

CYPRUS 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

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

REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and protects the freedom to worship, teach, and practice one’s religion. It grants the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and recognizes the Vakf, an Islamic institution that manages sites of worship and property Muslims have donated, as a charitable endowment. Two of the eight functioning mosques under the guardianship of the Ministry of Interior continued to lack bathroom and ablution facilities. The Department of Antiquities continued to limit regular access to Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque to only two of the five daily prayers, although it routinely granted expanded access during Ramadan and at the request of the imam. The imam of Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque said Department of Antiquities’ security guards continued to allow some non-Muslim tourists to enter the mosque without observing the proper dress code. The imam said that the Larnaca Turkish cemetery was completely full and the Ministry of Interior denied his request for the construction of a new cemetery in nearby Vakf land. The Jewish community reported authorities continued to conduct autopsies for nonsuspicious deaths, against the community’s wishes. Authorities continued to deny permission to perform animal slaughter for food production according to Jewish law. In early April, the Council of Ministers submitted to the House of Representatives a bill allowing kosher and halal slaughter of animals. The government withdrew the bill on April 24 following strong reactions by animal rights activists. Authorities did not respond to a request pending since 2017 from

the Chief Rabbinate of Cyprus to have the right to officiate marriage, death, and divorce certificates.

In May, unknown persons threw firecrackers into the premises of Koprulu Mosque in Limassol and sprayed anti-Muslim, antimigrant graffiti on the walls surrounding the mosque. Some religious minority groups continued to report societal pressure to engage in public Greek Orthodox religious ceremonies, such as weddings and christenings. Greek Orthodox Christians reported they sometimes faced ostracism from their community if they converted to another religion. Leaders of the main religious groups continued to meet under the framework of the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process (RTCYPP) and advocate for greater religious freedom for faith communities across the island.

U.S. embassy representatives continued to meet with government officials to discuss various issues, including access to religious sites on either side of the “green line” dividing the country. The Ambassador met with religious leaders to discuss religious freedom restrictions, access to religious sites, and interfaith cooperation. Embassy staff met with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious leaders to discuss topics, including access to religious sites island-wide and discrimination against minority religious groups. Except for a few virtual engagements because of COVID-19 restrictions, most were in-person meetings. Embassy officials also visited places of religious significance on both sides of the “green line” and encouraged continued dialogue and cooperation among religious leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population of the island at 1.3 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2011 census, the most recent, the population of the government-controlled area is 840,000. Of that total, 89.1 percent is Orthodox Christian and 2.9 percent is Roman Catholic, known locally as Latin. Other religious groups include Protestants (2 percent), Muslims (1.8 percent), Buddhists (1 percent), Maronite Catholics (0.5 percent), and Armenian Orthodox (0.3 percent), with small populations of Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Baha’is. The country’s chief rabbi estimates the number of Jews at 4,500, most of whom are foreign-born residents. A Jehovah’s Witnesses representative estimates the group has 2,600 members. Recent immigrants and migrant workers are predominantly Roman Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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

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

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

In addition to the Church of Cyprus and Islam, the constitution recognizes three other religious groups: Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, and Latins (Roman Catholics). Their institutions are tax exempt and eligible for government subsidies for cultural and educational matters, including to cover costs to operate their own schools, for school fees of group members attending private schools, and for activities to preserve their cultural identity.

Religious groups not recognized in the constitution must register with the government as nonprofit organizations in order to engage in financial transactions and maintain bank accounts. To register, a religious group must submit through an attorney an application to the Registrar of Companies under the Ministry of Energy, Commerce, and Industry stating its purpose and providing the names of its directors. Religious groups registered as nonprofit organizations are treated the

same as other nonprofit organizations; they are tax exempt, must provide annual reports to the government, and are not eligible for government subsidies.

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

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

The law requires animals to be stunned before slaughter; no religious exemptions are granted.

