

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Today's briefing will examine the situation faced by Muslims, Protestants, members of the Armenian Orthodox Church and the Jewish community in the Republic of Turkey. Last month we highlighted the serious problems experienced by the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate. We plan to hold a Commission hearing soon on Turkey to discuss human rights issues overall, Ankara's efforts to meet EU criteria for accession, and that country's implementation record as a longstanding OSCE participating State.

First, I do applaud efforts by Turkey to bring its legal system into conformity with OSCE commitments on religious freedom. The current government has taken significant steps to improve conditions for the enjoyment of religious liberties, steps that were unthinkable just a few years ago. At the same time, as we learned last month about the Greek Orthodox Church, there are important areas still requiring close attention and urgent action.

Turkey's system of regulating religious groups remains problematic, especially the ban on headscarves in public institutions and the secular government's strict control of Islamic teaching and practice. While the EU has rightfully focused much attention on the religious freedoms of non-Muslim religious groups, it has been virtually silent regarding the rights of Muslims to practice their faith. As Members of the Helsinki Commission have consistently urged every prime minister over the past decade, the right of women to openly manifest their religious beliefs, including in public places and schools must be fully respected. While the President of Turkey recently approved legislation to allow thousands of students expelled from universities to return, including women who violated the ban on headscarves, the ban nevertheless remains. The time has come to end this injustice.

The Armenian Orthodox Church has suffered the loss of important properties through government expropriations. Similar to the situation of the Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox and Catholic Churches, the Armenian Orthodox Church has lost much under current laws that enable the government to assume direct administration of properties that fall into "disuse" when the size of the local community falls below a certain point. In addition, the Armenian Patriarchate continues to seek recognition of its legal status. Last September, Turkey did adopt regulations to improve the way the size of a religious community is gauged and to give communities with legal status the ability to acquire new property. However, the loss of property has done much damage to the church and the legislation does not allow for the reclamation of properties unjustly expropriated by the State.

Protestant and evangelical groups are experiencing problems in meeting openly, despite reforms that purportedly allow non-Muslim religious communities to build churches and buy property. Groups without legal standing or unable to afford these options cannot meet in other locations, such as private homes or rented facilities, as authorities have actively sought to close these meeting places under the pretext of zoning laws. Worse yet, the reforms are enforced in varying degrees depending upon the will of the local officials. I urge the government to explicitly allow for the holding of religious meetings in rented facilities or private homes.

Turkey has a special relationship with the Turkish Jewish community dating back to the Ottoman period, when Sephardic Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition were welcomed and given refuge. After the November 2003 bombings of two Jewish synagogues, not only did Prime Minister Erdogan publicly denounce the bombings, but he also met with Jewish leaders, reportedly a first in the history of the Republic. At the same time, there are disturbing reports that "Mein Kampf," Hitler's notorious work outlining his anti-Semitic world view, has become a bestseller in Turkey. I urge the prime minister and other leaders in Turkey to speak out publicly against resurgent interest in such racist materials.

In closing, Turkey has done much to earn a date to begin negotiations with the European Union. I urge the Government of Turkey to continue its good work and redouble efforts to fully respect the rights of individuals and their communities to freely profess and practice their faith.