

World Watch Research

Turkey / Türkiye: Background Information

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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Turkey: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
86,260,000	257,000	0.3

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

Turkey's history was marked early on by a focus on religious identity, with people being divided by their religious beliefs rather than their ethnicity. During the 19th century, Christian minorities became influenced by the Enlightenment philosophy of nationalism. This changed their focus from being Greek Orthodox (for example) within the Ottoman Empire, to being a Greek who was also Orthodox. This change in emphasis led first to Greeks and Bulgarians wanting independence from the Ottoman Empire and then spread to other groups. The fear of the rise in nationalism amongst ethnic Christian groups was one of the reasons for the genocide of the Armenian, Syriac and Greek-Orthodox Christians in the late 19th century and then again during the 1st World War. This has since instigated the further marginalization of minority groups.

Turkey is a remnant of the Ottoman Empire, which consisted of the Balkans in south-eastern Europe, modern-day Turkey, the Middle East and most 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 "Republic of Turkey".

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 modern, secular republic. The country rapidly modernized and became a multiparty democracy in 1945. However, 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. In August 2014, after three terms as prime minister, Erdogan was elected Turkish president.

The attempted coup-attempt in July 2016

On 15 July 2016, an attempted coup was foiled and the regime took the opportunity to strike back fiercely. It accused the Islamic preacher and former ally, Fethullah Gülen (in self-exile in USA), of being behind the attempted coup-attempt. Tens of thousands of soldiers, policemen, judges, politicians, journalists, teachers, imams etc. were arrested on accusation of supporting Gülen and many more were removed from their workplaces and made unemployed. Nationalism, which already played an important role in Turkey, soared to new heights and minorities have since been under renewed pressure (especially the Kurdish population).

In April 2017, a referendum was held on [constitutional reforms](#) which would change Turkey from being a parliamentary democracy into a presidential one, granting considerable power to the president and making him the absolute decision-maker in Turkish politics (BBC News, 16 April 2017). In addition, the [new reforms would allow](#) Erdogan to stay in power until 2029 (BBC News, 16 April 2020). A small majority of 51% voted in favor of the reforms, with many yes-votes coming from the Turkish diaspora, and in April 2018 Erdogan announced new elections for both 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 known (BBC News, 25 June 2018).

Although President Erdogan lifted the state of emergency (which had been in place since the June 2016 coup) in July 2018, this did not stop the Turkish government from [cracking down](#) on opponents and attempted coup supporters (BBC News, 8 July 2018). One case in particular was the detention of US Pastor Andrew Brunson for attempted support of Fethullah Gülen and the PKK, which [led to sanctions](#) being imposed by the USA (BBC News, 2 August 2018). The Turkish economy [suffered quite severely](#) from these developments (BBC News, 10 August 2018). Brunson was eventually [released in October 2018](#), after being sentenced to three years imprisonment (World Watch Monitor, 12 October 2018).

In a major shift, the AKP party lost Ankara and Istanbul in the 2019 mayoral elections, which was perhaps a sign that the president had begun losing popularity. An important and positive development was the AKP's [acceptance of the re-election results](#) for the position of mayor in Istanbul in June 2019 (BBC News, 24 June 2019). The acceptance of the results of the re-election was (internationally) regarded as a major test for Turkish democracy. However, Erdogan significantly undermined the elections by transferring authority from the mayors to government-led ministries, making it impossible for opposition mayors to materialize their own plans ([Al-Monitor, 25 August 2020](#)). In addition, the lack of freedom of press and the strong accusations against opposition parties remain an issue of major concern.

Turkish forces deployed in Syria and Libya

In a show of strength, Turkish army units [invaded Syria](#) in October 2019 to drive Kurdish forces back from the Turkish border (BBC News, 14 October 2019). Turkey views the armed Kurdish groups in Syria as terrorists who support the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers Party, which Turkey has been fighting against for decades. Later on, in January 2020, Turkey officially began [deploying troops in Libya](#), in support of the West Libyan UN-backed Government of National Accord; support which did not come for free (see below: *Security situation*). Its intervention became a game-changer for the war in Libya, with the Turkey-supported forces ending the siege of Tripoli by East Libyan strongman Field-Marshal Haftar (The Independent, 6 January 2020). Currently, Turkey is keeping its troops and Syrian mercenaries in Libya to protect its interests. Although there is growing international and Libyan pressure to remove them, Turkey has no interest in withdrawing its troops and extended the mandate several times ([Nordic Monitor, 16 August 2024](#)).

Domestically, Erdogan has continued to tighten his grip on society. In December 2020, the AKP-dominated parliament adopted a new law introducing far-reaching oversight measures for Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). It allows for the replacement of NGO executives by government appointed officials as well as annual inspections when the NGO is accused of supporting terrorism, which can lead to restrictions on NGO activities ([Freedom House Press Release, 4 January 2021](#)). In addition, in July 2021 Erdogan announced that he intends to 'regulate' foreign funded news agencies. In the current Turkish media landscape, in which over 90% of the media companies are owned by businessmen connected to the AKP, independent media can only survive with foreign funding. In June 2022, the Turkish-language websites of Deutsche Welle and Voice of America were blocked for not applying for broadcasting licenses, with DW subsequently announcing in March 2023 that it is closing down its Turkey office ([VOA news, 27 March 2023](#)). The licenses would have given the Turkish media regulator RTÜK editorial control over online content ([Politico, 1 July 2022](#)). In addition, a [new anti-disinformation law](#) adopted in October 2022 will mean up to three years in prison for anyone "disseminating misleading information" in an apparent effort to further curb online media (The Guardian, 13 October 2022; see also below: *Technological landscape*). Although Erdogan would appear to have almost total control over the Turkish media landscape, these measures might well have been introduced to counter the independent media's popularity - especially social media news coverage ([Al-Monitor, 22 July 2021](#)).

