

# Turkey: Secularism with an Islamic flavour and persisting obstacles to religious freedom

By D. Pastoor, Persecution Analyst for Open Doors International

*Open Doors is non-denominational mission supporting persecuted Christians in more than 50 countries where Christianity is socially or legally discouraged or oppressed; their work focuses upon field work and the direct support of Christian minorities.*

## Turkey and the World Watch List

Each year, Open Doors<sup>1</sup> produces the World Watch List (WWL)<sup>2</sup>, which ranks 50 countries according to the intensity of persecution Christians face for their faith.

The WWL is based on a questionnaire<sup>3</sup> developed by Open Doors to gauge the level of persecution in over 60 countries. The questionnaires are completed by Open Doors field personnel working in the countries, as well as by external experts, to arrive at a quantitative score for each country. Countries are then ranked according to the points received. A country's position on the list is not an indication of persecution worsening or improving in the country. In some cases a country's score will be higher than in the previous year, and yet the country might have a lower position on the list because ranking is determined in relation to what has happened in other countries.

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.opendoors.org](http://www.opendoors.org)

<sup>2</sup> [www.worldwatchlist.us](http://www.worldwatchlist.us)

<sup>3</sup> The questionnaire that Open Doors uses was revised in 2012. Until 2012, the countries on the WWL were scored and ranked based on a questionnaire that was divided into six blocks: (1) Legal status of Christians (Is religious freedom guaranteed by the Constitution or comparable laws, and applied in court?); (2) Position of state toward Christians (What is the attitude of the state towards Christians and churches?); (3) Church organization (Can churches function freely?); (4) Role of the Church in society (Is it possible for Christians to express their faith in public life, not only evangelization?); (5A) Situation of individual Christians (part A) (What are the persecution incidents: killings; (arbitrary) arrests; kidnappings; physical harassment; houses or meeting places attacked; Christians forced to flee); (5B) Situation of individual Christians (part B) (What are the persecution incidents at a bit more generic level: discrimination at school or work (in general, with the authorities); hindrance in travelling; fines, threats or obstruction; pressure to change or renounce their faith); (6) Other Factors limiting the life of churches and believers (Are other groups/organizations besides the state monitoring or restricting the activities of Christians or churches?).

**Table 1: Open Doors' World Watch List 2011-2012<sup>4</sup>**

<b>Ranking 2012</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Points 2012</b>	<b>Ranking 2011</b>	<b>Points 2011</b>
1.	North Korea	88	1.	90.5
2.	Afghanistan	67.5	3.	66
3.	Saudi Arabia	67.5	4.	64.5
4.	Somalia	66.5	5.	64
5.	Iran	66	2.	67.5
6.	Maldives	63	6.	63
7.	Uzbekistan	61	9.	57.5
8.	Yemen	58.5	7.	60
9.	Iraq	57	8.	58.5
10.	Pakistan	56.5	11.	55.5
11.	Eritrea	56	12.	55
12.	Laos	55.5	10.	56
13.	Northern Nigeria	55	23.	44
14.	Mauritania	54	13.	53.5
15.	Egypt	53.5	19.	47.5
16.	Sudan	53.5	35.	37
17.	Bhutan	51	14.	53.5
18.	Turkmenistan	50.5	15.	51.5
19.	Vietnam	49.5	18.	48
20.	Chechnya	49.5	20.	47
21.	China	48.5	16.	48.5
22.	Qatar	47	17.	48.5
23.	Algeria	46.5	22.	45
24.	Comoros	45.5	21.	46.5
25.	Azerbaijan	45.5	24.	43.5
26.	Libya	42	25.	41
27.	Oman	42	26.	41
28.	Brunei	42	29.	39.5
29.	Morocco	41	31.	39.5
30.	Kuwait	40.5	28.	40
<b>31.</b>	<b>Turkey</b>	<b>40.5</b>	<b>30.</b>	<b>39.5</b>
32.	India	40.5	32.	39
33.	Burma/Myanmar	39	27.	40
34.	Tajikistan	39	33.	38
35.	Tunisia	39	37.	35
36.	Syria	39	38.	34.5
37.	United Arab Emirates	38.5	34.	37.5
38.	Ethiopia	36	43.	30
39.	Djibouti	33.5	39.	33.5
40.	Jordan	33.5	40.	33.5
41.	Cuba	33.5	41.	33.5
42.	Belarus	33.5	42.	32
43.	Indonesia	31.5	48.	26.5
44.	Palestinian Territories	31	44.	29.5
45.	Kazakhstan	30.5		
46.	Bahrain	30	45.	28.5
47.	Colombia	30		

<sup>4</sup> The World Watch List 2013 can be downloaded from [www.worldwatchlist.us](http://www.worldwatchlist.us).

<b>Ranking 2012</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Points 2012</b>	<b>Ranking 2011</b>	<b>Points 2011</b>
48.	Kyrgyzstan	29.5	46.	28.5
49.	Bangladesh	27.5	47.	27.5
50.	Malaysia	27	50.	22.5

Source: *Open Doors International*

Persecution situations are often a confusing mix of political, economic, social, ethnic and religious factors. As restrictions on religious freedom increase, the more vulnerable Christians are, particularly when persecution originates from both the government and hostile social groups.

In the case of Turkey, the combination of persistent legal restrictions and negative comments by some government officials towards Christians, social hostilities and the rise of observant Islam, has translated into a relatively high degree of persecution of Christians. Turkey ranked 31<sup>th</sup> on Open Doors World Watch List in 2012, ranking 30<sup>th</sup> in 2010 and 39<sup>th</sup> in 2009. This climb indicates that the levels of persecution of Christians have (comparatively) increased and that the situation in the country has deteriorated.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 2: Turkey on Open Doors' World Watch List 2002-2012**

	<b>2013<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2002</b>
<b>Rank</b>	51	31	30	35	39	34	35	36	39	39	34	35
<b>Points</b>	34	40.5	39.5	36.0	33.0	36.0	34.0	30.5	29.0	32.0	34.5	35.5

Source: *Open Doors International*

In Turkey<sup>7</sup>, religious freedom and persecution of Christians coexist. The rights of religious minorities are respected and protected by officialdom, but a large number of government restrictions affect the religious activities of Christians. The government restrictions on religious freedom, as this article will show, are based essentially on interpretations of the secular constitution and laws of the country that are heavily biased against both non-

<sup>5</sup> Turkey also ranks 'high' in Pew Forum's Government Restrictions Index and Social Hostilities Index, which is an alternative measure of religious freedom worldwide (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *Rising Restrictions on Religion*, 2011). For the first time, Turkey was also categorized as a 'country of particular concern' by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom in its 2012 annual report.

