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Impressions of Orthodoxy in Turkey: Secularization, Politics, Arts, and Tourism

Gitta Hammarberg

Since 1991, His All Holiness Bartholomew I, Archbishop of Constantinople, New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch, the 270th successor to Christ's apostle St. Andrew, presides over the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople. The Patriarchate has existed uninterrupted since the fourth century A.D., even when Byzantine Constantinople fell to the Muslim Turks in 1453. It has been a "church in captivity" for over 500 years, continuing even today in a secular Turkish state. The Patriarch leads over 300 million Orthodox Christians, the world's oldest and second largest Christian community.¹ The Muslim majority religion, approximately 99% of the population, is overseen by the government's Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*). The non-Muslim religions, including about seventy Greek Orthodox sites (with a dwindling population variously estimated at 2000–5000 members) and around fifty Armenian Orthodox sites (with 65,000 members) are regulated by a different government agency, the General Directorate for Foundations (*Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü*). The Orthodox sites, together with circa twenty Jewish sites (with 25,000 members), have special legal minority status, as dictated by the 1923 Lausanne Treaty.² As *Ecumenical*, the Patriarch is recognized by autocephalous and autonomous Orthodox churches internationally as the *primus inter pares* of bishops. The Turkish government, however, does not formally recognize the *ecumenical* authority of the Patriarch, only his authority over the country's Greek Orthodox community. What Steven Runciman said in 1971 about Patriarch Athenagoras (1948–72) holds equally true of the pres-

ent Patriarch: his relations with the Turkish secular state are “delicate and difficult” and the Turkish government “would prefer him not to be there at all.”³

Though the Turkish constitution mandates freedom of religion and the government in recent years has shown some tolerance of religion, there are nevertheless undue restrictions on religious groups and expression. The government regulates church property, it can close religious seminaries, grant cultural heritage status to sacred sites, prohibit the building of places of worship, and so on. To a non-expert observer, the boundaries between religious and secular life in Turkey seem fluid. The Patriarch’s status as religious leader seems ambiguous, and his religious functions seem to blend seamlessly into more secular ones. Though the ecumenical status of Patriarch Bartholomew is not officially recognized, there seems, however, to be a *tacit* recognition of this status, which, for instance, allows him to travel widely and perform ecumenical activities.⁴

Patriarch Bartholomew has been particularly active in ecumenical outreach. He has promoted peace and interfaith cooperation, served as president of the World Council of Churches, and joined Pope John Paul II in attempts to reconcile the Orthodox and Catholic churches. He has met with the World Jewish Congress, traveled extensively in Muslim countries, and visited Georgia and Armenia. His trip to Cuba in 2004 was the first visit by an Ecumenical Patriarch to Latin America. He has also organized interfaith conferences and addressed environmental issues in the Black Sea, the Danube basin, the Adriatic and Baltic Seas—a special interest that has made him known as the “Green Patriarch” and garnered him awards such as Norway’s Sophie Prize for linking faith to environmental issues.⁵ In addition, Patriarch Bartholomew promotes Byzantine culture. He is, for instance, one of the primary supporters of Byzantine art exhibitions held at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, including the current “Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261–1557).” His “Statement” in Greek and English opens the magnificent exhibition catalogue. He visited the exhibition and gave a lecture, “Byzantine Icons: A Legacy of Humanism,” on March 18, 2004.⁶ His “religious” leadership thus includes “secular” environmental and artistic issues.

Patriarch Bartholomew’s local authority as Archbishop of Constantinople, recognized by the government, extends most directly over small Greek Orthodox communities in Turkey as well as some communities in the Greek islands and Northern Greece—modest remains

