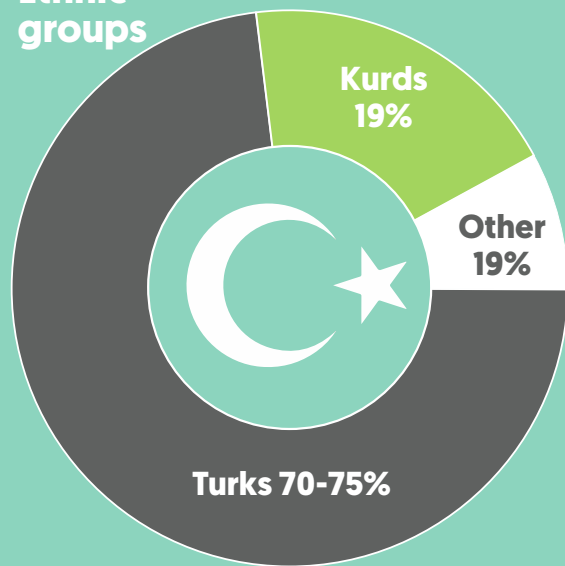


Human Rights Violations Against Ethnic & Religious Minorities in Turkey



Ethnic groups



Religion

Muslim - 99.8%

- **Sunni:** 84%. Estimated 65 million
- **Shiite (Alevi):** 11%. Estimated 14 million

Other - 0.2%

- **Christians:** 100,000
 - Estimated 70,000 **Armenian Apostolic**
 - Estimated 25,000 **Assyrian Christians** (majority based in Istanbul, about 4,000 in the southeast)
 - Estimated 4,000-6,000 **Protestants** (majority in Istanbul)
- **Jews:** Less than 20,000 (majority based in Istanbul)

Languages

Turkish
85-90% (official)

Kurdish
5-10%

Other

Arabic, Circassian, Greek, Armenian & Judezmo

Executive summary

Under President Erdogan's rule, Turkey's religious and ethnic minorities face increasing persecution. Kurds, Armenians, Greeks, Assyrians, and Jews, among other groups, have all suffered from persecution in recent years, as the government uses the country's non-Turkish minorities as scapegoats.

Although most of Turkey's population are ethnic Turks, the country is also home to the largest population of Kurds in the world, making them the most significant minority in Turkey. The remaining ethnic and religious minority groups are comprised of Armenians, Greeks, Christians, Jews, and Alevi.

Modern-day Turkey was founded in 1923 by Mustafa Kamal Atatürk, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The new Turkish state's founding principle was Turkish identity. The Turkish constitution failed to recognize minority rights, legally sidelining non-Turks. This foundational focus on ethnic identity required minorities to see themselves through a lens of what scholars have called "politically-constructed Turkishness," privileging Turkish identity above everything else in social and especially political life.

This emphasis on Turkishness left little room for ethnic and religious minorities, such as Kurds and Armenians, to feel part of the Turkish state, whose "Turkification policies...sought the dominance of Turkishness and Sunni Islam in every walk of life."

Since the early 20th century, Turkey has practiced a policy of "Turkification," a form of cultural assimilation

that fails to recognize individuals' rights to ethnic, national, and religious self-identification and that aims at forced assimilation with a Turkish identity.

When Erdogan took power in 2002 his "zero problems with neighbors" policy and his goal of joining the European Union were welcomed by Turkish minorities as well as Turkey's regional neighbors as a sign that Turkey's policies would become more liberal and inclusive.

However, under the government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's targeting of ethnic and religious minorities has increased.

According to Baskin Oran, Professor at Ankara University and author of Minorities and Minority Rights in Turkey: From the Ottoman Empire to the Present State, Erdogan "has consistently demonized a range of domestic groups during his two decades in power, from journalists and the free press to his ongoing campaign against the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP)."

Today, Erdogan's government and his nationalist supporters continued Atatürk's state legacy of Turkishness but have added elements of religious discrimination, automatically sidelining non-Turks, non-Muslims, and non-Sunni Muslims alike. Erdogan's style of mixing nationalism and religion is described by experts as "Islamofascism."



