

FINAL WWL 2019 COUNTRY DOSSIER

TURKEY

LEVEL 3/EMBARGO

(Reporting period: 1 November 2017 – 31 October 2018)

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Introduction

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Introduction

World Watch List Turkey	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2019	66	26
WWL 2018	62	31
WWL 2017	57	37
WWL 2016	55	45
WWL 2015	52	41

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country was among the fifty highest scoring countries (Top 50) in the WWL 2015-2019 reporting periods.

Please note: The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.

WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Turkey

Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17988453>

Recent country history

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

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

Since 2002 Turkey has been trying to reinvent its internal and public image. The concept of being a Western, secular country is no longer the leading principle. Instead, Islam is regarded as the element that cements Turkey's society. The need to adhere to the Western block disappeared after the USSR collapsed in 1991, when Turkey assertively turned to the Middle East. The goal of the government has since then been to make Turkey a key player in the region and a role model for other countries. But regionally and internationally, these objectives have faltered in the past few years.

The religious landscape

Turkey is currently going through a gradual change from a strictly secular country to a country based on Islamic norms and values. When secularism prevailed, Christians in Turkey experienced many restrictions since the state interpreted secularism to mean far-reaching state controls. Under the current regime of President Erdogan, secularism has steadily diminished and the country is accepting a more pronounced Islamic influence.

According to Turkish legislation based on the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, only four religious groups are recognized by the state: Sunni Islam, Greek Orthodoxy, Armenian Apostolics and Judaism. This information is recorded on each citizen's official documents, i.e. passport or ID card. The only other alternative is to leave the entry for religion blank. Since 2017, new ID cards do not have an entry for religion anymore. Religious affiliation is still registered on the electronic chip in the ID card though and it is still common for government officials to ask for one's religion.

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

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

Non-Muslims are tacitly banned from jobs in the state bureaucracy and security forces. Non-Muslims state that when they enlist for military service, their religious affiliation is noted by their superiors and there is also a "security check" because of their religious affiliation. There are no non-Muslims among Turkish military officers, provincial governors, or mayors. However, for the first time in Turkey's history, a Syriac Orthodox citizen was elected to Parliament in the June 2011 elections.

In May 2010 the government released a decree to all government organs stating that the rights of Christian and Jewish minorities should be respected and their leaders should be treated with respect. In August 2011 the government published a decree to return state-confiscated assets that once belonged to Greek, Armenian or Jewish trusts. Two issues should be noted in this context: For the return of the properties it is essential to be a registered organization; and in all these actions there is no mention at all of the emerging Turkish Protestant church. The decrees did not prevent the government from seizing over 100 title deeds from the ancient Syriac church since 2014. 55 deeds were returned in May 2018 after the EU parliament also addressed the issue.

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

The political landscape

Under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan there have been major shifts in both international and domestic politics – a shift away from Europe, away from Israel (a traditional ally), and towards the Muslim world. On 10 August 2014, after three terms as prime minister, Erdogan was elected Turkish president. In the June 2015 elections the AKP lost its absolute majority in parliament and negotiations for a coalition failed. In the new elections of 1 November 2015, the AKP won back its absolute majority. On 15 July 2016 a coup took place but failed and the regime struck back fiercely. It accused the Islamic preacher and former ally Fethullah Gülen (in self-exile in USA) to be behind the failed coup. Tens of thousands of soldiers, policemen, judges, politicians, journalists, teachers, imams etc. were arrested on accusation of supporting Gülen and many more were fired from their jobs. Nationalism, which

already played an important role in Turkey, soared to new heights and minorities have come under renewed pressure (especially the Kurdish population).

In April 2017, a referendum was held about [constitutional reforms](#) changing Turkey from a parliamentary democracy into a presidential one, granting huge powers to the president and making him the absolute decision-maker in Turkish politics. A small majority of 51% voted in favor of the reforms and in April 2018 Erdogan announced new elections for both the parliament and the presidency. Both elections in June 2018 [were won](#) by Erdogan and his AKP party, making him one of the most powerful leaders Turkey has ever had. Although Erdogan cancelled the state of emergency which had been in place since the June 2016 coup, it did not stop the Turkish government from [cracking down](#) on (political) opponents and alleged coup supporters. One case in particular was the detention of US Pastor Andrew Brunson for alleged support of Fethullah Gülen and the PKK, which [led to sanctions](#) being imposed by the USA. The Turkish economy suffered quite severely from these developments; the lira reached [record lows](#) in August 2018. Brunson was eventually [released in October 2018](#), after being convicted to three years imprisonment.

Epitomizing the current political situation is Turkey's record regarding journalism: Turkey is the country with [the highest number of journalists behind bars](#).

The socio-economic landscape

Turkey's economic growth averaged 6.8% annually for the period from 2002 to 2007, which made Turkey one of the fastest growing economies in the world. However, growth slowed to 1% in 2008, and in 2009 the Turkish economy was affected by the global financial crisis, with a recession of 5%. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development ([OECD](#)) the economy is projected to contract in 2019, after a sharp fall of the lira, followed by a loss of household and businesses confidence. The uncertainties associated with the failed coup attempt in July 2016 and ongoing geopolitical tensions in the region, as well as [the tensions with the US](#), highlighted in the Brunson-case, are holding back investment and consumption spending. GDP growth is projected to pick up gradually, however.

Turkey's economy is becoming more dependent on industry in major cities, mostly concentrated in the western provinces of the country, and less on agriculture. However, traditional agriculture is still a major pillar of the Turkish economy. In 2010, the agricultural sector accounted for 9% of GDP, while the industrial sector accounted for 26% and the services sector 65%.

