

AHI statement on the Desecration of 90 Tombs in the Istanbul Historical Orthodox Christian Cemetery

September 24, 2009

The American Hellenic Institute (AHI) expresses its deep concern over the recent incident of the desecration of 90 tombs at the Baloukli historical Orthodox Christian cemetery. In its recent statement on September 9, 2009 AHI commemorated the memory of the victims of the Turkish government's atrocities against the Christian minority in 1955. The statement also calls for the full compensation of victims and their heirs from the Turkish government.

In light of the recent 54th anniversary of Turkey's destruction of the 110,000 Greek Orthodox Christian community of Istanbul, this latest incident is reminiscent of the tragic pogrom that took place back in September of 1955. More than half a century later, Turkey still fails to pay respect to the sacred memory of these victims and continues to suppress religious freedom and basic human rights of the Greek Orthodox Christian minority.

As reported on the website of the Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (archons.org), the vandalism took place in the morning hours of September 2, 2009 when the vandals, who have not yet been identified, entered the cemetery from the stone fence facing the road. While violating the sacred ground, they destroyed the parts of the tombstones that carried the cross and damaged the signs that displayed the names, the dates of birth and death of the deceased. The Turkish authorities have started investigating this case as this incident has spurred great concern among the Greek minority in Istanbul. It should be noted that similar acts of vandalism into Orthodox Christian cemeteries have occurred in the past; however, this vandalism was especially destructive.

Throughout the years, the Turkish government has tolerated assaults against its Greek Orthodox Christian religious minority and the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Furthermore, the Greek Orthodox Halki Patriarchal School of Theology remains closed. Turkey imposes restrictions on religious groups and on religious expression. Turkey violates fundamental principles and law on freedom of religion and has created an atmosphere in which hostile actions can occur, as in the aforementioned case. These illustrations suggest that Turkey has no intention of significantly changing its attitudes towards religious minorities living within its boundaries. The extent of religious oppression and lack of respect that Turkey has chosen to display against the Greek Orthodox Christian minority encourages the recurrence of violent and disrespectful acts from extreme elements within Turkey.

AHI expresses its continued concern regarding the security of the 2,500 members of the Greek Orthodox Christian community still living in Istanbul. While the remaining Greek Orthodox Christian community is mostly comprised of elderly citizens, 54 years later, such events display that they still live under threat.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in its Annual Report, published on May 2009, recognizes that: “Turkey has systematically targeted the Greek Orthodox Christian community through a series of policies, resulting in killings, destruction of private and commercial properties, violation of religious sites and expropriation of income-generating properties of both private citizens and the Ecumenical Patriarchate.”

The above incident is a prime example that Turkey, 54 years later, appears to have made no real progress in the matter as it unrelentingly and unjustifiably continues to suppress the Greek Orthodox Christian community.

In an effort to enhance protection of such sacred historical sites and prevent the recurrence of similar vandalisms, the Board of Trustees of the Baloukli Hospital, has initiated the construction of a higher fence alongside the reconstruction of the tombs.

AHI urges the White House and the State Department to strongly express to Turkey the need to investigate and bring to justice the criminals who perpetrated this crime. It is essential that Turkey addresses this issue and places high priority to capture and prosecute these criminals. Furthermore, AHI requests that our government petition Turkey to provide a progress report on the actions taken on this matter.