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40 Asylum-seekers in Edirne under threat of an imminent humanitarian crisis

How to prevent such an outcome? Open Letter of 10 human rights NGOs calling on the Turkish authorities and the UN to follow their recommendations

**To : M. Atilla Toros
General Directorate of Ankara Immigration Department
Çamlıca Mahallesi 122. Cadde No:4
Yenimahalle/ANKARA**

CCs :
Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief
Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants
Special Rapporteur on minority issues
Working Group on arbitrary detention
UNHRC in Türkiye

HRWF/ CAP Liberté de conscience (07.22.2024) - In May 2023, the story of the 104 refugees of the [Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light](#) (AROPL) who presented themselves at the Turkish side of the Kapikule border seeking access to asylum in Bulgaria, but were blocked and beaten by the Turkish police, became international news. The AROPL is an internationally recognized new religion, registered in the United States of America with headquarters in the UK and in the EU. It is not to be confused with the Sunni-derivative

Ahmadiyya Community persecuted in Pakistan. AROPL members are regarded as heretics in both Sunni and Shia countries, and are [severely persecuted](#).

Media attention eventually generated a [United Nations statement](#) reminding Türkiye that the AROPL refugees faced serious risks if deported and that the obligation not to send back asylum seekers to countries where they may be persecuted or killed is “absolute and non-derogable.” The international mobilization allowed 67 AROPL members to leave Türkiye, while 40 remained there.

The remaining forty tried to scrupulously respect Turkish laws and immediately proceeded to legalize their stay. Since their original cases were administered in the city of Edirne, they asked the immigration office in Edirne if they could apply for asylum in Türkiye there. Upon being informed that they could, they settled in the city of Edirne and applied for asylum in Türkiye, based on the argument that they are from Iran and Iraq (except one who is from Palestine), where they are particularly at risk of detention due to blasphemy laws. Their asylum claims were registered, and they received a temporary residency permit in Türkiye for a year. They proceeded to organize themselves to survive, as most of them had left their countries of origin in a hurry and with little money. They pooled their resources together and rented a house where they could live communally and take care of the most vulnerable members. Many found jobs in Edirne.

On July 14, they received an order to leave Edirne and scatter to 18 different Turkish cities within fifteen days with no housing support. If they do not comply, their residence permits will be revoked, and they may be deported back to their countries of origin (notwithstanding the United Nations’ request to Türkiye not to do it). While now accustomed to deal with AROPL as a law-abiding and hard-working community, local authorities in Edirne told them the decision was taken in the capital Ankara and that there are security reasons not to keep them gathered in a city close to the Greek and Bulgarian borders. The AROPL suspects that opposition to its religious doctrines, which have been denounced as heretic in Türkiye too, also plays a role in the decision.

The decision presents a humanitarian crisis as none of these 40 members have the resources to find housing in these 18 cities. The refugees’ resources are barely sufficient to pay the rental of one house in Edirne where they are all living together and where they put all their modest resources. Simply put, they do not have the money to rent apartments in eighteen different cities. Additionally, the members will lose their jobs and will have to start looking for new ones in cities they know nothing about. This decision also places the most vulnerable members in an impossible situation. In several instances, old and vulnerable members are asked to move alone to other cities, where they will be the only AROPL member in town and will not be able to count on the solidarity and support of co-religionists. For example at least four Iranian elderly and sick women are put 15 hours away by car from their AROPL caretaker who speaks their same language. They do not speak Turkish nor English and as such have no chances of survival in these cities. In another instance a 60-year-old man with heart problems was put seven hours away by car from the nearest co-religionist from his same country who speaks the same language. In another case a 65-year-old man was put with his teenage daughter who does not speak Turkish in a city by themselves, where she will not be able to find a job to support them.

To all these objections, Türkiye answers that how the AROPL refugees find accommodation is their problem. The country does not seem to have a system for supporting refugees, not even by placing them in temporary camps as other countries do. This puts the group in the impossible situation of either ending up homeless on the streets or risk being rendered illegal and deported back to their countries of origin.

Recommendations to prevent a humanitarian crisis

- The group is asking Ankara to reconsider their decision by allowing the group to remain together in Edirne as this is where their rent is already paid.
- They are willing to make any agreement with the administration where they vouch not to ever approach the border or else they agree to be voluntarily deported.
- They are asking to be allowed to remain together so they can continue to take care of their vulnerable members.

We, the undersigned organizations and individuals, are deeply concerned about the imminent humanitarian crisis facing the 40 asylum-seekers of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light currently residing in Edirne, Turkey.

As detailed in the background information above, these 40 refugees, who fled persecution were granted temporary residency in Turkey after applying for asylum. However, they now face an order to disperse to 18 different cities across Turkey by the end of July without any housing or financial support.

Bitter Winter

CAP Liberté de Conscience

Center for Studies on Freedom of Religion Belief and Conscience

Center for Studies on New Religions

European Federation for Freedom of Belief

Gerard Noodt Foundation for Freedom of Religion or Belief

Human Rights Without Frontiers

International Council for Diplomacy and Dialogue

Observatory of Religious Liberty of Refugees

Soteria International

Turkish authorities crack down on Christianity; deny church land for worship space

- Authorities in Türkiye ignore requests from the Diyarbakir Protestant Church Foundation to use new land for a worship center; Foundation's legal challenge struck down by the Diyarbakir 4th Administrative Court.

