

World
Watch
Research

Turkey: Full Country Dossier

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OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Introduction

World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	11	-	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Turkey

Brief country details

Turkey: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
85,957,000	169,000	0.2

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Map of country



Turkey: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	64	50
WWL 2023	66	41
WWL 2022	65	42
WWL 2021	69	25
WWL 2020	63	36

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Turkey:	
Main persecution engines	Main drivers
Islamic oppression	Government officials, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, Political parties, Non-Christian religious leaders, Violent religious groups
Religious nationalism	Government officials, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Political parties, Non-Christian religious leaders, Violent religious groups
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials
Ethno-religious hostility	Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Government officials, Ethnic group leaders
Clan oppression	Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

The very strong *Religious nationalism* in society puts a lot of pressure on Christians. In recent years, the government started not only to target foreign, mostly Western, Christians, but has also banned foreign Christians with Turkish spouses and children from the country. This policy continued during the WWL 2024 reporting period. Furthermore, many of those who previously received the N-82 code (requiring them to seek approval prior to returning to Turkey), continue to struggle with the legal and practical consequences, including lengthy court cases, severely hindering them and their families in their daily life.

In addition, society's nationalism leaves almost no space for Christians to make an alternative message heard. In Turkey, nationalism and Islam are intrinsically linked and anyone who is not a Muslim, particularly a convert or someone who openly lives out their different faith, is not seen to be a loyal Turk. Similarly, Turkish secularism is also strongly nationalistic, with Christianity being viewed by both Muslims and secularists as a negative Western influence. Although conversion from Islam to Christianity is not legally forbidden, converts from Islam are put under pressure by their families and communities to return to Islam. Likewise, Turkish Christians coming from a more secular background also face severe pressure at times to recant their new faith. Christians therefore sometimes lead a double life and hide their conversion. Once known, a Christian with a Muslim background may be threatened with divorce and the loss of inheritance rights by family members. Converts from Islam can legally change their religious affiliation on ID cards to Christianity, but it can be a stressful process and they can still face discrimination at the hands of individual government officials.

The cocktail of Islam and nationalism also affects Christians who do not have a Muslim background. These are mostly from ethnic minorities (e.g. Greeks, Armenians, Syrians). They are hardly regarded as full members of Turkish society and their churches encounter all kinds of le-

gal and bureaucratic obstructions.

Christians from all categories of Christian communities have limited access to state employment, and experience discrimination in private employment, especially where employers have ties to the government. Since religious affiliation is still recorded on ID cards (nowadays via electronic chip), it is easy to discriminate against Christian job applicants.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Turkey has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR)
2. [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (ICESCR)
3. [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#) (CAT)
4. [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW)
5. [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC)

Turkey is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christian converts are ostracized and faced with opposition by their families, and threatened with divorce and loss of child custody (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian children are harassed because of their parents' faith (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christians face restrictions in employment in the public sector and experience discrimination in the private sector (ICCPR Arts. 25 and 26, and ICESCR Art. 6)
- Christians face harassment and violence if they talk about their faith or engage in proselytization (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- **Entry bans:** During the WWL 2024 reporting period, the Turkish government continued to ban expatriate Christians from (re)entering the country, often on vague security grounds. Many of the Christians involved had been living in Turkey for years and some are even married to Turkish citizens. Those who had received earlier bans, often still struggle with the legal and practical consequences for them, their families and the church communities they belong to. These bans seem to be a deliberate attempt to isolate the Turkish Protestant church.
- **Christian refugees:** Although levels of pressure and violence differ between cities, Christian refugees in Turkey (including converts from Islam to Christianity) often faced high levels of abuse and discrimination from local Turkish communities, the authorities and their own ethnic communities. Converts from Islam to Christianity are particularly vulnerable as they often have no legal status and deportation to their home countries would be very dangerous. Many of those Christians are Iranian, but there are various nationalities present, including Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans. While their refugee status put them at risk, mistreat-

ment becomes worse when their Christian faith becomes known. Threats are not only coming from radical Turkish individuals, but also from their own ethnic communities residing in Turkey. Levels of fear are sometimes so high that refugee convert Christians do not dare trying to connect with a local church in Turkey.

- **Church damaged:** In June 2023, Izmir municipality allowed the organization of a (non-Christian) youth festival inside the Greek Orthodox Saint Voukolos church building in Izmir, which acts as a cultural center. The Turkish youth caused damage to religious iconography. The church is the only surviving structure of the 1922 Smyrna Catastrophe, during which most Greek and Armenian Christian inhabitants of current Izmir were killed or expelled. After its restoration, the church building has been used as a cultural center with the Orthodox community being allowed to use it for religious rites on an occasional basis. The Izmir municipality issued an official apology afterwards ([Duvar English, 9 July 2023](#)). It is unlikely such an event would have ever been allowed to take place inside a (former) mosque.
- **Family violence:** Several, mostly young, Turkish Christian converts from Islam to Christianity have faced violence from family members, including mental and physical abuse, ostracization and being expelled from their homes.
- **Threats:** During the reporting period, many Christians, especially pastors, received both verbal and online threats, including death threats.
- **Bullying:** Several Christian children were bullied throughout the WWL 2024 reporting period. Bullying of especially children of Turkish converts has been a recurring issue for years now.
- **Permission for Christian cemetery revoked:** During a previous WWL reporting period [WWL 2022], a church was given permission to administer its own church cemetery for burials. During the WWL 2024 reporting period, this permission was revoked. Many other churches are also still waiting for such permission, having made their applications several years ago. It is another example of the sort of problems Turkish Christians have to deal with.

Specific examples of positive developments

- **New church opened:** For the first time in a hundred years, a new church has been built in Istanbul. The cornerstone of the Syriac Orthodox Saint Ephraim church was laid by President Erdogan himself in August 2019. The president was also present during the opening of the church in October 2023 ([Vatican News, 11 October 2023](#)).
- **Monastery re-consecrated:** In October 2022, the Syriac Catholic Monastery of St Ephrem in southeast Turkey was re-consecrated by Patriarch Ignace Joseph III Younan, head of the Syriac Catholic Church, who participated in the first service in a hundred years at the monastery ([Vatican News, 24 October 2022](#)).

External Links - Situation in brief

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Duvar English, 9 July 2023 - <https://www.duvarenglish.com/greece-reacts-against-party-held-at-historic-orthodox-church-in-turkeys-izmir-news-62696>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Vatican News, 11 October 2023 - <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/world/news/2023-10/turkey-first-church-syriac-orthodox-mor-st-ephrem-istanbul.html>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Vatican News, 24 October 2022 - <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2022-10/syriac-monastery-mor-efrem-reopening-assyrian-liturgy.html>

WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Turkey

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 Turkey report	AI Turkey 2022	https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/turkey/report-turkey/	4 July 2023
BBC News Turkey profile - updated 3 July 2023	BBC Turkey profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17988453	4 July 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI Turkey Report 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/TUR	4 July 2023
CIA World Factbook Turkey - updated 27 June 2023	World Factbook Turkey	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/turkey-turkiye/	4 July 2023
Crisis24 Turkey report (Garda World)	Crisis24 Turkey report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/turkey	4 July 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Turkey profile 2023	EIU Turkey profile 2023	https://country.eiu.com/turkey	4 July 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 Turkey	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	4 July 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Turkey not included	Democracy Index 2023	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Turkey	https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2023	4 July 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2023 Turkey	https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-net/2023	19 January 2024
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 Turkey profile	https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/turkey/	4 July 2023
Girls Not Brides Turkey report	Girls Not Brides Turkey	https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/turkey/	4 July 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 - Turkey country chapter	HRW 2023 Turkey country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/turkey	4 July 2023
Internet World Stats available in 2023	IWS 2023 Turkey	https://www.internetworldstats.com/europa2.htm#tr	4 July 2023
Middle East Concern – Turkey profile (24 countries covered)	MEC Turkey profile	https://meconcern.org/countries/turkey/	4 July 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Turkey	https://rsf.org/en/country/turkey	4 July 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2022 Turkey	https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/tur	4 July 2023
UNDP: Human Development Report Turkey	UNDP HDR Turkey	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/TUR	4 July 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Turkey	IRFR 2022 Turkey	https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/turkey/	4 July 2023
USCIRF 2023 Turkey report (17 CPC / 11 SWL)	USCIRF 2023 Turkey SWL	https://www.uscirt.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Turkey.pdf	4 July 2023
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook Turkey - April 2023	Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 Turkey	https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/d5f32ef28464d01f195827b7e020a3e8-050022021/related/mpo-tur.pdf	4 July 2023
World Bank Turkey data – 2021	World Bank Turkey data	https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=TUR	4 July 2023
World Bank Turkey overview – updated 10 April 2023	World Bank overview 2022	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/turkey/overview	4 July 2023

Recent history

Turkey's history was marked early on by a focus on religious identity, with people being divided by their religious beliefs rather than their ethnicity. During the 19th century, Christian minorities became influenced by the Enlightenment philosophy of nationalism. This changed their focus from being Greek Orthodox (for example) within the Ottoman Empire, to being a Greek who was also Orthodox. This change in emphasis led first to Greeks and Bulgarians wanting independence from the Ottoman Empire and then spread to other groups. The fear of the rise in nationalism amongst ethnic Christian groups was one of the reasons for the genocide of the Armenian, Syrian and Greek-Orthodox Christians in the late 19th century and then again during the 1st World War. This has since instigated the further marginalization of minority groups.

Turkey is a remnant of the Ottoman Empire, which consisted of the Balkans in south-eastern Europe, modern-day Turkey, the Middle East and most of North Africa. The empire took part in World War I on the losing side of the German and Austrian-Hungarian empires. The Ottoman Empire lost all its territories outside current Turkey, when France and England divided up the Middle East and North Africa. The Turks felt utterly humiliated which led to the establishment of the Turkish National Movement. Under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Pasha (a.k.a. Atatürk), the Turkish War of Independence was waged, the occupying armies were expelled and a new political system was created. On 1 November 1922 the newly founded parliament formally abolished the Sultanate, thus ending 623 years of Ottoman rule. The Treaty of Lausanne of 24 July 1923 led to the international recognition of the "Republic of Turkey".

Mustafa Kemal became the republic's first president and subsequently introduced many radical reforms with the aim of transforming the Ottoman-Turkish state into a modern, secular republic. The country rapidly modernized and became a multiparty democracy in 1945. However, politics were dominated by the Turkish army which staged coups in 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997 against the elected governments. Strongly secular politicians were viewed by the Turkish public as incapable and highly corrupt, which led to a political change in 2002. Since 3 November 2002, Turkey has been governed by the conservative Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In August 2014, after three terms as prime minister, Erdogan was elected Turkish president.

The alleged coup-attempt in July 2016

On 15 July 2016, an alleged coup was foiled and the regime took the opportunity to strike back fiercely. It accused the Islamic preacher and former ally, Fethullah Gülen (in self-exile in USA), of being behind the alleged coup-attempt. Tens of thousands of soldiers, policemen, judges, politicians, journalists, teachers, imams etc. were arrested on accusation of supporting Gülen and many more were removed from their workplaces and made unemployed. Nationalism, which already played an important role in Turkey, soared to new heights and minorities have since been under renewed pressure (especially the Kurdish population).