Many Christians report that by not listing themselves as Muslims on their identity cards (or leaving it blank), they have been unable to obtain jobs in the private sector. Also, Christian groups have historically complained of the impossibility of opening bank accounts, obtaining loans, or buying property since they are denied the right to be legal entities in the country.

Concluding remarks

After the failed coup of July 2016 developments in Turkey changed dramatically. The government took on more dictatorial powers and both nationalism and Islamization soared. The fight against the militant Kurdish minority intensified and Turkey took a much more assertive stance on the international scene, becoming militarily active in neighboring Syria and Iraq (primarily targeting Kurdish forces). As a result of the new strict government policies, the level of intolerance rose and all not siding with Erdogan face oppression. Non-Sunni citizens (including the tiny Christian minority) are facing growing pressure, which is increasingly translating into violent incidents. This trend is likely to continue.

External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Turkey

- The political landscape: constitutional reforms
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38883556>
- The political landscape: were won
https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44562011?intlink_from_url=https://www.bbc.com/news/topics/c6gzmx3zld1t/turkey-election-2018&link_location=live-reporting-story
- The political landscape: cracking down
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44756374>
- The political landscape: led to sanctions
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45036378>
- The political landscape: record lows
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-45142256>
- The political landscape: released in October 2018
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-45841276>
- The political landscape: the highest number of journalists behind bars.
<https://cpj.org/reports/2018/12/journalists-jailed-imprisoned-turkey-china-egypt-saudi-arabia.php>
- The socio-economic landscape: OECD
<http://www.oecd.org/turkey/turkey-economic-forecast-summary.htm>
- The socio-economic landscape: the tensions with the US
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/16/erdogan-may-have-freed-pastor-brunson-but-turkeys-economy-is-still-trapped/>

WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
81,917,000	194,000	0.2

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

How did Christians get there?

Christianity has a long history in Turkey. Due to the efforts of the Apostle Paul and his helpers, Christian congregations were founded in what is now Turkey in the earliest New Testament days. When John wrote the Book of Revelation he started off by writing letters to seven congregations in western Turkey. In the early phase, the Church often moved underground due to persecution by the Romans.

Under Constantine (emperor from 306 to 337) Christianity became the state religion. The city of Byzantium (a.k.a. Constantinople - the current Istanbul) became a hub of Christianity. In 1054 the Great Schism took place which caused a lasting split between the Western and Eastern Church. The result was that Byzantium became the centre of eastern or Orthodox Christianity, and also the capital of a huge empire - the Byzantine Empire.

In 1453 the Ottoman Turks conquered this empire when they took the capital by military force. Since then, Christians in Turkey have been under Muslim domination. A policy of Islamization began and Christianity gradually lost its influential position in the country. Since the 19th century, the power of the Ottoman Empire began to crumble, and territories were lost. During the First World War the Ottoman Empire sided with Germany and Austria-Hungary. In 1915 more than 1 million Armenians and Assyrians [Syriacs] were killed, decimating the role of the Armenian Orthodox Church and causing tensions with Russia throughout Anatolia, where the Armenian heartland was to be found. The Ottoman Empire finally collapsed in 1917.

At the close of the 1st World War, many issues needed to be settled in Turkey, the most important being the position of the various ethnic minorities and their religions. In the newly formed state of Turkey, the Greek, Armenian and Syriac minorities faced heavy discrimination. Pressure built up in the years up to 1923, when the Treaty of Lausanne was concluded. Millions of people were moved. A large part of the Greek minority left Turkey and moved to Greece, weakening the position of the Greek Orthodox Church in Turkey.

Since 1923 only two churches were recognized by the Turkish state - the Greek Orthodox Church and the Armenian Orthodox Church. Together they form about 70% of all Christians in Turkey. In addition to the Syriac Orthodox community, which was not included in the protections of the Lausanne Treaty, the remainder include the Roman Catholic Church, expatriate Protestant Christians, and indigenous Turkish Christians. After a lengthy court battle, official status was granted in 2000 to the Istanbul Protestant Church in Altintepe in 2000. This was the first (and up until now, only) official recognition of a Protestant church in Turkey.

What church networks exist today?

Church networks: Turkey	Christians	%
Orthodox	88,500	45.6
Catholic	38,700	19.9
Protestant	34,200	17.6
Independent	21,600	11.1
Unaffiliated	10,800	5.6
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-12	0.0
Total	193,788	99.9
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	8,800	4.5
Renewalist movement	20,500	10.6

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

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

Communities of expatriate Christians: The ranks of the expatriate believers in Turkey have swelled with tens of thousands of refugees arriving from Syria and Iraq to escape the violence of the former so called Islamic State. Apart from these refugees there are also Russian Orthodox Christians who have residency permits, and also some Roman Catholics, mostly immigrants from Africa and the Philippines. There are also hundreds of Christians from various embassies and international companies.

Historical Christian communities: Most of the historical churches in Turkey come from ethnic minorities and include Armenian Orthodox Christians, Syrian Orthodox, Chaldean Catholics (of Iraqi heritage) and Greek Orthodox.

Converts to Christianity: Christians with a Muslim background in Turkey have grown steadily in number from about 10 in 1960 to somewhere between 5,000 and 7,000 today. Most of them now attend non-traditional churches, many of them being home fellowships.

Non-traditional Christian communities: Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations mostly exist as small groups and are sometimes unable to afford a rented place of worship. Many of them are meeting in their homes, which can lead to opposition from neighbors.

Religious context

Religious Context: Turkey	Numbers	%
Christians	194,000	0.2
Muslim	80,532,000	98.3
Hindu	790	0.0
Buddhist	37,600	0.0
Ethnoreligionist	12,400	0.0
Jewish	16,700	0.0
Bahai	22,400	0.0
Atheist	64,000	0.1
Agnostic	890,000	1.1
Other	147,500	0.2

OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

The influence of Islam in Turkey is growing. According to WCD 98.3% of the Turkish population is Muslim, a third of whom are Alevi or Shia Muslims. Christians make up the third largest religious group in the country (after Agnostics).

