

CYPRUS 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Since 1974, the southern part of Cyprus has been under the control of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus. The northern part, administered by Turkish Cypriots, proclaimed itself the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”) in 1983. The United States does not recognize the “TRNC,” nor does any country other than Turkey. A substantial number of Turkish troops remain on the island. A “green line,” or buffer zone (which is over 110 miles long and several miles wide in places) patrolled by the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), separates the two parts. This report is divided into two parts: the Republic of Cyprus and the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. For areas in the north that have different Greek and Turkish names, both are listed (e.g., Kormakitis/Korucam).

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 sites of worship and property Muslims have donated, as a charitable endowment. According to press reports, on September 6, the headmaster of a public secondary school instructed a Muslim student wearing a headscarf to leave the school and return only after removing it. Then minister of education Kostas Champiaouris ordered an investigation of the case and transferred the headmaster from the school. Two of the eight functioning mosques under the guardianship of the Ministry of Interior continued to lack bathroom and ablution facilities. The Department of Antiquities continued to limit access to Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque to only two of the five daily prayers, although it routinely granted expanded access during Ramadan and at the request of the imam. The imam of Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque said Department of Antiquities security guards refused to let some non-Muslim tourists attend Friday prayers, despite the imam having invited them to attend. The government continued to allow non-Cypriot nationals living in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots to travel to Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque for pilgrimages during Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Mawlid al-Nabi. The Jewish community reported authorities continued to conduct autopsies in nonsuspicious deaths, against the community’s wishes, and the community continued to face

difficulties obtaining government permission to perform animal slaughter for food production according to Jewish law.

The Jewish community continued to report isolated instances of anti-Semitic verbal harassment. The nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) Caritas and Action for Equality, Support, Antiracism (KISA) reported cases in which private employers refused to hire women who wore hijabs. According to Caritas, Muslim students faced less discrimination than in previous years. Some religious minority groups continued to report societal pressure to engage in public Greek Orthodox religious ceremonies. Greek Orthodox Christians reported they sometimes faced ostracism from that community if they converted to another religion. In September a European Commission study found that 48 percent of respondents believed discrimination on the basis of religion or belief was widespread in the country. In January the European Commission (EC) published a Special Eurobarometer survey indicating 73 percent of residents believed anti-Semitism was not a problem. Leaders of the main religious groups continued to meet under the framework of the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process (RTCYPP) – an initiative of the Swedish embassy – and advocate for greater religious freedom for faith communities across the island.

U.S. embassy representatives continued to meet frequently with government officials to discuss issues including access to religious sites on either side of the “green line” dividing the country. The Ambassador met with many religious leaders to discuss religious freedom restrictions, access to religious sites, and interfaith cooperation. On September 3, the Ambassador hosted a reception for Salpy Eskidjian Weiderud, RTCYPP Executive Coordinator, to encourage continued cooperation among the faith communities and with government authorities to expand religious freedom on the island. Embassy staff met with NGOs and religious leaders to discuss topics including access to religious sites island-wide and discrimination against minority religious groups. Embassy officials also visited places of religious significance on both sides of the “green line” and encouraged continued dialogue and cooperation among religious leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population of the island at 1.3 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2011 census, the population of the government-controlled area is 840,000. Of that total, 89.1 percent is Orthodox Christian and 1.8 percent is Muslim. Other religious groups include Roman Catholics, known as Latins (2.9 percent), Protestants (2 percent), Buddhists (1

percent), Maronite Catholics (0.5 percent), and Armenian Orthodox (0.3 percent), with small populations of Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Baha'is. The country's chief rabbi estimates the number of Jews at 4,500, most of whom are foreign-born residents in the country. A Jehovah's Witnesses representative estimates the group has 2,600 members. Recent immigrants and migrant workers are predominantly Roman Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist.

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

The constitution sets guidelines for the Vakf, which is tax exempt and has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with its laws and principles. According to the constitution, no legislative, executive, or other act may contravene or interfere with the Church of Cyprus or the Vakf. The Vakf, which acts as caretaker of religious properties in the Turkish Cypriot community, operates only in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. The government administers and provides financial support for the physical maintenance of mosques in government-controlled areas.

