11/06/2020

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The release of this week's US State Department Report on International Religious Freedom for 2019 coincides with the latest eyebrow-raising provocations by Turkish leadership, especially threats to reconvert the iconic Hagia Sophia into a mosque. Nevertheless, the breadth of the Turkish state's limitations and outright discrimination against non- Muslim religious institutions and non-Muslims in the country, as detailed in the annual US report, is extensive and points to a systemic policy.

References to torture, suspicious deaths, disappearances and illegal arrests point to a lack of respect of religious minorities in the predominately Muslim country, which stretches from extreme southeast Europe to the Near East.

Among others, the US State Department notes that senior US government officials have continued to publicly and privately express to Turkish officials their view that the Hagia Sophia, the pre-eminent cathedral of eastern Christendom for nearly a millennia, before being converted into a "conquest mosque" in 1453, is a monument of exceptional significance, one that must be preserved in a way that

respects its religious history.

The report also states that US officials have stressed that the Hagia Sophia is a symbol of peaceful coexistence, real dialogue and of respect between religions.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and other high-ranking Turkish officials, even this month, claimed that the 6th century cathedral, transformed into a museum by the secular Turkish state in the 1930s, must be re-converted to a mosque.

The US State Department also said the Turkish government continued to restrict efforts by minority religious groups to train their clergy, reminding that the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Halki Seminary remains closed.

It recorded complaints by religious minorities of facing difficulties in opening or operating places of worship; resolving land and property disputes and legal challenges of churches whose lands the Turkish government previously expropriated. Additionally, the report stated that the Turkish government did not return any church properties seized in previous decades.

The report characteristically notes that "…The Secretary of State and other senior US government officials continued to urge government officials to reopen the Greek Orthodox seminary in Halki and allow all religious communities to train clergy in the country."

In a reply, Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman Hami Aksoy said in a statement, on Thursday, that the report's contents regarded Turkey included "claims without sources."

Referring to the report's stance on discussion to convert the Hagia Sophia and the Chora cathedral from their current status as museums into mosques, Aksoy said: "…Hagia Sophia and Chora are the property of the Republic of Turkey and all means of authority are a matter of Turkey's internal affairs."

He added that decisions made or to be made regarding these sites are not a concern of other countries.