Notes on the current situation

Citizens must either declare themselves members of a limited number of 'religions' (Sunni Islam, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church or Judaism) – or leave the section on religion in their ID Cards and Public Registry blank. Evangelical/Protestant Christianity, Shia Islam, Alevi Islam, Bahai, or atheism are not possible choices. This makes people vulnerable to discrimination, both because in many everyday situations identification must be shown, and this becomes public information which can be easily accessed. People under 18 years of age do not have the right to change their religion in the Public Registry unless their parents or legal guardians change it for them.

WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

Turkey scored 66 points (ranking 26th) in WWL 2019, a rise of 4 points compared to WWL 2018.

What type of persecution dominates?

Islamic oppression: Fanatical nationalism affects all Christians in Turkey, especially converts from a Muslim background. The cocktail of Islam and nationalism also affects other Christians who are mostly from ethnic minorities (e.g. Greeks, Armenians, Syriacs). They are hardly regarded as full-fledged members of Turkish society and encounter all kinds of legal and bureaucratic obstructions.

Ethnic antagonism: Syriac Christians in the southeast are caught between Kurdish clans, the government and the Kurdish militant group, PKK.

Dictatorial paranoia: Since the failed coup of July 2016, President Erdogan's government has dropped its mask of supporting democracy and is openly restricting freedom throughout Turkish society.

Who is driving persecution?

The general opinion is that a true Turk must be a Sunni Muslim. This religious nationalism has grown to new heights after the failed coup of 15 July 2016. President Erdogan has used the situation to enlarge his power and position, although his dictatorial behavior has not led to any direct persecution of Christians. Instead he is doing this indirectly by trying to transform Turkey from a secular state into a Sunni Muslim one, leaving little space for minorities. On a more local level, there is strong opposition from families on converts to Christianity as leaving Islam is considered betrayal of the Turkish identity, Islam and the family. This kind of oppression is viewed as "normal" and it is hardly reported or documented unless there is physical violence.

What it results in

The very strong religious nationalism in society puts a lot of pressure on Christians. The government has not targeted Christians in particular, but society's nationalism leaves almost no space for Christians to proclaim another message. Converts from Islam to Christianity in particular face social opposition, although conversion from Islam to Christianity is not legally forbidden. Converts from Islam are put under pressure by their families and communities to return to Islam, and even leaving one Christian denomination for another can be problematic. Christians therefore sometimes lead a double life and hide their conversion. Although converts from Islam can legally change their religious affiliation on ID cards to Christianity, it can be a difficult and stressful process. Once discovered, a Christian with a Muslim background may be threatened with divorce and the loss of inheritance rights.

The cocktail of Islam and nationalism also affects Christians who do not have a Muslim background. These are mostly from ethnic minorities (e.g. Greeks, Armenians, Syriacs). They are hardly regarded as full members of Turkish society and encounter all kinds of legal and bureaucratic obstructions. Christians have no access to state employment, and experience discrimination in private employment, especially where employers have ties to the government. Since religious affiliation is recorded on every ID card, it is very easy to discriminate against Christian applicants.

Violence

The following table is based on reported cases. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures.

Turkey	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	0	6	3	10	0
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	3	2	4	10	0

Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). Christians attacked refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. Christians arrested refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. Churches attacked refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. Christian-owned houses and shops attacked refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.

Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period

- During the WWL 2019 reporting period, several churches have been threatened with closure and some have been closed. In addition, several churches have been vandalized and damaged. One failed bomb attack in February 2018 was also [reported](#).
- In the WWL 2019 reporting period, several Christians were harassed for their faith. In two cases, converts were mistreated and severely injured. Several converts had to flee their homes due to (family) pressure. Several foreign Christians were forced to leave the country. [One](#) as recently as November 2018 (just days outside the WWL 2019 reporting period).
- In July 2018 US Pastor Andrew Brunson was released from state imprisonment (which began in October 2016) but was kept under house arrest until his 4th trial in October 2018, when he was released and allowed to return to the USA. It would seem that he was being held hostage for 2 years to extract political concessions from the USA.
- In May 2018, 55 title deeds of church property [were returned](#) to Syriac custody. 55 other title deeds remain with the Turkish state. According to World Watch Monitor reporting in July 2017, legal ownership of at least 100 ancient Syriac [Christian properties](#) in Turkey's southeast had been seized and transferred to the Turkish state treasury over the past five years. The properties confiscated by the government included two functioning monasteries and land belonging to the 4th century Mor Gabriel Monastery.

External Links - WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: reported
<https://www.christiantoday.com/article/turkey-catholic-church-suffers-second-attack-this-year/127147.htm>
- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: One
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/11/turkey-refuses-entry-to-n-american-christian-evangelist/>
- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: were returned
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/06/turkey-returns-confiscated-syriac-church-property-deeds/>
- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: Christian properties
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/07/legal-limbo-turkeys-syriac-christian-properties-still-unresolved/>

WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

Turkey scored 66 points (ranking 26th) in WWL 2019, a rise of 4 points compared to WWL 2018. Turkey is the only country in the world where the main religion, Islam, is totally blended with fierce nationalism. The country has been in a tense situation following the attempted coup in July 2016. Fierce rhetoric from the government has left less space for other voices, including the Christian one. There is more suspicion towards Christians, making public outreach hard, and this has contributed to an overall rise in score.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Turkey	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Very strong
Ethnic antagonism	EA	Strong
Denominational protectionism	DPR	Very weak
Communist and post -Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Very weak
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Very weak

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

Islamic oppression (Strong) / Religious nationalism (Very strong):

Fierce, fanatical nationalism affects all Christians in Turkey. The biggest pressure is on Christian converts from a Muslim background. Family, friends and community will often exert heavy pressure on them to return to Islam, the faith of the fathers. The general opinion is that a true Turk is a Muslim. Conversion is not only a question of family honor being hurt, it is also seen as a case of insulting Turkishness. This can result in court cases and imprisonment. The cocktail of Islam and nationalism also affects other Christians who are mostly from ethnic minorities (e.g. Greeks, Armenians, Syrians). They are hardly regarded as full-fledged members of Turkish society and encounter all kinds of legal and bureaucratic obstructions.

