Violence Based on Religious Intolerance

2008 Hate Crime Survey
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2008 Hate Crime Survey

Violence Based on Religious Intolerance is an excerpt from Human Rights First’s 2008 Hate Crime Survey, which includes sections examining six facets of violent hate crime in the 56 countries that comprise the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE): Violence Based on Racism and Xenophobia, Antisemitic Violence, Violence Against Muslims, Violence Based on Religious Intolerance, Violence Against Roma, and Violence Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Bias. The Survey also examines government responses to violent hate crimes in sections on Systems of Monitoring and Reporting and The Framework of Criminal Law and includes a Ten-Point Plan for governments to strengthen their responses. The Survey also includes an in-depth look at the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and the United States and contains a Country Panorama section that profiles individual hate crime cases from more than 30 countries within the OSCE.

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Executive Summary

Violence motivated by religious intolerance continued to be reported in many countries in Europe and North America in 2007 and 2008. Members of religious minorities throughout the region were subjected to numerous physical assaults causing serious injury or death. Adherents of religions deemed by governments to be nontraditional in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, Roman Catholics, Seventh Day Adventists, Evangelical Protestants, minority Orthodox Christians, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, were among those targeted for violence, sometimes in the context of government restrictions on religious activities and official rhetoric that vilifies such groups. In the United States, violent attacks on religious institutions sometimes combined antipathy toward particular confessions with hatred motivated by the racial makeup of their congregations.

High levels of violent attacks against Jews synagogues, and other Jewish sites continue across Europe and North America, combining both religious intolerance and racism. Antisemitic hate crimes are addressed in a separate section of the 2008 Hate Crime Survey: Antisemitic Violence.

Anti-Muslim violence, which includes violence motivated by religious intolerance as well as racist and anti-immigrant bias, was also present in many of the countries covered in this report. These and other patterns of violence towards Muslims are discussed in another section: Violence Against Muslims.

This section addresses violence against adherents and property of other vulnerable religious minorities. In some countries, members of minority religions are subject to violent attacks, reflecting longstanding tensions between minority religious groups and the majority religious community. In other cases, adherents of religions that are new or are perceived to be new in a particular area are the targets of violence.

Government officials are not always neutral with regard to such tensions and disputes, and may exacerbate them or create the atmosphere in which violent acts take place, as well as influencing the way such violent acts are addressed by the authorities. In several countries discussed here, governments have enforced restrictions on religious activity, specifically targeting minority religious groups and beliefs. In extreme cases, religious activities that are not approved by the authorities are criminalized, while official approval of religious activities by some groups is arbitrarily withheld. Government security forces and law enforcement officials have harassed or committed other abuses against persons engaged in religious activities, forcefully breaking up religious services, confiscating property, and fining or detaining religious leaders and other participants.

With or without such government action, officials at times condone or fail to refute vilification against some religious minority groups in the state or private media. In particularly egregious cases, law enforcement officials participate in attacks or fail to intervene and provide protection to members of religious minorities.
I. Violence Based on Religious Intolerance

A. Violence Against Individuals

In many countries of Eastern and Southeastern Europe and in the Russian Federation, nationalists promote the view of a people united by its ethnic origins and its unitary Church. The fusion of a religious identity with nationalist ethnic ideals has led to the exclusion of those who do not share this identity. As a consequence, the so-called nontraditional religions are under attack by governments and extreme nationalists alike. Government officials and extremist groups often use the same rhetoric against nontraditional religious groups, accusing the latter of being dangers to the nation’s future and even agents of foreign powers. This view can be heightened by the presence of religious groups that are new, or perceived to be new, to a particular place, especially as a result of the new freedoms following the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

In a climate of xenophobia and religious chauvinism, the pastors, priests, rabbis, or imams of minority religious congregations are particularly susceptible to threats and physical attacks in some countries, as they face, in some countries, official harassment or even imprisonment. Visiting religious workers of foreign nationality, if permitted access, may also be subject to the same harassment, threats, and violence to which citizens are subjected, as well as summary deportation and the denial of visas.

