

Turkey put on 'worst' list for religious freedom

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [April 18, 2012](#) issue

Turkey, a key U.S. and NATO ally, stands as a new and controversial addition to an annual list of the worst offenders of religious freedom by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Four of nine commissioners objected to putting Turkey among "Countries of Particular Concern"—a who's who of dictatorships and closed societies.

Some Greek Orthodox Americans are pleased with the decision, citing longtime abuses against Orthodox Christians in the historic heartland of Eastern Orthodoxy. "Turkey hasn't been tolerant," said Alexander Karloutsos, assistant to Archbishop Demetrios of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

Istanbul is the headquarters of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the spiritual leader of the world's 250 million Eastern Orthodox Christians. Commented Karloutsos: "Our seminary remains closed. We can't educate our clergy. We don't have a legal personality in Turkey and neither does the Catholic Church, Protestant churches, the Armenian Church, the Jewish community."

Turkey's ambassador in Washington decried the March 20 decision. "The categorization of Turkey as a CPC list country not only damages the credibility and relevance of the USCIRF," said Ambassador Namik Tan, "but also raises serious questions about the political motivation that drives this exercise."

Congress established the independent watchdog panel in 1998 to monitor religious

freedom globally. It recommends countries to the State Department for inclusion on its own annual list of worst offenders, which is typically smaller.

This year, the commission's list includes 16 countries, two of which are new: Turkey and Tajikistan.

The commission's new report cites Turkey's "systematic limitations on the freedom of religion or belief," particularly in relation to the country's non-Muslim religious minorities, and their rights to train clergy, offer religious education and maintain places of worship.

But the report also notes some areas in which Turkey has improved, including better protections for the property of non-Muslims—improvements the State Department has also noted in recent months. —RNS