

# **CYPRUS 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. Turkish Cypriots had relatively easy access to religious sites in the government-controlled area, although some cemeteries and mosques within Greek Cypriot military camps were reportedly inaccessible and neglected. Some prisoners in the Central Prison reported that prison regulations restricted their religious rights.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom. In April arsonists attacked the Koprulu Haci Ibrahim Aga mosque in Limassol. The archbishop of the Autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus (Church of Cyprus) and the government publicly condemned the attack, and the municipality helped restore the mosque.

U.S. officials met with government leaders, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations, and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom issues, including access to religious sites. In addition, embassy staff visited sites of religious significance throughout the island and observed religious ceremonies.

Note: Since 1974, the government of the Republic of Cyprus has controlled the southern part of the island, and Turkish Cypriots have administered the northern part of the island. In 1983, the northern part proclaimed itself the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" ("TRNC"). The United States does not recognize the "TRNC," nor does any other country aside from Turkey. A substantial number of Turkish troops remain on the island. The UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) patrols a buffer zone, or "green line," separating the two parts. The 1975 Vienna III Agreement covers the treatment of Greek Cypriots and Maronite Catholics living in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots living in the government-controlled area. The area administered by Turkish Cypriots is discussed in a separate section in this report.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

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According to the October 2011 census, which contains no data on religious affiliation, the population of the government-controlled area is more than 840,000. According to the 2001 census, 95 percent of the permanent population in the government-controlled area belongs to the autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus. Other religious groups include Roman Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Bahais, and Buddhists. The religious affiliation of recent immigrants and migrant workers is generally different from that of native-born citizens. Most of the approximately 2,100 Jews are foreign residents.

### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The constitution specifies that the Church of Cyprus has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with its holy canons and charter. By law, the Church of Cyprus is exempt from taxes on religious activity and pays taxes only on strictly commercial activities.

The constitution sets guidelines for the Vakif, a Sunni Muslim institution that regulates religious activity for Turkish Cypriots. The Vakif is tax-exempt and has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with its laws and principles. No legislative, executive, or other act may contravene or interfere with the Church of Cyprus or the Vakif. However, the Vakif operates only in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and does not administer mosques located in the government-controlled area. Mosques in government-controlled areas receive financial support from the government.

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

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

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nonprofit organizations are tax-exempt and must provide annual reports; they are not eligible for government subsidies.

Foreign missionaries must obtain and periodically renew residence permits to live in the country. It is illegal for a missionary to use “physical or moral compulsion” to bring about religious conversions. Police may investigate missionary activity based on a citizen’s complaint.

The government requires Greek Orthodox religious instruction in public primary and secondary schools. The Ministry of Education may excuse primary school students of other religious groups from attending religious services and instruction at the request of their guardians. Secondary school students may be excused by the ministry from religious instruction on grounds of religion or conscience, and they may be excused from attending religious services on any grounds at the request of their guardians, or at their own request if over the age of 16.

Conscientious objectors on religious grounds are exempt from active military duty and from reservist service in the National Guard, but must complete alternative service. There are two options available for conscientious objectors: unarmed military service, which is a maximum of five months longer than the normal 24-month service; or social service, which is a maximum of nine months longer than normal service, but requires fewer hours per day.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Epiphany, Annunciation, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Holy Spirit Day (Pentecost), Assumption, and Christmas.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The Ministry of Commerce generally granted religious groups registration as nonprofit organizations promptly.

Turkish Cypriots had relatively easy access to religious sites in the government-controlled area. A Turkish Cypriot authority reported, however, that Turkish Cypriot cemeteries and mosques in the villages of Kosi and Aplanda in the Larnaca district were inaccessible because they were within Greek Cypriot military camps. Turkish Cypriot authorities also stated that Greek Cypriot maintenance of mosques was limited to the main city centers and tourist areas, and that other mosques in the

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government-controlled area were neglected. In addition, Turkish Cypriots stated that the Ministry of Communications and Works' Department of Antiquities kept Hala Sultan Tekke (Mosque) open only during conventional museum hours, thus limiting access to the mosque to only two of the five daily prayer times.

On March 9, the press reported that police in Ayia Napa approached two Jehovah's Witnesses distributing religious publications in the street and issued them each 85 euro (\$111.35) fines for solicitation. Upon learning of the incident, the attorney general ordered that the fines be rescinded. The ombudsman, an independent state official, examined the complaint submitted by the Jehovah's Witnesses and noted that police leadership had not issued specific guidance to police officers on the legal right to proselytize.

The international nonprofit organization Conscience and Peace Tax International and the Jehovah's Witnesses argued that the longer duration of alternative service for conscientious objectors compared to military service was punitive. In contrast to previous years, the ombudsman's office did not receive any complaints from conscientious objectors about the procedures used by the government to confirm their conscientious objector status and eligibility for alternative military service.

