



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

### Forty-fifth session

14 September–2 October 2020

Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

## **Written statement\* submitted by Ecumenical Federation of Constantinopolitans, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[18 August 2020]

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\* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

GE.20-12225(E)



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## **Threats to Inter-Religious and Inter-Civilization Harmony resulting from actions taken by Turkey around the re-conversion of Museums -namely Hagia Sophia- to Mosques and the use of inflammatory rhetoric and propaganda conducive to a hostile environment for living communities**

The Ecumenical Federation of Constantinopolitans (EFC) is the worldwide federative body of the expatriated Greek-Orthodox Community of Istanbul. Most of the population (98%) of our Community is, contrary to the wishes of its members, presently living in various countries, away from their native land, Istanbul. This mass scale expatriation occurred as a result of the nationalist and discriminatory policies drawn up and implemented by the successive Governments of Turkey during the period 1955-2002. The veracity of the facts which led to this flight has been acknowledged, on numerous occasions, by the present leadership of Turkey<sup>1</sup>. During the past 10 years, EFC has submitted several proposals to the Government of Turkey stressing the clear need for implementation of effective and proportionate remedy and reparations measures in order to prevent the extinction of the Community still present in Istanbul, along the lines of the United Nations (U.N.) General Assembly Resolution 60/147<sup>2</sup>.

The members of the small Community still remaining in Istanbul have suffered multiple serious human rights violations and abuses, including of their minority rights, and their further survival and existence depend on the predominance of a much needed atmosphere of tolerance and respect of religious and cultural differences.

Unfortunately, the recent conversion from museum to mosque of the Byzantine era (6<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.) built Hagia Sophia Church, a site inscribed on UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage List, has been superseded by hostile slogans conducive to creating tensions between religions and civilizations. This inflammatory rhetoric was espoused, among others, by Turkish public officials. The widespread use of claims of the “right of sword and conquering” which was openly expressed - in the presence of the President of Turkey - during the ceremonial conversion of Hagia Sophia by the President of Religious Affairs of Turkey Mr. Ali Erbaş, who delivered his inaugural speech keeping in his hand a sword, was very unbecoming. The President of the Nationalist Movement Party Mr. Devlet Bahçeli, which supports the current Government of Turkey, openly claimed the “necessity of eliminating the remaining Byzantines”. Furthermore, according to press information verified by a question submitted by the leading opposition party (CHP), a flag of Taliban organization was seen during the above-mentioned inaugural ceremony.<sup>3</sup>

It is clear that the prevalence of such attitudes, reminding our Community of the era of persecutions it went through during the period 1955-2002, is highly alarming and runs contrary to the much needed –on a global scale- inter-religious and inter-civilizational mutual respect. This is especially true in a region has suffered a series of human tragedies, often caused by those exploiting and instrumentalizing religion as well as cultural heritage for their

<sup>1</sup> In a speech in May 2009 at the city of Düzce the Prime Minister Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated: “During many years those having different ethnic origin were expelled from our country. Did we gain? It is necessary to think about. In essence this was a result of a fascistic approach. We have fallen to these types of mistakes ourselves as well. But when we think with sincerity we are thinking that we made mistakes in this direction”.

In an interview of H.E. R.T. Erdogan, President of Turkey to nationwide STAR and NTV television channels in 20 April 2018 stated: “In past years the number of Greek-Orthodox citizens in our country was not small, was not, they were ten thousand and even hundred thousands, but because of numerous wrongdoings against them in our country it was pity that they were forced to go to Greece. We have also done mistakes, we must recognize these wrongdoings...”.

<sup>2</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 60/147, the Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/chpden-ayasofyada-acilan-taliban-bayragi-sorusu-41581412>.

own political agendas. Furthermore, hate speech against Christianity was also used by a part of media inside Turkey, in view of the conversion of Hagia Sophia to a mosque<sup>4</sup>.

Turkey is called to take all necessary measures to prevent such acts and refrain from any action or statement spurring inter-religious tensions and therefore endangering the living conditions and even the very existence of non-Muslim minorities.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2020/06/15/bati-istanbulu-ve-ayasofyayi-kaybetmeyi-hazmedemedi?paging=8>.  
<http://www.yenimesaj.com.tr/patrikhanenin-defteri-durulmeli-H1348856.htm>.