

How a social engineering project affected Christians in Turkey

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Abstract

The number of Christians in the Middle East and especially in Turkey has declined systematically. The majority of Middle Eastern countries are known for their authoritarian leaders and whose oppressive regimes are not tolerant of their Christian citizens. But what about Turkey which is known as a secular country? Why has the number of Christians in Turkey declined more in Turkey than in authoritarian regimes of the Middle East? Does Turkey pursue a deliberate policy or social engineering project to decrease its Christian population? This article will try to answer these questions.

Keywords Turkey, Christians, freedom of religion, assimilation, exile.

Christianity originated in the Middle East and from this region it spread to the other parts of the world. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Christian population of the Middle East was approximately 20%, but now it has dropped to 5% and it is estimated that the present Christian population, which is around 12 million, will have dropped to 6 million by the year 2020. One might ask: Why is the number of Christians dropping so rapidly? What is the reason behind this decline? The majority of Middle Eastern countries are being run by anti-democratic governments and they are intolerant of their Christian citizens. But what about secular Turkey? Why has the number of the Christians in Turkey declined more than that of the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East? How could a “secular” country be so discriminatory against its Christian minority? Is Turkey violating international treaties regarding freedom of religion?

1. Freedom of religion and international treaties

The freedom of religion is among the first rights introduced by the constitutionalist movements of the eighteenth century. According to Section 16 of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, which was written by George Mason and issued on 12 June 1776: “That religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator, and the manner of dis-

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charging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience.”² This declaration is drawn upon by Thomas Jefferson for the opening paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence of the USA. In Article 10 of the 1791 French Constitution, it is written “No one shall be disturbed on account of his opinions, including his religious views, provided their manifestation does not disturb the public order established by law.”³

Although the struggle for religious liberty has been going on for centuries, the codification of freedom of religion and belief has been realized only in the twentieth century. Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that, “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have a religion or whatever belief of his [her] choice.” Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) includes four paragraphs related to the freedom of religion. Article 1 of The UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981) states that, “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.”⁴

2. The case of Turkey

The founders of the new Turkish Republic were inspired by western constitutionalist movements and thus the freedom of religion was recognized by the 1924 Constitution. In Article 75 of this Constitution, it is written, “No one shall be criticized because of his/her philosophical belief, religion or sect. All religious ceremonies are free provided that they are not in conflict with security, moral traditions and norms of law.” Although the first and second sentences of the article are in a sharp contradiction to one another, at least freedom of religion is guaranteed under the constitution. But there are other articles which seriously restrict and make the exercise of this freedom impossible; such as Article 2 and Article 26. In Article 2, it is mentioned that, “The religion of the State of Turkey is the religion of Islam.”

² Dreisbach, Daniel L., *George Mason's pursuit of religious liberty in revolutionary Virginia* http://www.gunstonhall.org/georgemason/essays/dreisbach_essay.html.

³ http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/rightsof.asp.

⁴ Furthermore in Article 2 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1951), Article 4 of the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1954), Articles 3 and 4 of the Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons (1960), Articles 1, 2 and 5 of the Convention Against Discrimination in Education (1962), Article 5 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1969), Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976), Article 16 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1981), Article 14 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) and Articles 12 and 13 of the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (1994) the freedom of religion has been handled and guaranteed by international law and covenants.

In Article 26, it stated that, “The Grand National Assembly itself executes the holy law; makes, amends, interprets, abrogates laws...”⁵ According to this article, the implementation of the “holy law,” which means Sharia law, was among the powers of the Turkish Grand National Assembly. Although these provisions were abolished in 1928, and in 1937 secularism was adopted as one of the six basic principles of the Turkish Republic, in reality, nothing has changed until very recently.