In April 2017, a referendum was held on [constitutional reforms](#) which would change Turkey from being a parliamentary democracy into a presidential one, granting considerable power to the president and making him the absolute decision-maker in Turkish politics (BBC News, 16 April 2017). In addition, the [new reforms would allow](#) Erdogan to stay in power until 2029 (BBC News, 16 April 2020). A small majority of 51% voted in favor of the reforms, with many yes-votes coming from the Turkish diaspora, and in April 2018 Erdogan announced new elections for both parliament and the presidency. Both elections in June 2018 [were won](#) by Erdogan and his AKP party, making him one of the most powerful leaders Turkey has ever known (BBC News, 25 June 2018).

Although President Erdogan lifted the state of emergency (which had been in place since the June 2016 coup) in July 2018, this did not stop the Turkish government from [cracking down](#) on opponents and alleged coup supporters (BBC News, 8 July 2018). One case in particular was the detention of US Pastor Andrew Brunson for alleged support of Fethullah Gülen and the PKK, which [led to sanctions](#) being imposed by the USA (BBC News, 2 August 2018). The Turkish economy [suffered quite severely](#) from these developments (BBC News, 10 August 2018). Brun-

son was eventually [released in October 2018](#), after being sentenced to three years imprisonment (World Watch Monitor, 12 October 2018).

In a major shift, the AKP party lost Ankara and Istanbul in the 2019 mayoral elections, which was perhaps a sign that the president had begun losing popularity. An important and positive development was the AKP's [acceptance of the re-election results](#) for the position of mayor in Istanbul in June 2019 (BBC News, 24 June 2019). The acceptance of the results of the re-election was (internationally) regarded as a major test for Turkish democracy. However, Erdogan significantly undermined the elections by transferring authority from the mayors to government-led ministries, making it impossible for opposition mayors to materialize their own plans ([Al-Monitor, 25 Augustus 2020](#)). In addition, the lack of freedom of press and the strong accusations against opposition parties remain an issue of major concern.

Turkish forces deployed in Syria and Libya

In a show of strength, Turkish army units [invaded Syria](#) in October 2019 to drive Kurdish forces back from the Turkish border (BBC News, 14 October 2019). Turkey views the armed Kurdish groups in Syria as terrorists who support the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers Party, which Turkey has been fighting against for decades. Later on, in January 2020, Turkey officially began [deploying troops in Libya](#), in support of the West Libyan UN-backed Government of National Accord; support which did not come for free (see below: *Security situation*). Its intervention became a game-changer for the war in Libya, with the Turkey-supported forces ending the siege of Tripoli by East Libyan strongman Field-Marshal Haftar (The Independent, 6 January 2020). Currently, Turkey is keeping its troops and Syrian mercenaries in Libya to protect its interests. Although there is growing international and Libyan pressure to remove them, it seems Turkey has no interest in withdrawing its troops ([AP News, 21 June 2022](#), [Libya Update, 20 March 2023](#)).

Domestically, Erdogan has continued to tighten his grip on society. In December 2020, the AKP-dominated parliament adopted a new law introducing far-reaching oversight measures for Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). It allows for the replacement of NGO executives by government appointed officials as well as annual inspections, which can lead to restrictions on NGO activities ([Freedom House Press Release, 4 January 2021](#)). In addition, in July 2021 Erdogan announced that he intends to 'regulate' foreign funded news agencies. In the current Turkish media landscape, in which over 90% of the media companies are owned by businessmen connected to the AKP, independent media can only survive with foreign funding. In June 2022, the Turkish-language websites of Deutsche Welle and Voice of America were blocked for not applying for broadcasting licenses, with DW subsequently announcing in March 2023 that it is closing down its Turkey office ([VOA news, 27 March 2023](#)). The licenses would have given the Turkish media regulator RTÜK editorial control over online content ([Politico, 1 July 2022](#)). In addition, a [new anti-disinformation law](#) adopted in October 2022 will mean up to three years in prison for anyone "disseminating misleading information" in an apparent effort to further curb online media (The Guardian, 13 October 2022; see also below: *Technological landscape*). Although Erdogan would appear to have almost total control over the Turkish media landscape, these measures might well have been introduced to counter the independent media's popularity - especially social media news coverage ([Al-Monitor, 22 July 2021](#)).

Hagia Sophia becomes a mosque again

In July 2020, after a ruling by the Council of State which cancelled the decision to turn [Istanbul's Hagia Sophia](#) into a museum, Erdogan signed a presidential decree to convert the building into a mosque again. The move was internationally widely condemned and viewed as derogatory towards Orthodox Christianity in particular (CNN, 10 July 2020). Nevertheless, the move was a longstanding wish of Erdogan's religious support base, with Erdogan being in need of support given the various (economic) difficulties being faced. Slowly, but steadily, Erdogan is reversing the legacy of Turkey's founder Ataturk, with some analysts asking whether Turkish secularism will now be completely replaced by Islamism ([Al-Monitor, 24 July 2020](#)). However, although Erdogan visited the Hagia Sophia twice during the election campaign, in the May 2023 parliamentary and presidential elections nationalism rather than Islamism played the major role ([E-Ir, 31 May 2023](#)).

Both the parliamentary and presidential elections in May 2023 were won by Erdogan and his nationalist allies. Especially since the opposition managed to unify itself behind main opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, opposition hopes were high that Erdogan would be defeated. At the same time, economic difficulties were continuing and the government was facing criticism for its slow response to the devastating earthquake that hit southeast Turkey in February 2023 and killed at least 37,000 people ([15 February 2023](#)). Yet, using identity politics, focusing on Islam and 'Turkishness', while accusing the opposition of being pawns of the West, of collaborating with 'terrorists' and being pro-LGBTQIA+ and anti-Islam, Erdogan managed to secure 52.1% of the vote and win the election. However, although the elections themselves were viewed as free and fair, the election circumstances were definitely not. As already stated above, almost all media is controlled by the AKP. In addition, the popular opposition mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoğlu, was politically paralyzed shortly before the elections by bogus criminal proceedings being brought against him ([E-Ir, 31 May 2023](#)). Lastly, social media were strictly curtailed, with Twitter blocking the accounts of opposition politicians at the government's request ([BBC News, 16 May 2023](#)). The government also threatened to prosecute those who spread 'fake news' online ([Politico, 15 May 2023](#)).

At the geopolitical level, Erdogan saw himself forced to seek rapprochement with the UAE and Saudi-Arabia, in an effort to increase foreign investments in an economy severely hit by inflation, which saw the cost of living soar, while the lira lost more than 75% of its value during Erdogan's second term as president ([Reuters, 8 May 2023](#)). In exchange for those investments, he almost made a U-turn regarding his support for the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, which the UAE and the Saudi Kingdom deem to be a 'terrorist organization' ([Haarezt, 7 May 2022](#)). However, Erdogan has not given up all contact with the Muslim Brotherhood as a meeting with representatives in May 2022 showed ([Nordic Monitor, 30 May 2022](#)). Nonetheless, further rapprochement between Turkey and the UAE and Saudi Arabia during 2023 in exchange for further investment deals, are most probably also based on the understanding that Turkey will cease its support for the Muslim Brotherhood ([Al-Monitor, 10 June 2023](#)).

Following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in October 2023, the Erdogan government at first took a moderate stand. However, following Israel's ground attack on Gaza, President Erdogan started to strongly criticize Israel, accusing them of genocide. Despite the rhetoric, it is

likely that the Turkish government will continue its diplomatic and economic relations with Israel, as it has done during earlier crises ([BBC News, 2 January 2024](#)).

Political and legal landscape

Turkey is a presidential republic currently under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU, Democracy Index 2022) classifies Turkey as a 'hybrid' regime, although Turkey scores lower for the indicator 'civil liberties' than many "authoritarian" ranked countries.

According to Middle East Concern (MEC country report):

- "The constitution establishes Turkey as a secular state, affording no privileged status to Islam or Islamic law. While a founding principle of the modern Turkish state is the separation of State and religion, a degree of tension is inherent in this as the State must control religion to the extent necessary to prevent religion controlling the State. The constitution affirms the principle of non-discrimination, including on the basis of religion, and guarantees the free exercise of worship and religious rites, including freedom from religious compulsion, provided religious practices do not undermine the fundamental rights of others. Religious conversion is legally permitted, including from Islam, though social disapproval may be encountered."
- All non-recognized religious groups "must register as associations or foundations (with charitable or cultural objectives) in order to gain legal status. Although the Lausanne Treaty stipulated that recognized non-Muslims could govern personal status issues according to their own rites, all citizens of Turkey are now subject to the secular civil code."

According to Turkish legislation based on the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, only four religious groups are recognized by the state: Sunni Islam, Greek Orthodoxy, Armenian Apostolics and Judaism. A citizen's religion is recorded in official documents, although since 2017 new ID cards no longer have a written entry for religion anymore. However, religious affiliation is still registered on the ID card's electronic chip and it is still common for government officials to ask for one's religion.

Turkish legislation does not allow the training of church ministers in private education centers. As a result, all Greek Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic seminaries were forced to shut down in the 1970s and 1980s and remain closed to this day. Protestant Turkish Christians from a Muslim background have no facilities at all - they must either pursue their studies informally or train their pastors and leaders abroad. But under the guarantees of the Lausanne Treaty, the Greek and Armenian communities still maintain church grade schools accredited by the Ministry of Education. The Catholic and Protestant churches are able to provide catechetical training to their children on church premises.

Purchasing premises for church use can prove to be very difficult, since zoning laws tend to be arbitrary. Turkish law stipulates that only certain buildings can be designated as churches. Whether or not a specific building may be used by a religious group as a church is highly dependent on the political and personal leanings of the local mayor, as well as on the attitude of the local population.

According to the Association of Protestant Churches: "The usable number of historical church buildings is very limited. Therefore, a large portion of the Protestant community tries to overcome the problem of finding a place to worship by establishing an association or religious foundation ... and then renting or purchasing a property such as a building not considered a "classic" church structure, a stand-alone building, shop, or depot that has not traditionally been used for worship. ... However, many of these premises do not have official status as a place of worship and therefore ... they cannot benefit from the advantages ... given to an officially recognized place of worship such as free electricity and water as well as tax exemption. When they introduce themselves to the authorities as a church, they receive warnings that they are not legal and may be closed." ([TeK, 2022 Human Rights Violation report](#)).

Gender perspective

Turkey's legal framework has several loopholes that allow for gender inequality; indicative of this, Turkey ranks 112th out of 153 states in the [Global Gender Gap Index ranking of 2022](#). Whilst child marriage is prohibited, it is not punished as a criminal act; 15% of girls are married before the age of 18, with Syrian refugee girls at a heightened risk (Girls Not Brides Turkey). In 2020 President Erdogan made a second attempt to pass legislation that would grant rapists amnesty on the condition they married their victim ([Freedom United, 7 February 2020](#)). Whilst unsuccessful in passing this new law, the president withdrew Turkey from the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women and Domestic Violence in March 2021 (the Istanbul Convention) ([Council of Europe, 22 March 2021](#)). This is viewed as a political move to appease conservatives within Erdogan's party, who oppose the bill for encouraging divorce and protecting victims regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, which they fear could lead to same-sex marriage being permitted ([BBC News, 26 March 2021](#)).

