

TCA Fact Sheet: The Status of Religious Freedoms in Greece, Greek Cyprus, Armenia and Turkey

The United States Congress must adopt a balanced approach on the issue of religious freedoms and tolerance. H.Res.306 squandered this opportunity by singling out Turkey for criticism, while turning a blind eye to the state of religious freedoms and rights of minorities as well as the state of religious/cultural heritage in Greece, Greek Cyprus and Armenia.

Greece

- Athens is the only European capital without a functioning mosque. The historical Fethiye Mosque remains closed despite Turkey's offers to help with the restoration.
- There are also no functioning mosques in Thessaloniki. The historical Alaca Imaret Mosque is in despair and one part of the mosque is being used as a public toilet.
- The right of the Turkish minority in Greece to freely select its religious leaders (i.e. "Muftis") is not recognized. Rather, Greek authorities impose their appointed "Muftis" on the Turkish minority instead of them being elected by the Turkish/Muslim voters of Greece as dictated by international treaty law (see, for example, articles 40 and 45 of the Treaty of Lausanne).
- The right of the Turkish minority in Greece to articulate itself as "Turkish" is denied. The Greek Government considers this a criminal offense and presses charges against members of the Turkish minority that use the adjective "Turkish" in identifying themselves. This policy has led to the banning of several civic associations which use the adjective "Turkish". Despite unanimous judgments in favor of the Turkish minority by the European Court of Human Rights, the Greek government continues this denial of identity to ethnic Turks in Greece.
- Turks in Greece are prevented from running their pious foundations, resulting in the confiscation or despair of their properties. Turks in Greece are frequently prevented from repairing their mosques and other religious sites. There are cases of prison sentences and fines for simply repairing a mosque.
- Turkish historical and cultural heritage sites are neglected.
- Greece does not recognize its Macedonian minority in Greece and does not allow the Macedonian Church to function in Greece.

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Greek Cyprus

- There are only three active mosques in Greek Cyprus, but they are without full-time clergy due to Greek Cypriot restrictions.
- The request of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) to appoint full-time Muslim clerics (i.e. “Imam”) for the benefit of the Turkish Cypriots has been consistently refused by the Greek Cypriot administration.
- Greek Cypriot authorities continue to hinder Turkish Cypriots and others of Turkish descent to hold services at religious sites in Southern Cyprus.
- In contrast, there are 19 active churches, chapels and monasteries in the TRNC. Furthermore, the Government of Northern Cyprus recognizes two full-time clergy; also, visiting Orthodox Greek clergy are allowed to hold services. In addition, Greek Cypriots from Southern Cyprus and others are permitted to visit and hold services at religious sites.

Armenia

- There is only one functioning mosque in entire Armenia today, the Blue Mosque (or Goy Mescit). All other mosques, save for one which is non-functioning, have been destroyed. In the second half of the 19th Century alone, there used to be over 200 mosques in what are today the borders of Armenia.
- According to a report by Forum 18, a Christian religious freedoms watchdog, on July 15, 2011, ‘Armenia's religious minorities face barriers to their exercising freedom of religion or belief from senior officials, politicians, media outlets and priests of the dominant Armenian Apostolic Church.’ Persecuted religious minorities included Pentecostals and Jehovah’s Witnesses. In addition, both the Collaboration for Democracy Centre and the Helsinki Committee of Armenia has documented numerous instances of official and media intolerance, leading to denials of freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18 reports.

Turkey

- There are 101 places of worship for less than 5,000 Greek Orthodox citizens of Turkey.
- There are 55 (Gregorian, Catholic and Protestant) Armenian Churches in Turkey open to religious services of the nearly 60,000 Armenian citizens of Turkey.

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- There are 36 synagogues for about 25,000 Jewish citizens of Turkey.
- The Greek Orthodox Patriarch is freely elected by members of the Holy Synod (i.e. metropolitans). Non-Turkish citizens are not only allowed to be metropolitans, but they may also acquire Turkish citizenship.
- Turkey has become the first country to implement a property verdict by the European Court of Human Rights, returning a historical orphanage to the Greek Orthodox minority.
- Turkey has restored 12 Christian and Jewish heritage sites, including 1 synagogue and 12 churches from 2003-2010, restoration continues at 2 synagogues, 2 monastery and 3 churches. Among the most notable Christian heritage sites restored by Turkey are the Akdamar Armenian church in Van and the Osk Vank Georgian church near Erzurum. A major restoration project is being undertaken by the Turkish Ministry of Culture and the World Monuments Fund to restore the historical Armenian heritage site of Ani in Kars, including the Ani Cathedral and the Church of the Holy Savior.