<sup>6</sup> The methodology of the World Watch List was integrally revised in 2012. For this reason, ranks and scores on the WWL 2013 cannot be scored compared with previous years. Please visit [www.worldwatchlist.us](http://www.worldwatchlist.us) for more information about the revised methodology. Turkey dropped on the WWL 2013 because of many new entries, but by no means has the situation in the country improved, which belongs to the category 'Sparse Persecution.'

<sup>7</sup> This article will describe the situation of the Church in Turkey in general, but will not refer to the very specific problems faced by Christians within the Kurdish minority.

Muslim minorities and anti-secular Islamists. These restrictions add to the persistent societal intolerance against Christians.

This article will first provide an overview of traditional persecution dynamics in Turkey, which are a combination of legal restrictions and societal hostilities deeply rooted in the country's nationalist and secular ideology. This presentation will be followed by a description of newer trends regarding Christian persecution in Turkey related to the growing influence of Islam in Turkish society. Finally, this article will conclude with some remarks on the future outlook for Christian persecution in Turkey.

## **1. Traditional persecution dynamics in Turkey: nationalism and secularism**

The Turkish secularist model can be described as 'secularism with an Islamic flavour', to grasp the contradiction between the institution of a strict separation of religion and state and the actual preferential treatment for Sunni Islam. There is indeed a huge difference between the formal interpretation of the country's secular legislation and the informal practices by government officials, police officers and judges, which in fact are often discriminatory against Christians.<sup>8</sup>

Turkey is a secular state in name and to a certain extent this is true in practice, but various forms of persecution of non-Muslim minorities, including Christians, subsist. Turkish secularism is in fact anti-religious.<sup>9</sup> No chaplains are permitted in the Turkish Army and, until recently, headscarves were forbidden in universities and in public offices.

Legal restrictions, societal hostilities and nationalism are significant sources of persecution, causing human rights violations, such as hate crimes, unfair judicial treatments, discrimination and so on. People with a Muslim background who are interested in the gospel are often victims of strong discrimination by their families. In a society as strongly patriarchal as Turkey, conversion of a family member is considered to bring shame upon the entire family. Many converted Christians are disinherited or are disowned by their families. Muslims who convert to Christianity also risk losing their jobs. The government

---

<sup>8</sup> For examples, see Compass Direct News, 15 March 2011, 19 October 2010 and 28 May 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Oehring, 2008.

remains passive in the face of these types of discrimination that concern only a very small minority.

The country's nationalist ideology does not provide for the protection of minorities in practice. Nationalism has led not only to persecution of Christians, but also of other minorities such as the Alevi and Kurds. The Alevi are a minority branch of Islam that is considered 'deviant' by mainstream Islam. Approximately 15-20 million Turks (20-30% of the population) follow Alevism and are subject to persecution.

As Tozman<sup>10</sup> shows in his research, persecution of Kurds has almost always been at the expense of Christians. Tozman, quoting Yacoub, indicates that: "This particular form of nationalism pervades not only State institutions but society as a whole, and generally conveys a message that leaves no room for the Christian minorities."

According to Tozman:

Turkey's nationalism is an exclusive form of nationalism aiming at assimilation or marginalization, combined with severe suppression and discrimination. Neither the Lausanne minorities nor the other minorities were protected by the Turkish state and are even today still struggling to survive.... The main obstacle to an improvement in Turkey is the ultra-nationalistic attitude condemning everybody outside the 'main group' and perceiving them as threat to the integrity of the state. If Turkey does not start distancing herself from her current form of nationalism, any changes in law will continue to appear only on paper and not in reality.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note that there are significant differences between ethnic minorities and converted Muslim Background Believers (MBBs). It is generally considered that "to be a Turk is to be a Muslim". For this reason, Christians may be considered citizens, but never a

---

<sup>10</sup> Tozman, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Tozman, *ibid.*

Turk.<sup>12</sup> A person in Turkey who leaving Islam for Christianity is considered a disgrace to his/her family and risks honour killing, as was reported to Open Doors.

Threats against non-Muslims create an atmosphere of pressure and diminished freedom for other religions. In general, Christians face societal suspicion and mistrust, which is accentuated by the fact that Christians are often portrayed negatively in the national media. Some TV shows even encourage attacks on Christians<sup>13</sup>, as reported in 2012 by the Turkish Association of Protestant Churches<sup>14</sup>, which noted a “root of intolerance” in Turkish society toward adherents of non-Islamic faiths.

The judicial system defends religious freedom in name, but in practice, beliefs other than Sunni Islam are viewed with suspicion.<sup>15</sup> The Judiciary<sup>16</sup> is not always impartial and laws are sometimes applied in discriminatory ways.<sup>17</sup>

- The right to distribute religious propaganda is not always respected, despite the fact that the Turkish Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and even the right to distribute religious information which has no proven political motive.
- The secular system, which was designed to definitely obstruct the implementation of an Islamic theocracy, is being used for anti-secularist purposes by prosecutors, becoming discriminatory for non-Muslim religions.<sup>18</sup>
- Illegal detentions and intimidations (human rights violations) of religious minorities, tourists and expatriates are not uncommon.
- Christian evangelistic activities are sometimes criminalized.
- Judicial investigations against Christians, whether proven or not, are included on individuals security records', making them ineligible for government employment.

