors in the time since.



Backgrounder on Religious Freedom in Turkey

Since taking office in 2014, Turkish President Erdogan has overseen a continuing campaign of aggression against minority communities both in the country and over the southern border into Syria. Erdogan's stated goal is to return Türkiye to the glory days of the Ottoman Empire, a nationalistic rallying cry that leaves little room for religious or ethnic minorities in society.

Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire were relegated to second class status and were not afforded the protections available to their Muslim neighbors. Shortly before its fall in 1922, the Ottoman Empire conducted a genocidal campaign against Armenian Christians under its rule. Though the Armenian genocide itself is considered to have begun in 1915, the systematic killing of Armenians stretches back to the 1890s under the rule of Sultan Abdulhamid II. Armenia is the oldest Christian nation in the world and sits on modern day Turkey's eastern border.

Between 660,000 and 1.2 million Armenians were massacred from the spring of 1915 to the fall of 1916 in what some call the first genocide of the 20th century. When earlier killings are included, some estimate that as many as 2 million Armenian, Greek, and Syrian Christians were killed under Ottoman rule.

When the Ottoman Empire was replaced by the Republic of Turkey in 1922, about a million Christians were forcibly deported to Greece in an exchange that saw about half a million Greek Muslims sent to Turkey. The result can be seen today in the country's heavily Muslim population.

The history of the Armenian genocide is fresh in the minds of modern-day Türkiye. Though Türkiye denies the historicity of the Armenian genocide, nationalist politicians and their followers refer to minority communities in the country as *kılıç artıkları*, or "leftovers of the sword." Erdogan himself used this phrase in a public speech in Kayseri, a city that was cleansed of Armenians during the genocide and of remaining Christians in 1923 when they were deported to Greece.



Similar symbology is used elsewhere, including in 2020 when the Turkish government converted the Hagia Sophia, an ancient church, into a mosque. Ali Erbaş, head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, spoke at the mosque's opening ceremony holding a sword to symbolize Ottoman conquests and their subjugation of religious minorities under Muslim rule.

Türkiye's posture toward religious minorities extends beyond speeches and religious symbolism, though. Despite ostensibly a secular state, the Turkish government has created a complex system for regulating religious affairs that, in practice, significantly restricts the internal leadership and financial decisions of churches and other religious groups.

The country also actively enforces its blasphemy law, falling second in the world for its use of the discriminatory legal practice behind Russia, according to [research](#) done by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. While Türkiye often uses blasphemy charges to intimidate political opponents—a prominent example of the country's democratic backsliding—the law essentially criminalizes minority religious expression, which inevitably restricts minority communities.

The Erdogan administration seems committed to doubling down on the failures of the past. Far from accepting the international human rights standards protecting religious and ethnic minorities from persecution, Erdogan is intently curtailing their rights and leaving them even less space in a country that has long sought to eliminate religious minorities from its midst.

Resources and Reports

[State Department 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom – Turkey Chapter](#)

[USCIRF 2023 Annual Report – Turkey Chapter](#)

[ICC — Turkey: Challenges Facing Christians 2016-2020](#)

[USCIRF — Blasphemy Charges in Turkey](#)

