

CYPRUS 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Since 1974, the southern part of Cyprus has been under the authority of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus, while the northern part, administered by Turkish Cypriots, proclaimed itself the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”) in 1983. The United States does not recognize the “TRNC,” nor does any country other than Turkey. A substantial number of Turkish troops remain on the island. A buffer zone, or “green line,” patrolled by the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), separates the two parts.

REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and protects the freedom to worship, teach, and practice one’s religion. It grants the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and recognizes the Vakf, an Islamic institution that manages land Muslims have donated as an endowment for charitable purposes as well as sites of worship. The government granted Turkish Cypriots access to religious sites in the area it controls, including for visits by approximately 2,650 Turkish Cypriots and foreign nationals to Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque on three occasions. Seven of the eight functioning mosques, with the exception of Hala Sultan Tekke, in the government-controlled area were open for all five daily prayers, and six had the necessary facilities for ablutions. Despite long-standing requests, the government did not grant permission to the Muslim community to make improvements at mosques. A representative of the Buddhist community reported authorities raised obstacles to the operation of a temple in a village outside of Nicosia and forced the community to relocate the temple. In July the government removed a requirement to designate a person’s religion on civil marriage applications and certificates. The ombudsman’s office reported it was investigating new complaints regarding Ministry of Education (MOE) regulations for exempting students from religious instruction. The government required those who objected to military service on religious grounds to perform alternate service for longer periods.

The Jewish community reported incidents of assault, verbal harassment, and vandalism. Some religious minority groups reported pressure to engage in religious ceremonies of majority groups. Members of the Greek Orthodox majority reported they sometimes faced social ostracism from the Greek Orthodox community if they converted to another religion, such as Islam. A hotel reportedly

refused to hire Muslim women for a cleaning job because they wore a hijab. In June a bicommunal working group set up as part of the UN-facilitated settlement talks completed the restoration of Koprulu Mosque in Limassol and Mathiatis Mosque in Nicosia district, and in October the Department of Antiquities completed the restoration of Arnavut Mosque in Limassol. The United Nations introduced religious groups and civil society organizations to its “Faith for Rights” initiative, which aimed to strengthen and deepen the connections between religious groups and human rights. The religious and civil society groups reportedly received the initiative positively and discussed ways to engage the public in a dialogue on protecting human rights to promote freedom of religion. Leaders of the main religious groups on the island continued to meet and reaffirmed their commitment to the promotion of religious freedom across the island. In October the Office of the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process (RTCYPP) launched a pilot program offering Greek and Turkish language classes for priests, imams, nuns, and laypersons who worked for faith-based organizations.

U.S. embassy staff met with the government, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom issues, including access to religious sites island-wide and discriminatory treatment of minority religious groups. Embassy officials encouraged religious leaders to continue their dialogue and hold reciprocal visits to places of religious significance on either side of the “green line.”

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population of the island at 1.2 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2011 census, the population of the government-controlled area was 840,000. Of that total, 89.1 percent is Greek Orthodox Christian and 1.8 percent Muslim. Other religious groups include Roman Catholics (2.9 percent), Protestants (2 percent), Buddhists (1 percent), Maronite Catholics (0.5 percent), Armenian Orthodox (0.3 percent), with small populations of Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Bahais. Recent immigrants and migrant workers are predominantly Roman Catholic, Muslim, and Buddhist. The country’s chief rabbi estimates the number of Jews at approximately 3,000, most of whom are foreign born.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and protects the right of individuals to profess their faith and to worship, teach, and practice or observe their religion, individually or collectively, in private or in public, subject to limitations due to considerations of national security or public health, safety, order, and morals, or the protection of civil liberties. The constitution specifies all religions whose doctrines or rites are not secret are free and equal before the law. It protects the right to change one's religion and prohibits the use of physical or moral compulsion to make a person change, or prevent a person from changing, his or her religion. The ombudsman is an independent state institution responsible for protecting citizens' rights and human rights in general. The ombudsman has the power to investigate complaints made against any public service or official for actions that violate human rights, including freedom of religion, or actions exercised in contravention of the laws or the rules of proper administration. The ombudsman makes recommendations to correct wrongdoings but does not issue remedial steps.

The constitution states the Autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus (Church of Cyprus) has the exclusive right to regulate and administer the Church's internal affairs and property in accordance with its canons and charter. By law, the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus pays taxes only on commercial activities.