Hagia Sophia becomes a mosque again

In July 2020, after a ruling by the Council of State which cancelled the decision to turn [Istanbul's Hagia Sophia](#) into a museum, Erdogan signed a presidential decree to convert the building into a mosque again. The move was internationally widely condemned and viewed as derogatory towards Orthodox Christianity in particular (CNN, 10 July 2020). Nevertheless, the move was a longstanding wish of Erdogan's religious support base, with Erdogan being in need of support given the various (economic) difficulties being faced. Slowly, but steadily, Erdogan is reversing the legacy of Turkey's founder Ataturk, with some analysts asking whether Turkish secularism will now be completely replaced by Islamism ([Al-Monitor, 24 July 2020](#)). However, although Erdogan visited the Hagia Sophia twice during the election campaign, in the May 2023 parliamentary and presidential elections nationalism rather than Islamism played the major role ([E-Ir, 31 May 2023](#)).

Both the parliamentary and presidential elections in May 2023 were won by Erdogan and his nationalist allies. Especially since the opposition managed to unify itself behind main opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, opposition hopes were high that Erdogan would be defeated. At the same time, economic difficulties were continuing and the government was facing criticism for its slow response to the devastating earthquake that hit southeast Turkey in February 2023 and killed at least 37,000 people ([15 February 2023](#)). Yet, using identity politics, focusing on Islam and 'Turkishness', while accusing the opposition of being pawns of the West, of collaborating with 'terrorists' and being pro-LGBTQIA+ and anti-Islam, Erdogan managed to secure 52.1% of the vote and win the election. However, although the elections themselves were viewed as free and fair, the election circumstances were definitely not. As already stated above, almost all media is controlled by the AKP. In addition, the popular opposition mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, was politically paralyzed shortly before the elections by bogus criminal proceedings being brought against him ([E-Ir, 31 May 2023](#)). Lastly, social media were strictly curtailed, with Twitter blocking the accounts of opposition politicians at the government's request ([BBC News, 16 May 2023](#)). The government also threatened to prosecute anyone spreading 'fake news' online ([Politico, 15 May 2023](#)).

However, even Erdogan seems to have eventually run out of political goodwill: The municipal elections in March 2024 resulted in a major victory for the main opposition party CHP (37.7% of the vote), with the AKP losing an election for the first time since 2002. Besides losing support due to the austerity measures Erdogan was forced to introduce to support the ailing economy, he also lost part of his conservative base to the Islamist New Welfare Party, who strongly criticized him for Turkey's continuing (trade) ties with Israel despite the Israel-Hamas war ([Carnegie Endowment, 16 April 2024](#)). Following the elections, Erdogan had an official meeting with main opposition leader Özgür Özel, with both leaders announcing a "softening" or "normalization" of Turkish politics ([Middle East Institute, 9 July 2024](#)).

At the geopolitical level, Erdogan saw himself forced to seek rapprochement with the UAE and Saudi-Arabia, in an effort to increase foreign investments in an economy severely hit by inflation, which saw the cost of living soar, while the lira lost more than 75% of its value during Erdogan's second term as president ([Reuters, 8 May 2023](#)). In exchange for those investments, he almost made a U-turn regarding his support for the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, which the UAE and the Saudi Kingdom deem to be a 'terrorist organization' ([Haarezt, 7 May 2022](#)). However, Erdogan has not given up all contact with the Muslim Brotherhood as a meeting with representatives in May 2022 showed ([Nordic Monitor, 30 May 2022](#)). Nonetheless, further rapprochement between Turkey and the UAE and Saudi Arabia in exchange for further investment deals, are most probably also based on the understanding that Turkey will cease its support for the Muslim Brotherhood ([Al-Monitor, 10 June 2023](#)). In a similar development, Turkey thawed its ties with Egypt during 2024, with presidential visits to both Cairo and Istanbul. Previously, Erdogan had taken a strong stance against president al-Sisi and his violent coup in 2013 against Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood President Morsi ([Reuters, 4 September 2024](#)). Apparently, both the loss of momentum for the wider Muslim Brotherhood movement as well as economic necessity forced Erdogan to reshuffle his cards.

Following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in October 2023, the Erdogan government at first took a moderate stand. However, following Israel's ground attack on Gaza, President Erdogan started to strongly criticize Israel, accusing them of genocide. This further increased during 2024, especially after

Erdogan lost precious votes to the New Welfare Party on this issue. Turkey even cut all trade with Israel ([CNN, 5 June 2024](#)) Despite the rhetoric, it is likely that the Turkish government will restart its diplomatic and economic relations with Israel, as it has done during and after earlier crises ([BBC News, 2 January 2024](#)).