- The Foundation, founded in 2019, forced to meet in space that is too small for their 100+ congregation.

- ADF International supporting appeal, efforts for religious freedom in Türkiye.

[ADF International](#)(12.07.2024)- In the midst of increasing government hostility against Christians in Türkiye, the Diyarbakir Protestant Church Foundation has been prohibited from acquiring land zoned for religious buildings for a new worship center. Authorities and government officials

continually ignored and turned down their requests, claiming they lack the authority to grant them.

The Church, forced to meet in a space that is too small for their 100+ congregation, presented a legal challenge in order to secure new land, but the challenge was struck down by the court. ADF International is supporting the group's appeal.

"What we are seeing in Türkiye is a troubling display of blatant, faith-based discrimination against Christians," stated Kelsey Zorzi, ADF International's Director of Advocacy for Global Religious Freedom. *"The Diyarbakir Protestant Church Foundation is simply asking to use land that has already been designated for religious use, in order to build a facility large enough to safely accommodate their congregation; but authorities keep finding ways to deny their request since they are Christians. The land in question has been specifically designated for religious use, but the government is discriminating against the church because it is not associated with the state's preferred religion. The systemic and bureaucratic persecution is not only in direct violation of the basic human right to religious freedom but also Türkiye's international human rights obligations. The discrimination must stop."*

Pastor Ahmet Güvener of the Diyarbakir Protestant Church Foundation on the case:

Diyarbakir Protestant Church

Diyarbakir Protestant Church Foundation was founded in 2019 in Diyarbakir, a major city in the Southeast, by Protestant Turks and Kurds. The foundation serves over 100 Protestant Christians in Diyarbakir. One of its primary purposes is to host a Protestant church in Diyarbakir, but due to local zoning codes, it lacks proper meeting space to accommodate its parishioners.

As is frequently the case in Turkey, the applicants were met with a bureaucratic maze in which state institutions passed their applications back and forth, claiming to lack the authority to grant the land usage request. Under Turkish law, urban planning documents dictate where churches may be built, and thus, the applicants must receive approval to use a location designated for religious purposes to build a church. The court has told the church leaders that they can simply purchase undesignated land and apply for a religious use designation, however such a request has never been granted in Türkiye.

Orhan Kemal Cengiz, the lead attorney on the case in Türkiye and ADF International allied attorney, said *"Having a legally recognized worship place in Türkiye has always been a major issue. This problem, in my opinion, causes serious infringements of one of the most fundamental human rights, namely, freedom of religion. Unfortunately, Christians face numerous legal and practical barriers when they wish to establish a legally recognized worship place in Türkiye."*

The Foundation has submitted numerous petitions to different authorities with no resolution. In 2023, the Foundation brought a legal challenge to pursue using a designated worship plot to build a church that would meet the congregation's capacity needs. In 2024, the Court ruled against the church. ADF International and the Foundation are planning to appeal the Court's decision.

Faith-based discrimination in Türkiye

Türkiye has a population of roughly 83,000,000 with an estimated 99% of the population identifying as Muslim. There are approximately 170,000 Christians in Türkiye. Although Türkiye does not have a constitutionally recognized state religion, its government is increasingly marked by Islamization and nationalism, which creates challenges for religious minorities, particularly Christians.

It is estimated that around 185 foreign Protestant ministers living in Türkiye have been deported or effectively banned from reentering the country since 2018. Expatriate Christian ministers are usually deported or banned from entering Türkiye by a decision of the Ministry of Interior in collaboration with the Turkish Intelligence. The ministers in question are usually issued a certain code which leads to the termination or the non-renewal of their residence permits. Other codes prohibit foreign clergy from entering the country without prior permission. The code designation is usually the result of Turkish Intelligence claiming that the Christian minister in question is a threat to national security. The files of the Turkish Intelligence are not made available to the attorneys challenging the deportation decisions, making it difficult to effectively defend their clients in the national courts and resulting in domestic court losses across the board.

Türkiye has also shut down the Protestant seminaries, forcing the country's Christians to rely more heavily on foreign missionaries with seminary training from outside of Türkiye. The entry bans on foreign missionaries, therefore, are creating a stranglehold on trained church leaders in the country.

ADF International has supported the legal challenges of numerous foreign Christians who have received N-82 code cases, including [David Byle](#). David was forced to leave [Türkiye](#) in 2018 after he and his family of 7 had called it home for more than 19 years. The authorities alleged Byle was a threat to public order and security despite him successfully challenging previous charges brought against him. After leaving the country, the authorities imposed a permanent re-entry ban on David, something he only discovered upon trying to return home to his family. Exiled from Türkiye, the Byles now reside in Germany.

The missionary couple [Pam and David Wilson](#) have a similar story of expulsion after living in Türkiye for nearly four decades. In their case, however, they were assigned a G87 code. The code labels them as a "threat to security" and is normally reserved for terrorists.

Recently, [the highest court in Türkiye issued a decision](#) supporting the government on cases banning 9 foreign Christian workers from the country under "N-82" codes designating them "risks to national security".

