1. What is the attitude towards atheists in Turkey, particularly ones who were born Muslim?

Turkish society’s attitude toward atheists is relatively negative. Authorities’ attitudes seem less hostile and will be discussed in detail in Question 2.

Public Attitude

A May 2009 poll conducted by Istanbul’s Bahcesehir University and sponsored by Turkey’s Jewish Rabbinical Foundation measured people’s attitudes toward different others including atheists. It found that atheists were more unpopular to live next door to, less likely to be in a respondent’s close circle of friends, and perceived as more likely to be ostracised than other unpopular groups like Kurds, Jews or Armenians.¹ The survey was based on interviews with 1,715 people selected randomly from 34 cities²:

- 57 percent of Turks did not want to live next door to an atheist, 42 percent to Jews and 35 percent to Christians.
- 64% have a Kurd in their close circle of friends, 53% an Alevi, 14% an atheist, 10% an Armenian, 8% a Rum (local Greek-speaking Christian), 7% a Jew
- Three quarters of respondents knew nothing about the lifestyle and culture of Jews, Armenians, Rum, orth[sic] atheists.
- 57% of respondents think Muslims are not ostracized in Turkey. 52% think Christians aren’t, 46% that Jews aren’t, 45% that Alevis aren’t, 80% think they themselves are not ostracized for their identity or roots. The losers are atheists. 34% think atheists aren’t ostracized, but 37% think they are.¹

A 2007 article in the Independent cited analysts who claimed that “for all that it has a secular constitution, Turkey remains a relatively conservative country” with regard to religion. Only 2% of people interviewed in a 2006 religious study by Ali Carkoglu stated they did not believe in God; and this was with a 2% margin of error. Only 25% of Turks accepted

² ‘Study: Turks have little tolerance of diversity’ 2009, Associated Press, 31 May – Attachment 2
evolutionary theory. Carkoglu stated that “it takes considerable courage for a Turk to admit to a stranger that they are atheists”. The word ‘godless’ was said to be seen as an insult.  

A 2009 Washington Post article discusses incidents which enforce the view that atheism is frowned upon in Turkey. It cites a teacher at Marmara University who recalls how her students “accused” her of being an atheist for “teaching anything but the doctrine that God created the Earth and everything on it”. The article mentions a group led by prominent Muslim creationist Adnan Oktar which has distributed material “attacking evolution as equivalent to atheism, communism and worse”.  

With public attitudes more negative in some aspects towards atheists than toward other religious minorities, the mistreatment of religious minorities may translate into worse treatment of atheists. A 2009 US Department of State (US DOS) report said that there had been “reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice”. This included threats against non-Muslims which “created an atmosphere of pressure and diminished freedom” for these communities. Religious pluralism was widely viewed as a threat to Islam and to “national unity” with members of religious minorities facing suspicion and mistrust.  

On several occasions people were afraid to be publicly outed as atheists. Despite being confident of winning a case against the shutting of their website, the webmasters of Turkey’s most prominent atheism website, Ateizm.org, chose not to go to court, citing fear of attacks. The webmasters state that “[m]any Turkish intellectuals who were against Islam and outspoken about their views on religion were murdered by Islamic fundamentalists in the past” adding “[w]e do not want to risk our lives”. In a May 2010 court case where atheist parents successfully exempted their children from religious education, the names of the family were withheld, possibly due to the threat of violence from members of the public. Even those who reject only some parts of religious tradition, such as those who do not fast during Ramadan do not want their names aired publicly. They cite risking disapproval and even potential violence if they are seen to not be observing Ramadan. The US DOS’s reports of violence against minorities, however, did not mention any attacks on atheists.  