Political and legal landscape

Turkey is a presidential republic currently under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The Economist Intelligence Unit ([EIU, Democracy Index 2023](#)) classifies Turkey as a 'hybrid' regime, although Turkey scores lower for the indicator 'civil liberties' than many "authoritarian" ranked countries.

According to Middle East Concern ([MEC Türkiye country report](#), accessed 30 August 2024):

- "The constitution establishes Türkiye as a secular state, affording no privileged status to Islam or Islamic law. While a founding principle of the modern Turkish state is the separation of State and religion, in practice, the state controls religion and promotes the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam at home and abroad through the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). The constitution affirms the principle of non-discrimination, including on the basis of religion, and guarantees the free exercise of worship and religious rites, including freedom from religious compulsion – provided religious practices do not undermine the fundamental rights of others. Religious conversion is legally permitted, including from Islam, though social disapproval may be encountered."
- All non-recognized religious groups "must register as associations or foundations (with charitable or cultural objectives) to have limited legal status. Although the Lausanne Treaty stipulated that recognized non-Muslims could govern personal status issues according to their own rites, all citizens of Turkey are now subject to the secular civil code."

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. A citizen's religion is recorded in official documents, although since 2017 new ID cards no longer have a written entry for religion anymore. However, religious affiliation is still registered on the ID card's electronic chip 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. Protestant 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. 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.

Purchasing premises for church use 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 specific building may be used by a religious group as a church is highly dependent on the political and personal leanings of the local mayor, as well as on the attitude of the local population.

According to the Association of Protestant Churches: "The usable number of historical church buildings is very limited. Therefore, a large portion of the Protestant community tries to overcome the problem of finding a place to worship by establishing an association or religious foundation ... and then renting or purchasing a property such as a building not considered a "classic" church structure, a stand-alone building, shop, or depot that has not traditionally been used for worship. ... However, many of these premises do not have official status as a place of worship and therefore ... they cannot benefit from the advantages ... given to an officially recognized place of worship such as free electricity and water as well as tax exemption. When they introduce themselves to the authorities as a church, they receive warnings that they are not legal and may be closed." ([TeK, 2022 Human Rights Violation report](#)).

Gender perspective

Turkey's legal framework has several loopholes that allow for gender inequality; indicative of this, Turkey ranks 112th out of 153 states in the [Global Gender Gap Index ranking of 2022](#). Whilst child marriage is prohibited, it is not punished as a criminal act; 15% of girls are married before the age of 18, with Syrian refugee girls at a heightened risk ([Girls Not Brides Turkey](#), accessed 30 August 2024). In 2020 President Erdogan made a second attempt to pass legislation that would grant rapists amnesty on the condition they married their victim ([Freedom United, 7 February 2020](#)). Whilst unsuccessful in passing this new law, the president withdrew Turkey from the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women and Domestic Violence in March 2021 (the Istanbul Convention) ([Council of Europe, 22 March 2021](#)). This is viewed as a political move to appease conservatives within Erdogan's party, who oppose the bill for encouraging divorce and protecting victims regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, which they fear could lead to same-sex marriage being permitted ([BBC News, 26 March 2021](#)). In light of high rates of violence against women, the withdrawal faced widespread condemnation amid fears that perpetrators would have a greater sense of impunity than before ([Deutsche Welle - DW, 3 March 2021](#); [London School of Economics, 17 September 2020](#)). Despite the calls to annul the decision, Turkey's top administrative court ruled the government's action was [lawful](#) (Deutsche Welle - DW, 19 July 2022). Reports indicate that since the withdrawal, at least 603 women have been killed and 464 women have died under suspicious circumstances ([Deutsche Welle - DW, 24 May 2023](#)). However, no empirical evidence yet establishes a direct causal relationship between Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and the surge in incidences of femicide.

Religious landscape

Turkey: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	257,000	0.3
Muslim	84,548,000	98.0
Hindu	910	0.0
Buddhist	44,400	0.1
Ethnic religionist	14,600	0.0
Jewish	20,800	0.0
Bahai	25,400	0.0
Atheist	91,100	0.1
Agnostic	1,089,000	1.3
Other	169,000	0.2
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

According to WCD's 2024 estimates, 98.0% of the Turkish population is Muslim, a third of whom are Alevi or Shia Muslims. Most Turks are Sunni Muslims. Only 0.3% of the population are Christian, a considerable reduction from 25% a century ago (see below: *Christian origins*).

Turkey is currently going through a gradual change from being a strictly secular country to a country based on Islamic norms and values, although a form of [deism](#) is becoming popular, while others are agnostic (Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, Volume 24, 2024 - Issue 3, pp.595 - 615). Previously, when secularism prevailed, Christians and Muslims in Turkey experienced many restrictions since the state interpreted secularism to mean far-reaching state control and that no religion should be encouraged to flourish. Under the current regime of President Erdogan, secularism has steadily diminished and the country is accepting a more pronounced Islamic influence.

