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After Hagia Sophia, Turkey's historic Chora church also switched to mosque

Reuters (21.08.2020) - <https://bitly.com> - Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan reconverted the historic Chora church, one of Istanbul's most celebrated Byzantine buildings, into a mosque on Friday, a month after opening the famed Hagia Sophia to Muslim worship.

The mediaeval Church of the Holy Saviour in Chora, built near the ancient city walls of Constantinople, contains 14th century Byzantine mosaics and frescoes showing scenes from biblical stories.

They were plastered over after the city was conquered by the Muslim Ottomans in 1453, but brought to light again when - like Hagia Sophia - the building was converted to a museum by Turkey's secular republic more than 70 years ago.

Erdogan, whose AK Party is rooted in political Islam, has positioned himself as a champion of Turkey's pious Muslims and last month joined tens of thousands of worshippers in the first prayers at Hagia Sophia in 86 years.

The move was sharply criticised by church leaders and some Western countries, who said that reconverting Hagia Sophia exclusively for Muslim worship risked deepening religious rifts.

Last year a Turkish court annulled a 1945 government decision converting Chora - known as Kariye in Turkish - into a museum run by the Education Ministry.

On Friday, an edict signed by Erdogan and published in Turkey's official gazette declared "the management of the Kariye Mosque be transferred to the Religious Affairs Directorate, and (the mosque) opened to worship."

A church was first built at the site in the 4th century, but most of the existing building dates to an 11th century church that was partly rebuilt 200 years later following an earthquake.

Erdogan's edict on Friday did not say when the first Muslim prayers would be held at Chora, or what arrangements would be made for the Christian artworks there.

At Hagia Sophia, curtains have been drawn in front of an image facing worshippers of Mary and the infant Jesus.

Reporting by Tuvan Gumrukcu; Editing by Dominic Evans/Mark Heinrich

Turkey deporting foreign Christians or banning their return, sources say

Government appears to be targeting Protestant community.

Morning Star News (02.08.2020) - <https://bit.ly/30soLLB> - Dozens of foreign Christians in Turkey have been forced to leave the country or been banned from returning in what appears to be government targeting of the Protestant Christian community, rights advocates say.

Many, like Carlos Madrigal of Spain, have been serving in leadership roles in Protestant churches in the country for years. Such foreigners have lived in the country for decades, forming families and buying property, according to a researcher at Middle East Concern (MEC).

Madrigal has lived in the country for more than 19 years on a clergy visa as the spiritual leader of the Istanbul Protestant Church Foundation (IPCF), according to a press statement from the group. At the airport in November 2019, he was issued a stamp in his passport that he realized would keep him from returning to Turkey if he left the country, so he decided to cancel his trip and appeal the decision, according to published reports.

Madrigal appeared on Turkish television in June to point out that he could see no clear reason why he was banned from the country, the MEC researcher said.

Noting that the ban against Madrigal was issued in November 2019, the IPCF stated, "It is with great sadness that we must inform you that since 2019, it has been made increasingly difficult for foreign Protestant clergy serving in Turkey to be resident in our country."

Denied

Turkey's Ministry of Interior notified another foreign Christian, Joy Anna Subasigüller, a U.S.-born mother of three married to a Turkish pastor, on June 5 that her family visa was denied, according to German media outlet Deutsch Welle (DW).

Subasigüller, who has lived in Turkey 10 years, is a stay-at-home mom of three children ages 2, 4, and 4 months. Her children, like their father pastor Lütfü Subasigüller, are Turkish citizens, and she suspects the decision to deport her is related to his Christian work, according to DW.

Pastor Subasigüller was stunned that Turkish authorities would require them to abandon their home and relatives in Turkey, he told DW. The couple plans to contest the decision in court.

Another case involves a U.S. pastor in Istanbul who was about to fly out of the country from Istanbul with his family on June 24. He learned he would not be allowed to return to Turkey, canceled his flight and filed an appeal, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW).