Many individuals were particularly vulnerable because they were readily identified as members of minority religions: some were attacked during religious services, or en route to and from places of worship. Others included religious minority children in state schools. People who stood out because of distinctive dress, religious headgear, or other characteristics were attacked in the street by strangers shouting epithets. Members of religions for which missionary work is integral to their faith were also particularly vulnerable to attack:

- In Armenia, on March 29, 2007, a Jehovah’s Witness was reportedly attacked and choked at his workplace after a coworker learned of his religious adherence.  
- In Azerbaijan, four men on April 17, 2007, broke into a building Jehovah’s Witnesses rented for religious meetings in Baku and attacked two members of the congregation and property; although witnesses identified the attackers, police reportedly refused to investigate.
- In the Russian Federation, on July 5, 2007, unidentified young men attacked worshippers in a Baptist church with pepper gas during a service in Kirovo-Chepetsk (Kirov Oblast); the same church was repeatedly vandalized during the year.
- In Malatya, Turkey, on April 18, 2007, a group of young men claiming to be defending Islam and Turkish nationalism bound, tortured, and killed Necati Aydın, Uğur Yüksel, and Tillman Geske—who were employees of a Christian publishing house.
- In the United States, on May 24, 2007, a fellow student attacked 16-year-old Harpal Vacher, a Sikh, at Newtown High School in New York City. The attacker dragged Vacher into a bathroom, pulled off his turban, and sheared off his waist-length hair. In June, the New York-based civil rights organization Sikh Coalition said that at least 60 percent of Sikh students “suffered harassment in one form or another because of their religious symbols.”
Members of majority religions were also the object of attacks motivated by religious hatred:

- On March 12, in London, United Kingdom, two young people described as of Asian origin attacked 57-year-old Anglican priest Canon Michael Ainsworth, at St. George-in-the-East Church, in what police described as a “faith hate” crime. The two reportedly “jeered at the priest for being a churchman,” while inflicting bruises and cuts in severe beating.

B. Vandalism and Attacks on Property

The perpetrators of violent hate crimes motivated by religious hatred have also targeted places of worship, community centers, schools, and other community institutions. They also routinely targeted burial sites.

In several countries of Europe and North America attackers painted threatening graffiti and smashed windows in churches, temples, and other religious assembly halls, thereby expressing hatred and prejudice toward minority religions. These centers of religious activity are easily targeted and are often the most visible signs of a religious congregation’s presence in a particular area. These attacks echo similar incidents targeting Jewish and Muslim religious property that are discussed in sections of the 2008 Hate Crime Survey on Antisemitic Violence and Violence Against Muslims.

In Greece, on February 20, 2007, in Menidi, Athens, vandals threw three Molotov cocktails at a Jehovah’s Witnesses Kingdom Hall. A police investigation led to no arrests.

In the Russian Federation, places of worship were attacked during services or targeted at night for vandalism and arson:

- On July 11, 2008, arson completely destroyed a Jehovah’s Witnesses’ place of worship in Chekhov, Moscow Oblast. According to a member of the congregation, who led the efforts to salvage the building at four o’clock in the morning, the fire started with an explosion, and the flame spread rapidly through the entire building because the foundation was soaked with a flammable liquid. Jehovah’s Witnesses’ representatives were dissatisfied with the hesitant response by police and firefighters. Local police have reportedly refused to open an official investigation following the incident.

- In March 2007, attackers partially destroyed an Assembly of God Church in Moscow, setting off a blaze that destroyed the roof and much of the interior with an explosive device. The congregation had received numerous threats and local authorities had refused to register the property as belonging to the church.

- In February 2007, a young man firebombed a Jehovah’s Witnesses center in Kuybyshev, Novosibirsk Oblast.

- Attackers twice set fire to a Catholic chapel in the Krasnodar region during 2007.

In Serbia, on January 8, 2007, in Stapar, arsonists attacked an Adventist Church with a Molotov cocktail, causing serious damage to the interior; the fire department took action in time to save the building. President Boris Tadić mentioned the incident in his national address, saying that such acts must be stopped.

In the United States, in attacks in April, 2007, vandals in Stafford, Virginia broke windows at the Union Bell Baptist Church and daubed racial slurs on its walls; vandals also defaced the Strong Tower Ministries Church with racist and antireligious graffiti. Police investigated the incidents as hate crimes and detained four students as suspects.
C. Desecration of Burial Sites

The desecration of graves and cemeteries of religious minority communities was also reported throughout Europe and North America. Bias-driven vandals painted slogans on tombstones monuments and smashed them with hammers or explosives. Dozens of examples of such vandalism and desecration of graves and memorials are documented in sections of this Survey on Antisemitic Violence and Violence Against Muslims.