Non-Muslims are tacitly banned from high level jobs in state administration and security forces. In addition, converts from Islam to Christianity are sometimes placed under pressure at work by their colleagues and bosses, and usually avoid discussing their faith. 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'. There are no non-Muslims among Turkish military officers, provincial governors or mayors. However, in June 2011, for the first time in Turkey's history, a Syriac Orthodox citizen was elected to parliament.

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 also 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, which is difficult in Turkey; 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 Syriac Church since 2014. [55 deeds were returned](#) in May 2018 after the EU parliament also addressed the issue (World Watch Monitor, 1 June 2018). Yet, "representatives from various communities said the bulk of property claims had been settled over the last decade, mostly to the communities' satisfaction, although a few remaining cases were still progressing slowly through legal and government channels" ([US State Department IRFR 2023 Turkey](#), p.20). In addition, hundreds - if not thousands - of old church buildings are in a state of total neglect and are on the verge of becoming ruins where Christians have been forced to leave. This all adds to the slow but ongoing disappearance of Christian heritage in the country.

Reports from other sources:

- [USCIRF 2024 Turkey](#) - recommended for Special Watch List: Turkey has been kept on the 'Special Watch List' after recording troubling religious freedom conditions. USCIRF states: "Religious freedom conditions in Turkey remain worrisome, with the perpetuation of restrictive and intrusive governmental policies on religious practice and a marked increase in incidents of vandalism and societal violence against religious minorities. The government also continues to unduly interfere in the internal affairs of religious communities. Religious minorities in Turkey have expressed concerns that governmental rhetoric and policies contribute to an increasingly hostile environment and implicitly encourage acts of societal aggression and violence." A USCIRF Turkey country update was issued in July 2024.
- Middle East Concern ([MEC Türkiye profile](#), accessed 30 August 2024) states: [Since 2018] "significant numbers of foreign Christians residing in Türkiye have been designated security threats and banned from the country. This has impacted the functioning of many Protestant churches throughout the country. Some of those foreign Christians designated as security threats are married to Turkish citizens, often pastors in Protestant churches, and the security codes put pressure on the entire family to emigrate."

Economic landscape

According to the [World Factbook](#) Türkiye (accessed 30 August 2024):

- **Real GDP per capita (PPP):** \$34,400 (2023 est.)
- **Real GDP growth rate:** 4.52% (2023 est.)
- **Inflation rate (consumer prices):** 53.86% (2023 est.)
- **Unemployment:** 9.41%, with youth unemployment being almost twice as high at 17.6%
- **Percentage of population below national poverty line:** 14.4% (2020 est.)

According to the World Bank [Türkiye Economic Monitor \(March 2024\)](#):

- **Economy:** "Türkiye's economic policies built on low cost of borrowing, high investment, exports and employment delivered strong growth performance initially, but had started losing steam and

resulted in a widening current account deficit and very high inflation."

- **Economic growth:** "The economy registered strong growth performance in 2022 but the growth rate slowed down in the second half of 2022 and in 2023. The Turkish economy grew at 5.5 percent in 2022 thanks to strong economic activity in 2022H1 (fueled by resilient exports and private consumption); yet it started to moderate since 2022H2, and the economy grew by 4.5 percent in 2023.
- **Outlook:** "The recent steps taken towards normalization of macroeconomic policies are expected to boost confidence, mitigate macrofinancial risks, and support the vulnerable. Monetary policy is expected to remain tight, and inflation is expected to gradually decline after May 2024. The current account balance is expected to further improve starting from 2024, on the back of the change in growth composition, relying less on domestic demand with a higher contribution of net exports."

Reports from other sources:

- The World Bank's [World Development Indicators \(Fiscal Year 2023\)](#) rank Turkey in the "Upper middle income" category.
- The Fragile State Index ([FSI 2023 Turkey](#)) shows that after years of steady improvements in the economic indicators, the COVID-19 crisis negatively effected the economy and caused a small dip. However, in line with the unorthodox financial policy decisions of the Erdogan government in recent years, the Economy indicator shows a strong decline for 2022. Equally, the "Economic inequality" indicator also worsened. Nonetheless, the "Human Flight and Brain Drain" indicator is showing steady improvement, despite indications to the contrary (see below),
- A 2024 study by the Istanbul Policy Center found that "that there is a strong desire to live abroad among young people in Turkey" ([Istanbul Policy Center, March 2024](#)). The report refers to a [2020 study by SODEV](#), that found that the majority (70.3%) of Turkish youth think that making a career is not possible without the right social contacts (i.e. nepotism) and more than 60% want to move abroad (Middle East Eye, 21 May 2020). Another survey conducted in the beginning of 2023 had similar results, with 63% of the interviewed youth (18-25 years) wanting to live abroad. Improved living conditions and more (political) freedom are cited at the two main reasons for wanting to leave ([Duvar English, 2 June 2023](#)).
- A 2022 SODEV report entitled "[Youth crises](#)" describes how students feel underrated and excluded in a country where politicians drive polarization (on ethnic lines), and where they are labeled as "traitors" and "terrorists" because of their criticism.