Nine foreign Christians to be expelled for missionary activities

Highest Court Rules in Support of Government's Expulsion of Nine Foreign Christians for Alleged "Missionary Activities"

- **The highest court in Türkiye has issued a decision supporting the government on cases banning foreign Christian workers from the country under "N-82" codes designating them "risks to national security"; Six of the court's thirteen judges issued strong dissent.**
- **All nine expelled individuals now have opportunity to appeal to the European Court of Human Right.**
- **ADF International supporting legal challenges of numerous other Turkish Christians who have been similarly expelled.**

Türkiye's highest court, the Constitutional Court, has ruled that the government did not violate the rights of nine [foreign Christians](#) when it effectively expelled them from the country. Each of the nine foreign individuals had legally obtained residence permits to live in Türkiye.

However, because of their alleged "missionary activities," they were issued immigration codes that prevented them from entering or remaining in the country. The "N-82" codes designate them "risks to national security," thus blocking them from obtaining the necessary preauthorization to enter the country

"It has become increasingly clear as a growing number of foreign Christians are deemed national security threats each year, that [Türkiye is systematically trying to extinguish Christian beliefs inside its borders.](#)"

- Kelsey Zorzi, ADF International's Director of Advocacy for Global Religious Freedom

Following the decision from the Court, [Kelsey Zorzi](#), Director of Advocacy for Global Religious Freedom at ADF International, stated: *"This joint decision, though decided wrongly, provides an opportunity to appeal all nine cases to the European Court of Human Rights. The government's discriminatory targeting of Christian religious workers in Türkiye, all of whom have peacefully lived in Türkiye for many years, constitutes a clear violation of both the European Convention on Human Rights and the International Covenants to which Türkiye is a party.*

"It has become increasingly clear as a growing number of foreign Christians are deemed national security threats each year, that Türkiye is systematically trying to extinguish Christian beliefs inside its borders. International human rights defenders are losing hope that justice will be found within Türkiye. But the European Court of Human Rights gives hope to the human rights defenders who have been working on these cases for many years," she continued.

Background

The nine applicants are among over thirty foreign Christians who have received "N-82" codes from Turkish authorities for carrying out religious work in the country. While several of these have reached the Constitutional Court, this decision, handed down by the Court on June 7, 2024, is the first time that the country's highest court has issued a joint decision for separate N-82 code cases. The decision to rule jointly signals that the facts and law at hand are highly similar in each case and thus suggestive of the government's widespread scheme to ban foreign religious workers from the country. The decision this month also marks the first time that the Constitutional Court's General Assembly, which is the full bench of judges, issued a decision on an N-82 code case.

Perhaps most significantly, this latest decision marks the first time the Constitutional Court has been divided on an N-82 code case, allowing for dissenting judges to explain why the Court was wrong to find that no violation had occurred. All prior Constitutional Court decisions on N-82 code cases had unanimously found against the foreign Christian applicants.

Zorzi states: *"These cases represent clear, widespread, and systematic violations of the right to religious freedom and respect for family and private life. The majority opinion failed to recognize that the State's decision to categorize peaceful religious work as "a menace to public order and security" without any proof to this effect is a direct violation of the applicant's religious freedom."*

As Judge Zühtü Arslan, President of Türkiye's Constitutional Court, explained in his dissenting opinion, *"There is no concrete justification provided in either the administrative or judicial processes in the concrete case to suggest that the applicants' activities pose a threat to public order or security.... Conversely, it is impossible to categorically and abstractly regard the 'missionary' activity directed at the applicants as a threat to public order or security."*

According to Orhan Kemal Cengiz, one of four lawyers representing the applicants, *"The Court's opinion, as described by dissenting judges, is replete with contradictions. Despite the clear evidence that these foreign individuals were expelled due to their alleged missionary activities, the majority of the Court failed to see any infringements on freedom of religion."*

Regarding the [religious freedom](#) implications of the Court's decision, Can Kurtulan, another lawyer representing several of the applicants, explained: *"The June 7th decision of the Constitutional Court is a concerning one regarding religious freedom. With this decision, the prevailing local jurisprudence that 'missionary activities fall within the scope of freedom of religion and thought but can be restricted within legal limits' has been effectively nullified. Furthermore, at no stage of the proceedings was the reason for the N-82 code imposed on the clients disclosed, making it impossible to conduct a legality review. The process will proceed to the European Court of Human Rights, and those seeking justice on this matter still have hopes."*

The cases also constitute grave violations of due process as the government refuses to provide the foreigners who are issued N-82 codes the evidence against them or explanations of any wrongdoing. As Judge Zühtü Arslan,

President of Türkiye's Constitutional Court, explained in his dissenting opinion, "*The applicants were unable to acquire knowledge of the rationale behind the restriction code that was applied to them and other related procedures at any point in the concrete case subject.*"

According to Cengiz, "*It is undeniable that the applicants were unable to access the content of intelligence reports during their trials before the administrative courts. As a result, they were unable to present arguments against their expulsion, which violated their rights under article 1 of Protocol 7 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Clearly, these applicants' right to freedom of religion and their right to family and private life have been violated.*"

Concerning trend of faith-based discrimination

Türkiye has a population of roughly 83,000,000 with an estimated 99% of the population identifying as Muslim. There are approximately 170,000 Christians in Türkiye. Although Türkiye does not have a constitutionally recognized state religion, its government is increasingly marked by Islamization and nationalism, which creates challenges for religious minorities, particularly Christians. Türkiye is a party to the Lausanne Peace Treaty, which recognizes the status of Jews, Orthodox Greeks, and Armenians but not Protestants. Türkiye is a party to the European Convention of Human Rights and is, therefore, under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).