In light of high rates of violence against women, the withdrawal faced widespread condemnation amid fears that perpetrators would have a greater sense of impunity than before ([Deutsche Welle - DW, 3 March 2021](#); [London School of Economics, 17 September 2020](#)). Despite the calls to annul the decision, Turkey's top administrative court ruled the government's action was [lawful](#) (Deutsche Welle - DW, 19 July 2022). Reports indicate that since the withdrawal, at least 603 women have been killed and 464 women have died under suspicious circumstances ([Deutsche Welle - DW, 24 May 2023](#)). However, no empirical evidence yet establishes a direct causal relationship between Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and the surge in incidences of femicide.

Religious landscape

Turkey: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	169,000	0.2
Muslim	84,509,000	98.3
Hindu	820	0.0
Buddhist	40,400	0.0
Ethno-religionist	13,200	0.0
Jewish	15,300	0.0
Bahai	24,200	0.0
Atheist	59,800	0.1
Agnostic	970,000	1.1
Other	155,300	0.2
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

According to WCD's 2023 estimates, 98.3% of the Turkish population is Muslim, a third of whom are Alevis or Shia Muslims. Most Turks are Sunni Muslims. Only 0.2% of the population are Christian, a considerable reduction from 25% a century ago (see below: *Christian origins*).

Turkey is currently going through a gradual change from being a strictly secular country to a country based on Islamic norms and values. When secularism prevailed, Christians and Muslims in Turkey experienced many restrictions since the state interpreted secularism to mean far-reaching state control and that no religion should be encouraged to flourish. Under the current regime of President Erdogan, secularism has steadily diminished and the country is accepting a more pronounced Islamic influence.

Non-Muslims are tacitly banned from high level jobs in state administration and security forces. In addition, converts from Islam to Christianity are sometimes placed under pressure at work by their colleagues and bosses, and usually avoid discussing their faith. Non-Muslims state that when they enlist for military service, their religious affiliation is noted by their superiors and there is also a 'security check'. There are no non-Muslims among Turkish military officers, provincial governors or mayors. However, in June 2011, for the first time in Turkey's history, a Syriac Orthodox citizen was elected to parliament.

In May 2010 the government released a decree to all government organs stating that the rights of Christian and Jewish minorities should be respected and their leaders should also be treated with respect. In August 2011 the government published a decree to return state-confiscated assets that once belonged to Greek, Armenian or Jewish trusts. Two issues should be noted in

this context: For the return of the properties it is essential to be a registered organization, which is difficult in Turkey; and in all these actions there is no mention at all of the emerging Turkish Protestant church. The decrees did not prevent the government from seizing over 100 title deeds from the Syriac Church since 2014. [55 deeds were returned](#) in May 2018 after the EU parliament also addressed the issue (World Watch Monitor, 1 June 2018). Yet, "representatives from various communities said the bulk of property claims had been settled over the last decade, mostly to the communities' satisfaction, although a few remaining cases were still progressing slowly through legal and government channels" (US State Department IRFR 2022 Turkey, p.16). In addition, hundreds - if not thousands - of old church buildings are in a state of total neglect and are on the verge of becoming ruins where Christians have been forced to leave. This all adds to the slow but ongoing disappearance of Christian heritage in the country.

Other sources report:

- USCIRF 2023 Turkey SWL: Turkey has been kept on the 'Special Watch List' after recording troubling religious freedom conditions. Serious bureaucratic obstacles remained in place, including the closure of the Eastern Orthodox Halki seminary. Various religious and ethnic minority communities were targeted both by government officials as well as non-state actors and received threats of violence and actual violence.

Middle East Concern (MEC Turkey profile) states: [Since 2018] "significant numbers of foreign Christians resident in Turkey have been banned from the country. In 2018 the Armenian Apostolic Church in Turkey attempted to elect a patriarch as the incumbent was suffering from dementia and unable to function in his role. The election was prevented by the state and this state interference was condemned by the Constitutional Court. The death of the patriarch in 2019 opened the way for elections to proceed. In 2019 President Erdogan laid the foundation stone of a new Syriac church in Istanbul – the first such church to be built since the founding of the republic in 1923."

Economic landscape

According to the World Factbook Turkey:

- **GPD per capita (PPP):** \$31,500 (2021 est.)
- **Unemployment:** 13.4%, with youth unemployment being almost twice as high at 24.3%
- **Percentage of population below national poverty line:** 14.4% (2018 est.)

According to the World Bank Turkey overview (Recent Economic Developments):

- **Economic growth:** "Türkiye's economy grew by 5.6 percent in 2022, from 11.4 percent the previous year, as exports, investment, and manufacturing activity lost momentum. Private consumption, however, remained robust, expanding 19.6 percent in 2022. Value-added growth was led by the services sector (up 9.7 percent) and industry (up 3.3 percent). The labor market, supported by strong economic growth, rebounded fully from the pandemic."
- **Inflation:** "The Turkish lira (TRY) lost 30 percent of its value in 2022 despite an estimated \$5108 billion in indirect forex interventions by the central bank (CBRT)."

- **Outlook:** "Despite a drag on growth in 2023 due to earthquake-related production, export, and consumption disruptions, economic activity is expected to remain solid, supported by a 55 percent net minimum wage increase in January 2023 and expansionary fiscal policies ahead of the elections scheduled for May. Massive reconstruction efforts in the earthquake zone – with large multiplier effects – will boost growth in late-2023 and beyond. Pre-election spending and earthquake recovery will weaken fiscal balances. Additionally, the 8 most-affected provinces were host to 30 percent of Türkiye's poor in 2020 with poverty rates much higher than the national average, which could exacerbate inequality. Initial forecasts indicate a worsening of consumption-based poverty rate in 2023."

Other sources report:

- The World Bank's [World Development Indicators \(Fiscal Year 2022\)](#) rank Turkey in the "Upper middle income" category.
- The Fragile State Index (FSI 2023 Turkey) shows that after years of steady improvements in the economic indicators, the COVID-19 crisis negatively effected the economy and caused a small dip. However, in line with the unorthodox financial policy decisions of the Erdogan government in recent years, the Economy indicator shows a strong decline for 2022. Equally, the "Economic inequality" indicator also worsened. Nonetheless, the "Human Flight and Brain Drain" indicator is showing steady improvement, despite indications to the contrary (see below).
- A [2020 study by SODEV](#) found that the majority (70.3%) of Turkish youth think that making a career is not possible without the right social contacts (i.e. nepotism) and more than 60% want to move abroad (Middle East Eye, 21 May 2020). Another survey conducted in the beginning of 2023 had similar results, with 63% of the interviewed youth (18-25 years) wanting to live abroad. Improved living conditions and more (political) freedom are cited at the two main reasons for wanting to leave ([Duvar English, 2 June 2023](#)).
- A 2022 SODEV report entitled "[Youth crises](#)" describes how students feel underrated and excluded in a country where politicians drive polarization (on ethnical lines), and where they are labeled as "traitors" and "terrorists" because of their criticism.

After years of strong economic growth under Erdogan's rule, the lira started losing its value against the dollar from 2013 onwards. Not surprisingly around the same time, the 2013 Gezi protests took place. The decline continued during the last decade, but accelerated from 2021 onwards after Erdogan adopted unorthodox financial policies, lowering interest rates instead of raising them to stop inflation. The Central Bank tried to counter inflation by selling foreign exchange reserves, but with limited effect. Following his re-election, Erdogan seemed to have changed his mind by appointing a more 'market-friendly' finance minister and Wall Street banker as head of the Central Bank (the first woman to fulfil this role). Interest rates have increased since then, but not enough to stop the further downward trend of the lira ([Al-Jazeera, 28 June 2023](#)). In January 2024, the lira hit a new record low, having lost a third of its value in 2023 and 80% of its value in the last five years ([Asharq Al Awsat, 11 January 2024](#)). Meanwhile, the poverty threshold is three times higher than the increased minimum wage, meaning that millions of Turks are struggling to survive ([Duvar English, 3 January 2023](#)).

Gender perspective

Turkey has the highest gender gap in Europe and Central Asia as regards female labor force participation with a gender gap about 12% higher than the global average (UNDP HDR Turkey). The female [labor force participation](#) rate was 34.2% in 2022, compared to 71.1% for men (World Bank, Gender Data Portal 2023). Furthermore, the 2021 Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security study showed that the proportion of women in Turkey aged 25 and older and in employment was 28.5% (GIWPS 2021 Turkey).

Due to the increasing Islamization, it has reportedly become harder for women (both Christian and secular) who do not wear a head-covering to obtain employment. Many Christians also report that by not listing themselves as Muslims on their identity cards (or leaving it blank), they have been unable to obtain jobs in the private sector. In general, Christians in Turkey face discrimination in employment due to the hostile environment in Turkey. Christians are also kept out of senior positions in the government and armed forces. Female converts may be additionally vulnerable due to patrilineal inheritance practices; whilst the Civil Code grants equal inheritance rights to female and male inheritors.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the World Factbook Turkey:

- **Main ethnic groups:** The majority of the Turkish population (70-75%) are Turkish. 19% of the population is from Kurdish descent, while other minorities make up 6 -11% of the population (2016 est.).
- **Main languages:** The official language is Turkish. Kurdish and other minority languages are spoken as well.
- **Population:** 83,600,000 with a growth rate of 0.64% (2023 est.).
- **Urban population:** In 2023, 77.5% of the population lived in urban areas, while the annual urbanization rate stands at 1.11%.
- **Literacy rate:** 96.7% of the population can read and write; with a difference between men (99.1%) and women (94.4%) (2019).
- **Youth population:** The younger generation - up to 24 years of age - makes up 39% of the population, making it a country with a young population in need of (economic) opportunities.
- **IDPs/Refugees:** In 2023, Turkey hosted 3.35 million refugees from Syria and 45,000 refugees from Ukraine. In addition, there are 10,250 Iraqi's living in Turkey. Around 1.1 million Kurds are internally displaced because of the conflict between the Turkish army and the Kurdish PKK.
- **Life expectancy:** 76.5 years on average; women (78.9 years), men (74.1 years).

According to the UNDP Human Development Report Turkey:

- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Turkey ranks 48th out of 191 countries. The combined ratio of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a very high score of 0.838, making it one of the highest scoring countries in the wider MENA region.

- **Gender inequality:** With a Gender Development Index (GDI) score of 0.937, women are somewhat disadvantaged in comparison to men. The GDI measures the differences in life expectancy, years of education and GNI per capita per gender. Reflecting this disparity, the mean years of schooling for girls currently sits at 7.9 years, compared to 9.4 for boys (HDI profile).

Turkish society is on average conservative, Muslim, tribal and patriarchal. 'Turkishness' as an identity is continually used as a political weapon, since being Turk is commonly understood as being a Sunni Muslim. All other religious groups experience discrimination. In addition, many Arab refugees face hostility as they are blamed for rising prices and unemployment. Despite the social hatred, Turkey still hosts millions of Syrian refugees and has been hailed as an example for other countries by the World Bank. Nonetheless, President Erdogan has used the migrant crisis to force the European countries to [pay six billion euros](#) for hosting the refugees (The Guardian, 17 March 2020).

