

CYPRUS 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Note: This report was updated 9/18/17; see Appendix H: Errata for more information

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 remained 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 that 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 1,000 Turkish Cypriots and foreign nationals to Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque on three occasions. Six of eight mosques in the government-controlled area were open for all five daily prayers and had the necessary facilities for ablutions; two other mosques were also open but lacked some facilities. The government did not grant permission to religious groups to make upgrades at mosques. The government ombudsman’s office reported the legal requirement to note persons’ religion on the Civil Marriage Certificate violated the right to privacy and exposed them to possible discrimination. A state nursery school took students to a church to worship “holy remains” without the consent of their parents. The ombudsman concluded the visit was incompatible with the principles of religious freedom and the state’s neutrality towards all religions. 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, including Islam. Leaders of the main religious groups on the island continued to meet. The religious leaders made a joint call through the press for further easing of restrictions on freedom of religion, including on access to neglected places of worship and cemeteries. A mosque in a rural area was damaged extensively after an arson attack.

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. The U.S. Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs discussed the state of religious freedom with religious leaders, such as the mufti of Cyprus and the Greek Orthodox archbishop. 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 2016 estimate). According to the 2011 census, the population of the government-controlled area is more than 858,000. 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), 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 that has the power to investigate complaints made against any public service or official for actions that violate human rights, including freedom of religion, or are exercised in contravention of the laws or the rules of proper administration, and to protect citizens' rights and human rights in general. 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. The Vakf 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 or for school fees for members of the groups attending private schools or for activities to preserve their cultural identity.

Religious groups not among the five recognized in the constitution must register with the government as nonprofit organizations in order to engage in financial transactions and maintain bank accounts. In order to register as a nonprofit organization, 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, are tax exempt, and must provide annual reports to the government; they 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 Ministry of Education 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. All secondary school students may be excused by the Ministry of Education from religious instruction on grounds of religion or conscience, and they may be excused 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 or a fine of up to 6,000 euros (\$6,322), 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 are not eligible for permits to provide private security services.

Government Practices

The government granted Turkish Cypriots access to religious sites in the area it controlled; however, Muslim community leaders stated the government had not granted them full access to 17 mosques located on cultural heritage sites and denied them any administrative authority over the sites. Eight of these 17 mosques in the government-controlled area were open. Six of those were available for all five daily prayers and had the necessary facilities for ablutions. A Muslim leader reported there were no ablution facilities and no bathrooms at Bayraktar or Dhali mosques in the government-controlled area. The Ministry of Interior, which has oversight of Turkish Cypriot properties in the government-controlled area, reported that, with the exception of Bayraktar and Dhali Mosques, all other functioning mosques had ablution and bathroom facilities, including Paphos Mosque. The Ministry of Communications and Works' Department of Antiquities reported it provided bathroom facilities at a distance of approximately 100 meters (330 feet) away from Bayraktar Mosque, because the mosque was part of the medieval Venetian wall of the city, making it impossible to install sewage pipes. By year's

end, the government had again not responded to a Muslim leader's request 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.

As in previous years, the Department of Antiquities kept the Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque, the most important Islamic religious site in the country, open during standard museum hours, limiting access to the mosque to two of the five daily prayer times. The mosque's imam had to ask permission of the Ministry of the Interior and Department of Antiquities to keep the mosque open after 5:00 p.m. in the autumn/winter months and after 7:30 p.m. in the spring/summer months. In order 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 again waived 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 July 1, more than 1,000 pilgrims crossed into the government-controlled areas for a pilgrimage to Hala Sultan Tekke on Eid al-Fitr. On September 15, the police escorted approximately 1,000 Turkish Cypriots, Turks, and other foreign nationals to Hala Sultan Tekke for prayers on Eid al-Adha.

Rejecting a 2015 statement made by the pastor of the Evangelical Christian Center that evangelical prisoners in the central prison did not receive the same treatment as Christian Orthodox and Muslim prisoners, a Cyprus Police sergeant stated all religious groups had the same rights in prison and were free to hold services more frequently if requested. A response from the pastor was unavailable.

In January the ombudsman's office, in its capacity as the Anti-Discrimination Authority, reported that the law's requirement to designate a person's religion on the civil marriage certificate violated individuals' right to privacy and exposed them to possible discrimination in dealings with government and other authorities. The ombudsman recommended that the relevant provision of the law be amended to eliminate any reference to religion. At year's end, the civil marriage certificates continued to designate religion.

