

March 26, 2009

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 on behalf of the interests of the United States, we write in order to bring to your attention and consideration a number of issues as you prepare for your forthcoming visit to Turkey.

Our letter of February 17, 2009, addresses in detail the core issues of concern to the Greek American community with background information and reasons why support of the rule of law, U.S. laws and international law are in the best interests of the United States.

The projection of U.S. interests in the region depends heavily on the stability of the region. Therefore, 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, Turkey's continuing occupation of Cyprus, its intransigence in solving the Cyprus problem, its refusal to recognize the Republic of Cyprus and its veto to the accession of Cyprus to international organizations, its continuing violations of Greece's territorial waters and airspace, and continuing religious and human rights violations in Turkey, prevents this stability and damages U.S. interests.

Cyprus

Mr. President, in a statement that your campaign released to the Greek American community in October 2008, you stated:

"As president, [I] will show U.S. leadership in seeking to negotiate a political settlement on Cyprus. [I] believe strongly that Cyprus remain a single, sovereign country...within a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation...A negotiated political settlement on Cyprus would end the Turkish occupation of northern Cyprus and repair the island's tragic division while paving the way to prosperity and peace throughout the entire region."

Turkey contributes more than \$350 million annually in direct economic support to the regime in the occupied part of Cyprus, and it is estimated that the total cost to Turkey of its illegal occupation amounts to \$1 billion annually. This is money that can serve a more useful purpose in our fight in the war against terrorism, such as Afghanistan.

Cyprus is an important nation for U.S. interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. The British Bases on Cyprus and the British listening posts on Cyprus are on Cypriot territory and have been of significant importance to the United States. Cyprus is a member of the European Union (EU) and a Western-oriented country. It is important to U.S. interests that it remain so.

Since September 3, 2008, when the new round of negotiations began, there have been 19 meetings held between President Demetrios Christofias and the Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat. We welcome these developments. However, unless Mr. Talat is allowed to negotiate freely on behalf of the Turkish Cypriots, without the external pressures that are being placed on him by Turkey, there will be little chance for progress to be made. The Cypriots themselves should have ownership of the process and the solution that is by the Cypriot people for the Cypriot people.

We support a settlement of the Cyprus problem through negotiations based on a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation in a state with a single sovereignty and international personality, incorporating the norms of a constitutional democracy embracing key American principles, the EU *acquis communautaire*, U.N. resolutions on Cyprus, the pertinent decisions of the European Court of Human Rights and of other European Courts--as in the best interests of the United States.

Mr. President, we call upon you to ask Turkey to:

- demilitarize Cyprus now;
- withdraw its 43,000 occupation troops illegally in Cyprus (Turkey's troops can be more useful if deployed in Afghanistan);
- return to Turkey the 180,000 illegal settlers/colonists from Turkey in violation of the Geneva Convention of 1949;
- 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; and
- warn Turkish leaders not to manipulate the current talks or restrict Mr. Talat at the bargaining table.

In a joint statement issued by the United States and Turkey on the occasion of the visit of Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton to Turkey on March 7, 2009, the statement, among other things, states:

“...to support strongly a comprehensive and mutually-acceptable settlement of the Cyprus question under the auspices of the UN and in this context ending the isolations of the Turkish Cypriots...”

Mr. President, we submit that this is an isolation imposed by Turkey! The removal of Turkey's troops, colonists and barbed-wire fence would end the Turkish Cypriot's economic isolation caused by Turkey and go a long way to solving the Cyprus problem because the Greek and Turkish Cypriots could then work out a fair and effective agreement.

Advocating these policy decisions would underscore support for the rule of law and respect for international law. This would illustrate that the United States truly wishes to advance the cause of solving the 35-year-old Cyprus problem. Continuing former failed policies that promote a double standard in applying the rule of law to Turkey and the continuing appeasement of Turkey does not serve U.S. interests.

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, in a statement that your campaign released to the Greek American community in October 2008, you stated:

“[You were] one of 73 Senators who signed a letter to President Bush in 2006 urging him to press Turkey to restore the full rights of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Orthodox Christian Church in Istanbul. [And that you had sent] Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice a personal letter on the same matter. [You called on] Turkey to respect the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s rights and freedoms, including its property rights. Turkey should allow the reopening of the Patriarchate’s school of theology on Halki Island and guarantee the right to train clergy of all nationalities, not just Turkish nationals.”

We commend you for your support of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

The Turkish government has tolerated assaults against its Greek Orthodox Christian religious minority and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and continues the illegal closure of the Greek Orthodox Halki Patriarchal School of Theology.

These 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 toleration 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 (IRFA) 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.

We call on you, Mr. President, to impress upon Turkey 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 legal personality will be granted to 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 nearly 7,000 illegally confiscated properties from the Ecumenical Patriarchate by the Turkish government since 1936; and
- calls for the respect for human and minority rights in Turkey
- is prepared to implement provisions of the IRFA if necessary if these actions are not implemented by Turkey.

We further call upon you, Mr. President, to visit the Ecumenical Patriarchate in order to show your support for this Holy See and to send a strong message to the Turkish government that the United States will not tolerate future violations against the Ecumenical Patriarchate. You can underscore this by issuing a joint communiqué with His All Holiness Bartholomew II.

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 the referral to the International Court of Justice of the issue of the delimitation of the continental shelf. Despite the opening of accession negotiations with the EU and Greece's sincere efforts to achieve complete normalization in relations with Turkey, the latter continues to threaten Greece with war (casus belli) and promotes claims that are unfounded and devoid of any legal basis.

Since Turkey aspires to become a full member state of the EU and is currently a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, she should especially be more respectful of international law and the commitments she has undertaken in the context of the EU accession process, including the full respect for the principle of good neighborly relations.

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

We call on you, Mr. President, to impress upon Turkey 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 discussed above and the recommendations presented for their successful resolution are all embodied within the fundamental principles of democracy and are founded on the rule of law and what is in the best interests of the United States.

We appreciate the opportunity to bring these issues to your attention and thank you for your consideration of them.

Sincerely,

Aleco Haralambides
President

Nick Larigakis
Executive Director