Another foreign resident of Turkey, Hans-Jurgen Louven of Germany, had invested more than 20 years in culture and faith tourism in the country with encouragement and assurances from local officials. In August 2019 an application to renew his residency visa was denied, and he was ordered to leave the country in 10 days, according to Christian support group Open Doors' World Watch Monitor.

De facto ban

It is estimated that about 35 Christian workers received similar bans in 2019 and 16 more since the end of June, according to a Middle East and North Africa researcher for CSW.

The bans could go undetected by the unsuspecting. As Christian foreigners leave the country at airports, officials stamp an "N-28 Code" in their passports, according to the IPCF. Officially the code indicates that they need to obtain special approval to re-enter the country via their country's embassy, but those who have tried to obtain it have been refused, making the code essentially a de facto ban, said the MEC researcher.

The N-28 Code can also be used to deny visa renewals, according to the IPCF.

Those fighting the ban find that administrative courts are not giving lawyers access to reports from Turkish intelligence, according to the MEC researcher. Advocates hope that they will be more successful by appealing to the constitutional court and, if not, then at the European Court of Human Rights, he said.

Effect on churches

The targeting of foreign Christians puts pressure on Turkey's small and vulnerable Protestant community, which relies on foreigners for formal religious training and sometimes for funding, advocates say.

"This will deprive them of support and make them feel isolated and abandoned," said the CSW researcher.

There are about 10,000 Turkish Protestants who attend about 170 churches, many of them house churches, in the overwhelmingly Muslim country of more than 84.3 million people, said the MEC researcher.

While officially Turkey allows freedom of religion, including conversion from Islam, advocates say that pressure began building against foreign Christians in the country when U.S. pastor Andrew Brunson was imprisoned on spurious terrorism charges from 2016 to 2018.

Some Christians believe that a blacklist may have begun while authorities were trying to gather evidence against Pastor Brunson, the MEC researcher said. Some have noticed that many of those banned had attended one of three Christian conferences, he added.

"It's notable that none of these people have been charged with any breaking of the law," he said.

Foreign and local Christians love Turkey, he added, saying that some will have to count the costs of staying in light of recent developments.

"You actually find that Turkish Christians, they love their country," he said. "These people who are receiving the bans – I know many of them personally love Turkey and have given such a lot to Turkey."

Turkey ranked 36th on Open Doors' 2020 World Watch List of the countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.

Turkey's Council of State rules that Hagia Sophia is a mosque



Ankara (AsiaNews) – At 4 pm today (1 pm GMT), Turkish television announced that the country's top administrative court cleared the way for the **Basilica of Saint Sophia** to be restored as a mosque.

Asia News (10.07.2020) - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Turkey's-Council-of-State-rules-that-Hagia-Sophia-is-a-mosque-50554.html> - The Council of State overturned a decree issued in 1934 under then President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk that led to the transformation of the basilica - used for almost 500 years as a mosque after the fall of Constantinople (1453) - into a museum.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had championed the legal route to invalidate the 1934 decree, thus allowing one of the most magnificent Byzantine monuments, which served as a church for more than a thousand years, to be used as a mosque.

In recent weeks, many people in Greece, Russia, the United States, as well as the **ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople**, Bartholomew I, had expressed opposition to turning the ancient Christian place of worship into a mosque.

It is not clear whether foreigners and Christians will be able to visit the basilica. A TV report suggested that Hagia Sophia would also remain as a museum. The basilica is a UNESCO world heritage site.

Last night, İbrahim Kalın, Turkey's presidential spokesperson, said that opening Hagia Sophia to prayer will not hinder people visiting it, and that Turkey would preserve its Christian icons. (M.D.)