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

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

Conscientious objectors on religious grounds are exempt from active military duty and from reservist service in the National Guard but must complete alternative service. The two options available for conscientious objectors are unarmed military service, which is a maximum of four months longer than the normal 14-month service, or social service, which is a maximum of eight months longer than normal service but requires fewer hours of work per day. The penalty for refusing military or alternative service is up to three years' imprisonment, a fine of up to 6,000 euros (\$7,400), or both. Those who refuse both military and alternative

service, even if objecting on religious grounds, are considered to have committed an offense involving dishonesty or moral turpitude and are disqualified from holding elected public office and ineligible for permits to provide private security services.

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

Government Practices

Although requests for access to religious sites declined due to government-imposed COVID-19 mitigation measures, religious leaders on both sides of the island said this issue remained a top priority. As of year's end, the Ministry of Interior (MOI) had not responded to a letter from Imam Shakir Alemdar, representative of the Mufti, regarding the Department of Antiquities' August 2019 closure of the Limassol Great Mosque for restoration. The Department of Antiquities took the action without previously informing the Muslim community of the nature of, or timeline for, the restoration.

Muslim community leaders stated the government continued to allow the community access for religious services to only six of the 19 mosques located on cultural heritage sites as well as to two other mosques not located on such sites. Of the eight functioning mosques, seven were available for all five daily prayers and six had the necessary facilities for ablutions. The government again failed to respond to the Muslim community's longstanding request for permission to make improvements at the functioning mosques, and there was no change from previous years in either the number of open mosques or the number of ablution and bathroom facilities available at those mosques. The Bayraktar and Dhali Mosques had no ablution facilities and no bathrooms. Imam Shakir reported that the functioning mosque in Paphos was too small for the size of the Muslim population, holding approximately 100 worshippers, compared with an estimated Muslim population of approximately 5,000 in the area. He said the Department of Antiquities did not approve his request to allow the use of the recently restored Grand Mosque of Paphos. In 2019, the MOI said that installing facilities at Dhali Mosque was difficult due to limited space near the mosque but that it planned to identify a suitable location and develop new plans. MOI officials had not provided an update as of year's end.

The Department of Antiquities and Imam Shakir agreed on plans for the installation of bathrooms and ablution facilities at the Bayraktar Mosque. Shakir reported the Department of Antiquities informed him that the plans had been

submitted in October to the MOI to initiate the project. Construction, however, had not begun by year's end.

Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque, the most important Islamic religious site in the country, continued to be the only one of the eight functioning mosques not regularly open for all five daily prayers. The Department of Antiquities classified the mosque as an "ancient monument" and continued to keep it open only for standard museum hours, limiting access to the mosque to two of the five daily prayer times during most of the year. The imam reported the mosque remained open 24 hours daily only during Ramadan. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, only a few persons attended. Ramadan services were recorded and uploaded on YouTube. According to the Department of Antiquities and the mosque's imam, the imam still had to ask permission from the MOI and Department of Antiquities to keep the mosque open after 5 p.m. in the autumn and winter months and after 7:30 p.m. in the spring and summer months. The imam said the authorities routinely granted permission.

In October, the imam of Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque reported that security guards stationed at the complex by the Department of Antiquities sometimes did not require visitors to wear appropriate clothing when entering the mosque.

In previous years, the government waived visa requirements for the movement of non-Turkish Cypriot pilgrims crossing the "green line" into the south to visit Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque to conduct prayers and services on special occasions. The United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) facilitated these movements. No such requests were submitted during the year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Representatives of the Jewish community continued to report that authorities performed autopsies on deceased members of the community for deaths that were not suspicious, a practice they said violated Jewish religious beliefs and practice. They stated that despite their continuing efforts to raise the issue with government authorities during the year, it remained unresolved.

Jewish representatives again reported that Department of Veterinary Services' officials denied exemptions from the requirement to stun animals before slaughter following a 2019 department decision to no longer grant exemptions for religious slaughter. The Jewish community reported it was able to import kosher meat from other European Union (EU) countries at a significantly higher cost than if it were locally available. In early April, the Council of Ministers submitted to the House

of Representatives a bill allowing kosher and halal slaughter of animals, i.e., without stunning. The government withdrew the bill on April 24 following strong reactions by animal rights activists. Jewish community leadership reported sending letters on the issue to all members of the House of Representatives, the President of the Agriculture Committee, and the President of the Chamber of Commerce. On December 17, the EU Court of Justice ruled that EU member states may impose a requirement to stun animals prior to slaughter and that such a requirement does not infringe on the rights of religious groups.