The Kurds

The Kurds are the largest ethnic minority in Turkey and arguably the most targeted since the founding of the Turkish state in 1923. The Kurdish people make up an estimated 19 percent of Turkey's population. The Kurds speak primarily Kurdish and are majority Sunni Muslim, with a significant portion of Alevi, who are Shiite-Muslim. The Kurds predominantly reside in Southeast Turkey.

The consistent denial of Kurdish language, culture, and political rights has led to an unsolved 'Kurdish Question' in Turkey. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Atatürk vowed to protect the Kurdish population, claiming that "the Kurds and Turks are inseparable brothers and this homeland is the joint homeland of these two constituent peoples." The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, however, divided Kurdistan into four states in its creation of the modern state of Turkey.

In 1924, the words 'Kurds' and 'Kurdistan' were outlawed, and it was illegal to acknowledge their existence; the Turkish government also shut down Kurdish schools, organizations, and publications. In 1930, The Turkish Minister of Justice openly declared, "I believe that the Turk must be the only lord, the only master of this country. Those who are not of pure Turkish stock can only have one right in this country, the right to be servants and slaves."

Tensions between the Turkish government and the Kurds has led to a four-decades long armed conflict. In 1984, the Kurds took up arms to create the Kurdistan

Workers Party (PKK) – an organization that has been designated a terrorist organization by not only Turkey but also the United States and European Union. The demands of the PKK have evolved from total independence from Turkey to cultural and political rights for the Kurds within the Turkish state. The Turkish-Kurdish conflict, now in its fourth decade, has taken the lives of over 40,000 people.

Although Turkish state rhetoric tends to focus on the PKK's violent methods when describing the nature of the political tensions between Kurds and Turks, there have been many attempts at nonviolent reconciliation by other Kurdish groups. The Turkish government, however, tends to label any Kurdish advocates who call for resolution as "terrorists." This label has been extended to include Kurdish political parties and their leadership.

Human Rights Watch reported that: Since 1971, every party that has explicitly voiced the need to tackle the problems of the Kurdish minority has been closed down as "separatist" under Article 81 of the Law on Political Parties, which forbids the mention of racial or religious minorities. In the 1990s alone, eight political parties were shut down on these grounds. The People's Labor Party (HEP) and its successor parties have been subjected to relentless persecution by the state and its security forces for over a decade.

The “Kurdish Question”: A timeline of recent events

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| March 2013 | PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan calls on PKK fighters to leave Turkish soil amid peace talks. |
| April 2013 | Murat Karayilan, the PKK military leader, announces the withdrawal of PKK fighters from Turkey. |
| June 2013 | Stage two of PKK-Turkey announced by Ocalan. |
| October 2014 | Kurds protest the Turkish government for not assisting the Kurdish town of Kobani from ISIS. |
| July 2015 | Turkey strikes PKK for the first time in four years, ending the ceasefire. |
| July 2016 | Turkish coup takes place. |
| July 2016 | Turkey declares a state of emergency. |
| August 2016 | Turkey launches ‘Operation Euphrates Shield’ to prevent Kurds in Syria from expanding west. |
| October 2016 | Turkey targets Kurdish media, raids stations. |
| November 2016 | Turkey detained leaders of the People’s Democratic Party (HDP), Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ. |
| September 2017 | Erdogan threatens Iraqi Kurds after holding the independence referendum. |
| January 2018 | Turkey launches ‘Operation Olive Branch’ against Kurds in Afrin, northwest Syria. |
| July 2018 | Turkey lifts the state of emergency after two years. |
| October 2019 | Turkey launches ‘Operation Peace Spring’ into northeast Syria. |
| February 2020 | The Turkish government removes Kurdish mayors in the Southeast and replaces them with pro-Erdogan, AKP appointees. |
| September 2020 | Turkish authorities have locked up 20 senior members of the country’s leftist, Kurdish-led opposition party on charges stemming from their alleged participation in protests six years ago. |
| September 2020 | Turkish authorities lock up mayor Ayhan Bilgen. |
| March 2021 | Turkish prosecutor files a case to ban pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP). |
| June 2021 | 20-year-old Kurdish woman and HDP official shot dead by Turkish gunman. |