In addition to the Church of Cyprus and Islam, the constitution recognizes three other religious groups: Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, and Latins (Roman Catholics). Their institutions are tax exempt and eligible for government subsidies for cultural and educational matters, including to cover costs to operate

their own schools, for school fees of group members attending private schools, and for activities to preserve their cultural identity.

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

The government has formal processes by which religious groups may apply to use restored religious heritage sites for religious purposes.

According to a public school regulation, students are not allowed to cover their heads in school; however, the regulation explicitly states that the regulation should be implemented without discriminating against a student's religion, race, color, gender, or any political or other convictions of the student or the parents.

The law requires animals to be stunned before slaughter.

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

The ombudsman is an independent state institution responsible for protecting citizens' rights and human rights in general. The ombudsman may investigate complaints made against any public service or official for actions that violate human rights, including freedom of religion, or contravene the laws or rules of proper administration. The ombudsman makes recommendations to correct wrongdoings but cannot enforce them.

Conscientious objectors on religious grounds are exempt from active military duty and from reservist service in the National Guard but must complete alternative service. The two options available for conscientious objectors are 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 alternative service is up to three years' imprisonment, a fine of up to 6,000 euros (\$6,700), or both. Those who refuse both military and alternative service, even if objecting on religious grounds, are considered to have committed an offense involving dishonesty or moral turpitude and are disqualified from holding elected public office and ineligible for permits to provide private security services.

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

Government Practices

On September 6, local press reported Apostolos Varnavas Lyceum Headmaster Loizos Sepos instructed a Muslim student wearing a headscarf to leave the school and only return after removing it. The headmaster subsequently told the student's father that MOE regulations did not allow students to cover their heads, according to press reports. Then minister of education Champiaouris ordered an investigation of the incident, which was concluded by September 18. The MOE did not publicize the results of the investigation and announced on September 18 it would handle the issues arising from the investigation in accordance with the law. The minister met with the student, her father, and the headmaster on September 7. In response to continued criticism from students of the school, the MOE announced on September 8 it would transfer the headmaster to the State Institutes of Further Education.

In August the Department of Antiquities closed the Limassol Great Mosque for restoration without previously informing the Muslim community of the nature of or timeline for the restoration, according to Imam Shakir Alemdar, Representative of the Mufti in Cyprus. The representative sent a letter to the Ministry of Interior (MOI), which had not responded by year's end.

Muslim community leaders stated the government continued to allow the community access for religious services to only six of 19 mosques located on cultural heritage sites, as well as to two other mosques not located on such sites. Of the eight functioning mosques, seven were available for all five daily prayers,

and six had the necessary facilities for ablutions. The government again failed to respond to the Muslim community's long-standing 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. Bayraktar and Dhali Mosques had no ablution facilities and no bathrooms. The government installed temporary bathrooms at Bayraktar Mosque and Dhali Mosque during Ramadan. In 2018 the MOI determined ablution and bathroom facilities for Dhali Mosque could not be installed at the local imam's house across the street from the mosque due to structural issues. During the year, the MOI said installing facilities remained difficult due to limited space near the mosque; however, it said it planned to identify a suitable location and develop new plans.

The Department of Antiquities of the Ministry of Communications and Works provided bathroom facilities approximately 330 feet from Bayraktar Mosque. In October the Department of Antiquities said it was studying the placement of ablution facilities near Bayraktar Mosque. It said any new additions must be carefully placed because the mosque was part of the medieval Venetian wall of the city, an officially recognized ancient monument.

Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque, the most important Islamic religious site in the country, continued to be the only one of the eight functioning mosques not open for all five daily prayers. The Department of Antiquities continued to limit normal access to the mosque to two of the five daily prayer times during most of the year. The Department of Antiquities reported it kept the mosque open 24 hours daily during Ramadan. According to the Department of Antiquities and the mosque's imam, the imam still had to ask permission of the MOI and Department of Antiquities to keep the mosque open after 5 p.m. in the autumn/winter months, and after 7:30 p.m. in the spring/summer months; the imam said the authorities routinely granted permission.