Ethnic antagonism (Strong):

Ethnic antagonism has grown stronger in the WWL 2019 reporting period in the context of the Kurdish conflict. Syriac Christians in the south-eastern region particularly feel the pressure from the Syrian civil war and are caught between Kurdish clans, the government and the Kurdish militant group PKK. The tribal leaders use their monopoly on force to push out the Syrians from their homeland in the southeast. However, this only affects rural Christian populations. Most Christians in Turkey live in large cities and are not strongly affected by Ethnic antagonism. In addition, tribal law and customs still play an important role in especially the eastern provinces of Turkey. Converts might face more pressure there, as conversion to Christianity is not only seen as betrayal of Islam, but also of the family and clan. Last, but not least, Turkey's history is marked by the focus on ethnicity and religion. This focus led first

to the genocide on Armenians, Syrians and Greek-Orthodox Christians starting during the 1st World War and extending into the 1920's, and has since instigated the further marginalization of minority groups.

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong):

Since the failed coup of July 2016, President Erdogan's government has dropped its mask of supporting democracy and is openly restricting freedom throughout Turkish society. The media have been curtailed, and all forms of opposition are persecuted. In addition, Erdogan has [declared](#) that "democracy and free press are incompatible", which is not surprising given the many journalists that are imprisoned. Although Christians are not directly targeted by the government at the moment, the regime has openly declared Sunni Islam to be the religious norm in the country, thus clearly marginalizing Christianity.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of Persecution: Turkey	IO	RN	EA	DPR	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG	VERY STRONG	STRONG	VERY WEAK	-	VERY WEAK	STRONG	VERY WEAK
Government officials	Strong	Very strong	Strong	-	-	Very weak	Strong	Very weak
Ethnic group leaders	Strong	Strong	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Medium	Medium	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	Very weak	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	Medium	Medium	Medium	-	-	-	-	Very weak
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Medium	Strong	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	Strong	Medium	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
Political parties	Weak	Medium	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology (long version).

Drivers of Islamic oppression and religious nationalism:

- Government officials: It is no secret that President Erdogan wants to change Turkey from being a secular country into a Sunni Muslim one. So far, the changes have been implemented very gradually. One of those steps was the change in the Constitution after the [referendum](#) in April 2017, which gave the president more power and freed the way for him to stand in two more elections. Except for a small number of foreign Christians, the government has not targeted Christians in particular yet. However, there have been issues over church properties, particularly in the troubled south-eastern region. The government closed down and confiscated church buildings there for a variety of reasons. In some cases, the government said this happened because of reformed land registry laws and the reorganization of municipalities, in other cases the government [seized control over churches](#) for security reasons. Although it is difficult to prove whether the government is purposely hindering Christian communities or not, one country researcher is convinced that the government is trying to push the already diminished historical Christian communities out of Turkey.
- Extended family, non-Christian religious leaders and citizens: Converts from Islam are put under pressure by their families and communities to return to Islam. Once discovered, a Christian with a Muslim background may be threatened with divorce and the loss of inheritance rights.
- Political parties: In July 2017 the opposition party, Republican People's Party (CHP), organized a "Justice March" against the government, which was joined by hundreds of thousands of people. Nevertheless, it seems that none of the opposition parties are vocally supporting the historical Christian or other Christian communities, which leaves them vulnerable to government pressure.

Drivers of Ethnic antagonism:

- Ethnic group leaders: In the more rural areas, conservative norms and values are upheld by ethnic leaders. In the southeast, it would seem that Kurdish chiefs are trying to force the historical Syriac community out of the traditionally Christian territory. The Kurdish PKK is also trying to purposely drag the Syriacs into their conflict with the Turkish government for nationalistic reasons.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

- Government officials: The backlash resulting from the attempted coup of July 2016 has led to heightened polarization and public scapegoating of anyone who (allegedly) does not support Turkey or Erdogan's vision for Turkey. The fact that the alleged coup mastermind, Fethullah Gülen, is residing in Pennsylvania and that the USA has not extradited him so far (due to lack of evidence that he orchestrated the attempted coup) has increased tension between Turkey and the USA. Protestants in particular have felt the deterioration in relations. Since the USA is seen as Christian, Christians in Turkey are portrayed as spies of the West. Hate speech and threats to Protestant churches have increased. This has not spilled over into violence yet but the general atmosphere is tense.

Context

For a more detailed overview, see the Keys to Understanding section above.

Since 2002 Turkey has been trying to reinvent its internal and public image. The concept of being a Western, secular country is no longer the leading principle. Instead, Islam is regarded as the element that cements Turkish society. The need to adhere to the Western block disappeared after the USSR collapsed in 1991, when Turkey assertively turned to the Middle East. The goal of the government has

since then been to make Turkey a key player in the region and role model for other countries. But regionally and internationally, these objectives have faltered in the past few years.

