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March 28, 2017

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The Honorable  
Rex W. Tillerson  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

On behalf of the nationwide membership of the American Hellenic Institute (AHI), I write to raise the Institute's concern about rising tensions in the Aegean Sea between NATO allies Greece and Turkey, and separately, Turkey's most recent threat to Cyprus' sovereign right to explore for natural gas within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ), as you prepare for your visit to Turkey next week. AHI requests for these issues to be placed on your agenda in meetings with senior Turkish government officials.

In February, I wrote to President Donald Trump, urging the administration to act to uphold the rule of law and to call on Turkey, the provocateur of these tensions, to cease and desist with its actions that have dire implications to U.S. security interests in the eastern Mediterranean.

Historically, Turkey has violated Greece's sovereignty in the Aegean Sea on an almost daily basis. In 1996, Turkey's claims to the Imia islets nearly led the two NATO allies to war over the islands. In recent years, the Institute notes Turkey's frequent and egregious violations of NATO ally Greece's sovereignty in the Aegean Sea:

- In 2014, there were 3,045 total violations of Greek national airspace and Infringements of Air Traffic Regulations (ICAO) that resulted in eight engagements with Hellenic Air Force interception fighters, according to the Hellenic National Defense General Staff.
- On March 1, 2015, Turkey unilaterally issued a Notice to Airmen (NOTAM), a move to reserve extensive airspace over the Aegean Sea for military maneuvers that Greece protested. On March 3, 2015, Turkey canceled the NOTAM thanks to pressure from the U.S. and NATO.
- On July 15, 2015, six Turkish fighters crossed into Greek airspace 20 times – in a single day.
- On February 15, 2016, six Turkish fighter jets and a CN-235 maritime patrol aircraft violated Greek airspace 22 times – again, in a single day.
- In sum, **2,573** infringements and violations of Greece's airspace occurred in 2016.

In fall 2016, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has elevated tensions unnecessarily by publicly calling into question the integrity of the Treaty of Lausanne.<sup>1</sup> Now, on one day during the week of January 29 to February 4, 2017, Greece's Ministry of Defense recorded **138 violations** of Greek airspace over islands in the Aegean Sea, which had to be intercepted.<sup>2</sup> This is unprecedented. On the sea, Greek and Turkish ships were involved in a "faceoff" when a Turkish navy missile boat, and supporting crafts, entered and violated Greece's territorial waters by the Imia islets.<sup>3</sup>

These Turkish provocations have caused Greece's Defense Minister, Panos Kammenos, to state, "The Greek armed forces are ready to answer any provocation."<sup>4</sup>

Secretary Tillerson, Greece's sovereignty in the Aegean Sea and respect for the Treaty of Lausanne, both of which are in the best interests of the United States, must be respected. Greece must expend immense financial resources to defend its sovereignty—upwards of \$400 million a year—during an economic crisis from which it is in the best interest of the United States for Greece to emerge. Moreover, despite its economic difficulties, Greece continues to be of vital importance for the projection of U.S. strategic interests by its geographic location and its strong, unwavering support for NATO. As home to the most important naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea, NSA Souda Bay, Crete, Greece has been critical to the delivery of U.S. troops, cargo, and supplies, providing access and extending the U.S. and NATO's reach into the Middle East and North Africa. To illustrate, in 2015, more than 70 U.S. Navy and NATO ships and vessels visited Souda Bay and more than 2,830 U.S. Air Force and NATO planes utilized the 115th Combat Wing on Crete. Also, more than 65 U.S. ships and more than 1,200 trainees utilized NMIOTC.

- **In addition, Greece is a top contributor to the defense efforts of NATO, spending an estimated 2.38% of its GDP on defense. Greece is second behind only the United States in this regard.**

Greece aspires to achieve complete normalized relations with Turkey, however, the latter, as official policy, continues to threaten Greece with war (casus belli) and promotes territorial claims that are unfounded and devoid of any legal basis. These claims disregard all relevant treaties and agreements in force, including the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty under which the Dodecanese Islands and adjacent islets were ceded by Italy to Greece. As a signatory to the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty, the United States is obligated by U.S. law to carry out the treaty's provisions.

## Cyprus

Last week, the Turkish Foreign Ministry condemned Cyprus' research for natural gas within Cyprus' exclusive economic zone (EEZ).<sup>5</sup> In recent years, Turkey has violated international law by practicing "gunboat diplomacy" in the eastern Mediterranean with an incursion into Cyprus' EEZ. This has led Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades to express concern about Turkey sparking a "hot incident" in the eastern Mediterranean. He stated, "I fear the period from now until the referendum in Turkey, as well as the effort to create a climate of fanaticism within Turkish society,"<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-turkey-idUSKCN12021J>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-turkey-tensions-idUSKBN15G5AQ>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/30/greek-and-turkish-warships-in-standoff-in-aegean-sea>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/27/tensions-flare-greece-turkey-answer-provocation-erdogan>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.tornosnews.gr/en/tourism-businesses/new-investments/24162-turkey-threatens-again-to-take-actions-regarding-cyprus%E2%80%99-natural-gas.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/27/tensions-flare-greece-turkey-answer-provocation-erdogan>

The Republic of Cyprus has the sovereign right under international law to explore and exploit its natural resources within its EEZ. The United States has repeatedly stated it supports Cyprus' sovereign right to explore energy in its offshore areas. Cypriot government officials, such as Foreign Minister Ioannis Kasoulides, have stated the island's natural resources belong to all its people and that once a settlement is reached, potential revenues would be shared.

Secretary Tillerson, AHI's perspective on these pressing issues are founded on the rule of law and are based on what is in the best interests of United States security in the region. We again urge the administration to call on Turkey, a provocateur of tensions in the Aegean Sea, to cease and desist immediately with its aggressive behavior that has led to instability in the eastern Mediterranean—an area vital to United States' national security—and adhere to international law.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nick Larigakis". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Nick" and last name "Larigakis" clearly distinguishable.

Nick Larigakis  
President

cc: Vice President Mike Pence  
Defense Secretary James Mattis  
Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, Jonathan Cohen  
U.S. Ambassador to Greece Geoffrey Pyatt  
U.S. Ambassador to Cyprus Kathleen Doherty  
U.S. Ambassador to Turkey John Bass  
U.S. Department of State Cyprus Desk Officer Larina H. Konold  
U.S. Department of State Greece Desk Officer Amy Reichert  
Congressman Gus Bilirakis, co-chair of the Congressional Hellenic Caucus  
Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney, co-chair of the Congressional Hellenic Caucus