



Armenian National Committee of America

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PROTECTION OF CHRISTIANS AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Why Support H.Res. 306

- The adoption of H.Res.306 would add the powerful voice of the U.S. Congress to the defense of religious freedom for Christians in present-day Turkey, and reinforce the traditional leadership of Congress in defending freedom of faith around the world.
- H.Res.306 is urgently needed to address the vast destruction of Christian religious heritage as a result of the Turkish government's theft, desecration and disregard of ancient Christian holy sites and churches, many holding great significance to world Christian heritage. The **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) raises the following alarm in its 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.**"
- H.Res.306 honors our heritage as citizens of a nation founded on 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.
- Churches in Turkey have been desecrated. The adoption of H.Res.306 would bring support and relief to the Christian communities within Turkey, who remain highly vulnerable and are forced to endure restrictions on their right to practice their faith in freedom. For example, of the over 2,000 Armenian churches, which existed in the early 1900s, less than 100 remain standing and fully functioning today.
- This resolution is supported by the Co-Chairs of the Armenian, Hellenic and Human Rights Caucuses

Persecution of Christians in Turkey

- The USCIRF has, for three straight years, placed Turkey on its "watch list."
- 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 **personally felt "crucified"** by a state that wanted to see his church die out.

- Church property is routinely confiscated through discriminatory laws. The USCIRF has 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.”
 - Christians in Turkey face continued persecution and threats and are prohibited from even praying in their own churches. In August 2010, this 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>
 - The Halki Theological School, a Greek Orthodox Seminary that served as this ancient faith's international religious center, has been forcibly shut down by Turkey for over three decades, despite repeated protests from the United States and Christians from around the world. The School was the primary training center for educating future Greek priests and Church leaders, and, as a result, its closure is having serious detrimental effects on the Greek Orthodox faith.
 - The State Department International Religious Freedom Report from 2009 documented that although Turkey finally amended the foundation law to help Christians reclaim property that was illegally confiscated in the past, the new law did not allow for the return of property that has been sold to third parties, a significant portion of the property.
 - 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 left to decay for over 90 years, it turned this sacred site into a museum and refused to return it to the Armenian Church. Religious services are forbidden, except for one day a year, devastating the Christian community that wants to use the church for religious services.
 - Several Christian figures have recently been killed in Turkey. In June 2010, the head of the Catholic Church in Turkey Italian Bishop Luigi Padovese was stabbed to death in what many viewed as a premeditated murder that was religiously motivated. Turkey's top Roman Catholic bishop Monsignor Ruggero Francheschini publicly accused Turkish “ultra-nationalists and religious fanatics” of being behind the slaying. 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.
 - Turkey’s Supreme Court issued a ruling this year transferring ownership of a substantial part of the ancient Syriac Monastery of Mor Gabriel, dating from 379, to the Turkish state.
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