In October the imam of Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque said Department of Antiquities security guards stationed at the complex refused to let some non-Muslim tourists attend Friday prayers, despite the imam having invited them to attend. He also said visiting Department of Antiquities staff refused to wear appropriate clothing when entering the complex and security guards sometimes allowed visitors to enter the mosque wearing shoes. He said he spoke with the Head of the Antiquities Department but did not reach agreement on these issues by year's end.

According to the RTCYPP, the Muslim community, Republic of Cyprus authorities, local press, and the UNFICYP, the government continued to waive visa requirements for the movement of non-Turkish Cypriot pilgrims south across the “green line” to visit Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque to conduct prayers and services on special occasions. To cross the “green line” without identification checks to visit religious sites, Turkish Cypriots and foreign nationals residing in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots were still required to submit requests to UNFICYP, which then facilitated the approval process with the government.

According to the RTCYPP and local press, on June 6, 600 pilgrims, primarily of Turkish origin, crossed from the area under Turkish Cypriot administration to attend a special service led by Mufti of Cyprus Talip Atalay at Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque for Eid al-Fitr (compared with 884 in 2018). On August 13, police again escorted approximately 305 Turkish Cypriots, Turks, and other foreign nationals to Hala Sultan Tekke for prayers on Eid al-Adha (compared to 300 in 2018). On November 11, 415 pilgrims crossed into the government-controlled area to attend prayers at Hala Sultan Tekke on Mawlid al-Nabi (compared to 655 in 2018). A Muslim community representative said the government did not impose any new restrictions on those who could cross for the pilgrimages.

On January 25, UNFICYP facilitated the visit of 28 Turkish Cypriots to Deneia village inside the buffer zone for the first prayer service at Deneia Mosque since 1963. After the service, Deneia community leader Christakis Panayiotou held a welcome reception for the Turkish Cypriots.

Representatives of the Jewish community again reported authorities continued to perform autopsies on deceased members of the community for deaths that were not suspicious, a practice they said violated Jewish religious beliefs. They stated that, despite continuing to raise the issue with government authorities, it remained unresolved.

Jewish representatives said local Department of Veterinary Services officials continued to deny exemptions from the requirement to stun animals before slaughter, despite granting exemptions in previous years. A Department of Veterinary Services official said the department no longer granted exemptions for religious slaughter. The Jewish community reported they were able to import kosher meat from other European Union (EU) countries at a significantly higher cost than if it were locally available.

Jewish representatives said the government continued not to respond to their long-standing request to grant the Chief Rabbinate of Cyprus the right to officiate (sign as an authorized individual) documents, including marriage, death, and divorce certificates.

A Jehovah's Witnesses representative said the Jehovah's Witnesses were not allowed to bury their adherents in some municipal cemeteries, which were often managed by local Greek Orthodox churches. After the community wrote a letter to the Ministry of Interior, Larnaca Municipality responded it had designated a place within the municipal cemetery for non-Greek Orthodox groups to bury their followers.

Representative of the Mufti of Cyprus Imam Alemdar said the Larnaca Turkish cemetery was completely full. He sent a letter to the MOI requesting that a Vakf property near Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque be made available as a cemetery. The MOI had not responded by year's end.

In June the Cyprus Humanists Association said a school in Famagusta District presented a student with an award donated by a local business that was conditional on the student being an Orthodox Christian. The association said public schools previously presented similar awards conditional on the students being Greek Orthodox. It called on the Ministry of Education, the ombudsman, and Commissioner for the Rights of the Child Leda Koursoumba to prevent discrimination and maintain the secular character of public schools. The commissioner's office said as of year's end it had not received any formal complaints.

The military continued to require recruits to take part in a common prayer led by Church of Cyprus clergy during swearing-in ceremonies. Recruits of other faiths, atheists, and those who did not wish to take the oath for reasons of conscience could refrain from raising their hand during the ceremony. They instead recited 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 instances of anti-Semitic verbal harassment on the street.

