

US Commission on int't religious freedom: religious freedom conditions in Turkey remain worrisome



The US Commission on international religious freedom, an independent, bipartisan US federal government commission, this month issued its annual report, covering the year 2019.

In the report, and specifically referring to predominately Muslim Turkey, the report states that religious freedom conditions in Turkey remained worrisome, with the perpetuation of restrictive and intrusive governmental policies on religious practice, along with a marked increase in incidents of vandalism and societal violence against religious minorities.

As in previous years, the report says the Turkish government continued to unduly interfere in the internal affairs of religious communities, by preventing the election of board members for non-Muslim foundations.

The report specifically cited the fact that throughout 2019, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on numerous occasions called for the Hagia Sophia, a historic Greek Orthodox basilica that has held legal status as a museum since 1935, be reconverted into a mosque.

The report also cited the fact that in November 2019, a Turkish appeals court issued a decision permitting the Chora Museum, a former Greek Orthodox church, to be converted back into a mosque—thereby possibly setting an extremely negative precedent for a similar re-conversion of the Hagia Sophia.

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