---

<sup>12</sup> For more information on the concept of Turkish nationality and citizenship, cf. Icduygu and Soner, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> *Compass Direct News*, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Association of Protestant Churches, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> United States Department of State, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of recent court cases against Christians, please refer to Middle East Concern, [www.meconcern.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=298:turkey-persecution-of-christians&catid=29:turkey&Itemid=9](http://www.meconcern.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=298:turkey-persecution-of-christians&catid=29:turkey&Itemid=9).

<sup>17</sup> Yildirim, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> For examples, refer to *Compass Direct News*, 2006.

The legal status of several Christian churches is not fully recognized: the only non-Muslim minorities that are formally recognized are the Armenians (Gregorian Orthodox, 60,000), the Greek Orthodox (3,500) and the Jews (25,000). For historical reasons Christian denominations such as the Syriac Orthodox (15,000) are not officially recognized but have the right to operate churches. Catholics (including Chaldean, Armenian, Greek and Syrian rites, 35,000), Bulgarian Orthodox (500) and Evangelical Protestants (3,000-3,500) do not receive formal recognition.<sup>19</sup>

Christian denominations are not permitted to establish universities or seminaries to train their leaders<sup>20</sup>, therefore religious communities outside the Sunni Islamic mainstream cannot legally train new clergy in the country for eventual leadership. Faith-based social institutions (schools, hospitals, orphanages) are under official control<sup>21</sup>.

Some Christian denominations have had difficulty in finding places to lease, buy or in which to meet.<sup>22</sup> In its 2011 International Religious Freedom report, the United States Department of State indicates that:

[S]ome religious groups reported difficulties opening, maintaining, and operating houses of worship. Under the law religious services may take place only in designated places of worship. Municipal codes mandated that only the government can designate a place of worship, and if a religion has no legal standing in the country, it cannot register a site. Non-Muslim religious services, especially for religious groups that did not own property recognized by the GDF [General Directorate of Foundations], often took

---

<sup>19</sup> The numbers used are estimations from Open Doors International Research and reflect the situation in 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Because the government requires all places of learning to be under the control of the Education Ministry, the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox chose not to train their clergy in the country.

<sup>21</sup> These limitations were one of the main reasons for the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom to categorize Turkey as a country of particular concern in its 2012 annual report, in which it criticizes Turkey for regulating non-Muslim groups by restricting how they can train clergy, offer education and own their places of worship.

<sup>22</sup> According to Compass Direct News (2009): “*More than half of the population of Muslim-majority Turkey opposes members of other religions holding meetings or publishing materials to explain their faith, according to a recently issued survey. Fully 59 percent of those surveyed said non-Muslims either ‘should not’ or ‘absolutely should not’ be allowed to hold open meetings where they can discuss their ideas. Fifty-four percent said non-Muslims either ‘should not’ or ‘absolutely should not’ be allowed to publish literature that describes their faith.*”

place on diplomatic property or in private apartments. While police and prosecutors did not attempt to prevent or prosecute such gatherings, landlords were hesitant to rent to groups without confirmation that they would not be harassed by the police.<sup>23</sup>

Religious affiliation is listed on national identity cards but citizens can choose not to include a religion on their identity cards. Turkey is one of the few Muslim majority countries that allow their citizens to change their religious affiliation on their ID cards<sup>24</sup>.

Although it is legal for citizens who convert from Islam to another religion to amend their religious identity on their national identification cards, local officials sometimes harass individuals who have converted from Islam to another religion when they try to do so. Some non-Muslims maintain that listing religious affiliation on the cards exposes them to discrimination and harassment. Muslims who convert to Christianity are victims of various forms of harassment by government institutions.<sup>25</sup>

Religious minorities are legally exempted from compulsory religious and moral instruction in primary and secondary schools. The Government has claimed that the compulsory instruction covers the range of world religions, but religious minorities<sup>26</sup> assert that the courses reflect Hanafi Sunni Islamic doctrine and that anti-missionary rhetoric remain in compulsory school textbooks. A few religious minorities, such as Protestants and Syriac Orthodox, have encountered difficulty in obtaining exemptions, particularly if their identification cards did not list a religion other than Islam.

Moreover, maintenance of historic religious buildings requires government approval, so religious properties can fall into government hands if specific conditions are not met, such as belonging to a recognized religious community and complying with a number of administrative requirements including zoning issues. The case of the Mor Gabriel

---

<sup>23</sup> United States Department of State, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Open Doors International World Watch List Unit.

<sup>25</sup> Oehring, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> This concern has been voiced on various occasions by all religious minorities in Turkey.



monastery<sup>27</sup> belonging to the Syrian Orthodox community is a clear example of this, however there are numerous other examples that could also be mentioned<sup>28</sup>.

Christians in Turkey also suffer from a number of social hostilities<sup>29</sup> from nationalist and secularist groups, inspired by misconceptions of the nature of the secular state, historical resentments or irrational fears of Christians. The intensity of these social hostilities, which range from various forms of discrimination and intolerance to the use of physical violence, varies throughout the country.

The printing and distribution of Bibles and Christian literature is permitted and a Bible translation in modern Turkish was produced in 2001. The missionary agency Operation Mobilization publicly offers a “Bible correspondence course” through the creation of a foundation that operates without restrictions.<sup>30</sup> Legally Christians are free to print and distribute Christian literature, but strong societal limits persist outside of the major cities.

Although religious speech and persuasion is legal, some Christians face various restrictions and occasional harassment for alleged proselytizing. Christians and their lawyers engaged in religious advocacy have occasionally been threatened or pressured by government and state officials. Proselytizing on behalf of non-Muslim religious groups is considered socially unacceptable and provocative, and at times dangerous.

Although some positive changes have been brought about at the national level, forms of discrimination may continue at local police stations or in smaller towns of Turkey. Hostility against Christians tends to be stronger in rural areas, according to reports from Open Doors.

In spite of these difficulties, the Church as a whole has grown over the past decades. The various Orthodox denominations have remained stable or have decreased in size, mostly due to immigration, but the Catholic and Protestant Turkish populations have grown.

---

<sup>27</sup> Omtzigt, 2012, and Compass Direct News, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> For more information on this trials of the Mor Gabriel monastery, see Oran's article in this book.

