

## Turkish Embassy Briefing

### Oppose the Resolution "Urging the Republic of Turkey to Safeguard its Christian Heritage and to Return Confiscated Church Properties"

Turkey commends U.S. Congressional efforts to promote religious freedom and tolerance worldwide. Located at the crossroads of civilizations and home to people of many faiths, Turkey has always attached utmost importance to religious pluralism.

Notwithstanding this fact, Rep. Edward Royce (R-CA) and Rep. Howard Berman (D-CA) intend to introduce an unfortunate resolution "urging the Republic of Turkey to safeguard its Christian heritage and to return confiscated church properties."

The resolution is deeply regrettable because it unfairly distorts the facts on the ground while flatly overlooking Turkey's efforts to promote religious freedom and tolerance.

Moreover, the resolution inaccurately charges that the Ottoman Empire "intentionally destroyed" much of its ancient Christian populations. Tantamount to an accusation of a high crime, the use of this phrase is particularly deplorable and grossly unsubstantiated. "Intentional destruction" or "the intent to destroy" are not idle word choices. The "intent to destroy" defines a specific state of mind and constitutes the key "mental element" of the crime of genocide. When historically uncorroborated and legally unfounded, this hollow accusation amounts to an unwarranted, narrow political statement, and thus an attempt towards legislation of history. Apparently referring to the World War I era, this portion of the resolution seeks to impose an oversimplified and misleading narrative of complex historical events. For a period of over 100 years, Muslim and Christian populations moved en masse, were displaced, or were exchanged by treaty as the Ottoman Empire contracted and new states were born.

The use of the phrase, "destruction" is absolutely wrong and deceptive again when applied to ancient or disused religious sites. Preserving the vast number of historical and religious sites that date back to the earliest times of the human civilization is a tremendous challenge for any country. In this regard, it is unfair to allege that Turkey has ignored its Christian heritage. In 2005 Turkey joined with the U.S. non-profit Landmarks Foundation to restore the Akhtamar Church in Lake Van. Also with the Landmarks Foundation, Turkey is restoring the Balyan Church in Istanbul. And recently, Turkey independently launched the conservation project for the cathedral and the Church of the Holy Savior in Ani.

Turkey takes pride in repeatedly providing safe haven to those fleeing religious persecution throughout history. Thanks to the deeply rooted tradition of religious tolerance that exists in Turkey, Muslims, Jews and Christians have lived together in peace and harmony for centuries.

Sixty years ago, Turkey signed the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees the freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Towards this end, Turkey has for more than 20 years unconditionally respected and abided by the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

Furthermore, as a founding member of the Council of Europe, and as an accession country to the European Union, Turkey is continuously reviewing and enhancing the rights of religious minorities as appropriate.

Embassy of the Republic of Turkey

2525 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20008 | 202-612-6700  
For more information, go to: [www.washington.emb.mfa.gov.tr](http://www.washington.emb.mfa.gov.tr)

*The present-day Republic of Turkey was literally founded upon the violent, wholesale destruction and exile of many ancient Christian nations*

*This resolution simply calls on Turkey to end discrimination, and return Christian churches to their rightful owners*

*"Disused" because the overwhelming majority of the Christian parishioners of these churches were brutally and systematically massacred and exiled*

*Even if Turkey returned every single standing Christian church, this would still be far less than 10% of the thousands of Christian holy sites that existed prior to 1915*

*Turkey welcomed persecuted Jews fleeing from Spain in the late 15th Century, but has treated them and other minorities as second-class citizens ever since*

*Turkey has a tragic history of resolving issues of faith and identity through violence, not tolerance. Examples include Greeks, Armenians, Kurds, Cypriots and Assyrians*

*Hitler's Mein Kampf is among the best-selling books in Turkey, and Valley of the Wolves - a virulently anti-Semitic film - is among Turkey's most popular movies*

*Both Jews and Christians have faced attacks on their places of worship, restrictions on their community life, and intimidation by the government*

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As clearly pointed out in European Union's 2010 progress report and referenced by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom in its latest annual assessment, Turkey respects freedom of worship and there had been specific improvements for non-Muslim religious minorities.

Consequently, we respectfully recommend to all the Members of the U.S. House of Representatives that they not become co-sponsors of this unfair and inaccurate resolution but rather contribute in other positive and constructive ways to Turkey's ongoing efforts and positive gestures.

### Other recent steps taken by the Turkish Government's to enhance religious freedom

- In May 2010, the Prime Ministry issued a circular underlining that Turkey's non-Muslim citizens share with all other Turkish citizens the right to enjoy and maintain their own identities and cultures in parallel with the national identity and culture of Turkey. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has also urged all related government institutions and offices to act with utmost diligence on this matter.
- The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Istanbul has recently been permitted to conduct masses at religiously significant venues that had been, due to disuse, rendered museums. Significantly, the Greek-Orthodox Church held a religious service at the Sumela Monastery in the Black Sea coastal province of Trabzon in August 2010. The mass was officiated by Patriarch Bartholomeos, and approximately 4,000 Orthodox Christians from Turkey, Greece, Russia, Georgia and other countries attended the mass.
- In September 2010, for the first time since World War I, a religious service was organized by the Turkish Armenians at the church on Akhtamar Island.
- In order to ensure the future viability of the Orthodox Church, the appointment of non-Turkish citizen metropolitans to the Patriarchate's Holy Synod has been explicitly permitted since 2004. Furthermore, in 2010, Turkey offered citizenship to metropolitans of foreign nationality who chose to apply, and issues regarding the residence permits of the foreign clergy have been resolved.
- On November 11, 2010, Turkish authorities returned a former orphanage on Büyükkada to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate following a decision by the European Court of Human Rights. On this occasion, the attorney representing the Patriarchate declared, "This marks a first in Europe. Turkey became the first country to implement a decision of the ECHR by returning the property. This should be an example for other countries."

2011 Report: "The Turkish government continues to impose serious limitations on freedom of religion or belief, thereby threatening the continued vitality and survival of minority religious communities in Turkey."

#### *Hypocrisy!*

*The Turkish gov't, which says it supports religious tolerance and pluralism, undermines its credibility by attacking these same values in HRes306*

*In 2009, Armenians in Turkey, in a petition, said: "Armenians face racism and discrimination... and acute anti-Armenian sentiments continue to survive in broad segments of this society"*

*This ancient Armenian church was converted into a tourist museum, in which prayers are nearly entirely prohibited and worshippers are subject to prosecution*

*Catholic bishop Luigi Padovese, Apostolic Vicar for Anatolia and a leading Christian figure in the Middle East, was brutally murdered in Iskanderun, Turkey in June of 2010*