After years of strong economic growth under Erdogan's rule, the lira started losing its value against the dollar from 2013 onwards. Not surprisingly around the same time, the 2013 Gezi protests took place. The decline continued during the last decade, but accelerated from 2021 onwards after Erdogan adopted unorthodox financial policies, lowering interest rates instead of raising them to stop inflation. The Central Bank tried to counter inflation by selling foreign exchange reserves, but with limited effect. Following his re-election, Erdogan seemed to have changed his mind by appointing more 'market-friendly' finance ministers and heads of the Central Bank. Interest rates have increased since then to not less than 50%, cooling down the inflation to some extent ([Al-Monitor, 23 July 2024](#)). Nevertheless, the lira has continued to lose value. Meanwhile, the poverty threshold is three times higher than the

increased minimum wage, meaning that millions of Turks are struggling to survive ([Duvar English, 3 January 2024](#)).

Gender perspective

Turkey has the highest gender gap in Europe and Central Asia as regards female labor force participation with a gender gap about 12% higher than the global average ([UNDP Human Development Report Turkey](#), data updates as of 13 March 2024). The female [labor force participation](#) rate was 34.2% in 2022, compared to 71.1% for men (World Bank, Gender Data Portal 2023). Furthermore, the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security study ([GIWPS Türkiye](#), accessed 30 August 2024) showed that the proportion of women in Turkey aged 25 and older and in employment in 2023 was 34.5%.

Due to the increasing Islamization, it has reportedly become harder for women (both Christian and secular) who do not wear a head-covering to obtain employment. Many Christians also 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. In general, Christians in Turkey face discrimination in employment due to the hostile environment in Turkey. Christians are also kept out of senior positions in the government and armed forces. Female converts may be additionally vulnerable due to patrilineal inheritance practices; whilst the Civil Code grants equal inheritance rights to female and male inheritors.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook](#) Türkiye (accessed 30 August 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** The majority of the Turkish population (70-75%) are Turkish. 19% of the population is from Kurdish descent, while other minorities make up 6 -11% of the population (2016 est.).
- **Main languages:** The official language is Turkish. Kurdish and other minority languages are spoken as well.
- **Population:** 84,120,000 with a growth rate of 0.61% (2024 est.).
- **Fertility rate:** 1.9 children born per woman (2024 est.)
- **Urban population:** In 2023, 77.5% of the population lived in urban areas, while the annual urbanization rate stands at 1.11%.
- **Literacy rate:** 96.7% of the population can read and write; with a difference between men (99.1%) and women (94.4%) (2019).
- **Youth population:** The younger generation - up to 14 years of age - makes up almost 22% of the population.
- **IDPs/Refugees:** In 2024, Turkey hosted 3.12 million refugees from Syria and 41.000 refugees from Ukraine. In addition, there are 10,000 Iraqi's living in Turkey. Around 1.1 million Kurds are internally displaced because of the conflict between the Turkish army and the Kurdish PKK.
- **Life expectancy:** 76.7 years on average; women (79.2 years), men (74.4 years).

According to the [UNDP Human Development Report Turkey](#), data updates as of 13 March 2024:

- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Turkey ranks 45th out 191 countries. The combined ratio of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a very high score of

0.855, making it one of the highest scoring countries in the wider MENA region.

- **Gender inequality:** With a Gender Development Index (GDI) score of 0.941, women are somewhat disadvantaged in comparison to men. The GDI measures the differences in life expectancy, years of education and GNI per capita per gender. Reflecting this disparity, the mean years of schooling for girls currently sits at 8.1 years, compared to 9.6 for boys (HDI profile).

Turkish society is on average conservative, Muslim, tribal and patriarchal. 'Turkishness' as an identity is continually used as a political weapon, since being Turk is commonly understood as being a Sunni Muslim. All other religious groups experience discrimination. In addition, many Arab refugees face hostility as they are blamed for rising prices and unemployment. Despite the social hatred, Turkey still hosts millions of Syrian refugees and has been hailed as an example for other countries by the World Bank. Nonetheless, President Erdogan has used the migrant crisis to force the European countries to [pay six billion euros](#) for hosting the refugees (The Guardian, 17 March 2020).

Despite the agricultural roots of Turkish culture, modern-day Turkey is urban and has a young population (see above). In addition, a 2020 poll by the Foundation for Social Democracy ([SODEV](#)) found that the majority of the youth prefer "freedom of speech for all" over national and religious values (Middle East Eye, 21 May 2020). The majority of the Turkish population (78%) lives in urban areas and the rate of urbanization stood at 1.1% in 2023.

An issue of particular concern remains the general hostility towards Christians and Jews; hate-speech targeting Christians has been common for many years now. This has been encouraged by the government's response to the attempted coup-attempt in 2016; by vehemently attacking all (assumed) enemies it has stirred up nationalism in the country. The Hudson Institute wrote in April 2019:

- "Since the abortive coup, revisionist historical dramas disseminating anti-minority conspiracy theories ... have become the most effective form of propaganda. ... What is most alarming is the role of Turkey's state-run media outlets in smearing and scapegoating religious minorities, using state funds for incitement, particularly against Jews and Christians" ([Hudson Institute, 19 April 2019](#)).

