



**Cengiz Aktar:**

## **Turkish State Increasingly “Schizophrenic” on Religious Minorities**

ZURICH - The Turkish scholar and journalist, Prof. Cengiz Aktar, sees a Turkish state policy towards religious minorities that is “schizophrenic.” Speaking at a CSI event in Zurich on the 1st of April, Aktar observed that Turkey’s Islamist government has loosened the state’s longstanding lid on the politics of religious identity, while continuing to press Turkey’s Christians to the margins of society.

On the one hand, he noted, the Turkish authorities now devote public funds to restoring houses of worship and allow Armenian Christians to represent Turkey abroad, while, on the other hand, they prevent the restoration of many other Christian sites, suppress awareness of the Ottoman Genocide, and uphold a 1974 Turkish appeals court case that classified all non-Muslims as “foreigners.”

April 24, 2015 marks the 100th anniversary of the Ottoman Empire’s annihilation of Anatolia’s Christian population during World War I, through the massacre, deportation, forced conversion and enslavement of millions, affecting mainly Armenians, Assyrians, and Syriacs. Prewar Anatolia, Aktar noted, was 25% Christian; today Turkey is “the most homogenously Muslim country in the region, with a Christian population of less than 1%.” Turkey has never recognized the reality of the genocide, and has in the past prosecuted academics and activists for doing so.

Aktar claimed that he is “not optimistic” about the prospects of the Turkish state itself recognizing the Genocide. “This very state is the continuation of the Ottoman state which organized the massacres,” he said. One of the architects of the Genocide, Shukru Kaya, Aktar noted, became the Minister of the Interior in the new Turkish Republic after World War I, and land and property seized from the victims was distributed to other citizens. “A state will never recognize its faults by itself.”

Nevertheless, in his lecture, Aktar pointed to an increase in what he called “memory works,” or projects undertaken by civil society actors to restore the memory of the Genocide and the communities that fell victim to it. As examples, Aktar mentioned the rise in academic conferences and books dedicated to minority communities and the massacres, a wave of memoirs by writers in Turkey about their “Armenian grandmothers” (Armenian Christian women enslaved and forced to marry into Muslim families during the Genocide), and a large number of church and synagogue restoration projects undertaken by local communities – projects “they would never have dared” to take on in the past, Aktar said.

Aktar also mentioned that descendants of the estimated 300,000 Armenians who converted to Islam to escape the massacres – who today “may number in the millions” – are “now openly talking about their Armenian roots.” Some of these descendants “are even reconverting,” being baptized, and learning the Armenian language.

The task for advocates seeking the recognition of the genocide, and the creation of space for religious minorities in Turkey, Aktar said, is to “continue healthy, ever-deeper memory works to challenge the official narrative. There is no other way.”

Aktar’s lecture was sponsored by Christian Solidarity International, and is part of CSI’s ongoing lecture series on the Future of Religious Minorities in the Middle East. Aktar’s lecture, along with all the other lectures in this series, is available for viewing on <http://www.middle-east-minorities.com>.

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