

Religious Diplomacy, Ecumenical Claims, and the Challenge to Türkiye's Sovereignty Under the Treaty of Lausanne

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Abstract: *Since 2002, Turkish foreign policy has transformed at the intellectual, geographical, and practical levels, broadening its engagement with regions worldwide. In one of the most significant transformations, religious diplomacy assumed a key role in expanding Ankara's influence across Latin America, Eurasia, and Africa (Ozkan, 2014). Although President Erdoğan appears to adopt an Islamist stance for domestic political gain, due to some complexes and ignorance of history, he exhibits approaches that seem particularly suited to the Christian world. A careful look at Erdoğan's foreign travels is sufficient in this regard. In particular, contradictory decisions such as first imprisoning American Pastor Brunson for espionage and then releasing him on Trump's orders, first imprisoning German journalist Deniz Yücel for being a terrorist and then releasing him on Merkel's orders, and first opposing Sweden and Finland's entry into NATO and then accepting it due to personal interests, provide insights into this matter. In addition to his domestic political rhetoric against Netanyahu, it is also a profound contradiction that Türkiye is one of the three countries that do the most serious trade with Israel. In 2006, Benedict XVI visited our country, and Pope Francis visited on November 28-30, 2014. With Leo XIV's recent visit in November 2025, Erdoğan made history as the first leader to host a Pope three times during his reign. Pope Leo performed the Nicene Rite, which had been barred for 1700 years as a political display of power, and, as if baptizing the ecumenical claims of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch in Istanbul, he violated the sovereignty of the Republic of Turkey and the Treaty of Lausanne (www.ismetinonu.org.tr/lozan-baris-antlasmasi-tam-metni, www.diad.mfa.gov.tr). This religious diplomacy has been implemented not only by state institutions but also through active contributions from civil society organizations. Today, Turkey's religious diplomacy is much more sophisticated and comprehensive than imagined. Institutions that implement and develop religious diplomacy in Turkey have been reshaping themselves, both structurally and in terms of content (Doğan, 2013). Despite being predominantly Muslim, Turkey strives to maintain a secular nation-state structure that recognizes the right to life and worship of Christians, Jews, and even non-believers. This article examines the political behavior of the Catholic and Orthodox worlds toward Türkiye's sovereignty.*

Keywords: Vatican, Ecumenical, Turkish Sovereignty, Fener Greek Patriarchate, Turkish Orthodox Patriarchate, Treaty of Lausanne, Greater Middle East Project.

1. Introduction

For centuries, Rome and Istanbul have represented and epitomized two empires and two entities with significant spiritual and temporal power: the Papacy and the Caliphate. During the 19th and the 20th centuries, these institutions underwent substantial changes in a context of state secularization: in the case of the Papacy, there was a loss of temporal power and its "reduction" to a mainly moral authority; the Caliphate, on the other hand, was abolished after World War I, succeeded by the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), a bureaucratic body under state control, founded. Despite these changes, both institutions continue to play significant roles in the public life and public policy of the Italian and Turkish publics. While the Vatican can influence the Italian public sphere and public discourse through both its influence on ordinary people and its lobbying activities in relation to political decision-makers, in Turkey, the Diyanet has become the primary tool in the reshaping of Turkish society (both by the Kemalists and, later, by Erdoğan's AKP) (Ozzano, 2019).

With an ecumenical title, the Greek Patriarchate of Istanbul strives to achieve unity among the Orthodox churches. In the past, the Orthodox churches were not organized hierarchically but rather alongside one another and separately. Therefore, there is no hierarchy between them. The Greek Patriarch of Istanbul has no authority over the Archbishop of Athens or the Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow. However, he can achieve

unity within the scope they agree to. Difficulties arise in practice. For example, the Patriarchates of Istanbul and Moscow do not agree on the organization of the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches in America. A similar problem exists in France. The Archbishop of Athens presents more challenges to the Greek Patriarchate regarding ecumenism than the Ankara government. Historically, ecumenism was grounded in the geographical and political unity of the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires. Today, such a foundation is lacking (Poyraz, 2016).

The Republic of Turkey has no legal obligation to recognize the ecumenical status of the patriarch. According to the verbal agreement made at the Lausanne Conference, the patriarchate's stay in Istanbul was conditioned on its non-interference in worldly affairs (www.ismetinonu.org.tr). Byzantine Emperors prevented the Patriarchate of Constantinople from uniting with the Roman Catholic Church. The Ottomans, by contrast, entrusted the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople solely with coordinating the Orthodox churches within the empire's borders (Turkan, 2019).

