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**THE  
CONSTANTINOPOLITAN  
SOCIETY**

GREEKS EXPATRIATED FROM ISTANBUL  
BY TURKISH COERCION

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Tolerance and non-discrimination II:

Combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, also  
focusing on intolerance and discrimination against Christians  
and members of other religions

## **The Ecumenical Patriarchate in Turkey**

### **STATEMENT**

#### **Introduction**

We thank the OSCE and its current Chairmanship for the opportunity to contribute to a wider, yet focused dialogue, on the rights of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and religious freedom, in general, within the framework of its tolerance and non – discrimination agenda.

We represent the Constantinopolitan Society, a non – governmental / non – profit organization, established in 1928 in Greece by forcibly expatriated members of the Greek minority of Istanbul.

Our intervention will focus on fundamental religious freedom issues that the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Turkey is still confronted with. A situation that is in contrast with what is in effect internationally and with the E.U. criteria.

## General remarks

The Turkish government has not so far alleviated or done away with serious restrictions on freedom of religion or belief, including state policies and suffocating regulations of the past that deny legal personality / status to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, its right to own / maintain property -specifically resolve property problems not currently addressed by the new Law on Foundations that will enable the Ecumenical Patriarchate to function without undue constraints-, to train religious clergy, and to offer religious education. Not to mention that these policies and regulations have, in parallel, led to the dramatic decline, in numbers, of the Greek Minority in Turkey.

On the grounds therefore of these concerns, the United States Commission on International Freedom (USCIRF) in its 2013 Annual Report, issued on April 2013, underscores that:

*“USCIRF will continue to be vigilant in monitoring the religious freedom situation in Turkey. USCIRF continues to recommend that the U.S. government encourage the Turkish government to end its longstanding denial of full legal recognition for religious communities and permit religious minorities to train clergy in Turkey, including by reopening the Greek Orthodox Theological Seminary of Halki...”*

## Recent positive developments

- Although we have noted that the government has recently made positive gestures toward the Ecumenical Patriarchate, these generally have not been through permanent, institutional, or legal reforms. Rather, rights and privilege have been granted on an *ad hoc* basis, leaving open the possibility that they could be revoked or discontinued.
- We welcome the Turkish government’s acceptance of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew’s request to hold, for a fourth time, this year’s Divine Liturgy of the Dormition of Virgin Mary, on Aug. 15, 2013, at the historical Sümela Monastery in Trebizond, which was closed to worship for 90 years.
- In January 2013, among others, 470 acres of forest land have been returned to the owner of the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary, the Aya Triada Monastery Foundation.

## Negative developments and persisting shortcomings

Turkey does not accept the Patriarch’s ecumenical status and has been unilaterally trying to restrict his activities, specifically:

- Decision of the Supreme Court of Turkey (2007): the use of the title “Ecumenical” is forbidden to the Ecumenical Patriarch.  
Having said that, it’s worth mentioning that, at the regional level, in March 2010, the Venice Commission, a Council of Europe advisory body, in its avis, stated that there is no factual or legal reason, including the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, for the Turkish government not to acknowledge the status of the Patriarch as “Ecumenical”, based on the historically recognized title and prerogatives.

- Denial of recognition of legal personality to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, having as dire consequence the deprivation from its property (see also the March 2010 avis of the C.o.E. Venice Commission).
- The Greek Orthodox Theological Seminary of Halki, which had been operating since 1844, the only Greek Orthodox educational institution in Turkey for training its religious leadership, remains closed after 42 years. The Turkish Government, despite the promises that it will re-open it, prevents, with various pretences and excuses, its operation. The Theological Seminary of Halki should be re-opened with exactly the same status it held prior to its closure in 1971.
- In November 2011, the 1,700 years old historical Byzantine church of Haghia Sophia in Nicaea (Iznik), housed the 7th Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 787 AD, and recently served as museum, was officially turned into mosque.

Moreover, in June 2013, Haghia Sophia in Trebizond was turned into mosque by Turkish authorities. Built during the reign of Manuel I (1238-1263), Haghia Sophia constitutes one of the most important religious monuments of late Byzantine architecture. Its frescoes concealed by curtains stretched under its central dome, and its magnificent tiled floors obscured by crimson carpeting. These arbitrary interventions inevitably lead to damage in the structure and its priceless decoration, both sculpted and painted.

These repeated actions are raising concern that a systematic effort is made by the Turkish authorities to alter the historical and religious character of Byzantine religious monuments in Turkey.

- The three churches of Panayia Kafatiani, Aya Yani and Aya Nikola in the district of Karakoy-Galata in Istanbul, as well as their 72 immovable properties, continue to be illegally and forcibly occupied by the self-declared and nonexistent “Turkish Orthodox Patriarchate (TOP)”. Those three churches and their properties should be immediately returned to their legal owner, which is the Ecumenical Patriarchate.
- The Ecumenical Patriarchate keeps being a target of humiliating actions. For example, in the schoolbook on national security, published by the Ministry of Education of Turkey, in the chapter “The geographic position of Turkey and the threats against Turkey” and in the sub-chapter “Greece”, the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Halki Seminary are also mentioned among the problems regarding the relations with this country. In this way, the Patriarchate is subject to hostile actions.

### **Closing statement**

As a concluding remark, we would like to underline that respect for religious freedoms is a responsibility for every State. It is not a matter that circulars and statements of good intentions alone can address. It calls for firm will, constructive dialogue and common understanding.

Respect for these rights is beneficial for Turkey first and foremost, as it will strengthen its social, ethnic and religious structures, and safeguard pluralism and diversity in this country. Finally, every process is judged by the real and measurable outcome it brings to a challenging situation.

Thank you very much for your attention.\_