Caritas reported discrimination against Muslim children in schools declined compared with previous years. Caritas reported increased diversity awareness and language training during the year generally improved behavior towards non-native Muslim students.

Caritas and KISA said women wearing hijabs often faced difficulties finding employment. According to Caritas, in August a Somali woman was refused employment in a hotel because she was wearing a hijab. The prospective employer wrote in the applicant's rejection letter that "the covering of her face with a scarf is a problem." The woman filed a complaint with the ombudsman that was under review at year's end.

Members of minority religious groups continued to report societal pressures to participate in public religious ceremonies of majority groups. For example, children of various religious minorities said they faced social pressure to attend Greek Orthodox religious ceremonies at school. An Armenian Orthodox representative said community members who married Greek Orthodox received pressure from family members to have a Greek Orthodox wedding and follow Greek Orthodox rituals. Similarly, Armenian Orthodox army recruits reportedly felt peer pressure to take the oath administered by a Greek Orthodox priest.

Some Greek Orthodox adherents who converted to other faiths reportedly continued to hide their conversion from family and friends due to fear of social ostracism.

In May the EC carried out a study in each EU-member state on perceptions of discrimination and published the results in September. According to the findings, 48 percent of respondents believed discrimination on the basis of religion or belief was widespread in Cyprus, while 48 percent said it was rare; 58 percent would be comfortable with having a person of a different religion than the majority of the population occupy the highest elected political position in the country. In addition, 98 percent said they would be comfortable working closely with a Christian, 81 percent said they would be with an atheist, 84 percent with a Jew, 78 percent with a Muslim, and 81 percent with a Buddhist. Asked how they would feel if their child were in a "love relationship" with an individual belonging to various groups, 98 percent said they would be comfortable if the partner were Christian, 52 percent if atheist, 52 percent if Jewish, 48 percent if Buddhist, and 40 percent if Muslim.

In January the EC published a Special Eurobarometer survey of perceptions of anti-Semitism based on interviews it conducted in December 2018 in each EU member state. According to the survey, 73 percent of residents believed anti-Semitism was not a problem in Cyprus, and 47 percent believed it had stayed the same over the previous five years. The percentage who believed that anti-Semitism was a problem in nine different categories was as follows: Holocaust denial, 26 percent; on the internet, 23 percent; anti-Semitic graffiti or vandalism, 18 percent; expression of hostility or threats against Jews in public places, 19 percent; desecration of Jewish cemeteries, 20 percent; physical attacks against Jews, 18 percent; anti-Semitism in schools and universities, 19 percent; anti-Semitism in political life, 18 percent; and anti-Semitism in the media, 21 percent.

On June 22, the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage (TCCH), one of the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot technical committees established as part of the UN-facilitated settlement negotiations process, organized an inauguration ceremony to mark the completed restoration of Camii-Kebir Mosque in the city of Paphos. The mosque is classified as an ancient monument, and it did not function as an active mosque after restoration.

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 within the framework of the RTCYPP. On March 19, the leaders of the Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Armenian, Maronite, and Roman Catholic religious groups visited the collapsed Saint James Church in the buffer zone in Nicosia. They called for restoration of Saint James Church without delay, as well as for the restoration of Saint George Church, also located in the buffer zone in Nicosia.

On March 15, the religious leaders of the five groups recognized by the constitution jointly condemned the terrorist attacks at two mosques in New Zealand. On April 21, Mufti of Cyprus Atalay issued a statement condemning the terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka targeting Christians on Easter Sunday.

On June 4, Christian religious leaders under the framework of the RTCYPP issued a joint greeting for the Mufti of Cyprus and all the Muslim faithful wishing them a blessed Eid al-Fitr.