In August the ombudsman issued a report on a complaint submitted by the Cyprus Humanists Association against the Ministry of Education that a state nursery school took students to a church to worship "holy remains" without the consent of

the parents. The ombudsman concluded the visit was incompatible with the principles of religious freedom and state's neutrality towards all religions. The report said schools should abstain from such activities and called on the Ministry of Education to take appropriate action to prevent recurrence. Reacting to the ombudsman's report, the archbishop of the Church of Cyprus stated on September 22 that it was not the ombudsman's job to tell people how to practice their faith and she should not involve herself in matters of faith.

Commenting on the relevant Ministry of Education circular on rules exempting students from religious instruction in schools, the Commissioner for the Protection of the Rights of the Child, an independent state official with oversight on children's rights, wrote in August that students and/or their guardians should not be required to state the reasons they requested exemption from religious instruction.

On November 9, Minister of Defense Christoforos Fokaides unveiled a memorial to Jewish Holocaust survivors who were interned in camps on the island after World War II.

As in previous years, military recruits were required 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 were not required to raise their hand during the swearing-in 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 people with yarmulkes and *payot* (hair side curls). By year's end, the police had not arrested any suspects for any of the incidents.

Minority religious groups continued to report societal pressures to participate in public religious ceremonies. For example, they said children of various religious minorities faced pressure to attend religious ceremonies at school, even though they had the option to request they be exempted from participation. The Maronite community also reported Maronite national guard conscripts faced such pressure. Greek Orthodox adherents who converted to other faiths, including Islam,

reportedly continued hiding their conversion from family and friends out of fear of social ostracism.

On February 21, Dhenia mosque, an official heritage site located in the buffer zone in Dhenia village west of Nicosia, suffered extensive damage after arson. The government condemned the attack and contributed to the restoration of the mosque, completed on March 2. A police investigation did not lead to any arrests.

In April the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage (TCCH), one of the bicomunal working groups set up as part of the UN-facilitated settlement talks, announced that, as part of its Small Project Activities initiative, it would accelerate the restoration of Arnavut and Koprulu mosques in Limassol and of Mathiatis mosque in Nicosia district.

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 February 10, the leaders of the five principal religious groups, Archbishop Chrysostomos II of the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus; Dr. Talip Atalay, Mufti of Cyprus; Archbishop Soueif of the Maronite Catholic Church; a representative of the Armenian Orthodox Church (the archbishop was out of the country); and Father Jerzy Kraj, representing the Latin Catholic Church, made a joint call through the press for further easing of restrictions on freedom of religion, including improved access to destroyed or neglected places of worship and cemeteries. In March the religious leaders sent a joint letter to the leaders of the two communities outlining their expectations from a settlement with regard to the administration of properties belonging to religious institutions. In the same month, Mufti of Cyprus Atalay and Bishop Porfyrios of Neapolis, representing Archbishop Chrysostomos II, made a joint presentation at the Human Rights Council in Geneva, in which they highlighted their cooperative efforts for the realization of religious freedom across the island.

Members of all minority religious groups continued to report relations between the Church of Cyprus and other religious communities in the government-controlled area were cordial.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives continued to meet frequently with the government, including with officials from the Ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, Justice, and Defense, 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.

The U.S. Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs visited Cyprus in March and met jointly and separately with the leaders and representatives of the five main religious groups such as the mufti and the Greek Orthodox archbishop. He discussed the ongoing dialogue among the religious leaders, access to religious sites, and the religious leaders’ contribution to the efforts for a settlement. He visited several religious sites on both sides of the island and met with members of the Greek Cypriot and the Maronite communities residing in the area under Turkish Cypriot administration.