The Buddhist community continued to face difficulties finding a site for a permanent temple. The community purchased land outside of Nicosia, but building regulations allowed for only 6 percent of the land to be used for habitable structures. Following denial of the community's request for a variance, the Interior Ministry proposed an exchange of the Buddhists' land for government land, although at year's end the exchange had not been completed. The group continued to use a meditation center in Nicosia as a temple.

Several religious groups reported difficulties obtaining visas and residency permits for clergy and student volunteers from countries outside the European Union. The government did not process applications and renewals in a timely manner, and some groups reported that some members were forced to leave the country rather than risk staying illegally and face possible deportation.

Minority religious groups reported that military recruits rarely requested to be excused from taking part in a common prayer led by Church of Cyprus clergy during swearing-in ceremonies because they feared such a request would attract negative attention.

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Some prisoners in the Central Prison stated that prison management restricted their religious rights. In April the ombudsman reported that some members of the Church of Cyprus from Pontus filed a complaint that the prison management had denied them access to the church on November 21, 2011, an important religious holiday. The ombudsman also reported in April that prison management did not allow representatives of the Christian Center, an evangelical group located in Nicosia, to visit prisoners who had expressed the wish to meet with them. Prison management informed the ombudsman that prison regulations did not allow prisoners to be visited by representatives of a religious group other than the one they had declared upon admission into the prison. The ombudsman concluded that in both cases the prison management had restricted the religious freedom of the prisoners. The ombudsman recommended an amendment of the prison regulations to allow prisoners to meet with representatives of any religious group as desired.

The Jehovah's Witnesses, which had previously reported problems obtaining exemptions for children from religious instruction, stated that the Ministry of Education generally granted exemptions promptly and that their children did not experience difficulties in being excused from attending school performances containing religious content. However, the Jehovah's Witnesses reported that some schools did not make arrangements for the students to engage in supervised school work during the time of religious instruction class, as required by regulations. In one case, a school asked a student who had been granted an exemption to stay in class during religious instruction and punished her with an unexcused absence when she refused to do so. The Jehovah's Witnesses submitted an official complaint to the Ministry of Education and the ombudsman. The complaint was being investigated at year's end.

In October the Church of Cyprus and the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches organized a conference in Nicosia entitled "An Ongoing Need for Freedom of Religion or Belief in Cyprus," which brought together religious and political representatives from the country and the European Union. Attendees included the archbishop of the Church of Cyprus, the Maronite Catholic archbishop, the Armenian Orthodox archbishop, the Turkish Cypriot imam of Hala Sultan Tekke, and a representative from the Anglican Church of Cyprus. The interior minister provided opening remarks.

On October 26 and 27, nearly 1,000 Turkish Cypriots visited the Hala Sultan Tekke to celebrate Kurban Bayram for the second time since 1960. In addition, nearly 600 Turkish Cypriots visited the mosque for Asura on November 25.

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### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

On April 13, arsonists set on fire the Koprulu Haci Ibrahim Aga mosque in Limassol. The Turkish Cypriot press alleged that Greek Cypriot vandals were responsible for the attack, which occurred during Easter celebrations and extensively damaged the exterior as well as doors and windows. The government and the archbishop of the Church of Cyprus publicly condemned the attack. The municipality helped restore the mosque, which was fully operational at year's end. A Turkish Cypriot imam noted that this was not the first time the mosque had been attacked.

Some representatives of the Jewish community reported that members were verbally harassed on various occasions throughout the year.

As ethnicity and religion were often inextricably linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents of discrimination specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance. Those who were not members of the prevailing religious group often faced negative social reactions if they chose to refrain from participating in public ceremonies that were religious in nature. Likewise, Greek Cypriots who converted from Greek Orthodoxy to other faiths sometimes faced social ostracism. However, relations between the Church of Cyprus and other religious communities in the government-controlled area were generally cordial.

The Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage, a group composed of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots appointed by the leaders of their communities, identified cultural heritage sites throughout the island in need of emergency preservation measures. These sites included four mosques in the government-controlled area. The committee also provided partial support to maintain the Agios Panteleimonas Monastery in Myrtou, and organized small-scale, grassroots initiatives to help maintain cultural heritage sites, including religious sites, in poor condition on both sides of the island.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. embassy officials met frequently with government leaders, NGOs, international organizations, and leaders from a variety of religious groups to

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discuss religious freedom issues, including access to religious sites. Embassy staff observed religious ceremonies at Hala Sultan Tekke, which included attendees from government ministries, as well as leaders of the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Roman Catholic communities. Embassy staff regularly visited sites of religious significance and met with representatives of minority religious groups to listen to their concerns. Embassy staff attended the October conference on religious freedom.