Despite the agricultural roots of Turkish culture, modern-day Turkey is urban and has a young population (see above). In addition, a 2020 poll by the Foundation for Social Democracy ([SODEV](#)) found that the majority of the youth prefer "freedom of speech for all" over national and religious values (Middle East Eye, 21 May 2020). The majority of the Turkish population (78%) lives in urban areas and the rate of urbanization stood at 1.1% in 2023.

An issue of particular concern remains the general hostility towards Christians and Jews; hate-speech targeting Christians has been common for many years now. This has been encouraged by the government's response to the alleged coup-attempt in 2016; by vehemently attacking all (assumed) enemies it has stirred up nationalism in the country. The Hudson Institute wrote in April 2019:

- "Since the abortive coup, revisionist historical dramas disseminating anti-minority conspiracy theories ... have become the most effective form of propaganda. ... What is most alarming is the role of Turkey's state-run media outlets in smearing and scapegoating religious minorities, using state funds for incitement, particularly against Jews and Christians" ([Hudson Institute, 19 April 2019](#)).

Christians among Iranian refugees in Turkey are experiencing great difficulties. Many Iranian converts from Islam to Christianity flee to Turkey to escape persecution in their home country, with some of them illegally crossing further into Europe. However, those who follow the legal path and register with the UNHCR most often find themselves stuck in Turkey, because there are no (Western) countries willing to resettle them. They are not legally allowed to work and cannot open a bank account or even rent an apartment legally. Making things worse, they are settled in a specific location in Turkey and are not allowed to travel elsewhere without permission, although circumstances often simply force them to live elsewhere ([Article 18, 6 November 2019](#)). Hence, many of them accept illegal and very low paid jobs to survive, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. One Iranian convert described his escape to Turkey as "the worst decision you could ever make" ([Article 18, 1 July 2022](#)). In addition, despite their refugee status, they are still at risk of deportation back to Iran ([Article 18, 16 March 2021](#), [Duvar English, 4 February 2022](#)). Their situation has worsened in recent years, with a 2023 report again

highlighting their plight ([Article 18, June 2023](#)).

In addition to the Iranian convert refugees, there are also converts from Islam to Christianity from other countries, including Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. On top of pressure from parts of Turkish society and individual government officials, they also face pressure from their own families and communities. Several of them are in hiding in Turkey, with many of them fearful of making contact with local churches because of risk of discovery by community members. This is especially true for converts from Afghanistan.

Conversion is not prohibited by law. However, conversion to Christianity is widely considered to be unacceptable. Social and familial implications for conversion from Islam to Christianity or from one Christian denomination to another are likely. This causes converts to sometimes lead a double life and hide their conversion. Christians with a Muslim background who hide their new identity from their family and relatives would also hide their praying, their Bible and Christian materials and their accessing of Christian television and websites, etc. Those who hide their Christian identity are often afraid to meet up with other Christians. In conservative Islamic families it is more difficult for converts to be open about their Christian belief - in particular for women. Converts are under close watch by their families and communities and are sometimes put under house arrest by their families in an attempt to force them to recant their new faith.

Gender perspective

The lockdowns introduced to combat the spread of COVID-19 also served to increase the risk of domestic violence as family members spent more time together at home ([DW, 10 April 2020](#)). Many victims are hesitant to file for divorce or report abuse – particularly sexual violence – due to the attached stigma; about four in ten women Turkey have suffered physical and/or sexual violence (HRW, 26 May 2022). Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021 did not help in this regard (see below: *Gender-specific religious persecution / Female*). Turkey's religious authority also sparked criticism for its [controversial announcement](#) allowing parents to marry their adopted children after thousands were left orphaned by the earthquakes, raising concerns about the potential implications for child marriage (AI Monitor, 22 February 2023).

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2023 Turkey):

- **Internet usage:** 83.8% penetration – survey date: January 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 83.8% penetration – survey date: January 2022

A survey by the Turkish Statistical Institute ([TUIK, 27 August 2022](#)) identified that 89.1% of men aged 16-74 were Internet users, compared to 80.9% of women. Data further indicates that more men than women use social media platforms such as [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#) (Napoleon Cat, June 2023). This gender gap in access to technology could make it more difficult for female converts to access Christian resources and community.

According to World Bank Turkey data:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 101.8 per 100 people

According to Freedom on the Net 2023 Turkey:

- Turkey is rated as "not free".
- "Internet freedom in Turkey has steadily declined over the past decade. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) have enacted several laws that increase censorship and criminalize online speech. During the coverage period, the new Disinformation Law was enacted; it introduces prison sentences for spreading information deemed false, including online. In the run-up to the May 2023 elections, the Disinformation Law was used to silence members of the political opposition as well as critical journalists. Censorship is widespread, and hundreds of websites, online articles, and social media posts have been blocked or removed. Online troll networks frequently amplify progovernment disinformation, and journalists, activists, and social media users continue to face legal charges for their online content."

Turkey is a modern country, although rural areas tend to be less well developed. The Turkish government monitors all Internet use, mobile phones and landlines. Many websites are blocked in Turkey. Moreover, the law forces all major social media companies to store their user data inside Turkey, making it potentially possible for the government to track down anonymous posts ([Independent, 29 July 2020](#)). As mentioned above, in October 2022, the Turkish parliament ratified a new anti-disinformation law that allows for jail sentences of up to three years for "intentionally publishing disinformation or 'fake news' that the authorities claim spreads panic, endangers security forces or the overall health of Turkish society" ([The Guardian, 13 October 2022](#)). This is another nail in the coffin for free speech in Turkey.

Epitomizing the current political situation is Turkey's record regarding journalism: For four years (2012 and 2016-2018), Turkey was the country with the highest number of journalists in prison. This strict policy seems to have been successful: While the freedom of press has further deteriorated, the number of imprisoned journalists has dropped slightly as journalists apply self-censorship. However, even more striking is the high level of control the Turkish regime has over almost all Turkish television, radio and newspapers. All broadcasts are automatically paused when a speech by the president is to be aired and there is a strict screening process for checking which commentators can appear on TV ([Al-Monitor, 12 June 2020](#)).

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranks Turkey 165th out of 180 countries (World Press Freedom 2023 Turkey), a deterioration from #149 in the 2022 index. RSF states:

- "Authoritarianism is gaining ground in Turkey, challenging media pluralism. All possible means are used to undermine critics. ... tactics such as near systematic censorship on the internet, frivolous lawsuits against critical media outlets or the misuse of the judicial system have, until now, enabled Erdoğan to restore his popularity rating. ... ultra-nationalist groups, spurred on by anti-media political rhetoric, are taking to the streets to attack reporters, columnists, commentators and citizen-journalists who cover politics and discuss the economic crisis."

Turkey's intelligence agencies are well equipped and it is believed that the activities of Protestant Christians in particular are monitored closely (including the installation of listening devices inside churches). Nevertheless, Sat-7, God TV and other Christian television and radio

channels are broadcasting into Turkey. The Internet is used by many Christian groups to access Christian materials, which is often preferred over owning a hard copy of the Bible. Bible correspondence courses are particularly popular.

Security situation

Grey wolves

In 2022, the Protestant church community was shocked by a testimony from a leader of the far-right Grey Wolves group, who informed the Turkish representative of the Salvation Church in Malatya that agents of the Gendarmerie Intelligence and anti-terror unit had promised him "whatever he wanted" in 2016 if he murdered this representative, the Chair of the local church association and a Western church worker. The Grey Wolves leader said he received photos of the men and their addresses. A first attempt was aborted after a young boy was also present inside the church, while a second attempt was stopped after the murder of the Russian ambassador in December 2016. The testimony was a shocking reminder of the torture and murder of three Christian men in 2007, who were all members of Malatya's Salvation Church ([Ahval News, 8 September 2022](#)).

Turkish military activity abroad

After the attempted coup of July 2016, developments in Turkey changed dramatically. The government took on more dictatorial powers and both nationalism and Islamization soared. The fight against the militant Kurdish minority intensified and Turkey took a much more assertive stance on the international scene, becoming [militarily active](#) in neighboring Syria and Iraq, primarily targeting Kurdish forces (Reuters, 22 July 2020). As an example of this, WWR reported ([Open Doors Analytical, 8 July 2020](#)), that in June 2020 the Turkish airforce explicitly bombed Christian villages in the area surrounding Zakho in Dohuk district of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR), allegedly to target PKK supporters. The Turkish presence in Syria led to a further building up of tensions with Syria, Kurdish groups in Syria as well as with the USA. Domestically, the conflict with the Kurdish PKK continues after the ceasefire ended in 2015 ([International Crisis Group, 28 June 2021](#)).

Secondly, in a growing effort to enlarge its role in the wider region, in 2020 Turkey gave substantial military support for the UN-backed West Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA). Turkey's navy, air and intelligence support, including thousands of pro-Turkish Syrian fighters, proved to be a [game-changer](#) in Libya. Libya's capital Tripoli was in immediate danger of being overrun by East Libyan strongman Field-Marshal Haftar and the Libyan National Army; but with the Turkish support Haftar was driven back from the capital (Middle East Eye, 20 August 2020). The different Libyan governments have since stated clearly that all foreign forces should leave the country, including the Syrian mercenaries and Turkish troops. To date, Turkey has been unwilling to comply and in June 2022 even extended the mandate of its troops in Libya for another 18 months ([Arab News, 9 May 2021](#), [AP News, 21 June 2022](#)). The main reason why Turkey does not want to withdraw is that Turkey's support did not come for free; in exchange for supporting the GNA, the latter signed a deal [allowing Turkey to drill for gas](#) in Libya's territorial waters in the Mediterranean Sea (DW, 4 January 2020).

Furthermore, Turkey's involvement in Libya should also be seen in light of President Erdogan's neo-Ottoman vision, as well as in support for Islamist groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood. This pits Turkey, together with like-minded Qatar, against countries like the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt who all strongly oppose the Muslim Brotherhood, which those governments view as a threat to their stability. Unsurprisingly, those countries support Libyan strongman Haftar. That said, recent rapprochements between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt respectively, which continued in 2023, seem to have forced Erdogan to tone down his support for Islamist groups ([Arab Center DC, 2 June 2022](#)).

In addition, Turkey is also battling with Russia for influence in the region. Russia actively supports Syrian President Assad, and mercenaries from Russian security firm Wagner fight alongside Field-Marshal Haftar's forces. While Turkey supported Azerbaijan with drones and Syrian fighters during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, it was Russia which ended the conflict before all of Nagorno-Karabakh was conquered by Azerbaijan and installed a peace-keeping force in the area. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 offered a new opportunity in the fight for regional influence, with Turkey supplying Ukraine with Turkish-built drones ([Al-Jazeera, 19 July 2022](#)).

To complicate its foreign activities even further, Turkey is involved in a [conflict with Greece](#) regarding natural resources in the eastern Mediterranean Sea (BBC News, 13 September 2020). Unsurprisingly, while Turkey made a deal with Libya's GNA, Greece made an agreement with Egypt regarding their mutual boundaries in the Mediterranean. It appeared that both sides recently started talking again, but in May 2022 Erdogan accused Greece of recommending the USA not to sell F-16 fighter jets to Turkey and vowed not to speak to the Greek prime-minister again ([Al-Jazeera, 24 May 2022](#)).

Hence, it is clear that the ideological battle and the battle for resources remains closely linked in the context of a wider battle for regional influence.