Some additional examples of acts of vandalism against the property of minority religious groups include the following:


In Kosovo (Serbia), members of the Orthodox Serbian minority required the protection of the U.N. and Kosovo police military escorts to visit cemeteries in Albanian majority areas. Serb grave markers were routinely toppled or smashed. Serbs, who visited family graves in the cemetery in the Albanian part of Mitrovica in March 2008, said an estimated 80 percent of the Orthodox tombstones there—numbering more than 500—had been vandalized since 1999. On May 30, 2007, in a rare official acknowledgement, police confirmed that gravestones had been damaged at an Orthodox cemetery in Prizren.

Minority Armenian communities in Eastern Europe have suffered similar attacks—with gravestones identified with the Armenian Apostolic Church singled out for graffiti or destruction.
II. Government Hostility Toward Targets of Violence

Patterns of religiously motivated violence and prejudice often occur against a backdrop of official policies of discrimination and intolerance. Governments in some countries deny religious communities legal status, bar the construction or rental of places of worship, deny permits for cemeteries, and place restrictions on freedom of assembly, while subjecting members of religious minorities to harassment, public vilification by state officials or in the state media, arrests, beatings, and imprisonment.

Intolerance toward minority religions has, in some countries, been endorsed by local or national officials, and may be accompanied by violent police actions suppressing religious freedom. In some cases, police have actively collaborated with violent mobs to harm members of minority religions.

In several countries government officials deny the right to freedom of assembly and the right to build a place of worship to members of minority religious communities, while local authorities bar groups from renting premises for worship. Thus, religious minorities, notably Jehovah’s Witnesses and evangelical Christian churches, find obstacles to finding a place for their religious practices. Often the result is that worship services must be held in private homes. But such arrangements—not always legal—make individuals from these congregations vulnerable to attacks by their neighbors, as well as police harassment and raids.

In the Russian Federation, national and local officials have encouraged public antipathy toward nontraditional religions, which are sometimes characterized as harmful “cults” and denounced as foreign-supported representatives of external interests. In August 2007, for example, Governor Vyacheslav Dudka of Tula Oblast described adherents of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Jehovah’s Witnesses as part of a “religious expansion into Russia, stimulated by foreign intelligence agencies.”

In Serbia, monitors reported an increase in vandalism at Baptist, Adventist, and other Protestant churches, in the context of news media campaigns characterizing these faiths as malicious sects. The Council of Europe’s European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), in a 2008 report, concludes that Serbia’s Law on Churches and Religious Communities “helps create a negative climate for the so-called untraditional religious communities, such as Jehovah’s witnesses and certain Evangelical groups,” which is exacerbated by some leaders of the dominant church.

In some countries, religious majorities have played a role in the exclusion of minority religious groups, including by stigmatizing minority faith and belief communities and by pressing governments for measures to restrict their activities.

In Armenia, a number of incidents were reported in which clergy of the majority Armenian Apostolic Church assaulted members of minority religious groups with impunity. On June 1, 2007, in Lusarat, an Armenian Church priest reportedly harassed and physically assaulted two Jehovah’s Witnesses in a public square. On August 21, 2006, a priest reportedly assaulted two female Jehovah’s Witnesses, breaking the arm of one of them; police reportedly suspended a criminal investigation into
the assault on the grounds that the priest had expressed remorse.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbullet\ In \textit{Serbia}, ECRI's 2008 country report noted that government hostility toward minority religions had been exacerbated by leaders of the majority Serbian Orthodox Church, noting that some dignitaries of the church “have had a part in fostering hostility towards these groups, which they refer to as ‘cults,’ accusing their followers of being ‘satanists.’”\textsuperscript{23}
III. Review of Religious Intolerance in Select Countries

Kyrgyzstan

In Kyrgyzstan, the government does not officially support any religion. However, a May 6, 2006 decree recognized Islam, the religion of the majority, and Russian Orthodoxy as traditional religious groups. Members of some minority—nontraditional—religions have been denied the right to bury their dead in cemeteries controlled by local administrations, where burials are permitted in accord with Islamic ritual alone. Protestant families seeking to bury relatives in local cemeteries have been attacked by mobs and denied access to cemeteries by public authorities.

Protests were made by Protestant leaders over an incident in May 2008, in the village of Kulanak (Ysyk-Kol Oblasty). A mob armed with farm implements halted the funeral of a 14-year-old boy from a Baptist family and refused to allow his burial at the local cemetery. The mob subsequently went to the dead boy’s home to threaten and beat mourners. Police arrived, but, according to one witness, stood by as a member of the mob “was hitting the believers and the father.” Police then broke into the house and “took away the body of the boy despite the tears and crying in despair of the family members.” Police reportedly took the boy’s body and buried him in a shallow grave some 40 kilometers from the village. The family said it was subsequently under pressure to leave the community.

Representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church reportedly assured Protestant representatives at a meeting on July 2, 2008, that Baptists and members of other Christian denominations could bury their dead in Orthodox cemeteries. However, most local cemeteries banned the burials of non-Muslims.

Russian Federation

While adherents of officially designated traditional religions in Russia—Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism—continue to be victimized by violent ultranationalists, an increasingly high level of violence was directed toward nontraditional religions. In many regions of Russia, attacks targeted representatives of minority Christian denominations associated with the West. Frequent victims included members of various Protestant churches including Evangelical and Reformed Christians, Roman Catholics, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The SOVA Center for Information and Analysis reported six attacks on Protestant churches, two on Catholic churches, as well as one attack on a Jehovah’s Witnesses meeting hall and one on a Mormon church in 2007.

Harassment and violence against members of minority religions and faith communities in Russia occurred in the context of public policies and pronouncements restricting the freedom of religion of those professing so-called nontraditional faiths. These included often arbitrary and overly burdensome registration requirements, restrictions on building permits for places of worship, formal or informal bans on the rental of places of assembly for religious services, and sporadic public statements by political leaders denouncing minority faiths.

The SOVA Center observed in a March 2008 report that government and law enforcement officials frequently made negative statements “about representatives of Protestant churches and new religious movements,” the latter usually described by officials, media, and the public as nontraditional religions or “totalitarian sects.”
In official rhetoric against these “new movements” and nontraditional faiths—including Baptists, Roman Catholics, and Pentecostals—the public officials emphasized their “alien nature” and foreign funding, while accusing these groups of espionage. The public discourse of hostility toward minority religions, official discrimination that limits the rights of freedom of religion, and the government’s failure to protect religious minorities combines to send a message throughout Russian society that, in the SOVA Center’s view, “religious inequality is a norm of public life,” further encouraging religious intolerance and violence.

The SOVA Center has also suggested that violence against religious minorities was exacerbated by an expectation of impunity for such crimes. For example, on the night of January 6, 2007, young people stormed the headquarters of a Latter-day Saints church in Samara, smashing windows and throwing smoke bombs. The SOVA Center argued that the incident showed that extremist groups were confident they could act with impunity: a statement of the extreme nationalist Eurasian Union of Youths (ESM) took credit for the attack, as well as an assault on the office of the Russian Family Planning Association in Orenburg. The statement declared that ESM would continue to bring pressure against the “sectarians,” and that “acts of vandalism are extremely important for the building of a sovereign democracy and a healthy civil society in Russia.” No investigation into the organization’s role in the incidents was reported by law enforcement agencies.

A number of incidents were reported in 2007 and 2008 in which members of other minority religions and their places of worship and assembly were the targets of hate-motivated violence:

- In September 2007 in the Voronezh Oblast, classmates beat David Perov, a first grade school student whose father is a pastor at the local Christ Community Protestant Church, “for refusing to take part in an Orthodox prayer led by a priest whose son was David’s classmate.”

- In August 2007, three young men attacked the Orthodox Cultural and Educational Center in Istrinsky District (Moscow Oblast), assaulting the building supervisor and breaking windows after apparently mistaking the building for a Jehovah’s Witness facility. “The Center staff tried to convince the attackers to stop the destruction, but the young men said that they had come from Moscow specifically to beat the ‘Jehovists.’”

Arson attacks, in addition to those already cited, included the setting on fire in November 2007 of the home of the rector of a Roman Catholic church in Arkhangelsk—St. Elijah’s Cathedral—and, in December, the burning of a Catholic chapel in the village of Stanitsa Leningradskaya in the Krasnodar Krai.

Vandals also targeted cemeteries and monuments in the Russian Federation, with antireligious hatred motivating attacks on minority faiths as well as on Russian Orthodox churches and sites. For example, vandals in Saint Petersburg twice damaged crosses at the construction site of an Orthodox cathedral, in June and September 2007. Incidents of antireligious vandalism were reported at six Orthodox churches and a number of Orthodox cemeteries across Russia during the year.

