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November 11, 2020

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Secretary of State

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2201 C. St., NW

Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

On behalf of the nationwide membership of the American Hellenic Institute (AHI), I write regarding your forthcoming visit to Turkey to meet with His-All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I to discuss religious freedom in Turkey, in the region, and to promote the United States' strong stance on religious freedom around the world. AHI applauds your meeting with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and shares the Institute's policy positions on religious freedom in Turkey, that if acted upon, will demonstrate the United States' strong stance on religious freedom.

It is in the United States' best interest for the region in which Turkey is located to be politically, economically, and socially stable, and for democratic principles to flourish, including adherence to the rule of law and a respect for fundamental human rights and religious freedom.

Turkey has a longstanding history of suppressing religious freedom of minorities and lacks any real progress to address and improve its record on religious freedom. This is a notion that is also found in the U.S. State Department's 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom on Turkey. The report states that despite the constitutional claims of providing various freedoms with regards to religion, "The government continued to limit the rights of non-Muslim religious minorities, especially those not recognized under the government's interpretation of the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which includes only Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians."

The Ecumenical Patriarchate, located in Turkey, is the spiritual home of the world's oldest and second largest Christian Church. Turkey has made minimal progress to safeguard it or its spiritual leader of 300 million Orthodox Christians worldwide, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. In this regard, AHI has long maintained Turkey violates U.S. principles, norms, and law on freedom of religion. Recently, this has been most publicly exemplified by the re-conversion of the Hagia Sophia and St. Chora, UNESCO-designated museums located in Istanbul, into mosques, in violation of the UNESCO convention and U.S. laws.

In addition, safeguarding of the rights of the Ecumenical Patriarch is in the self-interest of the United States. The Ecumenical Patriarch has direct jurisdiction over the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America and thus is the spiritual and ecclesiastical leader of its 1.5 million adherents. As such, the Ecumenical Patriarch is, in a sense, also an American spiritual leader and should be afforded the protections of the American spiritual leader.

Key Points

- The Turkish government has tolerated assaults against its Greek Orthodox Christian religious minority, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and continues the illegal closure of the Greek Orthodox Halki Patriarchal School of Theology in Istanbul. These actions violate U.S. principles and law on freedom of religion as expressed in **Section 2804 of the FY98 Omnibus Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act (PL 105-277)**. This law calls for the Turkish government to safeguard the Ecumenical Patriarchate, its personnel, and its property, and to reopen the Halki Patriarchal School of Theology.
- Turkey stands in violation of **The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA)**, which obligates the president of the United States 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.
- IRFA also created the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), which continues to designate Turkey a “Tier 2” status in its annual report. In 2012, the USCIRF designated Turkey a “country of particular concern” (CPC).
- On multiple occasions, the European Court for Human Rights has ruled unanimously (including the Court’s Turkish representative) in favor of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The Court has condemned Turkey for improperly seizing property without compensation. The Court’s rulings have confirmed the Ecumenical Patriarchate has an international legal personality, a status which the Turkish government denies. (Religious minorities in Turkey are not recognized as legal personalities, and therefore, cannot own property.)

The Turkish government's tolerance of assaults upon Greek Orthodox Christian community, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and all religious minorities are further examples of how Turkey is a habitual violator of the rule of law in addition to Turkey's aggressive and provocative acts in the Aegean Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, and Middle East. Turkey must implement and strictly enforce the guarantees of religious freedom and human and minority rights set forth in the Treaty of Lausanne, the UN Charter, and U.S. laws, including IFRA. Therefore, the United States government must:

- call on Turkey to respect human and minority rights,
- hold Turkey accountable under IFRA, which obligates the President of the United States to take one or more of 15 enumerated actions toward a country that violates the Act,
- urge Turkey to grant legal personality to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, recognize the ecumenical role of the Patriarch and the Patriarchate, and safeguard it,
- press Turkey to immediately reopen the Halki School of Theology with the right to determine its administration, faculty and course of study and lift restrictions on the elections of the Patriarch.
- urge Turkey to promptly return the many illegally confiscated properties from the Ecumenical Patriarchate by the Turkish government since 1936,
- remain vocal in its strong objection to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's formal action that changed Hagia Sophia and St. Chora from museums into mosques and call for a reversal of their statuses, and
- reject any requests from Turkey to enter into Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with the State Department which impose import restrictions on cultural goods originating prior to 1924 or the formulation of the Turkish Republic – as was attempted in in late 2019/early 2020.

In conclusion, thank you for your visit to Turkey to meet exclusively with His-All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I. Your visit raises awareness of the plight of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and underscores the importance of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to addressing religious freedom and tolerance around the world.

Sincerely,



Nick Larigakis
President

CC: Samuel Brownback, Ambassador At Large For International Religious Freedom,
Department of State

Brian Bulatao, Under Secretary of State For Management

Philip T. Reeker, Acting Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of European and
Eurasian Affairs, Department of State

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Matthew A. Palmer, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European & Eurasian Affairs,
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Maria Olson, Director of the Office of Southern European Affairs, Department of State

David Berns, Deputy Director of the Office of Southern European Affairs, Department of
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David M. Satterfield, Ambassador of the United States to Turkey

Clare Orvis, Turkey Desk Officer, Department of State

Allison Davis, Executive Director, Cultural Heritage Center, Bureau of Educational and
Cultural Affairs, Department of State

The Congress