Turkey orders deportation of pastor's wife and mother-of-three

World Watch Monitor (03.07.2020) –

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2020/07/turkey-orders-deportation-of-turkish-pastors-wife-in-string-of-expulsions/> -

A Christian woman and mother-of-three has been told she has to leave Turkey, one of the latest incidents in a series of expulsions of Christian expatriates from the country.

Joy Anna Crow Subasigüller, originally from Florida, USA, and her Turkish husband Lütfü were married seven years ago. They settled and started a family in Turkey. Lütfü Subasigüller works as a protestant pastor in Ankara; Joy has been looking after the couple's three children who were all born in Turkey.

Their settled, peaceful life as a family, changed on 5 June when Joy was told by the Turkish migration department to prepare for deportation with apparently no reason given. "This decision makes me very sad – I love Turkey and the Turkish people," she told [Deutsche Welle](#) (DW). "I have lived here for ten years, they were the best years of my life," she said.

For the couple it is impossible to see how Joy could pose a security threat to the state of Turkey, which seems to be the reason for her deportation. She is a stay-at-home-mother with three children, the youngest an infant who still needs breastfeeding. Also, said her husband, "I am a Turkish citizen and so are my three children". The couple is challenging the decision in court, in the hope they might find out the real reason for banning them from staying in Turkey.

It is likely that Subasigüller's church work is the problem for the Turkish government. Joy is among the [more than 50 expatriate Protestant Christian workers](#) who have been denied residence visas or re-entry permits in the past 18 months.

In September last year the 58-year-old Hans-Jurgen Louven [heard that the renewal of his long-term residency permit had been denied](#) and that he had to leave the country within ten days. As his wife was in Austria at the time, he had to leave behind their daughter who was in her final year at university. The Christian Louven family, originally from Germany, had been living in Turkey for more than 20 years, working in the tourism industry, and was planning to stay there permanently.

"Systematic pressure"

There was a little break due to the COVID-19 virus outbreak but expulsions have now started again, said Timur Topuz, chair of the Istanbul Protestant Church Foundation, in an interview with the Turkish news site [Bianet](#).

On 24 June American pastor Zach Balon was about to fly from Istanbul airport with his family when he was [told he would not be allowed to re-enter Turkey](#). Balon decided not to travel and appeal the decision.

"We are faced with a systematic pressure targeting Protestant churches," said Topuz. Under Turkish law the Christian community – as with other religious communities – are not allowed to train their own religious leaders within the education system and they rely

on internships and pastors from abroad to serve their churches. "By requiring the pastors of several churches to have a preliminary entry permit, we see that there is an attempt to deprive the churches of pastors," he said.

Meanwhile, the issue has been raised in Turkish parliament, reports DW. Opposition MP Tuma Celik, from the leftist HDP, challenged the deportation orders saying they were violations of religious freedom and a threat to family stability. He also asked for a report about past deportations, how many Christian pastors had been expelled and why.

Many of those facing deportation or blocked from re-entry, were given a so-called N82 code, which involves the requirement of a 'preliminary permit', [linking an entry permit to a previous approval process](#).

Topuz said no-one understood why people such as Pastor Balon, who has been living in Turkey for years, based on a valid work permit, were given such a code. "There is no sense in giving him this code. No one knows why they gave it, to be honest. No one gives us a proper explanation about that," he said.

In their defence, the Turkish authorities said in court that the N82 code did not mean a ban on entering the country.

"However, in practice, all of those who have fallen victim to this situation and applied for a visa have had these applications rejected. Although N82 isn't an entry ban *de jure* it is a *de facto* entry ban in Turkey," said the [2019 Human Rights Violations report](#) by the Turkish Association of Protestant Churches.

The report also details how 35 Protestant Christian workers were refused entry to Turkey last year. Among them were 17 from the US, 6 from the UK, 3 from Germany, 3 from South Korea, 2 from Iran and 1 each from Spain, Finland, Mexico and Brazil. Together with their families they represented more than 100 people.

Some 170 small and large churches are part of the Turkish Protestant community with the majority located in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir.

