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President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

On behalf of the nationwide membership of the American Hellenic Institute (AHI) and in the best interests of the United States, I write to bring to your attention, and to take into consideration, a series of policy issues pertaining to the southeastern Mediterranean as you prepare to meet with the prime minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, on May 16, 2013.

We understand an agenda priority will be to engage Turkey, as a so called “reliable ally” and NATO partner, to assist with Syria and Iran in addition to ongoing efforts to develop the recent rapprochement between Turkey and Israel. Candidly, we have concerns and view with skepticism Turkey’s eagerness to offer assistance because history has demonstrated that Turkey is only interested in pursuing self-serving policies, regardless of what the United States’ or NATO’s positions might be. Turkey’s closeness with the Asaad regime before the uprising against him, and Turkey’s relations with Iran which undermine Western sanctions, are well-documented. Moreover, Prime Minister Erdogan has been slow to normalize relations with Israel since the apology by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that you facilitated. Instead, according to *The Jerusalem Post*, “Turkey’s consul general to the Palestinian Authority has presented his credentials to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and will become the first ambassador recognized by Palestine.”¹

Nevertheless, it would be counterproductive not to discuss with Prime Minister Erdogan Turkey’s provocative behavior in the southeastern Mediterranean that jeopardizes peace and stability in the region and is not in the best interest of the United States. The United States has an important stake in fostering good relations between two NATO allies, Greece and Turkey, and in achieving a just and viable settlement of the Cyprus problem. However, the litany of problems Turkey perpetuates that include the continuing occupation of Cyprus, its intransigence in solving the Cyprus problem, its refusal to recognize the Republic of Cyprus, its veto to the organizations, its continuing threats to block Cyprus from exploring in its EEZ, its continuing violations of Greece’s territorial waters and airspace in the Aegean Sea and continuing religious and human rights violations in Turkey, prevents stability and damages U.S. interests.

¹ “‘Turkey first state with ambassador to Palestine,’” *The Jerusalem Post*, April 15, 2013.

CYPRUS

During your visit to Turkey in April of 2009, you raised the important issues of Cyprus and the Ecumenical Patriarchate when you spoke before the Turkish Assembly.

Regarding Cyprus you said:

“Advancing peace also includes the disputes that persist in the Eastern Mediterranean. And here there’s a cause for hope...The United States is willing to offer all the help sought by the parties as they work towards a just and lasting settlement that reunifies Cyprus into a bizonal and bicommunal federation.”

I submit, Mr. President, that the best way to facilitate this is by your asking Prime Minister Erdogan to immediately:

- demilitarize Cyprus;
- withdraw the 43,000 occupation troops illegally in Cyprus;
- return to Turkey the 180,000 persons whom Turkey has settled in occupied Cyprus, in violation of the Fourth Protocol to the Geneva Convention of 1949; and
- tear down the green line barbed-wire fence across the face of Cyprus which, together with Turkey’s 43,000 occupation forces, is the real cause of the alleged isolation of the Turkish Cypriots in the occupied northern part of Cyprus.

Advocating these policy decisions would underscore support for the rule of law and respect for international law. Action in this regard would demonstrate that the United States truly wishes to advance the cause of solving the 39-year-old Cyprus problem. It does not serve U.S. interests to continue to appease Turkey and to continue with former failed policies that promote a double standard in applying the rule of law to Turkey.

Further, Turkey continues to act provocatively against Cyprus’ rights as the latter continues to explore for energy within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Turkey also has been lobbying in an effort to take advantage of the current economic crisis gripping Cyprus to advance its illegal political agenda on the island to the detriment of the Republic of Cyprus. Turkey’s Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, has sent letters to European leaders and Secretary Kerry calling for the partition of Cyprus. This is simply unacceptable of a U.S. and NATO ally.

Mr. President, we request it be conveyed to Prime Minister Erdogan that the United States is fully committed to the reunification of the Republic of Cyprus and that the United States will not stand for any attempts to use the current economic crisis as a means of forcing unjustified scenarios against the Republic of Cyprus. Deputy State Department Spokesman Patrick Ventrell reiterated this position when he said that the U.S. supports “efforts to reunify the island as a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation.”

A similar message needs to be communicated to Prime Minister Erdogan regarding Cyprus’s right to explore for energy, which it is currently conducting with the assistance of U.S.-based Noble Energy within its EEZ. We applaud the March 22, 2013 statement of State Department Spokeswoman Victoria Nuland when she stated, “As a general matter, the United States supports Cyprus’s right to explore energy in its offshore areas...”

TURKEY'S SUPPRESSION OF THE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM OF THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE AND ITS VIOLATIONS OF THE RIGHTS OF NON-MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN TURKEY

Mr. President, we congratulate and commend your support, generally, of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Ecumenical Patriarch. By receiving His All Holiness Bartholomew I at the White House on November 3, 2009, you underscored the important stature and recognition His All Holiness deserves as a well-respected and admired world religious leader.

Your support was further illustrated when, in your speech before the Turkish Assembly on April 6, 2009, you said:

"Freedom of religion and expression lead to a strong and vibrant civil society that only strengthen the state, which is why steps like reopening the Halki Seminary will send such an important signal inside Turkey and beyond. An enduring commitment to the rule of law is the only way to achieve the security that comes from justice for all people."

We also appreciate Secretary of State John Kerry's April 21, 2013 visit to the Ecumenical Patriarchate to meet with the Ecumenical Patriarch. With this visit, Secretary Kerry followed in the footsteps of his predecessor, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Unfortunately, there are a number of serious issues still facing the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Although at a joint press conference with Prime Minister Erdogan on March 25, 2012, you stated, "I am pleased to hear of his [Erdogan's] decision to reopen the Halki Seminary," to date this has not happened.

