



The Status of the Ecumenical Patriarchate

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Introduction

For many years, the Patriarchates and Christians of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Jerusalem, Antioch and Alexandria have suffered the specter of discrimination because of their religious beliefs. However, the intent of this paper is to highlight the pattern of discrimination faced by the Ecumenical Patriarchate and all Orthodox Christians in the Republic of Turkey today. Other non-Muslim and some Muslim religious groups also suffer from similar discriminatory practices. This is why Turkey has been on the “watch list” of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom since 2013. The focus, however, will be on the Ecumenical Patriarchate as the members of the Order of St. Andrew the Apostle (the Order) are committed to preserving and protecting the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The Order, its members and their families are under the canonical jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate believes that all issues related to such discriminatory practices should be resolved peacefully within the framework of the existing Turkish legal system. The Ecumenical Patriarchate condemns any attempt to disrupt the established democratic process in Turkey.

In this paper, the Order discusses three issues: (1) confiscation of properties belonging to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which has been exacerbated by the fact that the Ecumenical Patriarchate lacks legal status; (2) closure of the Halki Theological School; and (3) interference in the election of a new Ecumenical Patriarch. These issues all result from the fact that in Turkey today “no religious community has full legal status, and all are subject to state controls limiting their rights to maintain places of worship, train clergy, and offer religious education.”¹ The Order also decries insensitive recent Government policy regarding the conversion of historic Christian sites into mosques.

The Turkish government has promised an equitable resolution of all these issues, but what has been promised, unfortunately, so far has been only an illusion. There is a fable in Turkish folklore about a pigeon which in its simplicity took for real water a stream represented in a painting. The morale of the story is that we should not be fooled by illusions.

Confiscation of Property

During the twentieth century most of the properties belonging to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and its Orthodox Christian parishioners in Turkey were confiscated or destroyed by overt government decrees, confiscatory taxes,² and even a state-orchestrated pogrom in 1955.³ Today these wrongs remain largely uncorrected.

In 1936 the Ecumenical Patriarchate, its churches and institutions owned approximately 8,000 properties, many of them income producing. In 1998 only 2,000 remained. Today fewer than 500 properties are owned by Patriarchal related minority foundations, most of which are churches or other properties which produce no income.

¹ 2017 USCIRF Report, page 186

² www.Vladtepesblog.com, April 5, 2008

³ The Mechanism of Catastrophe, Speros Vryonis, Jr., GreekWorks.com, NY, 2005

The 2008 European Court of Human Rights Decision

In its landmark 2008 decision, the European Court of Human Rights (the Court) held that the Pringipos Orphanage property on Buyukada Island should be returned to the Ecumenical Patriarchate.⁴ The following year the Court held that property which had once belonged to the Koimisis Theotokou Church Foundation on Tenedos Island (Boscada) should be returned to that foundation. In the second case, the Court said that refusal of Government authorities to register the property as belonging to the church foundation amounted to a violation of the European Convention of Human Rights, Article I, Protocol I (protection of property), to which Turkey has subscribed.⁵

Following these two decisions, on August 27, 2011, President Erdoğan (then Prime Minister) promulgated what seemed to be a promising new decree (the Decree) that communities whose properties had been expropriated by the state could apply for their properties to be returned or to receive compensation for properties that had been sold to third parties. The Decree also permitted the formation of new religious community foundations to account for oversights in the 1935 foundations law and the reopening of foundations that previously had been closed and administered by the General Directorate of Foundations (the GDF).⁶ The Decree did not apply to many of the properties expropriated from the Ecumenical Patriarchate, but it was a step in the right direction.

Unfortunately, the manner in which the Decree was administered was challenging and flawed, and its results have disappointed. In other words, the Government's promise to return confiscated property was an illusion.

Most of the applications that were accepted were never acted upon. As detailed in our papers presented to this forum the past several years, administration of the Decree process was slow, flawed and conducted in an arbitrary fashion. The August 27, 2012 deadline did not afford applicants sufficient time to submit the required voluminous paper work for many of the parcels, principally because local Turkish Government offices did not respond to requests for title documents in a timely fashion.

⁴ www.echr.coe.int_ Case of Fener Rum Patrikligi, case no. 14340/05, 8/7/2008

⁵ www.echr.coe.int_ Case of Bozcaada Kimisis Theodoku, case nos. 37639/03, 37655/03, 26736/04, 3/3/2009

⁶ U.S. International Freedom Report, Turkey, 2011, page 4

Applications for 1,252 pieces of property associated with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, nevertheless, were timely submitted. Of these 1,252 applications, only 352 were accepted, and 900 were rejected. Of the 352 applications that were accepted, only a handful have resulted in the return of property.