In certain situations, however, atheists do come out publicly. One Turkish game show features local leaders of different religions competing live to win atheists over to their faith. The atheists who convert are given a trip to a religious destination overseas. The discussion

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4 Kaufman, M. 2009, ‘In Turkey, fertile ground for creationism; U.S. critics of evolution help translate their ideas for a society already torn between Islam and secularism’ The Washington Post, 8 November - Attachment 4


of atheism and religion in this jovial public environment suggests a level of tolerance. However, a Drive-by Times article states that there have been complaints by those who “have been put off by what they see as the rise of an intolerant attitude toward atheism”. Furthermore, the show’s creators publicly stated that “[w]e don't approve of anyone being an atheist…It doesn't matter which religion you believe in. The important thing is to believe”.

It is worth noting that Turkey’s identification cards contain a section for religious affiliation which may be voluntarily left blank. Taking this option may leave the atheists at risk of being identified. In the past, Christian converts are said to have faced discrimination as a result of the cards.

While no information was found on public attitudes specifically toward atheists who had previously practiced Islam, the US DOS reported that “citizens who converted from Islam to another religion often experienced some form of social harassment or pressure from family and neighbours”. No information was found on authorities’ attitudes specifically toward atheists who had abandoned their Islamic faith.

2. Would authorities fail to protect an atheist from attacks by the general public?

While no information was found on whether authorities would specifically protect an atheist from attacks by the general public, there have been incidents of violence against those seen as criticising certain religions; violence which authorities had not been able to prevent. Many of these were carried out by Turkish fundamentalist rebel group Hezbollah which will be discussed further in Question 3. As mentioned in Question 1, the webmasters of Ateizm.org feared identifying themselves publicly because “[m]any Turkish intellectuals who were against Islam and outspoken about their views on religion were murdered by Islamic fundamentalists in the past”. This threat of violence was so real that it has successfully been coupled with “creationists and others” seeking “court orders alleging defamation” to silence any critics of religion in an “an unbeatable one-two combination”. Despite this, of the incidents of religiously motivated attacks reported by the US DOS to have occurred in 2009, the majority had been responded to by authorities, through providing protection for victims and prosecuting perpetrators.

Authorities’ Attitude towards Athiests

9 Cables, J. 2009, ‘Turkish game show looks to convert atheists’, Drive-by Times, 2 August
10 Kremida, D. and Morris, W. 2010, ‘European Court Rules Against Turkey’s Religion ID’, Compass Direct News, 8 February – Attachment 10
Authorities’ attitude towards atheists is an indicator of whether they would protect them from attacks by the general public. On the face of it Turkey’s law and its state institutions seem tolerant of atheism. The Turkish Constitution supports freedom of religion. It establishes the country as a secular state, prohibits discrimination on religious grounds, and provides for freedom of belief and worship, including the private dissemination of religious ideas. According to the US DOS “other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion”.  

This freedom was in the context of a secular state upheld by fiercely secular state institutions. Turkey’s key state intuitions, including the armed forces, have in the past even opposed activities of the elected government on grounds that they threatened the secular state. There continue to be restrictions on religious expression in government offices and state-run institutions, including universities. Secularism is infused into ordinary soldiers with those who perform Islamic prayers or are married to women who wear headscarves being charged with “lack of discipline”.  

The support for secularism is sometimes manifested in the legal tolerance and protection of atheism. In the aforementioned May 2010 court case, the court ruled that the child of the atheist couple would be exempt from compulsory religion classes at a primary school. The court said “along with Christian and Jewish citizens, atheist people should have the right to be exempt from religion classes”. It added that “the Turkish Constitution and the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms protect freedom of belief”.  

When aforementioned creationist Adnan Oktar attempted to have the pro-atheist book by atheist scholar Richard Dawkins, The God Delusion, banned and its Turkish publishers jailed on the basis that it was insulting religion, a Turkish court threw out the case. Also, while authorities had closed down the aforementioned Ateizm.org, the webmasters expressed confidence that “[i]f we hired a lawyer and challenged the court order, we probably would have won our case”.