Christians among Iranian refugees in Turkey are experiencing great difficulties. Many Iranian converts from Islam to Christianity flee to Turkey to escape persecution in their home country, with some of them illegally crossing further into Europe. However, those who follow the legal path and register with the UNHCR most often find themselves stuck in Turkey, because there are no (Western) countries willing to resettle them. They are not legally allowed to work and cannot open a bank account or even rent an apartment legally. Making things worse, they are settled in a specific location in Turkey and are not allowed to travel elsewhere without permission, although circumstances often simply force them to live elsewhere ([Article 18, 6 November 2019](#)). Hence, many of them accept illegal and very low paid jobs to survive, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. One Iranian convert described his escape to Turkey as "the worst decision you could ever make" ([Article 18, 1 July 2022](#)). In addition, despite their refugee status, they are still at risk of deportation back to Iran ([Article 18, 16 March 2021, Duvar English, 4 February 2022](#)). Their situation has worsened in recent years, with a 2023 report again highlighting their plight ([Article 18, June 2023](#)).

In addition to the Iranian convert refugees, there are also converts from Islam to Christianity from other countries, including Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. On top of pressure from parts of Turkish society and individual government officials, they also face pressure from their own families and communities. Several of them are in hiding in Turkey, with many of them fearful of making contact with local churches because of risk of discovery by community members. This is especially true for converts from Afghanistan.

Conversion is not prohibited by law. However, conversion to Christianity is widely considered to be unacceptable. Social and familial implications for conversion from Islam to Christianity or from one Christian denomination to another are likely. This causes converts to sometimes lead a double life and hide their conversion. Christians with a Muslim background who hide their new identity from their family and relatives would also hide their praying, their Bible and Christian materials and their accessing of Christian television and websites, etc. Those who hide their Christian identity are often afraid to meet up with other Christians. In conservative Islamic 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.

Gender perspective

The lockdowns introduced to combat the spread of COVID-19 also served to increase the risk of domestic violence as family members spent more time together at home ([DW, 10 April 2020](#)). Many victims are hesitant to file for divorce or report abuse – particularly sexual violence – due to the attached stigma; about four in ten women Turkey have suffered physical and/or sexual violence ([HRW, 26 May 2022](#)). Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021 did not help in this regard. Turkey's religious authority also sparked criticism for its [controversial announcement](#) allowing parents to marry their adopted children after thousands were left orphaned by the earthquakes, raising concerns about the potential implications for child marriage (AI Monitor, 22 February 2023).

Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Turkey](#) (23 February 2024) / Survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 86.5% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 66.8% of the total population. As of January 2024, 47.1% of Turkey's social media users were female, while 52.9% were male.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 93.8% of the total population

According to [Freedom on the Net 2023 Turkey](#):

- Turkey is rated as "not free".
- "Internet freedom in Turkey has steadily declined over the past decade. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) have enacted several laws that increase censorship and criminalize online speech. During the coverage period, the new Disinformation Law was enacted; it introduces prison sentences for spreading information deemed false, including online. In the run-up to the May 2023 elections, the Disinformation Law was used to silence members of the political opposition as well as critical journalists. Censorship is widespread, and hundreds of websites, online articles, and social media posts have been

blocked or removed. Online troll networks frequently amplify progovernment disinformation, and journalists, activists, and social media users continue to face legal charges for their online content."

Turkey is a modern country, although rural areas tend to be less well developed. The Turkish government monitors all Internet use, mobile phones and landlines. Many websites are blocked in Turkey. Moreover, the law forces all major social media companies to store their user data inside Turkey, making it potentially possible for the government to track down anonymous posts ([Independent, 29 July 2020](#)). As mentioned above, in October 2022, the Turkish parliament ratified a new anti-disinformation law that allows for jail sentences of up to three years for "intentionally publishing disinformation or 'fake news' that the authorities claim spreads panic, endangers security forces or the overall health of Turkish society" ([The Guardian, 13 October 2022](#)). This is another nail in the coffin for free speech in Turkey.

Epitomizing the current political situation is Turkey's record regarding journalism: For four years (2012 and 2016-2018), Turkey was the country with the highest number of journalists in prison. This strict policy seems to have been successful: While the freedom of press has further deteriorated, the number of imprisoned journalists has dropped slightly as journalists apply self-censorship. However, even more striking is the high level of control the Turkish regime has over almost all Turkish television, radio and newspapers. All broadcasts are paused when a speech by the president is to be aired and there is a strict screening process for checking which commentators can appear on TV ([Al-Monitor, 12 June 2020](#)).

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranks Turkey 158th out of 180 countries ([World Press Freedom 2024 Turkey](#)). RSF states:

- "With authoritarianism gaining ground in Türkiye, media pluralism is being called into question. All possible means are used to undermine critics. ...Discriminatory practices against critical journalists and media outlets, such as stripping them of press passes, are commonplace. Judges who do the government's bidding try to limit democratic debate by censoring online articles tackling corruption and other sensitive topics. ... Cases of violence against journalists during the 2019 elections resulted in lenient sentences or endless trials, highlighting the culture of impunity in the country. Journalists daring to cover attacks on secularism, the impact of religious groups (Tarikat) or regional jihadist organizations are increasingly exposed to threats."