The constitution sets guidelines for the Vakf, which is tax exempt and has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with its laws and principles. According to the constitution, no legislative, executive, or other act may contravene or interfere with the Church of Cyprus or the Vakf. The Vakf operates only in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and does not administer mosques located in the government-controlled area. The Vakf acts as caretaker of religious properties in the Turkish Cypriot community. The government serves as caretaker and provides financial support to mosques in government-controlled areas.

Besides the Church of Cyprus and Islam, the constitution recognizes three other religious groups: Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, and "Latins" (Cypriot Roman Catholics). Their institutions are exempt from taxes and eligible for government subsidies for cultural and educational matters, depending on the needs of each group, for example, to cover costs to operate their own schools, for school fees for members of the groups attending private schools, or for activities to preserve their cultural identity.

Religious groups not recognized in the constitution must register with the government as nonprofit organizations in order to engage in financial transactions and maintain bank accounts. To register, a religious group must submit through an attorney an application to the Ministry of Commerce stating its purpose and provide the names of its directors. Religious groups registered as nonprofit organizations are treated the same as any other nonprofit organization; they are tax-exempt, must provide annual reports to the government, and are not eligible for government subsidies.

The government requires Greek Orthodox religious instruction and attendance at religious services before major holidays in public primary and secondary schools. The MOE may excuse primary school students of other religious groups from attending religious services and instruction at the request of their guardians, but Greek Orthodox children in primary school may not opt out. The MOE may excuse any secondary school student from religious instruction on grounds of religion or conscience, and may excuse them from attending religious services on any grounds at the request of their guardians, or at their own request if over the age of 16.

Conscientious objectors on religious grounds are exempt from active military duty and from reservist service in the National Guard but must complete alternative service. There are two options available for conscientious objectors: unarmed military service, which is a maximum of four months longer than the normal 14-month service; or social service, which is a maximum of eight months longer than normal service but requires fewer hours of work per day. The penalty for refusing military or alternate service is up to three years' imprisonment, a fine of up to 6,000 euros (\$7,200), or both. Those who refuse both military and alternate service, even if objecting on religious grounds, are considered to have committed an offense involving dishonesty or moral turpitude and are disqualified from holding elected public office and ineligible for permits to provide private security services.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The Ministry of Interior (MOI), which has oversight of Turkish Cypriot properties in the government-controlled area, granted Turkish Cypriots access to religious sites in the area it controlled; however, Muslim community leaders stated the government continued to withhold full access to 19 mosques located on cultural

heritage sites and deny them any administrative authority over the sites. The ministry made available six of those 19 mosques, as well as two other mosques not located on cultural heritage sites, for religious services. Of the eight functioning mosques, seven were available for all five daily prayers, and six had the necessary facilities for ablutions. Bayraktar and Dhali Mosques had no ablution facilities and no bathrooms, and the government removed temporary bathrooms installed during Ramadan at Dhali Mosque. The Ministry of Communications and Works' Department of Antiquities reported it provided bathroom facilities at a distance of approximately 330 feet from Bayraktar Mosque, because the mosque was part of the medieval Venetian wall of the city, making it impossible to install sewage pipes. According to the MOI, in 2016, the government approved architectural plans for ablution and bathroom facilities at the Dhali Mosque; construction had not begun by year's end. The government again failed to respond to a long-standing request by the Muslim community for permission to make improvements at the functioning mosques, and there was no change from previous years in either the number of open mosques or the number of ablution and bathroom facilities available at those mosques.

The only one of the eight functioning mosques not open for all five daily prayers was the Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque, the most important Islamic religious site in the country. The Department of Antiquities continued to keep it open during standard museum hours only, limiting access to the mosque to two of the five daily prayer times. The mosque's imam had to ask permission of the MOI and Department of Antiquities to keep the mosque open after 5 p.m. in the autumn/winter months and after 7:30 p.m. in the spring/summer months. To cross the "green line" without identification checks to visit religious sites, Turkish Cypriots were required to submit their requests to UNFICYP, which then facilitated the approval process with the government.

The government continued to waive visa requirements for the movement of non-Turkish Cypriot pilgrims south across the "green line" to visit Hala Sultan Tekke to conduct prayers and services on special occasions. On June 27, approximately 1,000 pilgrims crossed into the government-controlled areas for a pilgrimage to Hala Sultan Tekke on Eid al-Fitr. On September 5, police escorted approximately 700 Turkish Cypriots, Turks, and other foreign nationals to Hala Sultan Tekke for prayers on Eid al-Adha. On November 29, 950 more crossed the "green line" for a pilgrimage at Hala Sultan Tekke on the occasion of the Mawlid-al Nabi.

A representative of the Buddhist community reported it continued to encounter difficulties operating a temple due to the rigorous enforcement of laws not

typically observed for majority religious and other groups. Authorities prevented the community from operating a temple in Pera, a village outside of Nicosia where the community owned a house, arguing the community should have applied first for permission to change the building's use from a residence to a temple. Local authorities instructed the Buddhist monks to remove the temple sign and move statues inside. The Buddhist community did not apply for the permit to change the use of the house to a temple and abandoned the effort in that village. The community instead rented an apartment in Nicosia to use as a temple. A representative of the Buddhist community reported the Municipality of Nicosia sent a letter to the owner of the newly rented apartment warning that it could not be used for large gatherings because of insufficient parking. To prevent further action by the municipality, members of the community avoided parking outside the building. A 2015 government criminal case against the Buddhist priest for unlicensed alterations and additions to the building in Pera remained open, and the priest had to appear in court on several occasions. The Buddhist community also reported delays in the renewal of the same religious leader's temporary residence permit.

In response to a 2016 recommendation by the ombudsman, in July the government removed the requirement to designate a person's religion on civil marriage certificates and on applications for civil marriage.

The ombudsman's office reported it received new complaints regarding MOE regulations for exempting students from religious instruction and from participation in school-organized Greek Orthodox religious ceremonies. Most of the complaints concerned rejection of exemption applications because the applicants, who objected to the requirement to state their religion on their application, did not do so and the schools therefore denied the exemption. Another parent complained the school indiscreetly handled the student's exemption from a religious ceremony and traumatized the child. The ombudsman was examining the complaints at year's end.

The military continued to require recruits to take part in a common prayer led by Church of Cyprus clergy during swearing-in ceremonies. Recruits of other faiths, atheists, and those who did not wish to take the oath for reasons of conscience could refrain from raising their hand during the ceremony. They instead gave a pledge of allegiance at a separate gathering.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Representatives of the Jewish community continued to report incidents of assault and verbal harassment directed against individuals with yarmulkes and *payot* (hair side curls) but did not provide additional details. By year's end, the police had not arrested any suspects for any of the incidents.

Members of minority religious groups continued to report societal pressures to participate in public religious ceremonies. For example, children of various religious minorities faced pressure to attend religious ceremonies at school, even though parents had the option to request they be exempted from participation. A representative of a religious group reported younger non-Greek Orthodox students did not wish to be excluded from school-organized Greek Orthodox Church ceremonies but said there were cases of Greek Orthodox clergy denying communion to those students in front of their classmates. Some Greek Orthodox adherents, who converted to other faiths, including Islam, reportedly hid their conversion from family and friends due to fear of social ostracism.

An NGO reported an employer at a hotel refused to hire migrant Muslim women for a cleaning job, stating their hijab would get in the way of doing their work.

In June the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage (TCCH), one of the bicomunal working groups set up as part of the UN-facilitated settlement talks, completed the restoration of Koprulu Mosque in Limassol and Mathiatis Mosque in Nicosia district. The TCCH was restoring the mosques of Ayios Nicolaos (Aynikola) and Ayios Yiannis (Ayianni) in Paphos district. The Department of Antiquities assumed responsibility for restoring Arnavut Mosque in Limassol as an ancient monument and completed the work in October.

The leaders of the main religious groups on the island continued to meet regularly and visit places of worship on both sides of the buffer zone. On September 28, the RTCYPP, an initiative of the embassy of Sweden that served as a platform for all religious leaders to discuss and promote religious freedom and contribute to efforts for reunification of the island, convened its third Round Table for Human Rights with religious leaders and civil society organizations. At that meeting, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights introduced its "Faith for Rights" initiative, which aimed to provide space for a cross-disciplinary dialogue between religious groups concerning human rights, on the assumption that individual and communal expression of religion or belief could thrive and flourish in environments where human rights were protected. Attendees discussed ways to

engage women, men, and children from across the island in implementing the initiative. On October 5, the RTCYPP launched a joint project of religious leaders to offer Greek and Turkish classes for members of the Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Armenian Orthodox, Maronite, and Latin Catholic faith communities. The pilot course, the first of its kind, included a group of 20 persons, including priests, imams, nuns, and laypersons who worked for faith-based organizations.