There are, however, certain restrictions which may have the potential to be used against atheists, particularly by powerful religious groups. There are legal restrictions against “insulting a government-recognized religion”. There had also been a court case initiated in 2006 and continuing into 2009 against two Muslim converts to Christianity who had not only “charged [with] inciting hatred against Islam”, but also “insulting Turkishness”.  

The aforementioned atheism website was blocked twice within Turkey, most recently in 2007, by authorities following a court order resulting from a complaint by Adnan Oktar. Ateizm.org was said to have “openly, scientifically, honestly and courageously discussed and criticized” every aspect of Islam. Part of the reason for Oktar’s attack on the site may be due

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to its criticism and debunking of the “false claims” by his creationist organisation Bilim Arastirma Vakfi (Science Research Foundation).19

In September 2008, Oktar also successfully obtained a court order to block access in Turkey to Richard Dawkins’ website. However, the official reason the site had been blocked was due to Oktar’s claims that he and his book were defamed on the site and that it “violated” his personality, rather than because it insulted religion.20 Oktar’s press assistant had claimed that “[w]e are not against freedom of speech or expression”.21

Minority Rights Group International (MRG) has stated that compulsory religious instruction in schools is discriminatory against anyone who was not a Sunni Muslim including “atheists, agnostics and secularists, who may not wish their children to receive any religious education”.22

3. Are there any reports of Hezbollah targeting atheists/non-practising Muslims in Turkey?

While no information was found on Hezbollah explicitly targeting atheists in the general population, they have declared their hostility against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) due to its perceived atheism. Hezbollah is also hostile towards anyone deemed as un-Islamic and those supporting secularism, which may include non-practicing Muslims.

Hezbollah is a fundamentalist Islamic group made up of Kurds and alternatively referred to as Turkish Hezbollah or Kurdish Hezbollah. The group has little connection to its much larger Lebanon based namesake. Its goal is the destruction of the constitutional regime of Turkey and establishment of an Islamic state by violent means.23

The group is hostile towards anyone who is deemed un-Islamic, including atheists. An academic article from 2004 states that Hezbollah “has opposed every group that has deviated from what they believe to be the true path of Islam”.24 The formation of the group occurred after a split within the PKK due to Hezbollah’s hostility towards the ‘atheism’ of the PKK embodied in its Marxist ideology.25 26 Hezbollah declared war on the PKK and Hezbollah’s founder, Hüseyin Velioglu, is said to have “fiercely fought the PKK who he viewed as

Hezbollah’s propaganda against the Turkish state also included painting it as atheist. 

Hezbollah has killed many who were seen as pro-secular or offending religious sentiments, mostly during the 1990s. In 2000 the Global Security website reported that “Turkish officials say Hizbollah…could be responsible for the murders of several leading Turkish prosecular academics and journalists in recent years”. While it started off targeting PKK militants, in the late 1990s they “started killing secularists, moderate Muslims, representatives of Kurdish religious charitable foundations and clerics from other religious movements”. They also targeted “liquor stores, bordellos, and other establishments that the organization considered “anti-Islamic””. Attacks had included using acid on women not dressed in an “Islamic manner”. Victims had included a former member of parliament, Mehmet Sincar, and an Islamic feminist writer. 

There have been “widespread” allegations in the “mainstream Turkish press” that the Hezbollah was encouraged by, if not actually linked to, the Turkish security apparatus. This was due to the latter’s support of the group’s attacks against Kurdish nationalists. Any connection has been denied by the Turkish authorities who, in the late 1990s began to take tougher action against the group, arresting 130 members in 1998, 250 in 1999 and 3300 in 2000. It is illegal to be a member, supporter or sympathizer of Hezbollah in Turkey and the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board cited claims that “citizens suspected to have any kinds of ties to these organizations are harassed by security forces and violations of their human rights have been common”. 

Attachments


2. ‘Study: Turks have little tolerance of diversity’ 2009, Associated Press, 31 May. (FACTIVA)


18. ‘Turkish Hizballah’ 2002, *Federation of American Scientists web site*, 22 May