of a once glorious Byzantine empire. Minority religions have not had an easy time in an overwhelmingly Muslim and now secular state. The list of human rights violations is long and includes acts of ethnic cleansing, pogroms, forced expulsions, acts of terrorism, vandalism, and even restrictions on the theological functioning of the Orthodox church.⁷ The size of the Orthodox community in today's Turkey is negligible: "The Greek community in Turkey is dwindling, elderly and frightened. Its population has declined from about 110,000 at the time of the signing of the Lausanne Treaty in 1923 to about 2,500 today [1991]."⁸ Documenting the state of the Greek congregations in Istanbul, Anastasia Stanmeyer cites George Jahos, a caretaker at a small church in downtown Istanbul: only nine people attend Sunday services. Jahos feels that Orthodox congregations in Turkey "are finished." My own visit to several Greek Orthodox churches in the vicinity of the Patriarchate in June 2004 (in the company of a Turkish-speaking Macalester College student, Basak Candar) bore out this pessimistic view. We visited the 13th-century Church of St. Mary of the Mongols, which, according to the *Eyewitness Travel Guide* to Istanbul, "is the only Greek Orthodox church in Istanbul to have remained continuously in the hands of the Greek community since the Byzantine era." It was never converted to a mosque nor put to other uses and still contains a rich array of ancient icons and an especially beautiful Byzantine mosaic of the Theotokos Pammakristos.⁹ The caretaker told us that services are held only once a month and that no more than fifteen persons on the average attend, all of them elderly. According to Douglas Frantz, "the population of ethnic Greeks, with an average age of sixty, has been whittled from 15,000 to about 2,500 over a century of expulsions, attrition and migration."¹⁰ This situation threatens the continued operation of the church and many churches have reverted to the state when the community has decreased to less than ten people. An Armenian Orthodox church in Kirikhan, Hatay province, for instance, had to be turned over to an Armenian Orthodox Church Board after a complex court case.¹¹ The Orthodox sites of worship are not only endangered in a spiritual sense, but also badly in need of upkeep and staffing. Andre Gerolymatos, assessing the year 2003–04, accuses the Turkish state of wishing to eliminate all traces of Byzantium:

Churches, monasteries, neo-classical houses and public buildings that represented the Greeks and hence Turkey's European heritage has [sic] been destroyed or simply allowed to decay. Even Saint Sophia, one of

the greatest Churches and architectural monuments of the Greco-Roman period has languished as a museum relic rather than be permitted to function as a church. Why? The inescapable conclusion is that any reference to Hellenic civilization or Christianity is offensive to the Turkish state. Otherwise the Ecumenical Patriarchate would not need to secure an official permit in order to paint a wall or fix a church bell.¹²

Even at the Patriarchate itself, the 18th-century Church of St. George was open during our visit, but no guide was available at midday on a Saturday, despite the published 9:00–5:00 “daily” schedule. Two caretakers were in the process of dusting the church and allowed us to look at the rich icons, the Byzantine-era Patriarch’s throne, an ornate iconostasis, and other unique treasures housed there. The Church of the Pammakaristos housed the Patriarchate from the time of the Ottoman conquest until it was converted into a mosque in the 16th century. A side chapel with Byzantine mosaics operates as a museum and is supposedly open during prayer hours. We gained access into the courtyard with the help of neighborhood children, which at least gave us a glimpse of the outside of the church and the remnants of Byzantine marble friezes displayed on the lawn. Other churches are also accessible only by ringing the doorbell on the gate to alert the caretakers, which is not always successful. We managed to rouse the caretaker of another small Church of St. George in the neighborhood, but it was clear that visitors were hardly expected and that services were held sporadically at best. Although this church, too, contains ancient icons (especially fine ones of its patron saint), the caretaker could offer us no relevant information and we were struck by the incongruously garish blue paint that had recently been applied to the interior walls.¹³ The 12th-century Church of the Pantocrator, now a mosque, was similarly desolate. Despite being featured prominently in guidebooks and advertised as potentially accessible outside prayer hours, we had no luck. All these churches are located in the vicinity of the current Patriarchate, a once thriving Greek and Jewish community, now in urgent need of urban renewal. The Jews and Greeks have apparently been succeeded by extremist Islamists, judging by the profusion of their election posters and banners as well as covered women, including very young girls. The locals had no knowledge of the Orthodox churches.