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were assigned a G87 code. The code labels them as a “threat to security” and is normally reserved for terrorists.

Constitutional Court: Expulsion of Protestant leaders does not violate freedom of faith



[AsiaNews](#) (10.06.2024) - The expulsion by government authorities of Protestant leaders and pastors heading Churches on the basis of secret service reports ‘does not constitute a violation of freedom of religion’. This is what the Constitutional Court has ruled in a majority decision taken in recent days that reopens more than one question about the practice of worship.

The Protestant community is in the crosshairs, with more than 170 communities scattered throughout the country and which, for years, have been reporting critical issues and abuses: denied requests, revoked residence permits and forced deportations are just a few examples.

Nevertheless, for the judges, the government and administration acted in accordance with justice and there would have been no ‘violation’ in prohibiting the entry or stay of religious leaders who, in response, launched a protest by taking the matter to court.

The Directorate of Immigration Management applied the restrictive code N-82 against already resident Protestants, which entails ‘prior authorisation’ for entry. The enforcement was taken for reasons of public order, security or health, in line with reports by the National Intelligence Organisation (MIT) describing ‘missionary activities’.

Residence permits were revoked, deportation orders were issued against some and those who went abroad for holidays were not allowed to return to Turkey. The religious officials then took the matter to the judiciary, but already in the first and second instance there

were no grounds for finding violations and the decisions were 'in accordance with the law and procedure'.

According to the judges, it was possible to apply for a special permit or visa at the entrance.

Hence the decision to appeal to the Constitutional Court, with the hypothesis of violations of freedom of religion, which were, however, rejected in this case as well, with the green light for 'proportionate' intervention in cases where the activities were 'missionary' in nature.

Actions that, the judges go on to say, may endanger 'public order, security, the rights and freedoms of others or other values that prevail in the balancing act'.

Among the critical (and opposing) voices was that of former Constitutional Court President Zühtü Arslan, who recalled that freedom of religion is guaranteed by Article 24 of the Constitution. 'In a democratic society based on pluralism, the duty of the State,' he pointed out, 'is not to accept that some of the various worldviews or beliefs are "wrong", but to take the necessary measures to allow individuals to live according to their worldviews and beliefs'.

Today, there are more than 8,000 Protestants in Turkey, mostly ethnic Turks, with 170 churches or congregations concentrated mainly in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, which, in 2009, formed the Association of Protestant Churches.

The aim is to 'be an organisation of sharing, representation and solidarity' of the country's Protestant reality, creating a place of 'unity and cooperation' as well as 'monitoring and determining' the 'legal position' before the laws of the Turkish Republic. To date, Protestants are not allowed to train their own clergy within the national education system, which is why some are led by foreign pastors.

According to the latest 2023 report, the majority of the 33 religious workers were marked with the code N-82, meaning 'foreigner whose entry is subject to prior authorisation', and the remainder with the code G-87, meaning 'person who may pose a danger to general security'.

Religious officials were therefore forced to leave Turkey or were not allowed to re-enter the country. According to the association's data, since 2019, 250 people have been prevented from entering, denied permission to stay or deported, including US citizens Amanda Jolyn Krause, Benjamin Charles McClure, Helmut Frank and Matthew Vern Black.

Finally, after years of stalemate, the dispute over the Greek Orthodox seminary (and theological school) in Halki, one of the many theatres of contention between Greece and Turkey closed by Ankara in 1971 but which could soon reopen, seems to have broken down.

This was reported by the daily Karar, according to which the resumption of activities would be linked to the second wave of government reforms initiated after the local elections on 31 March. Education Minister Yusuf Tekin, with a delegation, visited the area on 29 May for a meeting with officials of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Greek Orthodox community. Earlier, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis had discussed the matter, with the former reiterating the 'efforts' underway for the reopening.

Turkey's cultural heritage cudgel

By Dr. Elizabeth H. Prodromou



- **Cultural Heritage and Turkey's Religious Minorities**
- **Cultural Heritage and International Law**
- **Cultural Heritage as Essential to Turkey's Ancient Christian Communities**
- **Undermining Religious Heritage via Commercialization**
- **Conclusion**

[Religious Freedom Institute](#)/ HRWF (10.06.2024) - From 26 to 29 May, the Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of America, Australia, Canada and Europe organized their [4th International Conference on Religious Freedom](#) in Athens, with a special focus on the situation in Turkey. See "[The EU and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, a fortress under siege.](#)"

One of the panelists was Dr. Elizabeth H. Prodromou (*) who had published an interesting research paper a few years ago titled "[Turkey's Cultural Heritage Cudgel](#)" that carefully analyzed President Erdogan's strategy of suffocation and erasure of Christian minorities in Turkey. With the recent transformation of one more historical church in a mosque in Istanbul - [The Church of Saint Savior in Chora](#), built in the fourth century - HRWF thinks that it is worth contextualizing this new attempt to delete the historical presence of Christianity in Turkey by republishing her 2020 article.