<sup>29</sup> According to the United States Department of State, *International Religious Freedom Report 2011*: “There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Threats against non-Muslims created an atmosphere of pressure and diminished freedom for some non-Muslim communities. Many Christians, Bahais, Jews, and Alevis faced societal suspicion and mistrust, and some elements of society continued to express anti-Semitic sentiments. Additionally persons wishing to convert from Islam sometimes experienced social harassment and violence from relatives and neighbors.”

<sup>30</sup> [www.bccturkey.org/](http://www.bccturkey.org/)

Convert Protestants have also increased in number from a few hundred in 1992 to 3,000-3,500 Evangelical Christians, whilst other denominations have remained stable.<sup>31</sup>

Church growth has stabilized now: “The Turkish Church has often been described as a church with a revolving door. It seems that many who came through the front door have left through the back door and therefore the faces in the church have changed but the number stayed the same,” says one missionary expatriate Christian living in Turkey.

## **2. The growing influence of Islam in Turkish society**

In addition to these nationalist and social hostilities, the growing influence of Islam in Turkish society has added to the persecution of Christians in the country. In order to properly understand the growing influence of Islam in Turkish society, it is important to bear in mind the following conceptual clarifications.

As the following sections make clear, there has undeniable been a revival of observant or conservative Islam over the last decade. Society as a whole has become more Islamic. Furthermore, without establishing a direct relation with the former, hate crimes against Christians have also increased. In some cases, these hate crimes can be linked to extremist Islamic movements, although the majority of cases are perpetrated by radical nationalist groups. Additionally, parallel to these major social trends, the governing AK party has progressively moved towards an Islamic agenda – political Islam.

### ***2.1. The revival of observant Islam***

Whilst traditionally persecution originated mainly in nationalism (equating Turkishness to being a Muslim), combined with a discriminatory form of secularism as described in the preceding section, some new trends can be perceived. Observant Islam is growing stronger in the country in spite of the country’s secular Constitution and tradition and it can be said that parts of the country are slowly Islamising.

The country’s landscape is changing rapidly. Significant numbers of mosques are being built, financed mostly through government funds. According to Forum 18, there are now

---

<sup>31</sup> Some reports indicate that the population of Catholics has also increased, but this could not be confirmed by independent sources.

about 85,000 mosques in Turkey. For comparison, in 2009, the Turkish government contributed 3,060,000 Turkish lira (the equivalent of 1,343,365 euros or 1,991,820 US Dollars) to 85 mosques for building expenses.<sup>32</sup>

The rise of conservative Islam in the country has added to the persecution of Christians in Turkey.<sup>33</sup> Police officers are present in some church services to protect churchgoers, but also to monitor the activities of Christians. This police protection began only after the deadly attacks against Christians in the past six years, following the heavily publicized Malatya murders.<sup>34</sup>

On the one hand, this police presence is positive because it is an indication that violence against Christians is a concern for the police. On the other hand, it is discomfoting that this police protection is needed and that Islamist and nationalist movements are repeatedly using violence against Christians. However, this protection is not generalized and many church properties are vandalized. Also, the presence of police officers in church services could also be seen as a form of control or surveillance of religious activities in the country.

“Despite some promising developments, Christians in Turkey continue to suffer attacks from private citizens, discrimination by lower-level government officials and vilification in both school textbooks and news media, according to a study by a Protestant group. In its 2012 annual Report on Human Rights Violations, released in January 2012, the country’s Association of Protestant Churches notes mixed indicators of improvement, but notes that there is a “root of intolerance” in Turkish society toward “adherents of non-Islamic faiths”.<sup>35</sup>

## ***2.2. Frequent hate crimes against Christians***

Hate crimes against Christians are commonplace. As noted in one of the two reports published by the Turkish Association of Protestant Churches in 2010, “Hate crimes

---

<sup>32</sup> Yildirim, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> According to the International Religious Freedom Report, 2011 from the United States Department of State: “Several Protestant pastors, some Protestant church legal advisors, and several Protestant churches across the country received heightened police protection due to threats. Some pastors reported receiving threatening telephone calls or messages during the reporting period.”

<sup>35</sup> Compass Direct News, 2012.

continued to be perpetrated against Christians in 2010 and there were various attacks carried out against Protestants and their churches”.<sup>36</sup> Religious meetings in homes are strongly discouraged in some parts of the country for fear of Muslim extremists. Church properties (including cemeteries) are frequently vandalized and are not always given protection by the police.

A military coup in 1980 put an end – temporarily – to an extended period of terrorism and violence by both far-left extremists and radical Islamic movements<sup>37</sup>, but extremist Islam seems to be resurging once again, albeit underground and illegally. There is clear evidence that Al Qaeda is recruiting Turks for its ranks abroad and perhaps domestically, as well.<sup>38</sup> In addition to Al Qaeda, Turkish Hezbollah is another illegal group that has been active since its founding in 1979 aiming at imposing a Turkish Islamic state similar to Iran.<sup>39</sup>

Extremist Islam has existed for decades, but has never been a mass movement and has so far been contained by the country’s military. In recent years, an increasing number of violent incidents by Islamic movements have been reported, some of which appear to be related to Al Qaeda and other Islamic groups. The planned attack on churches in Ankara and their clergy, the Turkish Parliament and the U.S. Embassy by 11 alleged Al Qaeda militants that was made public in December is the most recent illustration of this.<sup>40</sup>

Middle East Concern, a Christian human rights advocacy organization, counted 22 incidents – defined as any reported case of persecution of Christian, although not necessarily religiously motivated – in 2011, 22 in 2010, 14 in 2009 and 16 in 2008.

Between September 2011 and February 2013, the World Watch List Unit of Open Doors recorded the following incidents, based on media research only:

- A large-scale Al Qaeda plot to bomb “all of the churches in Ankara,” as well as the Turkish Parliament and U.S. Embassy in the Turkish capital (9 December 2011);

---

<sup>36</sup> Association of Protestant Churches (Turkey), Committee for Religious Freedom and Legal Affairs, 2010.