Limited progress in police investigations into the types of incidents described above was reported in the Russian Federation, with prosecutions going forward in a number of arson attacks on places of worship in past years. In Novgorod, in February, a man accused of burning down a Seventh-day Adventist Church in September 2003 was convicted on charges of “intentional destruction of a property.” He was sentenced to two years imprisonment.
Serbia

In the annual survey of attacks on religious communities in Serbia, covering September 2006 to September 2007, the monitoring group Forum 18 said attacks were more violent and increasingly directed at individuals, although the overall number of attacks declined. It said police “continue to be apparently unwilling to protect members of religious minorities or religious sites at risk of attack—even if they have already been attacked.” The report found that, notwithstanding a number of robberies of places of worship of the Serbian Orthodox Church, “the vast majority of attacks have been on Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, Jehovah’s Witness, and other religious minority individuals and property.”

There are seven traditional religious communities in Serbia: the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Muslim community, the Roman Catholic Church, the Slovak Evangelical Church, the Jewish community, the Reform Christian Church, and the Evangelical Christian Church. Additionally, six nontraditional religious groups received legal status from the Religion Ministry: the Seventh-day Adventists, United Methodist Church, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Evangelical Church of Serbia, Church of Christ’s Love, and Christ’s Spiritual Church.

Forum 18 stressed reluctance by many religious communities to report attacks to the police or to make public the fact of such attacks. In some cases, smaller traditional communities that have been attacked have denied being victims of bias-motivated violence—with a view to avoiding the stigma of a church under attack. A new religion law categorizes religious communities either as traditional or nontraditional, and some smaller communities classified as traditional have told monitors “they want to follow the lead of the Orthodox and Catholics in not often publicly discussing attacks.”

A number of incidents in Serbia in 2007 included physical assaults:

- On March 28, 2007 a resident of Stari Banovci (Srem District) held at gunpoint two Jehovah’s Witness missionaries, Austrian Wolfgang Hrdina and American Christopher Kunicki, threatening and insulting them for 45 minutes. The same individual reportedly smashed the windshield of Hrdina’s car, and on April 10 he beat Hrdina about the head and kicked him until passersby came to the victim’s aid. It is not known whether prosecutors have investigated the case.

In its 2008 annual report, Amnesty International criticized Serbia for continued “ethnically and politically motivated attacks.” The report cited an attack on Života Milanović, a member of the Hare Krishna religious community in Jagodina:

[Milanović] who had been assaulted five times since 2001, was in June 2007 stabbed in the stomach, arms and legs. In November, the NGO Youth Initiative for Human Rights applied on his behalf to the European Court of Human Rights in respect of Serbia’s failure to protect the right to life, provide an efficient legal remedy, and ensure freedom from torture and discrimination.

Other incidents in Serbia in 2007 cited by Forum 18, apart from those in Kosovo, included arson attacks and vandalism of places of worship and the homes of religious leaders:

- On September 23, in Batajnica, the façade and entrance door of a new Jehovah’s Witness Kingdom Hall was damaged by vandals immediately after it opened. One day later, a police inspector began a series of public lectures sponsored by the local Serbian Orthodox Church about dangerous “sects.”

- On the night of September 16, in Kraljevo, vandals daubed the slogan “Stop Sects” on an Evangelical (Pentecostal) church and an Adventist church.

- On May 29, unknown attackers threw stones at an Adventist church in Novi Sad, breaking two windows and shutters. There were also traces of fire damage.
On March 29, unknown attackers threw stones at the Vojvodina headquarters of an Adventist church in Novi Sad, breaking four windows.

On the night of March 18, in Sombor, attackers smashed windows at the home of the Adventist pastor, with one stone landing “near the bed of two of his young sons.” Police said the attacker was identified, but he was not charged with committing a religiously motivated crime.

Vandals in early January attacked a Brethren church, in Sremska Mitrovica, breaking windows and damaging a door and an interior wall.

On January 8, in Stapar, arsonists attacked an Adventist Church with a Molotov cocktail, causing serious damage to the interior; the fire department took action in time to save the building.

Other reported incidents of vandalism at Adventist churches included a July 9, 2007, case in which an Adventist Church in Belgrade was plastered with stickers with the slogan “Sects are Death for the Serbian nation.” Adventist churches in Sombor, Stapari, Kikinda, and Ruma were reportedly the object of attacks by vandals prior to the Belgrade incident.

Kosovo

Attacks on Serbian Orthodox religious sites occurred in Kosovo, which unilaterally declared independence in February 2008 and gained recognition by many European states. Attacks were made on Orthodox churches and cemeteries associated with the Serbian minority as well as ethnic Serbs participating in Orthodox religious rites.

On March 2, 2007, two juveniles were detained on suspicion of involvement in vandalism at the Orthodox cemetery in Obiliq.

On August 17, 2007, vandals defaced the cross on the gate of Orthodox Church in Gjilan, and wrote racist slogans on its walls, including “Death for all Serbs.”

On May 30, 2007, five young teenagers were detained for damaging an Orthodox church in Prizren; Kosovo police said the vandalism was not classified as “hate-motivated” but was carried out for “financial gain.”

In other incidents, buses carrying members of the Orthodox Serb minority within Kosovo were targeted with stones. In one case, on November 7, 2007, police said young Kosovo Albanians blocked a road in Suchice village, Pristina, while Kosovo Serbs were celebrating a religious festival in the nearby church. No charges were brought against the three suspects in the case, reportedly because of their age.

Amnesty International found that “fear of inter-ethnic attacks restricted the freedom of movement of Serbs and Roma in Kosovo,” while the perpetrators of attacks were rarely brought to justice:

Buses carrying Serb passengers were stoned by Albanian youths; grenades or other explosive devices were thrown at buses or houses. Orthodox churches continued to be looted or vandalized, including in an attack with a rocket-propelled grenade on the Orthodox monastery in Dečan.

The Kosovo Police Service (KPS) spokesman in August 2007 said attacks on religious and cultural sites increased in 2007, with 52 attacks recorded as of that date, but that “the majority of these incidents have criminal activity, rather than ethnic intolerance, as motive and background.” The KPS claimed to have solved 18 of the crimes.

Turkey

The right to freedom of religion is provided by the Constitution and is “generally respected by the government.” While most religious groups in Turkey recognize that conditions for religious freedom have improved in the past decade, some Muslim and Christian religious minorities continue to experience
restrictions on religious freedom. For many non-Muslim groups—particularly the Greek and Armenian Orthodox communities who have long existed in Turkey—these restrictions include “state policies and actions that effectively prevent [them] from sustaining themselves by denying them the right to own and maintain property, to train religious clergy, and to offer religious education above high school.”

Despite the legal safeguards, societal abuses and discrimination based on religious intolerance occur in Turkey, mainly affecting non-Muslim communities—who represent less than one percent of the Turkish population. Although all non-Muslim groups have been victims of bias-motivated violence in the past, in recent years, predominantly affected are those groups, such as the relatively new Protestant community, that are engaged in legally protected proselytizing activities, as well as Roman Catholics. Additionally, there have been reports of harassment by police of members of the Alevi Muslim minority community.

In 2007 and in the first half of 2008, Roman Catholic and Protestant Christian religious leaders, members, and religious property were the subject of threats and sporadic violence, including murder. The Turkish government has generally responded adequately to the most serious attacks, conducting investigations and prosecuting perpetrators. For example, in October 2007 the Supreme Court upheld a sentence of 18 years and 10 months imprisonment imposed upon the accused murderer of Roman Catholic priest Andrea Santoro, who was killed in February 2006.

Threats and violent attacks have taken place in the context of sometimes contradictory positions taken by government officials regarding certain aspects of religious freedom. To some extent, this reflects a society that is grappling with the growth in numbers of Protestant Christians who are ethnically Turkish, a relatively new phenomenon. (Virtually all other Christians in Turkey are members of a different ethnic group.) For example, the Interior Ministry’s Director General of Laws Niyazi Güney declared to Turkish parliamentarians that “missionary work is even more dangerous than terrorism and unfortunately is not considered a crime in Turkey.” In contrast, when asked by the media whether missionary work was in fact a danger to Turkey, Religious Affairs Director Ali Bardakoğlu responded by reaffirming the right to share one’s beliefs: “It is their natural right. We must learn to respect even the personal choice of an atheist, let alone other religions.”

In the most serious incident of violence reported during 2007, a group of young men claiming to be defending Islam and Turkish nationalism murdered three employees of a Christian publishing house in Malatya on April 18. The killers bound and tortured the three Protestant Christians: Turkish citizens Necati Aydin and Uğur Yüksel, and a German colleague Tillman Geske. Police promptly detained five suspects, students who shared a room in a hostel; each reportedly carried letters saying “We did this for our country. They are attacking our religion.” Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan condemned the Malatya attack, and a small demonstration was held in central Istanbul to protest the murders.

