



Freedom of Religion in Turkey?

The Turkish constitution provides for a special role of the religious authority Diyanet and for the concept of **a religious**-ethnic centralized state. The right to exercise religious beliefs and the right to belong to a religious group are not in the individual's sphere as it is in the western world. Diyanet, regulates the religious life of Sunni Islam, the confession of the majority of the population. Other beliefs are disadvantaged. The once thriving Christian minority has been reduced to numerical insignificance.

Even 20 million Alevis, who are **considered** Muslim, are impeded from practicing their religion by the Sunni majority. Christians and other minorities are practically excluded from careers as civil servants and do not receive special treatment doing military service. As a matter of fact religious minorities in Turkey are in dramatic decline.

The Diyanet appoints imams and sends them to countries with Turkish populations and with populations of Turkish descent, for example, Germany and Austria. There are local Diyanet representations in both countries fostering religious and national ties with Turkey, but not mandating integration efforts into the host society. In Austria Diyanet is represented by ATIB.

The founder of the Turkish Republic, Kemal Ataturk, established the separation of religion and state about eighty years ago, the military being the guarantor of the secular state and the overseer of everything from religious life to the banning of political parties. The headscarf has been and remains a highly explosive ideological matter. Turkish secularism is imposed from above, not grown bottom up like Western secularism. The comparison with French Laicité is absolutely misleading. Secularity introduced approx. 80 years ago has never been realised in a nation wide way.

Despite all of Kemalism's control, its efforts to enshrine secularism in the population have failed. Even today there are still two antagonistic groups: the religious population in rural areas, including migrants to the cities, and the relatively smaller group of western oriented city population. For all intents and purposes Turkey finds itself in a clash of cultural beliefs.

One instrument for this clash of cultures is the influx of capital from Muslim sources. If one practices Islam, one can count on economic and financial support. This applies not only to

areas of housing, work, school and alimentation, but also to entrepreneurs in financing and contracting.

Ethnic and religious separatism is considered the biggest problem of Turkey. Talking about a full membership of Turkey is equivalent to squaring the circle. EU Progress Reports state that Turkey`s “pace of reform in the areas of human rights, free speech and **freedom of religion** is at an unacceptable level”. Unfortunately the European Commission in 2004 stated that Turkey has “sufficiently” fulfilled the Political Criteria. Thus breaching its own principles.

A shocking demonstration of this religious-nationalist attitude is the murder of the employees of a bible-printing press in Malatya in 2007. The perpetrators justified this act as a fight against the enemies of the faith and the Turkish nation. German socialist MEP Vural Öger, of Turkish descent, poured oil into the fire when he declared that the EU was responsible for this criminal act because of the pressure applied on the Turkish legislative to institute reforms.

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