Furthermore, the Turkish government continues to tolerate assaults against the remaining 2,500 Greek Orthodox Christian religious minority and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, continues the illegal closure of the Greek Orthodox Halki Patriarchal School of Theology and refuses to return numerous church properties which were illegally seized.

In 2012, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) rightfully cited Turkey for "systematic and egregious limitations" on religious liberty and designated Turkey a "country of particular concern." The USCIRF recommended the Secretary of State to designate Turkey as such and from 2009-2011 Turkey was placed on USCIRF's "Watch List." However, the USCIRF came to the unfortunate conclusion in its 2013 annual report released April 30 to upgrade Turkey's two tiers, from "country of particular concern" to a "other countries and regions monitored" status despite all of these outstanding issues with regard to the Ecumenical Patriarchate as well as other religious minorities in Turkey. We are deeply disappointed with this decision.

Turkey's actions violate U.S. principles on freedom of religion and U.S. law as expressed in Section 2804 of the Omnibus Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act of 1998 (PL 105-277). The law states that the "United States should use its influence with the Government of Turkey to suggest that the Government of Turkey:

- recognize the Ecumenical Patriarchate and its nonpolitical religious mission;
- ensure the continued maintenance of the institution's physical security needs, as provided for under Turkish and international law, including the Treaty of Lausanne, the 1968 Protocol, the Helsinki Final Act (1975) and the Charter of Paris;
- provide for the proper protection and safety of the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Patriarchate personnel; and

- reopen the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s Halki Patriarchal School of Theology.”

We condemn Turkey’s tolerance of assaults against its Greek Orthodox Christian minority, the limited progress so far on the protection of the human and minority rights of the non-Muslim communities in Turkey, its continuing illegal closure of the Greek Orthodox Halki Patriarchal School of Theology, and its illegal seizure of property of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Greek Orthodox Christian minority of Istanbul, Imbros and Tenedos.

Under the International Religious Freedom Act (IFRA) of 1998, the President of the United States is obligated to oppose violations of religious freedom in any country whose government “engages in or tolerates violations of religious freedom and promote the right to religious freedom in that country.” The Act further obligates the President to take one or more of 15 enumerated actions with respect to any such country.

Therefore, we call on you, Mr. President, to impress upon Prime Minister Erdogan that our government:

- will not tolerate such violations from an ally and calls on Turkey to immediately implement and enforce strictly the guarantees of religious freedom and human and minority rights set forth in the Treaty of Lausanne, the UN Charter, other international agreements, and U.S. laws;
- expects that the Ecumenical Patriarchate will be safeguarded and that Turkey will recognize the legal personality of the Ecumenical Patriarchate;
- calls for the immediate reopening of the Halki School of Theology and the lifting of restrictions to the elections of the Patriarch;
- calls for the immediate return of the many properties which were illegally confiscated from the Ecumenical Patriarchate by the Turkish government since 1936;
- calls for the respect for human and minority rights in Turkey; and
- is prepared to implement provisions of the IRFA if necessary if these actions are not implemented by Turkey.

The AEGEAN SEA

Turkey has made an outrageous claim to one-half of the Aegean Sea in total disregard of all the relevant international treaties and agreements in force, has engaged in provocative activities in the Aegean, and does not agree to refer the issue of the delimitation of the continental shelf to the International Court of Justice. Despite the opening of accession negotiations with the EU and Greece’s sincere efforts to achieve complete normalization in its relations with Turkey, Turkey continues to threaten Greece with war (*casus belli*) and promotes claims that are unfounded and devoid of any legal basis.

Because Turkey aspires to become a full member state of the EU, she must be more respectful of international law and the commitments she has undertaken in the context of the EU accession process, including the full respect of the principle of good neighborly relations.

In the past twelve months there have been numerous violations against Greek sovereign territory, via air and sea. The sea violations are especially problematic because Turkey has dispatched research vessels to the southern Aegean between the Greek islands of Rhodes and Kastellorizo. These actions encroach upon Greece’s continental shelf.

Mr. President, the situation in the Aegean has become acute and has the potential to trigger a flashpoint that would be detrimental to stability in the region.

We call on you, Mr. President, to impress upon Prime Minister Erdogan to:

- adhere to international law and legal procedures with respect to any dispute it has with Greece in the Aegean Sea; and
- immediately abandon its provocative actions in its violations of Greek territorial waters and airspace.

The issues and the recommendations for their successful resolution presented in our letter are embodied within the fundamental principles of democracy, are founded on the rule of law, and are based on what is in the best interests of the United States. We appreciate the opportunity to bring them to your attention. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Nick Larigakis
President

cc: Secretary of State John Kerry
Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel
Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy R. Sherman
Chief of Staff to the President Denis McDonough
National Security Advisor Tom Donilon
Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia Marie Yovanovitch
Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Suzan Johnson Cook
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Europe and Eurasian Affairs (Greece, Turkey, Cyprus and the Caucasus) Eric S. Rubin
Director of Southern European Affairs Maryruth Coleman
U.S. Ambassador to Greece Daniel B. Smith
U.S. Ambassador to Cyprus John M. Koenig
U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Francis J. Ricciardone, Jr.
Department of State Senior Turkey Desk Officer Christina Agor
Department of State Greece Desk Officer Davida Baxter
Department of State Cyprus Desk Officer Lindsay Coffey
Department of State Turkey Desk Officer Daniel Langenkamp
Department of State Turkey Desk Officer Stephanie Hutchison
The Congress