



TURKEY

Overview

- Turkey's population is approximately 80 million (there are also 3.9 million refugees according to the UNHCR).
- The vast majority (98%-99%) are Muslim (a quarter of those are Alevis, a small offshoot of Shi'a Islam).
- The attempted military coup of 15th July 2016 resulted in tens of thousands of job losses and arrests in political purges, as well as severe restrictions on independent media.

Christian Communities

Christians in Turkey include indigenous Christian communities, Turkish Christian believers from Muslim backgrounds, and expatriates (including refugees). The largest Christian group is the Armenian Apostolic Church, followed by the Syriac Orthodox Church. Istanbul remains the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church; the Patriarch is recognised by the Government as the leader of the very small Greek Orthodox community. Also present are churches belonging to the Catholic rite (Armenian, Syriac, Chaldean and Latin), Anglican churches and other evangelical churches, many of which belong to the Association of Protestant Churches (TeK).

Christians in Turkey enjoy a considerable degree of freedom, though pressures persist. Those who choose to leave Islam face family and societal pressure, though this rarely results in violence.

In 2019 President Erdogan laid the foundation stone of a new Syriac church in Istanbul – the first such church to be built since the founding of the republic in 1923.

Legal Context

The constitution establishes Turkey as a secular state, affording no privileged status to Islam or Islamic law. While a founding principle of the modern Turkish state is the separation of State and religion, a degree of tension is inherent in this as the State must control religion to the extent necessary to prevent religion controlling the State. The constitution affirms the principle of non-discrimination, including on the basis of religion, and guarantees the free exercise of worship and religious rites, including freedom from religious compulsion, provided religious practices do not undermine the fundamental rights of others. Religious conversion is legally permitted, including from Islam, though social disapproval may be encountered. The Armenian Apostolic and Greek Orthodox churches, together with the Jewish community, have recognition under the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 – although their administrative structures do not have legal entity. These two churches may operate religious community schools, though restrictions on private universities prevent the operation of training colleges. All other religious groups must register as associations or foundations (with charitable or cultural objectives) in order to gain legal status. Although the Lausanne Treaty stipulated that recognised non-Muslims could govern personal status issues according to their own rites, all citizens of Turkey are now subject to the secular civil code.

Pressure Points

Andrew Brunson, an American pastor, was detained two years from October 2016 to October 2018 on spurious terrorism charges and was finally released after the United States applied sanctions on Turkey. The Turkish economy was hard hit and “foreign powers” blamed by the Turkish media. Since then, significant numbers of foreign Christians resident in Turkey have been banned from the country.

In 2018 the Armenian Apostolic Church in Turkey attempted to elect a patriarch as the incumbent was suffering from dementia and unable to function in his role. The election was prevented by the state and this state interference was condemned by the Constitutional Court. The death of the patriarch in 2019 opened the way for elections to proceed.

Case Study

In 2019 the Turkish government has apparently been systematically denying visas to expatriate Christian workers, many of whom have lived in Turkey for years, owning property and raising their families. Usually the husband is subject to the order, with the wife and children free to remain in the country.

At least twenty-three foreign Christians have been deported or banned from Turkey with no reasons given apart from unsubstantiated allegations that they are threats to public order and/or national security. Those targeted include citizens of Brazil,

Canada, the United States, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Iran, Germany, South Korea and Finland.

Many Protestant Turkish churches turn to foreigners as volunteer church leaders as seminaries or clergy training programs are prohibited by law.

Prayer Points

Please pray:

- For God's encouragement and strength for those facing entry bans and peace for their families during this uncertain time.
- Those with entry bans will be able to successfully contest the decisions and that any policy targeting the residency of church volunteers on account of their Christian service will be clearly exposed and hindered
- Turkish state will stop their campaign against expatriate Christians and that their contribution to Turkish society will be recognised and appreciated
- Christian community in Turkey will respond appropriately and that faith will prevail over the present uncertainties and anxieties.

Information compiled by:

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