Embassy staff continued to discuss religious freedom issues with the NGOs Movement for Equality, Support, Anti-Racism (KISA) and Future Worlds Center, and met with representatives of the Armenian Orthodox, Bahai, Buddhist, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah’s Witness, Jewish, Latin, Maronite, and Muslim communities to listen to their concerns about access to and the condition of religious sites, and inquire about incidents of discrimination or violence based on religion, societal attitudes toward minority religions, and obstacles to full enjoyment of religious freedom. Embassy officials were supportive of the ongoing religious leaders’ 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

Since 1974, the northern part of the country has been run by a Turkish Cypriot administration that 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. 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 that Muslims have donated as an endowment for charitable purposes as well as sites of worship, the exclusive right to regulate its internal affairs in accordance with Vakf laws. Turkish Cypriot authorities approved 109 of 163 requests received through UNFICYP for access to Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox places of worship in the north. Turkish Cypriot authorities

reported they allowed church services for the first time in more than 40 years at five locations. In May the Turkish Cypriot authorities announced new restrictions on church access, stating the Greek Cypriots were abusing the right to religious freedom and politicizing the situation by increasing the number of requests for access to churches. Some minority religious groups reported police surveillance and restrictions of their activities and political criticism of Turkish Cypriot converts to other faiths, particularly Christianity.

The bicomunal working group Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage (TCCH) reported it had restored three religious sites and another five were under restoration. The TCCH also reported completing eight small cultural heritage projects, including religious sites, and completing project designs for another four 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.”

Turkish troops limited access to Maronite villages and churches in Turkish military zones.

Embassy representatives 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 also discussed religious freedom within the Turkish Cypriot community with representatives of the Armenian Orthodox, Alevi Muslim, Bahai, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Protestant, and Sunni Muslim communities.

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. Religious groups report an estimated 10,000 migrant workers of Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab origin are Alevi Muslims, and there are 100-200 members of the Naqshbandi Sufi order. According to sociologists, other small groups include approximately 330 members of the autocephalous Greek Orthodox 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. There are approximately 450 African students who are predominantly Pentecostals and Roman Catholics.

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 the 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, and Maronite residents may hold liturgies or masses at four designated functional Maronite churches by Maronite-designated clergy without seeking permission. 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 predesignated 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 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 give 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 “Ministry of Education (MOE)” chooses the curriculum, which is based on a textbook commissioned by the “MOE” in Turkey. Non-Muslim students may be excused from attending on an individual basis by schools or teachers 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 Turkish Cypriots to conscientiously object to military service, which includes a one-day annual reserve duty requirement in addition to the 12-15-month initial service requirement.

“Government” Practices

Authorities continued to restrict access to Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox places of worship. Turkish Cypriot authorities announced restrictions on church access, stating Greek Cypriots were abusing the right to religious freedom and politicizing the situation by increasing the number of requests for access to churches. One Greek Orthodox monastery was open for prayer but still required special permission for Mass.

Authorities continued restrictions on regular religious services in certain churches. UNFICYP reported that, of 163 requests received during the year, 109 were approved, compared with 128 requests and 88 approvals in 2015.

In May the “Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)” announced new restrictions on religious services. Speaking to the press, “Foreign Minister” Tahsin Ertugruloglu said Apostolos Andreas, St. Barnabas, and St. Mamas churches would remain open for religious services throughout the year, but all other churches, except for St. George Exorinos, which would be the site of monthly religious services, would be available for religious services only once a year, either on their name day, or on Easter or Christmas. “Prime Minister” Huseyin Ozgurgun said his “government” would implement these new arrangements, because Greek Cypriots were exploiting religious freedom for political gains and some churches had been turned into “political symbols.” He said there had been a significant and deliberate increase in Greek Cypriot requests to hold religious services in the north, adding that the “government” had reviewed religious access procedures and formulated new technical criteria to deal with such requests. “MFA” Under Secretary Mustafa Lakadamyali told the press it was difficult for police to be present at different churches at the same time.

In May Republican Turkish Party “Member of Parliament” Erkut Sahali criticized the “MFA” for restricting religious services. Rejecting the “government’s” assertion that the new criteria were technical, Sahali said decisions to allow services should be standard and made consistently, blaming the “government” for using technicality as a guise when decisions were actually arbitrary. UN Special Advisor of the Secretary General on Cyprus Espen Barth Eide, mediator in ongoing reunification talks, said restrictions went against the bicomunal spirit and stated to the press that he had asked Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci to rectify this new policy.

In June a UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom and Cultural Rights condemned Turkish Cypriot authorities’ restrictions on church services and expressed concern

about the “possible violations of cultural rights and the rights of religious freedom” that could arise from these attempts.

