

Testimony of Pastor Ramazan Arkan

Thank you so much for giving me this opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Ramazan Arkan. I am the leader of the Association of Protestant Churches in Turkey. In our country, which has a population of 86 million, there are about 10,000 Protestant Turkish Christians. I am here representing Turkish Christian churches, most of which are made up of Turks who have converted from Islam to Christianity. I am also here representing many Christian organizations from around the world which work in Turkey. Today, I would like to share with you the problems the Turkish Christians and church is currently facing.

The Turkish law, with democratic roots, guarantees equal rights for all regardless of religious belief. But, sadly, the Turkish church faces many difficulties and much discrimination. This affects us, both as individuals and as a community. Unfortunately, when we have tried to address these issues with Turkish authorities, we have most often been ignored because, as Christians, we are a religious minority.

Let me explain some of the challenges we face as a Turkish Christian minority:

- 1.** Because of the size of our Christian communities and due to lack of financial means, many Turkish churches tend to gather in small storefronts throughout the country. Other churches have rented or purchased their own buildings and have set themselves up as an officially recognized foundation. However, none of these churches are recognized as official places of worship. According to official Turkish zoning plans, there are legal places which are allocated for the construction of Christian churches. When we have asked for permission to build on these sites, we have been denied. Additionally, there are historical church buildings, which the Turkish church should have the right to use as meeting places, but the Turkish Church has not been able to obtain permission to gather and worship in most of these buildings. Many of these locations have been converted into mosques instead.
- 2.** As I said earlier, most Turkish Christians have converted from Islam to Christianity. As Turkish Christians, we continuously face false accusations and hate speech, both in society and through the media. Because of this, we have many challenges in our daily lives. Religious affiliation is attached to all Turkish identity records. If Christians choose to register themselves as “Christian” rather than “Muslim”, this can lead to serious acts of discrimination in schools and places of work. Many Christians have lost their jobs because of this or have not been hired for work in the first place.
- 3.** Turkish law states that all students from 5th grade on must receive Islamic education classes in school. Regardless if a school is public or private, most Christian students are

forced to attend Islamic classes, even if their religion is listed as “Christian” on their official government identification record.

4. In Turkey, it is forbidden to open a Christian college or university to provide education and training for Christian clergy. We are not allowed to award official diplomas for those who want to serve professionally as pastors in our churches.

5. Turkey has been allocated the right from other European countries to send Imams or Islamic leaders to work in mosques in their countries. However, as a Turkish church, we have not been legally permitted to bring foreign Protestant clergy from outside of Turkey to serve in our churches.

6. In Turkey, being a Christian pastor or member of clergy is not officially recognized as a legal career.

7. In Turkey, there has been no new cemetery allocated for Christian burial. As a result, we have to bury our dead in sections of state controlled Islamic cemeteries.

8. Because of financial limitations, as well as the legal status of the Turkish Christian clergy, many of the churches in Turkey rely on volunteers—both Turkish locals and foreign expats. Since 2019, 172 expats living in Turkey and working alongside Turkish churches have received the “N-82 codes”. These codes have forced them to leave the country. The N-82 code forbids foreigners to enter the country without special permission from the Turkish authorities. No one has been given this “special” permission. These codes label foreign workers as “a threat to national security”, and they are expelled from Turkey, no longer able to reenter the country. In total there have been approximately 375 foreigners living in Turkey, and supporting the Turkish church, who have had their residence permits revoked and have not been allowed to reenter Turkey. These codes have mostly been applied to individuals without notice and they find out when trying to return to Turkey from their home country. These individuals are then forced to leave Turkey without being able to finalize their services, say goodbye to friends, nor clean out their homes and belongings. Surprisingly, some of these foreigners are even married to Turkish citizens and have children born in the country. Not only has this destroyed families and relationships, it has left a void in local Christian churches. Because of the deportation of these foreign workers, many churches have been unable to provide services, local Turkish leaders have faced fatigue and frustration, and some churches have even had to close altogether.

I am sad to report to you that as the Turkish Protestant Church Association, we have regularly documented these problems in several different annual human rights violation reports, but we have not seen any positive changes as a result.