In the months after the murders, Turkish authorities condemned violence against Christians and acted promptly to respond to new threats. On October 3, 2007, after a formal address to the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly in Strasbourg, France, Turkish President Abdullah Gül classified the attacks on Christians as political murders, adding that “there are no attacks targeting Christians in Turkey, but political crimes have occurred and one of them was against a Christian priest. The murderer was captured and is being tried by independent courts.”

However, representatives of Turkey’s Protestant community continue to express concern about persistent violence. In an October 2007 statement, the Alliance of Protestant Churches in Turkey declared that
violence had increased significantly in the wake of the April 2007 Malatya murders, noting that Turkish Protestants had already suffered “scores of threats or attacks” on congregations and church buildings during the previous year. In 2008, the organization reported 19 anti-Protestant incidents, including threats to church leaders and attempts to destroy church property, and urged authorities to take action to respond to these incidents. The head of the Alliance, Zekai Tanyar, stressed that Protestants continue to be intimidated by what is perceived as rising intolerance against their community, particularly in smaller cities and towns. As a consequence, many “are reluctant to go to the police when they receive anonymous threats or face what can only be described as discrimination in their dealings with public authorities: they fear they will only draw more attention to themselves and, in any case, will not succeed.” Although state protection has sometimes been provided, this is only in a minority of cases, such as when there are “serious attacks on church buildings and serious threats to the lives of church leaders.”

On December 16, 2007, in Izmir, Turkey, a young man stabbed Roman Catholic priest Adriano Franchini after mass at St. Anthony’s church. Another priest, belonging to the Syriac Christian community in southeast Turkey, was kidnapped on November 28, 2007 in Mardin, but released after two days.

In other reported incidents, Protestant pastors have been threatened with murder and armed men have attempted to gain access to Protestant churches. In January 2008, a court in Samsun heard evidence that a 17-year-old had made repeated telephone death threats to Protestant pastor Orhan Pıçaklar of the Agape Church there, beginning on December 29, 2007. The suspect was detained on January 5, 2008, and sections of the police interrogation report were cited in evidence. The case was heard by Judge Sinan Sönmez of Samsun’s First Minor Petty Offenses Court on January 6, who reportedly ordered the immediate release of the accused “because of his youth.” In December 2007, the Economist cited threats against the Agape Church’s pastor in an article on why some Christians currently feel under threat in Turkey:

This has been a bad year for Orhan Pıçaklar. As a Protestant missionary in Samsun, on the Black Sea, he has had death threats and his church has been repeatedly stoned. Local newspapers called him a foreign agent. A group of youths tried to kidnap him as he was driving home. His pleas for police protection have gone unanswered.

Other threats were reported in Ankara, Turkey’s capital. On May 6, 2008, three men sought access to the locked Kurtulus Church. One man threatened the Church’s Protestant pastor, and another threatened a church member with a gun.

Ukraine

In Ukraine, where Orthodox Christianity is the dominant religion, property of Protestant churches and other minority religions were targeted in a range of incidents. The Armenian Apostolic Church, which has been in Ukraine since the fourteenth century, has also experienced attacks of vandalism. In April, vandals daubed a swastika on the Armenian Apostolic church in Kyiv, and the next day damaged the church’s bell tower where construction work had just been completed.

The Interior Ministry, according to press reports, said it had registered 873 instances of desecration of burial sites from January to mid-May, 2007 in Ukraine, but apparently did not indicate which targeted Jewish, Muslim, or other minorities. The majority of reported desecrations targeted Jewish cemeteries (see additionally the Survey sections on Antisemitic Violence and Ukraine); although there were, however, several instances in which Christian churches and cemeteries were vandalized, particularly in the Donetsk and Odessa regions, and in the Crimea. On April 30, 2007, vandals destroyed more than 400 tombstones at the Old Crimea cemetery in Mariupol; police arrested the offenders and the trial was pending at the end of the year. In October, vandals desecrated some 30 tombstones in the form of...
a cross there, toppling them or daubing them with “satanic” symbols.

Uzbekistan

In Uzbekistan, a longstanding government campaign targeting independent Muslims and alleged members of banned Islamic organizations has resulted in widely documented torture, arbitrary detention and imprisonment, as well as other human rights violations. Minority Christian groups have also suffered under increasing government restrictions on religious activities. In May 2008, members of minority religious congregations were reportedly “afraid to go out on the street where they live for fear of being persecuted” after the airing of a state-run television film that vilified Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians, and Methodists. The film used police footage taken during raids on places of worship and described minority Christian activities as “a global problem along with religious dogmatism, fundamentalism, terrorism and drug addiction.”

