



Armenian National Committee of America

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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, Syrians, 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 and it is criminal to even discuss or write about the Armenian Genocide.
- 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.
- The Turkish government recently selected the Armenian community’s religious leader against the wishes of the community.³
- Of the over 2,000 Armenian churches, which existed in the early 1900s, only 38 remain today.
- Although there have been 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.”⁴

¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Report 2009.

² State Department’s International Religious Freedom Report 2012.

³ “Turkish Armenians sue Turkey over belated patriarch election,” Hurriyet. December 1, 2010.

⁴ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Report 2012.

- 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.
- The USCIRF also wrote, "Turkey fails to legally recognize religious minority communities, such as the Alevis, the Greek, Armenian, and Syriac Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches, and the Jewish community. Furthermore, Turkish officials meddle in these communities' internal government and education and limit their worship rights."
- Christians in Turkey face continued persecution and threats and are prohibited from even praying in their own churches. In August 2010, such 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>
- 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 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 religious services.
- Several prominent Christian figures have recently been killed in Turkey. 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.