H. R. 4347

To require the Secretary of State to provide an annual report to Congress regarding United States Government efforts to survey and secure the return, protection, and restoration of stolen, confiscated, or otherwise unreturned Christian properties in the Republic of Turkey and in those areas currently occupied by the Turkish military in northern Cyprus.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

March 28, 2014

Mr. ROYCE (for himself and Mr. ENGEL) introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on Foreign Affairs

A BILL

To require the Secretary of State to provide an annual report to Congress regarding United States Government efforts to survey and secure the return, protection, and restoration of stolen, confiscated, or otherwise unreturned Christian properties in the Republic of Turkey and in those areas currently occupied by the Turkish military in northern Cyprus.

1 Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-
2 tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,
3 SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.
4 This Act may be cited as the “Turkey Christian
5 Churches Accountability Act”.

SEC. 2. FINDINGS.

Congress finds the following:

(1) United States diplomatic leadership contributes meaningfully and materially to the protection internationally of religious minorities and their faith-based practices and places of worship.

(2) The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 states that “It shall be the policy of the United States to condemn violations of religious freedom, and to promote, and to assist other governments in the promotion of, the fundamental right to freedom of religion.”.

(3) The House of Representatives, when it adopted House Resolution 306 on December 13, 2011, called on the Secretary of State, in all official contacts with Turkish leaders, to urge Turkey to “allow the rightful church and lay owners of Christian church properties, without hindrance or restriction, to organize and administer prayer services, religious education, clerical training, appointments, and succession”, and to “return to their rightful owners all Christian churches and other places of worship, monasteries, schools, hospitals, monuments, relics, holy sites, and other religious properties, including movable properties, such as artwork, manuscripts, vestments, vessels, and other artifacts”.

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(4) On September 28, 2010, the House of Rep-
representatives adopted House Resolution 1631, calling
for the protection of religious sites and artifacts, as
well as for general respect for religious freedom in
Turkish-occupied areas of northern Cyprus.

(5) Christian churches and communities in the
Republic of Turkey and in the occupied areas of Cy-
prus continue to be prevented from fully practicing
their faith and face serious obstacles to reestab-
lishing full legal, administrative, and operational
control over stolen, expropriated, confiscated, or oth-
erwise unreturned churches and other religious prop-
erties and sites.

(6) In many cases the rightful Christian church
authorities, including relevant Holy Sees located out-
side Turkey and Turkish-occupied territories, are ob-
structed from safeguarding, repairing, or otherwise
caring for their holy sites upon their ancient home-
lands, because the properties have been destroyed,
expropriated, converted into mosques, storage facili-
ties, or museums, or subjected to deliberate neglect.

(7) While the Turkish Government has made
efforts in recent years to address these issues and to
return some church properties, much more must be
done to rectify the situation of Christian commu-
unities in these areas, as a vast majority of Christian holy sites continue to be held by the Turkish Government or by third parties.

(8) On April 24, 2013, Catholicos Karekin II and Catholicos Aram I, spiritual leaders of the millions of Christian Armenian faithful in Armenia and the Diaspora, noted that Turkey continued to unjustly “[retain] confiscated church estates and properties, and religious and cultural treasures of the Armenian people”, and called on Turkey “[t]o immediately return the Armenian churches, monasteries, church properties, and spiritual and cultural treasures, to the Armenian people as their rightful owner”.

(9) The boundaries of Turkey encompass significant historic Christian lands, including the biblical lands of Armenia (present-day Anatolia), home to many of early Christianity’s pivotal events and holy sites, such as Mount Ararat, the location cited in the Bible as the landing place of Noah’s Ark.

(10) These ancient territories were for thousands of years home to a large, indigenous Christian population, but, because of years of repressive Turkish Government policies, historic atrocities, and bru-
tal persecution, today Christians constitute less than one percent of Turkey’s population.

(11) As a result of the Turkish Government’s invasion of the northern area of the Republic of Cyprus on July 20, 1974, and the Turkish military’s continued illegal and discriminatory occupation of portions of this sovereign state, the future and very existence of Greek Cypriot, Maronite, and Armenian communities are now in grave jeopardy.

(12) Under the Turkish occupation of northern Cyprus, freedom of worship has been severely restricted, access to religious sites blocked, religious sites systematically destroyed, and a large number of religious and archaeological objects illegally confiscated or stolen.

(13) The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, in its 2012 annual report, criticized “the Turkish government’s systematic and egregious limitations on the freedom of religion”, and warned that “[l]ongstanding policies continue to threaten the survivability and viability of minority religious communities in Turkey”.

(14) Christian minorities in Turkey continue to face discrimination, prohibitions on the training and succession of clergy, and violent attacks, which have
at times resulted in lenient sentencing, including the reduced sentence for the murderer of the Catholic Church’s head bishop in Turkey, Luigi Padovese, in June 2010, or delayed justice, including the unresolved torture and murder, in April 2007, of three employees of a Protestant Bible publishing house in Malatya, Turkey.

(15) The Government of Turkey, in contravention of its international legal obligations, refuses to recognize the 2,000-year-old Sacred See of the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s international status, has confiscated the large majority of the assets and properties of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Greek cultural and educational foundations, maintains that candidates for the position of Ecumenical Patriarch must be Turkish citizens, and continues to refuse to reopen the Theological School at Halki, thus impeding training and succession for the Greek Orthodox clergy in Turkey.

(16) The Government of Turkey, in contravention of its international legal obligations, continues to place substantial restrictions and other limitations upon the Armenian Patriarchate’s right to train and educate clergy and select and install successors without government interference.
(17) Religious freedom is an essential cornerstone of democracy that promotes respect for individual liberty, which contributes to greater stability, and is therefore a priority value for the United States to promote in its engagement with other countries.

SEC. 3. REPORT REQUIREMENTS.

(a) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 180 days after the date of the enactment of this Act and annually thereafter until 2021, the Secretary of State shall submit to the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives and the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate a report on the status and return of stolen, confiscated, or otherwise unreturned Christian churches, places of worship, and other properties in or from the Republic of Turkey and in the areas of northern Cyprus occupied by the Turkish military that shall contain the following:

(1) A comprehensive listing of all the Christian churches, places of worship, and other properties, such as monasteries, schools, hospitals, monuments, relics, holy sites, and other religious properties, including movable properties, such as artwork, manuscripts, vestments, vessels, and other artifacts, in or from Turkey and in the territories of the Republic
of Cyprus under military occupation by Turkey that are claimed as stolen, confiscated, or otherwise wrongfully removed from the ownership of their rightful Christian church owners.

(2) Description of all engagement over the previous year on this issue by officials of the Department of State with representatives of the Republic of Turkey regarding the return to their rightful owners of all Christian churches, places of worship, and other properties, such as monasteries, schools, hospitals, monuments, relics, holy sites, and other religious properties, including movable properties, such as artwork, manuscripts, vestments, vessels, and other artifacts, both those located within Turkey’s borders and those under control of Turkish military forces in the occupied northern areas of Cyprus.