



Armenian National Committee of America

1711 N Street NW | Washington DC 20036 | Tel: (202) 775-1918 | Fax: (202) 775-1918 anca@anca.org | www.anca.org

Vote YES on H.R. 4347

The Turkey Christian Churches Accountability Act

Protecting Christians, Preserving Churches & Promoting Religious Freedom

Key Reasons to Support H.R. 4347:

- This bipartisan religious freedom measure represents a practical and principled American stand in support of the basic right of Christians in Turkey to practice their faith in their own sacred houses of worship.
- H.R. 4347 is needed to address the vast and ongoing destruction of Christian religious heritage as a result of the Turkish government's theft, desecration, and disregard of thousands of Christian holy sites, including many which are profoundly significant to world Christian heritage.
- This measure honors our heritage as citizens of a nation founded upon the principle of religious liberty. In January 2011, President Obama noted the importance of “bear[ing] witness to those who are persecuted or attacked because of their faith” and President Bush declared in 2009, “No human freedom is more fundamental than the right to worship in accordance with one's conscience.”
- The adoption of this measure would send a powerful message of solidarity and support to persecuted and vulnerable Christian communities in Turkey who are forced to endure restrictions upon their right to freely practice their faiths.
- The adoption of this legislation is entirely consistent with the proud American tradition of Congressional leadership in defending freedom of faith around the world.

Background on the Persecution of Christians in Turkey:

- Before 1915, the territory of modern-day Turkey was home to a large, ancient, and vibrant Christian population, comprised of millions of Armenians, Greeks, Pontians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriacs, and other Christian peoples. The Christian population in Turkey was decimated during the Armenian Genocide starting in 1915, during which well over 1,500,000 Christians were murdered, many because they refused to renounce their Christian faith. Today, Christians account for less than .1% of its population.
- Christians in Turkey face continued persecution and threats. In the past several years, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has listed Turkey as a serial violator of religious freedom, listing it either on its watch list or tier one violator, along with Iran, Sudan and North Korea.

- USCIRF reported “Over the previous five decades, the [Turkish] state has, using convoluted regulations and undemocratic laws to confiscate hundreds of religious minority properties, primarily those belonging to the Greek Orthodox community, as well as Armenian Orthodox, Catholics, and Jews. . . . The state also has closed seminaries, denying these communities the right to train clergy.”¹
- Christians cannot legally train clergy in Turkey and the Ecumenical (Greek Orthodox) and Armenian Patriarchate are prevented from owning and transferring property.²
- The Halki Theological School, a Greek Orthodox Seminary that was used as an international religious center, and the Armenian Holy Cross Seminary in Istanbul, have been forcibly shut down by Turkey for over three decades despite repeated protests from the United States and Christians from around the world. The closure of the seminaries is severely undermining the survival of both Christian communities, since they have no institution for educating future priests in Turkey, where church leaders are required to be citizens.
- Despite a few public announcements vowing the return of some religious property, as the USCIRF reports, “ad hoc announcements have not resulted in systematic changes in constitutional and legal structures that would remedy violations of religious freedom for non-Muslim minorities,” some of which are on the verge of “virtual disappearance.”³
- In 2009, Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Christian Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople, appeared on CBS's *60 Minutes* and reported that Turkey's Christians were second class citizens and that he felt "crucified" by a state that wanted to see his church die out.
- Although in 2007, the Turkish government finally restored the Church of the Holy Cross on Akhtamar Island, one of the most sacred Armenian churches, which had been confiscated and allowed to decay for over 90 years, Turkey turned it into a museum and refused to return it to the Armenian Church. Religious services are forbidden, except for one day a year, devastating the Armenian community that wants to use the church for services.⁴
- Several prominent Christian figures have been killed in Turkey in recent years. In June 2010, the head of the Catholic Church in Turkey Italian Bishop Luigi Padovese was brutally murdered and nearly decapitated a day before he was to visit with the Pope, who was to highlight the persecution of Christians in the Middle East. Padovese's murderer received a reduced sentence, after unsubstantiated accusations against the Bishop for alleged provocation were raised by the defendant. Before his murder, Bishop Padovese had been petitioning for the status of the Church of St. Paul in Tarsus, Turkey to be changed from a museum into a functioning place of regular worship. Even though his appeals were echoed personally by the Pope, Turkey refused the request.

¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Report 2009.

² State Department's International Religious Freedom Report 2012.

³ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Report 2012.

⁴ In August 2010, such religious prohibition was caught on video, when children were prevented from praying at the Church of the Holy Cross in Akhtamar Island. See video: <http://www.huliq.com/1/822-policeman-turkey-breaks-armenian-childrens-prayer>