

Turkey only NATO member on U.S. “Special Watch List” for violating religious freedoms



Turkey is once again on a U.S. State Department’s “Special Watch List” in the 2020 Annual Report by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

Turkey was the only country in NATO to be on the “Special Watch List” because “in 2019, religious freedom conditions in Turkey remained worrisome, with the perpetuation of restrictive and intrusive governmental policies on religious practice and a marked increase in incidents of vandalism and societal violence against religious minorities.”

The report highlighted Turkey’s anti-Jewishness and the targeting of other religious minorities like Alevi’s, as well as Greek, Armenian and Assyrian Christians.

“Many longstanding issues concerning religious sites, such as the inability of the Greek Orthodox community to train clergy at the Halki Seminary, remained unresolved,” the report said.

The Theological School of Halki (Θεολογική Σχολή Χάλκης, Turkish: Ortodoks

Ruhban Okulu), was founded on 1844 on the island of Halki and was the main school of theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church's Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople before it was shut down in 1971 under the guise of a new law that banned private higher education.

The report also explained that “in several instances in 2019, Armenian, Assyrian, and Greek religious and cultural sites, including numerous cemeteries, faced severe damage or destruction—in some cases because of neglect, but also due to vandalism or state-endorsed construction projects.”

The report also went into detail about the threat of Hagia Sophia once again becoming a mosque under orders from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

“President Erdoğan called multiple times for the Hagia Sophia, a historic Greek Orthodox basilica that has held legal status as a museum since 1935, to be converted back into a mosque. In November 2019, a Turkish higher court also issued a decision permitting the Chora (Kariye) Museum, a former Greek Orthodox church, to be converted back into a mosque—thereby possibly setting a precedent for the similar conversion of the Hagia Sophia,” the report said.

The report also went into detail about violence and murders against religious minorities.

“Throughout 2019, members of Turkey's various religious and ethnic minority communities faced both threats of violence and actual violence, including at least two killings. In May, 86-year-old Zafir Pinari, a Greek man, was found murdered in his home on the island of Gökçeada [Imvros, Greek: Ἰμβρος],” the report said.

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