RIGHTS OF THE CHRISTIANS IN TURKEY AND THE US CONGRESS

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On 15 June 2011, a draft resolution entitled Resolution Urging the Republic of Turkey to safeguard its Christian Heritage and to Return Confiscated Church Properties was submitted to the US House of Representatives.

As a justification of the draft, it is stated that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and freedom to manifest his religion in teaching, practice, worship and that within this framework, Turkey is obliged to accord to all its citizens and its religious minorities freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Then, it is expressed that the Ottoman Empires oppression and intentional destruction of much of its ancient Christian populations has left only a small fraction of these populations and meanwhile, the intentional destruction of over 2.000.000 Armenians, Greeks, Assyrians, Pontians and Syriacs is mentioned. Furthermore, it conveys that the Republic of Turkey has been responsible for the destruction and theft of much of the Christian Heritage within its borders, has hindered the remaining Christians on its territory from freely practicing their faith, and that the reforms carried out over the past decade to ameliorate the situation of religious minorities have been sorely inadequate.

Last of all, it urges the Government of Turkey to honor its obligations under international treaties and human rights law to: end all form of religious discrimination, without hindrance or restriction, to allow to organize prayer services, religious education, clerical training, appointments and succession, religious community gatherings and social services without any restrictions, return to their rightful owners all churches, other places of worship, monasteries, schools, hospitals, monuments and other religious properties, including movable properties and allow, without hindrance or restriction to preserve, reconstruct and repair all churches, other places of worship, monasteries, schools, hospitals, monuments and other religious properties.

If those reading the draft resolution do not know the subject well, they could reach the following conclusion: More than 2.000.000 Christians have been murdered during the

Ottoman Empire period. Christian heritage in the country during the Turkish Republican period have been destroyed or stolen. The Turkish Republic still discriminates against Christians and restricts allowing the organization of prayer services, religious education, clerical training, appointments, religious community gatherings and social services. Some

churches and other places of worship, monasteries, schools, hospitals, monuments and other religious properties and movable properties are not returned. Moreover, their maintenance, reconstruction and repair are also restricted.

A text submitted to the Congress entailing this much fabrication or exaggeration is surprising. A short research displays that despite some problems, the Christians in Turkey essentially benefit from all kinds of religious freedom, their churches are open, no restrictions are applied on religious education and moreover, schools of religious communities exist, and that there are no problems related to religious buildings as long as it is in conformity with the Law of Foundations. There is also no obstacle to settling issues like the Theological School in Heybeliada as long as they are in conformity with Turkeys educational legislation. Concerning the religious monuments left behind after the First World War and the War of Independence by non-Muslim minorities, since no religious community exist, utilizing these for non-religious purposes is quite normal. Meanwhile, it should also not be forgotten that in the recent years, monuments like the Akhdamar Church, which possesses artistic value, or monuments existing in places which have enough religious community are open to worship by being restored by the Government. We believe that the Christians in Turkey are in a period in which the Government supports them the most.

When this is the situation, why has there been a necessity to prepare such a draft resolution?

The militant Armenians in the US are disappointed with not being able to pass a resolution in the Congress in the recent months which recognizes the genocide allegations and with not being able to persuade President Obama to express the term genocide. Furthermore, some US Jews have taken an approach against Turkey due to its relations with Israel. With the participation of some the Congress members, these two groups are in an attempt to start a propaganda campaign against Turkey. For this purpose, apart from the genocide allegations which always draws attention in the US, they also want to utilize the issue of religious freedoms and in particular, the rights of Christians which the US public opinion is highly susceptible to.

The first evidence of this is that two separate draft resolutions concerning the genocide allegations and the rights of Christians, which do not quite relate to each other, have been submitted to the House of Representatives at the same time. The second is that a majority of the co-sponsors of both draft resolutions are formed by the same individuals.

Concerning how successful this campaign will be, this first of all depends on Turkish-American relations. As long as these relations develop normally without serious tensions, the draft resolutions against Turkey being adopted and therefore, the campaign being successful is quite difficult.

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