The founding fathers of the Turkish Republic inherited a social engineering policy of eliminating Christians from the previous regime, known as Union and Progress (*İttihat ve Terakki*) and were very faithful on this issue. They did not refrain from placing some secular laws in the Constitution, but they never implemented these articles and in reality acted in the opposite way. On 16 March 1923, when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk addressed the members of the Craftsmen’s Association in Adana province, he said, “The Armenians and others, the other elements, those who have established dominion over our Adana have occupied our art centres and acted as the landlord of the county. Without a doubt, there is not injustice and insolence more than this. The Armenians have no right in this fertile country. The country belongs to you, the Turks. This country is historically Turkish, it is currently a Turkish land and will belong to the Turks forever.”⁶ Surely, there were articles regarding freedom of religion in the laws and constitutions, but the spirit of Atatürk’s discourse always prevailed. The Christians were a target, but there was also no freedom for other faiths. Almost all religious communities were not allowed to organize themselves as they wanted.⁷

In the 1920s the Christians who were living in Istanbul and made up nearly half of the province’s population, were not allowed to travel outside of the province unless they had official permission. For example, until the 1940s, the condition to be able to enrol in The Military Veterinary School was “to be a citizen of the Turkish Republic and come from Turkish descent.”⁸

The secularist character of the Turkish Republic was mentioned in the 1961 Constitution and freedom of religion was referred to in Article 19. In the 1982 Constitution of Turkey the freedom of religion was recognized by Article 24. According to Article 24: “All individuals shall have freedom of conscience, religious beliefs, and, conviction...” It is true that democracy requires the recognition of fundamental rights and freedom of religion must be considered among these rights. However, the scope of the freedom of religion and implementation of this freedom until very

⁵ Earle, Edward Mead, *The new Constitution of Turkey*. <http://www.bilkent.edu.tr/~genckaya/1924constitution.pdf>.

⁶ *Atatürk’ün Söylev ve Demeçleri*, Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Yayınları, 2006, 519-521.

⁷ Oehring, Otmar, *TURKEY: Is there religious freedom in Turkey?* F18News on 12 October 2005.

⁸ Oran, Baskın, ‘300 Aydın Bildirisi’ ve ‘Türk’, *Radikal*, 07.04.2013.

recently used to be one of the most important issues facing Turkish democracy. In order to understand the real situation of Christians and the restrictions of freedom of religion, it is necessary to look at the Ottoman era.

2.1 *The Ottoman era and the situation of Christians*

During the Ottoman era, the principle of “ruling class” (*millet-i hakime*) was accepted and the notion of *millet* (class) was used for different religious communities. On the other hand, the word *millet* referred to the administrative type of different religious communities as well. The Muslims were *millet-i hakime* and the Christians were *millet-i zimni*, which means a class which “is under the protection of a ruling class.” Thus, the system of *millet* allowed every religious community to live according to their beliefs and jurisdiction. For a long period of time, the Ottomans did not force anybody to change his/her religion in order to become a Muslim. The non-Muslim community had the right to elect their own religious leaders and under the authority of their leaders to run their religious, administrative, judicial and educational affairs. They kept the birth and death records of their communities until the Tanzimat Decree, of 1839.⁹ There wasn't any interference in their school curriculum and priests were not restricted in their preaching. Within this framework, they had the right to organize their institutions and thus they had a kind of autonomy.¹⁰

This policy continued during the whole period when the Ottoman Empire was in the ascendancy (1453-1683). During this period, the Ottomans were tolerant of all their ethnic and religious communities. For example, when the Hungarian King intimidated the Serbian King Brankovich and said, “I will destroy Protestant churches all over Serbia and instead of them establish Catholic churches,” the Ottoman Sultan Fatih Mehmet II made this promise to the Serbian King: “If you obey my authority, near every mosque a church will be erected and everybody will be free to pray to his Creator.” In response to this, the Serbian King, instead of obeying the Hungarian King, preferred to live under the Ottoman rule.¹¹ The policy of non-intervention in the religious affairs of Christians continued for more than three hundred years. But at the beginning of the nineteenth century when the Christian communities, such as the Serbs and Greeks, began to ask for their national rights, the situation changed. After the independence of Greece (1830), the Ottoman rulers began to make some reforms to their system in order to appease the Christian communities. Although

⁹ Cevdet Paşa, A., *Tarih-i Cevdet*, Üçdal Neşriyat, Ankara, 1984, c.VI, 2690.