In 2003, Erdogan became prime minister and in 2014 he was elected president of Turkey. In the June 2015 elections the AKP lost its absolute majority in parliament and negotiations for a coalition failed. In the new elections of 1 November 2015, the AKP won back its absolute majority. On 15 July 2016 a coup took place but failed and the regime struck back fiercely. It accused the Islamic preacher and former ally Fethullah Gülen (in self-exile in USA) to be behind the failed coup.

After the failed coup of July 2016 developments in Turkey changed dramatically. The government took on more dictatorial powers and nationalism and Islamization soared. In [schools](#), many teachers were fired on accusation of links with the Gülen-movement, head teachers have been replaced by those loyal to the Islamic AKP-party and Islamic Imam Hatip schools are on the rise. The fight against the militant Kurdish minority intensified and Turkey took a much more assertive stance in the international scene, becoming militarily active in neighboring Syria and Iraq (primarily targeting Kurdish forces). Because of the new strict government policies, the level of intolerance against all those not siding with Erdogan has increased. Non-Sunni citizens (including the tiny Christian minority) are facing growing pressure, which is increasingly translating into violent incidents.

Christian communities and how they are affected

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

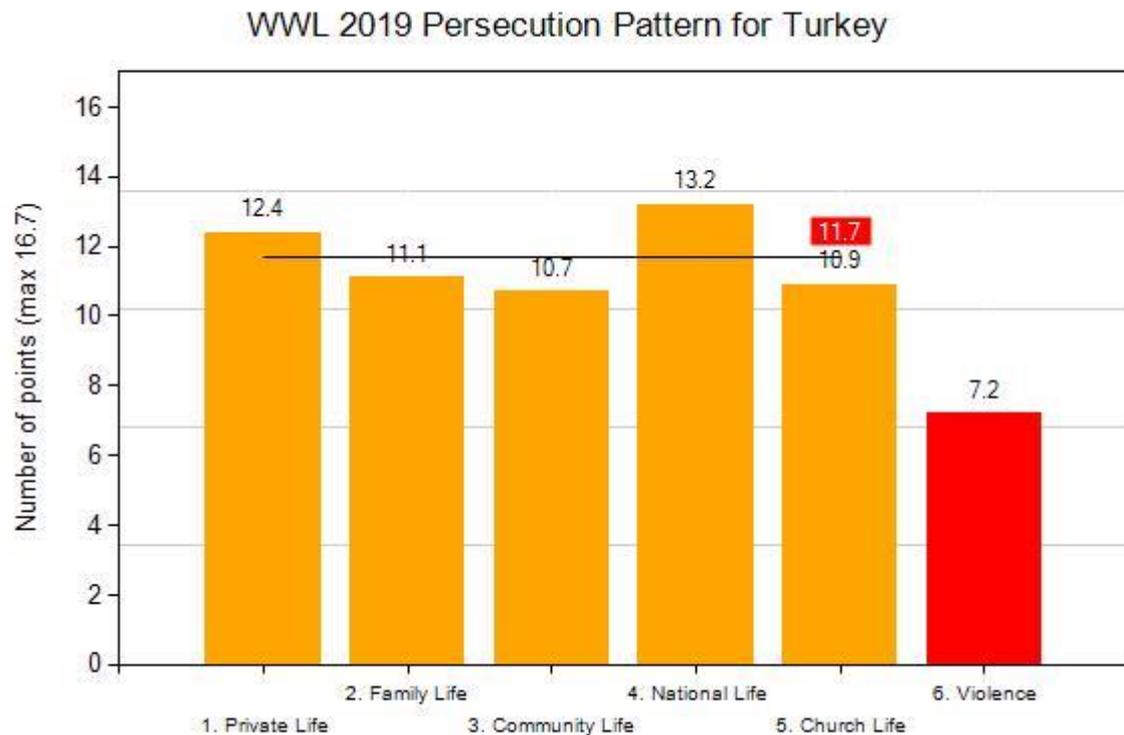
Historical Christian communities: These include the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox and Greek Orthodox churches (the only churches "recognized" in the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923), and the Assyrian, Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholic churches, all of which are monitored regularly and subjected to controls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

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

Converts to Christianity: Christian converts from a Muslim background bear the brunt of persecution in Turkey. Pressure comes from family, friends, community and even the local authorities. They are considered traitors to the Turkish identity. Besides converts from a local, Turkish background, there are also communities of [converts from other countries](#) such as Iran.

Non-traditional Christian communities: Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations mostly exist as small groups who find it difficult to function and some are unable to afford a rented place of worship. Many of them are meeting in private homes, which can lead to opposition from neighbors.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The WWL 2019 Persecution pattern for Turkey shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (11.7), rising from 10.7 in WWL 2018. The reason for this increase is the overall rise in pressure, in particular in the *family, community* and *national spheres of life*. This is directly related to the growing animosity against Christians (caused both by nationalistic feelings, and the commotion surrounding the Brunson-case).
- Although all *spheres of life* show very high levels of pressure, pressure is highest in the *Private* and *National spheres of life*. The score for *private life* reflects both the difficulty for converts to openly practice their faith among their family members as well as the growing pressure on all Christians to be careful how to speak and with whom to share about their faith in a climate that is hostile against Christianity. The very high score for *National life* indicates the difficulty for Christians and Christian organizations to operate in Turkey. Media reporting on Christians is very biased and Christians regularly experience discrimination when engaging with the authorities.
- The score for violence went down from 8.7 in WWL 2018 to 7.2 in WWL 2019. No killings were reported during the WWL 2019 reporting period, which helped keep the score for violence down.