Alevi

Alevi are the largest religious minority in Turkey, composed of an estimated 14 million. Discrimination against the Alevi population has been marked by a series of targeted massacres. In the 1993 Sivas Alevi Massacre, 35 Alevi composed of intellectuals, writers, poets, and artists were burned alive by a mob at a hotel in Sivas, Turkey.⁴⁸ In 1978, 111-150 Alevi were murdered, over a thousand injured, and their properties burned and damaged by a mob known as the Maras Massacre.⁴⁹

Other major massacres against the Alevi:

- 1921 Kocgiri Massacre
- 1937-1938 Dersim Massacre
- 1938 Erzincan Zini Gedigi Massacre
- 1978 Malatya Massacre
- 1980 Corum Massacre
- 1995 Istanbul, Gazi Quarter Massacre

The Alevi religion is considered a branch of Shi'ite Islam, but Turkey does not recognize the religious minority. This also means that the state does not recognize Alevi houses of worship.⁵⁰ Alevi, like Sunni Muslims, read from the Quran but do not worship in a mosque but instead a cemevi, or prayer hall.⁵¹ Alevi continue to be denied by the government in opening cem houses (cemevi) and are forced to pray at mosques instead.⁵² According to the Religious Affairs Directorate, Turkey is home to 82,693 mosques compared to only 937 cem houses.⁵³

Huseyin Guzelgul, an Alevi religious leader, or “dede,” has said: “when we pay taxes or do military service, we’re treated exactly like Sunni citizens. But when it comes to the costs for our houses of worship — no. Here, we’re discriminated against.”⁵⁴

Alevi refuse “Turkish identity with Sunni Islam and have resented projects such as the construction of mosques in Alevi villages.”⁵⁵

On August 27th, 2021, Alevi homes were vandalized and marked with an “X” in Adana, Turkey. Residents reported this was the 38th incident in which Alevi homes were vandalized.⁵⁶

Christians

The 2020 State Department report on International Religious Freedom in Turkey described the government as limiting “the rights of non-Muslim religious 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.”⁵⁷ Nearly a century ago, Turkey’s Christian population was 20 percent.⁵⁸ Today, the Christian population makes up only 0.2 percent of the entire population, or about 100,000 in total.⁵⁹

In 1942, the Turkish government passed a law to punish non-Muslim minorities specifically. The law “implemented a devastating economic destruction policy against non-Muslim minorities through heavy taxation, confiscation of properties, and exile of members of these groups to work camps.”⁶⁰

Under Erdogan’s rule, many point to the July 2016 coup when Christian populations’ concerns grew. However, reports indicate that Christians in Turkey had been targeted long before this date. In 2006 a Catholic priest, Father Andrea Santoro, was murdered in Trabzon, Turkey. Father Santoro was accused of converting Muslims to Christians.⁶¹

Freedom House’s 2021 Report, which rated Turkey ‘Not Free’ for the fourth year in a row, listed among its reasons the targeting of non-Sunni Muslims: “non-Muslims were increasingly targeted with hate speech during 2020, with Armenians in particular subjected to public vilification as the Turkish government supported the Azerbaijani military in its offensive against ethnic Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh.”⁶²

In 2001, the Turkish government recognized Protestant missionaries as the “third-largest threat to the security of Turkey.”⁶³ State-sponsored Turkish media later warned that the purpose of Christian missionaries is to “divide the country, undermine its unity, and make Turkish citizens tools of their dark ambitions.”⁶⁴

The U.S.-based Christian organization Open Doors ranks Turkey 36th on a list of 50 countries where Christian’s face persecution: “fierce rhetoric from the government has left less space for other voices, including the Christian church—the general opinion is that a true Turk is a Muslim.”⁶⁵