Statute of the Fener Greek Patriarchate

The Greek Patriarchate of Istanbul has been in the news for activities that exceed the jurisdiction granted by Turkey and confer a status not recognized by the Republic of Turkey. From Turkey's Political perspective, the Patriarchate is a Turkish institution subject to the laws of the Republic of

Turkey, permitted to remain within Turkish territory solely to fulfill the religious needs of the Orthodox Greek minority, with the rights and powers of an ordinary church. The legal status of the Greek Patriarchate of Constantinople will be determined by the legal system of the state in which it is located.

The Church, known as the Greek Patriarchate of Constantinople, has never, in its history, exercised authority beyond the borders of the state in which it is located. Therefore, it has never used the adjective "ecumenical" in this sense (Yasin, 2022).

Some Orthodox churches, believing they had established a church outside their jurisdiction after annexing a Ukrainian church, have since September 14, 2018, stopped commemorating the Ecumenical Patriarchate in services. However, to understand the current debate, it should be emphasized that the protocols serve a function beyond their primary function. The Ecumenical Patriarchate also recognizes that the 14 autocephalous (independent), two autonomous, and one semi-autonomous geographical regional churches (Poyraz, 2016) that constitute the Orthodox (Eastern) Church are all equal, that there is no superiority or subordination between them, and that "none of them has authority or dominion over the other. However, the Ecumenical Patriarchate faces significant opposition because it claims to have "the duty," sovereignty, or authority to establish an Orthodox Church in areas outside the geographical boundaries of other patriarchs and archbishops." Moreover, the attempt by the Fener Greek Patriarchate of Istanbul to separate the Ukrainian Patriarchate from Moscow has pitted Turkey against Russia, an approach that violates national sovereignty within Türkiye. A sovereign country cannot be expected to allow its sovereignty to be compromised in international relations (Altındal 204, 2024, and 2025).

The statement "even if Turkey does not accept it, the Patriarchate is ecumenical" is baseless and meaningless. Such arguments are merely reflections of political objectives that use religious justifications and rules as a basis. Both the claim that all Orthodox Christians worldwide accept the Patriarchate's leadership and the statement that "the Ottomans granted it the title of ecumenical" are false. Turkey has the freedom and sovereignty to determine the status of an institution within its own state. As noted above, Turkey's perspective is that the Patriarchate is a religious institution that meets the religious needs of the Orthodox Greek people and is entirely subject to the laws of the Republic of Turkey. Turkey's responsibility is to ensure the religious freedoms of its own people in accordance with international law and practice. Furthermore, in contrast to the Fener Greek Patriarchate, the Turkish Orthodox Church, which supported the War of Independence, uses Turkish as the language of worship, recognizes that Istanbul is Istanbul and not Constantinople, and serves the Orthodox community.

Turkish Orthodox Patriarchate

The Patriarchate owns three principal churches. These are: The Virgin Mary Turkish Orthodox Church (Anatolian Orthodox Church of the Istanbul Archdiocese), the Karaköy St. Nicholas Church, and the St. Aya Yani Church. These

three churches were transferred to the Turkish Orthodox Church during the War of Independence. Since then, they have been under the control of the Turkish Orthodox Patriarchate. The Istanbul Orthodox Patriarchate claims that these churches were seized by force during the War of Independence and seeks to reclaim them (www.sabah.com.tr/yasam/87-yil-once-aldiginiz-kiliseyi-geri-istiyoruz).

The Fener Greek Patriarchate in Istanbul is an ethnically based church that supported the Greek occupation during the War of Independence against the Independent Turkish Orthodox Church, which has a history of Turks converting to Christianity following the Turkish conquest of Anatolia.

The Independent Turkish Orthodox Church defended the unity of Türkiye during the War of Independence and opposed the separatist aims of the Pontic Greeks in the Black Sea region.

Vatican's Ambitions

Relations between Turkey and the Vatican have been discussed more frequently since Pope Francis's 2014 visit to Turkey. Turkey-Vatican relations, which were formally established in 1960, have an important historical background. Formal relations, which were attempted in substantial measure during the reign of Sultan Abdulhamit II, particularly to reduce France's influence over Catholics and for other reasons, were not established due to several factors.

There were a lot of studies related to the reasons why the Turkish-Vatican relations, which began at a high level of friendship in the second half of the 19th century, were not formalized until the second half of the 20th century (Türkan, 2019).