<sup>37</sup> For more information, refer to Laciner, 2007; Ozoren, 2004; and Levitsky, 2003.

<sup>38</sup> Rotella, 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Markus Tozman, *op. cit.*

<sup>40</sup> Compass Direct News, 2012.

- Officials from the Malatya Municipality demolished three buildings under construction in an Armenian Christian cemetery (2 February 2012).
- A child whose father was a Muslim religious leader who converted to Christianity, made a public profession of Christian faith at school. The child's classmates mocked him and spat upon him. When the boy threatened to inform the principal, a fellow student threatened to murder him if he did so. The boy's father went to talk to the father of the aggressor, who responded by threatening the convert's life. The Christian child began to be subjected to beatings with a stick, inflicted by the religion teacher at the school (17 February 2012).
- Christian clerics in Turkey express their anxiety regarding the growing threats they face in wake of an attack against Pastor Semih Serkek of the Protestant "Lütuf" ("Grace") Church (7 April 2012).
- The existence of the oldest functioning Christian monastery in the world is at risk after a ruling by Turkey's highest appeals court in Ankara. The court said the land which has been part of the monastery for 1600 years is not its property. The lawsuit also claimed that the sanctuary was built over the ruins of a mosque (12 July 2012).
- Police say they thwarted an assassination plot against a Christian pastor when they arrested 14 suspects, two of whom had been part of his congregation for more than a year (15 January 2013).
- Statues and Christian symbols are subjected to creaking by inspectors at Turkish airport (15 January 2013).
- A pastor's daughter who was exempted from religious culture and moral education courses in school was made to choose an elective course on Islamic religious education (16 January 2013).
- One person was arrested on charges of planning an attack on the İzmit Protestant Church to assassinate its pastor (15 January 2013).

- A Protestant church has been fined after authorities determined that its pastor had been working illegally when he applied for an indefinite visa despite having already served the parish for 10 years (16 February 2013).

Of course, not all of these hate crimes against Christians should be assigned to Islamic extremists, given the prevailing anti-Christian attitude in Turkish society. Extremist Islam does exist as an underground movement, but it is not a major challenge in Turkey. It is also important to underline that ultra-nationalists also often use Islam as a cover.

### ***2.3. The institutionalization of political Islam***

Perhaps the clearest expression of the growing influence of Islam in the country are the policies of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has been in power since 2002. The traditionally secular state, under constant protection by the national army, has in recent years become more permissive of public expressions of Islam under the Government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Abdullah Gül.

The ruling AK party, has – at least partially – an Islamist agenda. Although some analysts would disagree with this interpretation, the AKP Government should be evaluated based on its actions and rather than on its official discourse. Whether the AKP is simply being politically pragmatic – opportunistic – and whether this Islamist agenda is a moderate or a radical one is unclear, as clever strategists can be expected to conceal their intentions.

When looking at statements by Turkish officials, many cases of doublespeak can be found. On one occasion, Prime Minister Erdoğan stated that his goal was “to raise a religious generation”, but President Gül has also declared that Muslim countries should avoid politicizing Islam. Many statements by the government are also more cosmetic than substantial. For example, the official decree issued by the government in August 2011 regarding the possibility of religious minorities to reclaim their confiscated religious properties,<sup>41</sup> did not apply to all religious communities nor the majority of properties appropriated in recent decades.

---

<sup>41</sup> Compass Direct News, 2011.

The ruling AK party was founded in 2001, and by the 2002 general elections the party had already obtained a two-thirds majority in Congress. The AKP describes itself as a mainstream liberal-conservative party “with no religious axis,” but it is undeniable that its roots are in the Islamic tradition (the Islamist Virtue Party of which Gül was a prominent member, amongst others). Erdoğan himself was banned from his office as mayor of Istanbul and sentenced to prison in 1994 after an incident in which he read a pro-Islamist poem.

The AKP leaders may publicly deny their Islamist agenda and claim that the party has abandoned its Islamist roots, but the multiplication of issues contradicting the country's secularist tradition must not be overlooked. As one analyst consulted for this article declared, “to the AKP, Islam is more important than Kemalism”. Just three examples of this development are the changes in the country's foreign policy priorities, the legislation concerning minority foundations and the role that is played by the Diyanet (the presidency for religious affairs).

### ***Turkey's Islamist foreign policy turn***

Prime Minister Erdoğan is a charismatic leader, but his position and that of his party regarding the relation between Islam and the state is unclear. Some analysts say that the AKP promotes a moderate Islam, without renouncing the secular organization of the state and democratic values, but recent pro-Muslim shifts in Turkey's foreign policy indicate that the AKP is probably more Islamist than it confesses publicly.<sup>42</sup>

During its first years in government, it appeared as if the AKP had abandoned its Islamist roots. The AKP once had a pro-Western leaning (membership negotiations with the European Union, intensification of the cooperation with Israel and active collaboration with NATO); but recent developments seem to indicate a change in the country's foreign policy.<sup>43</sup>

The escalation of a diplomatic conflict with Israel leading to the withdrawal of the Turkish ambassador to the country (following the Gaza flotilla raid in which nine Turkish activists

---

<sup>42</sup> International Crisis Group, 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Cagaptay, 2012.

were killed<sup>44</sup>), the apparent loss of interest in EU membership and the *rapprochement* with Islamic nations such as Iran and the Palestinian Authority can be seen as elements of what could be an Arab-Muslim turn in Turkey's foreign policy.<sup>45</sup>

Turkey's role in the Middle East is something to monitor in the future. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolutions, it is likely that Turkey will seek to reinforce its leadership in the region and that the AKP will intensify its ties with Islamic parties. As the international think tank Stratfor writes in its 2012 forecast: "On the foreign policy front, Turkey will try to influence the rise of political Islamists, particularly in Egypt and Syria", noting however that, "Ankara's [domestic policy] constraints will prevent it from taking meaningful steps in that regard".<sup>46</sup> Erdogan's government is immensely popular mainly because of its very successful economic policy. The country's infrastructure and living conditions have considerably improved. Turkey is the fastest growing economy of Europe. Turkey's exports to Iran and the Arab world are rapidly becoming more important than exports to Europe, which is probably one of the underlying explanations of the country's pivotal turn in foreign policy.<sup>47</sup>

For many, the fact that the Government is pro-Islam and its policies have been economically beneficial for the country, this Islamist orientation is also seen as something positive, leading to a decreasing support for secularism and increasing support for (moderate) Islam, because previous secular governments were characterized by high levels of corruption and inflation.

