

**Remarks by Dr. Elizabeth H. Prodromou**  
Visiting Associate Professor of Conflict Resolution  
The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University

**Testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats**

**Congressman Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), Chairman**

**Hearing on “The Future of Turkish Democracy”**

**July 15, 2014 at 2 p.m.  
Room 2200, Rayburn House Office Building**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee,

Good afternoon. Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. Allow me to thank you for the invitation to brief you today on the future of democracy in Turkey. I respectfully request that my written comments, from which I will draw for this testimony, be submitted into the Congressional Record.

As a former Commissioner and Vice Chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom and as a current member of the Secretary of State’s Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group, I am heartened by the Subcommittee’s recognition that media freedom, the rights of religious minorities, and the vitality of civil society, are crucial issues for the health and quality of democracy in Turkey, as well as for Turkey’s capacity to play a consistent, positive, and effective role in partnership with the United States and NATO in confronting serious threats to stability in Europe and Eurasia.

In an effort to respect the time limitations on this hearing and well aware of the expertise of my fellow panelists, let me offer some general remarks and, then, specific data points, that focus on the rights of religious minorities in Turkey. The most constructive way of thinking about the rights of religious minorities in Turkey, as part of an overall assessment of democracy in Turkey, is within the context of international human rights standards established in foundational documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, amongst others. International human rights standards unequivocally identified the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to change one’s religion or belief, as well as freedom, either alone or within a community, in public and private, to manifest religious belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. (Paraphrase from the UDHR and ICCPR).

Measured against these international human rights standards, it is fair to say that there is evidence of some progress in Turkey during the period since the AKP (Justice and Development Party) was elected into government. The progress has come largely in two areas: the first is what I would call discursive improvements, in the form of a breaking of the long-held taboos in the Turkish government, media, and civil society, on discussions regarding systematic and egregious violations in the rights of religious minorities in Turkey (e.g. discussion of the Armenian Genocide, cleansing of Greek Orthodox Christians and the suffocation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, through mechanisms of violence and non-violence);

and the second is what I would call remedial efforts designed to loosen restrictions on religious freedom for Turkey's religious minority communities, particularly the rights of the country's tiny Christian minority communities (they comprise less than 1 percent of Turkey's overall population). The progress in these two areas has been widely reported, particularly when it comes to the 2011 liberalization in the law regulating property rights (return and compensation) for the country's religious minorities (return and compensation of vast amounts of property expropriated and/or transferred by the Turkish state from the Greek, Armenian, and Syriac Christian communities), and when it comes to permission by the Turkish state authorities for celebrations at well-known Christian religious sites, such as the Greek Orthodox Sumela Monastery and the Armenian Apostolic Monastery of Akhtamar. The invitation to leaders of the country's religious minority communities (e.g. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Kuryakos Ergun, head of the Syriac Mor Gabriel Monastery) to address the Turkish Parliament as part of the constitutional reform process, also suggested the possibility for improving the rights of religious minorities in Turkey.

However, despite signals, suggestions, and hopes for improvements in religious freedom conditions for Turkey's religious minority communities, the facts on the ground reveal a sobering picture of no substantive change—by that, I mean the failure to make legal and institutional changes necessary to ensure that all of Turkey's citizens are treated equally before the law—and, indeed, worrisome changes of deterioration in the rights of religious minorities. Indeed, put simply, if one uses religious freedom for Turkey's minority communities as a metric for the overall robustness and quality of democracy in Turkey, there is cause for grave concern. Three issues illustrate my point:

1. An Islamization strategy built on the conversion of Christian Churches into mosques (e.g. St. Sophia in Trabzon and Iznik/Nicaea, and the declared commitment of the AKP government to convert the Byzantine Cathedral of Aghia Sophia—a UNESCO World Heritage site) into a mosque, and on the destruction of any physical footprint of the religious patrimony of Christianity in Turkish-occupied Cyprus.
2. The continuing interference in the internal governance structures of Christian and Jewish minorities in Turkey (e.g. imposition of arbitrary citizenship requirements for election to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Armenian and Syriac Patriarchates).
3. Prohibitions on religious education and, especially, training of clergy, which ensures the disappearance of hierarchs and priests and, therefore, the annihilation of Christian communities which, by their nature, depend on religious orders. Especially emblematic is the ongoing closure of the Greek Orthodox Theological School of Halki (40-plus years closed) on the Island of Heybeliada, a reality that is purely political and unrelated to legal limitations (e.g. public statements to this effect last year, by both PM Erdogan and members of his government).
4. Failure to bring to justice and/or to prosecute and/or convict perpetrators of violence against members of Turkey's Christian communities, and the troubling rise of anti-Semitism in Turkey (e.g. statements by members of the government, in Turkish state and private media outlets).
5. Turkish state's use of racial coding system for religious minorities: Ancestry Codes of Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Syriacs, Others (Roman Catholics and Protestants) as 1 through 5, by the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Information, and the Population Directorate.
6. The comprehensive religious cleansing policy perpetrated by the Turkish Armed Forces, with support from the Turkish Cypriot authorities, in Turkish-occupied Cyprus. July 20<sup>th</sup> marks the 40<sup>th</sup> year of Turkey's occupation of northern Cyprus, and the systematic cleansing of any Christian presence in Turkish-occupied Cyprus proceeds apace. Eg.s: desecration of Greek, Armenian, and Maronite Christian religious sites, the looting and black-marketeering of religious icons and art, the arbitrary limitations on rights of worship for the tiny, surviving community of

Greek Orthodox enclaved in the Rizokarpassos area in the northern part of Cyprus, as well as systematic denial of requests by the Turkish military and Turkish-Cypriot authorities, for religious services by Christians seeking to cross the Green Line.

Measured against the symbolic and episodic improvements in the rights of religious minority communities in Turkey over the past 11-or-so years, there is a broader pattern of continuing policies of economic/property disenfranchisement of Christian (and, more recently, Jewish) minorities, state interference in the internal governance and education of religious communities, institutionalized and informal racist bias and discrimination against religious minorities, and continuing religious cleansing of Christians from Turkish-occupied Cyprus. In a word, religious freedom is a sobering metric of the democracy deficits in Turkey's institutions of governance and Turkey's political leadership (both Islamist/AKP and Kemalist/CHP/MHP).

Consequently, I respectfully suggest that this Subcommittee consider ways to encourage improvements in the legal and institutional frameworks necessary to ensure that all of Turkey's citizens enjoy full equality before the law. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief is inextricably tied to and refracted in media freedom and a vibrant civil society—in Turkey and elsewhere. Likewise, the strength of Turkey's democracy—particularly when it comes to rule of law and equality before the law for religious minority communities—is inextricably connected to Turkey's will and capacity to cooperate with the United States and NATO allies in confronting some of the most pernicious and serious threats (e.g. sectarian and communal violence, religious terrorism, and authoritarian forms of governance) to the Eurasian security environment.

Holding Turkey to international standards and to the expectations of a US partner and NATO ally make immanent strategic and moral sense.

I thank you for your attention.