The high-profile case of US pastor Andrew Brunson drew attention to the small protestant community in Turkey. Brunson was accused of espionage and held in custody for two years, before [he was released](#) in October 2018.

In their 2018 report the Association of Protestant Churches said that [public hate speech against the small Christian community had increased](#) since Brunson's case. In 2019 fewer incidents were recorded but the problem was still prevalent, its 2019 report said.

Constitutional Court judgment on Armenian Patriarchal election – a precedent?

By Mine Yildirim

Forum 18 (25.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2xvYwbo> - Turkey's Constitutional Court ruled in May 2019 that state interference in the election to replace the ailing Armenian Patriarch was not prescribed by law and not necessary in a democratic society. The precedent is relevant for similar cases over interference in the internal affairs of other religious communities, particularly those the state considers Lausanne Treaty minorities. But any impact remains to be seen.

Turkey's Constitutional Court (Anayasa Mahkemesi – AYM) issued an important judgment in May 2019 addressing state interference in the election of a religious leader, namely the long-standing obstruction of the election of a Patriarch for the Armenian community in Turkey. The Court found such interference not prescribed by law and not necessary in a democratic society.

The Armenian Apostolic Church community is the largest Christian community in Turkey.

State interference in the internal affairs of religious or belief communities is a long-standing concern that impacts a number of religious or belief communities in critical ways.

In theory, the Constitutional Court judgment could be applied to [other religious communities in Turkey which endure such state interference](#). The judgment sets a precedent and should guide other courts when considering analogous cases, though whether this happens in practice remains to be seen.

While the judgment includes important findings related to the state's unjustified interference in the internal affairs of the Armenian community, it also raises questions about whether the Constitutional Court is an effective domestic remedy or an actor that conveniently blocks applications to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg, thus closing the door to international supervision.

The state had prevented the Armenian community from electing its religious leader between 2009, when the then Patriarch Mesrob Mutafyan could no longer perform his duties due to illness, and 2019, when the community finally elected Bishop Sahak Mashalyan as the new Patriarch.

The December 2019 election of the new Patriarch became possible only after the state authorities allowed elections to go ahead following the death in March 2019 of Mutafyan, the 84th Patriarch of Turkey's Armenians.

The state's obstruction of the election of a Patriarch by the Armenian community [had affected community affairs in very negative ways](#).

Constitutional court judgment

The Turkish Constitutional Court's judgment of 22 May 2019 on the individual application made by two local Armenians Levon Berç Kuzukoğlu and Ohannes Garbis Balmumciyan in 2014 (Application No. 2014/17354) has significant implications for the interferences in the internal affairs of religious or belief communities in Turkey.

The applicants had complained that the state's refusal of the request they made for the election of a Patriarch for Turkey's Armenians violated their right to freedom of religion.

The Istanbul 3rd Administrative Court rejected Kuzukoğlu and Balmumciyan's original application on 27 March 2012. It argued that, under the 1863 Regulation for the Armenian Millet (ethno-religious community) and subsequent Interior Ministry directives (talimatname), the Patriarchal seat can be considered vacant only following the death or resignation of the Patriarch.

The Administrative Court ruled that since the Patriarch (Mesrob Mutafyan) was neither dead nor had given his resignation as of 4 October 1998, elections could not be held. The Court therefore found that the state's refusal of the request for a new election was not incompatible with the law.

The applicants appealed against this decision, but the Court of Cassation (10th Chamber) rejected their appeal on 23 November 2015.

Constitutional Court finds state interference not prescribed by law

The Constitutional Court's May 2019 judgment presents an accurate description of the [state interference in the Armenian community's right to elect its own leader](#), both before the applicants lodged their case and subsequently.

When considering the applicable law, the Constitutional Court refers to the 1863 Regulation for the Armenian Millet (ethno-religious community) and international legal provisions, including the European Convention on Human Rights and the 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty's provisions on the protection of non-Muslims in Turkey.