#### *Law on Foundations*<sup>48</sup>

In Turkey, fiscal policies heavily affect religious minority foundations. Orhan Kemal Cengiz claims that the legislation regulating minority foundations, which are foundations set up for religious minorities to allocate funds or property for charitable purposes, is being used as a means to "routinely and systematically [deprive] these vulnerable groups of their

---

<sup>44</sup> Mitnick, 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Barkey, 2011.

<sup>46</sup> Stratfor, 2012.

<sup>47</sup> Cagaptay, 2012.

<sup>48</sup> For more information on this topic, see Onder's article in this book.



possessions and financial means”.<sup>49</sup> Though the foundations were introduced to curb and control Islamist movements that were regarded as a threat to the secular state, in the course of time, the system came to be used mainly against minorities.<sup>50</sup>

Since 1949, these foundations have been granted autonomy in their administration, after having been under the governance of the General Directorate of Foundations from 1936 onwards. However, since then these minority foundations have been subject to high taxes and faced bureaucratic and judicial obstacles to acquire property.

Starting in 1936, the Turkish government seized hundreds of lands and buildings owned by its Greek, Armenian, Syriac and Jewish communities.<sup>51</sup> As a result, several foundations ceased to exist, because many of them had relied heavily on revenues earned from leasing out their properties.<sup>52</sup> In 2002, within the context of Turkey’s EU membership negotiations, the Law of Foundations was amended to allow minority foundations to acquire real estate with the permission of the responsible government department, overturning a ruling in 1974 that prohibited non-Muslim communities from acquiring new property. But once again, huge bureaucratic burdens and non-compliance by civil servants impeded a palpable improvement in the situation.

Moreover, these amendments did not resolve the issue of the historic religious properties that had been confiscated by the government after 1936. As a result of pressures from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), recent developments involving this issues appear to be positive. In August 2011, *Compass Direct News* reported that:

The Turkish government made a historic U-turn in state policy ... issuing an official decree inviting Turkey’s Christian and Jewish communities to reclaim their long-confiscated religious properties.... The landmark decree is a significant step toward eliminating decades of unfair practices imposed by the Turkish state against its non-Muslim citizens.

---

<sup>49</sup> Cengiz, 2010.

<sup>50</sup> Cengiz, 2003.

<sup>51</sup> Compass Direct News, 2011.

<sup>52</sup> Icdygu, A., Toktas, S. & Soner, A., 2008.

Orhan Kemal Cengiz, however, warns that “appearances might be deadly deceiving in Turkey”.<sup>53</sup> The international community should monitor the implementation of this decree closely. The scope of this decree is limited to the recognized religious minorities in Turkey only. Beyond that, a similar law had already been adapted in 2008, in which the recognized minorities were also permitted to claim their property confiscated from 1974 onwards. Of the several thousand claims submitted to date, only a tiny fraction has been returned. The majority of the requests were declined with the most arbitrary rulings by judges and by civil servants who simply did not adhere to the government’s decrees.<sup>54</sup>

*The Diyanet (presidency for religious affairs)*

It would be premature to state that Turkey is becoming an Islamic state in disguise. Support for the secular state is still very strong in the country. However, the military, long a powerbroker in its role as watchdog of the secular state, has in the past year been subjected to civilian government controls.

Islam is more visible in society, as it becomes ‘politically correct’ for women to wear headscarves and people of influence to attend Friday prayers. Until recently, women attending university or in public office were not permitted to wear a headscarf. This principle has been effectively challenged by both the President and the Prime Minister, both of whose wives wear headscarves.

The Turkish state was founded on the basis that the state must control religion and carefully monitor religious groups for what it considers ‘extremist messages’. However, only Sunni Islam is being protected. Shi’a muslims and Alevis are discriminated against in a way similar to the Christian minorities.

Through the Diyanet, which is the Presidency for Religious Affairs and is funded by a separate tax, the government exerts control over religious activities: imams are appointed and paid by the Department of Religious Affairs (under the responsibility of the Prime Minister) and mosques are maintained with government funds. In fact, the government

---

<sup>53</sup> Orhan Kemal Cengiz, *idem*.

<sup>54</sup> *Welt Online*, 2008, and Yacoub, 2004.

actively supports the building of mosques and schools as part of its agenda to promote Islam in the country.

As Mine Yildirim writes:

The Diyanet is a massive organization with a broad mandate, large budget and vast sphere of influence. Under Law no. 633 of 1965 (“The Presidency of Religious Affairs, Its Establishment and Obligations”), its mandate is to operate affairs related to the belief, worship and moral principles of the Islamic Religion, enlighten the public about religious issues and to administer places of worship (mosques and mescit). Operating under the Prime Minister's Office and with a president appointed by the Prime Minister, the Diyanet has five main departments; the Higher Committee for Religious Affairs, an advisory council; Education, including Koran courses for children and adults; Religious Services, including services for families, discipleship, mosque services and social and cultural services with a religious content; and Publications and Public Relations. Domestic activities are carried out via muftis and religious personnel all over Turkey. Activities carried out abroad are conducted by Diyanet religious counsellors, diplomatic attachés and other personnel, with 1,350 people in 81 countries.<sup>55</sup>

In the same article, Yildirim notes that:

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, the number of Diyanet personnel has increased from 74,000 to 117,541. During this period, 2,000 Diyanet personnel have moved to positions in other state departments. Currently its budget is about 2,500,000,000 Turkish lira (1,097,538,190 euros or 1,626,694,770 US dollars). This is a larger budget than some full government ministries.

Yildirim also notes that:

---

<sup>55</sup> Yildirim, 2011.