Religious sites

The conversion of Churches into Mosques has been a frequent practice of Erdogan's government. Perhaps Erdogan's most famous rebuke of Turkey's Christian population took place when his government turned the historical Hagia Sophia Byzantine Church in Istanbul into a functioning Mosque. The Hagia Sophia museum had been a valuable cultural monument open to all citizens and visitors since 1931.⁶⁶ Through a Presidential decree in 2020, President Erdogan declared the museum a place of worship. Erdogan did not stop at the Hagia Sophia, he quickly eyed "Istanbul's Church of St. Saviour in Chora, known as Kariye in Turkish," converted that church into a structure for Muslim prayers too.⁶⁷

UNESCO reports have claimed that "after 1923, out of 913 monuments of Armenian heritage in Eastern Turkey, 464 have vanished completely, 252 are in ruins, and 197 are in need of restoration."⁶⁸

Religious persecution through "legal" means

Turkey is considered a secular state which grants religious minorities constitutional protection. However, Christians in Turkey face profound government-sanctioned obstacles, including a new law passed by the Turkish parliament that increases government control over civil society by targeting freedom of association. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported:

The Law on Preventing Financing of Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction has ostensibly been introduced to comply with a United Nations Security Council counterterrorism resolution (1373 of 2001) and in response to a 2019 report by the Financial Action Task Force, an intergovernmental money-laundering and terrorism financing watchdog. But its provisions greatly exceed the aim of preventing the financing of terrorism and weapons proliferation. Instead, it would enable the Interior Ministry to target nongovernmental groups' legitimate and lawful activities and the right to association of their members.⁶⁹

The law, which will make it difficult for Christian organizations to raise and access funds, passed in January 2021 in the Turkish parliament.

In 2016, American Evangelist pastor [Andrew Brunson](#) was detained in Turkey and held captive by the Turkish government for two years.⁷⁰ Pastor Brunson was accused of having links to the [PKK](#) and being involved in the July 2016 coup.⁷¹ The detainment of Pastor Brunson further strained U.S.-Turkish relations. Pastor Brunson was released in 2018 after U.S. pressure.





Threats against religious and ethnic minorities

In 1915, Ottoman Turks committed genocide against 1.5 million Armenians. An estimated 200,000 Armenians were “assimilated into Muslim families” following the 1915 genocide.⁷² The United States officially recognized the Armenian Genocide in April 2021.⁷³ Turkey continues to deny the Armenian genocide. Tensions between Armenians and the Turkish government continue to exist. Turkey assisted Azerbaijan in the war against Armenia over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020.⁷⁴ The border between Turkey and Armenia has been closed since 1993.⁷⁵

Turkey’s involvement in Syria and consistent backing of radical Islamists across the region have played an important role in igniting religious tensions. Christian communities and organizations in Turkey have received death threats across the country. In 2015, “fifteen Turkish Protestant congregations and their leaders” were targeted with death threats sent directly to their social media accounts and cell phones.⁷⁶ Local bus stations in Konya, Turkey—home to a large swath of Erdogan supporters and the AKP base—displayed ads warning ‘Don’t take Jews, Christians as allies.’⁷⁷ The city of Konya is home to a large swath of Erdogan supporters and the AKP base.⁷⁸

In 2019, a Korean Christian evangelist was murdered

in southeast Turkey. Turkish authorities have called the killing a simple robbery incident, but an unnamed Turkish evangelist claims that “this wasn’t just a robbery; they came to kill him. We always get threats. They know that I am trying to spread the Gospel, so they may target me too. This may be a sign.”⁷⁹

“There is an Islamist and nationalist atmosphere that makes it uncomfortable for Christians in Turkey,” according to Yetvart Danzikyan, editor-in-chief of Istanbul’s Armenian newspaper Agos.⁸⁰

“During the Armenian-Azerbaijan war over Nagorno-Karabakh, in which Turkey supported Azerbaijan, anti-Armenian sentiment increased dramatically. Armenian neighborhoods across Turkey were heavily targeted by ultra-nationalists and Islamists, where churches were vandalized and burned.”⁸¹

The Assyrian population has also been caught in the conflict between the Kurds and the Turkish government. In 2018, an Assyrian priest faced terrorism charges for providing food and water to PKK fighters.⁸² The Assyrian community faces frequent targeting due to fellow Assyrians in Syria who are allied with the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces [SDF], which Turkey views as a wing of the PKK.