As to the few parcels that were returned, there are two problems. First, the properties are not income producing, and it will be difficult to maintain them. Second, the Turkish Government continues to delay the election of minority foundation board members (see below for the role of foundations) to manage the properties. Without proper minority foundations, the return of property is meaningless because the properties, under existing Turkish law, cannot be effectively managed. A related concern is that existing Turkish law unfairly restricts the eligibility of Orthodox Christians who wish to serve as minority foundation board members. Clergy are not allowed to serve, and only citizens who live adjacent to a property are eligible to serve as a minority foundation board member for that property. With the dwindling number of Orthodox eligible to be elected Board members, the minority foundations will not be able to sustain returned properties. In addition to allowing clergy to serve as minority foundation members, a fair solution is to allow Orthodox Christians who do not necessarily reside in the district in which a property is located to serve as minority foundation board members for that property.

Absence of Legal Standing Results in Loss of Property

An underlying impediment to the return of property is that the Ecumenical Patriarchate and other religious institutions lack legal standing in Turkey. Therefore, they are precluded from owning property. The Ecumenical Patriarchate cannot own the churches in which its parishioners worship or the cemeteries in which they are buried. Because it lacks legal standing, the Ecumenical Patriarchate cannot seek legal redress in Turkey to recover its lost properties.

Without a legal personality, the Ecumenical Patriarchate cannot apply for permits to repair deteriorating property. When a commercial building or even a church structure deteriorates sufficiently, the Government may declare the building to be abandoned and may seize it without compensation.

All church properties are owned by government-denominated minority foundations, which are under the jurisdiction of the General Directorate of Foundations (GDF) established pursuant to the 1935 Law on Religious Foundations. The GDF may seize a minority foundation when the GDF arbitrarily deems the foundation to “no longer be of charitable or practical use.” In fact, the GDF has seized 17 Greek Orthodox foundations since 1970, thereby confiscating almost 1,000 properties. Many of the properties produced income upon which the Ecumenical Patriarchate relied. The GDF may also unilaterally prevent the foundation boards from holding elections.⁷ Effectively, there is no appeal when the GDF closes down a minority foundation or seizes its property.

The GDF today regulates activities of all religious community foundations and their affiliated properties. The number includes 75 Greek Orthodox, 42 Armenian, and 19 Jewish foundations.⁸

While it can be argued that the majority Sunni Muslim religious facilities also lack legal standing, their financial survival is secure because the Directorate of Religious Affairs is responsible for the operation of all registered mosques and Muslim institutions. Imams and other religious workers are civil servants paid by the Government,⁹ whereas the Ecumenical Patriarchate must rely on income producing property. By accelerating the loss of such property because of the deleterious way in which the GDF has managed the minority foundation system, the Turkish Government, in a subtle manner, has effectively denied to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and other minority religious institutions a viable means of financial support otherwise available to Sunni Muslim religious institutions.

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, to which Turkey has subscribed, explicitly grants minorities the right:

to establish, manage and control at their own expense, any charitable, religious and social institutions, any schools and other establishments

⁷ “A Tale of Reciprocity,” Dilek Kurban and Konstantinos Tsitsalikis, Research Center for Minority Groups, Testev Publications, July 2010, page 11.

⁸ U.S. International Freedom Report, Turkey, 2011, page 5

⁹ *ibid*

for instruction and education, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their religion freely therein.¹⁰

Halki School of Theology

The closure of Halki is another instance of discrimination. Founded in 1844, Halki served the Orthodox Christian community worldwide until 1971 when it was forced to stop admitting new students. Throughout the years, almost a thousand students graduated from Halki, including many distinguished clerics, theologians, and most of the Ecumenical Patriarchs elected since the School's founding.

Following its closure, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has had to send young men from its community, desiring to enter the priesthood or study theology, abroad, to one of the theological schools outside Turkey. In many instances they do not return to Turkey after their studies. Since the closure of Halki, the Ecumenical Patriarchate also has had difficulties finding the staff necessary to carry out its administrative responsibilities for its world-wide mission.

For many years, urgent petitions by the Ecumenical Patriarch, the Order and many others, to allow the reopening of Halki have gone unheeded, despite illusory promises by Turkish officials that Halki will be reopened.

Presidents of the United States, beginning with President Carter and his successors, Vice President Biden, many U.S. Secretaries of State (including Hillary Clinton and John Kerry), a host of European Union officials, and many international bodies also have repeatedly urged the Government of Turkey to allow the reopening of Halki.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew tirelessly has met and discussed this issue many times with high ranking officials of the Turkish Government, including President Erdoğan. The President of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, Mehmet Gormez, publicly supported the reopening of Halki when he met with the Ecumenical Patriarch in July 2012. On that day Professor Gormez embraced the Patriarch and proclaimed:

As the Religious Affairs Directorate, we see non-Muslim citizens living in Turkey as an integral part of this country. Regarding religious freedoms -- freedom of religion, freedom to receive an education and the sacredness of

¹⁰ The Treaty of Lausanne, 1923, Article 40. See also Article 42.

places of worship -- we demand for them the same rights that we demand for ourselves. We think it is a fundamental right for people from every ethnicity and religion not only in our country but also in every part of the world to practice their religion freely, educate their children in accordance with their beliefs and raise their own theologians.¹¹

