



Australian Hellenic Council NSW Inc.

A coordinating body for the Australian Hellenic community

MEDIA RELEASE



The strategic importance of Greece for the West in the Eastern Mediterranean at a time of considerable conflict and upheaval in the area was the central theme of discussions which Nicholas Larigakis, the President of the American Hellenic Institute (AHI), held with various Australian politicians and Greek and Cypriot diplomatic representatives during his recent visit to Canberra.

The AHI, founded in 1974 after the illegal invasion and occupation of Cyprus, strongly advocates the rule of law and maintains a significant lobbying presence on Capitol Hill and the White House in Washington in pursuit of Hellenic issues that are of paramount interest to the United States.

In face to face meetings with Federal MPs Steve Georganas, Alex Hawke, Maria Vamvakinou and Julia Banks and later in a round table discussion which included Linda Burney and David Coleman, organised by the Australian Hellenic Council, Larigakis stressed that Turkey has become increasingly belligerent in the region and that its actions towards Greece, a NATO ally, are provocative and potentially destabilising, marked by an intransigent position over Cyprus settlement talks, frequent air and naval infringements and violations of Greece's territorial sovereignty, and in recent times in its bellicose announcements challenging both Greece's and Cyprus' rights to explore for potentially rich gas reserves within those countries' respective exclusive economic zones.



Conference with MPs Linda Burney, David Coleman, Maria Vamvakinou and Steve Georganas

Larigakis noted that Turkey continues to occupy northern Cyprus in violation of international law and despite UN resolutions calling for it to withdraw the 40,000 Turkish troops stationed on the island. The AHI President also pointed out that Turkey's actions in Syria - where it persists in attacking Syrian Kurdish forces of the PYD which are fighting ISIS on the ground - highlights Turkey's recent history as an unfaithful ally of the US and the West.



Nick Larigakis is passionate about his defence of Hellenism and reminded MPs of how the interests of the US (and by extension the West) and Greece are closely intertwined. In a letter

penned to the new US secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, ahead of his recent visit to Ankara to meet President Turkish Erdogan, the AHI warned of the rising tensions in the Aegean and urged the new Administration to uphold the rule of law and to call on Turkey to cease and desist. The AHI also expressed concerns about Turkey's blatant resort to "gunboat diplomacy" in the Aegean and pointed out that in years gone by Turkey has proven to be an unfaithful ally of the West and this fear is only now being exacerbated by the forthcoming referendum at which Erdogan is attempting to clothe himself with sweeping powers and extend his presidency to 2029, potentially reflecting what the Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades recently referred to as a "climate of fanaticism within Turkish society".



(l-r) George Vellis, George Vardas, Elly Symons, Senator Arthur Sinodinos, Nick Larigakis and Michael Christodoulides

In the meeting with Senator Arthur Sinodinos, the former Cabinet Secretary and now Minister for Industry, Innovation and Science, the delegation also discussed the recent developments in the Eastern Mediterranean in terms of Australia's interests, noting that Australian Federal Police continue to serve as part of the UN peacekeeping force on Cyprus. Notwithstanding the historical ties that have developed between Turkey and Australia in the wake of the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign in 1915, the combined AHC-AHI delegation suggested that Australia's approach to Turkey should not be unduly constrained by these historical sentiments in light of Turkey's increasingly provocative military incursions into Greek airspace and when also viewed against the backdrop of growing human rights violations in Turkey itself. Larigakis stressed that Greece continues to play a vitally important role for the projection of the US's interests because of its geographic location, as well as the incomparable naval facilities available to NATO forces in Souda Bay, Crete and given Greece's strong, unwavering support for NATO.

As for Cyprus, with current settlement talks seemingly stalled, Larigakis noted that Ankara controls the agenda over Cyprus and argued that both the United States and the European Union should pressure Turkey because of the continuing illegal occupation of the island. Turkey should support the process of attempting to resolve the dispute rather than encumbering the process.

These sentiments were also repeated in meetings with the Greek Ambassador to Australia and the Cyprus High Commissioner with the AHI President pledging his unfailing support for achieving a lasting peace settlement on the divided island.

A public meeting was also held at the Hellenic Club at Woden where Nick Larigakis gave an informative lecture on Greece's foreign affairs in the Mediterranean and the work of the AHI in Washington and Athens to ensure that Greece's and the United States' mutually-inclusive interests are protected.

The Australian Hellenic Council applauds the dedication and initiative shown by Nick Larigakis and the American Hellenic Institute in its constant lobbying and advocacy for Greece and wishes them every success in the future.

Dated: 3 April 2017

George Vardas
Secretary Australian Hellenic Council