Jewish representatives again said the government continued not to respond to their longstanding request to grant the Chief Rabbinate of Cyprus the right to sign official documents as an authorized party, including marriage, death, and divorce certificates.

A Jehovah's Witnesses representative said that Jehovah's Witnesses were still not allowed to bury their adherents in some municipal cemeteries – which were often managed by local Greek Orthodox churches – despite asking the MOI for assistance with the municipalities in 2019.

Representative of the Mufti of Cyprus Imam Alemdar said the Larnaca Turkish cemetery was completely full and that new land for Islamic burials was required. In February, he sent a letter to the MOI requesting that a Vakf property near Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque be made available as a cemetery. According to the representative of the Mufti, an MOI official denied the request in February, saying there was space for burials in the existing cemetery.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

On May 31, unknown individuals threw firecrackers into the premises of Koprulu Mosque in Limassol and sprayed anti-Muslim, antimigrant graffiti on the wall surrounding the mosque. President Nicos Anastasiades, mayor of Limassol Nicos

Nicolaides, and all principal political parties condemned the attack. A police investigation did not identify the perpetrators of the attack. Police increased patrols around the three mosques in Limassol, and the municipality of Limassol installed closed-circuit television at Koprulu Mosque. Authorities repaired the damage caused, which they described as slight, and cleaned the graffiti from the walls. On June 1, leaders of the five constitutionally recognized religious groups jointly condemned the attack and the vandalism.

Unlike in previous years, representatives of the Jewish community reported there were no instances of anti-Semitic verbal harassment in public places.

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

NGOs Caritas and KISA said women wearing hijabs often faced difficulties finding employment. According to Caritas, in October 2019, a Somali woman filed a complaint with the Ombudsman based on a hotel's refusal to employ her in August 2019 because she was wearing a hijab. Her case remained under review at year's end.

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

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

In September, the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage (TCCH), one of the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot technical committees established as part of the UN-facilitated settlement negotiations process, completed a project to stabilize the Saint James and Saint George Churches in the buffer zone in Nicosia. The TCCH

said the churches could not be fully restored because they were in an area controlled by the Turkish military. In October, the TCCH launched projects for restoring four mosques in the villages of Kalo Chorio, Maroni, Lefkara, and Ayios Theodoros in Larnaca District.

The leaders of the main religious groups on the island continued to meet regularly, in-person and online, within the framework of the RTCYPP. On February 14, Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Armenian, Maronite, and Roman Catholic leaders met to mark the 10th anniversary of the RTCYPP and issued a joint statement calling on all Cypriots and political leaders to join them in their effort to advance religious freedom. They met again on June 16 at the Home for Cooperation, a nonprofit community center in the buffer zone in Nicosia, and were joined virtually by Foreign Minister Ann Linde of Sweden in another ceremony to mark the 10th anniversary of the RTCYPP, which began as an initiative of the Swedish embassy.

On May 6, leaders of the five constitutionally recognized religious groups issued a joint message on the occasion of Easter and Ramadan to extend their prayers to those suffering the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, to thank those on the front lines, and to call on the faithful to abide by authorities' instructions to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. On March 20, the five religious leaders issued a joint message uniting their voices and their prayers against the pandemic.

In May, Christian religious leaders under the framework of the RTCYPP issued a joint greeting to the Mufti of Cyprus and all Muslim faithful wishing them a blessed Eid al-Fitr.