A joint project of religious leaders through the RTCYPP offering Greek and Turkish language classes for members of the Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Armenian Orthodox, Maronite, and Roman Catholic communities continued; participants included priests, imams, nuns, and laypersons who worked for faith-based

organizations. On May 9, language class participants attended an iftar at Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives continued to meet frequently with government officials from the Ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Justice, as well as the Department of Antiquities, to discuss religious freedom issues, including encouraging greater access to religious sites on either side of the “green line” and discrimination against minority religious communities.

The Ambassador discussed restrictions on access to religious sites and interfaith cooperation with many religious leaders, including the Archbishop of the Church of Cyprus, the Archbishop of the Maronite Church of Cyprus, the Archbishop of the Armenian Orthodox Church of Cyprus, and the Apostolic Nuncio. The Ambassador visited Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque and discussed the mosque’s limited hours of operation and the condition of Larnaca Turkish Cemetery with the resident imam. She also visited the Jewish Community Center in Larnaca and discussed religious freedom and religious-based discrimination with the Chief Rabbi of Cyprus. The Ambassador discussed with the Swedish ambassador ways to promote religious freedom on the island and to support the efforts of the RTCYPP to encourage cooperation among religious leaders. On September 3, the Ambassador hosted a reception to honor RTCYPP Executive Coordinator Salpy Eskidjian Weiderud, a recipient of the Secretary of State’s 2019 International Religious Freedom Award, and to encourage continued cooperation among the faith communities and with government authorities to expand religious freedom on the island.

Embassy staff continued to discuss religious freedom issues, including religious-based discrimination, with NGOs Caritas and KISA. They engaged representatives of the Anglican, Armenian Orthodox, Baha’i, Buddhist, Evangelical, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jewish, Maronite, Muslim, and Roman Catholic communities to hear their concerns about access to and the condition of religious sites and cemeteries, incidents of religious-based harassment and discrimination, societal attitudes toward minority religions, and obstacles to religious freedom. Embassy officials supported religious leaders’ continuing dialogue within the RTCYPP and encouraged continuing reciprocal visits of religious leaders to places of worship on both sides of the “green line.”

THE AREA ADMINISTERED BY TURKISH CYPRIOTS

Executive Summary

The Turkish Cypriot “constitution” refers to the “state” as secular and provides for freedom of religious faith and worship consistent with public order and morals. It prohibits forced participation in worship and religious services and stipulates religious education may be conducted only under “state” supervision. The “constitution” grants the Vakf the exclusive right to regulate its internal affairs. Turkish Cypriot authorities continued to grant improved access to Greek Orthodox religious sites compared with previous years. The “Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)” said during the year it approved 156 of 203 total requests to hold religious services during the year, compared with 118 of 153 requests in 2018. Turkish-Speaking Protestant Associations (TSPA) representatives continued to report police surveillance of their activities.

The TSPA said Turkish Cypriots who converted to other faiths often experienced societal criticism. The TCCH reported completing restoration of three more religious sites – two archeological sites that have basilicas and a minaret of a mosque – and said the restoration of five churches continued at year’s end. Mufti of Cyprus Atalay and Church of Cyprus Archbishop Chrysostomos II met throughout the year and arranged visits to places of worship across the buffer zone. In February the leaders of the Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Maronite Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, and Roman Catholic communities renewed their plea for the restoration of St. James Church and St. George Church, two Greek Orthodox churches located in the buffer zone.

In May the U.S. Ambassador met with Mufti of Cyprus Atalay, who was also head of the “Religious Affairs Department,” to discuss cooperation among religious leaders and access to religious sites. Embassy officials met with representatives at the “MFA” and the Vakf to discuss unrestricted access to religious sites. In September embassy officials attended a Greek Orthodox worship service at Panagia Lysi Church, the first service held in the church since 1974. Embassy officials continued to meet with leaders from Sunni and Alevi Muslim, Armenian and Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Roman Catholic, and Protestant communities to discuss access to religious sites and instances of religious-based discrimination.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to 2011 census information from the Turkish Cypriot authorities, the most recent data available, 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. The Alevi Culture Association estimates that approximately 10,000 immigrants of Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab origin and their descendants are Alevi Muslims. The TSPA estimates there are 1,000 Turkish-speaking Protestants. The government of the Republic of Cyprus estimates 314 members of the Church of Cyprus and 69 Maronite Catholics reside in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. According to sociologists, other groups include Russian Orthodox, Anglicans, Baha'is, Jews, and Jehovah's Witnesses. According to "Ministry of Education (MOE)" statistics for the 2017-18 academic year, there were slightly more than 90,000 foreign students enrolled at universities in the area administered by the Turkish Cypriots. Of these, 61 percent were Muslim Turks, and the rest were predominantly Christians and Muslims from more than 140 different countries.