On November 16, in commemoration of the International Day of Tolerance, the religious leaders from the five principal religious groups – Archbishop Chrysostomos II of the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus; Talip Atalay, Mufti of Cyprus; Archbishop Doghramadjian of the Armenian Orthodox Church; Father Ibrahim Khita, representing the Maronite Catholic Church; and Father Jerzy Kraj, representing the Latin Catholic Church – jointly visited churches in the buffer zone and discussed the importance of religious freedom and the restoration of religious monuments. The leaders reaffirmed their commitment to dialogue and cooperation and reiterated their request to the political leadership to respect religious heritage and the right to worship.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy representatives continued to meet frequently with government officials – from the Ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Justice, as well as the Department of Antiquities and the Office of the Ombudsman – to discuss religious freedom issues, such as access to religious sites on either side of the “green line” dividing the country.

Embassy staff continued to discuss religious freedom issues with the NGOs Movement for Equality, Support, Anti-Racism and Future Worlds Center. They met with representatives of the Armenian Orthodox, Bahai, Buddhist, Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Latin, Maronite, and Muslim communities to hear their concerns about access to and the condition of religious sites, and to inquire about incidents of discrimination or violence based on religion, societal attitudes toward minority religions, and obstacles to full enjoyment of religious freedom. For example, embassy officials frequently discussed with Greek Orthodox leaders their community’s concerns over the restrictions Turkish Cypriot authorities placed on the number and the duration of church ceremonies conducted in the area under Turkish Cypriot administration, as well as the heavy “police” monitoring of services, including occasional videotaping of the congregation. Embassy officials were supportive of religious leaders’ ongoing dialogue and encouraged the

continuing reciprocal visits of Christian and Muslim leaders to places of worship on both sides of the “green line.”

THE AREA ADMINISTERED BY TURKISH CYPRIOTS

Executive Summary

The Turkish Cypriot “constitution” refers to the “state” as secular and provides for freedom of religious faith and worship consistent with public order and morals. It prohibits forced participation in worship and religious services and states religious education may be conducted only under “state” supervision. It grants the Islamic Vakf, which manages land Muslims have donated as a charitable endowment and sites of worship, the exclusive right to regulate its internal affairs. Turkish Cypriot authorities continued to restrict access to religious sites. UNFICYP reported that of 112 requests it received to facilitate religious services at churches in the northern part of the island during the year, the “TRNC Ministry of Foreign Affairs” (“MFA”) approved approximately 67. The “MFA” reported that, of 133 total requests (including both UNFICYP-facilitated and non-UNFICYP-facilitated requests) to hold religious services during the year, it approved 83. Alevi Muslims said they lacked places to worship and funding to construct them and that authorities treated them and other religious minorities unequally. In May the “ombudsman” stated the “Ministry of Education” (“MOE”) was violating freedom of religion by imposing mandatory religion courses based on Sunni Islam at schools, without presenting alternatives to non-Sunnis. Some minority religious groups continued to report police surveillance and restrictions of their activities.

The Turkish-Speaking Protestant Association (TSPA) continued to report societal discrimination toward Protestants, and some minority religious groups said Turkish Cypriots who converted to other faiths, particularly Christianity, faced criticism. A pastor of a church whose members were African students reported difficulties in securing a place of worship. The TCCH reported it had completed restoration of eight religious sites and was restoring another seven. The TCCH also reported completing five small cultural heritage activities, including religious sites, and completing project designs for another two sites. Religious leaders such as the mufti and the archbishop continued to promote religious dialogue by meeting and arranging visits to places of worship across the “green line.”