As part of the state the Diyanet plays an active role in influencing the extent to which freedom of religion or belief can be enjoyed in Turkey. One example is that the state accords a de facto authoritative status to formal Opinions from the Diyanet on religious or belief communities outside the Diyanet's structure.

As the United States Department of State claimed:

Members of recognized non-Muslim religious communities were exempted legally from compulsory religious and moral instruction in primary and secondary schools but in practice faced difficulty obtaining exemptions from the compulsory instruction, particularly if their identification cards did not list a religion other than Islam. The government claimed the compulsory instruction covered the range of world religions, but religious groups asserted that the courses reflect Hanafi Sunni Islamic doctrine.<sup>56</sup>

Religious education in fourth grade should provide an introduction to various faiths, but most of the time is spent teaching Islam. As reported by the Turkish Association of Protestant Churches, the presentation of Christian faith is highly negative, presenting the Bible as a falsified document. This organization finds that some text books encourage discrimination of the country's small Christian community, despite growing international concern over increasing violence against non-Muslims in Turkey.

### **3. Future outlook of Christian persecution in Turkey**

It is important to underscore that the traditional persecution sources – secularism and nationalism – that were described in the first section of this article, are still the main sources of persecution today. The ongoing, rising anti-Christian mindset triggering violence in the recent years is rooted mainly in very ingrained nationalism which is deliberately exploiting Islam. The influence of conservative Islam in Turkey should not be ignored or underestimated, but should not be exaggerated either. Political Islam is a trend that still is in an early stage but that could develop more negatively in the future.

---

<sup>56</sup> United States Department of State, op. cit.

Understanding the general tendencies regarding religious freedom in Turkey is extremely complex. Government restrictions, social hostilities and nationalism are indeed important sources of persecution, causing severe human rights violations, such as hate crimes, unfair judicial treatments, discrimination and so on, and observant Islam is increasing.

Not all is negative, though. Following lengthy legal battles, some churches are now registered and have authorizations to organize church services or the renting of a meeting place. Other churches do not have these authorizations, but are not hindered by government in doing so.<sup>57</sup> For the first time in fifty years, a Christian Assyrian won a seat in the Turkish Parliament in the 2011 elections.

When Turkey was still actively negotiating its membership of the EU,<sup>58</sup> the country adopted a series of reforms to comply with the Copenhagen criteria, which contributed to increased religious tolerance in the country and protection for minorities. The government was determined to prevent incidents similar to the Malatya murders in 2007, which badly affected its image.

However, this process of reform, considered too slow and insufficient by many European observers, has now been halted. Enthusiasm in Turkey for EU membership has dropped from 2/3 of the population a decade ago to 1/3 today.

The needed reforms were not completed and whilst some improvements can be seen, the country did not succeed in eliminating the various forms of discrimination against Christians completely. Moreover, as Markus Tozman analyzes, after EU negotiations

---

<sup>57</sup> In the words of Association of the Protestant Churches (Turkey), “The only way the Protestant Community can obtain legal personality is by establishing a foundation or association. Now that it is possible for churches to establish associations, gradually more and more churches are doing so. Although a small number of churches that have established an association have had a positive experience, some negative observations have also been made: many other types of associations exist for years without government inspection but Christian associations are inspected within their first year of existence. This is taken as an indication that the government views Protestants with suspicion and wants to keep them under government control. Furthermore, administrative practices are so inconsistent as to prove chaotic. Virtually every church has experienced a different set of procedures. In experience the procedures followed by the police and civil authorities have been far from predictable, transparent or consistent. Civil servants are permitted to use excessive personal discretion and they use this to restrict the religious freedom of Protestants. The Protestant Community’s basic desire is that their existing congregations be recognized by the government as religious congregations and that a legal structure be created that all can understand and apply. It is believed that having legal personality will lead to acceptance in the society and significantly aid in efforts to solve other related problems”.

<sup>58</sup> Negotiations about the membership of the European Union of Turkey have effectively stopped, although officially they are still open.

started, “open discrimination against Christians, too, decreased – but instead, subtle discrimination takes place, today”.

It seems as though Turkey is taking steps backwards and steps forward at the same time as far as religious freedom is concerned. In particular there remains a constitutional vacuum concerning Christian churches, since only the Armenian and Greek Orthodox denominations are recognized. A new Constitution, which initially was to be written by the end of 2012 but is still being drafted because of lacking parliamentary consensus, could have a positive outcome for the Christian minorities in the country, but could also be used by the AKP to further implement their Islamist agenda.<sup>59</sup>

Summarizing the situation of religious freedom in Turkey, an expatriate Christian who formerly lived in Turkey says, “In Turkey, there is freedom of religion but Christians are not given any space to exert this right”. The legal and constitutional protection of nationalism, together with the principle of indivisibility of the nation and the people and the deeply engrained nationalism in Turkish culture, have been the main sources of persecution of Christians in the country. The rise of violent incidents against Christians in recent years were in almost all cases perpetrated by nationalists.

The tension between secularism and (moderate) Islam at the political level, also contributes to an identity crisis at the individual level. Most Turks are nominal Muslims and are searching for their identity. Less than 33% of the Muslims in the country would be adhering to the five pillars of their faith. The rest are nominal Muslims living secular lives. Considering that 50% of the Turkish population is younger than 25 years of age, it is clear that most of these young people are not devout Muslims. Many Turks are very curious about Christianity and ask expatriate Christians many questions, giving them hope for a revival in Turkey. But the (recent) rise of extremist Islam can also be interpreted as a consequence of this identity crisis.

Since the AKP is in power, the situation in the country is rapidly changing. To some extent, it might be a positive change that Kemalism – nationalism – is promoted less under the AKP Government than under the previous secular governments. However, political Islam

---

<sup>59</sup> For more information on the constitution drafting process, see Onder's article in this book.

as a substitute for radical nationalism can hardly be seen as an element that will improve the situation of Christian minorities.

## References

Association of Protestant Churches (Turkey), Committee for Religious Freedom and Legal Affairs, *Report on Human Rights Violations 2010*.

Association of Protestant Churches (Turkey), Committee for Religious Freedom and Legal Affairs, *A Threat” or under Threat? Legal and social problems of Protestants in Turkey, 2010*.