Cultural Heritage and Turkey's Religious Minorities

There is another significant factor that adds to Turkey's disregard for its human rights commitments and security obligations. Specifically, the Turkish state's cultural heritage policy has been deployed as a cudgel against the country's ancient Christian communities, specifically, and against other religious and ethnic minorities, more generally. Ankara's cultural heritage policies have been consequential in degrading the [institutional religious freedom](#) of religious minority communities, and have been [decried](#) by international cultural heritage experts as a domestic and foreign policy propaganda tool for state-regime aggrandizement.

Turkey's more recent cultural heritage decisions draw from the wellspring of the founding conditions of the Turkish Republic in 1923. The new statemakers, led by the Republic's first President, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, mobilized a cross-disciplinary cadre of state-supported, professional intellectuals dedicated to creating a new national identity project, expressed in the Turkish Historical Thesis. The consequent cultural heritage policies (and an associated property rights regime) used legal mechanisms informed by the homogenizing, anti-pluralist logic that had driven the just-completed, violent phase of the genocide against Turkey's Anatolian Christian communities.[i] The nationalist identity project erased, appropriated, and destroyed the relics of Turkey's past of which "ethnic

Turks had little to do with...prior to the appearance of Turkic peoples pushing west and south from the steppe regions of Central Asia.”[ii]

Within the parameters of a neo-Ottoman framework for controlling religious diversity in 21st-century Turkey, the current Islamist-Erdoganist government of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has continued the cultural heritage policies of its secularist-Kemalist predecessor. The core marker of continuity has been the acquisition, repackaging, and repurposing of the cultural and religious heritage of the Greek, Armenian, and Syriac Christian communities who inhabited Asia Minor long before the Turks’ arrival to those lands. Reinforcing the continuity and reach of this policy, Ankara has also been broadening the targets of the bullseye to concentric circles that encompass the country’s non-Sunni and/or non-Turkish religious and ethnic communities of Jews, Alevis, and Kurds, among others.

Cultural Heritage and International Law

The concept of cultural heritage—as well as the associated and, for some, subset concept of religious heritage—is nebulous. Yet, there is an expansive set of international legal frameworks and multilateral institutions in place. For example, the Hague Conventions and Geneva Protocols; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); and International Criminal Court (ICC) structures are each designed to ensure the protection of cultural and religious heritage in times of war and peace. International law and multilateral institutions make it clear that [cultural and religious heritage](#) includes movable and immovable objects, sites, and tangible/material forms, as well as intangible practices and activities, that, taken together, both preserve and respect the memory, and contribute to the sustainability, of distinct cultural and religious communities.

International principles, norms, and mechanisms for cultural and religious heritage protection and management in times of war and peace also capture the crucial significance of memory as a mechanism of the synchronic and diachronic sustainability of religious communities, whether in robust, living communities or in at-risk communities—to include facing decline and disappearance. Consequently, churches, *cemeteris*, mosques, synagogues, libraries, schools, cemeteries, manuscripts, music, ritual objects and dress, as well as the worship, maintenance, and other practices associated therewith, are part of a holistic ecosystem for the actualization, remembrance, and transmission of cultural and religious identity in individual and collective action. In sum, cultural heritage includes both tangible and intangible features that tell a story about the past, present, and future of institutional religious freedom and religious vitality.

[READ MORE](#)

End notes:

[i] Benny Morris and Dror Ze’evi, *The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey’s Destruction of Its Christian Minorities, 1894-1924* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019); and Giles Milton, *Paradise Lost: Smyrna 1922* (London: Sceptre Press, 2009).

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] Tugba Tanyeri-Erdemir, “The Fate of Tanzimat-Era Churches in After the Loss of Their Congregations,” in Maximilian Hartmuth, ed., *Christian Art Under Muslim Rule* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Nederlands Instituut Het Nabije Olsen, 2016).

[iv] Guldi and Armitage, 15. Emphasis added.

[v] Guldi and Armitage, 16.

(*) *Dr. Elizabeth H. Prodromou Kyrou is a Professor in the International Studies Program at Boston College and a Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center. She was a diplomat on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) from 2004 to 2012 and served as a member of the U.S. Secretary of State's Religion & Foreign Policy Working Group from 2011 to 2015. She advises organizations and institutions such as the European External Action Service (EEAS) of the European Union. Her academic research concentrates on the intersection of geopolitics, religion and human rights.*

Controversies about compulsory religious classes for Muslims

Turkish man officially changes religion to exempt child from mandatory Islamic lessons



[Stockholm Center for Freedom](#) (04.06.2024) - A man in Turkey has officially converted to Christianity from Islam with the aim of making his child exempt from religion classes, which are required in Turkey's primary, middle and secondary schools despite the fact that the country is officially a secular republic, [Turkish Minute](#) reported on Tuesday, citing the Sözcü daily.

Bülent Sağış, who lives in the western province of Aydın, requested that the Didim Civil Registry Office change the religious information in his record, which currently says he is Muslim, to Christian in accordance with his rights under the law, Sözcü said.

Sağış explained on X on Monday that only Christian and Jewish children in Turkey are exempt from religion classes, adding that he officially changed his religion in order to protest the mandatory nature of the classes.