In addition, during 2023 Turkey used Sweden's NATO application, which needed approval from all NATO members, including Turkey, to force the country to do more against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which Turkey, but also the EU and the USA, have designated as a terrorist organization. In the end, in July 2023 Erdogan gave the greenlight after Sweden reiterated that it would not provide support to Kurdish groups, although the admission still needs to be confirmed by the Turkish parliament ([Politico, 23 December 2023](#)).

In January 2024, Turkish police arrested 70 [suspects with ties to Islamic State](#) group in raids (abc news, 11 January 2024). The report also states: "In late December [2023], Turkish security forces detained 32 suspected IS militants that the state-run Anadolu news agency said were allegedly planning attacks on synagogues, churches and the Iraqi Embassy."

Gender perspective

Turkey remains the only Member State of the Council of Europe that has not recognized the right to conscientious objection to military service and as such Christian men (women are not conscripted) who object on religious grounds face severe harassment by the state, including administrative and criminal proceedings based on the Law on Conscription and the Military

Criminal Law which ultimately results in ‘civil death’– the loss of fundamental rights and freedoms ([IOG, 5 January 2022](#)).

Trends analysis

1) The security services continue to clamp down on all opposition

The state of emergency which was declared after the failed 2016 coup officially ended in 2018, but the security services are continuing to clamp down on all forms of opposition. With new laws in place, human rights organizations are claiming that the state of emergency has now actually been made permanent. Even seven years later, there were still arrests being made of alleged followers of Fethullah Gülen, which Turkey consistently accuses of being members of the "Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation" (FETÖ). For example, in June 2023 the alleged "FETÖ Turkmenistan director" was arrested, while a nephew of Gülen was detained in July 2023 ([AA, 17 June 2023](#), [YeniSafak, 14 July 2023](#)). Fears of being accused of FETÖ membership are still so strong, that most Turks do not dare to speak about it publicly. Anti-terrorism laws are also frequently used to target government critics and the last remaining independent journalists in Turkey ([Committee to Protect Journalists, 30 June 2022](#)).

2) Turkey's economy and geopolitical activities point to an uncertain future

Although Turkey has seen huge economic growth since 2000, there is now a lot of uncertainty about the future. The value of the Turkish Lira has been in a downward spiral for almost three years and youth [unemployment](#) remains generally high (Trading Economics, accessed 25 July 2023). The unstable political situation on the geopolitical level is another major challenge, with Turkey fighting against the PKK inside Turkey and the Kurdish-led SDF in Syria, and supporting the GNA in Libya, having supported Azerbaijan during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Hence, President Erdogan is playing an insecure (geopolitical) game on multiple fronts which might affect Turkey in the coming years.

3) All non-Sunni citizens have faced growing pressure

As a result of government policies and growing nationalism, the level of intolerance has risen and all those not siding with President Erdogan face oppression. Sunni citizens opposing Erdogan and non-Sunni citizens, including the tiny Christian minority, are facing growing pressure, which at times translates into violent incidents. Although Turkish Christians do not yet seem to be direct targets for government persecution, the continuing targeting of foreign Christians with entry bans is worrying and seems to be an effort to isolate the Turkish Protestant church.

The situation for Historical Christian communities in the southeast of Turkey is particularly worrying. Much of their property has been taken away by the Turkish government in recent years and their ancient culture is gradually disappearing. Besides that, the arrest and prosecution of US Pastor Andrew Brunson, who was being held as a political hostage from 2016 to 2018, shows clearly that the Turkish government under President Erdogan has developed into a regime without scruples. Overall, Christians need to act carefully, especially in the public sphere.

Another category of Christians facing severe pressure are the Christian refugees in the country, especially converts from a Muslim background (see above: *Social and cultural landscape*). It is likely that they will continue to face hardship in the country, both from parts of Turkish society, from individual government officials as well as from their own ethnic communities (such as Afghans, Syrians, Iraqis) and governments (e.g., Iran).

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WWL 2024: Church information / Turkey

Christian origins

Christianity has a long history in Turkey going back to the Bible's earliest New Testament days. Due to the missionary activity of the Apostle Paul and others, Christian congregations were founded in what is now Turkey in the 1st century AD. Indeed, the Bible's Book of Revelation starts off with letters written to seven congregations in western Turkey.

Under Constantine (Roman emperor from 306 to 337 AD) Christianity became the state religion. The city of Byzantium (a.k.a. Constantinople - the current Istanbul) became a hub for Christianity. In 1054 the Great Schism took place which caused a lasting split between the Western and Eastern Church. The result was that Byzantium became the center of eastern or Orthodox Christianity, and also the capital of a huge empire - the Byzantine Empire. In 1453, the Ottoman Turks conquered this empire when they took the capital by military force. Since then, Christians in Turkey have been under Muslim domination. A policy of Islamization began and Christianity gradually lost its influential position in the country.

Protestant missionaries entered Turkey in the early 19th century and from the 1840s worked predominantly with the Armenians. By the end of the 19th century there was a large Armenian Protestant population throughout the land. Since the 19th century, the power of the Ottoman Empire began to crumble, and territories were lost. During the First World War the Ottoman Empire sided with Germany and Austria-Hungary. In 1915 (and following years) more than 1 million Armenians and Assyrians [Syriacs] were killed, decimating the Armenian Orthodox Church in what came to be known as the Armenian Genocide ([Britannica, accessed 19 January 2024](#)).

The Ottoman Empire finally collapsed in 1920. After the 1st World War and the ensuing 1919 Paris Peace Conference and 1920 Treaty of Sevres, the allies divided Turkey up into various areas. The Greeks were given a large portion in the west, the Kurds and remaining Armenians were to have areas in the east, the allies were to control areas in the south and the main waterways, leaving a small part in the center for Turkish administration. The Greeks invaded to claim the area given to them but were defeated by the new Republican movement led by Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk). At the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, Turkey was formally recognized in its current form. The failed attempt by the Greeks helped lead to the population exchanges in the early 1920s; a large part of the Greek minority was forced to leave Turkey and moved to Greece, weakening not just the position of the Greek Orthodox Church but also the wider Christian witness in Turkey. In the newly formed state of Turkey, the remaining Greek, Armenian and Syriac minorities faced heavy discrimination.

Protestant missionaries were allowed to stay after the Treaty of Lausanne, but under tighter restrictions and with fewer rights than before and slowly stopped working there. Protestant missionaries returned to Turkey in the 1960s and found two Turkish Christians; the Turkish church has been slowly growing ever since.

Church spectrum today

Turkey: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	75,800	44.9
Catholic	45,000	26.6
Protestant	25,200	14.9
Independent	12,900	7.6
Unaffiliated	10,200	6.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	169,100	100.1
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	8,000	4.7
Renewalist movement	8,600	5.1

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

Originally, in 1923, only two church denominations were recognized by the Turkish state - the Greek Orthodox Church and the Armenian Orthodox Church. At that time, they together formed about 70% of all Christians in Turkey. In addition to the Syriac Orthodox community, which was not included for protection listed by the Lausanne Treaty, there are also Christians belonging to the Roman Catholic Church, expatriate Protestant Christians and indigenous Turkish Christians. After a lengthy court battle, official status was granted in the year 2000 to the Istanbul Protestant Church in Altintepe. This was the first (and up until now, only) official recognition of a Protestant church in Turkey.

In April 2007, the Turkish (Protestant) Christian community was shocked by the brutal torture and murder of Christian converts Ugur Yuksel and Necati Aydin and German national Tilman Geske. The murder took place at the Zirve publishing house in Malatya, in the east of the country (see above: *Map of country*). The culprits, who pretended to be interested in the Christian faith, were caught, but it took more than ten years to bring them to justice, while significant doubts remain whether all those involved were actually punished ([Mission Network News, 28 January 2019](#)).

Further southeast, once the heartland of the Historical Christian communities, only a remnant remains. In 1914, nearly 25% of the Turkish population was Christian. Only 0.2% remains today

([The Conversation, 21 November 2019](#)). Near Midyat (see above: *Map of country*), several monasteries are still inhabited, including the famous Mor Gabriel Monastery - built in 397 AD, which is the oldest surviving Syriac Orthodox monastery in the world. Another 1,500 year old monastery in the same area, Mor Yakup, has been restored after being abandoned following the Armenian Genocide. However, both monasteries are further threatened in their existence. Title deeds were taken from Mor Gabriel and only (partly) returned after a lengthy legal dispute even involving the European parliament and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ([World Watch Monitor, 1 June 2018](#)). Father Aho, the custodian of Mor Yakup, was sentenced in April 2021 to two years in prison for "supporting a terrorist organization" after providing bread for visitors who were allegedly members of the Kurdish PKK ([Asia News, 7 April 2021](#)). Christians from the Historical Christian communities in this area have been caught up in the struggle between the Turkish government and the local Kurdish population, and that ordeal continues to this day.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Historical Christian groups like the Armenian and Assyrian (Syriac) churches face high pressure and hostility in the south-eastern region of Turkey. For decades, they have been caught between the rivalries of the Turkish army and Kurdish resistance groups. Most Christians from those churches do not live in their ancestral region anymore but have moved to western areas of Turkey.

Most Turkish Protestant communities are located in the Western coastal cities, including Istanbul. Those cities tend to be more liberal and secular, while inland areas are more conservative, Islamic and socially hostile towards Christians. However, some urban areas within the bigger cities are conservative as well.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians

There are expatriate Christians in the country, but they are not involuntarily isolated from other Christian communities. Because these foreign Christians can freely interact with other Christian communities, they are not considered as a separate category for scoring and WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities

These include the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox and Greek Orthodox churches (the only churches "recognized" in the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923), and the Assyrian, Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholic churches, all of which are monitored regularly and subjected to controls and limitations by the government; their members are considered 'foreign' in many official dealings, as well as in the minds of the general public. They are hardly regarded as full members of Turkish society and encounter all kinds of legal and bureaucratic obstacles. For example, the Armenian and Greek Orthodox churches need permission from the Turkish government to select new church leaders.

Only a couple of thousand Christians remain in the southeast, the historical homeland of the Armenian and other Historical Christian communities. After the Armenian Genocide, they re-

mained under pressure from both the Turkish authorities as well as Kurdish clans, who are regularly trying to claim their remaining land. In addition, this is also the area where the PKK, the outlawed Kurdish militant independence organization, and the Turkish army have been fighting one another for decades. The Historical Christian communities have often become the victim of the ongoing friction between Kurdish separatists and the Turkish authorities. A typical example is the case of Assyrian priest Fr. Sefer Bileçen, who was sentenced to two years in prison on charges of supporting the PKK in 2021, after offering food to unknown men in his monastery.

There are also expatriate Christians belonging to Historical Christian churches. There are Russian Orthodox Christians who have residency permits, while there are also Roman Catholics, mostly immigrants from Africa and the Philippines. In the past few years, their ranks have swelled with the thousands of Christian refugees arriving from Syria and Iraq to escape the war in their homelands.

Converts to Christianity

Christian converts from a Muslim background bear the brunt of rights violations in Turkey. Pressure comes from family, friends, community and even the local authorities. They are considered traitors to the Turkish identity. Besides converts from a Turkish background, there are also communities of converts from other countries such as Iran.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations mostly exist as small groups and some are unable to afford a rented place of worship. Many of them are meeting in private homes, which can lead to opposition from neighbors.

