

CYPRUS 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Since 1974 the southern part of Cyprus has been under the authority of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus, while the northern part, administered by Turkish Cypriots, proclaimed itself the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”) in 1983. The United States does not recognize the “TRNC,” nor does any country other than Turkey. A substantial number of Turkish troops remained on the island. A buffer zone, or “green line,” patrolled by the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), separates the two parts.

REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and protects the freedom to worship, teach, and practice one’s religion. It grants the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and recognizes the Islamic institution Vakf, which regulates religious activity for Turkish Cypriots. The Republic of Cyprus government granted Turkish Cypriots access to religious sites in the government-controlled area, including for visits by approximately 1,000 Turkish Cypriots and foreign nationals to Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque on three occasions. Six mosques in the government-controlled area were open for all five daily prayers and had the necessary facilities for ablutions; several other mosques were also open but lacked some facilities. The government did not grant permission to religious groups to make upgrades at mosques. The government ombudsman found four complaints about restrictions on religious freedom in schools had merit and requested consultations with the Ministry of Education. An evangelical Christian pastor reported evangelical prisoners were not granted the same access to worship services as Orthodox Christians or Muslims. The government required those who objected to military service on religious grounds to do alternate service for longer periods.

The leaders of the main religious groups on the island continued to meet and visit places of worship across the “green line.” The religious leaders had their first joint meeting with the political leaders of the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities. The Jewish community reported incidents of assault, verbal harassment, and vandalism. Some religious minority groups reported pressure to engage in religious ceremonies of majority groups. Members of the Greek Orthodox majority sometimes faced social ostracism from the Greek Orthodox community if they converted to another religion, including Islam.

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U.S. embassy staff met with the government, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom issues, including access to religious sites island-wide. Within the government, embassy representatives met with officials from the Ministry of Interior, the Department of Antiquities, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Defense, and the ombudsman. Embassy officials discussed religious freedom issues with the NGOs Movement for Equality, Support, Anti-Racism (KISA) and Future Worlds Center, and with representatives of the Armenian Orthodox, Bahai, Buddhist, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jewish, Latin, Maronite, and Muslim communities. Embassy officials encouraged religious leaders to continue their dialogue and hold reciprocal visits to places of religious significance on either side of the "green line."

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population of the island at 1.2 million (July 2015 estimate). According to an October 2011 Republic of Cyprus census, the population of the government-controlled area is more than 858,000. According to information from the 2011 census, 89.1 percent of the population in the government-controlled area is Greek Orthodox Christian and 1.8 percent is Muslim. Other religious groups include Roman Catholics (2.9 percent), Protestants (2 percent), Buddhists (1 percent), Maronite Catholics (0.5 percent), Armenian Orthodox (0.3 percent), Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Bahais. Recent immigrants and migrant workers are predominantly Roman Catholic, Muslim, and Buddhist. The country's chief rabbi estimates the number of Jews at approximately 3,000, most of whom are foreign-born residents.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and protects the right of individuals to profess their faith and to worship, teach, and practice or observe their religion, individually or collectively, in private or in public, subject to limitations due to considerations of national security or public health, safety, order, and morals, or the protection of civil liberties. The constitution specifies all religions whose doctrines or rites are not secret are free and equal before the law. It protects the right to change one's religion and prohibits the use of physical or

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moral compulsion to make a person change, or prevent a person from changing, his or her religion.

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

The constitution sets guidelines for the Vakf, an Islamic institution regulating religious activity for Turkish Cypriots. The Vakf is tax exempt and has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with its laws and principles. No legislative, executive, or other act may contravene or interfere with the Church of Cyprus or the Vakf. The Vakf operates only in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and does not administer mosques located in the government-controlled area. The Vakf acts as caretaker of religious properties in the Turkish Cypriot community. The government serves as caretaker and provides financial support to mosques in government-controlled areas.

The constitution recognizes three other religious groups: Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, and "Latins" (Cypriot Roman Catholics) as institutions exempt from taxes and eligible for government subsidies.

Religious groups not among the five recognized in the constitution are not required to register with the government. To engage in financial transactions and maintain bank accounts, however, they must register as nonprofit organizations. In order to register as a nonprofit organization, a religious group must submit through an attorney an application stating its purpose and provide the names of its directors. Religious groups registered as nonprofit organizations are tax exempt and must provide annual reports to the government; they are not eligible for government subsidies.