A key question here concerns the relevance of the 1863 Regulation that regulates the election of Turkey's Armenian Patriarch (Articles 1-7), the various organs of the Patriarchate and their elections, and the functioning of the charity and social bodies within the Patriarchate, and also includes provisions on the Jerusalem Patriarchate (which was in 1863 under the Ottoman Empire). Article 2 sets out how elections take place when the Patriarch's seat becomes vacant for various reasons, such as "the death of the Patriarch, resignation and other".

While the 1863 Regulation is a remnant from the Ottoman era, throughout the Republican era the state authorities have left the procedure of the four elections for the Armenian Patriarch that have taken place (in 1950, 1961, 1990, 1998 and 2019) partly unchanged, but with some arbitrary changes. These have left the Armenian community with only limited influence over its own election and with no way to foresee what procedures the state would impose.

For the most part, the election Directives were based on the Cabinet Decree of 18 September 1961 (No. 511654), which had been issued only for that year's Patriarchal election and which included no provisions for future elections. Despite this, the Interior Ministry has continued to use this Decree.

The Interior Ministry's submission to the Constitutional Court states that the measures taken by the authorities derive from "the state's positive obligation to organise the religious field".

The Constitutional Court's judgment describes the issue as one that essentially relates to religious freedom that is protected under Article 24 of Turkey's Constitution. Equally, the Constitutional Court recognises as relevant the Lausanne Peace Treaty, specifically Article 38 that refers to the freedom to practice religion, and the applicable jurisprudence of the ECtHR in Strasbourg.

The Constitutional Court notes that the election of a religious leader constitutes a form of manifestation of religion and, as such, is protected under the Constitution.

In addition, the Constitutional Court finds that measures that led to the [appointment of a Patriarchal Vicar-General \(in 2010\)](#) occurred not as a result of a process that took place

within the competing civilian and spiritual initiatives in the Armenian community, but as a result of "state pressure that was unconstitutional".

As a result, the Constitutional Court finds that there has been interference in the Armenian community's right to freedom of religion or belief, a freedom that is guaranteed under Article 24 of the Constitution.

A crucial finding in the judgment concerns the legality of the restriction. The Constitutional Court notes that it may be considered that public authorities have the authority to organise the election of the Armenian Patriarch under the 1863 Regulation and practice in subsequent elections.

However, the Constitutional Court rules that under Article 13 of the Constitution, fundamental rights may only be restricted by law. It notes that, in the present case, a legal provision that can prevent arbitrary actions by public authorities, that will enable persons to know the law, that is accessible, foreseeable and absolute is absent. As a result, the restriction cannot be considered as being prescribed by law.

While the Constitutional Court found that the restrictions pursued a legitimate aim, that of protecting the right to freedom of religion of the members of the Armenian community, other criteria for permissible limitations were not fulfilled.

Moreover, the Constitutional Court noted that events that occurred after the application was submitted in 2014 demonstrate the state's continuing desire to determine the conditions under which elections for an Armenian Patriarch might take place.

In conclusion, the Constitutional Court found that the state has not been able to demonstrate a pressing social need that overrides the "spirit of Armenian traditions" and the "Armenian community's will". Therefore the interference in the applicants' right to freedom of religion or belief by way of refusing the request to hold Patriarchal elections cannot be considered compatible with the requirements of a democratic society, and Article 24 of the Constitution had thus been violated.

The judgment provides an authoritative interpretation of applicable law and therefore should guide future practice. Patriarch Mashalyan welcomed the Constitutional Court judgment, adding on 16 March 2020 that "it should be taken into account in the preparation of directives for elections in the future".

Sebu Aslangil, the lawyer in the case, commented to Forum 18 in February 2020 that the Constitutional Court judgment is a precedent in its reference to legality, secularism and the right to freedom of religion or belief. However, he argued that it is important that these judgments continue and that similar judgments concerning analogous applications become the norm for all court decisions.