U.S. embassy officials met with Turkish Cypriot representatives to discuss access to religious sites and the ability to hold religious services at the sites without

restrictions. Embassy officials continued to meet with leaders from different religious groups to discuss freedom of worship and access to religious sites.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to 2011 census information from the Turkish Cypriot authorities, the population of the area administered by Turkish Cypriots is 286,000. The census contains no data on religious affiliation. Sociologists estimate as much as 97 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, of which 500 are members of the Naqshbandi Sufi order. Religious groups report an estimated 10,000 migrant workers of Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab origin are Alevi Muslims. According to sociologists, other small groups include approximately 330 members of the Church of Cyprus, 200 members of the Russian Orthodox Church, 150 Bahais, 150 Maronite Catholics, 180 Anglicans, 150 Jews, 300 Turkish-speaking Protestants, and 40 Jehovah's Witnesses. According to "MOE" statistics for the 2016-17 academic year, there were 79,686 foreign students enrolled at universities in the area administered by the Turkish Cypriots. Of these, 50,650 were predominantly Muslim Turks and 29,036 were foreign students, many of them Christian and Muslim, from more than 100 different countries.

Section II. Status of "Government" Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The Turkish Cypriot "constitution" states the territory is a "secular republic" and provides for freedom of conscience and religious faith and unrestricted worship and religious ceremonies, provided they do not contravene public order or morals. It prohibits forced prayer, forced attendance at religious services, condemnation based on religious beliefs, and compelling of individuals to disclose their religious beliefs. It stipulates religious education may only be conducted under "state" supervision. The "law" does not recognize any specific religion, and individuals cannot "exploit or abuse" religion to establish, even partially, a state based on religious precepts or for political or personal gain. The Vakf has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with Vakf laws and principles. Although the "constitution" states the Vakf shall be exempt from all taxation, its commercial operations are subject to applicable taxes. It also receives income from properties it manages. According to the "constitution," the Turkish Cypriot authorities shall help the Vakf in the execution of Islamic religious services and in meeting the expenses of such services. No

other religious organization is tax exempt or receives subsidies from Turkish Cypriot authorities.

The 1975 Vienna III Agreement covers the treatment of Greek Cypriots and Maronite Catholics living in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and the treatment of Turkish Cypriots living in the government-controlled area. Among other provisions, the agreement provides for facilities for religious worship for Greek Cypriots, stating they are free to stay and “will be given every help to lead a normal life, including facilities for education and for the practice of their religion.”

Turkish Cypriot “regulations” stipulate Greek Orthodox residents may conduct liturgies or masses led by three priests designated by the Orthodox Church at three designated functional churches in the Karpas Peninsula without seeking permission. Maronite residents may hold liturgies or masses at four designated functional Maronite churches by Maronite-designated clergy without seeking permission. These religious groups must submit applications to the authorities for permission to hold religious services at churches or monasteries other than these seven designated churches. For the application to be considered, the date should be of significance to that religious group; the church or monastery must be structurally sound; it must not be located in a military zone; and it must not have a dual use, for example, as a museum. Permission is also necessary for priests other than those officially pre-designated to conduct services. Specific permission is required for services in which Cypriots who are not residents in the Turkish Cypriot-administered area, such as members of the Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox Churches, participate. UNFICYP coordinates some applications, which must be submitted 10 days before the date of the requested service.

The “Religious Affairs Department” represents Islam in the area administered by the Turkish Cypriots. Whereas the Vakf manages land that has been donated as an endowment by Muslims for charitable purposes, the “Religious Affairs Department” oversees how imams conduct prayers and deliver sermons in mosques.

Religious groups are not required to register with authorities as associations in order to assemble or worship, but only associations registered with the “Ministry of Interior” (“MOI”) have the right to engage in commercial activity and maintain bank accounts. Religious groups and nonreligious groups have the same registration process and are required to submit the founders’ names and photocopies of their identification cards to the “MOI,” along with a copy of the

association's rules and regulations. Associations do not receive tax-exempt status or any "government" benefits or subsidies. Religious groups are not permitted to register as associations if the stated purpose of the association is to provide religious education to their members.

There is compulsory instruction covering religion in grades four through eight in all schools. These classes focus primarily on Islam but also include sessions on comparative religion. The "MOE" chooses the curriculum, which is based on a textbook commissioned by the Ministry of Education in Turkey. Schools or teachers may excuse non-Muslim students from attending the course or taking the mandatory exam at the end of the semester on an individual basis at the request of their guardians, but there is no formal process to request such an exemption. At the high school level, religion classes are optional.