¹⁰ Küçük, Cevdet, Osmanlılarda Millet Sistemi ve Tanzimat, *Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e Türkiye Ansiklopedisi*, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul, 1985, c.IV, 1007.

¹¹ Akgündüz, Ahmet, *Bilinmeyen Osmanlı*, OSAM Yayınları, İstanbul 2000, 359.

with the Tanzimat Decree (1839) and Islahat Reforms (1856), the Ottomans made some amendments in favour of Christians, they never found them satisfactory.

The Christian communities' desire for self-rule or independence greatly irritated the Ottoman administration. Especially after the Greek Independence, the proportions of Muslims and Christians attracted the ruler's attention and they began to concentrate on this issue. Thus, they started to increase the number of Muslims in some regions, mainly in Anatolia. In the 1820s, the proportion of Muslims in the Ottoman Empire was 59.6%, but later, in the 1890s, with loss of territory and migration, the proportion of Muslims increased to 76.2%. Between 1859 and 1879, approximately 2 million Muslims, mainly Tatars, migrated from the Caucasus region to the Ottoman lands. After the 1878-79 Ottoman–Russian War, there was a great influx from the Balkan region to Anatolia. The war caused the migration of 1.5 million people to Anatolia, while 300 000 of them died on the way. The Balkan Wars, which occurred in 1912-13, caused another wave of migration to Anatolia in which 640 000 people migrated.¹²

The nineteenth century saw an intensive struggle between the Ottomans and Russians; they waged war against each other during 1806-1812, 1828-1829, 1853-1856 and 1877-1878. Especially in the second half of this century, both empires desired to increase the population of their majority religions in the border areas. In 1860 there were some negotiations in Istanbul between the two empires and the Ottomans put pressure on the Russians to allow the migration of Caucasian Muslims to land under their control. The Russians accepted this suggestion on the condition that the Ottomans would settle them in areas far from the border. The migration of Muslims created an opportunity for Russians as well. They were encouraging the Christians, mainly Greeks and Armenians, to come and settle in Russia. In 1861, the Russian Tsar Alexander openly invited the Greeks to come and settle in Russia. But the Russians were not as successful as the Ottomans because the ethnic consciousness of Christians was highly developed and they were not faithful to Russia. After the 1877-78 Ottoman-Russian war, Germany and the Ottomans became close allies and German commanders began to train the Ottoman army. Thus, the Germans too were supporting the idea of Islamizing Anatolia. The German General Von Der Goltz, who first began to train the Ottoman army in 1883, always advised the army officers to leave the Balkans and concentrate on Anatolia.¹³ The Ottoman-Russian wars which occurred after the 1850s to some extent were "population wars."

Under the Ottoman Empire, a Census Department was founded in 1835 for the first time. The most comprehensive census was held in 1881-1893 and its results

¹² Dündar, Fuat, *İttihat ve Terakkî'nin Müslümanları İskan Politikası (1913-1918)*, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul 2011, 56.

¹³ Dündar, Fuat, *Modern Türkiye'nin Şifresi*, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul, 2008, 44-49,63.