### AREA ADMINISTERED BY TURKISH CYPRIOTS

Since 1974, Turkish Cypriots have administered the northern part of the island. In 1983 it proclaimed itself the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”). The United States does not recognize the “TRNC,” nor does any country other than Turkey.

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“Laws” in the Turkish Cypriot-administered area generally protect religious freedom; however, some policies restrict religious freedom. Some religious groups, including Greek Orthodox and Maronite Catholics, had limited access to their places of worship in the north. Some groups complained that some religious sites were damaged, close to collapse, or had been converted to other uses. Some religious groups reported that the authorities monitored their activities. The trend in the Turkish Cypriot authorities’ respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Greek Cypriots continued to report that vandals damaged and removed religious icons from vacant Greek Orthodox churches located in the Turkish Cypriot-administered area.

Embassy representatives met with Turkish Cypriot “officials,” NGOs, international organizations, and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom issues, including access to religious sites and the ability to hold religious services freely. Embassy staff observed religious ceremonies and visited sites of religious significance.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

According to the 2011 census, which contains no data on religious affiliation, the population of the area administered by Turkish Cypriots is 295,000. Sociologists

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estimate 98 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. An estimated 10,000 immigrant workers and 3,000 settlers from Turkey of Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab origin are Alevis, and there are also small numbers of followers of other schools of Islam. Other small groups include: 330 members of the autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus, 200 members of the Russian Orthodox Church, approximately 200 Bahais, 110 Maronite Catholics, 180 Anglicans, 150 mostly expatriate Jews, and 40 Jehovah's Witnesses. There are small numbers of Roman Catholics and members of several Protestant denominations, including Pentecostals, Baptists, and Methodists.

### Section II. Status of "Government" Respect for Religious Freedom

#### **Legal/Policy Framework**

"Laws" in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots generally protect religious freedom; however, some policies restrict religious freedom, particularly for members of the Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox churches.

The "law" refers specifically to a "secular republic." The "law" does not recognize any specific religion. It states, however, that the Sunni Muslim Vakif, which regulates religious activity for Turkish Cypriots, has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with Vakif laws and principles. The Vakif has preferential tax status; it is tax-exempt in its religious activities, but its commercial operations are subject to applicable taxes. It also receives income from properties it manages. No other religious group in the area is tax-exempt.

The 1975 Vienna III Agreement covers the treatment of Greek Cypriots and Maronite Catholics living in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots living in the government-controlled area. Among other provisions, the agreement provides for facilities for religious worship for Greek Cypriots, stating that "the Greek Cypriots at present in the north of the island are free to stay and they will be given every help to lead a normal life, including facilities for education and for the practice of their religion, as well as medical care by their own doctors and freedom of movement in the north."

Religious groups are not required to register with authorities as associations, but only registered associations may engage in commercial activity and maintain bank accounts. Associations do not receive tax-exempt status or any "government"

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benefits or subsidies. Religious groups are not permitted to register as associations if the stated purpose of the association is to conduct religious services.

Turkish Cypriot authorities limit access to Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox places of worship. “Regulations” stipulate that Greek Orthodox and Maronite Catholic residents may hold liturgies or masses conducted by designated priests at designated churches in their areas of residence without seeking permission. The authorities require religious groups to submit applications for permission to hold religious services at churches or monasteries other than the six they have designated. The authorities also require applications that request permission for religious services conducted by priests other than those with official designation. Permission is also required for services that include participation of Greek Cypriots who are not residents in the Turkish Cypriot-administered area, such as members of the Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox churches living in the government-controlled area. Applications to hold worship services at these sites are required ten days before the date of such religious services.

There is no formal Islamic religious instruction in public schools. However, there is compulsory instruction covering religion, culture, and ethics in grades four through eight in all schools. It focuses primarily on Islam, although it also covers comparative religion. The instruction is mandatory and attendance is required of all students, regardless of their faith. Non-Muslim students may be excused from attending religious instruction at the request of their guardians. At the high-school level, such instruction is optional. There are no “state-supported” religious schools.

There are no provisions or “laws” allowing Turkish Cypriots to engage in conscientious objection to military service.

The following holy days are official holidays and are observed widely in the Turkish Cypriot community: Ramadan Bayram, the Birth of the Prophet Mohammed, and Kurban Bayram.

### “Government” Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom; however, the authorities imposed restrictions that affected members of religious minority groups.

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Greek Orthodox and Maronite Catholics continued to be prohibited from visiting most religious sites located in military zones in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. The Jewish community reported that a Jewish cemetery remained inaccessible due to its location in a military zone. Some religious groups complained that some religious sites to which they had little or no access were damaged or close to collapse.

The most recent reports indicated that Turkish Cypriot authorities did not allocate additional funds beyond 546,430 Turkish lira (\$346,000) in 2006 to complete the restoration of 15 Greek Orthodox churches in the area they administered. In addition, authorities stated that some Greek Orthodox and Maronite churches had long been converted to other uses. One religious group complained that religious items were being held in museums against the wishes of the community.

