

**Discrimination by Turkey Against Its Greek Minority
and the Ecumenical Patriarchate**

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I thank you for the opportunity for the Order of St. Andrew/Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to express its views regarding discrimination exercised by the Turkish government against the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul and the Greek minority of Turkey. The Order of St. Andrew is a United States-based organization consisting of Orthodox Christian laymen who seek to promote the well-being of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the spiritual center of 300 million Orthodox Christians throughout the world. Among these Orthodox Christian laymen are members of Congress, the government, the professions, and the business world.

Discrimination against minorities in Turkey has been a common practice, indeed a governmental policy, for most of the 20th century, and regrettably continues to this very day. This discrimination was present from the beginnings of the Turkish Republic established by the young Turks in the 1920's and has persisted through a succession of Turkish governments during the 20th century and up until today. The discrimination has taken on various forms and shapes, but it essentially aimed at economically undermining the Greek minority (as well as the Jewish and Armenian minorities), thereby forcing out-migration of most of the Greek minority to Greece, the United States, and other countries. Two brilliant books describing this discrimination - in reality, a century-long ethnic cleansing - have recently been published: The Mechanism of Destruction: The Turkish Pogrom of September 6-7, 1955, and The Destruction of the Greek Community of Istanbul, by Speros Vryonis, Jr.; and Turkish Policy Towards Greek Education in Istanbul 1923-1974 : Secondary Education and Cultural Identity, by Irimi Sarioglou.

Without going into great detail, I would like to enumerate chronologically some of the methods used by the various Turkish governments during the 20th century to discriminate against the Greek minority:

- 1) In the 1930's, legislation was passed barring entry into the professions by Greek citizens living in Istanbul;
- 2) In 1941, legislation was passed permitting forced conscription into labor battalions of Christians and Jewish males between the ages of 18 and 45;
- 3) In 1942 legislation was passed implementing the *varlik vergisi*, a confiscatory tax on property and estates, which once assessed on an individual or a corporation, had to be paid within 15 days. The tax rate on Greeks, Jews and Armenians was 10 times the rate levied on Muslim Turks. Those unable to pay were sent to Askale in eastern Turkey and consigned to harsh labor;
- 4) The pogrom of September 6-7, 1955, which Professor Vryonis' book discusses in detail, resulted in 1000 homes destroyed in the Greek community and 2500 partially destroyed - all were looted; 4000-4500 stores were looted and destroyed or damaged; 30 Greek males were killed; 200 Greek women were raped; of 83 Greek Orthodox churches in Istanbul, 59 were burned and most others suffered serious damages; the tombs of past patriarchs were destroyed; Christian

cemeteries were defiled;

- 5) In 1961 (June 21), a military junta decree (No.5/1248) entitled “Review of Public Benefits Foundations,” deprived all Greek foundations - churches, schools, etc., - of their freely elected governing boards, transforming them into simple administrative organs with no authority and making the foundations a legal and financial hostage of the state;
- 6) In 1964 (September 16), a governmental decree (No. 6/3801) was issued which resulted in the eventual expulsion of between 40,000 to 48,000 of the Greek minority, most of whom were Turkish citizens;
- 7) In 1974 a decision by the Turkish Highest Court of Appeals retroactively stripped the Greek minority of all property it had acquired since 1936; (In 1936 the Turkish government had conducted a mandatory registration of all minority properties);
- 8) In 1980 Turkish authorities retroactively invalidated wills and testaments of those expelled under the 1964 decree.

How successful have these government-inspired discriminatory policies been? In 1924, Istanbul and its environs had a population of approximately 1,065,866. Muslims numbered 656,281; Greeks 297,788; Armenians 73,407; and Jews 56,390. Today Istanbul’s population is 12 – 13 million and the Greek minority numbers 2 – 3 thousand. Confiscation of properties owned by the Greek minority and the Ecumenical Patriarchate continues unabated, and in fact appears to have increased in pace and intensity.

Under pressure from the European Union, the present Turkish government passed legislation some three years ago so that the Greek minority (and other minorities) could have the right to acquire property and regain “seized” property. Seized properties in most cases describe properties which have fallen into disuse and disrepair, for which the Turkish government would not grant permits for repairs. Consequently the property was declared “abandoned” and then “seized” by the General Directorate of Foundations. A very high percentage of the applications to regain “seized” property by virtue of this legislation has been rejected. Minority Greek and Greek Orthodox properties therefore continue to be confiscated at an alarming rate even today – since 1999 some 75% of Patriarchal and Patriarchal-affiliated properties have been confiscated. The Turkish government, again under pressure from the EC, is purportedly revising this legislation, but as reported in the “European Parliament Resolution on Turkey’s Progress Toward Accession,” the expected Law on Foundations pending in the Turkish Parliament does not remove the shortcomings of the present law. If this new law does not essentially repeal the 1974 decision of the High Court of Appeals that forbids minority foundations to acquire properties beyond those listed in the 1936 declarations, then this revised law too will prove to be a sham and a sop to appease the EU prior to the release of the EU October/November report on Turkey.

I will only touch on a few other property issues, simply to show the extent of the discriminatory practices against the Greek minority:

- 1) All the Greek cemeteries (approx. 40) in Istanbul have been expropriated;
- 2) Properties on the islands of Gokceqda (Imvros) and Bozcaada (Tenedos) have been

expropriated through the forced expulsion of what was once a majority Greek population; the EU in June of this year has specifically called for Turkey to comply with the Acquis communautaire for the protection of human rights of the Greek minority living on Imvros and Tenedos;

- 3) The patriarchal orphanage on the island of Buyukada (Prinkipos) has been claimed by the Turkish government;
- 4) The Baloukli Hospital and Old Aged Home in Istanbul has had 136 pieces of property confiscated by the Turkish government, properties which sustained it economically; the hospital was recently assessed a 42% tax retroactive to 1999;
- 5) All the monasteries (8) on the Princes Islands have been expropriated.