were issued in 1897. The statistics were given by *Vilayet* (Province) by sex, age, religion and ethnic affiliation. According to this census, the total population of Anatolia (including Istanbul) was 12 490 370 and out of this figure 10 222 839 were Muslims, 1 021 363 were Greeks, and 1 106 086 were Armenians. There were also 140 082 others.¹⁴ After the 1893 census the Ottomans held two more censuses, one in 1905 and the other in 1914. In the Census of 1905, the number of Muslims was shown as 15 508 753, while the number of Orthodox Greeks was 2 823 063 and the number of Catholic Greeks was 29 749. In the same census, the number of Gregorian Armenians was shown as 1 031 708, Catholic Armenians were 89 040 and Protestant Armenians 52 485. According to Kemal Karpat, on 14 March 1914, the population of the Ottoman Empire was as follows: 15 044 846 Muslims (81.02%), 1 792 206 Greeks (9.6%), 1 294 851 Armenians (6.9%) and 388 113 others (2.03%).¹⁵ According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica in 1914 the approximate population of the Empire was as follows: total 25 000 000, of whom about 10 000 000 were Turks, 6 000 000 were Arabs, 1 500 000 were Kurds, 1 500 000 were Greeks and between 1 000 000 and 1 500 000 were Armenians.¹⁶ Dimitri Pentzopoulos states that in 1910 seven million Greeks lived around the shores of Aegean and Black Sea region, which was under the domain of Greece and the Ottoman Empire. At this time, the total population of Greece was 2 631 952 people and the Greek state was representing only 37% of this figure.¹⁷ The figures about the Christian and Muslim population of the Ottoman Empire do not match with one another, but the interesting thing is, during the 1890s and most of the first decade of the 1900s, the Ottoman Census Department was run by either members of Christian minorities or an expatriate. Between the years 1893 and 1896 the directors were Jewish. Between 1898 and 1902 an Armenian, known as Mıgırdıç Sinabyan Efendi, served as director. While he was director, he sent a number of people, mainly from the Armenian community, to France and England to study modern census techniques.¹⁸

However, if the abovementioned figures are correct, then the Christians would have been overrepresented in the Ottoman parliament. After approving the first constitution of the Empire, the first general elections were held in February 1877 and the parliament conducted its first meeting on 19 March 1877. At that time, out

¹⁴ Mutlu, Servet, Late Ottoman population and its ethnic distribution, *Nüfusbilim Dergisi\Turkish Journal of Population Studies*, 2003, 25, 3-38.

¹⁵ Karpat, Kemal, Ottoman population records and the census 1881/82-1893, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 9, 1978, 237-74.

¹⁶ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1975, 790.

¹⁷ Pentzopoulos, Dimitri (2002), 27.

¹⁸ Stanford J., Shaw (1978), The Ottoman census system and population, 1831-1914, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 9, 325-338.

of 115 members of the parliament, 48 were non-Muslims and thus the percentage of non-Muslim representatives was 42%.¹⁹ Yet, in the first meeting of the Assembly, the representatives of the Greek and Armenian communities asked for their languages to be accepted as an official language of the state.

With the second constitutional era (1908-1912), the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) came to power on 5 August 1912 and the parliament was shut down. CUP pursued a very intensive forced migration policy. Between 1913 and 1918 almost one third of the Anatolian population was uprooted from their places and settled in different parts of Anatolia. With this population movement, the Arabs, Albanians, Gypsies, Georgians, Kurds and Laz were mixed with one another so as not to create a threat in the future.²⁰

Members of Ottoman parliaments according to their origin

Year	Turks	Arabs	Albanians	Greeks	Armenians	Jews	Slavs	Total
1908	147	60	27	26	14	4	10	288
1912	157	68	8	15	13	4	9	284
1914	144	8	-	13	14	4	-	259

After the second constitutional era, in a “general election” held in 1908, CUP gained almost all the seats in parliament. Out of 289 seats, 288 belonged to CUP. Before elections, CUP, also known as Young Turks, bargained with representatives of all different communities and for each of them, based on their own population, appointed a quota. Thus, the elected members of parliament consisted of 147 Turks, 60 Arabs, 27 Albanians, 26 Greeks, 14 Armenians, 4 Jews and 10 Slavs. This time CUP was in favour of the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire and thus had the support of ethnic and religious minorities. Even the Greeks were allowed to establish their own ethnic party in Istanbul, but since the Jewish population was not sufficient for the election of one Member of Parliament, CUP provided a quota for them. According to the election rules, for each Member of Parliament the votes of 50 000 males were needed and by this time the Jewish male population in Istanbul was around 25 000. In October 1911, the Turco-Italian war in Libya and military losses of the Ottoman Empire forced CUP out of office and a political coalition called the Liberal Union came to power. However, the defeats in the Balkans created a new opportunity for CUP and on 23 January 1913, it staged a coup, known as the Sublime Porte incident and established a new cabinet under Şevket Pasha.²¹ After

¹⁹ Dündar, Fuat, *Modern Türkiye'nin Şifresi*, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul, 2008, 94.