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

Legal Framework

The Turkish Cypriot "constitution" states the territory is a "secular republic" and provides for freedom of conscience and religious faith and unrestricted worship and religious ceremonies, provided they do not contravene public order or morals. It prohibits forced prayer, forced attendance at religious services, condemnation based on religious beliefs, and compelling individuals to disclose their religious beliefs. It stipulates religious education requires "state" approval and may only be conducted under "state" supervision, but the "law" allows summer religious knowledge courses to be taught in mosques without "MOE" approval. The "law" does not recognize exclusively 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.

According to the "constitution," 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. The "constitution" does not explicitly recognize religious groups other than the Vakf. According to the "constitution," Turkish Cypriot authorities shall help the Vakf in the execution of Islamic religious services and in meeting the expenses of such

services. No other religious organization is tax exempt or receives subsidies from Turkish Cypriot authorities.

The 1975 Vienna III Agreement covers the treatment of Greek Cypriots and Maronite Catholics living in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and the treatment of Turkish Cypriots living in the government-controlled area. Among other provisions, the agreement provides for facilities for religious worship for Greek Cypriots. The agreement states 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 two priests designated by the Orthodox Church at three designated functional churches in the Karpas Peninsula without advance notification or permission: Agia Triada Church in Agia Triada/Sipahi, Agia Triada Church in Rizokarpaso/Dipkarpaz, and Agios Synesios Church in Rizokarpaso/Dipkarpaz. According to the “MFA,” Maronite Catholic residents may hold liturgies or masses led by Maronite-designated clergy without seeking permission at three designated functional Maronite churches: Agios Georgios Church in Kormakitis/Korucam, Timios Stavros Church in Karpasia/Karpasa, and Panagia Church in Kampyli/Hisarkoy.

Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox worshippers must submit applications to the authorities for permission to hold religious services at churches or monasteries other than these six designated churches, including at restored religious heritage sites. For the authorities to consider an application 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, with exceptions for some Maronite churches; it must not have a dual use, for example, as a museum; there should be no complaints from local Turkish Cypriot residents; and police must be available to provide security. Permission is also necessary for priests other than those officially pre-designated to conduct services. Specific permission is required for individuals who do not reside in the Turkish Cypriot-administered area, including members of the Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox Churches, to participate. UNFICYP coordinates these applications, which religious groups must submit 10 days before the date of the requested service.

The mufti heads the “Religious Affairs Department,” which represents Islam in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and functions as a civil authority. Whereas

the Vakf manages Muslim-donated property as an endowment for charitable purposes, the “Religious Affairs Department” oversees how imams conduct prayers and deliver Friday sermons in mosques.

Religious groups are not required to register with authorities as associations 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 they 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 mandatory religious instruction in grades four through eight in all schools, public and private. These classes focus primarily on Sunni Islam but also include sessions on comparative religion. The “MOE” chooses the curriculum, which is based on a textbook commissioned by the Ministry of Education in Turkey. Students may opt out of mandatory religion courses in grades six through eight. At the high school level, religion classes are optional.

There are no provisions or “laws” allowing conscientious objection to mandatory military service, which requires a 12-15-month initial service period and one-day annual reserve duty. The penalty for refusing to complete mandatory military service is up to three years’ imprisonment, a fine of up to 10,800 Turkish lira (\$1,800), or both.