He also criticized the Education Ministry's new education curriculum for "disregarding" secularism, democracy, science and the principles of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey.

Barbaros Şansal, one of Turkey's most famous fashion designers and an outspoken critic of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, slammed the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) for the development.

"Everyone can be Christian or non-Muslim now by simply filling out a form at the civil registry. Long live the AKP," Şansal said in a tweet.

Many have argued that the AKP government aims to separate education in Turkey from its secular foundations and align it with the party's own ideology. Education ministers during AKP rule have been criticized for their efforts to distance education from its national character and tie it to religious and reactionary ideologies.

In 2022 Turkey's top court ruled that compulsory religion classes violate freedom of religion, upholding two past decisions of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) that criticized Ankara on the principle and content of compulsory religious education.

Meanwhile, a group of lawmakers from Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and Alevi associations last month [protested](#) the "Century of Turkey Education Model" for primary and secondary education [announced](#) by the ministry a week earlier.

The new curriculum underwent a reduction of about 35 percent in content, with the limitation of the evolution theory to secondary biology and the complete removal of integrals from mathematics, as a result of its fourth overhaul in the last 22 years under the rule of the AKP government.

The EU and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, a fortress under siege

Willy Fautre, director of *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

[The European Times](#) (06.05.2024) - East of the European Union, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, 84, courageously holds a vulnerable fortress defending the historical presence of Christianity in Turkey, which has been under threat for centuries and more particularly under President Erdogan's rule.

The Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate

From 26 to 29 May, the Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of America, Australia, Canada and Europe organized their [4th International Conference on Religious Freedom](#) in Athens, with a special focus on the situation in Turkey. The previous ones since 2010 had been held in Brussels, Berlin and Washington.

Anthony J. Limberakis who has been the National Commander of the Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate since 1998, had invited prestigious speakers, such as

- Michael R. Pompeo, Former U.S. Secretary of State
- Despina Chatzivassiliou-Tsovilis, Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)

- Evangelos Venizelos, Former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs (2013-2015), Professor of Constitutional Law at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
- U.S. Ambassador to the Hellenic Republic, George J. Tsunis
- Mayor of Athens Haris Doukas
- Roman Catholic Archbishop of Vilnius Gintaras Grusas (Lithuania)
-

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, elected in October 1991 as the 270th Archbishop of the 2000-year-old Church, addressed the audience in Athens by video from Istanbul. A wide range of hierarchs, archbishops and metropolitans from various EU countries, the UK and the United States also contributed to the debates about religious freedom with the audience.

The Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate is a devoted group of passionate leaders, relentlessly focused on protecting religious freedom for everyone and ensuring the future of the Ecumenical Patriarchate – the historical spiritual center of the world’s 300+ million Orthodox Christians. Most archons are Greek-American and constitute a sort of Praetorian Guard committed to the defence of the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Greek Orthodox Churches in Turkey against President Erdogan. Their number is voluntarily limited to dedicated influential philanthropist leaders: currently about 290 members from 22 countries.

[The Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate](#) was founded on the Sunday of Orthodoxy, 10 March 1966 to support the Ecumenical Patriarchate as well as to contribute to its advancement and welfare.

Christianity under threat of suffocation in Turkey

During the conference in Athens, the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Union (COMECE) in Brussels condemned the recent decision by the Turkish authorities to convert the Church of Saint Savior in Chora, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Istanbul, into a mosque, saying in a [statement](#) “This step further dilutes the historical roots of the Christian presence in the country. Any interreligious dialogue initiative promoted by Turkish authorities loses credibility.”

The Church of Saint Savior in Chora, built in the fourth century, is an emblem of Eastern Christianity and a significant historical marker of the Christian presence in Turkey. It was converted into a mosque in the 16th century during the Ottoman Empire. It was designated a museum in 1945 and reopened for public display in 1958 after extensive restoration efforts by American art historians.

The inauguration ceremony of the Chora church as a mosque, held remotely by President Erdogan from Ankara, was broadcasted nationally. The event included prayers led by local worshipers and speeches by prominent religious figures, such as Istanbul’s mufti, Safi Arpaguş.

The U.S. State Department expressed deep concern about this new stroke of strength. In 2020, President Erdogan and hundreds of worshipers participated in the first Muslim prayers held at the Hagia Sophia in 86 years, marking its redesignation as a mosque despite widespread international disapproval.

The COMECE in Brussels had then called the change of status of the Hagia Sophia “a blow to interreligious dialogue.” On that occasion, the bishops also pointed out Turkey’s ongoing issues with hate speech and threats against national, ethnic and religious minorities.

The conversions of churches into Islamic places of worship are viewed as strategic efforts by the Turkish president to consolidate support from his conservative and religious base amid the country's ongoing economic challenges.

For more than 50 years, the Halki seminary, formally the Theological School of Halki, has been closed by the Turkish authorities. Founded on 1 October 1844 on the island of Halki (Heybeliada in Turkish), it was the main school of theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church's Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople until the Turkish parliament enacted a law banning private higher education institutions in 1971. An international campaign to reopen this theological school is ongoing but has remained unsuccessful.

The Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, security in Europe and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople

Three religious capitals in Europe compete for leadership of Christianity: Rome (Holy See of the Roman Catholic Church), Moscow (Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church) and Istanbul (Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Eastern Orthodox Church/ Constantinople).