In June 2008, 26 Protestant congregations in Uzbekistan published an open letter protesting vilification in the media, which named individual religious leaders and churches. Public school and university administrators had been employed to promote these efforts by pressuring students to watch a film attacking religious minorities. The letter said that “garbled facts, aggressive attacks, lies and slander” were used to encourage intolerance and hatred toward members of religious minorities.

In December 2006, state television had screened a similar “prime-time national television attack on Protestant churches” over two consecutive nights. One Protestant commentator protested that “we were accused of everything, including turning people into zombies and driving them to psychiatric hospitals. Everyone points at us on the streets.” The program cited officials of the government religious committee condemning missionary activity, named some registered churches as “illegally operating,” and alleged that the United States funded missionary activity through its Peace Corps program. A deacon of Uzbekistan’s Russian Orthodox Church, who declared that “freedom of faith” was fully respected, told viewers “the spreading of sects can be compared to cancer. Members of such a system, whose mind has been poisoned by false religious ideas, try to lead other people to this wrong path.”

The climate of hostility toward minority religions was also encouraged by state action to fine or imprison Uzbek Protestant leaders for their religious activities. In one case in which monitors were asked to withhold certain details, a family was subjected to ongoing threats and violence:

The daughter of a pastor was kidnapped in April [2007] by unknown young men before being freed in a traumatized state. ... The kidnapping is the latest in a series of attacks on the family, which has included telephoned threats, hostile visits from neighbors, and beatings, allegedly inspired by the mullahs at the local mosque angry that the pastor is a convert to Christianity who actively preaches his faith.

Threats of prosecution for unregistered religious activity are combined with harassment and threats by local authorities and neighborhood structures, notably the local neighborhood committees (mahallas) to which local authorities summon residents to compulsory assemblies. In a September 2003 report, Human Rights Watch described the role of the mahalla system in implementing the government’s policies to restrict all forms of religious expression outside official channels. Then, as now, a principal concern was to suppress “independent” Muslims who practice Islam outside of the government channels.

For centuries, the mahalla was an autonomous institution organized around Islamic rituals and social events, but the current government transformed it into a national system for surveillance and control. Uzbekistan is divided up into approximately 12,000 mahallas, each containing between 150 and 1,500 households. The mahalla committees are
local government authorities with the power to administer a range of activities.

By keeping files on those considered “overly pious” in their religious expression, carrying out surveillance, and reporting people’s “suspicious” religious activity to police, mahalla committees assist the government in its crackdown against peaceful, independent Muslims who practice Islam outside government-controlled religious institutions.

Mahallas also organize public rallies in which independent Muslims (and others) “are abused, threatened, and demonized.” These are described as a modern version of public meetings organized in the Soviet era in order to denounce and discredit those acting contrary to the interests of the ruling party. Human Rights Watch, which called these “hate rallies” that target individuals to limit their religious freedom, described the procedure:

They are carefully staged spectacles that function as a form of extrajudicial punishment, shaming and humiliating independent Muslims and their immediate relations. Speeches made by officials at the meetings serve as warnings, frightening people into abandoning religious practices the state finds objectionable or disavowing relatives or friends who have been branded “enemies.” Officials discredit the meetings’ subjects as worthless to society, and as bad mothers, fathers, and neighbors, thereby further isolating such people from the support networks that their community would otherwise provide.**

In June 2007, Bakhtier Tuichiev, the pastor of a Full Gospel Pentecostal Church in Andijan which was denied registration, declared that it had become “too dangerous” to continue, and said the church was to be closed. He referred to pressure “from the leaders of the local mahallas” and from the public prosecutor.**
Section Endnotes


16 Kosovo unilaterally declared independence in February 2008 and gained recognition by at least 40 governments; see the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244.


28 Galina Kozezhnikova, Radical Nationalism and Efforts to Counteract it in 2007, the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, March 14, 2008, http://xeno.sova-center.ru/6BA2468/6BB4208/AC15D1E.


31 Galina Kozezhnikova, Radical Nationalism and Efforts to Counteract it in 2007, the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, March 14, 2008, http://xeno.sova-center.ru/6BA2468/6BB4208/AC15D1E.


42 Kosovo unilaterally declared independence in February 2008 and gained recognition by many European states; see the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244.