Private sphere:

Conversion is not prohibited by law. However, there are likely to be social and familial implications for conversion from Islam to Christianity or from one Christian denomination to another. Although the level and nature of oppression from families would vary considerably depending on the background of the family, conversion to Christianity is widely considered unacceptable. Christians sometimes lead a double life and hide their conversion, which means hiding their praying, reading of the Bible and access of Christian websites. This kind of oppression is viewed as "normal" and it is hardly reported or

documented unless there is physical violence. There is also family and church pressure on those who change church affiliation from historical to non-traditional churches. Again this is not documented or reported upon. Those who hide their Christian identity are often too afraid of meeting fellow believers.

Family sphere:

Although converts from Islam can legally change their religious affiliation on ID cards to Christianity, it can be a difficult and stressful process. If the ID card reads Muslim, children of converts are obliged to attend courses on Islam at school. Unless converts have changed the religious affiliation on their cards, any children will automatically be registered as Sunni Muslims. Once a conversion to Christianity becomes known, converts can face the threat of divorce and lose their inheritance rights. They can also experience difficulties in organizing a Christian wedding or burial (where a convert's last wishes are not respected and the burial is carried out according to Islamic rites). Applications for Christian cemeteries have been denied in some parts of the country. Where this has happened, Christians can only be buried according to Christian rites in sections reserved for all non-Muslims or be buried in a historically Christian cemetery.

It is nearly impossible for Christians to adopt a Muslim child. Children of Christians, and especially of converts, are often harassed either because of society's religious intolerance or because of nationalist zeal. Spouses of converts occasionally experience pressure to divorce.

Community sphere:

Converts face strong pressure from their family, friends and neighbors to recant their Christian faith. There are compulsory Islamic classes in the schooling system, although non-Muslim children can opt out. However, there have been reports of societal and teacher discrimination against those who opt out. Christian schoolchildren are regularly discriminated against in classes, by both teachers and other students. There are Christians who study at Turkish universities but they are barred from reaching higher positions or professorships at university level. Christians have no access to state employment and experience discrimination in private employment, especially where employers have ties to the government. Since religious affiliation is recorded on every ID card, it is very easy to discriminate against Christian applicants. There is a possibility to leave the religious affiliation section blank, but this might attract suspicion. Christians are marginalized in Turkey and treated by society as second-class citizens.

National sphere:

The Turkish Constitution is very restrictive in its approach towards the rights of religious minorities. Converts (particularly those who are church leaders in the southeast or in rural areas elsewhere) are sometimes given disrespectful treatment by police and security forces because of their open Christian identity. Christians face difficulties in obtaining permits for building churches or for getting place-of-worship status. Access to public sector jobs, the state's security apparatus and law enforcement is denied to Christians, as is promotion in the army, despite obligatory military service. Although one's religious affiliation is no longer displayed on the [new ID cards](#), it is still registered on the chip in the card. The rise of nationalism in the country caused issues for non-Muslim business owners, as nepotism is reportedly widespread under the ruling AKP-party. Local media and columnists in particular have been biased against Christians. There have been several reports of intolerance and prejudices against Christians. There are concerns about the impartiality of the judiciary in court cases that involve Christian minorities, especially after the government ousted more than 4000 members of the judiciary due to alleged ties to the Gülen-movement.

Church sphere:

It is impossible to register as a new religious community as such. Although there is an option for churches to register as an "association", this is also a difficult process and some applications have been denied. Establishing foundations with the aim of supporting a new religious community is also prohibited. The Turkish secret service (MIT) closely watches Christian groups and their activities, although the security services are also (visibly) protecting churches during services, especially after threats made by the Islamic State group. It is very difficult to get official permits for repairing or renovating church buildings. Many church buildings, seminaries or schools that have in the past been confiscated, have not been returned.

Organizing activities outside designated church facilities are generally regarded as evangelism and hence obstructed by both local officials and the community. This has especially become difficult after the coup and the following state of emergency, in which all alleged suspicious behavior can lead to arrests. Openly integrating converts into existing churches is made difficult, mainly by the community. Changes in leadership of the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic churches must be given government approval, even though these are leaders of religious communities which do not exist in law and whose personal positions are not recognized in law. The training of Christian leaders legally is impossible. Christian materials are available in the Turkish language, but their distribution remains sensitive as it is automatically linked to evangelism.

It is difficult for church leaders to obtain a visa. Many foreign religious workers are either denied a visa or their residence permit is simply not renewed.

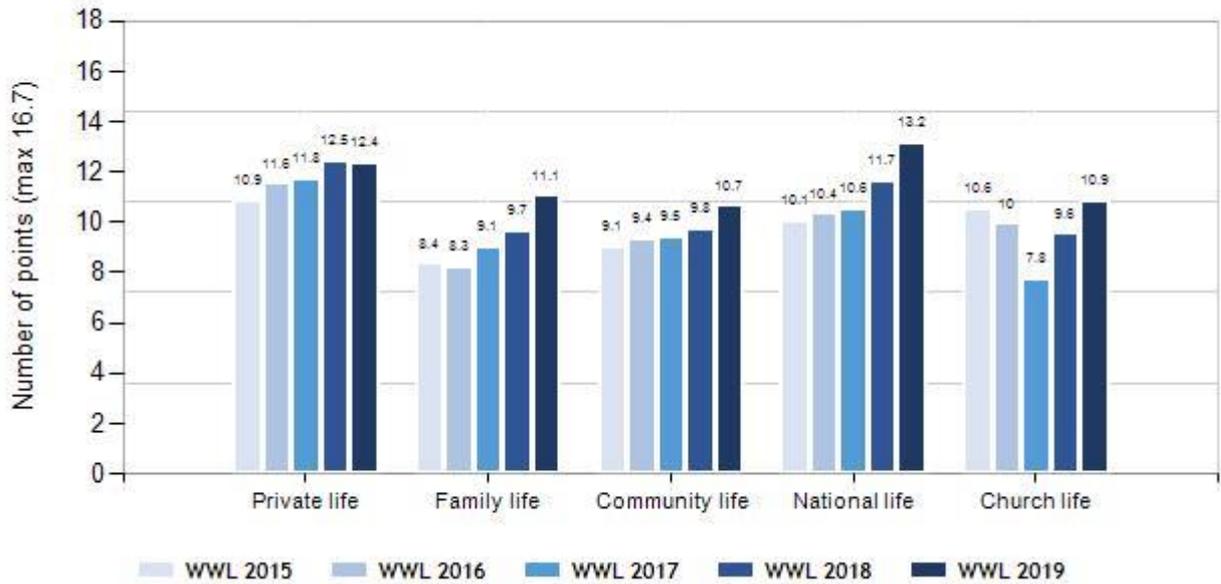
Violence:

Christians in Turkey face violence on a regular basis. For a summary of the statistics on violence and examples, please see the Short and Simple Persecution Profile section above.

5 Year trends

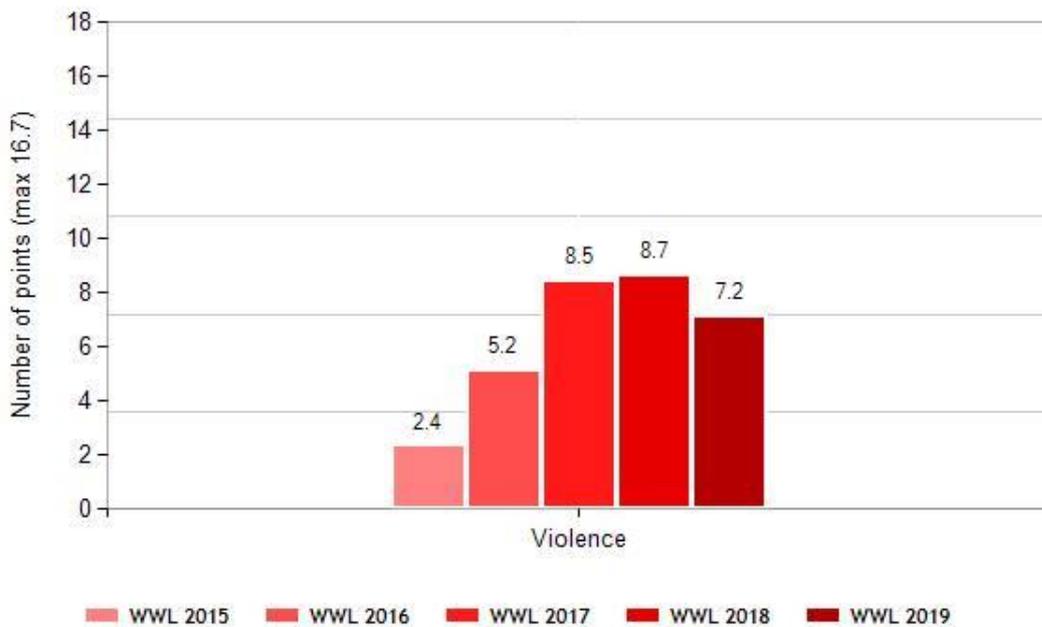
The level of pressure in the *all spheres of life*, except *Church life*, have been growing steadily over the last five years (first chart). There have also been notable increases in pressure in the *Family* and *National spheres of life*. The second chart, showing average pressure, shows that the overall level of pressure on Christians has risen from a high level to a very high level in the last two reporting periods. This reflects the growing pressure on Christians in general due to the changing political climate. The number of violent incidents recorded in Turkey has grown over the years. The scores for violence (third chart) have thus risen to a very high level over the last five years.

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Turkey (Spheres of life)



WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Turkey	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2019	11.7
2018	10.7
2017	9.8
2016	9.9
2015	9.8

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Turkey (Violence)



Gender specific persecution

Female:

Conversion to Christianity is probably more difficult for women as they are more vulnerable to persecution in an Islamic society in which they have an inferior position. Muslim leaders regularly degrade women and want to exclude them from all forms of public life. That holds particularly true for women from minorities and even more so in rural areas. Pressure on female converts to marry a Muslim man can create unstable family environments. Women are expected to bring honor to their families by their career choices and their relationships and marriage choices. Becoming a Christian or marrying a Christian are threats to that expectation. Given the current revival of Islam, women are likely to face increasing pressure to meet Islamic expectations of dress and conduct.

Male:

Media, police, bureaucratic and communal persecution target both men and women. However, men are expected to be defenders of Islam and Turkishness (which are closely aligned in public perception), so failure to live up to that expectation creates pressure on men that can prevent them from ever stepping foot into a church. According to sources, men and boys are more likely to be arrested and mistreated by the authorities.

During military service men are in an environment where, if their Christian religion is recorded in their ID, they are likely to be viewed with suspicion by their superiors and bullied by their peers.

Persecution of other religious minorities

Both government and society verbally attack religious groups such as Alevites and Jews and ethnic groups such as the Kurds. This trend is likely to continue. Turkey is a supporter of Muslim Brotherhood entities such as Hamas and hence has become opposed to Israel. Public speech has therefore gone from being anti-Israel to anti-Semitic. President Erdogan has been guilty of promoting such attitudes. This has naturally made the few remaining Jews in Turkey very fearful and some hundreds have recently emigrated to Israel, leaving those behind even more vulnerable. In Turkey young nationalistic Turks can respond to hate speech and perform violent acts, thinking they have the state's and public approval.

In addition, the Gülen movement has been heavily persecuted since the 2016 coup. Yazidis in Turkey's south east face similar issues as the Syriac Christians. Nusayri refugees (Alawites) from Syria feel enormous pressure to leave the country. The Alevites are also discriminated against (officially they do not exist as specific group and cannot run any houses of worship) as well as Kurds in general.