²⁰ Dündar, Fuat, *İttihat ve Terakki'nin Müslümanları İskan Politikası (1913-1918)*, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul 2011, 13.

²¹ Sonyel, Salah R., *Minorities and the destruction of the Ottoman Empire*, Turkish Historical Society Printing House- Ankara 1993, 250.

this coup and the assassination of Şevket Pasha on 11 June 1913, CUP gradually changed its ideology and in the congress of 1913, the unionist policy was forsaken and the policy of “Nationalism and Turkism” replaced it.²²

There is no doubt that there were millions of Christians within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. But with the collapse of the Empire and the establishment of a new Turkish Republic, within a very short time almost everything changed. After the First World War, when the new Turkish Republic was established, there was still a considerable Christian population. By that time the Orthodox Greeks were used to being one of the largest groups in Turkey. At the beginning of the 1920s, their number exceeded 1.5 million. But in the population exchange between Turkey and Greece, 1.5 million Orthodox Christians were driven out and replaced by Muslim Turks, who mainly came from Western Thrace. By the end of 1923, Greece was faced with an influx of 1.5 million refugees from Turkey. The number of refugees was equal to a quarter of the country's total population.²³ This sudden population exchange almost destroyed the physical connection of Greeks with Anatolia and had a detrimental effect on their spirit. By their departure, they left behind thousands of years of heritage and memories. Thus they could be considered the great loser of the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. According to Dimitri Pentzopoulos, in order to understand the nationalist behaviour of Greeks, “one must always bear in mind that the Greeks feel emotionally much closer to Byzantium than to Ancient Athens.”²⁴

2.2 The Kemalist era and Christians

The 1920s and 1930s were a nation building time for Turkey. During this period Turkey struggled to create a national identity which idealized a homogenous society based on the ideology of Kemalism. At that time, nationalism was very common in Europe: in Italy the fascism of Mussolini and in Germany the Nationalist Socialist Party of Hitler were in power. While Hitler and his supporters praised the superiority of the Arian race over all humankind, the supporters of Mustafa Kemal collected skulls to examine and measure them in a laboratory to determine whether they were the skulls of Turks. In this ambiance they even opened the grave of the famous architect Mimar Sinan to examine his skull in a laboratory to see whether or not he was a Turk.²⁵

²² Tunaya, Tarık Zafer, *Türkiye’de Siyasal Partiler*, C.2- Mütareke Dönemi, İletişimYayınları, İstanbul 1999, 36.

²³ Pentzopoulos, Dimitri (2002) *The Balkans exchange of the minorities and its impacts on Greece*, Michael Llwellyn Smith, 16.

²⁴ Pentzopoulos, Dimitri (2002), 26.

²⁵ In August of 1935, 347 years after the death of the great architect, his grave, which was at Suleyma-

Especially in the 1920s and 1930s the role of the Turks was greatly exaggerated. The Sumerians, the Hittites, even the Eskimos were all claimed to be Turks. Those who were not from the Turkish race were not considered to be able to make any contribution to civilization. These ideas were injected into society. Mahmut Esat Bozkurt, the Turkish Minister of Justice of Turkey in the 1930s, said, “The one who does not come from Turkish descent has only one right in this country; the right to serve and to be a servant.”²⁶ This mentality made life unbearable for ethnic and religious minorities. The regime was not tolerant of practicing Muslims either. The state took a hostile position toward religion and banned all kinds of religious origination. In 1924, the law of “unified education” created the Directorate of Religious Affairs (DİB) with the state forbidding religious education outside of its control. The Sunni/Hanefi interpretations of Islam were accepted as the “official Islam” and the state took the responsibility to teach this interpretation.