“Government” Practices

Three Greek Orthodox churches, Apostolos Andreas, St. Barnabas, and St. Mamas Churches, were again open for prayers throughout the year, as they had been in previous years, but Turkish Cypriot authorities continued to require advance notification for religious services there. While St. Mamas and St. Barnabas Churches functioned as museums and were only open during working hours, the Greek Orthodox priest held the key to Apostolos Andreas Monastery, according to the “MFA.” According to the “MFA,” services took place for the first time since 1974 at four Greek Orthodox churches during the year. The four churches were Panayia Eleousa Church in Trypimeni/Tirmen Famagusta Area; Ayia Paraskevi in

Angastina/Aslankoy Famagusta; Ayios Theodoros Church in Lapithos/Lapta; and Panayia in Lysi/Akdogan.

According to statistics reported by the “MFA,” authorities continued to grant improved access to Greek Orthodox places of worship compared with previous years. UNFICYP reported the “MFA” approved 83 of 129 requests it received to facilitate religious services at churches in the northern part of the island during the year, compared with 90 approvals of 123 requests in 2018. The “MFA” reported it approved 156 out of 203 total requests (including both UNFICYP-facilitated requests and requests submitted directly to the “MFA”) to hold religious services during the year, compared with 118 approvals of 153 requests in 2018. A Greek Orthodox Church representative said Turkish Cypriot authorities continued to deny access requests without explanation, stating the list of criteria a request must meet is “self-explanatory.” Orthodox representatives continued to report the “MFA” sometimes approved applications with insufficient time before the dates of requested religious services, resulting in cancellations or low attendance.

Armenian Orthodox leaders said they had not submitted religious access requests during the year partly out of frustration with delayed approvals in prior years. A Greek Orthodox representative stated 63 religious sites remained inaccessible due to being located within Turkish military zones or the buffer zone.

In April Turkish Cypriot authorities again allowed Greek Orthodox worshippers to hold Good Friday church services at St. George Exorinos Church in Famagusta.

A Maronite community representative said the Turkish military continued to restrict access to the Church of Archangelos Michael in the village of Asomatos/Ozhan. Maronite representatives continued to report being required to submit a list of persons planning to attend Sunday services by the preceding Tuesday. The “MFA” said this was because the Church of Archangelos Michael is located within a military zone. The “MFA” said it required only advance notification, not a request for access, to hold Sunday services and that no one was refused admittance during the year. According to the “MFA,” the Turkish military again allowed Maronites to celebrate Mass in Ayia Marina on July 17, the name day of Ayia Marina, and denied Maronites access to the Church of Marki near Kormakitis/Korucam. A Maronite representative said Turkish Cypriot authorities allowed services at Panagia Church in Kamyli/Hisarkoy without prior permission only on August 15 for the Assumption of the Virgin observation.

Armenian Orthodox representatives said continued limitations on access imposed by Turkish Cypriot authorities prevented them from fully renovating and maintaining the Sourp Magar Monastery.

The TSPA reported police continued to monitor its activities, asking specific questions about TSPA members and ceremonies. According to the TSPA, in April police interrupted a training for young pastors organized by TSPA at a hotel in Koma Yialou/Kumyali, questioning and intimidating participants.

According to the Alevi Culture Association, the first phase of construction on an Alevi house of worship (*cemevi*) and cultural complex was completed in July. The association said the six million Turkish lira (\$1 million) provided by the “government” for the internal design and construction of the building was insufficient for connecting electricity and water to the complex, establishing a morgue and kitchen, and finishing the external design. The Alevi Culture Association continued to say it perceived favoritism in “state” funding toward the Sunni Muslim population through financing of mosque construction and administration.

According to local press reports, the Turkish government provided much of the aid to fund construction of Sunni Muslim mosques.

In July the “Ministry of Education” announced a protocol was signed with Turkey to open the Religious Anatolia High School within the premises of Hala Sultan Religious High School, a public school. Secular Turkish Cypriot groups criticized the protocol, stating it imposed Islam on secular Turkish Cypriots. In August the Secondary Education Teacher’s Union criticized the Hala Sultan Religious High School administration and the “Ministry of Education” for organizing a competition with prizes for students who could recite the hadith.

