



# AHI

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Dr. Jeremy Sabloff, Chair  
Cultural Property Advisory Committee  
Cultural Heritage Center (ECA/P/C)  
U.S. Department of State  
2200 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20037

**Re: Meeting of the Cultural Property Advisory Committee Regarding Proposed Memorandum of Understanding with the Republic of Turkey Federal Register: October 2, 2019 (Volume 84, Number 191 (Page 52550))**

Dear Dr. Sabloff and Cultural Property Advisory Committee Members:

We submit this testimony on behalf of the American Hellenic Institute (AHI) and its members. AHI is dedicated to advancing the rule of law in US foreign policy especially in US relations with Greece, Cyprus and Turkey. AHI urges the Department of State to reject the request from the Government of the Republic of Turkey for a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which imposes import restrictions on cultural goods originating prior to 1924 or the formation of the Turkish Republic. It is unconscionable that the U.S. State Department would even consider recognizing the Turkish Government's rights to the material remains of Turkey's Greek, Armenian and Assyrian populations, which were slaughtered en masse or forced to emigrate in the dying days of the Ottoman Empire and the early days of the Turkish Republic.

The Turkish government asserts that the MOU would be an "essential step to mitigate illicit trafficking." Left unsaid is the harsh reality that Turkey is not, and has not been, a responsible steward of cultural property. For many decades Turkey has enabled or tolerated the destruction of cultural property. In the wake of its unlawful invasion in 1974 and continued occupation of 1/3 of the territory the Republic of Cyprus, the religious artifacts from over 400 churches have been stolen and the churches have been destroyed. Moreover, the Turkish government continues to sponsor policies to rewrite history by destroying the cultural legacy of others as evidenced by the widely reported destruction of the 3,000 year old ruins in Ain Dara which were bombed by the Turkish Air Force and the recent state-approved "treasure-hunting" legalized looting of Armenian and Jewish sites in Kahramanmaraş.

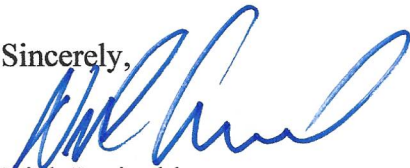
In fact, the reality is that Turkish cultural policies reinforce and support long-standing policies that deny and work to erase the reality of Greek, Armenian and other cultures that preceded the arrival of the Turks to Asia Minor, Thrace and Constantinople by thousands of years. The Pontic and Armenian Genocides, the expulsions of over one million Greeks and the century of accompanying Turkish denials are but the most disturbing evidence of this.

The governing Turkish statute makes lawful the confiscation of religious property by including ethnographic objects relating to religion in its scope and placing objects of religious heritage under state control. In contrast, religious communities are denied the legal personality essential for owning property including churches, cemeteries, ceremonial objects, documents and any and all other property. The consequences of this “legal theft” was clearly apparent with the conversion of the Church of St Savior in Chora, located in Instabul, Turkey, into a mosque. Given these facts, if the MOU is approved President Erdogan will consider his plan to convert Hagia Sophia into a mosque to be justified.

A focus on the facts of Turkey’s long-standing policies destroying and denying the presence of other cultures, rather than the disingenuous rhetoric of the MOU, makes clear what this proposed MOU does and does not do. The documented destruction of cultural property by the Turkish government means that this proposed MOU does **NOT** protect cultural property. Rather than protecting cultural property this MOU **WILL** be US Government recognition and endorsement of Turkish law confiscating church property and potentially place the family heirlooms of thousands of Americans of Greek, Armenian and Assyrians at risk. Ironically, any MOU would make U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Turkey’s enforcer for “clawing back” the material remains of displaced minority populations, which would likely comprise of a large portion of the “designated materials” subject to detention, seizure and forfeiture under any accompanying import restrictions.

The facts and evidence clearly do not justify this MOU request. At a time when Turkey aligns with Russia to purchase missiles; continues the illegal occupation of Cyprus; initiates policies converting churches to mosques; launches military attacks on US allies; floods, bombs and destroys cultural sites; we should not reward Turkey with an agreement that legitimizes its seizure of minorities’ communal and personal property. Given the facts the American Hellenic Institute urges rejection of this illegitimate Turkish MOU request.

Sincerely,



Nick Larigakis  
President