“President” Mustafa Akinci reacted to the “MFA’s” once-a-year rule, saying he did not support restrictions on religious freedom. Turkish Cypriot NGOs and political parties also reacted to the “MFA’s” decision and said further restrictions would negatively influence the peace process. Republic of Cyprus and Greek Cypriot religious authorities referred to the restrictions as “a very negative development” and said freedom of faith was a basic right that should be respected and protected. The Religious Track Cyprus Peace Process, a peacebuilding initiative with religious leaders established under the auspices of the embassy of Sweden, said it would have been better to make such decisions only after discussing them with all stakeholders, including “government” officials, religious communities, and NGOs.

In June the press reported the “MFA” turned down the request of Greek Cypriots to hold a religious service at Saint George Exorinos Church in Famagusta on June 19 for Pentecost. The “MFA” said Pentecost was not a special day.

Between January and September the authorities allowed church services to take place, on a one-time basis, in five additional churches: Church of Timiou Prodromou in Argaki/ Akcay; Church of Neo Chorio in Neo Chorio/Minarelikoy; Church of Agia Eirini in Karavas/Alsancak; Church of St. Anne in Famagusta; and Church of Prophet Elias in Fylia/Serhatkoy. This brought to 39 the total number of churches at which authorities, beginning in 2013, have allowed services after a hiatus of more than 40 years.

In May the press reported approximately 150 Greek Cypriots attended a prayer at the Agios Epihanios Church in the village of Yildirim, the second such prayer since 1974. The ceremony was supposed to have been held on May 12, but Turkish Cypriot authorities said permission was requested late by the Greek Cypriots and had to be held on May 21.

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. In September the press reported heavy security measures at a religious ceremony at St. Mamas Church in Morphou.

The Turkish-Speaking Protestant Association (TSPA) reported some families of its members were frightened to attend religious services due to police pressure; therefore, TSPA representatives visited families instead. Heavy Police escorts continued to accompany visiting Greek Orthodox worshippers. According to press reports, Turkish Cypriot police individually searched the Greek Cypriots before entering the church. Turkish Cypriot representatives stated the purpose of the police presence was to provide security and protect religious icons and artifacts; however, religious groups said they viewed the police presence as intimidation and harassment.

The “Religious Affairs Department” staffed 190-200 mosques, all Sunni, with 360 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 reported they lacked places of worship and funding to construct such facilities. Alevi Muslims reported 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 “state” funded mosques for Sunnis, but only one cemevi (place of worship) for Alevis, which had been under construction for several years.

A representative of the Greek Orthodox Church stated that some religious sites, to which they had little or no access, were damaged or close to collapse due to decades of neglect.

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

Turkish Cypriot religious groups continued to report Muslim parents seeking to send their children to religious summer courses faced strong public criticism from secular community members, particularly local “government” teachers.

Some Alevis and Christians stated the mandatory religious education in schools was overly focused on Sunni Islam, and their children had no formal recourse to

opt out of the classes. Alevis reported the education system discriminated against Alevis and disregarded them in religious education. One Alevi representative reported 100 percent of scholarships were provided to students who would study at religious schools and at the Hala Sultan Religious High School, which promoted and taught only Sunni Islam.

Four Turkish Cypriots had ongoing cases at the “Constitutional Court” for not attending their one-day annual military reserve duty requirement. Two Turkish Cypriots declared they were conscientious objectors in the area administrated by Turkish Cypriots.

The TSPA reported local authorities removed the association’s sign installed outside its fellowship house in January, stating it was against the rules governing associations to put up such a sign. In September the TSPA also reported Turkish Cypriot police interrupted a congregation of 35 foreign worshippers who were staying at a private apartment building and asked for their names, passports, and identification information. The group refused and contacted the association’s lawyer. The TSPA said the police paid monthly visits to the association to check on the group and monitor its activities.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Non-State Actors

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.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The TSPA continued to report discrimination within the Turkish Cypriot community toward Protestants.

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 first phase of the restoration, which consisted of the restoration of the main church building and annex buildings, was completed in October and opened on November 7. Republic of Cyprus President Nicos Anastasiades tweeted “Completion of the renovation project by Greek and Turkish Cypriots offers a message of hope.” The second phase of the project, which included the small chapel, surrounding buildings, and an environmental landscaping, was expected to be completed by the end of 2017.

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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

Embassy officials continued to meet with leaders from the Alevi, Bahai, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Protestant, and Sunni communities living in the areas controlled by Turkish Cypriots to discuss freedom of worship and access to religious sites.

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 longstanding U.S. policy.