A joint project of religious leaders through the RTCYPP offering Greek and Turkish-language classes for members of the Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Armenian Orthodox, Maronite, and Roman Catholic communities continued for priests, imams, nuns, and laypersons who worked for faith-based organizations. Classes continued online when in-person gatherings were not possible due to COVID-19-related restrictions.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

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

The Ambassador discussed restrictions on access to religious sites and interfaith cooperation with numerous religious leaders, including the Archbishop of the Maronite Church of Cyprus and several Orthodox Church of Cyprus metropolitan bishops. She visited the Jewish Community Center in Larnaca and discussed religious freedom and religious-based discrimination with the Chief Rabbi of Cyprus. The Ambassador discussed with the Swedish ambassador ways to promote religious freedom on the island and to support the efforts of the RTCYPP to encourage cooperation among religious leaders.

Embassy staff continued to discuss religious freedom issues, including religious-based discrimination, with Caritas, the Cyprus Refugee Council, and KISA. They used social media to promote religious freedom and engaged representatives of the Armenian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witness, Jewish, Maronite, Muslim, and Roman Catholic communities to hear their concerns about access to, and the condition of, religious sites and cemeteries, incidents of religious-based harassment and discrimination, societal attitudes toward minority religious groups, and obstacles to religious freedom. Embassy staff visited Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque and discussed the mosque's limited hours of operation and the condition of the Larnaca Turkish Cemetery with the resident imam. Embassy officials supported religious leaders' continuing dialogue within the RTCYPP and encouraged continuing reciprocal visits of religious leaders to places of worship on both sides of the "green line."

THE AREA ADMINISTERED BY TURKISH CYPRIOTS

Executive Summary

The Turkish Cypriot "constitution" refers to the "state" as secular and provides for freedom of religious faith and worship consistent with public order and morals. It prohibits forced participation in worship and religious services and stipulates religious education may be conducted only under "state" supervision. The "constitution" grants the Vakf the exclusive right to regulate its internal affairs. Turkish Cypriot authorities continued to grant improved access to Greek Orthodox religious sites, although visits declined due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The "Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)" said during the year it approved 26 of 31 requests to hold religious services during the year, compared with 156 of 203 requests in 2019. The "MFA" reported that no requests were made for religious services after March 12 due to COVID-19 mitigation measures. Turkish-Speaking Protestant Associations (TSPA) representatives continued to report police surveillance of their activities. According to Greek Orthodox representatives,

police monitored their church services. They reported plainclothes police officers present during services checked priests' identification and monitored the congregation.

The TSPA said Turkish Cypriots who converted to other faiths often experienced societal criticism. The TCCH reported completing conservation and structural support to five churches and the walls of Nicosia's historic city center. Mufti of Cyprus Atalay and Church of Cyprus Archbishop Chrysostomos II continued to meet virtually throughout the year. Their representatives continued to meet in-person in the buffer zone in accordance with COVID-19 mitigation protocols.

Embassy officials continued engagement with the office of the Mufti of Cyprus, who was also head of the "Religious Affairs Department," by telephone and virtually to discuss cooperation among religious leaders and access to religious sites. Embassy officials met with representatives of the "MFA" and the Vakf to discuss unrestricted access to religious sites. Embassy officials continued to meet with leaders from the Sunni and Alevi Muslim, Armenian and Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Roman Catholic, and Protestant communities to discuss access to religious sites and instances of religious-based discrimination.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to 2011 census information, the most recent available from Turkish Cypriot authorities, the population of the area administered by Turkish Cypriots is 286,000. The census contains no data on religious affiliation. Sociologists estimate as much as 97 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. The Alevi Culture Association estimates that approximately 10,000 immigrants of Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab origin and their descendants are Alevi Muslims. The TSPA estimates there are 1,000 Turkish-speaking Protestants. The government of the Republic of Cyprus estimates 351 members of the Church of Cyprus and 308 Maronite Catholics reside in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. According to sociologists, other groups include the Russian Orthodox, Anglican, Baha'i, Jewish, and Jehovah's Witness communities. According to "Ministry of Education (MOE)" statistics for the 2020-21 academic year, there were approximately 80,000 foreign students enrolled at universities in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. In November, authorities announced 37,000 of these students were no longer present in the north due to the pandemic, many having returned to their home countries to continue their education online. Of these, 60 percent were Muslim Turks and the rest were predominantly Christians and Muslims from more than 140 countries.