External Links - Church information

- Christian origins: Britannica, accessed 19 January 2024 - <https://www.britannica.com/event/Armenian-Genocide>
- Church spectrum today - additional information: Mission Network News, 28 January 2019 - <https://www.mnnonline.org/news/malatya-murders-a-12-year-fight-for-justice/>
- Church spectrum today - additional information: The Conversation, 21 November 2019 - <https://theconversation.com/christians-have-lived-in-turkey-for-two-millennia-but-their-future-is-uncertain-127296>
- Church spectrum today - additional information: World Watch Monitor, 1 June 2018 - <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/06/turkey-returns-confiscated-syriac-church-property-deeds/>
- Church spectrum today - additional information: Asia News, 7 April 2021 - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Assyrian-monk-gets-two-years-in-a-Turkish-prison-for-giving-a-piece-of-bread-52809.html>

WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Turkey

Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

Position on the World Watch List

Turkey: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	64	50
WWL 2023	66	41
WWL 2022	65	42
WWL 2021	69	25
WWL 2020	63	36

The drop in overall score was caused mainly by a fall in the violence score from 5.7 points in WWL 2023 to 3.1 points in WWL 2024. There were fewer church buildings targeted than in WWL 2023, although overall societal attitudes toward the church have not significantly changed. Average pressure increased very slightly from 12.1 to the level of 12.2 points. Societal hatred remains a serious issue of concern for all Christians, whether they belong to the Historical, Protestant or refugee communities. In addition, the Protestant community continues to be targeted with entry bans, with several expatriate Christians being forced to leave the country. During the WWL 2024 reporting period, asylum seekers and refugees of Christian faith in particular (including converts from Islam to Christianity) from such countries as Iran, Afghanistan and Syria faced significant discrimination and abuse.

Persecution engines

Turkey: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Strong
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Strong
Clan oppression	CO	Medium
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all

Turkey: Persecution engines (continued)	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Islamic oppression (Strong) combined with Religious nationalism - Islamic (Strong)

Fanatical nationalism affects all categories of Christian communities in Turkey. The greatest pressure is on Christian converts from a Muslim background. Family, friends and community will often exert heavy pressure on them to return to Islam, the faith of the fathers. The general opinion is that a true Turk is a Muslim. Conversion is not only a question of family honor being hurt, it is also seen as a case of 'insulting Turkishness'. This can result in court cases and imprisonment. The cocktail of Islam and nationalism also affects non-convert Christians who are mostly from ethnic minorities (e.g., Greeks, Armenians, Syriacs). They are hardly regarded as full-fledged members of Turkish society and encounter all kinds of legal and bureaucratic obstructions. Furthermore, their church buildings are easily recognizable, which tends, at times, to provoke difficulties and cause added pressure.

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong)

Since the failed coup of July 2016, President Erdogan's government has dropped its mask of supporting democracy and is openly restricting freedom throughout Turkish society. The media have been curtailed, and all forms of opposition face persecution. In addition, President Erdogan has [declared](#) that "democracy and free press are incompatible" (Ahval News, 3 October 2018), which is not surprising given the many journalists in prison. Although Turkish Christians are not directly targeted by the government at the moment, except for some entry bans affecting Turkish Christians married to an expatriate Christian, the regime has openly declared Sunni Islam to be the religious norm in the country, thus clearly marginalizing Christianity.

Ethno-religious hostility (Strong)

This persecution engine has grown stronger in the context of the Kurdish conflict. Syriac Christians in the south-eastern region particularly feel the pressure from the Syrian civil war and are caught between Kurdish clans, the government and the Kurdish militant group, PKK. Tribal leaders use their power to push out the Syriacs from their homeland in the southeast. This mostly affects rural Christian populations. Many Christians live in large cities in western Turkey and are not strongly affected by this, although social hostility towards ethnic Christian minorities is present in all of Turkey.

Clan oppression (Medium)

Tribal law and customs still play an important role in especially the eastern provinces of Turkey. Converts from Islam are likely to face more pressure there, as conversion to Christianity is not only seen as betrayal of Islam, but also of the family and clan. Similarly, this engine also plays an

important role in the pressure faced by refugee converts from countries like Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

Drivers of persecution

Turkey: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG	STRONG	STRONG	MEDIUM				STRONG	
Government officials	Strong	Strong	Medium					Strong	
Ethnic group leaders			Medium						
Non-Christian religious leaders	Medium	Medium							
Violent religious groups	Medium	Medium							
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Strong	Strong	Strong	Medium					
One's own (extended) family	Strong			Medium					
Political parties	Medium	Strong							

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Islamic oppression and Religious nationalism - Islamic

- Government officials (Strong/Strong):** President Erdogan seems intent on changing Turkey from being a secular country into a Sunni Muslim one. So far, the changes have been implemented very gradually. One of those steps was the change in the Constitution after the [referendum](#) in April 2017, which gave the president more power and freed the way for him to stand in two more elections (The Guardian, 10 April 2017). In contrast to previous years, the government has now also started to target Turkish Christians: Some non-Turkish spouses of Turkish Christians have been banned from the country. In addition, many expatriate Christians who fulfilled important roles within the Turkish Protestant church have been banned from the country.

In the recent past, there have been issues over church property, particularly in the troubled south-eastern region. The government closed down and confiscated church buildings there for a variety of reasons. In some cases, the government said this happened because of reforms affecting land registry laws and the reorganization of municipalities, in other cases the government [seized control of churches](#) for security reasons (WWM, 18 July 2017). Although it is difficult to prove whether the government is purposely hindering Christian communities or not, one country researcher is convinced that the government is trying to push the already diminished Historical Christian communities out of Turkey.

- **Extended family (Strong / N/A), non-Christian religious leaders (Medium/Medium) and citizens (Medium/Strong):** Converts from Islam are put under pressure by their families and communities to return to Islam. Once discovered, a Christian with a Muslim background may be threatened with divorce and the loss of inheritance rights.
- **Political parties (Medium/Strong):** In July 2017, the opposition party, Republican People's Party (CHP), organized a "Justice March" against the government, which was joined by hundreds of thousands of people. Nevertheless, it seems that none of the opposition parties are vocally supporting the historical Christian or other Christian communities, which leaves them vulnerable to government pressure. In contrast, several parties encourage the Islamic-nationalism narrative.
- **Violent religious groups (Weak/Weak):** The Turkish Grey Wolves are a group that has grown in influence in Turkey, also due to the nationalist rhetoric of President Erdogan. Being fiercely nationalistic, they blend Turkish identity with Islam. The Grey Wolves are not shy of using violence and it is believed that its members have been behind several attacks on Christians, especially Christian refugee communities.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- **Government officials (Strong):** The backlash resulting from the alleged coup-attempt in July 2016 has led to heightened polarization and public scapegoating of anyone who (allegedly) does not support Turkey or President Erdogan's vision for Turkey. The fact that the alleged mastermind behind the coup, Fethullah Gülen, is residing in Pennsylvania and that the USA has not extradited him so far (due to lack of evidence that he orchestrated the attempted coup) has increased tension between Turkey and the USA. Protestants in particular have felt the deterioration in relations. Since the USA is seen as Christian, Christians in Turkey are portrayed as spies of the West. Hate-speech and threats to Protestant churches have increased. The general atmosphere is tense and the murder of South Korean evangelist Jinwook Kim in November 2019 stirred up fear.

Drivers of Ethno-religious hostility

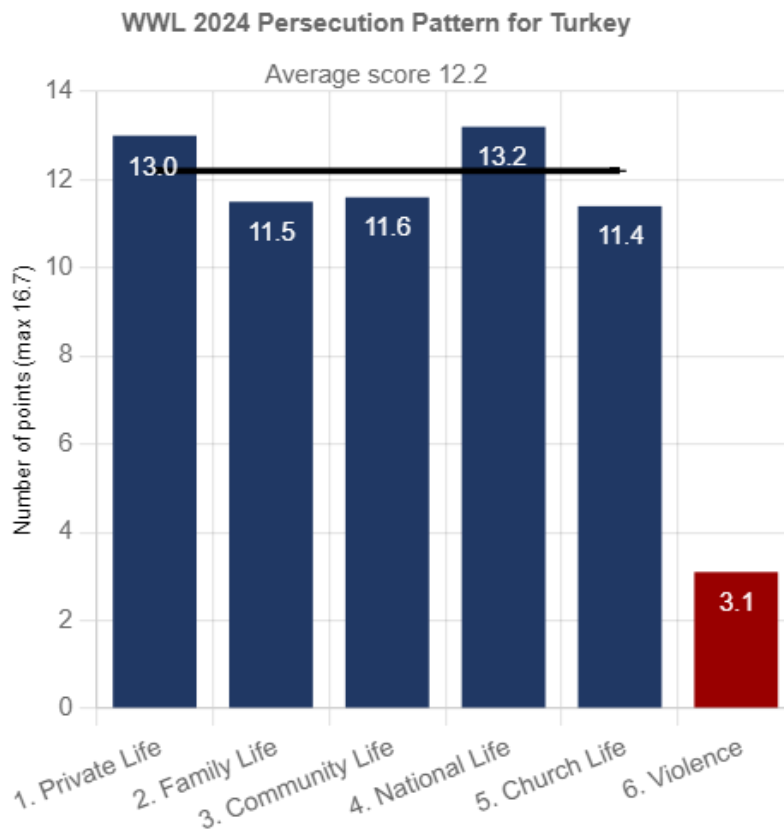
- **Citizens, including mobs (Strong):** Turkish society is in general hostile towards its ethnic religious minorities. Refugee children in particular have been bullied in schools, while right-wing mobs intimidatingly drove through Armenian neighborhoods in Istanbul during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war.
- **Ethnic group leaders (Medium):** In the more rural areas, conservative norms and values are upheld by ethnic leaders. In the southeast, it would seem that Kurdish chiefs are trying to force the historical Syriac community out of the traditionally Christian territory. The Kurdish PKK also seems to be purposely trying to drag the Syriacs into their conflict with the Turkish government for nationalistic reasons.
- **Government officials (Medium):** Government officials often have a negative attitude towards the ethnic historical Christian communities (Armenians, Syriacs and Greeks).

Drivers of Clan oppression

- **Citizens and (extended) family members (Medium):** Family ties can be strict within Turkey, and society regards a true Turk to be a Sunni Muslim. Christians, even those coming from

historical Christian communities, are seen as foreigners and a conversion from Islam to Christianity is often regarded as shaming the honor of the family.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for Turkey shows:

- The average pressure on Christians remains at a very high level and increased very slightly from 12.1 to 12.2 points.
- Pressure is strongest in the *National sphere of life* (13.2 points) and is directly related to the animosity towards Christians (caused both by nationalistic feeling and the growing societal opposition towards anything Christian). It indicates not only the difficulty Christian individuals experience but also that of Christian organizations operating in Turkey. Media reporting on Christians is also very biased and Christians regularly experience discrimination when engaging with the authorities.
- The next highest score is for *Private life* (13.0 points) and reflects both the difficulty for converts to openly practice their faith among their family members as well as the growing pressure on all Christians to be careful about how and with whom they speak about their faith in a climate that is hostile towards Christianity.
- The score for violence dropped from 5.7 points in WWL 2023 to 3.1 in WWL 2024. This was mainly caused by a lower number of reported attacks on church buildings.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (3.75 points)

Public expressions of faith in writing (often online) can result in some level of persecution, either in writing or in other forms. Especially converts from Islam to Christianity can sometimes lose their jobs, face harassment by family and friends, or receive threats after their new faith has come to be known.

Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.50 points)

Conversion is not prohibited by law. However, there are likely to be social and familial implications for conversion from Islam to Christianity (or from one Christian denomination to another). Although the level and nature of oppression from families varies considerably depending on the background of the family, conversion to Christianity is widely considered unacceptable.

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.50 points)

Levels of social hostility towards Christianity are high in Turkey and conversion to Christianity is widely considered unacceptable. Discussing one's Christian faith with fellow citizens can lead to harassment and social exclusion.

Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (3.25 points)

Harassment of Christians is common in Turkey and displaying Christians symbols can provoke hostility and (physical) violence.

Block 1: Additional information

Individually, Turkish convert Christians experience the highest levels of pressure in the *Private sphere* where family members can make life difficult, especially for (young) women. However, Turkish society is diverse, with traditional Islamic, secularist, leftist, cosmopolitan, nationalistic, or a combination of these traits, present in families. Hence, family pressure can vary significantly depending from which background a convert comes. In contrast to neighboring countries, Turkish converts do not have to be afraid of being arrested by the police, since conversion is not illegal in Turkey.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.75 points)

If the ID card of a convert parent reads Muslim, the family's children are obliged to attend courses on Islam at school. Although it has recently become easier to get an exemption from Islamic classes, many converts have not changed their religious registration because of the social stigma for them and their children. In addition, the Turkish curriculum is in general influenced by Turkish nationalism and the idea that Christianity is something alien to Turkish society.

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.75 points)

Several instances of children of Christians being bullied have been reported over the years. Children of Christians, and especially of converts, are often harassed either because of society's religious intolerance or because of nationalist zeal.

Block 2.6: Christian couples have been hindered in adopting children or serving as foster parents because of their faith. (3.25 points)

Adoption is not a common practice in Turkey, but Christians are even more likely to be unable to adopt a child. In 2013, President Erdogan stated that Turkish children adopted by Christian (and gay) couples in foreign countries should be retrieved and brought back to Turkey. Hence, it is nearly impossible for Christians to adopt a Muslim child.

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (3.25 points)

The hostile environment makes it difficult for parents who are converts to raise their children in a Christian way, especially if there is also pressure from the (extended) family.

Block 2: Additional information

Establishing Christian family life is not impossible in Turkey, but significant challenges remain, especially regarding the upbringing of children in a Christian way. Baptisms are not hindered by the authorities, but family and societal pressure can still force Turkish Christians to conduct them secretly. While marriage registration and other civil procedures are in principal secular in nature and do not cause much hindrance, finding a burial spot to have a Christian funeral can be difficult as the number of Christian cemeteries are few and the deceased has to be registered as a Christian. In theory, Turkish Christians should not be discriminated against in custody, inheritance or divorce cases as the law is secular and not based on the Sharia. However, in practice prejudices and discrimination might occur, especially due to the Islamization of the judiciary under President Erdogan.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (4.00 points)

Individual Christians are being watched by both government and society. Turkish Christians know that all their communication is monitored by the government. Also, Turkish intelligence agencies actively try to recruit informers and there are fears that it is not uncommon for unidentified agents to be participating in church activities. Even newspapers can be threat, as some media have been publishing negative articles (including names and pictures) about several Christians.

Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (3.75 points)

Name calling, death threats and other types of harassment are commonly experienced by many Christians in Turkey.

Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (3.75 points)

There are compulsory Islamic classes in the schooling system, although non-Muslim children can opt out. However, there have been reports of societal and teacher discrimination against those who opt out. Christian schoolchildren are regularly discriminated against in classes, by both teachers and other students. There are Christians who study at Turkish universities but they are barred from reaching higher positions or professorships at university level. In addition, thousands of new Imam Hatip schools have been opened in recent years; raising the total number of these Islamic education schools to over 5,000. Hatip schools are playing a more and more important role within the Turkish educational system and are generally inaccessible for Christians.

Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.75 points)

Christians have no access to state employment and experience discrimination in private employment, especially where employers have ties to the government.

Block 3: Additional information

Turkish society is in general hostile towards Christianity, not least because President Erdogan commonly portrays 'the West' as a threat. Turkish historical Christians are generally viewed as 'foreigners'; as the saying goes: "A true Turk is a Sunni Muslim", which summarizes well social attitudes towards Christians. In the once majority Christian southeast of Turkey, the few remaining Christians from the historical Christian communities are still being discriminated and driven out, as recent abductions and (legal) actions against clergy and monasteries have shown. Despite this, Turkish society is diverse with the Turkish Christian community being able to flourish.

ish in some areas, especially in the western, more liberal coastal areas.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.6: Christians have been barred from public office, or has promotion been hindered for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)

Access to employment in the public sector, state security apparatus and law enforcement is denied to Christians, as is promotion in the army, despite obligatory military service. Although one's religious affiliation is no longer visibly displayed on the new ID cards, it is still registered on the chip in the card.

Block 4.10: Media reporting has been incorrect or biased against Christians. (4.00 points)

Local media and columnists in particular have been biased against Christians. There have been several reports of intolerance and prejudice against Christians.

Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (3.75 points)

The Turkish Constitution is very restrictive in its approach towards the rights of religious minorities. Although the Constitution does not technically limit the freedom of religion, it clearly promotes 'Turkishness' above all other ideologies.

Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (3.75 points)

Christians have to be very careful when expressing themselves in public. Social prejudice makes it difficult to speak out and the Turkish government does not accept criticism.

Block 4: Additional information

At the national level, Christianity is viewed as a foreign influence, despite the fact that the historical Christian communities have roots going back to the very early days of Christianity. Especially since the alleged coup-attempt in 2016, Turkey has seen a rise in Islamization and has become even more religiously (and ethnically) intolerant. A clear example is the case of Fabronia Benno, the first Syriac Christian politician, who functioned as co-mayor of the south-eastern city of Mardin. Running under the name Februniye Akyol, as longstanding policies prohibit the use of the Syriac language, she was dismissed after two years in 2016 following accusation of having ties with the Kurdish PKK.

In recent years, hundreds of expatriate Christians, including ones with Turkish spouses and children, have been deported from the country. Although such action is claimed to be necessary on grounds of security, it seems that these deportations are linked to the holding of a conference about working with youth and children. In addition, it is likely that foreign spouses of Turkish Christians and pastors are being deported to put the latter under pressure. Turkish converts can formally change their religious affiliation, but family pressure and fear of discrimination prevents some from doing so. While the media have almost been completely taken over by companies linked to the AKP and President Erdogan, Turkish civil society and NGOs have become increasing-

ly restricted. For instance, a recent NGO law focusing on anti-terrorism allows severe interference by the authorities.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (3.75 points)

It is impossible to register as a new religious community. Although there is an option for churches to register as an "association", this is also a difficult process and some applications have been denied. Establishing a foundation with the aim of supporting a new religious community is also prohibited.

Block 5.3: Christian communities have been hindered in building or renovating church buildings or in claiming historical religious premises and places of worship which had been taken from them earlier. (3.75 points)

It is very difficult to get official permits for repairing or renovating church buildings. Many church buildings, seminaries or schools that have been confiscated in the past, have not been returned. Building new church buildings is almost impossible. It is an absolute exception - the first time in a hundred years! - that a new church was built in Istanbul. The Syriac Orthodox church of St. Ephrem was opened in attendance of President Erdogan himself in October 2023. ([Vatican News, 11 October 2023](#)).

Block 5.10: Christians have been hindered in training their own religious leaders. (3.75 points)

The training of Christian leaders is impossible to do legally in Turkey. The seminaries of the Historical Christian communities were closed down in the 1970s and have remained closed ever since, despite a campaign by the Greek Orthodox Church to reopen their seminary in Halki. Only unofficial training can take place. Many church leaders are sent abroad for their training.

Block 5.18: Churches have been hindered in establishing, managing, maintaining and conducting schools, or charitable, humanitarian, medical, social or cultural organizations, institutions and associations. (3.75 points)

It remains very difficult to formally establish and run any kind of association with a clear Christian profile. All activities in this area are monitored and Christians struggle even more as they are supported by foreign churches in most cases, which is viewed with suspicion.

Block 5: Additional information

Church life is restricted in Turkey. Although Christians are able to freely gather for worship, Christian converts do not have their own church buildings; they have to rent spaces or have to use (foreign) historical church buildings. Following the Lausanne treaty, the Armenian and Greek Orthodox churches need permission from the Turkish authorities to appoint church leaders. All church activities, publications and (foreign) visitors are being monitored; there were recent attempts by the intelligence agencies to recruit church members as informers among both Turkish and foreign refugee Christians. On the positive side, Bibles and Christian materials can

be imported, printed and sold openly, although churches refrain from distributing them freely because of (severe) social opposition. Likewise, Christian programs can be broadcast from within Turkey, but some churches censor themselves and keep a low profile to avoid social opposition. Others have an open and active online presence, but have to put up with a lot of hate-speech.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced

Possible reasons for this may be:

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons

- *Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*
- *In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.*
- *Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.*

3. The use of symbolic numbers

In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWL chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.*

Turkey: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	2	7
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	3	0
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	0	1
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	1	0
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	10 *	10 *
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	1
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	1	1
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	1	5
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	12	3

In the WWL 2024 reporting period:

- **Christians killed:** No Christians were killed because of their faith during the reporting period, but several Christians have been killed in previous years.
- **Churches and Christian buildings attacked:** One historical church building was desecrated (see *Specific examples of violations* above), while another was vandalized.
- **Christians attacked:** Several Christians have faced attacks, harassment and bullying, both from family and community members.
- **Christians arrested:** At least three expatriate Christians have been detained for shorter and longer periods after being designated as a 'security risk'.
- **Christian properties attacked:** At least one Christian association experienced a burglary, with a strong suspicion this happened to them because they are known to be Christian.

- **Christians forced to relocate or leave the country:** Several foreign Christians were forced to leave the country or were not allowed to re-enter. Several Turkish Christians had to relocate because of (family) pressure.