There are no provisions or "laws" allowing conscientious objection to mandatory military service, which includes a 12-15-month initial service requirement and a one-day annual reserve duty.

"Government" Practices

Authorities continued to restrict access to Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox places of worship, and the "MFA" continued to state Greek Cypriots were abusing the right to religious freedom and politicizing the situation. Apostolos Andreas, St. Barnabas, and St. Mamas Churches remained open for religious services throughout the year. Apostolos Andreas Monastery was open for prayer but still required special permission to celebrate liturgy.

Authorities continued restrictions on regular religious services in certain other churches. UNFICYP reported, of 112 requests it received to facilitate religious services at churches in the northern part of the island during the year, the "MFA" approved approximately 67, compared with 139 requests and 84 approvals in 2016. The "MFA" reported that, of 133 requests (including both UNFICYP-facilitated and non-UNFICYP-facilitated requests) to hold religious services during the year, it approved 83, compared with 163 requests and 109 approvals in 2016.

In April the "MFA" again did not allow Good Friday church services to take place at the St. George Exorinos Church in Famagusta.

Turkish Cypriot civil society organizations criticized authorities for not allowing Greek Cypriots to perform church services and urged greater access to religious sites.

In response to a complaint from an Alevi Muslim association that religion courses ignored their needs, the “ombudsman” published a report in May stating the “MOE” only offered Sunni Islam-based academic religion courses in schools and that the policy ran contrary to basic rights of equality, faith, and freedom of religion, as stated in the “TRNC constitution.” It advised the “MOE” to make religion courses optional and more inclusive. In a joint press conference, the Pir Sultan Abdal Association, an Alevi Muslim association, the Primary Education Teachers’ Union, and the Secondary Education Teachers’ Union also stated they were against mandatory religion courses in schools.

Some Christians, as well as Alevis, stated the mandatory religion classes in schools were overly focused on Sunni Islam, and they expressed concerns that their children had no formal recourse to opt out of the classes. Alevis reported the education system discriminated against them. For example, one Alevi representative reported all students at the Hala Sultan Religious High School, which offered additional classes in Sunni Islam, received scholarships, but students at other schools were not all eligible for scholarships.

According to a representative of the Maronite community, the Turkish military continued to grant Maronites limited access to their churches and villages located within Turkish military zones. The Turkish military allowed Maronites to celebrate Mass once a year in the Church of Ayia Marina. It denied Maronites access to the Church of Marki near Kormakitis/Kormacit. The Maronite Church of Archangelos Michael in the village of Asamatos/Ozhan was also located within a Turkish military zone but did not require permission to function regularly on Sundays.

A representative of the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus stated 50-55 religious sites remained inaccessible due to being located within Turkish military zones.

On July 11, police in Turkey released “Director of the Religious Affairs Department” and Mufti Talip Atalay after four days of interrogation. “Acting Director of Religious Affairs” Fahrettin Ogdu told the press Atalay was not detained due to “Fethullah Gulen Terrorist Organization”-related affiliations, but rather because of unfounded accusations made by the “MFA” in an attempt to

punish Atalay for his participation in the Religious Track dialogue with other religious leaders.

In August local newspapers reported the “MFA” did not grant permission for Greek Cypriots to conduct a religious ceremony on September 1-3 at St. Mamas Church to celebrate the saint’s name day. The “MFA” stated that due to security concerns and the overlap with Muslim holiday Kurban Bayram in the area administered by the Turkish Cypriots, it suggested postponing the religious ceremony one week. Main opposition Republican Turkish Party issued a written statement criticizing the “MFA” for preventing Greek Cypriots from holding Mass at St. Mamas, citing annual celebrations there since 2003. The Greek Cypriots declined to hold the religious ceremony a week later.

Some minority religious groups, including evangelical Christians, continued to report Turkish Cypriot authorities, including the police, monitored their activities. A Greek Orthodox priest reported heavy police presence during church services, including police inside the church videotaping services held by the enclaved Greek Cypriot community.

The TSPA again reported some of its members were frightened to attend religious services due to police pressure; TSPA representatives visited homes instead.

According to a Greek Orthodox official, police were instructing Greek Orthodox priests to limit the length of services, and there were instances when police intervened during the service to tell the priest to expedite it. Heavy police escorts continued to accompany visiting Greek Orthodox worshippers. Turkish Cypriot authorities said the escorts were to provide security; Greek Orthodox officials said they were for surveillance.