In March authorities denied permission to the Greek Orthodox Bishop of Karpasia to enter the north to visit the Metropolitan Church of St. Mamas in Morphou. The authorities stated the bishop had previously conducted unauthorized religious services at the Apostolos Andreas monastery and was therefore in violation of the requirement for written notification and permission to conduct religious services.

Some religious groups reported that Turkish Cypriot authorities, including the police, monitored their activities. A resident Greek Orthodox priest reported heavy police presence during church services and stated the police questioned him frequently about his activities. Turkish Cypriot “officials” stated that the purpose of the police presence was to provide security and protect religious icons and artifacts; however, religious groups perceived the monitoring as intimidation and harassment.

Turkish Cypriot authorities eased restrictions on holding regular religious services in certain churches, although authorities did not approve all requests. The authorities denied some Church of Cyprus requests to hold religious services in churches not officially designated, including a request to hold April 17 services at the Holy Church of St. Euphemitos in Lysi, and a request to hold April 20 services for the Feast of the Virgin Mary at the Church of St. Charalambos in Neo Chorio Kythreas.

The four churches in the primarily Maronite village of Kormakitis and the Maronite church in Karpashia functioned regularly and did not need special permission for any services. Three smaller Maronite churches required special permission to hold services, and one church in Kambyli required a special permit

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at all times. In April Maronite Catholics celebrated the Festival of Saint George in Kormakitis for the first time in 38 years, in cooperation with the local municipality.

Authorities scheduled a hearing in the “Constitutional Court” for early 2013 on the case of Turkish Cypriot Murat Kanatli, who began declaring his conscientious objection to the one-day annual military reserve duty requirement in 2009.

Turkish Cypriot authorities permitted construction of a number of mosques with funding from Turkey. Some non-Sunni Muslims lacked places of worship and funding to construct such facilities. Alevi, which like all non-Sunni Muslim religious groups were recognized by the authorities as an association and not as a religious group, reported that due the lack of a cem evi (house of worship), they were required to conduct funerals inside mosques, contrary to their traditions. In April the Pir Sultan Abdal Association, an Alevi NGO, visited Turkish Cypriot political parties to request support to build a cem evi and to advocate for inclusion of Alevism in the education curriculum. While several of the parties expressed support regarding the inclusion of Alevism in the education curriculum, there were no reports of further action.

In February authorities closed a “state”-supported Islamic religious department that had opened in a public high school in November 2011 after teachers unions and the education authorities reached an agreement. The teachers unions had protested the department’s opening, and supported secular education as a key aspect of Turkish Cypriot identity. The authorities insisted there was demand for religious courses. The students continued their education in a private Turkish school until construction of a new “state”-supported religious school was completed.

A Turkish-speaking Protestant congregation filed a “court” case due to the authorities’ continued refusal to grant it legal recognition as a religious association with the purpose of conducting religious services. Authorities reportedly requested the congregation provide an application that did not include reference to religion, including in the name of the association, as required by “law.” As a result, the authorities denied the group’s application, as they had done for the past eight years. The group’s inability to register as an association prevented it from establishing a trust fund and purchasing property. The congregation used rented space in Kyrenia and Nicosia for religious services.

The “Antiquities Department” did not begin its planned restoration of the 200-year-old Greek Orthodox Chapel of Saint Thekla that was demolished, reportedly by accident, in 2011.

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### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Greek Cypriots continued to report that vandals damaged vacant Greek Orthodox churches and removed religious icons in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. According to Turkish Cypriot authorities, police closely investigated all such complaints of vandalism.

Turkish Cypriot religious authorities reported that Muslim parents seeking to send their children to religious summer courses faced strong public criticism, particularly from local teachers.

Some religious groups reported that Turkish Cypriot converts from Islam to other religions faced social ostracism.

The Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage, a group composed of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots appointed by the leaders of their communities, identified cultural heritage sites throughout the island in need of emergency preservation. These sites, five in each community, included five churches located in the area administered by the Turkish Cypriots. The committee also assumed a coordination and facilitator role for the restoration of the Apostolos Andreas monastery in Karpasia. In addition, the committee organized small-scale grassroots initiatives to help maintain cultural heritage sites, including religious sites, in poor condition on both sides of the island.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

Embassy representatives met with Turkish Cypriot authorities, NGOs, international organizations, and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom, including access to religious sites and the ability to hold religious services at the sites without restrictions. Embassy staff observed religious ceremonies at Saint Mamas in Morphou, a historically important church that attracted a large number of worshippers from the government-controlled area, and visited the Maronite enclave in Kormakitis. In June the embassy sponsored participation in an international exchange program that focused on cultural heritage preservation, applicable to the preservation of historic religious sites, for the lead Turkish Cypriot representative on the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage.