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One Year to the Presidential Election: Has President Obama Met Expectations?

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Less than a year from now Americans will be going to the polls to vote. Up for election are the office of President, the entire House of Representatives, and about one-third of the Senate. This provides an opportunity for the Greek American community to become actively involved in securing support for issues affecting U.S. relations with Greece and Cyprus.

President Obama swept into victory three years ago proclaiming: “The time for change is now!” Whatever changes have occurred, I leave it up to the readers to decide how they have been affected personally. However, as it relates to the issues of importance to the Greek American community there is one thing for sure—nothing has changed significantly. In some instances one can claim the community’s issues have even digressed. One example is the recent increase in provocative actions and extremely belligerent rhetoric directed at Cyprus by Turkey.

A quick review of our issues since President Barack Obama came to office shows the following:

- The illegal occupation of Cyprus, now in its 37th year, by more than 40,000 Turkish troops, continues;
- Provocations in the Aegean Sea continue as Turkish military aircraft violate Greek national airspace with frequency. The Turkish threat of war (*casus belli*) if Greece exercises its legal rights in the Aegean Sea under the Law of the Sea Treaty and international law remains in effect. Turkey continues to claim sovereign rights in the Aegean Sea which are unfounded and devoid of any legal basis;
- The Halki Patriarchal School of Theology remains closed and the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s rights, freedoms, and security continue to be threatened in violation of the U.S. International Religious Freedom Act; and

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- The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) continues with its intransigent and provocative actions against Greece refusing to negotiate in good faith to resolve the name issue.

Yes, we have seen slight progress on certain issues, and I want to properly acknowledge them. In March 2010, Greece entered the U.S. Visa Waiver Program. Turkey did return an illegally confiscated orphanage as ordered by the European Court of Human Rights and granted citizenship to a number of Orthodox clerics that will help to address concerns about sustaining a line of succession for the Ecumenical Patriarch. With respect to the latter two developments, the question of how influential of a role the Obama administration played is debatable.

In 2008, Presidential Candidate Obama's campaign statements on the community's issues were frankly the most favorable ones that we have seen in quite some time from a presidential candidate. However, the community must remind the president that his campaign statements have largely gone unfulfilled during his first term.

And the opportunities for Obama administration to fulfill them have been there!

President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have visited Turkey. There, they did make some important gestures, including the president's visible meeting with His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, and in the case of Secretary Clinton, a meeting with His All Holiness at the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Unfortunately, public statements calling for the immediate re-opening of the Halki Seminary and full recognition, support, and protection of the Ecumenical Patriarchate were absent. At separate venues during press conferences in Turkey, opportunities to call for the "immediate" removal of all Turkish occupying troops in Cyprus or to call for an end to provocative acts by Turkey against Greece in the Aegean were missed. Will Vice President Joe Biden's December visit to Turkey be different?

While it seems President Obama finds it difficult to express public support for the Ecumenical Patriarchate or allies Greece and Cyprus, *The Los Angeles Times* reported in October that President Obama has placed more calls to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan than to any other world leader this year next to British Prime Minister David Cameron, prompting former *New York Times* Istanbul bureau chief Stephen Kinzer to jokingly refer to Prime Minister Erdogan "Obama's second best friend." In addition, at the recent G20 Summit the president supposedly reserved the "biggest hug" for the Turkish prime minister. In my opinion, this would indicate the president is not willing to press Turkey on issues of concern to the Greek American community.

Turkey's aggressive behavior in the region is well-documented, ranging from airspace violations of Greece, its continuing occupation of Cyprus, its saber-rattling rhetoric as Cyprus and Israel explore for gas and oil, its support of Iran in the UN Security Council, and its dispute with Israel, to name a few.

Nonetheless, the Obama Administration is presently pushing for a \$111 million arms sale to Turkey during a time when she is acting increasingly belligerently in the eastern Mediterranean and threatening U.S. allies. Frankly, this is unacceptable, irresponsible, and disappointing.

Our community needs to send a strong message. One way to convey a strong message will be through our wallets as election season kicks in.

In a tough political environment, fundraising will be at a premium and every candidate will be looking to outreach to as many ethnic groups as possible to gain an edge. Let's be smart with our contributions. Let's make sure we get a candidate's commitment so we can make our contribution count. If we don't like what we hear, let's support the candidate that will.

This message is especially important for those who will be running for president. In the case of President Obama we need to hold him accountable to his campaign statements.

Can we count on President Obama to communicate a hard-hitting message to Ankara over her continuous irresponsible and destabilizing actions? After all, if the United States can't feel secure and confident enough to candidly express to a fellow NATO ally with whom "... our bonds are sound, our friendship is sure, and our alliance is strong," and, "Our partnership is rooted in our long history and very long list of mutual interests, *but most importantly, it is rooted on our common democratic values,*" as stated by Secretary Clinton on her visit to Turkey in July, then to whom can we say it?

President Obama has another year to show us if he is willing to send that message.

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