Part of the reason for the difficulty in sustaining Turkish Orthodox congregations is the scarcity of trained clergy, especially acute after the closing of both Greek and Armenian theological seminaries in 1971, when the state nationalized private institutions of higher learning. The figures for Armenian Orthodox priests are indicative: 43 churches and 16 communities without a church are served by a total of 18 ordained priests. Forty to fifty additional priests are sorely needed.¹⁴ According to Frantz, “fewer than half of Turkey’s Greek Orthodox churches are open, in part because of a shortage of priests.”¹⁵ Patriarch Bartholomew has energetically tried to convince the government that the Halki seminary, founded in 1844, with room for 80–120 seminarians, should be reopened. After an intense international campaign and after the Patriarch’s meetings with Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in August 2003, the prospects for reopening finally seem quite good. “The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) appears to be looking favorably upon the request,” according to the Patriarch, and “we are waiting with certainty. A political solution to this is very simple, and it should come very soon.”¹⁶ The Patriarch has expressed openness to “reasonable government controls.” In an interview with George Gilson, the Patriarch states:

We want the school to operate again as it did until 1971. Since it will operate on Turkish soil, there will be some supervision from the [Turkish] education ministry. This does not disturb us in the least, because we have nothing to hide. The school used to be run in a manner that was transparent, far from politics and under the umbrella, protection and financial support of the Ecumenical Patriarchate...Turkey will benefit from the reopening of such a school, because it will demonstrate to the whole world that there is indeed freedom of religion. It will show that minority rights are respected.¹⁷

The opening of the seminary has become a political football between Turkey and Greece on questions of expanding minority rights on both sides. This could help the Patriarch’s cause. One of the several petitions for reopening the seminary, for example, notes that, “in 1937, the mayor of Thessaloniki, Greece, donated the house that Mustapha Kemal was born in to the Turkish government. The Turkish government should make a similar gesture and should allow the Theological School of Halki to open.”¹⁸ Turkey’s bid for European Union (EU)

membership will no doubt support the seminary opening, as the Patriarch himself likes to stress. Gerylmatos argues convincingly that Turkey could have a “magnificent historical and cultural mechanism” for claiming “Europeanness” and thus strengthen its case for EU inclusion. It would only have to *claim* its status as the inheritor of Byzantine culture, allow the Orthodox church to flourish freely and support the Ecumenical Patriarchate, allow Hagia Sophia to function as a church, remove its forces from Cyprus, and negotiate a compromise of the fate of the Turkish Cypriots.¹⁹ The *Turkish Daily News* of June 8, 2004 cites an NTV report on Prime Minister Erdogan’s visit to Greece in May: “Authorities have sped up the work to reopen the theological school in Heybeliada Island off Istanbul and the Foreign ministry has requested relevant authorities to submit their assessments on the issue.” Erdogan made the point that the government is considering the issue, though the Foreign ministry “declined to elaborate.” According to the same NTV report, “the reopening of the seminary required legal changes that would allow the seminary to have an independent structure, not linked to any theological faculty.”²⁰ Religious issues have a way of entering international politics even in secular states.

Another obstacle to hiring Orthodox priests is that Orthodox clergy in Turkey are required to hold Turkish citizenship, with a very few exceptions.²¹ This has also been addressed by Patriarch Bartholomew, himself an ethnic Greek with Turkish citizenship. This year he took the radical step of appointing non-Turkish clerics to half of the twelve seats on the Holy Synod, the council governing the church, to reflect its ecumenical reach. The appointments include citizens of the United States, Great Britain, Greece, New Zealand, and Finland. Contradictory statements regarding these appointments, however, provide another reflection of the Patriarchate’s ambivalent relationship to the state. While a church official maintained that the government had accepted the Patriarchate’s notification of the appointments, a government official denied that permission for the Patriarchate to make such appointments had been granted.²² However, international politics should strengthen the Patriarchate’s power over religious matters. Foreign support, especially from the American Archdiocese, has been voiced for the appointments, and pressure from the EU also favors the Patriarch’s right to make such appointments. These concrete examples seem to indicate that though the local Orthodox communities in Turkey face a precarious diminution, there is some hope for a brighter future. Specifically, property rights of churches are being addressed, proper training of

Orthodox priests is likely to improve, and the ecumenical scope of the Patriarchate is enhanced by an internationalized Holy Synod.