Turkey's intelligence agencies are well equipped and it is believed that the activities of Protestant Christians in particular are monitored closely (including the installation of listening devices inside churches). Nevertheless, Sat-7, God TV and other Christian television and radio channels are broadcasting into Turkey. The Internet is used by many Christian groups to access Christian materials, which is often preferred over owning a hard copy of the Bible. Bible correspondence courses are particularly popular.

Security situation

Islamic State group

In January 2024, Turkish police arrested 70 [suspects with ties to Islamic State](#) group in raids (ABC News, 11 January 2024). The report also states: "In late December [2023], Turkish security forces detained 32 suspected IS militants that the state-run Anadolu news agency said were allegedly planning attacks on synagogues, churches and the Iraqi Embassy."

Grey wolves

In 2022, the Protestant church community was shocked by a testimony from a leader of the far-right Grey Wolves group, who informed the Turkish representative of the Salvation Church in Malatya that agents of the Gendarmerie Intelligence and anti-terror unit had promised him "whatever he wanted" in 2016 if he murdered this representative, the Chair of the local church association and a Western church worker. The Grey Wolves leader said he received photos of the men and their addresses. A first attempt was aborted after a young boy was also present inside the church, while a second attempt was stopped after the murder of the Russian ambassador in December 2016. The testimony was a shocking reminder of the torture and murder of three Christian men in 2007, who were all members of Malatya's Salvation Church ([Ahval News, 8 September 2022](#)).

Turkish military activity abroad

After the attempted 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 (Reuters, 22 July 2020). As an example of this, WWR reported ([Open Doors Analytical, 8 July 2020](#)), that in June 2020 the Turkish airforce explicitly bombed Christian villages in the area surrounding Zakho in Dohuk district of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR), allegedly to target PKK supporters. The Turkish presence in Syria led to a further building up of tensions with Syria, Kurdish groups in Syria as well as with the USA. Domestically, the conflict with the Kurdish PKK continues after the ceasefire ended in 2015 ([International Crisis Group, 28 June 2021](#)).

Secondly, in a growing effort to enlarge its role in the wider region, in 2020 Turkey gave substantial military support for the UN-backed West Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA). Turkey's navy, air and intelligence support, including thousands of pro-Turkish Syrian fighters, proved to be a [game-changer](#) in Libya. Libya's capital Tripoli was in immediate danger of being overrun by East Libyan strongman Field-Marshal Haftar and the Libyan National Army; but with the Turkish support Haftar was driven back from the capital (Middle East Eye, 20 August 2020). The different Libyan governments have since stated clearly that all foreign forces should leave the country, including the Syrian mercenaries and Turkish troops. To date, Turkey has been unwilling to comply and in June 2022 even extended the mandate of its troops in Libya for another 18 months ([Arab News, 9 May 2021](#), [AP News, 21 June 2022](#)). The main reason why Turkey does not want to withdraw is that Turkey's support did not come for free; in exchange for supporting the GNA, the latter signed a deal [allowing Turkey to drill for gas](#) in Libya's territorial waters in the Mediterranean Sea (DW, 4 January 2020).

Furthermore, Turkey's involvement in Libya should also be seen in light of President Erdogan's neo-Ottoman vision, as well as in support for Islamist groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood. This pits Turkey, together with like-minded Qatar, against countries like the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt who all strongly oppose the Muslim Brotherhood, which those governments view as a threat to their stability. Unsurprisingly, those countries support Libyan strongman Haftar. That said, recent rapprochements between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt respectively, which continued in 2023, seem to have forced Erdogan to tone down his support for Islamist groups ([Arab Center DC, 2 June 2022](#)).

In addition, Turkey is also battling with Russia for influence in the region. Russia actively supports Syrian President Assad, and mercenaries from Russian security firm Wagner fight alongside Field-Marshal Haftar's forces. While Turkey supported Azerbaijan with drones and Syrian fighters during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, it was Russia which ended the conflict before all of Nagorno-Karabakh was conquered by Azerbaijan and installed a peace-keeping force in the area. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 offered a new opportunity in the fight for regional influence, with Turkey supplying Ukraine with Turkish-built drones ([Al-Jazeera, 19 July 2022](#)).

To complicate its foreign activities even further, Turkey is involved in a [conflict with Greece](#) regarding natural resources in the eastern Mediterranean Sea (BBC News, 13 September 2020). Unsurprisingly, while Turkey made a deal with Libya's GNA, Greece made an agreement with Egypt regarding their mutual boundaries in the Mediterranean. It appeared that both sides had started talking again, but in May 2022 Erdogan accused Greece of recommending the USA not to sell F-16 fighter jets to Turkey and vowed not to speak to the Greek prime-minister again ([Al-Jazeera, 24 May 2022](#)). Despite such rhetoric, Erdogan hosted the re-elected prime-minister in May 2024, stating that there were "no unresolvable problems" ([Al-Jazeera, 13 May 2024](#)).

From the above, it is clear that both the battles for ideology and resources remain closely linked within the context of a wider battle for regional influence.

NATO

In 2023, Turkey used Sweden's NATO application, which needed approval from all NATO members, including Turkey, to force the country to do more against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which Turkey, but also the EU and the USA, have designated as a terrorist organization. In July 2023 Erdogan finally gave the green light after Sweden reiterated that it would not provide support to Kurdish groups, although the admission still needs to be confirmed by the Turkish parliament ([Politico, 23 December 2023](#)).

