

The Winning Christian ‘Cards’ in AKP’s Foreign Policy

Policy Brief

September 2015

Joe Hammoura

Office of Turkey

Middle Eastern Christians suffered from repeated oppression movements, which threatened their very existence in the past few years. However, Turkey has lately launched various initiatives to enhance the living condition for the Christian minorities, such as giving back confiscated properties to their original owners and allowing them to build up a church.

The current ruling *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party) (AKP), has a different approach towards various Christian sects, contrary to the previous secular ruling parties. They do not paint them all with the same brush, so that each sect is treated in a way to better fit in the Turkish authorities' foreign policy.

The Syriac sect's living conditions in Turkey have been improving just as the Turkish-Swedish relation is on the rise. On the other hand, the Orthodox and Armenian sects have been suffering because of the strife in the relations among Turkish authorities and Greece and Armenia respectively. But, overall, all the Christian minorities have been manipulated by the Turkish government in order to secure political gains, while exercising pressure on them when needed for its own benefit.

The decline of the role of Christians' and their presence has been predominant in all Middle Eastern countries. Treating minorities as inferior has been a dominant characteristic under the reign of nationalist military regimes of the last mid-century as Turkey, Iraq and Syria. In an Islamic dominated population and the rise of fundamentalists, the future holds no good news for the Middle Eastern Christians, as their persecution and the process of elimination not to say eradication continues violently.

Iraq has witnessed a mass exodus of Christians fleeing from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham's (ISIS) brutality, while the immigration of Syrian Christians to Europe has increased drastically in the last couple of years. With the evident Christian persecution, the question has shifted from the 'Christians' role' in the Middle East to a matter of their mere survival.

During these troubled times, Turkey is altering its practices, where it has issued a permit to build a new church, to serve around 25,000 Syriac community in Istanbul. This move is the first in kind in almost 90 years.[1] While it is a praised gesture from the Turkish authorities, it comes after a series of reforms towards various Christian confessions in Turkey, to whom "*1,014 confiscated foundation properties have been returned,*" and "*more have been promised.*"[2]

Despite the government's rhetoric, the relations between the Turkish authorities and Christians is best described as strained. Divided among Greeks Orthodox, Armenians, Assyrian/Syriac and others, around 120,000 Christians live in Turkey, which accounts for less than 1 per cent of the Turkish population.[3] The long reign of the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party) (AKP) has posed the problematic of the relation between the Islamic rooted party and some Christians Turks.

Contradictory to the secularists who often treated the 'Christians dossier' as a whole –painting all sects with the same brush–, the AKP's approach in regards to this matter, proves to be quite different. The AKP's view is more related to the relation between each sect and its regional or

international counterparts, which determines the AKP's policies towards Christians. Therefore it is essential to understand distinctive particularities in policy making towards each sect on its own.

A Greek Orthodox residing in Turkey nowadays is disadvantaged, because the relation between this sect and the Turkish authorities is related to the Turkish-Greek relations, and to the conditions of the Muslim minority in Greece. In recent years, the already complex relations between Greece and Turkey are marked by an increasing involvement of religious topics, which has a direct relation, in a way or another, to the religious conditions of the Muslim minority living in Greece.

The AKP's Turkey is championing for the construction of the first mosque in Athens and the ability of Muslim Greeks citizens to choose their own Mufti, who is currently chosen by the Greek government. In January 2013, the former Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan informed his Greek counterpart Antonis Samaras that Turkey would be willing to pay for the construction of a mosque in Athens,^[4] and insisted that Muslims in Greece should be able to elect their own Mufti.^[5] On one hand, Turkey is playing the Greek orthodox minority "card" in politics in the face of Greece, by offering the re-opening of the Orthodox Halki Seminary School^[6] in Istanbul, and on the other hand it is waving the idea of converting Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque^[7] as a way to practice pressure. To conclude, when the relation between Turkey and Greece is good, positive change for the Greek Orthodox minority will be evident, and vice versa.

Contrary to the negative conditions experienced by the Greek Orthodox because of their relations with Greece, Syriacs/Assyrian minority in Turkey is enjoying better conditions nowadays, despite the fact that they cannot exercise their full rights as other Christian sects. Not to forget that the first church that is set to be built in Turkey was granted to Syriacs, due to fact that the relation between this sect and Turkish authorities is of direct relation with Turkey and Europe.

As a member of the European Union, and a host to the largest exile communities of Syriac/Assyrian Christians,^[8] Sweden provides a good example to understand the policies of Turkey towards this minority sect. In March 2013, the Spiritual Leader of the Assyrian Orthodox Community and Deputy Patriarch Metropolitan Yusuf Çetin joined former President of Turkey Abdullah Gül in a visit to Sweden, which was the first time in the history of the Republic of Turkey for a Christian religious leader to join a Turkish President during a trip overseas.^[9]

Known by the presence of a powerful Assyrian/Syriac lobby, Sweden is also one of the leading countries that have been strongly supporting Turkey's EU bid.^[10] And as long as the Swedish-Turkish relations remain as good as it does today, and Turkish-European relations are relatively good, the Christians Assyrian/Syriac community in Turkey will benefit. This is why the "democratisation package" approved by the Turkish government in October 2013 granted to return of the confiscated land of the 1,700-year-old Syriac Mor Gabriel Monastery to the monastery's foundation.^[11]

In the past few years, the relation between the Turkish government and the Syriac sect is witnessing amelioration, yet these enhancements remain subject to the political mood of the Turkish authorities. The Lausanne treaty of 1923 who granted rights for some Christian

minorities in Turkey, failed to give Syriacs the right to build schools and religious associations, whereas, it granted, by law, for both the Orthodox and Armenian to have their own.