At the Archons' Conference in Athens, Anthony J. Limberakis, the National Commander of the Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in America, vividly condemned Putin's war of aggression on Ukraine, deplored that Orthodox fight against Orthodox and that Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church has blessed it as a holy war. "Nothing can justify a call to kill. Moscow Patriarchate violates God's law and gravely discredits the Russian Orthodox Church in the eyes of the whole world and in history," he said.

The Russian Orthodox Church is an accomplice of President Putin in the perpetration of war crimes and crimes against humanity, in the dismantling of the international order and the security architecture in Europe.

A collateral impact of such a policy is that a number of Orthodox churches in neighboring countries of Russia are trying to keep away from Moscow Patriarchate in various ways, though without breaking their canonical links, because they disagree with Patriarch Kirill or because their official status in other European states is under threat of being degraded or worse.

A window of opportunity for the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople

In Ukraine, the **Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU)** was established by a council under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople that convened in Kyiv on 15 December 2018 to sever all links with the Moscow Patriarchate. On 5 January 2019, Patriarch Bartholomew granted the OCU a *tomos* of autocephaly.

The **Ukrainian Orthodox Church still in communion with the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC/ MP)** has institutionally distanced itself as much as it could from Patriarch Kirill but without making secession. The UOC/MP continues its activities but more and more parishes are joining the OCU and draft laws have been tabled in parliament for reducing its status and even banning it.

In [Latvia](#), the **Orthodox Church of Latvia (OCL)** seceded from the Patriarchate of Moscow and the Latvian parliament approved the full independence of the Church in September 2022 for security reasons.

"The state established the status of our Church as autocephalous. The state has determined that the Latvian Orthodox Church is legally independent from any ecclesiastical center located outside of Latvia, maintaining spiritual, prayerful and

liturgical communion with all canonical Orthodox churches of the world,” the Orthodox Church of Latvia said.

As to the **Latvian Orthodox Autonomous Church (LOAC)**, it had declared itself a part of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 2011.

In **Lithuania**, Russia’s ongoing invasion of Ukraine has caused some stormy reverberations. Many priests have found adherence to Patriarch Kirill’s position in Russia’s war on Ukraine an impossible task.

A so-called “exarchate” is being created for the Orthodox Church of the Patriarchate of Constantinople so that dissenting clerics can be integrated in this structure. This will act as an alternative to the existing Lithuanian Archdiocese of Vilnius, which is subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow. A scenario similar to the one in Ukraine.

In **Estonia**, the authorities decided in January 2024 not to renew the residence permit of Metropolitan Eugene, head of the **Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate**. His expulsion was justified by national security concerns as the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church had consistently supported the Kremlin's aggression against Ukraine.

In April, Estonian Interior Minister Lauri Läänenemets and leader of the Social Democratic Party, announced on the ETV channel his intention to invite the parliament to recognize the Russian Orthodox Church as a terrorist organization in order to eventually ban its activities in the country.

Orthodox parishes will have the opportunity to join the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople as it happened in Ukraine after creating the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

Under Estonian law, the **Orthodox Church of Estonia** (independent from Moscow) is already under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople as on 20 February 1996, Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople had formally reactivated its 1923 canonical subordination.

Conclusions

The Orthodox Churches under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church/ Moscow Patriarchate are increasingly losing ground and influence in a number of countries along the Eastern EU border due both to deep internal theological disagreements with the support of Patriarch Kirill to Russia’s war on Ukraine and security issues by the concerned states.

While the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople is under pressure in its historical lands, Turkey, it is expanding along the borders of the European Union as an increasing number of Orthodox Churches are severing their links with Russian Patriarch Kirill and looking for a safe haven in another Orthodox family.

The geopolitical situation in Eastern Europe is providing a unique window of opportunity for the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople to attract more international attention and support.

Footnote: *The author of the article attended the 4th International Conference on Religious Freedom in Athens.*

European bishops accuse Turkey of diluting 'historical roots of Christian presence in the country'

By Anugrah Kumar

[The Christian Post](#) (27.05.2024) - European bishops have condemned the recent decision by Turkish authorities to convert the Church of Saint Savior in Chora, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Istanbul, into a mosque, calling it an effort to dilute the historical roots of Christianity in the country.

"This step further dilutes the historical roots of the Christian presence in the country. Any interreligious dialogue initiative promoted by Turkish authorities loses credibility," the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union, or COMECE, said in a [statement](#).

The [transformation of the Church of Saint Savior](#) in Chora into a mosque earlier this month came four years after the similar conversion of the Hagia Sophia Basilica, another iconic Byzantine Christian site, into a mosque. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan formally inaugurated the Chora church for Islamic worship earlier this month.

"This is a step further in diluting the historical roots of the Christian presence in the country, and it is a regrettable decision that will make religious coexistence more difficult. With this action, any initiative regarding interreligious dialogue promoted by the country's authorities will inevitably lose credibility," stated Fr. Manuel Barrios Prieto, Secretary General of COMECE.

The Church of Saint Savior in Chora, built in the fourth century, is an emblem of Eastern Christianity and a significant historical marker of the Christian presence in Turkey. It was converted into a mosque in the 16th century during the Ottoman Empire. It was designated a museum in 1945 and reopened for public display in 1958 after extensive restoration efforts by American art historians.