Another aspect of the secularization of Orthodoxy became a point of contention in connection with Turkey's plans to commemorate Christianity in the year 2000. Theodore G. Karakostas, for instance, expressed dismay at the commercial exploitation of Orthodox places of worship in converting Byzantine churches to mosques and/or museums while repressing Orthodoxy. "For Turkey to use Christian sites for commercial purposes after eliminating the Christians who once upheld those sites is IMMORAL and OBSCENE!" Karakostas exclaims, feeling that Turkey has no claim to the Byzantine heritage after first destroying Byzantium and continuing to destroy the last vestiges of Byzantine culture.²³ One can sympathize with these sentiments from a religious point of view, though one could equally well argue, along with Gerolymatos, that restoring and displaying churches and Byzantine art for tourists in a secular way is preferable to the ultimate erasure that otherwise seems inevitable. A functioning Hagia Sophia might, as Gerolymatos puts it, provide a "boost in tourism as millions of Orthodox Christians would flock to Constantinople."²⁴ Byzantine culture represents a rich artistic heritage that deserves to be seen, even by non-believers. The Patriarch himself, as we have seen, supports artistic displays of Orthodoxy.

One prime example of "commercialization" is the Church of St. Saviour in Chora, included in virtually all city tours of Istanbul and filled with visitors at all times. This was certainly the case during my two visits to the church in August 1999 and again in May 2004, when the church-museum was filled with Orthodox nuns and other believers as well as non-believers. The ancient monastery complex within which the current church is situated has undergone numerous changes, due to earthquakes, crusades, iconoclasts, and the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople. The church seen today dates from the 11th century, with significant remodeling and artistic adornment added in the early 14th century. After the Ottoman conquest it was converted to a mosque without significant architectural changes besides the addition of a minaret and the whitewashing of the interior art. A good example of artistic-religious hybridity, it was characteristically referred to as "The Church Mosque."²⁵ In 1848–58, it was restored to its present condition by the American Byzantine Institute, and turned into an attractive museum. The guidebooks today contain obsessively detailed explanations of each fresco and mosaic and their Biblical subtexts—clearly

directed at tourists entirely unfamiliar with the Bible.²⁶ The careful restoration and conversion to a museum have made this precious example of Byzantine culture open for all to appreciate.

Though the cycle of conversion, destruction, deterioration, rebuilding, and redecorating of churches seldom ends up as successfully as in this church, layers of an interesting hybrid past are characteristic of most churches in regions settled by successive population waves. One such region of Turkey is Cappadocia, which is a prime spot for tourism. It boasts some officially designated "World Heritage Sites" (e.g., Göreme Open-Air Museum), several museums, and numerous facilities and festivals for tourists. Its main attractions include amazing volcanic rock formations, Byzantine churches hewn in rock, and multi-storied underground cities.²⁷ The Christian heritage of the region is one of its main attractions, and the Byzantine rock churches are a major part of any tour, their number estimated at between 400 and 1,000.²⁸ They date from the 6th through the 12th centuries and, though many structures and much of the material has been "recycled" by successive populations or destroyed by nature, these churches provide unique evidence of a flourishing early Christian culture. Cappadocia was a major Christian site and is intimately linked to important figures. For example, three Orthodox Church fathers lived and worked there: Gregory of Naziansus, Gregory of Nyssa, and St. Basil the Great. They are amply featured in tourist brochures. Most of the churches are open to the public free of charge or at nominal fees. Most of them are also virtually unprotected and therefore prey to natural disintegration, vandalism, graffiti, and camera flashes. Only a small portion of them have been restored (and hence charge entrance fees), especially those located in open-air museums, such as that in Göreme. Indeed, the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism promotes the Nevsehir region for "Faith Tourism" and of the 24 sites mentioned on one of its web pages, 20 are Byzantine churches and monasteries.²⁹

Many of the Cappadocian sites vividly represent religious hybridity. For instance, one of the old cave towns in the Zelve valley features a church supplied with a rock-carved minaret, still standing close to a monastery where Christians hid from iconoclastic persecution. Virtually all of its frescoes and walls are covered with centuries of multicultural, multi-religious graffiti. Roadside stands offer tourists the most

peculiar trinkets, combining religious images and secular elements. One example is a small wall decoration of a Byzantine iconic cloth representation of the Virgin Eleousa, framed in metalwork incorporating three “evil eyes.”³⁰ Equally incongruous are glass-enclosed icons containing prayer tokens with money folded to show the face of Atatürk, found in the small church of St. George in Fener.

