



Consul General

*Consulate General of Turkey
Boston MA*

**Senator Dominick J. Ruggerio
President of the Senate
State of Rhode Island
82 Smith St., Rm 318
Providence, RI 02903**

March 24, 2021

Honorable President of the Senate,

I, as the Consul General of Republic of Turkey in Boston, accredited also to the State of Rhode Island, would like to first of all express my wishes for a good and a productive legislative year ahead for the State of Rhode Island General Assembly and the Senate, in good health for all its distinguished members and families.

Today I write to you regarding a Senate Resolution, number S 0694, dated March 18, 2021, titled "Celebrating March 25, 2021, as the 200th Anniversary of Greek Independence Day and Celebrating Democracy in Greece and the United States."

First of all, having full awareness of the special meaning for this year for the Greek nation, I would like to express this Consulate's sincere hope that 2021 contributes to the future of Greece. It is also crucial that the celebration events for the 200th anniversary of Greek Independence will be held in a way that will not have negative repercussions on the bilateral relations between Turkey and Greece. Therefore, I need to underline that I find it very worrying that S 0694 had been drafted in such a way as to target Turkey's past and present, with false claims, accusations and distortion of facts.

I sincerely believe that a national day celebration for any country in the world should be about expressing joy, dignity and pride of its very own existence and not about trying to smear another country's name. The latter is hardly the way that a mature and a self-confident country would choose, especially by making a scene in front of the audiences of third countries, in this case the United States. Considering S 0694 from this perspective, I believe that its content should be troubling not only for my Consulate General and the Turkish-Americans living in the State of Rhode Island but also for Greek diplomats and Greek-Americans.

As for the specific lines of the resolution, one has to acknowledge that, in the year of 2021, the open criticism of the practices of the age of conquest simply defies the logic. Should the Byzantium had the ability, the Ottoman lands would then have been conquered. So, one may

indeed find it difficult to understand which criteria may help to judge this medieval episode of history so bitterly except for those what we all share today. Yet, blames of enslavement etc. seem like convenient to employ for some. Moreover, in the conquered İstanbul, by a precept of the Islamic law, any Christian population who had agreed to pay the supplementary due of the poll tax, “to which Muslims were no liable, they obtained from the *imam* exactly the same rights and obligations as the Muslims enjoyed” (İnalçık, 234). This was the beginning of the next chapter for Greeks of İstanbul and elsewhere under the Ottoman rule in 1453. Enslavement would indeed be the last word to define it.

Moreover, should the opposite be true, it must then be a complete miracle that the Greeks, the original descendants of the founders of İstanbul, who had spent half a millennium as “slaves”, as claimed by S 0694, held the largest stake in the enterprises and remained highly active in both Turkish and foreign owned businesses after some hundred years. In 1921, the Greeks owned 171 restaurants out of a total of 257; 444 beerhalls out of 471 and 528 wholesale businesses out of 654 (Johnson, 263). Greeks, followed by the Jews and Armenians had the same dominant role in all leading sectors to include banking, shipping and insurance. And what kind of enslavement was that then as we see a Greece today and a Greek nation, who had excelled in their mother tongue, preserved their faith %100, fully embraced their culture and customs and put forward an unchanged, untainted and un-weakened Greek identity? Could the Greeks become more Greek in any given respect under a different rule or if their lands had not been conquered?

I would therefore kindly state all these points in the hope that your decisions might indeed embrace a vision for a world in peace, cooperation and harmony, all what we truly need today.

I also would like to inform the distinguished Senate of the State of Rhode Island that, albeit with different connotations, 1821 had been a turning point in Turkey’s common history with Greece. History is a matter of arriving at a conclusion backed by solid facts. We have the Article 59 of the Lausanne Peace Treaty at hand and I am sure that you already know its content. This is a conclusion, encompassing the definitive outcome of nine years, from the start of the Great War to the end of the Turkish War of National Liberation. Times have changed. We must work towards a future of peace, partnership and harmony. And this starts in the minds and the hearts of our nations. Therefore, for the sake of truth as well as for that of peace and harmony among nations, a long, common history should not be reduced to wars. What we share in our cultures is a testimony to that. When Republic of Turkey celebrates the centennial of our Republic in 2023, I would like to assure you that a future-oriented approach will be the case.