Constitutional Court - effective domestic remedy in religious freedom cases?

The Constitutional Court's judgment is thorough and well argued, and the finding that the restriction on the way the Armenian community chooses its religious leader was not prescribed by law is particularly significant. On the other hand, a significant shortcoming of the Constitutional Court's judgment was its timing.

The application was lodged in 2014, but the Constitutional Court did not rule until May 2019, two months after the 8 March death of Patriarch Mesrob Mutafyan. Therefore the judgment came when the state's arguments that an election could not go ahead no longer existed.

The timing might be interpreted as a sign of the Constitutional Court's hesitation to contradict state practice in situations where domestic practice clearly contradicts human rights standards.

Patriarch Mashalyan commented that the Constitutional Court is independent and therefore the timing of the judgment did not raise any questions. Aslangil, however, maintained that "had it been issued before the death of Mesrob Mutafyan, it would have been a very strong judgment".

Where it is evident that legitimising state practice that is not compatible with human rights law in the area of freedom of religion or belief would jeopardise the Constitutional Court's position as an effective domestic remedy, the Court's practice has been to postpone judgment.

That over 20 individual applications on conscientious objection to military service are still pending with the Constitutional Court is compatible with this finding. The Constitutional Court had referred an individual application on conscientious objection to the Plenary Chamber of the Constitutional Court in 2016. The Court has not yet ruled on any of these cases.

Patriarchal election interference despite Constitutional Court judgment

After the May 2019 Constitutional Court judgment, the state authorities continued to interfere in the way the Armenian community elected its new leader following Patriarch Mutafyan's death two months earlier. The interference came despite the binding nature of Constitutional Court judgments for legislative, executive and judicial organs, administrative authorities, and real and legal persons under Article 153 of the Constitution.

The Armenian community started the process of electing the 85th Patriarch by forming an Election Steering Committee (Mütesebbis Heyet). The Interior Ministry, however, sent the directive for the election which stipulated that the future Patriarch had to be "from among the class of bishops of the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul", that is, those serving directly in Istanbul. This effectively reduced the pool of candidates to just two.

Views in the Armenian community differed on whether this interference was in accordance with the law and/or justified. Patriarch Mashalyan considered the directive as "based on the 1863 Regulation" and not prepared "despite the Constitutional Court judgment". On the other hand, the lawyer Aslangil commented that the state administration, including the Interior Ministry and the Court of Cassation, demonstrated that they were in no way affected by the judgment.

The Interior Ministry not only changed the criteria for candidates, but also influenced the election of the Locum Tenens (temporary leader, Deghabah) so that the election was between only two candidates. "This is 100 per cent in contradiction to the Constitutional Court judgment," Aslangil insists. The Election Steering Committee, however, did not object to the state-imposed changes in the criteria for the elections.

Aslangil appealed to the Administrative Court in October 2019, objecting to the Interior Ministry's interference in the Patriarchal elections then in preparation. However, the Administrative Court has yet to give a ruling, and there is no limit as to how long it can take to do so. According to Aslangil, were the Administrative Court to reject the application, the applicants could challenge this decision directly to the Constitutional Court. However, this could then also cause the 2019 election to "lose its legitimacy".

Administrative Court and Court of Cassation decisions on non-Muslim minority issues have, since the 1960s, been overwhelmingly against the interests of these communities, Aslangil complains.

The latest of these judgments concerned Archbishop Karekin Bekdjian, the Istanbul-born spiritual leader of Germany's Armenian community. He had challenged the state's move to [annul his election in March 2017 as Locum Tenens of the Patriarchate](#). Ankara Administrative Court ruled in December 2019 that since the new Patriarch has now been elected, there is no reason for this case to be reviewed. Aslangil objected to this ruling, which is still awaiting court consideration.