According to the Lausanne Treaty, Christians were officially accepted as a religious minority and their minority rights were under the guarantee of international law.²⁷ But the Kemalist mindset did not take the minority rights of the Christians into consideration and they pursued a social engineering project against them. Actually, almost all segments of Turkey’s society were the target of this policy, but the case of Christians was the worst. While the aim of this social engineering project was to assimilate different ethnic groups into Turkish identity, for Christians there were only two alternatives: either they could become Muslims and Turks or they would be exiled from the country. For Kemalist ideology the best citizen would be secular,

niye Mosque in Istanbul, was dug up and his skull was removed. This mission of opening the grave was given to three members of the Research Institution of Turkish History, respectively Hasan Ferit Çamlıbel, Afet İnan and Şevket Aziz Kansu. Let us remember that Afet İnan was the spiritual daughter of Mustafa Kemal. Among the team members, Şevket Aziz Kansu was an anthropologist who carefully measured the skull and pronounced that the head was brakisefal, which meant he was a Turk. Just one day after the excavations, the members of the team visited Atatürk in Istanbul and gave him the good news. Atatürk then gave the orders to make a statue of Architect Sinan. Thus, after twenty years, the first statue of Architect Sinan was erected at the Ankara University. The picture of Sinan which currently decorates a Turkish banknote was taken from this statue. Later, for the purpose of restoration, once more the grave was opened, but the skull was not there. Currently nobody knows the fate of Sinan’s skull.

²⁶ *Milliyet Gazetesi*, 19 Eylül 1930 and *Yeni Posta Gazetesi* 21 Eylül 1930.

²⁷ In fact, mostly we classify minorities as ethnic, linguistic and religious but when it comes to the Middle East this definition is not sufficient because in this region there are minorities of the minorities. For instance, although the Kurdish population constitutes one of the minority groups in Turkey, in the Kurdish region they have priority over other minorities, such as Yezidis and Syriacs because the Kurds share the same religious affiliation as the majority Muslim Turks. The pressure on Yezidis and Syriacs is not restricted to the Turkish State. They are under the pressure from Muslim Kurds as well. The excessive pressure on Yezidi Kurds and Syriacs forced them to leave their country in the 1960s and settle in Europe and the USA.

Atatürkist, Sunni Muslim and Turk. Unfortunately, this frame did not leave room for the Christian to be a proper citizen of Turkey.

All citizens of Turkey, whether they were Christians or Muslims, had to support the DİB through their taxes. Not only Christians, but even the Alevi who are the largest religious minority in Turkey, were not allowed to open their own prayer houses and temples. Only during the last two decades have they begun to open their houses of prayer, but they still lack legal status. The DİB has a huge budget and considerable authority; it even determines the content of Friday prayers to be read in the mosques. Many citizens of Turkey until very recently refrained from disclosing their religious identity. The Alevi especially had to hide their religious identity until the end of the 1990s.²⁸

The more nationalism increased, the more the status of ethnic and religious minorities worsened. Even in the late Ottoman period some religious minorities had legal status under the *millet* system, but by time of the founding of the new Turkish Republic, this status of minorities disappeared.²⁹ It is really difficult to compare the current status of Christian minorities with that of the Ottoman era. Especially in the last years of the Ottoman Empire, they enjoyed almost every basic right and were represented in the state apparatus. In 1896, there were 2 297 public servants in Istanbul and out of this figure, 597 were non-Muslims, which corresponds to 26% of public servants.³⁰ At that time, many high level Ottoman officers and ministers were Christians, but in the new Turkish Republic, with high level bureaucratic restrictions, almost no Christians were allowed to work as a public servant.