Most of the Cappadocian rock churches are small, only partially preserved, and unsuitable as sites for modern worship. Some churches are still in use, however. Our visit to Mustafapasa (in Ürgüp town, Nevşehir province) came just after the Third Sinasos Culture and Art Festival, celebrated at the end of May. As part of the festival, Patriarch Bartholomew led a religious service in the Church of Constantine and Helen, with several other Orthodox prelates present. Flower decorations, quite dried up, still adorned the central pillars during our visit in June—perhaps an indication that locals want to extend the Patriarch’s presence. We met a devout Armenian Orthodox believer, Alex Karakulakyan, owner of the Prokopi Restaurant in Ürgüp, who proudly showed us a photograph in which he stood next to the Patriarch at the celebration and who himself demonstratively wore a large silver cross. Prokopi perpetuates Armenian culture in its fabulous menu.

Religious practice in the towns and villages of this region, though difficult for lack of working churches and clergy, is clearly reinvigorated by visits by Orthodox clergy. The Anadolu News Agency’s account of the event emphasized the Patriarch’s visit as a *cultural* mission. It quoted him as saying that he “sincerely believed that Turkey would join the European Union” and that Turkey already deserves EU membership “thanks to its cultural heritage and mission.” He also thanked “Turkish officials for their support to Orthodox people to perform their religious practices in the churches around Anatolia which had been closed for 80 years.”³¹ Again, secular concerns seamlessly blend into religious ones.

To conclude, to an outside observer it seems that the ecumenical powers of the Patriarch are increasingly recognized by the Turkish government. Within Turkey, Orthodoxy shows signs of reinvigoration even as its adherents are decreasing in numbers and most of its churches falling into disrepair and neglect. Paradoxically perhaps, the Orthodox religion is given a boost through political aspirations (such as EU membership), by cultural events (such as the Arts Festival in Nevşehir or the exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum), and through

“museification” and tourism. Secular activities promote the religious practice and visibility of Turkish minorities. ●

Notes

1. “Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew Head of the Holy Orthodox Church, World Leader for Peace and Reconciliation,” online at <http://archons.patriarchate.holiness.asp>, 14 June 2004; “The History of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, online at <http://www.patriarchate.org/book/INTRODUCTION>, 14 June 2004.
2. “Turkey: International Religious Freedom Report 2003,” U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, online at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2003/24438.htm>, 14 June 2004; “Orthodox Church,” online at <http://mb-soft.com/believe/txc/orthodox.htm>, 14 June 2004.
3. Steven Runciman, *The Orthodox Churches and the Secular State* (Trentham, New Zealand: Auckland University Press, 1971), pp. 81–82.
4. “Turkey: International Religious Freedom Report 2003,” op. cit.
5. “Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew Head of the Holy Orthodox Church,” op. cit.; Nick Manginas, “Five Years of Ministry,” online at http://www.patriarchate.org/PRESS_ARTICLES/Five_Years_Of_Ministry, 14 June 2004; Kerin Hope, “Environment: Ecumenical Patriarch Takes up the Cause,” online at <http://www.grid.unep.ch/articles/q2c5c22.htm>, 14 June 2004.
6. Helen C. Evans, ed., *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261–1557)* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. vi–vii, xiv; his lecture is reproduced online at http://www.goarch.org/en/special/usvisit2004/holiness/addresses/ad_031804_lecture.asp, 17 June 2004.
7. See e.g., 1923–1993: *70 Years of Turkish Provocation and Violations of the Treaty of Lausanne. A Chronicle of Human Rights Violations. The Struggle for Justice*, Komotini, Citizens’ Association of Constantinople-Imvros-Tenedos-Eastern Thrace, 1997; “Denying Human Rights and Ethnic Identity,” Human Rights Watch, [1991], online at <http://home.att.net/~dimostenis/greektr.html>, 14 June 2004; Anastasia Stanmeyer, “A Diminishing Flock,” excerpt from article in *The Tampa Tribune* (1994), online at <http://home.att.net/~dimostenis/greektr.html>, 14 June 2004; “Dwindling, Elderly and Frightened? The Greek Minority in Turkey Revisited,” AIM Athens (31 January 2000), online at <http://home.att.net/~dimostenis/greektr.html>, 14 June 2004.
8. Stanmeyer, op. cit.; Hope, op. cit.
9. *Istanbul. Eyewitness Travel Guides* (New York: DK Publishing, 1998), p., 111.
10. Douglas Frantz, “Greeks of Turkey,” *The New York Times* (7 August 2000), online at <http://www.greekhelsinki.gr/english/articles/nyt-greekofturkey-07-08-200.html>, 14 June 2004.
11. “Turkey: International Religious Freedom Report 2003,” op. cit.
12. Andre Gerolymatos, “2003–2004: The Critical Year for Turkey and the EU,” *Diogenes. The Balkan Chronicles*, online at <http://www.omogenia.com/~diogenis/turkeyandeu2003-04.html>, 17 June 2004.
13. It is telling that the *Eyewitness Guide* to Istanbul, op. cit., p. 111, carelessly misattributes a marble detail on its exterior wall to the Church of Mary of the Mongols.