Regarding the education of the Greek minority students, the discriminatory policies of the Turkish government have caused a severe deterioration in the quality of their education. Systematic intervention in the administration of the schools has played a major role in this deterioration. Qualified primary school teachers from the Greek minority community are denied teaching positions in the Greek minority schools – another example of economic discrimination. Libraries of the Greek minority schools are severely deficient because of a 6-year process for getting books approved by the Turkish authorities. Property restrictions also contribute to the deterioration of the Greek minority education, as unused school buildings cannot be used for any purpose other than education, and are frequently seized by the Turkish government.

Dialogue between cultures and civilizations is often called for by Turkish government officials in meetings and conferences on the international scene. As recently as October 1, 2006, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, speaking at Georgetown University, highlighted the urgent need for dialogue, understanding and respect for various cultures and religions. Yet dialogue between the Greek minority community and the Turkish government is scarce to non-existent. The Ecumenical Patriarchate has written and sent over thirty letters to the Prime Minister and other ministers and authorities about the problems of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Greek minority community, and has had no response to any of these letters.

On October 30, 2003, the Ecumenical Patriarch met with Prime Minister Erdogan in Ankara and presented him with a letter which listed the problems faced by the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Greek minority community. The Prime Minister stated he would respond to the letter within a week, but no response was ever sent.

On April 17, 2006, a meeting took place at the Ecumenical Patriarchate with representatives of the Greek minority community and representatives of the Ministries of Internal and Foreign Affairs and Education, and a representative of the General Directorate of Foundations. At this meeting the problems of the Greek minority community were raised, but there were no suggestions or indications given by any of the representatives from the ministries or Directorate of Foundations about how these problems might be resolved. Indeed, the only response by the governmental representatives was that once Turkey entered the EU, then most of these problems will be solved.

It is ironic that the Turkish government seems to expend more time and energy on the perceived human rights infringements of a thriving Muslim minority in the Thrace region of Greece, than on the all too real human rights deprivations of a depleted and ravaged Greek minority in Turkey. In the past 18 months, more than 20 Turkish ministers have visited Thrace, most recently former foreign minister Yasar Yakis. All too frequently, declarations are issued by

Turkish officials, including Prime Minister Erdogan, about the “plight” of the Muslims in Thrace, while letters and entreaties from the decimated Greek minority and the Ecumenical Patriarchate go unanswered. The Muslim minority in Thrace today numbers approximately 110,000; the Greek minority in Istanbul approximately 2,500. The Muslim minority in Thrace is served by 210 elementary schools, two middle schools, two high schools and two religious schools; a set quota of Muslim students is given preferential treatment for entrance into the university system. On the other hand, the schools of the Greek minority in Istanbul are being confiscated. There are approximately 300 mosques in Thrace, and a new mosque is to be constructed in central Athens in Elaionas; there are a number of Muslim cemeteries in Thrace, and a three hectare property in Schisto in Athens has been designated for the site of Athens’ first Muslim cemetery. In Istanbul all Greek minority cemeteries (approximately 40) have been confiscated as have many churches and monasteries.

In Thrace a Muslim, Ilhan Ahmet, has served as a New Democracy Party Parliamentary Deputy for several years, and recently the PASOK Party nominated a Muslim, Gulbeyaz Karahasan, as a candidate for Parliament from the Xanthi region. In Turkey a court ruled in April of this year that the authors of a government-ordered report on minorities and human rights were not guilty of “inciting hatred and enmity” when they said that Turkey should grant more right to minorities. Professors Ibrahim Kaboglu and Baskin Orhan faced up to five years in prison after they issued their report in 2004, which angered nationalists and led to their being charged by a state prosecutor. The report recommended, among other things, that Turkey give equal rights to Turkish non-Muslims, who are presently barred from jobs in the police and Foreign Ministry, and from becoming military officers.

Where is the equivalence that the Turkish government seeks to make between the Muslim minority in Thrace and the Greek minority in Istanbul? One enjoys full human and religious rights and the other struggles with few human and religious rights. One is thriving and the other is near extinction.

Turkey’s treatment of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Greek minority is in violation of its obligations under the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 and its obligations under international human rights law. Regarding the Treaty of Lausanne, I will refer only to Article 37, which states that the Treaty’s provisions have the force of “fundamental laws” and take precedence over conflicting legislative or administrative acts; Article 40, which guarantees non-Muslim minorities the freedom to establish, manage and control private schools; and Article 44, which specifies that “in so far as the [provisions of the Treaty] affect non-Muslim nationals of Turkey, these provisions constitute obligations of international concern.”

As a member state of the United Nations, Turkey, in its treatment of religious minorities, is in violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). It is in violation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (DERID).

As a member state of the Council of Europe and a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Turkey is in violation, among other articles, of Article 1 of Protocol 1, with regard to its seizure and restrictions on the use of properties of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

And finally as a participating state in the Organization for Security and Cooperation on Europe (OSCE), Turkey is in violation of Article VII of the Helsinki Accords, which guarantee and protect the rights of national minorities; it is in violation of the Vienna Concluding Document (1989) with regard to religious minority rights to train and appoint personnel; and it is

in violation of the Charter of Paris (1990) with regard to the right of national minorities to establish and maintain their own educational, cultural and religious institutions, organizations and associations.

The enormity of what has happened to the Greek minority and the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Turkey staggers the mind. The ethnic cleansing of the Greek minority and the strangulation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate must come to a stop. The Order of St. Andrew asks for your support in its efforts to sustain them in this most critical time.