The “Religious Affairs Department” staffed 192 mosques, all Sunni, with 225 imams. Members of the majority Sunni religious community continued to voice concerns the “government” was interfering with religious affairs by selecting imams.

Some non-Sunni Muslims continued to state they lacked places of worship and funding to construct such facilities. Alevi Muslims said the authorities treated them and other minority religious groups unequally. The Alevi Culture Association continued to report that due to the lack of a house of worship, Alevis were required to conduct funerals inside mosques, contrary to their traditions. They also said they perceived favoritism in “state” funding toward the Sunni

Muslim population through financing of mosque construction and support for administration of mosques. One Alevi representative reported there were 196 [sic] “state”-funded mosques for Sunnis, but only one *cemevi* (place of worship) for Alevis, which had been under construction for several years and still not been completed. Consequently, Alevis had to worship at the unfinished *cemevi* or at some other location. Turkish Cypriot authorities earmarked three million Turkish liras (\$792,000) in the “state” budget in 2016 for the completion of the *cemevi* but had not yet disbursed the funds. The tender process to complete construction of the *cemevi* was expected to begin the first half of 2018.

A representative of the Greek Orthodox Church again stated that some religious sites, to which Church officials had little or no access, were damaged or close to collapse due to decades of neglect. The representative did not cite specific examples.

Greek Orthodox religious groups continued to complain that authorities placed religious items, including icons, in storage rooms or displayed them in museums, against the wishes of the communities to whom they were sacred.

In August Turkish Cypriot local authorities cancelled a TSPA-organized theatrical performance, even though the authorities had previously issued all necessary permits. The TSPA stated it believed local authorities, who reportedly did not provide a justification, cancelled the event because they deemed the performance Christian propaganda.

The TSPA also reported Turkish Cypriot authorities had prevented it from opening an office in Famagusta for the previous two years.

The TSPA said the police paid monthly visits to the association to check on the group and monitor its activities.

The TSPA reported it sent a letter to “President” Mustafa Akinci in September requesting the abolishment of mandatory religion courses in schools, a place to worship, and an opportunity to broadcast Christmas or Easter programming on a “state” television channel. By year’s end, the president had not responded, according to the TSPA.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The TSPA continued to report societal discrimination within the Turkish Cypriot community toward Protestants. The TSPA reported that, after previously agreeing to rent the group an assembly room for a Christmas party and play planned for December 24, a local school principal canceled the event on December 19. According to the TSPA, the school principal succumbed to pressure from nationalists who disapproved of the religious celebration. Despite appeals, the “MOE” did not intervene on the association’s behalf.

The TCCH reported it had completed restoration of eight religious sites and was restoring another seven. The TCCH also reported completing five small cultural heritage activities, including religious sites, and completing project designs for another two sites. The TCCH and the UN Development Program Partnership for the Future continued restoration work at the Greek Orthodox Apostolos Andreas Monastery in the Karpas Peninsula, a popular destination for pilgrims. The second phase of the project, including the restoration of the small chapel, surrounding buildings, and environmental landscaping, was expected to begin during the first half of 2018.

A pastor of a church, whose members were African students studying in universities in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots, reported difficulties in securing a place of worship. The pastor said local companies rejected their requests to rent halls for religious ceremonies and required payment of an entire year’s rent up front. They reported Near East University in the north had a mosque on campus for Muslims but did not have a chapel or church for Christians.

Muslim and Orthodox religious leaders continued to promote religious tolerance by meeting and arranging pilgrimages for their congregations to places of worship across the “green line,” such as Hala Sultan in the Republic of Cyprus and St. Barnabas in the “TRNC.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy representatives continued to meet with Turkish Cypriot authorities at the “Presidency” and the “MFA” to discuss access to religious sites and the ability to hold religious services at sites without restrictions.

Embassy officials also discussed issues pertaining to religious freedom, including access to sites of worship and instances of societal discrimination within the Turkish Cypriot community, with representatives of the Armenian Orthodox, Alevi

Muslim, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Protestant, and Sunni Muslim communities.

All references to place names within this report are for reference purposes only and are meant to convey meaning. They should not be interpreted as implying or indicating any political recognition or change in long-standing U.S. policy.