

## Country Profile

# Turkey

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This Country Profile provides a brief overview of religious diversity and its governance in the above-named state. It is one of 23 such profiles produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, state-religion relations and religiously inspired radicalisation on four continents. More detailed assessments are available in our multi-part Country Reports and Country Cases.

**Countries covered in this series:**

Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

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Total population: 82 million

### Religious affiliation (percent)

Islam		99.9
Sunni Islam	78	
Alevi	18	
Shia-Caferi	3.9	
Other		0.1

Sources: Turkish Statistical Institute, Population Census, 2019. As there is no official data on the religious composition of the population, the above figures are estimates, based on survey research carried out by private companies and NGOs.

### Role of religion in state and government

The Constitution of Turkey defines the Republic as secular, but Sunni Islam is practically the official religion of the state as Turkish national identity is closely tied to Islam and the religious bureaucracy is part of the state structure. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), originally founded as a department attached to the prime ministry (and currently to the presidency since Turkey's 2018 transition to a presidential system), is primarily charged with the administration of mosques and their personnel across the nation. It issues opinions on matters related to the doctrine and practice of Islam. In recent years, the responsibilities of *Diyanet* have expanded to include running a TV channel, engaging in the community and familial affairs of citizens, playing an effective role in the solution of social problems, finding ways to prevent the moral degeneration of society, and so on. *Diyanet* currently employs over 100,000 people and has a budget that exceeds the combined budgets of several cabinet ministries. In addition to its enormous size and daily involvement in social life, *Diyanet* also plays a significant political role in legitimizing government actions. It does this in the form of public statements issued by its director or written sermons prepared by *Diyanet* headquarters which are sent to all mosques around the country to be read at Friday prayers. Finally, with legislation passed in 2010, *Diyanet* has taken on a task that transcends the confines of a secular state; it has been assigned to offer "legal advice" on the laws, statues and regulations prepared by the administration.

The officially recognised religious minorities identified by the Turkish government are the Greek Orthodox, the Armenians and the Jews. These groups were granted certain protections and a small measure of autonomy by the Lausanne Treaty of 1923, which secured the independence of the Turkish nation-state. Several other religious groups, such as Syriacs, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Bahais, Jehovah's Witnesses, have a *de facto* but legally insecure presence. None of the groups listed above has legal personality.

**Freedom of religion**

The Constitution of Turkey endorses freedom of conscience, religious belief and worship, and prohibits discrimination based on religious grounds. It also prohibits the exploitation of religion or religious feelings for political ends or for regulating state affairs. Still, the nearly complete homogeneity of the population around the Muslim identity, combined with the secular foundation of the republic, has led to a perennial tension between the secularists and Islamists throughout Turkish political history. This has also led to an ongoing debate about the proper place of religion in public and political life. While Islamists, and recently some “liberals” and “multiculturalists,” have demanded a greater role for religion in public and political affairs, the secularists have argued that religion needs to be kept private and that politics should not be based on religious precepts. The outcome of this debate has varied, depending on the relative room for maneuver that the politically powerful group may have. This is due to the institutional setup in place readily allowing for governmental expansion or contraction in the role of religion in state affairs. Some historical periods, such as the 1990s, witnessed restrictions on public religious expression, such as the wearing of Islamic headscarves by female university students, whereas in recent years, there has been a rapid expansion in the religious infrastructure and in the use of religious language in politics and state affairs.

It is ironic that Muslims should complain of secularism restricting freedom of religion, because if any mention is to be made of limitations on this freedom, they certainly apply to the non-Muslim and non-Sunni groups. Many non-Muslim groups are officially unrecognized and those that are face governmental interventions in their internal affairs, including occasional arbitrary confiscations of their property. Other violations include routine discriminatory language and behaviour in education and employment and the denial of conscientious objection to military service.

The most serious violation concerns the Alevis, given the size of the community (at least 15 million) and its deep historical roots in Turkish society. The Alevi faith is officially declared to be a “heretic” sect of Islam and their places of worship are not recognized, despite several judgments in their favor from both the European Court of Human Rights and high courts within Turkey.

Islamists also complain about a law passed in 1925 which banned *sufi* brotherhoods and other grassroots religious groupings because they were seen by the new republican regime at the time as potential sources of political trouble. Although this law is still in effect, it is rarely enforced or enforced only when it is convenient for the government to do so. Hence a series of workshops organized by the government in 2009-2010, presumably to address the problems faced by the Alevis, ended with the declaration that, as the Alevi faith is equivalent to a *sufi* order and their places of worship to *dervish* lodges, and given the theological opinion that each religion may have only one place of worship, the 1925 law makes it impossible to meet Alevi demands.

**Religious diversity governance assessment**

It must be evident from the foregoing that religious diversity is not a value in Turkish political culture, despite the republic's constitutional secularism. As already indicated, even the officially recognized minorities (Jews, Greeks, and Armenians), living under the protection of the Lausanne Treaty, are in miniscule proportions to the total population of 82 million, with each group numbering only tens of thousands. Under constant threat of economic, social, cultural and governmental discrimination, a non-Muslim citizen of Turkey is not even considered or called a "Turk," a designation reserved for Muslims. This also angers ethnically non-Turkish Muslims such as the Kurds. Moreover, the Lausanne Treaty does not actually identify these three groups for legal minority status but generally refers to "non-Muslims," while the Turkish government has traditionally chosen to interpret the Treaty in this way. But even then, many of the obligations, such as funding of their schools and so on, are not met by the government.

Education is a primary area in which the lack of respect for diversity may be observed. Article 24 of the Constitution declares the "freedom of conscience, religious belief and conviction," but the same article also mandates compulsory instruction in "religious culture and morals" in primary, middle, and high schools. Repeated judgments in both domestic courts and the European Court of Human Rights have concluded that this instruction is in effect Sunni Muslim indoctrination, but has not led to any effort on the part of the government to end this instruction or to substantially amend its contents. It is possible to be exempt from these religion classes, but only if the student's identity card is marked as "Christian" or "Jewish," that is, if they belong to those officially recognized minority groups. Others, such as atheists, agnostics, non-practicing cultural Muslims, who may not be interested in taking religion classes, non-Sunni Muslims or non-Muslims who are not recognized, such as Bahais, Syrians, and so on, as well as Alevi, cannot be exempted from these classes.

Given the presumed equivalence between national and religious identities, every child born as a citizen in Turkey is registered as Muslim, unless declared and proven otherwise, and this is indicated in their government-issued identity card. Obviously, there is a limit to the choice of religions that could legally be stated in an identity card – only those religions officially recognized by the state are acceptable. Identifying oneself as "atheist" or even just leaving that box blank is not acceptable (albeit in practice there may be exceptions). With the urging of the European Union, the government has designed new national identity cards, which do not contain the entry for religion, but one's name may readily indicate their non-Muslim status, and those with Muslim sounding names are generally presumed to be practicing believers.

**About the GREASE project**

Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing together European and Asian Perspectives (GREASE)

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

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