The government requires Greek Orthodox religious instruction and attendance at religious services before major holidays in public primary and secondary schools. The Ministry of Education may excuse primary school students of other religious groups from attending religious services and instruction at the request of their guardians, but Greek Orthodox children in primary school do not have the option of opting out. Secondary school students may be excused by the Ministry of Education from religious instruction on grounds of religion or conscience, and they

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may be excused from attending religious services on any grounds at the request of their guardians, or at their own request if over the age of 16.

Conscientious objectors on religious grounds are exempt from active military duty and from reservist service in the National Guard but must complete alternative service. There are two options available for conscientious objectors: unarmed military service, which is a maximum of five months longer than the normal 24-month service; or social service, which is a maximum of nine months longer than normal service but requires fewer hours per day. The penalty for refusing military or alternate service is up to three years' imprisonment or a fine of up to 6,000 euros (\$6,529) or both. Those who refuse both military and alternate service, even if objecting on religious grounds, are considered to have committed an offense involving dishonesty or moral turpitude and are disqualified from holding public office – including the Presidency of the Republic or membership in the House of Representatives, the European Parliament, and local government bodies – and are not eligible for permits to provide private security services.

Government Practices

The government approved the registration of a Buddhist organization as a nonprofit organization in July.

Turkish Cypriots were granted access to religious sites in the government-controlled area; however, Muslim community leaders stated the government had not granted them full access to mosques located on cultural heritage sites and denied them any administrative authority over the sites. Eight mosques in the government-controlled area were open. Six of those were available for all five daily prayers and had the necessary facilities for ablutions. A Muslim leader reported there were no bathrooms at the Bayraktar Mosque in the government-controlled area. The Ministry of Communications and Works' Department of Antiquities responded that it provided bathroom facilities at a distance of approximately 100 meters away, because the mosque is part of the medieval Venetian wall of the city, making it impossible to install sewage pipes. By year's end the government had not decided on a Muslim leader's request for permission to make improvements at the functioning mosques.

Turkish Cypriots stated the Department of Antiquities kept the Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque, the most important Islamic religious site in the country, open during standard museum hours, limiting access to the mosque to two of the five daily

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prayer times. The mosque's imam had to notify the Ministry of the Interior and Department of Antiquities to keep the mosque open after 5:00 p.m. in the autumn/winter months and after 7:30 p.m. in the spring/summer months. In order to cross the "green line" without identification checks to visit religious sites, Turkish Cypriots were required to submit their requests to UNFICYP, which then facilitated the approval process with the government.

The government waived visa requirements for the movement of pilgrims south across the "green line" to visit Hala Sultan Tekke to conduct prayers and services. On July 21, 1,000 pilgrims crossed into the government-controlled areas for a pilgrimage to Hala Sultan Tekke on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr. The crossing was the result of an agreement between Archbishop Chrysostomos and Mufti Atalay on July 8. On September 30, the police escorted approximately 1,000 Turkish Cypriots, Turks, and other foreign nationals to Hala Sultan Tekke for prayers shortly after the end of Eid al-Adha. For the first time, a Greek Orthodox priest attended the service representing the archbishop. On December 23, 1,000 Turkish and Turkish Cypriot pilgrims visited Hala Sultan Tekke for prayers commemorating the Prophet Muhammad's birthday.

The ombudsman reported in June her office had examined four complaints she had received in 2014 related to the implementation of the Ministry of Education's policy on religious freedom in education. In one of these, the parents of a high school student stated the school's deputy principal pressured and threatened the student when he refused to participate in a school-organized religious service. In another complaint, the parents of a student exempted from religious instruction said he was punished with unexcused absences for not attending religion classes. The problem was rectified after the submission of an additional complaint to the school administration. The Association of Atheists of Cyprus complained about a 2013 Ministry of Education circular encouraging public schools to organize groups of pupils to help during the liturgy at Greek Orthodox Churches and to participate in children's church choirs. A secondary school student submitted the fourth complaint after the Ministry of Education rejected his application for exemption from religious instruction on the grounds of conscience. The ministry said the student should have stated in his application he was not an Orthodox Christian in order to qualify for exemption.

The ombudsman concluded, after examining the four complaints, the Ministry of Education followed practices that did not safeguard the state's neutrality and obstructed freedom of religion, thought, expression, and conscience, which created

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the reasonable impression it favored a specific religion. Following consultations with the ombudsman, the ministry issued a new circular amending the policy on exemptions. The ombudsman objected to the circular because it required applicants to state their religion. The ombudsman's office reported it continued to receive complaints after the implementation of the new policy and sent a letter to the Ministry of Education pointing out the problematic aspects of the new policy. The ombudsman continued to monitor this issue.

The pastor of the Evangelical Christian Center in Nicosia stated in January evangelical prisoners in the Central Prison did not receive the same treatment as Christian Orthodox and Muslim prisoners. He said the Orthodox and Muslim prisoners attended religious services within the prison compound once a week, whereas evangelical Christians were allowed to congregate twice a month and participation was restricted only to those whom the pastor named in advance.

Military recruits were required to take part in a common prayer led by Church of Cyprus clergy during swearing-in ceremonies. Recruits of other faiths, atheists, and those who did not wish to take the oath for reasons of conscience were not required to raise their hand during the swearing-in ceremony. They instead gave a pledge of allegiance at a separate gathering.

Unlike in previous years, although the government's policies remained unchanged, there were no reports of criticism from NGOs or religious groups that alternative service for conscientious objectors was longer than military service or that the procedure to determine conscientious objector status was not independent and impartial. The Office of the Ombudsman did not receive any complaints from conscientious objectors about the procedures the government used to confirm their conscientious objector status and eligibility for alternative service.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Members of minority religious groups said they feared negative social reactions if they chose to refrain from participating in public religious ceremonies. Greek Orthodox adherents, who converted to other faiths, including Islam, said they hid their conversion from family and friends out of fear of social ostracism. Members of all minority religious groups reported relations between the Church of Cyprus and other religious communities in the government-controlled area were cordial.

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Representatives of the Jewish community reported incidents of assault, verbal harassment, and vandalism directed against people with yarmulkes and *payot* (hair side curls). In January a crowd of up to 20 young Greek Cypriots threw rocks at an assistant rabbi's house while he hid inside. In March a member of the Jewish community was assaulted in his car and his prayer books were thrown out into the street by a Greek-speaking assailant. The Jewish community representatives reported receiving nearly weekly reports of verbal harassment of observant Jews by individuals from Arab countries in the Finikoudes district of Larnaca.

The Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage (TCCH), one of the bicomunal working groups set up as part of the UN-facilitated settlement talks, identified cultural heritage sites throughout the island in need of emergency preservation measures. These sites included seven churches and monasteries in the north and four mosques in the government-controlled area. In March the TCCH announced the completion of emergency preservation works at the Evretou Mosque and the Tzerkezoi Mosque in the government-controlled area.

The leaders of the main religious groups on the island continued to meet regularly and visit places of worship on both sides of the buffer zone. On September 10, the leaders of the five principal religious groups, Archbishop Chrysostomos II of the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus; Dr. Talip Atalay, Mufti of Cyprus; Archbishop Soueif of the Maronite Catholic Church of Cyprus; Archbishop Nareg of the Armenian Orthodox Church of Cyprus; and Father Jerzy Kraj, representing the Latin Catholic Church of Cyprus, met jointly with the leaders of the two communities, the first such joint meeting since 1974. In the meeting, the religious leaders reiterated their request for free access for worship, upkeep, renovations, and restorations of their respective religious monuments on both sides of the "green line" and agreed to continue to meet regularly to better understand and support each other.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives met frequently with the government, including with officials from the Ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, Justice, and Defense, as well as the Department of Antiquities and the Office of the Ombudsman, to discuss religious freedom issues, such as access to religious sites on either side of the "green line" dividing the country.

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Embassy staff discussed religious freedom issues with the NGOs Movement for Equality, Support, Anti-Racism (KISA) and Future Worlds Center, and met with representatives of the Armenian Orthodox, Bahai, Buddhist, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witness, Jewish, Latin, Maronite, and Muslim communities to listen to their concerns about access to religious sites. Embassy officials were supportive of the ongoing religious leaders' dialogue and encouraged the continuing reciprocal visits of Christian and Muslim leaders to places of worship on both sides of the "green line."

THE AREA ADMINISTERED BY TURKISH CYPRIOTS

Executive Summary

Since 1974 the northern part of Cyprus has been run by a Turkish Cypriot administration that proclaimed itself the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" ("TRNC") in 1983. The United States does not recognize the "TRNC," nor does any country other than Turkey. The Turkish Cypriot "constitution" refers to the "state" as secular and provides for freedom of religious faith and worship consistent with public order and morals. It prohibits forced participation in worship and religious services and states religious education may be conducted only under "state" supervision. It grants the Islamic Vakf, which manages land that has been donated as an endowment by Muslims for charitable purposes as well as sites of worship, the exclusive right to regulate its internal affairs in accordance with Vakf laws. UNFICYP reported that the number of Christian pilgrims allowed access to religious sites rose during the year. The Turkish Cypriot authorities approved 88 of 128 requests received through UNFICYP for access to Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox places of worship in the north. Turkish Cypriot authorities reported they allowed church services for the first time in more than 40 years at 14 locations. Some minority religious groups reported police surveillance of their activities and political criticism of Turkish Cypriot converts to other faiths, particularly Christianity. Turkish troops limited access to Maronite villages and churches in Turkish military zones.

Some religious groups reported Turkish Cypriot converts from Islam to other religions, particularly Christianity, faced social ostracism. Religious leaders continued to promote religious dialogue by meeting and arranging visits to places of worship across the "green line."

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Embassy representatives met with Turkish Cypriot representatives to discuss access to religious sites and the ability to hold religious services at the sites without restrictions. Embassy officials also discussed religious freedom issues within the Turkish Cypriot community with representatives of the Armenian Orthodox, Alevi Muslim, Bahai, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Protestant, and Sunni Muslim communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to 2011 census information from the Turkish Cypriot authorities, the population of the area administered by Turkish Cypriots is 286,257. The census contains no data on religious affiliation. Sociologists estimate as much as 97 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. Religious groups report an estimated 10,000 migrant workers of Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab origin are Alevi Muslims, and there are 100-200 members of the Naqshbandi Sufi order. Other small groups include approximately 330 members of the autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus, 200 members of the Russian Orthodox Church, 150 Bahais, 150 Maronite Catholics, 180 Anglicans, 150 Jews, 300 Turkish-speaking Protestants, and 40 Jehovah's Witnesses. There are approximately 450 African students who are predominantly Pentecostals and Roman Catholics.

Section II. Status of “Government” Respect for Religious Freedom

“Legal” Framework

The Turkish Cypriot “constitution” refers specifically to a “secular republic” and provides for freedom of conscience and religious faith and unrestricted worship and religious ceremonies provided they do not contravene public order or morals. It prohibits forced prayer, forced attendance at religious services, condemnation based on religious beliefs, and compelling of individuals to disclose their religious beliefs. Religious education may only be conducted under “state” supervision. The “law” does not recognize any specific religion, and individuals cannot “exploit or abuse” religion to establish, even partially, a state based on religious precepts or for political or personal gain. The Vakf, an Islamic foundation that manages property donated as a religious endowment for Turkish Cypriots as well as sites of worship, has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with Vakf laws and principles. Although the “constitution” states the Vakf shall be exempt from all taxation, its commercial operations are subject to applicable taxes. It also receives income from properties it manages.

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According to the “constitution,” the Turkish Cypriot authorities shall help the Vakf in the execution of Islamic religious services and in meeting the expenses of such services. No other religious organization is tax exempt or receives subsidies from the Turkish Cypriot authorities.

The 1975 Vienna III Agreement covers the treatment of Greek Cypriots and Maronite Catholics living in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and the treatment of Turkish Cypriots living in the government-controlled area. Among other provisions, the agreement provides for facilities for religious worship for Greek Cypriots, stating they are free to stay and “will be given every help to lead a normal life, including facilities for education and for the practice of their religion.”

Turkish Cypriot “regulations” stipulate Greek Orthodox residents may conduct liturgies or masses led by two designated priests at three designated functional churches in the Karpas Peninsula without seeking permission, and Maronite residents may hold liturgies or masses at four designated functional Maronite churches without seeking permission. Religious groups must submit applications to the authorities for permission to hold religious services at churches or monasteries other than these seven designated churches. Permission is also necessary for priests other than those officially designated to conduct services. Specific permission is required for services in which Cypriots participate who are not residents in the Turkish Cypriot-administered area, such as members of the Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox Churches. UNFICYP coordinates applications, which must be submitted 10 days before the date of such religious services.

The “Religious Affairs Department” represents Islam in the area administered by the Turkish Cypriots. Whereas the Vakf manages land that has been donated as an endowment by Muslims for charitable purposes, the “Religious Affairs Department” oversees imams’ conduct of prayers and sermons in mosques.

Religious groups are not required to register with authorities as associations, although only associations registered with the “Ministry of Interior” have the right to engage in commercial activity and maintain bank accounts. Religious groups and nonreligious groups have the same registration process and are required to submit the founders’ names and photocopies of their identification cards to the “interior ministry,” along with a copy of the association’s rules and regulations. Associations do not receive tax-exempt status or any “government” benefits or

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subsidies. Religious groups are not permitted to register as associations if the stated purpose of the association is to provide religious education to their members.

There is compulsory instruction covering religion in grades four through eight in all schools. These classes focus primarily on Islam, but also include sessions on comparative religion. The “Ministry of Education” chooses the curriculum, which is based on a textbook commissioned by the Ministry of Education in Turkey. Non-Muslim students may be excused from attending on an individual basis by schools or teachers at the request of their guardians, but there is no formal process to request such an exemption. At the high school level, religion classes are optional.

There are no provisions or “laws” allowing Turkish Cypriots to engage in conscientious objection to military service, which includes a one-day annual reserve duty requirement in addition to the 12–15 month initial service requirement.

“Government” Practices

Alevi Muslims, who had already registered as an association, established the Alevi Culture Foundation, an NGO, in order to receive funding and donations. The “government” recognized the foundation during the year, the first time it had done so for a non-Sunni religious institution. The foundation had the right to request a tax exemption from the “Ministry of Finance” after providing proof its commercial activities were carried out for charitable purposes, but it had not yet carried out any commercial activities or requested a tax exemption. After it was established, it received 250,000 Turkish Lira (\$85,675) from the “government” in May for construction of what would be the first *cemevi* (Alevi house of worship) in Cyprus. Construction of the *cemevi* began in 2007 but was delayed for lack of funds. There were no reports of other religious groups or of foundations linked to them attempting to register during the year.

The “Religious Affairs Department” staffed 190-200 mosques, all Sunni, with 360 imams. Members of the majority Sunni religious community voiced concerns the “government” was interfering with religious affairs by selecting imams.

Catholic students at Near East University were granted use of a multipurpose room for celebrating Mass in March. Beginning in November 2014, Catholics at Eastern

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Mediterranean University also had regular access to campus facilities to celebrate Mass.

Turkish Cypriot authorities restricted access to Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox places of worship. Greek Orthodox and Maronite Catholics could not freely visit religious sites located in Turkish military zones in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. One Greek Orthodox monastery was open for prayer but still required special permission for Mass.

Turkish Cypriots eased restrictions on holding regular religious services in certain churches, although they did not approve all requests. UNFICYP reported of 128 requests, 88 were approved. Eleven additional requests sent directly to the Turkish Cypriot authorities were also approved.

The Turkish Cypriot authorities allowed church services to take place in the following 14 churches for the first time in 40-50 years: Panagia Monastery in Agillar/Mandres; Church of Ayios Georgios of Xalona in Bostanci/Zodia; Church of Saint George in Alsancak/Karava; Church of Ayia Irene in Akdeniz/Ayia Irene; Church of Ayios Afxentios in Buyukkonuk/Komi Kepir; Church of Timios Prodromos in Bogazici/Lapathos-Ammochostos; Church of St. Marina in Tepebasi/Diorios; Church of Ayia Foteini in Yesilkoy/Ayios Andronikos; Church of Panagia Galaktotrofousa in Balikesir/Palaikythro; Church of Archangelos Michael in Yenierenkoy/Ayialousa; Church of the Christ the Savior in Gecitkale/Lefkoniko; Church of Saint Epifanios in Yildirim/Milia; and the Church of Artemios in Gazikoy/Afancia.

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

In September the press reported restoration work at the Maronite St. George Church in Kormacit/Kormakitis village had stopped because authorities did not give the necessary permission for the restoration. According to a Maronite representative, the group had applied for the permit at the wrong office. He stated that after the error was discovered, the authorities promptly issued the permit and the restoration was completed in December.

Some non-Sunni Muslims lacked places of worship and funding to construct such facilities. An Alevi NGO reported that initially, due to the lack of a house of

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worship, Alevis were required to conduct funerals inside mosques, contrary to their traditions. They also said they perceived favoritism in “state” funding toward the Sunni Muslim population through financing of mosque construction and support for administration of mosques.

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

Some Alevis and Christians stated that the mandatory religious education in schools was overly focused on Sunni Islam and their children had no formal recourse to opt out of the classes.

Some minority religious groups reported Turkish Cypriot authorities, including the police, monitored their activities. A Greek Orthodox priest reported heavy police presence during church services, including police inside the church videotaping services held by the enclaved Greek Cypriot community (i.e., those living permanently in the north). Visiting Greek Orthodox worshippers were also accompanied by a heavy police escort. Turkish Cypriot representatives stated the purpose of the police presence was to provide security and protect religious icons and artifacts; however, religious groups said they viewed the police presence as intimidation and harassment.

An Orthodox bishop reported the Turkish Cypriot tourism authorities allowed a Turkish television production company to film a scene from the drama “Valley of the Wolves” at the St. Barnabas Monastery in August without informing the Church of Cyprus. The bishop stated he was offended by this, calling it a “desecration.”

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Non-State Actors

According to a representative of the Maronite community, the Turkish military granted Maronites limited access to their churches and villages located within Turkish military zones. The Maronites were allowed to hold Mass once a year in the Church of Ayia Marina. In November the Turkish military gave permission to restore it. The Turkish military also began to clear a road to the church in order to bypass a military zone and cleaned a Maronite cemetery near the village. Maronites were unable to visit the Church of Marki near Kormacit/Kormakitis. They were allowed to conduct low-profile services and make a pilgrimage July 20

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to the Monastery of the Prophet Elias. The Maronite Church of Archangelos Michael in the village of Ozhan/Asamatos was also located within a Turkish military zone but did not require permission to function regularly on Sundays.

A representative of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus stated 50-55 religious sites were inaccessible due to being located within Turkish military zones.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Turkish-Speaking Protestant Association leader reported discrimination within the Turkish Cypriot community toward Protestants continued and police paid monthly visits to the association to check on the group.

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

The Turkish-Speaking Protestant Association reported Turkish Cypriot converts from Islam to other religions, particularly Christianity, faced social ostracism and political criticism. A Turkish Cypriot Protestant leader said members of the Protestant congregation feared openly attending church due to societal discrimination.

The TCCH and the UN Development Program (UNDP) Partnership for the Future continued restoration work at the Greek Orthodox Apostolos Andreas Monastery in the Karpas Peninsula, a popular destination for pilgrims, with an estimated completion date of May 2016.

In January the press reported the European Union and UNDP were providing \$3.5 million to restore the 400-year-old Greek Orthodox Agios Pantalemeion Monastery in Camlibel/Myrtou.

In April the TCCH said that, since its inception in 2008, it had restored 18 sites and another 40 sites were in immediate need of restoration. The TCCH announced it would begin minimum conservation measures on a series of 14 cultural heritage sites, including religious sites, to include cleaning, minor repairs, and consolidation work.

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Religious leaders continued to promote religious dialogue by meeting and arranging visits to places of worship across the “green line.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives met with Turkish Cypriot authorities to discuss access to religious sites and the ability to hold religious services at sites without restrictions. Embassy staff worked in cooperation with the Vakf to ensure the Armenian Orthodox community was allowed to contribute its views regarding the use of the newly restored Armenian church and monastery complex in north Nicosia.

Embassy officials also met with leaders from the Alevi, Bahai, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Protestant, and Sunni communities to discuss access issues and encouraged greater religious freedom.

All references to place names within this report are for reference purposes only and are meant to convey meaning. They should not be interpreted as implying or indicating any political recognition or change in longstanding U.S. policy.