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Freedom of Religion or Belief: Issues, Opportunities, and the Specific Challenges of Combating Anti-Semitism and Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians, Muslims and Members of Other Religions

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Session I: Freedom of religion or belief, non-discrimination and other human rights and fundamental freedoms as the essential normative basis for peaceful coexistence and security in the OSCE region

Contact Person: Ali Chousein Oglou
mailto: alihuseyinoglu1@gmail.com / & btaytd@otenet.gr

Islam and Limits of Religious Autonomy in Western Thrace, Greece

Western Thrace, located at the northeastern part of Greece, is a region where approximately 150.000 Muslim Turkish people live. It is the only officially recognized minority group in Greece the legal status of which was established by the 1923 Peace Treaty of Lausanne. Since then, rights and liberties of the Muslim Turkish minority have been safeguarded by a variety of bilateral agreements signed between Greece and Turkey as well as those international ones that Greece signed and ratified.

The presence of Islam in Greece is an old phenomenon that dates back to the Ottoman administration of the Balkan Peninsula. A majority Muslim demography has actually inhabited the area of Western Thrace long before the region became part of modern Greece in the early 1920s. Since then, Muslim Turks, being one of the oldest autochthonous minority groups in Europe, have been granted rights and liberties as citizens of Greece to enjoy their ethnic, religious and cultural identities. Nevertheless, they have never been allowed to enjoy their freedoms in full terms.

Regarding freedom of religion, Minority members residing inside the region of Western Thrace are allowed to own and function their own sacred places such as mosques, masjids and cemeteries. However, many problems about enjoyment of religious liberties persist. First, members of the Muslim Turkish minority are not given the right to define their own religious leaders as well as board members of their pious foundations. Greece, rather, appoints members of the Minority to these posts for decades. The same problem is also existent for the Muslim Turks of Rhodes and Kos islands in the Dodecanese region.

Second, growing trend of Islamophobia in the OSCE region causes fear and discomfort among Muslim Turks and threatens their historical survival. In recent years, a number of mosques and cemeteries could not escape from getting targeted by Islamophobes in Greece. Hate motivated attacks against Islam in Western Thrace are displayed through smashing windows of mosques,



desecrating tombstones inside Islamic graveyards, planting freshly-cut pigs' heads outside of mosques and vandalizing exterior walls of sacred places with anti-Muslim and/or anti-Turkish graffiti and slogans.

At this point, it is useful to underline that the vast majority of Islamophobic attacks remain unidentified and so unpunished by Greek state apparatuses. This is also obvious from the official statistics of the OSCE's Hate Crime Reporting; all types of hate crimes recorded officially by the Greek police between 2009 and 2015 numbers as 245 but only 10 out of 68 cases were brought before the court and prosecuted under the Greek law¹. The low number of perpetrators stands as one of the main factors that encourages growing trend of Islamophobia in different segments of the Greek society inside and outside of Western Thrace.

And third, some members of the Minority, including those living in different parts of Greece has recently faced closure of their makeshift places of worships. Owned and managed by members of the Muslim Turkish minority, these places provided the opportunity for Muslim worshipers from any ethnic identity to pray collectively. Even though these makeshift houses of prayers were allowed to function freely for a couple of years inside the premises owned by Minority NGOs, the ones in Didymoticho, Veria and Thessaloniki were officially closed in 2017 on the grounds that they lacked special permission from the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs to manage houses of worship. To remind, along with three recently-legalized ones there are more than 80 makeshift Islamic houses of prayers that have been functioning for a long time across Athens, the only European capital city with hundreds and thousands of Muslim population but without a single official mosque.²

Therefore, we call upon the Greek state

- To respect the right of its Muslim Turkish nationals to define their religious leaders and members for administrative boards of their own pious endowments
- To take urgent actions against fighting increasing trends of hate-motivated attacks at different segments of the Greek society
- To work in close dialogue and collaboration with its Turkish and non-Turkish Muslim citizens in fighting against Islamophobia.
- To respect the right of around half a million Muslims, residing either inside or outside Western Thrace and Dodecanese Islands, to manage and function their own makeshift places of worships so that their right of collective praying is safeguarded.

¹ "OSCE-OIDHR, Hate Crime Reporting, Greece," accessed 19 June 2017, <http://hatecrime.osce.org/greece?year=2015>.

² Based on recent news and official statements, construction works are likely to finish very soon and the first and only official mosque of Athens with a capacity not more than 350 is likely to open in coming months.