

## Op-Ed

### 2011: A Year of Opportunity

by Nick Larigakis

January 22, 2011

At the beginning of each New Year, many of us take this wonderful opportunity to recommit ourselves to our goals, ambitions, and yes, even resolutions! The feeling of shedding the old provides relief, if only psychologically, so that we can start fresh in tackling the same old issues and new ones, either personally or professionally. 2011 is no different...or is it?

As it relates to issues affecting U.S. relations with Greece, Cyprus, and Turkey there seems to be a different feel in the air that I haven't quite experienced in all the years that I have been in Washington.

During the first two years of the Obama administration we have seen some positive rhetoric about our issues, albeit it has not led to any policy changes and our outstanding issues remain unchanged. Nonetheless, it's important to begin somewhere. 2010 saw a number of other developments that taken collectively has the potential to provide us with a great opportunity to advance our agenda in 2011.

The historic midterm election of November has dramatically changed the landscape on Capitol Hill. The Obama administration will face a Republican controlled House and a diminished Democratic majority in the Senate. In my opinion, this will cause a deadlock in the domestic agenda for at least the next two years, and therefore, the foreign policy agenda may come more to the forefront. Of course, this includes Afghanistan, Iraq, and North Korea, but I contend secondary and tertiary issues may take on a new prominence. Greece and Cyprus fall into this latter category.

2010 also saw the significant deterioration of Turkey- Israel relations over the Gaza flotilla incident that occurred May 31. Add to the list Turkey's refusal to support stronger economic sanctions against Iran at the UN and the cause and effect has resulted in a strain in relations between Ankara and Washington. Moreover, with a strong neoconservative presence in the House of Representatives, there is a good chance that there will be mounting criticism of Turkey due to its recent actions.

One sign that this may already be occurring are recent statements made by Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), who is the new chair of the all important House Committee on Foreign Affairs. For example, following a meeting with Turkish Ambassador to the U.S. Namik Tan on December 7, 2010, she described the meeting as a "frank discussion about some troubling Turkish policies" that included Turkey's positions toward Cyprus and the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

"Turkey must fully support a Cypriot solution to reunification of the island and immediately withdraw its troops from northern Cyprus," she said.

She also expressed concern about the "restrictive policies" placed on the Ecumenical Patriarchate by the Turkish government. "I asked that these policies be substantially changed to allow the Church to re-open the Halki Seminary and to remove the restrictive criteria for Patriarchal succession," she said.

Congresswoman Ros-Lehtinen concluded, "These are issues which must be addressed soon if we are to avoid permanent damage to our relationship."

I can't recall another leading member of the foreign affairs committee issuing a public statement so critical of Turkey.

Further, it's important to note that Turkey—at least in the foreseeable future—won't be able to count on the full support of the Israeli lobby in Washington, which traditionally has been a very strong pro-Turkey advocate. Morris Amitay, a former executive director of AIPAC who has also represented

Turkey, told the *Washington Times*, “If someone asked me now if I would try to protect Turkey in Congress, my response would be, ‘You’ve got to be kidding.’”

In addition, it’s significant that during the second week of February a very large delegation, which will include the leadership of the leading Jewish American organizations, will be visiting Athens and Thessaloniki. (Incidentally, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is reported to be visiting Athens February 6 or 8.)

All this creates a window of opportunity to advance our agenda in 2011; an opportunity that many of us have not seen before. But this window may not be open for long. Therefore it becomes incumbent upon all of us to actively engage our policymakers to educate (or in some cases, remind) them that in addition to everything else that Turkey is doing, it also continues to be the main impediment to a Cyprus solution and has contributed to the cultural and religious desecration in occupied Cyprus; it continues to violate the religious freedom of the Ecumenical Patriarchate; and it continues to violate the territorial airspace of Greece.

I am not saying it will be easy. Turkey still has allies in the U.S. led first and foremost by the defense industry. It was recently reported that Turkey is scheduled to spend “approximately \$4.5 billion on arms procurement in 2011” and there is a proposed 10-year program whereby Turkey is planning to spend upward of a staggering amount of \$25 billion on U.S. weapons!

Earlier this month, I met with the new U.S. ambassador to Turkey, Francis J. Ricciardone. I asked him about this procurement and his reply was that his job will require him to facilitate the sale of U.S.-made products to Turkey.

Nonetheless, I still believe the opportunity is there to make progress on our issues. However, to be effective, we must collectively keep reminding President Obama of his very positive campaign statements to the Greek American community. We must continue to engage our policy makers on the issues that affect us. Working together toward the same goals can result in some positive developments in 2011.

The time is right. The opportunity is here and now.

---

*Nick Larigakis is President and COO of the American Hellenic Institute*