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## Turkey Decrees Partial Return of Confiscated Christian, Jewish Property (Update)

Posted By [Weekly Staff](#) On August 28, 2011 @ 11:41 am In [News](#) | [1 Comment](#)

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ANKARA, Turkey—Turkey's government is returning hundreds of properties confiscated from the country's Christian and Jewish minorities over the past 75 years in a gesture to religious groups who complain of discrimination that is also likely to thwart possible court rulings against the country, reported the Associated Press (AP).



The Akhtamar Church

A government decree published on Aug. 27 returns assets that once belonged to Greek, Armenian or Jewish trusts and makes provisions for the government to pay compensation for any confiscated property that has since been sold on.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was scheduled to announce the decision formally later Sunday when he hosts religious leaders and the heads of about 160 minority trusts, at a fast-breaking dinner for the holy Muslim month of Ramadan, officials said.

The properties include former hospital, orphanage or school buildings and cemeteries. Their return is a key European Union demand and a series of court cases has also been filed against primarily Muslim Turkey at the European Court of Human Rights. Last year, the court ordered Turkey

to return an orphanage to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate.

Some properties were seized when they fell into disuse over the years. Others were confiscated after 1974 when Turkey ruled that non-Muslim trusts could not own new property in addition to those that were already registered in their names in 1936. The 1974 decision came around the time of a Turkish invasion of Cyprus that followed a coup attempt by supporters of union with Greece and relations with that country were at an all time low.

Erdogan's Islamic-rooted government seeking to promote religious freedoms has pledged to address the problems of the religious minorities. In the past few years, it amended laws to allow for the return of some of the properties, but restrictions remained and the issue on how to resolve properties that were sold on to third parties was left unsolved.

The decree overcomes those restrictions and helps scupper further court rulings.

"There was huge pressure from the European Court of Human Rights which has already ruled against Turkey," said Orhan Kemal Cengiz a human rights activist and lawyer who specializes in minority issues.

"It is nevertheless a very important development," he said. "With the return of properties and the compensations, the minority communities will be able to strengthen economically and their lives will be made easier."

The country's population of 74 million, mostly Muslim, includes an estimated 65,000 Armenian Orthodox Christians, 23,000 Jews and fewer than 2,500 Greek Orthodox Christians.

Religious minorities have often complained of discrimination in Turkey, which had a history of conflict with Greece and with Armenians who accuse Turkish authorities of trying to exterminate them early in the last century. Turkey says the mass killings at that time were the result of the chaos of war, rather than a systematic campaign of genocide. Few minority members have been able to hold top positions in politics, the military or the public service.

Turkey is also under intense pressure to reopen a seminary that trained generations of Greek Orthodox patriarchs. The Halki Theological School on Heybeliada Island, near Istanbul, was closed to new students in 1971 under a law that put religious and military training under state control. The school closed its doors in 1985, when the last five students graduated.

### **Pressure from the U.S.**

As the Armenian Weekly has [reported](#) in recent months, there were more than 2,000 Armenian churches operating in what is Today Turkey before the Armenian genocide of 1915. Most of these churches were destroyed and their properties confiscated. The aforementioned decree does *not* include these church properties. It is only limited to properties confiscated in the past 75 years.

The Erdogan decree coincides with increased U.S. Congressional scrutiny of Turkey's repression of its Christian minority. Last month, with a vote of 43-1, the House Foreign Affairs Committee adopted an amendment to the State Department Authorization bill, spearheaded by Ranking Democrat Howard Berman (D-Calif.) and Rep. David Cicilline (D-R.I.), calling for the return of Christian Churches confiscated by the Turkish government and end of Turkey's discrimination against its Christian communities. Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA) Executive Director Aram Hamparian welcomed that decision, stating, "Ninety six years after the genocide perpetrated against the Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians, the Turkish Government has destroyed or confiscated the vast majority of their holy sites and places of worship. The Foreign Affairs Committee today sent a powerful message to Turkey that it must come to terms with this brutal legacy, respect religious freedom of surviving Christian communities, and return the fruits of its crimes." The passage of the resolution was also hailed by Greek and Syriac American organizations, including the American Hellenic Educational and Public Affairs Association (AHEPA), American Hellenic Institute (AHI), American Hellenic Council (AHC) and the Syriac Universal Alliance, among many others.

The amendment is similar to a resolution (H.Res.306), introduced in June by Representatives Ed Royce (R-Calif.) and Howard Berman (D-Calif.), which has over 35 cosponsors.

Turkey's treatment of its Christian minority has also emerged as an issue to contention in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee consideration of U.S. Ambassador to Turkey nominee Francis Ricciardone. In response to questions submitted by Senator Robert Menendez (D-N.J.), Amb. Ricciardone erroneously asserted that a majority of Christian churches functioning in 1915 continue to operate as churches today. A revised response recently submitted to the key Senate panel continued to misrepresent the number of functioning churches. Armenian American church leaders issued powerfully worded spiritual messages in response to the Ambassador's statement. In an Aug. 15 [statement](#), Archbishop Oshagan Choloyan, Prelate of the Armenian Apostolic Church of Eastern U.S. stressed that the Ambassador's initial assertion was "so blatantly false that it cannot remain unchallenged." He went on to explain that "the facts are quite clear. From the massacres of Armenians in 1895-96 and the Armenian Genocide in 1915, to the decades following the establishment of the Turkish republic, Christian houses of worship were systematically destroyed or confiscated. My own church's hierarchal see, the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, was a victim of this process, and today is exiled in Lebanon. The archives of the Catholicosate contain hundreds of original deeds and other documentation of churches and church owned property that was confiscated."

The Primate of the Armenian Apostolic Church of Eastern U.S., Archbishop Khajag Barsamian [stated](#) that Amb. Ricciardone's response had "deeply offended Armenian-Americans", explaining that "the loss of these many hundreds of churches, their neglect and outright destruction, and the conversion of many of our sanctuaries into mosques, is a matter of intense pain to Armenians: an ongoing reminder of the loss of life and the destruction that we suffered as a result of the 1915 Genocide.

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## 1 Comment To "Turkey Decreases Partial Return of Confiscated Christian, Jewish Property (Update)"

#1 Comment By [Avery](#) On August 28, 2011 @ 12:13 pm

*'It is only limited to properties confiscated in the past 75 years.'*  
Right you are ArmenianWeekly.

How convenient *'... those that were already registered in their names in 1936.'*  
Whatever happened in the real world in **1915-1923** apparently didn't happen on the Turkish calendar. Since all traces of Armenians were erased by 1936, why not start the calendar in 1936: solves a lot of problems for the Turks.

Another desperate ploy by the Turks to head-off massive pressure that they sense is building and coming from the West: now that they have abandoned Kemalism, are returning to their Islamist Ottoman roots, and the secular honeymoon with the West is drawing to a close.

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