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TURKEY: Turkey's Christians face increasingly dangerous persecution

By Lela GILBERT

Newsweek (13.04.2021) – <https://bit.ly/2Q7kFq2> – Once upon a time, tourists in Turkey eagerly made their way to Hagia Sophia—a historic architectural marvel shimmering with the golden light of ancient mosaics. Although marred by many centuries, images of Jesus, Mary and John the Baptist reflect the spirit of a fledgling Christian world. In fact, Turkey's earliest churches are recalled in the New Testament itself—in Antioch, where St. Paul began his missionary journeys, and in

the Seven Churches portrayed by St. John in his Book of Revelation.

Christianity once flourished in Turkey, until the Ottoman Empire's 1915 genocide of Armenians, Assyrians, Greeks and other Christians. Now the Islamist regime of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his neo-Ottoman agenda has magnified Turkey's anti-Christian hostility. Since a failed coup attempt in 2016, the regime intensified its scapegoating of Christians, while occasionally making deceptively amiable gestures toward them.

In July 2020, Erdogan officially declared that Istanbul's Hagia Sophia—beautiful mosaics and all—would once again become a mosque. Erdogan announced that this would gratify “the spirit of conquest” of Mehmet II, the Ottoman sultan who captured Constantinople from the Christian Byzantines in 1453, and turned the church of Hagia Sophia into a mosque.

That, and the transformation of Istanbul's beautiful Chora Church of the Holy Saviour, merged into a swelling stream of Turkish Christian churches being confiscated, shuttered, torn down, or converted into mosques.

Troubles within the Greek Orthodox patriarchate and a disputed election of the Armenian Orthodox patriarch have also sounded international alarms. But even more troubling are the enmity and abuse displayed by the regime toward Christians themselves, both as faith groups and individuals.

During the genocidal ISIS invasion of Syria and Iraq, floods of refugees poured into Turkey. Most were Muslim, but a considerable number of them were Christians representing venerable Middle Eastern churches. As a bloc, the refugees were useful to Erdogan who, if his political demands weren't met, periodically threatened to release millions of them into Europe.

Meanwhile, according to numerous sources, Christian refugees in Turkey have been treated with contempt, consigned to remote locations, far removed from existing churches or co-religionists. Neither Turkish speakers nor Muslims, the Christian men could not legally find employment, while language and religious issues sidelined women and children struggling to work or attend school.

Unwarranted confrontations with authorities have become commonplace.

My friend Charmaine Hedding is founder of Shai Fund, a Christian charity. After the ISIS invasion in Iraq, she visited Turkish refugee centers across the country several times in order to provide food vouchers for destitute Christian families. On one visit, quite unexpectedly, she and two colleagues were roughly taken aside by a local government official. He ordered them into a room, locked the door and then angrily slammed a Koran onto the table in front of them. He pointed a finger at each of them, demanding that they convert to Islam. This angry radical lectured them for several hours before their release. They were terrified.

One beloved Christian, who selflessly assists refugees who fled ISIS, is a Chaldean Catholic priest named Father Remzi Diril, who visits and comforts Christian families, providing religious services, sacraments, infant baptisms and charitable assistance. He “logs thousands of miles tending his flock, the community of Iraqi Christian refugees in Turkey. Their exact number is unknown, but it is estimated to be 40,000.” Unsurprisingly, Father Diril has also faced harassment.

Ominously, Father Diril’s elderly parents—71- and 65-year-old residents of a tiny Christian community—were kidnapped from their home in 2020.

AsiaNews reported in March 2021, "Turkey's human rights agency has rejected the request by Fr. Remzi Diril for an investigation. Nothing is known about his father who went missing over a year ago while his mother's body was found naked, with signs of torture." This horrific crime remains unresolved.

As Father Diril prays and waits, we're reminded of the arrest and imprisonment of American Pastor Andrew Brunson. After serving as a Christian clergyman in Turkey for 23 years, he was suddenly locked up in solitary confinement in October 2016 under ridiculously false charges. Brunson's case became a top news story in the U.S. while former President Donald Trump repeatedly demanded his release. Brunson, who struggled with intense anxiety and depression during his imprisonment, finally walked free in July 2018.

In the meantime, friends inside Turkey report, since 2019, some 73 foreign Christians have been expelled from the country, including spouses of Turkish pastors, thus tearing innocent families apart. Some of these workers are denied re-entry at passport control upon arrival. Others receive N82 visa stamps on their travel documents, falsely labeling them as a threat to public health, safety and/or order and making their return to Turkey impossible.

Recently, *Morning Star News* reported, "A German pastor fighting expulsion from Turkey is hopeful that he may be the exception to a wave of foreign Christian leaders expelled from the country as 'threats to national security.'" And a Syriac Orthodox monk was accused of terrorism, tried and sentenced to more than two years in prison for providing bread and water to hungry monastery visitors.

Violations of religious freedom against Turkey's Christians are increasingly rampant. I asked former Turkish parliamentarian and Foundation for Defense of Democracies scholar Aykan Erdemir to explain.

“The Erdogan government’s glorification of the Ottoman ‘spirit of conquest’, and references to the ‘right of the sword’ in converting Hagia Sophia and other churches, have relegated Turkey’s Christian citizens to an inferior rank of conquered minorities,” Erdemir said. “Such supremacist policy and rhetoric will exacerbate precarious conditions for Christians. They will be at the mercy of a repressive government that swings back and forth between outbreaks of persecution and spectacles of tolerance.”

Lela Gilbert is senior fellow for religious freedom at Family Research Council and a fellow at Hudson Institute’s Center for Religious Freedom.

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