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

Legal Framework

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

According to the “constitution,” the Vakf has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with Vakf laws and principles. Although the “constitution” states the Vakf shall be exempt from all taxation, its commercial operations are subject to applicable taxes. The “constitution” does not explicitly recognize religious groups other than the Vakf. According to the “constitution,” Turkish Cypriot authorities shall help the Vakf in the execution of Islamic religious services and in meeting the expenses of such services. No other religious organization is tax exempt or receives subsidies from Turkish Cypriot authorities.

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

Turkish Cypriot “regulations” stipulate Greek Orthodox residents may conduct liturgies or masses led by two priests designated by the Orthodox Church at three designated functional churches in the Karpas Peninsula without advance notification or permission: Agia Triada Church in Agia Triada/Sipahi, Agia Triada Church in Rizokarpaso/Dipkarpaz, and Agios Synesios Church in

Rizokarpaso/Dipkarpaz. According to the “MFA,” Maronite Catholic residents may hold liturgies or masses led by Maronite-designated clergy without seeking permission at three designated functional Maronite churches: Agios Georgios Church in Kormakitis/Korucam, Timios Stavros Church in Karpasia/Karpasa, and Panagia Church in Kampyli/Hisarkoy.

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

The Mufti heads the “Religious Affairs Department” in the “Prime Minister’s Office,” which represents Islam in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and functions as a civil authority. Whereas the Vakf manages Muslim-donated property as an endowment for charitable purposes, the “Religious Affairs Department” oversees how imams conduct prayers and deliver Friday sermons in mosques.

Religious groups are not required to register with authorities as associations to assemble or worship, but only associations registered with the “Ministry of Interior (MOI)” have the right to engage in commercial activity and maintain bank accounts. Religious and nonreligious groups have the same registration process, and they are required to submit the founders’ names and photocopies of their identification cards to the “MOI” along with a copy of the association’s rules and regulations. Associations do not receive tax-exempt status or any “government” benefits or subsidies. Religious groups are not permitted to register as associations if the stated purpose of the association is to provide religious education to their members.

There is mandatory religious instruction in grades four through eight in all schools, public and private. These classes focus primarily on Sunni Islam but also include sessions on comparative religion. The “MOE” chooses the curriculum, which is based on a textbook commissioned by the Ministry of Education in Turkey. Students may opt out of mandatory religion courses in grades six through eight. At the high school level, religion classes are optional.

There are no provisions or “laws” allowing conscientious objection to mandatory military service, which requires a 12 to 15-month initial service period and one-day annual reserve duty. The penalty for refusing to complete mandatory military service is up to three years’ imprisonment, a fine of up to 10,800 Turkish lira (\$1,500), or both.

“Government” Practices

The TSPA reported police continued to monitor its activities, asking specific questions about TSPA members and ceremonies.

Three Greek Orthodox churches, Apostolos Andreas, St. Barnabas, and St. Mamas Churches, were again open for individual prayers throughout the year, but Turkish Cypriot authorities continued to require advance notification for religious services. While St. Mamas and St. Barnabas Churches functioned as museums and were only open during working hours, individuals could still go to the churches to pray during those hours. The “MFA” reported that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, no additional Greek Orthodox churches were reopened for services for the first time since 1974.

According to statistics reported by the “MFA,” authorities continued to grant access to Greek Orthodox places of worship. UNFICYP reported the “MFA” approved 15 of 18 requests it received to facilitate religious services at churches in the northern part of the island during the year, compared with 83 approvals of 129 requests in 2019. The “MFA” reported it approved 26 of 31 total requests (including both UNFICYP-facilitated requests and requests submitted directly to the “MFA”) to hold religious services compared with 156 of 203 total requests in 2019. The “MFA” reported that since March 12, no requests were made for religious services due to COVID-19 restrictions.

A Greek Orthodox representative stated 63 religious sites remained inaccessible due to their being located within Turkish military zones or the buffer zone.

