

How urban planning is used to undermine Christian institutions in Turkey

Authorities are using zoning laws and urban planning regulations to prevent construction of Christian institutions, according to a new report documenting restrictions across multiple cities.



Istanbul's Sultan Ahmet Mosque, known as the Blue Mosque, in 2012. | Credit: Alan Holdren

By [Bryan Lawrence Gonsalves](#)

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On January 22, 2026, the European Court of Human Rights declared inadmissible [a complaint](#) by the Surp Kevork Armenian Church Foundation in Samatya against the Republic of Turkey.

The Armenian minority foundation in Istanbul has historically owned several plots of land, including one on which it operates a cafe whose income helps fund its religious, educational and charitable work. Turkish authorities reclassified some of those parcels as “green space” in a zoning plan, a designation that can pave the way for the city to take the land.

The foundation objected, warning that the move puts revenue generating property on a path to future expropriation and threatens the financial base that sustains its church and community services. Turkish courts held that once a more detailed plan is adopted, Istanbul authorities may expropriate the land within five years.

The foundation challenged the zoning decision in Turkey's administrative courts, arguing that the state had failed to strike a fair balance between public aims and the foundation's rights. Now the European Court has upheld the municipality's decision, citing public interest in expanding green space, easing population density and protecting Istanbul's historic heritage.

The dispute sits within a longer history of property conflicts involving Christian minority foundations in Turkey, including Armenian and Greek Orthodox institutions. Over the twentieth century, many minority properties were confiscated, placed under state control or lost through restrictive interpretations of foundation law.

Zoning law as a tool of oppression

EWTN News spoke to Youssef Ayed, Associate Researcher at the European Centre of Law and Justice, who says the Armenian foundation's case reflects a broader vulnerability facing historic churches in Turkey. Church properties can remain formally intact while governmental measures steadily undermine long term security.

Ayed explained that the current case reflects a wider pattern in which authorities use zoning decisions and administrative paperwork to weaken Christian foundations without an outright seizure. Land can be reclassified for public use, titles can be challenged through older foundation records, foundations can be placed under state control and some properties can be denied recognition altogether because of how they were historically registered. The result, he explains, is a slow erosion of minority institutions through legal and bureaucratic steps rather than a single dramatic confiscation.

While acknowledging that legal remedies exist, Ayed says they tend to work only under pressure. "There are verified cases in which Christian foundations have succeeded in recovering property, most often following international litigation or sustained diplomatic pressure," he said, pointing to the Greek Orthodox Orphanage of Büyükada, restored after a 2010 European Court ruling.

He also pointed to a 2011 decree that opened a path for some non-Muslim foundations to apply for the return of properties confiscated since 1936 or to receive compensation. The reform resulted in a number of restitutions, but its impact has remained limited because implementation has been uneven and tightly constrained by procedural rules, leaving many properties outside the process.

In this context, a zoning designation can function as a pressure point. Even if day-to-day operations continue, the reclassification signals that a minority institution's economic base may be temporary.

Critics argue that state compensation for property seized, does not address what is at stake for churches, schools and charities whose mission depends on long term continuity, not a single financial payout.

The state of religious freedom in Turkey

Ayed situates the issue within what he calls a wider pattern of state action against Christian minorities. "There is a well-established and systemic pattern whereby the Turkish authorities use legal and administrative instruments to progressively undermine the rights of religious minorities, particularly Christian communities," he said. While property disputes are central, he points to other indicators, including "Turkey's persistent refusal to recognize the legal personality of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Armenian Patriarchate," and interference in internal governance "notably by exerting control over or delaying the election of patriarchs." He also notes that the Greek Orthodox Seminary of Halki "has remained closed since 1971, despite repeated calls from international bodies to allow its reopening."

For Ayed, these measures add up to more than bureaucratic friction. "The treatment of Christian minorities in Turkey reveals a serious and structural deterioration of freedom of religion in the country," he explained, affecting Catholic and Orthodox communities as well as Protestants, converts from Islam and foreign Christians. He notes that the political climate increasingly casts Christianity as suspect: "Shaped by an increasingly Turco-Islamist ideology promoted by President Erdoğan, Christianity is often portrayed—explicitly or implicitly—as foreign, disloyal, or incompatible with Turkish national identity."

International Scrutiny as a Safeguard

Ayed further explained said even when cases reach Strasbourg, international litigation often brings limited relief because the European Court tends to focus on whether procedures were followed, not on whether minority institutions are being steadily squeezed in practice. As a result, he said, foundations are frequently sent back to Turkish courts instead of receiving a clear remedy that protects their property. In his view, that reality leaves historic churches depending less on predictable legal protection and more on sustained international attention, "the only genuinely effective safeguard for historic churches in Turkey remains constant and sustained international scrutiny—not only from the Council of Europe, but also from the European Union and the United States."

Without steady pressure from European institutions and key allies, formal obligations on religious freedom can be pushed aside whenever politics or strategic interests take priority.

The Armenian foundation's case may be closed in Strasbourg, but the underlying concern remains: urban planning decisions that appear neutral can, over time, hollow out the economic life of Christian institutions, leaving historic minorities legally present yet increasingly unable to sustain their religious and charitable work.

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