

Turkish president oversees laying of foundation stone for nation's first new church since 1923, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew participates



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan oversaw a ceremonial laying of the foundation stone for the construction of the first new church building in Turkey in nearly a century.

In a ceremony held Saturday in Istanbul, Erdogan celebrated the beginning of construction for the new church, which will serve the local Syriac Christian community and will be the first new church built in Turkey since the nation became a republic in 1923.

In his remarks at the ceremony, Erdogan championed tolerance for minority communities in the Muslim-majority nation, declaring that “this country, this state belongs to everyone.”

"It is the Turkish republic's duty to meet the need for space to worship for the Syriac community, who are the ancient children of this geography," stated Erdogan, as reported by AFP.

"Anyone who has affection for, contributes to and is loyal to Turkey is a first-class citizen. There are no barriers to anyone in politics, trade or any other area."

The church will be constructed in the Istanbul neighborhood of Yesilkoy, located in the Bakirköy municipality. According to Erdogan, the church should be completed within the next two years.

Plans to construct the church were first announced in January, with Yusuf Cetin, the Syriac Orthodox Church's metropolitan for Istanbul and the capital Ankara, supporting the decision.

"We're proud of living under the Turkish flag in this land," stated Cetin, as reported by Anadolu Agency, also saying that "everyone's hearts beat for our Turkey."

The Syriac Christian community will be paying for the building, which is expected to have a sanctuary with space for approximately 700 believers.

Erdogan has a controversial record when it comes to religious freedom for the Islamic country's small Christian minority.

Last year, the Erdogan government garnered negative international attention for its detaining of American pastor Andrew Brunson under allegations that he was connected to a terrorist group that engaged in a failed coup in 2016.

Brunson, who had lived in Turkey for more than 20 years, was eventually freed and returned to the United States after the Trump administration demanded his release.

In a hearing held in June by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Brunson expressed his concerns that Christian persecution was on the rise in Turkey.

"There is still a high degree of freedom for Christians relative to other Muslim countries in the region, but I am concerned that all the signs point to this changing soon," stated Brunson.

“I think there are a number of people in the Turkish church, who as they see a lot of the foreign Christians being expelled from the country, [who] are very concerned about what is going to happen to them.”



/ Source: christianpost.com