14. Barbara Baker, "Turkey: Orthodox Patriarch Steps Up Seminary Debate—Church Leader Seeks to Reverse 32-Year Ban on Theological Schools, *Compass Direct* (12 September 2003), online at http://www.religioscope.info/article_215.shtml, 14 June 2004.
15. Frantz, op. cit.
16. Baker, op. cit.
17. George Gilson, "Bartholomew Demands Equal Rights. Ecumenical Patriarch Hopes Dialogue Will Permit Halki Seminary to Reopen, and Allow the Greek Minority Full Rights as Citizens," *Athens News* (22 February 2002), online at http://www.grecoreport.com/halki_school.htm, 17 June 2004.
18. Hellenic Electronic Center, online at <http://www.greece.org/themis/halki2/halki.html>, 17 June 2004.
19. Gerolymatos, op. cit.
20. "Turkey Considers Reopening Greek Orthodox Seminary," *Turkish Daily News*, Ankara (8 June 2004), online at www.abig.org.tr/en/template.asp?nx=0&id=2621&go=Civilizations+Meet%3AReligion, June 17, 2004.
21. "Turkey: International Religious Freedom Report 2003," op. cit.
22. James C. Helicke, "Patriarch Appoints Non-Turkish Clerics," AP (2 March 2004), online at http://www.hrwf.net/html/turkey_2004.html#Patriarchappoints, 14 June 2004; "Bartholomew's Appointments Need Gov't Approval," *Turks. US, "Views"* (10 March 2004), online at <http://www.turks.us/article.php?story=20040310230811615>, 14 June 2004.
23. Theodore R. Karakostas, "Why Turkey's Year 2000 Commemoration of Christianity Must Be Opposed," online at <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Congress/1881/commemoration.htm>, 14 June 2004.
24. Gerolymatos, op. cit.
25. Tevhit Kekeç, *The Museum of Kariye*, Istanbul, Hitit Color, [n.d.], 11.
26. İlhan Aksit, *The Museum of Chora. Mosaics and Frescoes*, Istanbul, Aksit Kültür Turizm Sanat Ajansı, 2002; Kekeç, op. cit.
27. These three elements are singled out in Demir Ömer, *Cappadocia Cradle of History*, Derinkuyu, Demir Color Kartpostal ve Turistik Yayıncılık, [n.d.], 15.
28. Ömer, op. cit., 15, 14; Durmus, Serap Sahin, *Cappadocia*, Republic of Turkey Ministry of Tourism, [brochure], p. 13.
29. See http://goturkey.kultur.gov.tr/turizm_en.asp?belgeno=9250, 17 June 2004.
30. I thank Rogelio Miñana for drawing my attention to this trinket; a similar combination shaped into a wallet with key chain is also sold at the Atatürk airport.
31. "Fener Greek Orthodox Patriarch leads Religious Ceremony in Nevşehir," Anadolu Agency (22 May 2004), online at <http://www.turkishpress.com/turkishpress/news.asp?ID=20325>, 14 June 2004.