The Greek Foreign Ministry issued a strong condemnation, stating that the decision to operate the Chora church as a mosque distorts its character as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and undermines its universal cultural significance. "The maintenance of monuments' universal character and compliance with international standards for the protection of religious and cultural heritage is a clear international obligation binding on all States," the Ministry's statement read.

The inauguration ceremony of the Chora church as a mosque, held remotely by President Erdogan from Ankara, was broadcasted nationally. The event included prayers led by local worshipers and speeches by prominent religious figures, such as Istanbul's mufti, Safi Arpaguş. The General Directorate of Foundations in Turkey organized the ceremony, which saw significant attendance from the community.

The U.S. State Department also expressed concern. A spokesperson encouraged the Turkish government to preserve and ensure access to sites that have hosted different religious communities, respecting their diverse histories. "We encourage the Turkish government to preserve and ensure access to sites and buildings that have hosted

different religious communities in a way that respects their diverse histories," the spokesperson told the state-run Athens-Macedonian News Agency.

The conversions of churches are viewed as strategic efforts by the Turkish president to consolidate support from his conservative and religious base amid the country's ongoing economic challenges.

In 2020, President Erdogan and hundreds of worshipers participated in the first Muslim prayers held at the Hagia Sophia in 86 years, marking its redesignation as a mosque despite widespread international disapproval.

COMECE had called the change of status of the Hagia Sophia "a blow to interreligious dialogue." On that occasion, the bishops also pointed out Turkey's ongoing issues with hate speech and threats against national, ethnic and religious minorities.

Sarkozy urges Macron to recognize the genocide of the Assyro-Chaldeans

While France officially recognized the Armenian genocide in 2001, the former president calls on the state not to forget the massacre of 250,000 Christians between 1915 and 1918 by the Ottoman Empire.

By Marion Mourgue

[Le Parisien](#) (27.02.2024) - This Tuesday, the former President of the Republic Nicolas Sarkozy delivered a major speech in support of this community of some 40,000 members present on the national territory.

On the occasion of the Grand annual dinner of the Assyro-Chaldeans of France, organized this Tuesday, February 27 in Paris, the former President of the Republic Nicolas Sarkozy delivered a major speech in support of this community of some 40,000 members present on the National territory. The Assyro-Chaldeans continue to demand official recognition by France of the genocide of over 250,000 of their ancestors perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire between 1915 and 1918. And this, as other European countries have already done.

"Today the Armenian genocide is recognized. Justice has been served to the dead. The genocide of your ancestors is still not recognized by our laws," declared Nicolas Sarkozy from the podium in front of more than 150 guests, including parliamentarians from all sides. "You demand this official recognition of the misfortunes of your people. My presence among you is the mark of my complete support for this recognition," continued the ex-president who had already taken a stand in 2011, then at the Élysée, against "religious purges". And to insist again, this Tuesday evening: "Half of a population disappearing in a few months is not a massacre, as History is punctuated by it, it is a genocide, planned and orchestrated. »

"The government must decide and the President of the Republic must do so"

Precisely a year ago, senators LR Bruno Retailleau, present in the room, and Valérie Boyer, tabled a proposed resolution for France to recognize this genocide. A text then largely voted on by the upper house. Today, Nicolas Sarkozy, who calls himself a "Christian by training, culture and heart," is urging the French state to go further.

"This resolution which directly challenges the government therefore awaits a response," the former president firmly pointed out. "The Armenian genocide was recognized in 2001, it has been twenty-three years and this long wait has lasted too long. It is time that the equality in death and misfortune of the Armenian and Assyro-Chaldean peoples is finally recognized. The government must pronounce itself and the President of the Republic must do so," said Nicolas Sarkozy, adding that the Assyro-Chaldeans could "count on his support to tell him so".

An "essential" recognition for all Eastern Christians who aspire to regain their lands. "Our duty is to tirelessly defend the right of Christians to live at home," concluded Nicolas Sarkozy, much applauded, calling for "awakening consciences." Before heading to the Élysée where the state dinner was held in honor of the Emir of Qatar.

Note: In charge of this HRWF project: Nail Beth Kinne, member of the board

A Catholic Church attacked during the mass in Istanbul: one dead

HRWF (30.01.2024) - On 28 January, during a Sunday Mass, two masked assailants attacked the Santa Maria Catholic Church in the Büyükdere quarter of Sariyer district of Istanbul. 52-year-old Tuncer Cihan was killed in the shooting.

It was reported that during the attack, around 35 to 40 people were in the church, who threw themselves on the ground after the shooting began. The reason of the attack was unknown.

Police raided 30 locations and detained a total of 47 people as part of the investigation into the attack.

Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya said shortly before midnight that two men he described as members of the Islamic State extremist movement had been arrested. One of the terrorists is from Tajikistan, and the other one from Russia.

The Islamic State group soon claimed responsibility for the attack.

On 3 January this year, 25 suspected Islamic State members were arrested across Turkey, accused of plotting attacks on churches and synagogues, according to state-run Anadolu Agency.

The church was founded and is run by an Italian order of Franciscan friars. The construction of the church began in 1864, and it was opened to worship in 1866.