Anti-Semitism

Jews in Turkey face widespread anti-Semitism, a direct result of Erdogan's rhetoric and interference in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In the recent Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Erdogan accused Israel of "terrorism" and said, "it is in their nature, they are murderers, to the point that they kill children who are five or six years old."⁸³ They only are satisfied by sucking their blood." The State Department condemned his comments and labeled them as "anti-Semitic remarks."⁸⁴

Erdogan is also known to have "once wrote and directed a play called "Mas-Kom-Yah," short for "Masons, Communists, and Jews"—the "three great enemies" of Islam."⁸⁵

Erdogan's aggressive tone has propelled anti-Semitism in Turkey and has inspired conspiracy theories against the minority group. In 2013, for example, the Turkish deputy prime minister Besir Ataly blamed Jewish people for the Gezi protests in Istanbul, stating: "there are some circles that are jealous of Turkey's growth, they are all uniting, on one side the Jewish Diaspora. You saw the foreign media's attitude during the Gezi Park incidents; they bought it and started broadcasting immediately, without doing an evaluation of the [case]."⁸⁶

Turkish state television, TRT1, produced a drama in 2017 based on the Ottoman sultan Abdulhamid II, known in the West as "The Red Sultan." The drama series, reported to be popular among nationalists and Islamists, portrays the belief in a Zionist plot to bring down the Sultan in revenge for his refusal to grant Palestine to Theodor Herzl as widely and uncritically accepted.⁸⁷ It is reported that the series "received approximately 95 percent of its funding from the Turkish government."⁸⁸

Jews in Turkey often are viewed as representatives and ambassadors of Israel. A writer for Salom has reported that "A Turkish Jew who has never visited Israel in their life could be seen as an Israeli in Turkey."⁸⁹ The targeting of Jews increases during heightened tensions between Israel and Palestine and significantly during Israel's recognition of Jerusalem as its capital.

In 2018, Erdogan blamed the 2013 Gezi protests on George Soros, stating, "the person, who financed terrorists during the Gezi incidents, is currently in prison [Osman Kavala]. And who is behind him? The famous Hungarian Jew George Soros. This is a man who was assigned to divide nations and shatter them. He has so much money and he is spending it in these ways."⁹⁰ Erdogan also blamed Jews for Turkey's worsening economy citing the "interest-rate lobby," implying the conspiracy theory that Jews control nations by "driving countries into economic crisis and then lending their governments money at exorbitant interest rates."⁹¹

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee submitted a report in 2019 to the United Nations on anti-Semitic incidents in Turkey and documented the general trends below:

- Being Jewish or being connected to Jewishness is often used as a label to defame individuals.
- Jews are often portrayed as evil people.
- Jews in Turkey are perceived as an extension of or responsible for Israel's policies, particularly in connection to Palestinians.
- Israel's unfavorable treatment of Palestinians is viewed as a reason to threaten Jews in Turkey or to highlight the patronage shown to Turkey's Jews.
- Anti-Semitic propaganda and attacks rise when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is heated.
- Anti-Semitic attitudes and speech are pervasive and often no action is taken against it or to prevent it.
- Anti-Semitic attacks, when prosecuted, are decided on a narrow basis – the judges often do not take into account the hate crime nature of the attack.

The report includes numerous anti-Semitic incidents in Turkey.⁹² Other incidents include calls for boycotting Israeli goods in response to Israel's military actions⁹³, and groups of Turkish nationalists brandishing placards that read "Dogs allowed, Armenians and Jews cannot enter" outside their office in the Western city of Eskisehir."⁹⁴

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