



Myths and Facts:

Turkey's Troubling Record of Restricting Religious Freedom

Despite Turkey's well-documented track record of violence and discrimination against minority faiths, the Turkish government is today attacking bipartisan efforts to seek the adoption of a measure supporting religious freedom, H.R.4347, on the unfounded basis that Turkey, in fact, has an admirable record of religious tolerance.

The Turkish Embassy, which has, in recent days, circulated several documents attacking this bipartisan legislation undermines the credibility of its own claims to religious tolerance and freedom of faith by aggressively opposing a measure that simply embraces and seeks to advance these values.

Listed below are a series of Myths and Facts setting the record straight regarding the misinformation from the Turkish Embassy.

Myth: "Turkey has always attached utmost importance to religious pluralism."

Fact: The present-day Republic of Turkey was literally founded upon the violent, wholesale destruction and exile of many ancient Christian nations from their ancient homelands. The territory of Turkey, once a vital center of Christianity, now has a Christian population of less than .2%.

Myth: There have been "specific improvements for non-Muslim religious minorities."

Fact: The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has reported that: "The Turkish government continues to impose serious limitations on freedom of religion or belief, thereby threatening the continued vitality and survival of minority religious communities in Turkey."

Fact: The vulnerable Christian community in Turkey remains at-risk and cannot afford continued international indifference and inaction.

In June 2010, the head of the Catholic Church in Turkey Italian Bishop Luigi Padovese was stabbed to death in what many viewed as a premeditated and religiously motivated murder. Turkey's top Roman Catholic bishop Monsignor Ruggero Francheschini publicly accused Turkish "ultra-nationalists and religious fanatics" of being behind the slaying. Before his murder, Bishop Padovese had been petitioning for the status of the Church of St. Paul in Tarsus, Turkey to be changed from a museum into a functioning place of regular worship. Even though his appeals were echoed personally by the Pope, Turkey refused the request. Those accused of this murder have been released from prison, pending trial.

Fact: Turkey claims it is a "tremendous challenge" to preserve the religious sites, but then prohibits churches from repairing and using the sites that currently belong to them. Turkey wants to be commended for renovating a token number of religious sites and converting them into museums, but not criticized for expropriating a vast number of Christian sites from their rightful owners, who would have maintained and repaired them at their own cost, if they had been left in safety and allowed to do so.

Myth: The Turkish Embassy says "this resolution is deeply regrettable."

Fact: This bill simply calls upon Turkey to end discrimination, and return Christian churches to their rightful owners.

The Turkish government's opposition to this bill only confirms its intolerance to religious freedom, its indifference to valid and well-intentioned international scrutiny, and its unresponsiveness to the faith-based freedoms and aspirations of its own citizens.

Myth: Christian religious properties are "disused religious sites."

Fact: The euphemism "disused" is used by the Turkish Embassy in the hope that it will conceal the reality that the overwhelming majority of the Christian parishioners of these churches were brutally and systematically massacred and exiled. It is similar to neo-Nazis seeking to defend the immoral expropriation of "disused" Jewish synagogues in areas of Europe violently and systematically emptied of Jews during the Holocaust.

Myth: Turkey has provided "safe haven" for those fleeing persecution.

Fact: Turkey welcomed persecuted Jews fleeing from Spain in the late 15th Century, but has treated them and other minorities as second-class citizens ever since. In recent years, the Turkish government has assumed an increasingly aggressive and belligerent approach toward Israel.

Hitler's *Mein Kampf* was recently a best-selling book in Turkey, and *Valley of the Wolves* – a virulently anti-American and anti-Semitic film which was highly praised by Prime Minister Erdogan's wife – is among Turkey's most popular movies.

Myth: Turkey has a "deeply rooted tradition of religious tolerance."

Fact: Turkey has a tragic history of resolving issues of faith and identity through violence, not tolerance. Examples include its state-sponsored murder and persecution of Greeks, Armenians, Kurds, Cypriots and Assyrians.

In 2006, Hrant Dink, an editor of an Armenian-language newspaper who was assassinated after being prosecuted for "insulting Turkishness," because he wrote about the Armenian Genocide, reported repeated death threats, which included references to his identity as an Armenian Christian. After his murder in 2007, policemen posed proudly for pictures with the accused assassin. Four years after this crime, not a single person has been convicted for Dink's murder on a busy Istanbul street in broad daylight. In September 2010, the European Court of Human Rights found Turkey guilty of failing to protect Dink, when authorities knew his assassination was imminent, and of then failing to adequately investigate his murder.

Myth: "Muslims, Jews, and Christians have lived together in peace and harmony."

Fact: Jews and Christians have both faced attacks on their places of worship, restrictions on their community life, and intimidation by the government.

Fact: Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is today among the best-selling books in Turkey, and *Valley of the Wolves* - a virulently anti-Semitic film - is among Turkey's most popular movies.

Myth: Non-Muslims have the right to their "identity and culture."

Fact: Despite facing threats of violence and prosecution, Armenians in Turkey, in a widely circulated petition during 2009, asserted that: "Armenians face racism and discrimination... and acute anti-Armenian sentiments continue to survive in broad segments of this society."

Myth: A service has been allowed in the Armenian church on Akhtamar Island

Fact: This ancient Armenian church was converted into a tourist museum, in which prayers are nearly entirely prohibited and worshippers are prevented from praying.