According to the US Department of State's [International Religious Freedom Report for Turkey 2017](#) (pp.6-7): "The government continued to limit the rights of non-Muslim minorities, especially those it did not recognize as covered under the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. It continued to consider Alevism a heterodox Muslim group and continued not to recognize Alevi houses of worship (cemevis). As part of a broader shutdown by government decree of organizations for allegedly spreading terrorist propaganda, the government closed two Shia Jaferi-owned television stations in January. [...] Alevis expressed concern about security and said the government failed to meet their demands for religious reforms. [...] Non-Sunni Muslims did not receive the same protections as recognized non-Muslim minorities, although both experienced difficulty operating or opening houses of worship, challenging land and other property claims, or obtaining exemptions from mandatory religion classes. The government continued to train Sunni Muslim clerics, while restricting other religious groups from

training their clergy, and continued to fund the construction of Sunni mosques while restricting land use of other religious groups."

In December 2018, [the Appeals Court ruled](#) that the government should pay the electricity expenses of *cemevis* (Alevi's houses of worship), like the government also does for mosques. However, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) gave a similar ruling in 2016, which was ignored by the government. If the government does heed this ruling, that might open up possibilities for churches to ask for equal treatment too.

Future outlook

The political outlook: Turkey's economic future is not looking bright. The value of the Turkish Lira has been in a downward spiral, youth [unemployment](#) remains high ($\pm 20\%$) and the instable political situation is [detering investors](#). Although the country has seen huge economic growth since 2000, there is now a lot of uncertainty about the future. The state of emergency has officially ended, but the security services keep clamping down on all opposition. With new laws in place, human rights organizations are claiming that the state of emergency is now actually [made permanent](#). At the same time, Erdogan seems to be isolating Turkey from Europe, the United States and Arab states. The conflict with the Kurdish PKK has intensified and the country has proved vulnerable to [attacks and bombings](#) from Kurdish and other groups in recent years.

The outlook for Christians - through the lens of:

- *Islamic oppression / Religious nationalism:* There has been a rise in the use of hate-speech in the press (often local press) directed against churches and foreign Christian church workers. This has led to municipalities and local officials trying to close the churches. Now that the Brunson case is over, the general atmosphere might become less tense. However, Christian refugees are experiencing increasing restrictions from the authorities and are being threatened with deportation. There is also a rise in violent incidents against Christian refugees - from mob attacks on churches to attacks on individuals. It is not likely that the situation will improve. The country's Islamization is continuing and the pressure on the Christian community has increased massively ever since the coup attempt in 2016 - and is still growing.
- *Ethnic antagonism:* The Christian population is tiny, consisting only of 0.2% of the population. Taking into consideration the fact that just a century ago Christians made up 20% of the country's population, the [fear of total extinction](#) is not unrealistic, in particular for the ancient Historical Christian communities. The overall atmosphere against Christians is hostile, with Christianity being seen as something foreign. As long as "Armenian" is used as a slur, instead of being spoken of as a respected and legit minority, it is unlikely that the attitude towards Christians will change.
- *Dictatorial paranoia:* The arrest and detention of Andrew Brunson has resulted in many foreign families leaving the country and in fewer new workers considering taking up positions in Turkey. There is a government campaign to prevent residency permits being given to foreign church workers - especially in Eastern Anatolia and in more rural provinces. The government appears to be making this "clearance" of foreign Christians less obvious by stopping workers from opening bank accounts, for example - a prerequisite for obtaining residency. In addition, although Erdogan ended the state of emergency in July 2018 after a two year period, with his new powers as president in a presidential system, he does not need the state of emergency laws in order to control the country with an iron fist.

Conclusion: Christians do not seem to be direct targets for government persecution but the general situation for Christians is deteriorating. The situation for Historical Christian communities in the southeast of Turkey is particularly worrying. A lot of their property has been taken away by the Turkish government in recent years and their ancient culture is gradually disappearing. Besides that, the arrest and prosecution of US Pastor Andrew Brunson, who was being held as a political hostage for 2 years, shows clearly that Turkish government under Erdogan has developed into a regime without scruples. Overall, Christians will have to operate carefully, especially in the public sphere.

External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines: declared
<https://ahvalnews.com/press-freedom/media-and-democracy-not-compatible-says-erdogan>
- Drivers of persecution: referendum
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/10/turkish-referendum-all-you-need-to-know>
- Drivers of persecution: seized control over churches
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/07/legal-limbo-turkeys-syriac-christian-properties-still-unresolved>
- Context: schools
<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/06/turkey-high-schools-student-stand-up-against-islamism.html>
- Christian communities and how they are affected: converts from other countries
<http://www.222ministries.com/articles/view/104>
- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence: new ID cards
<http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/religion-be-left-new-identification-cards-turkey-326099214>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: International Religious Freedom Report for Turkey 2017
<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281212.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: the Appeals Court ruled
<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/12/turkey-court-recognizes-alevi-houses-of-worship.html>
- Future outlook: unemployment
<https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/youth-unemployment-rate>
- Future outlook: deterring investors
<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/turkey/overview>
- Future outlook: made permanent
<http://bianet.org/english/human-rights/203384-state-of-emergency-is-made-permanent>
- Future outlook: attacks and bombings
<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2016/06/timeline-attacks-turkey-160628223800183.html>

- Future outlook: fear of total extinction
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-religion-turkey-christians-factbox/factbox-christians-in-turkey-idUSTRE50L08O20090122>

Additional Reports and Articles

WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

A selection of articles is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

Use the country search function at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

Recent country developments

Use the country search function at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/> (password: freedom).