When we come to the parts of S 0694 regarding the current state of affairs, however, we again see a number of fundamental distortions of facts. For the issues in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey has always prioritized diplomacy and dialogue with Greece, despite the continuing provocative steps of her counterpart. The efforts of Turkey have finally bore fruit and the 61st round of Exploratory Talks (ET) were held on January 25 of this year, after a pause of five years. It was a good and an encouraging start. The President of Republic of Turkey H.E. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Chief Advisor attended the talks, marking a commitment of Turkey at

the highest level. Many statements supporting the talks were issued from third countries, including the European Union and the United States. The parties mutually agreed to hold the next round in Athens.

The issues that Turkey has with Greece are purely bilateral and should be addressed through bilateral dialogue and in good faith. Yet Greece might seem to be reluctant to activate these bilateral dialogue channels at times. Therefore, if a local body at a third country, in this case the General Assembly of the State of Rhode Island, is really willing to take a step regarding this very specific foreign policy issue, it should be in a way to encourage the countries in question, in this case Greece, to take more active steps to build and to enhance dialogue and good relations. I believe that, however, the distinguished members of the General Assembly would agree that S 0694 certainly had not been written in such letter and spirit.

As for the parts of S 0694 that refer to human rights, democracy and religious freedoms in Turkey, deduced to a perspective of the issues regarding the Greek Orthodox Patriarchs, it should be brought to the attention of the distinguished members of the Senate of Rhode Island that religious leaders have historically been respected and enjoyed privileged status in Turkey. The Patriarchate runs its own affairs and provides spiritual services without any interference. Senior Turkish officials visited the premises of the Patriarchate and the Turkish high level authorities, including President Erdoğan himself, furthered dialogue with Patriarch to better understand and meet the needs of the Patriarchate. According to the Turkish legislation, the Patriarch has to be a Turkish citizen. Since 2010, 30 clergymen attached to the Patriarchate have been granted Turkish nationality through the decisions of the Council of Ministers, which waived the requirements of obtaining Turkish nationality through regular procedures. Therefore, succession is no longer an issue for the Patriarchate. "Ecumenicity" of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, on the other hand, is a matter of theological and doctrinal debate within the Orthodox Church. Turkey's policy is in line with the Opinion of the Venice Commission published in 2010:

"The ecumenical nature of the Patriarchate is thus first and foremost a spiritual and ecclesiastical matter – not a legal one" (Paragraph 84)

"...It should be emphasised that the Commission has seen no evidence or heard no claim to the effect that the Turkish authorities are directly trying to stop the Patriarch from using the title ecumenical. There does not seem to be any prosecution of him or his followers or any others for using the title. Furthermore, there seems to be no direct attempt at trying to stop him exercising his ecumenical functions; whether it is the administration of churches answering to him, or providing religious leadership in other ways..." (Paragraph 90)

"...The Commission notes that there is no indication that the Turkish authorities prevent the Patriarchate from using this title and that the Turkish authorities are under no positive obligation to themselves to use this title...." (Paragraph 110)]

Having considered all of the above information, I believe any future reader of history will be perplexed by the State of Rhode Island's inclusion in its legislature completely erroneous information regarding the freedoms and practices of a specific religion within the territories of another country. On the other hand, if the distinguished legislative body of the State of Rhode

Island would like to express the importance it attaches to rights and freedoms elsewhere in the world, the situation of the Turkish Muslim population in Greece should be of genuine concern. The Turkish Muslim Minority in Western Thrace had been denied their Turkish identity, religious and education rights for decades by Greece, who continues to tighten its grip on them, even under the conditions of COVID-19 pandemic. If needed, the Consulate General of Turkey can provide a lengthy list of these violations, which run totally against the Lausanne Treaty as well as the verdicts of the European Court of Human Rights.

Honorable President Ruggiero,

I do hope that, paying due consideration to the above mentioned points, the Senate of Rhode Island will refrain from proceeding the S 0694 with its current unfortunate and misleading content at the General Assembly and review it in such a way that it will serve to the peace and harmony of the Turkish-American and Turkish-Greek populations who have chosen the beautiful State of Rhode Island as their home.

I would like to assure you that the Consulate General of the Republic of Turkey in Boston will be at your disposal in case you need any further information or clarification.

Best regards,



Ceylan Özen Erişen

CC:

Senator Michael J. McCaffrey - Senate Majority Leader

Senator Dennis L. Algiere - Senate Minority Leader