The “Religious Affairs Department” continued to appoint and fund all 205 imams at the 210 Sunni mosques in the northern part of the island.

A representative of the Church of Cyprus again stated some religious sites, to which Church officials had little or no access, were deteriorating. Since 1974 the Church of Cyprus has been unable to access St. James Church in the buffer zone. In February the already damaged church partially collapsed amid heavy rains.

Greek Orthodox religious groups continued to state authorities placed religious items, including icons, in storage rooms or displayed them in museums, against the wishes of the communities to whom they were sacred. In January local press reported the international NGO Walk of Truth recovered four fragments of religious frescoes removed from churches in the north after 1974 and returned

them to the Republic of Cyprus. Two of the frescoes were identified as belonging to Panayia Absinthiotissa Church and Monastery in Sychari/Asagi Taskent.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The TSPA continued to report societal discrimination toward Protestants, including denial of access to venues to hold religious events and verbal harassment. For example, in April a TSPA representative said local authorities in Karavas/Alsancak canceled a previously approved Easter celebration on the day of the event. The TSPA said Turkish Cypriots who converted to other faiths, particularly Christianity, faced societal criticism. The TSPA stated a Turkish Cypriot security forces member stopped attending church services due to pressure from colleagues in the military.

Muslim and Orthodox religious leaders continued to promote religious tolerance by meeting and arranging pilgrimages for their congregations to places of worship across the “green line,” including Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque in the Republic of Cyprus and St. Barnabas in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots.

On February 14, the leaders of the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Muslim, Maronite Catholic, and Roman Catholic communities issued a joint statement calling for the restoration of the Church of Saint James and the Church of Saint George located in the buffer zone in Nicosia, renewing a joint plea they made in 2014. On March 19, representatives of each of the five religious communities visited the partially collapsed Greek Orthodox Church of Saint James in the buffer zone in Nicosia.

The TCCH reported it had completed restoration of two religious heritage sites: the Basilica of Agia Triada and the Agios Philon archeological site (site of a Byzantine church and early Christian episcopal complex). Neither was functioning as an active place of worship following the restoration, and no religious group requested to use either site for religious purposes during the year. The TCCH continued restoring another five religious sites. The TCCH and the UN Development Program Partnership for the Future continued restoration work on the Greek Orthodox Apostolos Andreas Monastery in the Karpas Peninsula, a popular destination for pilgrims. The TCCH reported the tendering process for the second phase of the restoration had been completed; it anticipated work to commence by the end of the year.

In March local press reported three individuals stole a 300-kilogram (660-pound) church bell from the nine-meter (30-foot) tower of the recently renovated St. Panteleimon Monastery in Myrtou/Camlibel. According to press reports, police arrested three suspects and found the bell in a barn belonging to one of the suspects in Avlona/Gayretkoy village. The suspects were released on bail pending trial, which had not begun as of year's end.

In May police arrested the caretaker of Selimiye Mosque (formerly Agia Sophia Cathedral) and three of his colleagues, who were reportedly attempting to sell two church bells and five chandeliers that were kept in the mosque's storage room. The "Religious Affairs Department" announced it had suspended the personnel involved in the theft and recovered all the items; the police investigation continued at year's end.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In May the Ambassador met with Mufti of Cyprus Atalay, head of the "Religious Affairs Department," to encourage cooperation among faith communities and discuss ways to expand access to religious sites on both sides of the island. Embassy representatives continued to meet with Turkish Cypriot authorities at the "MFA" and the Vakf to discuss access to religious sites and the ability to hold religious services at sites without restrictions.

On September 8, embassy officials attended a Greek Orthodox service, the first service since 1974, at the Panagia Lysi Church. Embassy officials discussed issues pertaining to religious freedom, including instances of societal discrimination within the Turkish Cypriot community, with representatives of the Armenian Orthodox, Alevi Muslim, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Protestant, and Sunni Muslim communities. Embassy officials frequently discussed with Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox leaders concerns about restricted access to churches and other religious sites in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots.

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.