Gender perspective

Turkey remains the only Member State of the Council of Europe that has not recognized the right to conscientious objection to military service and as such Christian men (women are not conscripted) who object on religious grounds face severe harassment by the state, including administrative and criminal proceedings based on the Law on Conscripted and the Military Criminal Law which ultimately results in 'civil death'— the loss of fundamental rights and freedoms ([IOG, 5 January 2022](#)).

Christian origins

Christianity has a long history in Turkey going back to the Bible's earliest New Testament days. Due to the missionary activity of the Apostle Paul and others, Christian congregations were founded in what is now Turkey in the 1st century AD. Indeed, the Bible's Book of Revelation starts off with letters written to seven congregations in western Turkey.

Under Constantine (Roman emperor from 306 to 337 AD) Christianity became the state religion. The city of Byzantium (a.k.a. Constantinople - the current Istanbul) became a hub for 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 center 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.

Protestant missionaries entered Turkey in the early 19th century and from the 1830s-1840s worked predominantly with the Armenians. By the end of the 19th century there was a large Armenian Protestant population throughout the land. Since the 19th century, the power of the Ottoman Empire began to crumble, and territories were lost. The first attacks on the Armenians started in 1895 and gradually increased. In 1915 (and following years) more than 1 million Armenians and Assyrians [Syriacs] were killed, decimating the Armenian Orthodox Church in what came to be known as the Armenian Genocide ([Britannica, accessed 19 January 2024](#)).

The Ottoman Empire finally collapsed in 1920. After the 1st World War and the ensuing 1919 Paris Peace Conference and 1920 Treaty of Sevres, the allies divided Turkey up into various areas. The Greeks were given a large portion in the west, the Kurds and remaining Armenians were to have areas in the east, the allies were to control areas in the south and the main waterways, leaving a small part in the center for Turkish administration. The Greeks invaded to claim the area given to them but were defeated by the new Republican movement led by Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk). At the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, Turkey was formally recognized in its current form. The failed attempt by the Greeks helped lead to the population exchanges in the early 1920s; a large part of the Greek minority was forced to leave Turkey and moved to Greece, weakening not just the position of the Greek Orthodox Church but also the wider Christian witness in Turkey. In the newly formed state of Turkey, the remaining Greek, Armenian and Syriac minorities faced heavy discrimination. Protestant missionaries were allowed to stay after the Treaty of Lausanne, but under tighter restrictions and with fewer rights than before and slowly stopped working there. Protestant missionaries returned to Turkey in the 1960s and found two Turkish Christians; the Turkish church has been slowly growing ever since.

Church spectrum today

Turkey: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	111,000	43.2
Catholic	49,900	19.4
Protestant	24,400	9.5
Independent	13,200	5.1
Unaffiliated	59,100	23.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	257,600	100.2
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	8,200	3.2
Pentecostal-Charismatic	8,700	3.4

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

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:** Christians 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. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

Originally, in 1923, only two church denominations were recognized by the Turkish state - the Greek Orthodox Church and the Armenian Orthodox Church. At that time, they together formed about 70% of all Christians in Turkey. In addition to the Syriac Orthodox community, which was not included for protection listed by the Lausanne Treaty, there are also Christians belonging to the Roman Catholic Church, expatriate Protestant Christians and indigenous Turkish Christians. After a lengthy court battle, official status was granted in the year 2000 to the Istanbul Protestant Church in Altintepe. This was the first (and up until now, only) official recognition of a Protestant church in Turkey.

In April 2007, the Turkish (Protestant) Christian community was shocked by the brutal torture and murder of Christian converts Ugur Yuksel and Necati Aydin and German national Tilman Geske. The murder took place at the Zirve publishing house in Malatya, in the east of the country (see above: *Map of country*). The culprits, who pretended to be interested in the Christian faith, were caught, but it took more than ten years to bring them to justice, while significant doubts remain whether all those involved were actually punished ([Mission Network News, 28 January 2019](#)).

Further southeast, once the heartland of the Historical Christian communities, only a remnant remains. In 1914, nearly 25% of the Turkish population was Christian. Only 0.2% remains today ([The Conversation, 21 November 2019](#)). Near Midyat (see above: *Map of country*), several monasteries are

still inhabited, including the famous Mor Gabriel Monastery - built in 397 AD, which is the oldest surviving Syriac Orthodox monastery in the world. Another 1,500 year old monastery in the same area, Mor Yakup, has been restored after being abandoned following the Armenian Genocide. However, both monasteries are further threatened in their existence. Title deeds were taken from Mor Gabriel and only (partly) returned after a lengthy legal dispute even involving the European parliament and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ([World Watch Monitor, 1 June 2018](#)). Father Aho, the custodian of Mor Yakup, was sentenced in April 2021 to two years in prison for "supporting a terrorist organization" after providing bread for visitors who were allegedly members of the Kurdish PKK ([Asia News, 7 April 2021](#)). Christians from the Historical Christian communities in this area have been caught up in the struggle between the Turkish government and the local Kurdish population, and that ordeal continues to this day.

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Turkey>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

External Links

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