Turkey's Christian population has decreased very dramatically in the twentieth century to the verge of extinction. The last anti-Christian mass violence was orchestrated in 1955 which was carried out by the "deep state". During the 6-7 September incidents, which can be considered as the last link in the massive chain of the social engineering project, in total 5 317 buildings were attacked and plundered including 4 214 houses, 1 004 workplaces, 73 churches, 1 synagogue, 2 monasteries and 26 schools of minorities. Fifty-nine percent of the ravaged workplaces belonged to Greeks, 17% to Armenians, 12% to Jews and 10% to Muslims. During the attacks, 11 people were killed and approximately 300-600 were wounded.³¹ But it was enough to force 80 000 Greeks to abandon Turkey in 1955 and leave their ancestors' land forever. At the beginning of the 1990s, the former Chief of the Special War Department, General Sabri Yirmibeşoğlu, confessed that, "The 6-7 September incidents were the deeds of "deep state." And the aim was accomplished. I

²⁸ Alpay, Şahin, Freedom of religion far from secured in Turkey, *Today's Zaman*, 1 April 2012.

²⁹ Oehring, Otmar, *TURKEY: Is there religious freedom in Turkey?* F18News on 12 October 2005.

³⁰ Dündar, Fuat, *Modern Türkiye'nin Şifresi, İletişim Yayınları*, İstanbul, 2008, 102.

³¹ Aktar, Ayhan, *Sabah*, 5 Eylül 2005.

am asking you: Wasn't it a wonderful plot?"³² Certainly no one can deny that such "wonderful plots" have caused a dramatic decline in the number of the Christian population in Turkey. It is estimated that the current number of Greeks in Istanbul is around 2 000.³³

Until very recently, Christians were perceived as "domestic foreigners."³⁴ In the late 1960s, when the Cyprus conflict surfaced and became an international problem between Turkey and Greece, the state expropriated the land and properties owned by Christian community foundations. The Greek Orthodox Church had owned 11 000 properties in Istanbul, but now owns around 500.³⁵ Due to the escalation of the Cyprus problem, the historic Theological School of Halki (*Heybeliada*), which had opened in 1844 to train Greek Orthodox clergy, was closed down in 1971 and is still closed (at the date of writing).

Kemalist ideology pursued a social engineering project from the very beginning. In implementing their social engineering schedule, the Kemalists benefited from the Union and Progress Party's policies.³⁶ The main target of this project was to assimilate everybody into Turkish identity, whether they were Christian or Muslims, Kurds, Arabs or Circassians. In spite of all this, the Muslim minorities of the country are considered inferior Turks. If they revolt or try to create problems, they are brutally punished. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the majority of those who came from the Balkans and Caucasus region were ready to be assimilated into the Turkish identity, but the Kurds who lived in their own areas resisted this policy. This situation caused many revolts and much unrest among them. In short, Kemalism was a mono-cultural nation building project. Not only Christians but the Kurds, Alevi, faithful Muslims, Islamists, leftists and liberals were targeted in this project. According to the constitution, Turkey is a secular state and the Christians are guaranteed the right to practice their religion freely. But secularism is never understood in Western style and it is used as an ideological tool to guarantee state control over religion. Kemalist authoritarian understanding of secularism never separated state and religion. There was always a state monopoly and control over religion.

Although in recent years the government has implemented some reforms to improve the rights of Christian minorities in Turkey, there is still a long way to go. The

³² Güllapoğlu, Fatih, *Tanksız Topsuz Hareket*, Tekin Yayınevi, 1991, 104.

³³ Akçam, Taner, 6-7 Eylül ve Suriye, *Taraf*, 9 Eylül 2013.

³⁴ Eibner, John, Turkey's Christians under siege, *Middle East Quarterly* Spring 2011.

³⁵ Grossbongardt, Annette, Christians in Turkey: The Diaspora welcomes the Pope, *Der Spiegel*, 28 November 2006.

