THE DRAFT RESOLUTION IN THE US REGARDING THE CHURCHES AND PROPERTIES IN TURKEY AND THE TURKISH REPUBLIC OF NORTHERN CYPRUS

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For around three years, some Armenians and Greeks residing in the US have been intending to take advantage of some unused churches and other religious properties for their campaign of denigrating and criticizing Turkey in the 2015 process.

In this regard, a draft resolution under the title Turkish Christian Churches Act was introduced to the House of Representatives at the end of March. The resolution requires that the US Department of State report on an annual basis regarding the churches and other religious properties in Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) that have not been returned or restored to the proprietors in any other way, that a list of aforementioned properties be added to the report, that annual developments on returning of the properties be indicated, and that this report be sent to the two chambers of the US Congress. In addition, information in this report will be included in the annual report on human rights and international religious freedom released by the US.

During and in the years following the First World War, the majority of Greeks and Armenians residing in the Ottoman Empire left the country or were sent to other countries as they cooperated with countries fighting against the Ottomans. Properties left by them, including the religious ones, were transferred to public property. But the ownership of those religious properties sufficient in number and quality for the religious services of Greeks and Armenians who stayed in the country were transferred to the Greeks and Armenians of Turkey. As a result of increase in international contacts and tourism, most of these properties were given to the relevant congregations and some were reimbursed for. Apart from this, some historically valuable churches were repaired by the government and were opened to worship.

In this period where immensely positive developments took place in terms of Christian religious sites, the introduction of a draft law to the US House of Representatives, as if there was a directly opposite case, is a difficult contradiction and makes one think that the main purpose is not the return of the properties but rather to vilify and harm Turkey in the 2015 process.

If one looks at the issue from the international law point of view, as in all parts of the world, all movable and immovable properties in Turkey are subject to Turkish legislation. This is why draft resolutions becoming law will mean intervening in the internal affairs of Turkey, and for this reason it will not be recognized by Turkey, and thus, will harm the Turkey-US relations which is on a rather delicate balance.

The aforementioned draft law, was adopted by a majority in the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee after a few amendments and was sent to the General Assembly. After its adoption, it will be transferred to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and then to the Senate Plenary Session, and in case of adoption, will become law following the signing of the President. Briefly, it takes a very long time for this resolution to become law, and in normal conditions it is not expected to become law given that this is the election year in the US.

Nonetheless, this resolution and other resolutions on the side of the Armenians and/or Greeks, including the genocide allegations, remain on the agenda to be used against Turkey as a means to pressure Turkey in the 2015 process.

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