Ahead of the tense relation between Turkey and Armenia, first and foremost, both countries have considered the events of 1915 as an essential axis in shaping the relation between Turkish authorities and Armenian minority in Turkey. Despite the last soft policies adopted by Turkey towards the Armenians in their demands to recognise the Armenian genocides,^[12] the situation for Armenian minority does not seem positive, which has been affirmed by the former Chief Editor of the weekly *Agos*, Rober Koptaş, saying that the small Armenian community feels intimidated, and the “*Armenians fear expressing their religious identity here [Turkey].*”^[13]

Condolences and sympathy from the current Turkish authorities towards the Armenian Cause are remarkable nowadays. But this attitude is related and most probably limited to the 100th anniversary of the 1915's events, where Armenian Turks did not get out of it more than “*the assigning of bureaucrats of Armenian origin*”^[14] in administration, and nothing more.

Generally, one can see that Turkey is developing tolerant policies towards Christian minorities, especially when compared to other states in the Middle East. But by looking at the details of each policy practiced with each Christian sect, one can see a smart manipulation of the “Christian dossier” by Turkey, where sects have become subject of bargains steered in accordance to Turkish foreign policies.

Please cite this publication as follows:

Hammoura, J. (June, 2015), “The Winning Christian ‘Cards’ in AKP’s Foreign Policy”, Vol. IV, Issue 6, pp.27-32, Centre for Policy and Research on Turkey (ResearchTurkey), London, Research Turkey. (<http://researchturkey.org/?p=8995>)

Endnotes

[1]The Economist, *Build it: A new church in Turkey*, January 10, 2015. [Accessed on 8th March 2015], Available on:

<http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21638193-turkeys-first-new-church-90-years-build-it>

[2]Şahin A., *Turkey’s minorities laud efforts to mend decades-old troubles*, February 13, 2015. [Accessed on 8th March 2015], Available on:

<http://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2015/02/13/turkeys-minorities-laud-efforts-to-mend-decadesold-troubles>

[3]Deutsche Welle, ‘*Christians in Turkey are second-class citizens,*’ May 8, 2014. [Accessed on 8th March 2015], Available on:

<http://www.dw.de/christians-in-turkey-are-second-class-citizens/a-17619847>

[4]Dabilis A., *Erdogan Offers To Build Mosque in Greece*, Greek Reporter, January 29, 2013. [Accessed on 8th March 2015], Available on:

<http://greece.greekreporter.com/2013/01/29/erdogan-offers-to-build-mosque-in-greece/>

[5]Ekathimerini News, *Mosque and school spark new feud between Turkey and Greece*, October 11, 2013. [Accessed on 8th March 2015], Available on:

http://www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/_w_articles_wsite1_1_11/10/2013_522630

[6]Altıntaş B., *Turkey considering reopening Halki Seminary*, minister says, Today’s Zaman, July 31, 2013. [Accessed on 8th March 2015], Available on:

http://www.todayszaman.com/national_turkey-considering-reopening-halki-seminary-minister-says_322355.html

[7]Hurriyet Daily News, *Turkish Deputy PM expresses ‘hope’ to see Hagia Sophia as mosque*, November 16, 2013. [Accessed on 8th March 2015], Available on:

<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-deputy-pm-expresses-hope-to-see-hagia-sophia-as-mosque.aspx?pageID=238&nID=57998&NewsCatID=338>

[8]Swedish National Institutions for Language, *Demographics of Sweden*. [Accessed on 8th March 2015], Available on: <http://www.eurfedling.org/Sweden.htm>

[9]Anadolu Agency, *Assyrian priest to accompany President Gul*, March 8, 2013. [Accessed on 8th March 2015], Available on:

<http://www.aa.com.tr/en/rss/141101-assyrian-priest-to-accompany-president-gul-in-sweden>

[10]Akarçeşme S., *Sweden shows support for Turkey's EU bid*, Today's Zaman, February 26, 2013. [Accessed on 8th March 2015], Available on:

http://www.todayszaman.com/diplomacy_sweden-shows-support-for-turkeys-eu-bid_308223.html

[11]Hurriyet Daily News, *Return of Mor Gabriel Monastery lands to Syrians officially approved*, October 7, 2013. [Accessed on 10th March 2015], Available on:

<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/return-of-mor-gabriel-monastery-lands-to-syriacs-officially-approved.aspx?pageID=238&nID=55858&NewsCatID=339>

[12]Çandar C., *Erdogan surprises with condolence message to Armenians*, Al-Monitor, April 24, 2014. [Accessed on 10th March 2015], Available on:

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/04/erdogan-condolence-armenians-shrewd.html#>

[13]Lowen M., *Pope Francis visit: Turkey's Christians face tense times*, BBC News, November 27, 2014. [Accessed on 10th March 2015], Available on:

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30214805>

[14]Şahin A., *Turkey's minorities laud efforts to mend decades-old troubles*, op. cit. [Accessed on 8th March 2015], Available on:

<http://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2015/02/13/turkeys-minorities-laud-efforts-to-mend-decadesold-troubles>