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TURKEY: PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS

- Before 1915, the territory of modern-day Turkey was home to a large, ancient, and vibrant Christian population, comprised of millions of Armenians, Greeks, Pontians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriacs, and other Christian peoples. The Christian population in Turkey was decimated during the Armenian Genocide starting in 1915, during which well over 1,500,000 Christians were murdered, many because they refused to renounce their Christian faith. Today, Christians account for less than .2% of its population¹ and it is criminal to even discuss or write about the Armenian Genocide.
- Christians in Turkey face continued persecution and threats. Church property is routinely confiscated through discriminatory laws. “Over the previous five decades, the [Turkish] state has, using convoluted regulations and undemocratic laws to confiscate hundreds of religious minority properties, primarily those belonging to the Greek Orthodox community, as well as Armenian Orthodox, Catholics, and Jews. . . . The state also has closed seminaries, denying these communities the right to train clergy.”²
- Christians cannot legally train clergy in Turkey and the Ecumenical (Greek Orthodox) and Armenian Patriarchate are prevented from owning and transferring property.³
- The Turkish government recently selected the Armenian community’s religious leader against the wishes of the community.⁴
- “[T]he Armenian Patriarchate experiences direct Turkish government interference in the selection of its religious leadership, and the Turkish state also prevents the Armenian Orthodox community, which the State Department estimates at 65,000, from operating an independent seminary.”⁵
- Although Turkey finally amended the foundation law to help Christians reclaim property that was illegally confiscated in the past, the new law does not allow for the return of property that has been sold to third parties, a significant portion of the property, or for property confiscated because the Christian population diminished.⁶

¹ CIA World Factbook: Turkey. 2011.

² United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Report. May 2009.

³ State Department’s International Religious Freedom Report 2010.

⁴ “Turkish Armenians sue Turkey over belated patriarch election,” Hurriyet. December 1, 2010.

⁵ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Report. May 2009.

⁶ State Department’s International Religious Freedom Report. May 2009.

- Built in 915 A.D., the Akhtamar Church in Van, Turkey, is very important to Armenian Christian heritage and is situated in what once was a vibrant Armenian city. In 2007, the Turkish government finally restored the church, which had been left to decay for over 90 years, but turned it into a museum, refusing to return it to the Armenian Church, and excluded any mention of the church's Armenian-Apostolic history. Religious services are forbidden, except for one day a year, devastating the Armenian community that wants to use the church for religious services.
- The Halki Theological School, a Greek Orthodox Seminary that was used as an international religious center, has been forcibly shut down by Turkey for over three decades despite repeated protests from the United States and Christians from around the world. The School was the primary training center for educating future Greek priests and its closure is having serious detrimental effects on the Greek Orthodox faith as a result.
- Several Christian figures have recently been killed in Turkey. 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 murder that was religiously motivated. Turkey's top Roman Catholic bishop publicly accused Turkish "ultra-nationalists and religious fanatics" of being behind the slaying.⁷ In April 2007, three Protestant Christians were killed at a Christian publishing office. The three had their hands and feet tied before their throats were slit. The four suspects, assumed to have been part of a radical Islamist group, were said to have been motivated by nationalist and religious feelings. In 2006, Andrea Santoro, a Catholic priest stationed in the Black Sea province of Trabzon, was shot and killed by a 16-year-old youth while praying at the city's Santa Maria Church.
- In September 2009, several Christian Armenian and Greek buildings in Istanbul were marked with insignia, which coincided with increasing harassment of the Christian population and the anniversary of the 1955 pogroms against the Christian population of Istanbul.⁸
- In January 2007, Hrant Dink, an editor of an Armenian-language newspaper was assassinated after being prosecuted for "insulting Turkishness," because he wrote about the Armenian Genocide. In 2006, Dink had reported repeated death threats, which included references to his identity as an Armenian Christian, to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. After his murder, policemen posed for pictures with the accused assassin and not a single person has been convicted for his murder 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.

⁷ "Turkish nationalists accused of killing bishop," Associated Press. October 14, 2010.

⁸ Die Presse, International Christian Concern, Euronews.