

**Remarks for American Hellenic Institute Breakfast and Briefing
Rep. Chris Smith
July 24, 2019**

I would like to thank Nick Larigakis and his able staff, especially Elias Gerasoulis, for inviting me to share a few remarks, and to congratulate the American Hellenic Institute for being a clear and consistent voice on issues of concern to Greece, Cyprus and the United States since 1974.

1974 of course was the year of Turkey's invasion and occupation of Cyprus – a completely unacceptable and illegal act, compounded each day that significant portions of Cyprus remain under Turkish rule. Indeed, just this week marked the 45th anniversary of the invasion.

I have been in Congress since 1981, and the issue of Turkey's conduct – particularly with respect to destroying the religious and cultural heritage of occupied Cyprus – has been a consistent concern of mine, and one on which I have engaged over the years.

I currently serve as co-Chairman of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, and just last month we held a hearing on the Global Persecution of Christians. Among the testimony we received was a statement by Dr. Elizabeth Prodromou, who is a familiar name to many

of you, dating back to her service as a Commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

In her testimony, she characterized what has happened to Christians in Turkey and in Turkish Occupied Cyprus as a “institutional discrimination,” one that involves State interference in the internal function and ecclesial appointments of the Christian Churches; legislation and regulations that deprive Christians of equal access to religious and general education; punitive property rights regimes designed to economically disenfranchise Christians; and “policies that produce the destruction of cultural and religious heritage of Christians in their lands of origin and countries of citizenship.”

Today, the Turkish government continues to impose unjustifiable restrictions on the practice of the Greek Orthodox Church, particularly by restricting who can participate in the Church’s Holy Synod that elects the Patriarch. Turkey has also failed to follow through on pledges to reopen the Halki seminary, which has remained closed for nearly half a century and prevented other seminaries in the country from operating.

Indeed, President Erdogan recently threatened to again turn the Hagia Sophia, which we know was once one of the greatest and most venerated sites in Christendom, into a mosque. Built by the Emperor Constantine, it was forcibly turned into a mosque, its icons

whitewashed, following the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453. The secularizing Ataturk turned it into a museum, and the existing status quo retains restored Christian artworks in addition to Islamic accretions. This cannot change.

The United States just two years ago witnessed firsthand the kind of brutality that President Erdogan's government is capable of during his official visit to Washington in 2017.

I voted in the House Foreign Affairs Committee and on the Floor for H. Res 354 that condemned the violence perpetrated by Erdogan's thugs on peaceful protesters and American police outside the Turkish Ambassador's residence.

I was the lead Republican cosponsor of the Protect and Preserve International Cultural Property Act that was signed into law in May 2016, which calls for an interagency coordinating committee to coordinate and advance executive branch efforts to protect and preserve international cultural property at risk from political instability, armed conflict, or natural or other disasters. This of course should apply to occupied Cyprus.

Also in December 2016, Congress passed—and the President signed into law—a bill that I authored called the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act. That law sharpens the powers of

the President to impose visa bans on serious violators of religious freedom.

In my opinion, the State Department ought to be using the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act to impose visa bans on Turkish authorities who are complicit in imposing these severe restrictions on the religious rights of Greek Orthodox Christians and particularly the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The same goes for any such violations that are ongoing in Turkish-occupied Cyprus.

Names of specific Turkish officials involved in these rights violations can be submitted to the State Department, and the State Department should be urged to uphold the law's intent.

Finally, it is with sadness that I note that this past week Turkey crossed a Rubicon which I am afraid will forever alter our relationship with this ostensible NATO ally when it went ahead with the purchase of Russia's S-400 missile defense system.

I fully support the Administration's decision to block Turkey's purchase—and suspend its role in the production—of the advanced F-35 combat aircraft as a result of this precipitous step.

Further, as a cosponsor of H. Res 372, a resolution "Expressing Concern for the United States-Turkey Alliance," I reiterate the call made

in that resolution that we fully implement sanctions against Turkey pursuant to the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act of 2017.

At the same time we should recognize that Cyprus and Greece are both important and reliable allies, not only for the United States but also increasingly for friends like Israel.

We are grateful in particular for our Navy's access to Souda Bay on the northwestern coast of Crete, home to the only pier in the Mediterranean large enough to dock an aircraft carrier.

Let me close by saying that when it comes to cooperating on national security, regional stability, respect for human rights, and the refugee crisis, the United States can count on Greece and Cyprus, but that doesn't mean it can take either country for granted.

Greece is confronting significant challenges and shouldering considerable burdens. Among these are the path to full recovery from the national debt crisis and the presence of tens of thousands of refugees and migrants who are effectively in limbo after having crossed from Turkey.

Cyprus meanwhile needs US support to secure a just and enduring settlement that reunifies the island.

Thank you again for the invitation, and thank you to the American Hellenic Institute for the good work that you do.