Ecumenic and Turkish Sovereignty

According to the verbal agreement made at the Lausanne Conference, the patriarchate's stay in Istanbul was contingent upon its refraining from interfering in worldly affairs.

Because of the differences between Catholicism and Orthodoxy, the Patriarch cannot be comparable to the Pope. Bartholomew's (Head of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Istanbul) ecumenism is akin to the rector of Al-Azhar attempting to declare himself caliph.

It is said that according to the statement of the Fatih District Governorship of the Republic of Türkiye dated August 15, 2022, "*The Patriarchate, whose status was clarified after lengthy discussions during the negotiations of the Treaty of Lausanne, was transformed into a new status with the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. Within this framework, the Patriarchate, as a church of the Greek minority in Turkey, is a religious institution vested solely with religious authority and should be considered within the Treaty's framework on the "Protection of Minorities." Unlike Greece, while Turkey has the freedom to elect its own religious officials, the Patriarchate lacks "ecumenical" political and administrative status. ...In conclusion, the claim of "ecumenism" of the Fener Greek Patriarchate, which is accepted as a religious organization affiliated with the Fatih District Governorate in the minutes of the Treaty of Lausanne*

and in judicial decisions, is incompatible with legal facts” (Yasin, 2022).

www.fatih.gov.tr/fener-rum-patrikhanesinin-ekumeniklik-iddiasina-iliskin-basin-aciklamamiz).

Attacks on the Sovereignty of Türkiye

- 1) The Greek Patriarch of Istanbul uses the name "Constantinople" instead of "Istanbul" in the illegal agreements she signs. In his speeches, he uses the title of "Ecumenical Patriarch" and refers to Istanbul as "Constantinople."
- 2) Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Türkiye, emphasized the importance of Lausanne by saying, "This treaty is a document that declares the collapse of a massive attempt to destroy the Turkish nation, which had been prepared for centuries and was thought to have been completed with the Treaty of Sèvres. It is a political victory unprecedented in Ottoman history." Every attack on the Treaty of Lausanne is an attack on Turkish sovereignty.
- 3) The Turkish Orthodox Patriarchate is assumed to be non-existent. Sevgi Ereneler, Public Relations Officer of the Independent Turkish Orthodox Patriarchate, emphasized that the "ecumenical" claims of the Fener Greek Patriarchate amounted to interference in Türkiye's internal affairs and sovereignty. Article D of Section 5 of the Treaty of Lausanne addresses minority issues. Similarly, on page 100 of Article D of Section 5, an agreement was reached regarding the Patriarchate. Accordingly, the Patriarchate remained in Istanbul, with the approval of the British and Greek sides, on the condition that it would not engage in political activities and would only fulfill religious duties.
- 4) The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Fener is an ethnic church, a Greek church. The possibility that this church could harm Turkey domestically has diminished today. Whether Turkey is harmed abroad depends on the stance of the Greek lobby in America. Providing benefits to Turkey internationally also depends on Greek and Turkish interests not conflicting. If a conflict arises, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Fener should not be expected to take a stance against Greek interests.
- 5) According to the Turkish Constitution, there is no legal difference between a church priest and a mosque imam. Nor can they undertake any international initiative without the permission and knowledge of the Republic of Turkey. Bartholomew has repeatedly violated these unlawful approaches. This is a blatant attack on a country's sovereignty.

Although the Pope's recent visit to Türkiye was framed as a peace initiative, the emblem's messages make it clear that the real goal is to strengthen the Catholic Church at the expense of Türkiye's sovereignty and to grant ecumenical legitimacy to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. Furthermore, how is it possible that at a peace-themed event, not a single word is said about an attempted genocide that killed tens of thousands of people, including children and women? Years ago, Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror, later Abdulhamid II, and then Mustafa Kemal Atatürk did not permit the Iznik Ceremony, which was clearly a violation of our sovereignty so who, and under whose orders, has permitted this ceremony in Iznik/Turkiye (where the final version of the Bible, the holy

book of Christianity, was prepared, and the belief that Jesus was the son of God was officially accepted for the first time at this meeting). History will reveal this secret in the future.

All of this is part of the United States' and Israel's Greater Middle East Project.

In conclusion, the ecumenical aspirations of the Fener Greek Patriarchate, while rooted in complex religious traditions, intersect problematically with Türkiye's legal and political sovereignty. The continued relevance of the Treaty of Lausanne and Türkiye's secular constitutional framework underscores the need for clarity in defining the roles of religious institutions within national borders. As religious diplomacy evolves, a balanced approach that respects both international engagement and the domestic legal order is essential.

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