Barkey, Henri J., “Turkish Foreign Policy and the Middle East”, in *CERI Strategy Papers*, No. 10, 6 June 2011.

Cagaptay, Soner, “Turkey’s post-EU world”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 28 February 2012. Available at: [www.cagaptay.com/11266/turkey-post-eu-world](http://www.cagaptay.com/11266/turkey-post-eu-world).

Cagaptay, Soner, “Turkey’s Foreign Policy Pivot”, *Los Angeles Times*, 21 March 2012. Available at: [www.cagaptay.com/11403/turkey-foreign-policy-pivot](http://www.cagaptay.com/11403/turkey-foreign-policy-pivot).

Cengiz, Orhan Kemal, Transcript of an oral presentation for the working-level meeting of foreign embassies organized by the Dutch Embassy in Ankara, 4 April 2003.

Cengiz, Orhan Kemal, “Minority foundations in Turkey: From past to future”, in *Today’s Zaman*, 6 June 2010.

*Compass Direct News*, “Media Bias Fans Anti-Christian Sentiment”, 17 March 2006.

*Compass Direct News*, “Converts Subjected to Official Harassment”, 3 July 2006.

*Compass Direct News*, “More than Half in Turkey Oppose Non-Muslim Religious Meetings”, 4 December 2009.

*Compass Direct News*, “Trial over ‘Insulting Turkishness’ Again Yields No Evidence”, 28 May 2010.

*Compass Direct News*, “Christians in Turkey Acquitted of ‘Insulting Turkishness’”, 19 October 2010.

*Compass Direct News*, “Christians in Turkey Face Harassment; Murder Trial Stalls”, 15 March 2011.

*Compass Direct News*, “Turkey Overturns Historic Religious Property Seizures”, 30 August 2011.

*Compass Direct News*, “Al Qaeda Cell in Turkey Accused of Planning to Bomb Churches”, 9 December 2011.

*Compass Direct News*, “Ancient Monastery Threatened”, 22 January 2012.

*Compass Direct News*, “Turkish Christians Subject to Discrimination, Attacks, Report Says”, 14 February 2012.

Icduygu, A., & Soner, A., “Turkish Minority Rights Regime: Between Difference and Equality”, in *Middle Eastern Studies*, 42 (3) (2006), pp. 447-468.

Icduygu, A., Toktas, S. & Soner, A., “The politics of population in a nation-building process: Emigration of non-Muslims from Turkey”, in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 31 (2) (2008), pp. 358-389.

International Crisis Group, “Turkey and the Middle East: Ambitions and Constraints”, 7 April 2010. Available at:  
[www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/turkey-cyprus/turkey/203-turkey-and-the-middle-east-ambitions-and-constraints.aspx](http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/turkey-cyprus/turkey/203-turkey-and-the-middle-east-ambitions-and-constraints.aspx).

Laciner, Sedat, “Combat against Religionist Terrorism in Turkey: Al Qaeda and Turkish Hezbollah Cases”, in *Turkish Weekly*, 2 April 2007.

Levitsky, Olga, “In the Spotlight: Turkish Hezbollah”. Center for Defense Information 2003.

Middle East Concern, “Turkey: Persecution of Christians. Information from Annual Survey for 2010”. Available at:  
[www.meconcern.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=298:turkey-persecution-of-christians&catid=29:turkey&Itemid=9](http://www.meconcern.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=298:turkey-persecution-of-christians&catid=29:turkey&Itemid=9).

Mitnick, Joshua, “Flotilla Assault Off Gaza Spurs Crisis”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 June 2010.

Oehring, Otmar, “Turkish nationalism, Ergenekon, and denial of religious freedom” in *Forum* 18, 21 October 2008.

Oehring, Otmar, “Religious freedom survey, November 2009”, in *Forum* 18, 27 November 2009.

Omtzigt, Pieter, “Initiatiefnota: De zorgwekkende situatie van het Mor Gabriel Klooster een de Aramees sprekende Christenen in Turkije - De ‘Süryoye’”, 8 March 2012. Available at:  
[www.cda.nl/Upload/Omtzigt/Initiatief\\_Nota\\_Mor\\_Gabriel\\_Pieter\\_Omtzigt.pdf](http://www.cda.nl/Upload/Omtzigt/Initiatief_Nota_Mor_Gabriel_Pieter_Omtzigt.pdf).



- Ozoren, Suleyman, "Turkish Hizballah: A Case Study of Radical Terrorism", in *Turkish Weekly*, 1 December 2004.
- Rotella, Sebastian, "Turks increasingly turn to Islamic extremism", *Los Angeles Times*, 28 June 2009. Available at:  
[www.articles.latimes.com/2009/jun/28/world/fg-turk-terror28](http://www.articles.latimes.com/2009/jun/28/world/fg-turk-terror28).
- Strategic Forecasting Inc. (Stratfor), *Annual Forecast 2012*. Available at:  
[www.stratfor.com/forecast/annual-forecast-2012](http://www.stratfor.com/forecast/annual-forecast-2012).
- Tozman, Markus, "Turkey for the Turks: Syrian Orthodox Arameans in Southeast Anatolia", BA Paper II, Maastricht University, 2011.
- United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2012*.
- United States Department of State, *International Religious Freedom Report*, 2011
- Welt Online*, "Vorladung für Jesus Christus", 21 February 2008. Available at:  
[www.welt.de/politik/article1706413/Vorladung-fuer-Jesus-Christus.html](http://www.welt.de/politik/article1706413/Vorladung-fuer-Jesus-Christus.html).
- Yacoub, Jospheh, "Minorities and Religions in Europe. Case Study: The Assyro-Chaldeans of Turkey", in *European Yearbook of Minority Issues*, 4 (5) (2004), p. 29-4.
- Yildrim, Mine, "The Diyanet: The elephant in Turkey's religious freedom room?", *Forum* 18, 4 May 2011.
- Yildrim, Mine, "Denigrating religious values: A way to silence critics of religion?", in *Forum* 18, 15 February 2012.