Notwithstanding the above, Halki today remains closed.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom in its 2017 report states that the U.S. Government

should press the government of Turkey to fulfill private and public promises that the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary (will) be reopened....¹²

The Process for the Election of a New Ecumenical Patriarch

In 1923 and 1970 the Governors of Istanbul issued decrees imposing restrictions on the election of an Ecumenical Patriarch and the metropolitans who elect him, which require that the Ecumenical Patriarch and the hierarchs who vote for him must be Turkish citizens. The Ecumenical Patriarchate accepts that candidates for the office will become Turkish citizens immediately following their election as Ecumenical Patriarch, if they are not already Turkish citizens.

The canons of the Orthodox Church, however, state that the Ecumenical Patriarch is to be elected freely from all hierarchs of the Ecumenical Patriarchate throughout the world, not just those in Turkey. In 2011, President Erdoğan (the Prime Minister at the time) issued a decree (reported as an “executive reform statement”), which waived the five year residency Turkish citizenship requirement for Orthodox hierarchs wishing to apply for “exceptional” Turkish citizenship. This decree was a positive step forward, but the reality is that there is no rational reason why an Orthodox hierarch must be a Turkish citizen simply in order to cast a vote for the election of a new Ecumenical Patriarch whose ministry is world-wide, not just local.

¹¹ www.parikiaki.com, July 9, 2012

¹² 2017 USCIRF Report, page 186. See also 2016 USCIRF Report 205 and 2015 USCIRF Report, page 186.

As the U. S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has stated, we look forward to the day when the Turkish government will permit the Ecumenical Patriarchate and other religious groups to select and appoint their leadership in accordance with their internal guidelines and beliefs.¹³

Insensitive Government Policy Regarding Historic Christian Sites

Since 1934, most historic Christian places of worship in Turkey have been maintained as museums, open to the public. In 2012, however, the ancient church of Saint Sophia in Nicaea (site of the Second Ecumenical Council in 787) was summarily converted from a museum into a mosque. Even local Muslim residents complained that this action was totally unnecessary as there are plenty of mosques to service the local population.¹⁴ The same year Saint Sophia in Trabzon suffered a similar fate. In 2014 Saint Sophia at Eraclea (Eregli), built by Emperor Theodosius II between 408 AD and 450 AD became the ninth church, named Saint Sophia, to be so converted.¹⁵ Muslim prayer services now have been introduced in the historic Saint Sophia (Istanbul) museum, which was the home of the Ecumenical Patriarchate for almost one thousand years, and the Government is considering converting this historic building into a mosque.¹⁶ This disturbing pattern has not been limited to Orthodox churches. In recent months Armenian, Syriac, Catholic, and Protestant churches also have been subjected to a similar fate.

Recommendations

The Order recommends the following:

¹³ 2016 USCIRF Report, page 205

¹⁴ “The Church That Politics Turned Into a Mosque,” Susanne Gusten, The New York Times, February 8, 2012

¹⁵ “Ninth Hagia Sophia Church Converted Into a Mosque in Turkey”, September, 25, 2014, www.pravoslavie.ru/english73914.htm

¹⁶ “Hagia Sophias: From Museums to Mosques,” Robert Ousterhout, March 11, 2014, www.theamericanconservative.com

First, the Government of Turkey should reopen and extend the August 27, 2012 Decree deadline for the submission of applications to recover seized property, which did not give applicants sufficient time to respond. The Decree should be expanded to include all seized properties that were excluded. The Government should also revamp the manner by which the Decree is implemented. A Public Advocate, who is not a Government bureaucrat, should be employed to ensure that the Decree is implemented in a fair and expeditious manner.

Second, the Government of Turkey should adopt a policy which enables election of Orthodox Christians to be board members of minority foundations, in a manner which assures that all the minority foundations will be able to manage returned property effectively.

Third, the Government of Turkey should allow the Halki School of Theology to reopen and operate with its own theologians and in a manner consistent with its own Christian beliefs.

Fourth, the Government of Turkey should refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The 1923 and 1970 directives of the local Istanbul Government, relating to the citizenship of those who are entitled to vote for, or be elected as, a new Ecumenical Patriarch, should be rescinded.

Fifth, the Government of Turkey should desist from its recent policy of converting museums which were historic Christian sites into mosques, especially when there is no overriding need for additional mosques in such locations. This policy is an impediment to harmony among religious groups.

Closing

In closing, the Order joins our fellow Christian, Muslim, Jewish and brothers and sisters of all other faiths condemning barbaric acts of intolerance in the Middle East. As the Ecumenical Patriarch has proclaimed, we cannot remain indifferent or silent before such irrational persecution, cultural intolerance and appalling loss of life. Christians, Muslims, and Jews are being barbarically persecuted, tortured and executed because of their faith. The Order asks world leaders to take whatever steps necessary to end this calamity.