5 Year trends

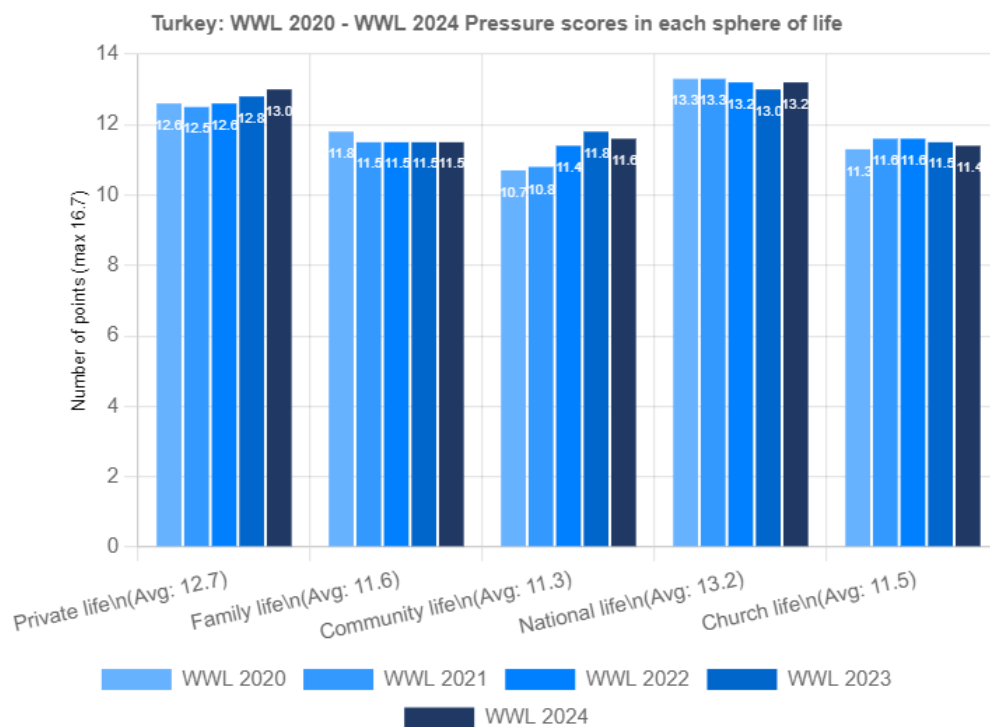
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Turkey: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	12.2
2023	12.1
2022	12.0
2021	11.9
2020	11.9

The table above shows that the overall level of pressure on Christians has been creeping up in the last five reporting periods, and is at a very high level. This reflects the growing pressure on Christians in general due to the challenging political climate.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The chart above shows that - with the exception of *Community life* - the level of pressure in all *spheres of life* has more or less been stable over the last five WWL reporting periods. The very high score for the *National sphere of life* for five consecutive WWL reporting periods reflects the difficult political and public climate for Christians in Turkey.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



The chart above shows that the score for violence targeting Christians in Turkey has fluctuated between fairly high and very high levels. The highest score occurred in WWL 2021 and was mainly caused by the killing of two Christians and a higher number of attacks on church properties being reported. Likely due to less Christian activities being organized during the COVID-19 pandemic, fewer violent incidents were reported for WWL 2022. The rise in WWL 2023 was due largely to a higher number of attacks on church properties, with also a higher number of Christians being forced to relocate inside the country. In contrast, less church attacks were reported in WWL 2024.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites; Denied access to social community/networks
Security	Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Enforced religious dress code
Technological	-

Turkey sees high levels of domestic violence and femicide. Although the country remains part of CEDAW, the Law on Protection of Family and Prevention of Violence against Women (2012) and the National Action Plan on Combating violence against Women (2021-2025), gender inequalities and stereotypes continue to perpetuate child and early marriages and widespread violence against women and girls ([UN Women, 2023](#)). A country expert summarized as follows: “Generally speaking, women are more vulnerable to persecution in Turkey because their position in society is of inferior status. ... Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence, did anything but help the role of women. Christian or other minority women are particularly vulnerable, even more so in rural areas. Violence and murders of women have massively increased over the past years under Erdogan’s rule.”

Female converts are most vulnerable to persecution, especially in rural areas. Within Islamic society they are already considered to have less authority than men and are subject to familial control. Becoming a Christian, or marrying a Christian, contradicts the expectations on women to bring honor to their family; they are expected to honor their families by their career choices, their relationships and their marriage choices. As the holders of familial honor, the behavior of women and girls impacts how the family and community is perceived. This means that women are controlled and beaten for both real or imaginary shameful behavior. The violation of rights of women and girls affects their families, inspiring anger, fear and anxiety in other family members.

Converts – particularly those who are unmarried – risk sexual abuse, harassment, rejection and being denied access to church or religious materials. Sexual abuse is rarely talked about in Turkey’s honor and shame culture – as such, many victims carry trauma alone. Reliable statistics for the number of women and girls affected by sexual violence is largely absent due to the stigma associated with reporting. Country experts indicate that female Turkish Christians experience greater levels of mental abuse than men in general.

Christians also face pressure in the public sphere. Given the current increased emphasis on Islam, women are likely to face increasing pressure to meet Islamic expectations of dress and conduct. Those who fail to do so risk being harassed, insulted and even physically harmed.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Political and Legal	-
Security	Forced out of home – expulsion; Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

In Turkey, media, police, bureaucratic and communal discrimination and hostility target both male and female Christians. However, men face the additional pressure of interwoven religious and cultural expectations: They are expected to be defenders of Islam and 'Turkishness', concepts which are closely aligned in public perception. Failure to live up to that expectation creates pressure on men that can prevent them from ever stepping foot into a church.

According to sources, men and boys are more likely to be detained or threatened, face job loss and unemployment, or family rejection. Men may be required by their employers to attend Friday prayers at mosques, which is not expected of women. They additionally face physical violence and death threats. During military service men are in an environment where, if their Christian religion is recorded in their ID, they are likely to be viewed with suspicion by their superiors and bullied by their peers. Despite obligatory military service, Christians are unlikely to rise in army ranks, and converts face extra challenges to live as a Christian in the military environment. A country expert shared a story of a convert conscripted into the army who “had to keep his Christian faith basically a secret... maintaining his devotional practices had become a virtual impossibility.”

Christians also have much difficulty finding employment in the public sector, while they also face discrimination in the private sector. As men are the main financial providers, the violation of rights of male Christians can hit his wider family and community hard. It can cause anger, fear and anxiety. The psychological toll of being unable to provide for their families can be considerable.

Persecution of other religious minorities

In Turkey, young nationalistic Turks can be quickly won over by hate-speech propaganda and carry out violent acts, thinking they have the state's and public approval. In addition, the Gülen movement has been heavily persecuted since the 2016 coup-attempt. Yazidis in Turkey's southeast face similar issues as the Syriac Christians. Nusayri refugees (Alawites) from Syria feel enormous pressure to leave the country. Alevites are also discriminated against (officially they do not exist as a specific group and cannot run any houses of worship) as well as Kurds in general.

According to the US Department of State (IRFR 2022 Turkey):

- "The government continued to limit the rights of non-Muslim minorities, especially those not recognized under the government's interpretation of the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which includes only Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians. ... The government continued to treat Alevi Islam as a heterodox Muslim 'sect'. Accordingly, the government did not recognize Alevi houses of worship (*cemevis*), despite a 2018 ruling by the Supreme Court of Appeals that *cemevis* are places of worship. In March 2018, the head of Diyanet said mosques were the appropriate places of worship for both Alevis and Sunnis." (p.2, 13)
- Non-Sunni religious minorities are also disadvantaged in the educational system: "Non-Sunni Muslims and nonpracticing Muslims said they continued to face difficulty obtaining exemptions from compulsory religious instruction in primary and secondary schools and often had to choose from electives dealing with different aspects of Sunni Islam The government said the compulsory instruction covered a range of world religions, but some religious groups, including Alevis and members of Christian denominations, stated the courses largely reflected Hanafi Sunni Islamic doctrine and contained negative and incorrect information about other religious groups." (p.16).

Both government officials and society verbally attack religious minority groups such as Alevites and Jews and ethnic minority groups such as the Kurds. This trend is likely to continue. Although toning down its public support of Muslim Brotherhood entities following rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt, Turkey still remains a supporter. In line with this support, public attitudes are often anti-Israel and anti-semitic in nature. Anti-Jewish conspiracy theories and negative stereotypes are not uncommon in the public sphere, especially on social media. This has naturally made the small Jewish community in Turkey anxious and some hundreds have recently emigrated to Israel, leaving those behind even more vulnerable. However, Jewish citizens reported that "the government continued to coordinate with them on security issues", while the neglected Jewish cemetery in central Bodrum was renovated by the municipality. Similarly, renovations continued on the Jewish Cultural Heritage Project in Izmir (IRFR 2022 Turkey, p.15).

In November 2018, [the Appeals Court ruled](#) that the government should pay the electricity expenses of *cemevis* (Alevi houses of worship), just as the government also does for mosques ([Al-Monitor, 10 December 2018](#)). However, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) gave a similar ruling in 2016, and both rulings seem to have been ignored by the government. If the government does heed this ruling, that might open up possibilities for churches to ask for equal treatment too.

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Islamic oppression / Religious nationalism - Islamic

There has been a rise in the use of hate-speech in the press directed against unnamed 'foreign entities', which is commonly understood as a reference to the (Christian) West and hence foreign Christian church workers and the (Turkish) churches they support. The general atmosphere remains tense. Christian refugees are experiencing increasing restrictions from the authorities and are being threatened with deportation. It is not likely that the situation will improve. The government efforts regarding Islamization are continuing and the pressure on the Christian community has increased massively ever since the coup-attempt in 2016 - and is still growing.

Dictatorial paranoia

The arrest and detention of Andrew Brunson in 2016 (he was released in 2018) resulted in many foreign families leaving the country and in fewer new Christian workers considering taking up positions in Turkey. Furthermore, the government expelled at least 80 foreign Christian workers and their families in the months covered by the WWL 2020 - WWL 2024 reporting periods. In the last two years, foreign Christians married to a Turkish Christian have also been targeted, which has made fears grow that in the future the Turkish government will increasingly target indigenous Turkish Christians after so many expatriate Christians have been driven out. In addition, President Erdogan has strong presidential powers, which allow him to have a strong grip on the country, including (social) media, and limit the room for maneuver for any form of opposition.

Ethno-religious hostility

The Christian population is tiny, consisting only of 0.2% of the population. Taking into consideration the fact that at the start of the First World War Christians made up nearly 25% of the country's population (The Conversation, 21 November 2019), the fear of total extinction is not unrealistic, in particular for the ancient Historical Christian communities. The overall atmosphere against Christians is hostile, with Christianity being seen as something foreign. As long as "Armenian" is used as a slur, instead of being spoken of as a respected and legitimate minority, it is unlikely that the attitude towards Christians will change.

Clan oppression

Although urbanization and modernization are continuing, it is likely that adherence to tribal customs and laws will remain important in parts of the country. This will continue to make conversion from Islam to Christianity difficult.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: declared - <https://ahvalnews.com/press-freedom/media-and-democracy-not-compatible-says-erdogan>
- Drivers of persecution description: referendum - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/10/turkish-referendum-all-you-need-to-know>

- Drivers of persecution description: seized control of churches - <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/07/legal-limbo-turkeys-syriac-christian-properties-still-unresolved>
- Block 5.3: Christian communities have been hindered in building or renovating church buildings or in claiming historical religious premises and places of worship which had been taken from them earlier. (3.75 points): Vatican News, 11 October 2023 - <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/world/news/2023-10/turkey-first-church-syriac-orthodox-mor-st-ephrem-istanbul.html>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: (UN Women, 2023). - <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/where-we-are/turkey/ending-violence-against-women>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: the Appeals Court ruled - <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/12/turkey-court-recognizes-alevi-houses-of-worship.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Al-Monitor, 10 December 2018 - <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/12/turkey-court-recognizes-alevi-houses-of-worship.html>
- Future outlook: nearly 25% - <https://theconversation.com/christians-have-lived-in-turkey-for-two-millennia-but-their-future-is-uncertain-127296>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Turkey>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.