Aslangil, the lawyer, commented that administrative courts do not have the necessary expertise to deal with these cases and therefore hesitate to give bold decisions. Asked what needs to be done, he responded: "The Constitutional Court has to reject our case so that we can go to the ECtHR."

Only [once a case has been considered by the Constitutional Court can applicants lodge a case to the ECtHR in Strasbourg](#).

Commenting on the interference, Garo Paylan, an Armenian MP from the HDP (Halkların Demokratik Partisi – People's Democratic Party) at the time the directive was sent to the Election Steering Committee, told Bianet news agency on 24 September 2019 that under these circumstances the coming elections "cannot be called an election".

Paylan pointed out that in previous elections for a new Armenian Patriarch, candidacy has been open to Armenian clerics from around the world, not just to those serving directly in the Patriarchate in Istanbul. "There are many clerics from Sivas, Malatya, Adana and Istanbul, and all of these candidates were able to participate in all elections, they had the right to be elected," he added.

Is untimely justice really justice?

The Constitutional Court's May 2019 finding is significant in ruling that the state interference in the election of an Armenian Patriarch is not prescribed by law and not necessary in a democratic society. It also sets a precedent and is thus relevant for similar cases over state interference in the internal affairs of other religious communities in Turkey, more specifically those considered as minorities by the state under the Lausanne Peace Treaty (such as the Greek Orthodox or the Jews). Whether this happens in practice remains to be seen.

If the Constitutional Court consistently delivers this line of judgments, it could become an effective agent of change in Turkey. However, it cannot be overlooked that the timing of the judgment in May 2019 played into the hands of the Constitutional Court and the authorities.

The judgment raised the profile of the Constitutional Court as a high court delivering a judgment in line with ECtHR jurisprudence. Yet, due to its timing, the judgment had no impact on rectifying the injustice that the Armenian community experienced. It also closed the door for an application to be made to the ECtHR in Strasbourg, thus blocking international supervision of the implementation of the judgment.

Also as a result of the timing of the judgment, the authorities did not have to deal with an authoritative judgment on the state's unjustified interference in the election.

IDC calls for release of Syriac monk

In Defence of Christians (13.01.2020) - <http://bit.ly/2U5wWuG> - Turkey has arrested Syriac Orthodox monk, Father Aho, on fraudulent charges of treason.

On Thursday evening, January 9, Turkish anti-terror security forces raided Saint Yakoub d'Qarno, a Syriac Orthodox Monastery, in Turabdin, Southeastern Turkey. They searched the monastery and arrested the caretaker, Father Aho Bilicen, charging him with the unsubstantiated claim that he provided bread and water to a member of the PKK Kurdish party. The PKK has a known history of extorting local populations of basic necessities wherever they operate.

Yakoub d'Quarno monastery had been closed for over twenty years due to the incessant conflict between Turkish security forces and Kurdish PKK fighters in the region. Due to the self-sacrificial work of Father Aho, the monastery was able to open again in 2013 and is reported to have served tens of thousands of visitors since its reopening.

IDC calls on the Turkish government to immediately release Father Aho.

IDC President Toufic Baaklini has said, "IDC will relentlessly raise the case of Father Aho's unjust imprisonment to the highest levels of the Trump administration and will recommend that failure to release him should trigger sanctions similar to those used in the case of Pastor Andrew Brunson."

HRWF Comment

On 13 January, Lord Alton (UK Parliament) asked a written phrased as follows:
To ask Her Majesty's Government what representations they have made to the government of Turkey about the reported arrest of Father Aho Bilicen a Syriac-Orthodox monk, at Mor Yakoub church in Turkey on 9 January.

The answer of Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon on 27 January was:
Our Embassy has so far deliberately not raised his case with the Turks and indeed may not do so due to the nature of the charges against the priest which revolve around alleged support to the terrorist group the PKK.

For more information, see <http://bit.ly/38I11of>