³⁶ First, in 1889 the organization established as "The Committee of Ottoman Union" (*İttihad-ı Osmani Cemiyeti*) by medical students and one year later changed its name to "The Committee of Union and Progress." In 1906 the organization transformed itself into a political party. Kazım Karabekir, *İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti*, YKY, İstanbul 2009, p.209

Justice and Development Party has passed some new laws and according to these new laws, even Christian community foundations can ask for their expropriated properties to be returned. Besides this, the new law makes it easy to open houses of worship, but in many areas of Turkey it is still difficult to pass bureaucratic and local authority obstacles. Religious communities still do not have the right to establish their religion-based organizations and they cannot open educational institutions to teach their religion. Even in Article 39 of the Lausanne Treaty it is written that “Turkish citizens belonging to non-Muslim minorities will have the right to the same civil law and politics as Muslim citizens. All people of Turkey will be equal regardless of their religion.”³⁷ All these restrictions drew the attention of NGOs and human rights commissions who closely follow Turkey. Therefore, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, in its annual report of March of 2012, listed Turkey as one of the worst offenders of religious freedom. The commission’s list of 2012 includes 16 countries, and among them two were new: Turkey and Tajikistan.³⁸

It is really disturbing to see the name of Turkey among the most serious offenders of human rights and included among mainly Third World countries. There are particular reasons why Turkey was added to the list of “Countries of Particular Concern.” It is sure that one of them stems from the legal position of churches. The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, spiritual leader of the world’s 250 million Eastern Orthodox Christians, highlights the problem thus: “Our seminary remains closed. We can’t educate our clergy. We don’t have a legal status in Turkey and neither do the Catholic Church, Protestant churches, the Armenian Church, or the Jewish community.”³⁹ It seems that the issues of Christian minority rights to train clergy, offer religious education and maintain places of worship have drawn the attention of the commission.

In the commission’s 2008 report, Turkey is among the countries listed as “under review” and in the 2009 report it included in the “watch list.” According to the commission’s 2012 report Turkey’s situation has deteriorated. Turkey’s foreign ministry has reacted harshly to the report and declared that “this report purposefully ignores further steps taken recently.”⁴⁰ Whether Turkey deserves to be placed among the worst countries of the world or not is a controversial issue, but those who live in Turkey and watch the country closely must admit that the freedom of

³⁷ *Lausanne on its 70th anniversary*, The Ministry of Culture of the Turkish Republic, prepared by Mehmet Özel, 1993, 48.

³⁸ The others were Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Uzbekistan, Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Turkmenistan and Vietnam. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report 2013, <http://www.aina.org/reports/uscirf2013.pdf>.

³⁹ Markoe, Lauren, Turkey, key U.S. ally, cited for religious freedom woes, *The Washington Post*, 20 March 2012.

⁴⁰ Alpay, Şahin, Freedom of religion far from secured in Turkey, *Today’s Zaman*, 1 April 2012.

religion and living conditions of Christians have improved in recent years. In many aspects, it may not be compatible with democratic norms and standards, but in 2012 it is much better than in 2008 and in previous years.

In addition, it is not only the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom that criticizes Turkey, Amnesty International, which watches the country very closely, also stated in its report of 2012 and the previous year that Turkey violated freedom of religion.⁴¹ In addition, the Amnesty International report pointed out that under international law, state neutrality and secularism are not legitimate reasons for imposing restrictions on the exercise of the freedom of religion.

The process of applying to join the EU has changed many things in Turkey and during its third term of office, the Justice and Development Party looks more mature and empathetic to the rights of the Christian minority. Christians are aware of this reality and know very well that there is no doubt that the current government is much more tolerant of the minority's basic demands than its predecessors were. But firstly the legal framework must be clarified and secularism should be transformed into constitutional principles. To achieve this, the new constitutional process will provide a great opportunity for a new beginning in Turkey. Whether Turkey will be able to make such a major change in its new constitution or not is a tough question and many people have doubts in this regard. However, Turkey eventually has to face the reality of real democracy and create such an environment that its Christian minorities feel free and consider themselves as equal citizens.

⁴¹ Amnesty says Turkey violates freedom of religion with headscarf ban, *Today's Zaman*, 24 April 2012.