A Maronite community representative said the Turkish military continued to restrict access to the Church of Archangelos Michael in the village of Asomatos/Ozhan. Maronite representatives continued to report being required to submit a list of persons planning to attend Sunday services by the preceding Tuesday. The “MFA” said this was because the Church of Archangelos Michael is located within a military zone. The “MFA” said it required only advance notification, not a request for access, to hold Sunday services and that no one was refused admittance during the year. According to the “MFA,” the Turkish military again allowed Maronites to celebrate Mass in Ayia Marina in January and February and denied Maronites access to the Church of Marki near Kormakitis/Korucam.

As a result of a UN Development Program- and TCCH-facilitated tender, restoration and maintenance work began at the Armenian Sourp Magar Monastery during the year. Completion was expected in 2021.

According to local press reports, the Turkish government provided significant aid to Sunni Islam activities in the in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots.

Secular Turkish Cypriot groups and teachers’ unions continued to criticize a protocol with Turkey announced by the “MOE” in 2019 to open the Anatolia Religious High School within the premises of Hala Sultan Religious High School, a public school. They said the protocol imposed Islam on secular Turkish Cypriots. The Secondary Education Teachers’ Union reported that the Hala Sultan Religious High School administration and the “MOE” enrolled 200 students in the school without the usually required entrance exams.

The Alevi Culture Association reported their children were subject to mandatory Sunni Islam religious instruction at school and could not opt out.

The “Religious Affairs Department” continued to appoint and fund all 225 imams at the 210 Sunni mosques in the northern part of the island.

A representative of the Church of Cyprus again stated some religious sites, to which Church officials had little or no access, were deteriorating. The TCCH reported the completion of work to support the exterior structures of St. James Church and St. George Church, both located in the buffer zone, during the year.

Greek Orthodox religious groups continued to state authorities placed religious items, including icons, in storage rooms or displayed them in museums against the wishes of the communities to whom they were sacred.

According to Greek Orthodox representatives, police monitored their church services. They reported plainclothes police officers were present during services checking priests' identification and monitoring the congregation.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The TSPA continued to report societal discrimination toward Protestants, including verbal harassment. The TSPA again said Turkish Cypriots who converted to other faiths, particularly Christianity, faced societal criticism and feared losing their jobs. The TSPA continued to report many members preferred to remain silent about their faiths and beliefs. The TSPA also reported police continued to closely monitor its activities and occasionally visited representatives to inquire about church activities and attendance levels.

Muslim and Orthodox religious leaders continued to promote religious tolerance by meeting and arranging pilgrimages for their congregations to places of worship across the "green line," primarily before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-March. These included the Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque in the government-controlled area and St. Barnabas Church in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. After March, there were few pilgrimages and meetings across the "green line" due to pandemic mitigation measures.

The TCCH reported it had completed restoration of five religious heritage sites: structural support at Agios Georgios Church in Nicosia; structural support at St Jacob Church in Nicosia; conservation work at Agios Sergios Church in Agios Sergios/Yeni Bogazici, Vakhos Church in Famagusta, and Archangelos Michael Church in Yialousa/Yeni Erenkoy.

The TCCH also continued restoring four other religious sites. It and the UN Development Program Partnership for the Future also continued restoration work on the Greek Orthodox Apostolos Andreas Monastery on the Karpas Peninsula, a popular destination for pilgrims. The TCCH reported preparations for initiating the tendering process for the second phase of the restoration.

The "Religious Affairs Department" announced it suspended personnel involved in the 2019 attempted theft of two church bells and five chandeliers from the

Selimiye Mosque (formerly the Agia Sophia Cathedral) and recovered all the items. After a completed police investigation, the accused were awaiting trial at year's end.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials continued to engage with the office of the Mufti of Cyprus, who also heads the “Religious Affairs Department,” by telephone and virtually to discuss cooperation among religious leaders and access to religious sites. The embassy promoted religious freedom on social media and met with representatives of the “MFA” and the Vakf to discuss unrestricted access to religious sites. Embassy officials continued to meet with leaders from the Sunni and Alevi Muslim, Armenian and Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Roman Catholic, and Protestant communities to discuss access to religious sites and instances of religious-based discrimination.

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.