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TCA Fact Sheet: The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Istanbul

A summary of the ongoing policy of the Turkish government to ensure and enhance the state of religious freedoms of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate are presented below. Contrary to allegations, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate is able to freely carry out its religious activities in present-day Turkey.

Permission to conduct religious services outside of the established churches

- The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Istanbul is permitted to conduct masses at religiously and historically significant sites. In August last year, the Greek-Orthodox Church held a religious service officiated by Patriarch Bartholomeos at the Sumela Monastery in Trabzon, Turkey to which over 3,000 Orthodox Christians from all over the world attended. There was also substantial participation in the mass held by the Greek Orthodox Church in August this year, again at Sumela.

Citizenship of Orthodox senior clerics

- Since 2004, the appointment of non-Turkish citizen metropolitans (i.e. Orthodox senior clerics) to the Patriarchate's Holy Synod has been explicitly permitted. Furthermore, metropolitans of foreign nationality have been allowed to acquire Turkish citizenship in an expedited fashion as of 2010. It should be noted that several Greek Orthodox metropolitans have already acquired Turkish citizenship under this new rule.
- These developments have provided for a practical response to concerns raised vis-à-vis the requirement that the Patriarch be of Turkish citizenship. This requirement derives its source from a regulation enacted in 1862- the provisions therein relating to religious matters remain in force today.

The issue of contested property

- Last year, Turkey returned a historical orphanage located on the island of Buyukada to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. This is no small gesture. In so doing, Turkey became the first country to implement a property claim verdict by the European Court of Human Rights.
- It should further be noted that according to a decree adopted on August 27, 2011 by the Turkish government, all properties registered to religious minority foundations in 1936 will be returned to their owners or full compensation will be paid if the property was sold to a third party. Indeed, this recent decree applies to properties registered by the Patriarchate to the Greek Orthodox community foundation. This is a

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historic step and one that will hopefully set an example for Greece to return properties owned by foundations of the Turkish minority in Greece to their rightful owners.

The “Ecumenical” Title

- There is no legal obligation requiring that Turkey recognizes the “ecumenical” title of the Patriarchate. In fact, according to the Venice Commission (the Council of Europe’s advisory body on constitutional matters) Turkish authorities are formally free to refrain from using this title. The Commission explicitly stated that “it cannot be inferred from the European Convention on Human Rights that the Turkish authorities are obliged themselves to actively use this title when referring to the Patriarchate, nor to formally recognize it” (Venice Commission, *Opinion no. 535 / 2009*, para.99).
- It should further be noted that at the Lausanne Peace Conference, Turkey allowed the Patriarchate to reside in Istanbul on the condition that the Patriarchate provides religious services solely to the Greek Orthodox minority of Turkey. The head of the Greek delegation, Mr. Venizelos, willfully accepted this decision as stated in the minutes of the Peace Conference. The exercise of “ecumenical” status is thus incompatible with the agreement reached at the Lausanne Conference.
- In light of these sensitive realities, by not obstructing the Patriarch and Church or others to use or refer to the “ecumenical” title, Turkey has been displaying what can only be described as a very lenient and accommodating stance on this matter.

Heybeliada Theological School

- Turkey is committed to the re-opening of the Heybeliada Theological School in a manner that is compatible with its laws. Currently, religious instruction in Turkey is conducted under State supervision- a constitutional restriction which applies to all religious communities (Muslim or non-Muslim). Leaving religious instruction and the raising of clergymen of one Turkish religious group to be administered outside of the Turkish educational framework and preventing other religious minorities from doing the same is hardly compatible with the principles of equality in front of the law. Serious concerns remain that the re-opening of the Heybeliada Theological School under such arrangements would also pave the way of the opening of “Medrese” type institutions (i.e. establishments used for teaching Islamic theology and law).
- Displaying a constructive stance, Turkey has devised various formulas so that the Heybeliada Theological School may start functioning again within the Turkish educational framework. One such proposal foresees the opening of the School under the aegis of a state university in Turkey. However, despite this proposal having been supported by other Christian and Jewish minorities in Turkey, it has not been accepted by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchy.

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