

# THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF THE POLITICIZATION OF THE FENER GREEK PATRIARCHATE

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The Fener Greek Patriarchate in Istanbul operates as a public institution within the framework established by the 1923 Lausanne Peacy Treaty, is bound by the laws of Türkiye, and is subordinate to Turkish secular authorities. The administrator of this institution, the Fener Greek Patriarch, is required to be a Turkish citizen and is issued a diplomatic passport by Türkiye, signifying that the government considers the Patriarch to be an important individual representing public interests of the country. In line with these factors, the Patriarchate is tasked with serving the religious needs of the Orthodox Greek ( *Rum* in Turkish) citizens of Türkiye and is required to abstain from all political activities both at home and abroad. However, the Patriarchate has had a problematic relationship with the Turkish government in this regard since the founding of the Republic of Türkiye, because the Patriarchate insists on using the ecumenical title[1], something that the Turkish government has persistently rejected to recognize due to this titles ramifications in terms of state sovereignty.

Relying on its traditional status of *primus inter pares* (first among equals) in the Eastern Orthodox world, the Patriarchate has for a long time sought to enhance its position by using the ecumenical title. Were the Turkish government to acquiesce to such a plan and were the autocephalous Orthodox churches agree to the Fener Greek Patriarchates supremacy, the Patriarchate could eventually seek to establish itself as the Eastern Orthodox equivalent of the Roman Catholic Church and become a state within a state in Türkiye (emulating the Vatican within Italy).

Orthodox churches are steeped in nationalism by their very nature[2], and the legacy of the dissolution of the Ottoman State (Empire) triggered by nationalist trends had a profound effect on the mindset of the Ankara Government that established the Republic of Türkiye in 1923 following the successful conclusion of the Turkish National Struggle (1919-1922). In the aftermath of a destructive war with Greece that ravaged Anatolia and considering the Fener Greek Patriarchates strong connections to Greek nationalism, the

Ankara Government engaged in arduous negotiations during the Lausanne Peace Conference (1922-1923) with Greece and the Allied Powers of the First World War to have the Patriarchate relocated to Mount Athos in Greece. The Ankara Government calculated that the Patriarchates presence in Türkiye would serve as an instrument for Greek and Western interventionism and sought to avoid this threat (which had historical precedents) to its sovereignty through negotiations. However, Greece and its Allied Power backers were so adamant about the Patriarchate remaining in Türkiye that negations ground to a halt, which jeopardized the whole Lausanne Peace Conference process. In the end, the Ankara Government and its counterparts came to a verbal gentlemens agreement[3] whereby the Patriarchate would remain in Türkiye but would be required to be a subject of civil administration and to abstain from all political activities.

These historical factors have framed the relationship between Türkiye and the Fener Greek Patriarchate ever since. Unsatisfied with being confined within Türkiye and aspiring for the recognition of the *primus inter pares* status and beyond, the Patriarchate has used a combination of Christian solidarity and backing from Greece and the predominantly Chrisitan Western countries to push its ecumenical agenda. In response to this, Türkiye has chosen to stonewall the Patriarchates political maneuvers, which has meant that the Patriarchate has played its own game with no results. There are both domestic and foreign policy reasons for Türkiye strategically ignoring the claimed international status of the Patriarchate. Domestically, Türkiye has wished to avoid alienating its citizens of Greek origin that could be triggered by engaging in open confrontation with the Patriarchate. Internationally, Türkiye has sought to avoid offending the Eastern Orthodox world and (being a part of the Western camp during the Cold War) was mindful of the Patriarchate being historically used as a foreign policy tool by the West against the officially atheist Soviet Union.

The Fener Greek Patriarchates use as a foreign policy tool has had lasting impact throughout the Cold War and present times in the context of the ongoing Ukraine-Russia war. It is a widely known and reported fact[4] that the West (primarily the United States) has employed the Patriarchate as an intelligence and psychological asset against both the Soviet Union and subsequently Russia to undermine the Moscow Patriarchates position in the Eastern Orthodox world and thereby reduce Russias cultural influence during the Cold War and later in post-Soviet countries. It is therefore no wonder that Russia has always viewed the Fener Greek Patriarchate with suspicion and has treated the Patriarchate as an instrument of the West in the international arena.

In recent times, this has resulted in dramatic developments such as Ukraines efforts to wean itself off Russian influence, which in turn has placed Türkiye in an uncomfortable position between Ukraine, Russia, and the United States. Following Russias persistent aggressions against Ukraines territorial integrity starting in 2014, Ukraine (with the tacit backing of the United States) sought to establish a unified, independent, and national Orthodox church of Ukraine free from the Moscow Patriarchates control and thus applied to the Fener Greek Patriarchate to be granted such a right. Despite the Fener Greek Patriarchate having no clearly defined authority in this regard and strong opposition from the Moscow Patriarchate, the Fener Greek Patriarchate proceeded with granting this right

to Ukraine. The Moscow Patriarchate retaliated by severing its ties with the Fener Greek Patriarchate. This means that the largest church (or one of the largest based on how one assesses church jurisdiction) in Eastern Orthodoxy has broken its communion with the Fener Greek Patriarchate.

Following the trend of American interventionism in Eastern Orthodox affairs, during an official visit to the Fener Greek Patriarch Bartholomew in last August, the United States Ambassador to Ankara Tom Barrack openly referred to the Patriarch as ecumenical.[5] This has naturally caused considerable public reactions and displeasure in Türkiye. Whether it was his personal convictions[6] that motivated him to use such a controversial title or whether he received specific instructions to do so, Ambassador Barracks statements were highly inappropriate in terms of international diplomatic etiquette.

For now, Türkiye continues to strategically ignore the Fener Greek Patriarchates maneuvers, while the Patriarchate continues to remain aloof from the realities of being a public institution in Türkiye. This aloofness is well-entrenched and manifests itself in interesting ways. For example, until recently, the Patriarchate did not even have a Turkish-language official website, with Greek and English as the only two language options.[7] Today, the Patriarchates website does offer Turkish language as an option, but only in a limited scope in the sense that many parts of the website do not have Turkish content. Even more inappropriately, the Patriarchate openly displays the ecumenical title in the header section of its website.

Despite the provocative actions taken by the Patriarchate, the Turkish government nevertheless refrains from displaying harsh responses to both the said religious institution and the Orthodox Greek community in Türkiye that it represents. This is in stark contrast to Greeces treatment of the Muslim Turkish minority in Western Thrace. Right under the nose of the European Union and despite the Turkish minority having never acted in a way that could pose a challenge to Greeces state sovereignty, the Greek government has for decades now engaged in a systemic campaign of harassment and marginalization against the institutions of the Turkish minority.[8] This well-documented systemic campaign, which has been the subject of multiple European Court of Human Rights judgements against Greece, is designed to slowly and methodically erase centuries-long Turkish presence and identity in Greece. This situation clearly demonstrates troubling double standards whereby Greece continues to be treated as the Christian golden child of the West despite being the serial rule breaker in the EU, while Türkiye continues to be treated as the Muslim other despite taking measured responses against sustained provocations.

**Picture: US Ambassador to Ankara Tom Barrack with Fener Greek Patriarch Bartholomew during their meeting in Istanbul on 11 August 2025. - Source: Eualive.net*

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