



Turkey: Issues and Recommendations for Policy Makers

As a NATO member and U.S. ally, Turkey increasingly undemocratic turn should worry the U.S. and prompt an immediate change in U.S. policy. Turkey's foreign policy has negatively affected religious minorities, the Middle East, and Europe. President Erdogan's transformation into an authoritarian leader threatens to destabilize Turkey and the region, which will have serious negative repercussions for U.S. foreign policy.

Issues:

→ In the historically Syriac Orthodox area of Mardin city in Southeast Turkey, the government has seized more than 100 properties (churches, monasteries, cemeteries, and lands) with title deeds. In particular, the battle over the status of The Monastery of St. Gabriel is troubling because of its importance to the Syriac community. Although there is a proposed law pending in the Parliament which would give back around 56 title deeds, others will remain with the Treasury department.

→ Activists in Europe complain that in meetings with Turkish officials over land issues, Turkey pressures them to drop advocacy for recognition of various pogroms and genocides in order to receive the lands back.

→ Turkey's wide-ranging crackdown since the attempted July 2016 coup has seriously alarmed rights groups and observers. The subsequent crackdown has seen around 65,000 people arrested and another 152,000 dismissed from their jobs by government decrees, including state officials, teachers, bureaucrats, and academics. Figures are outstandingly high, with over 3,000 schools, dormitories and universities shut down, 5,822 academics losing their jobs, 4,463 judges and prosecutors dismissed, 189 media outlets shut down and 319 journalists arrested by government decrees.^{1,2} Detainees claim being denied food, water, and medical treatment in addition to physical torture.

→ In Turkey, Article 301 of the penal code, on "insulting Turkishness," has been used to prosecute people who criticize the president, the government, or their actions. In 2006, the well-known Armenian-Turkish journalist Hrant Dink was prosecuted under Article 301 and received a six-month suspended sentence before being assassinated by a radical nationalist.

→ Armenians have not been able to elect a new Patriarch due to the Turkish government's interference. The state invented a new leadership role within the local church hierarchy: a Patriarchal Vicar General to handle the day-to-day affairs of the patriarchate. State authorities have repeatedly blocked the nomination of a new Patriarch by the Armenian Apostolic Church.³

→ The Syriac Orthodox community's efforts to build a new church and an elementary school in Istanbul have been rejected by the government, severely limiting their ability to teach their native language, culture, and religion. Additionally, Christians face regular and often unpunished hate-speech. The religious minority group known as the Alevis long to see their places of worship – cemevis – recognized as such by the state and seek a state curriculum that includes lessons on their faith to combat negative distortions.

¹ <https://turkeypurge.com/>

² <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2018-01-29/remarkable-scale-turkeys-global-purge>

³ <https://armenianweekly.com/2018/03/09/turkey-cant-armenians-elect-patriarch/>



IN DEFENSE OF CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

→Freedom of speech has been severely curtailed, with harassment and forced co-optation now the norm for any newspaper, TV station, or blogger that criticizes the government or President Erdogan. The government has brutalized and arrested members of opposition parties, most notably the HDP, whose head Selahattin Demirtaş was arrested for “supporting a terrorist organization.”

→Currently, U.S. Pastor Andrew Brunson has been unlawfully imprisoned since October 2016 and is being held hostage to extract political concessions from the United States. Turkey also jailed a U.S. consular staff member in Turkey over unfounded claims of “supporting terrorism.”

→Turkey’s potential purchase of Russian S-400 missiles and increased anti-American rhetoric pumped out by Turkish leaders, including by President Erdogan, which include threats to attack areas in northern Syria where US special operations forces are deployed, endangers the future of the U.S.-Turkey relationship.

→Turkey’s recent “Olive Branch” operation in the Kurdish-controlled Afrin region in Syria has been exceptionally precarious for Christians and Yazidis, who have expressed concerns over the participation of Turkish-backed Syrian Islamic militants who have threatened them and targeted civilian areas. Several minorities have already been killed, shrines and religious sites have been destroyed or forcibly converted into mosques, and people’s homes have been looted. Like in Iraq in 2014, the situation foreshadows the potential for ethnic cleansing.

Recommendations:

1. Work with Turkey to transport Yazidis and Christians out of the Afrin canton in order to prevent ethnic cleansing. Call on Turkey and its allies to exercise restraint in Afrin to ensure mass-murder does not take place.
2. Pressure Turkey to allow Christians to select their own leaders freely, open schools as they wish and return all Christian properties to the proper religious authorities. Encouraging better treatment of minorities, such as removing Article 301, would also promote social harmony in Turkey.
3. Leverage the U.S. relationship with Turkey to encourage democratic values (such as free speech), and the speedy release of Amnesty International’s Taner Kılıç, HDP head Selahattin Demirtaş, U.S. Pastor Andrew Brunson, and all other activists and political opponents. Also, expediting the slow-moving investigations into Hrant Dink’s murder could lead to answers for his family and community.
4. The United Nations Security Council has authorized the establishment of an investigative team to support Iraq’s domestic efforts to hold ISIS accountable for acts that may amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide committed in the country. Turkey should be encouraged to cooperate with the investigative team to identify and prosecute individuals in the Turkish armed forces, business community, and government who aided and abetted ISIS in its genocidal campaign.
5. In light of the unrelentingly hostile stance toward the United States, the introduction of sanctions against Turkey would be appropriate. In particular, targeted visa bans on Turkish government officials thought to be responsible for the detentions and a ban on imports of Turkish manufactured handguns, which pull in an estimated \$100 million in annual revenue for Turkey⁴, would pressure Turkey to change its current track.

⁴ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/02/us-sanctions-turkey-pros-cons.html#ixzz59kW9oa9J>