

April 16, 2013

The Honorable John Kerry
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Re: Serious and Ongoing Violations of Religious Freedom in Greece

Dear Mister Secretary:

We write as an informal group of human rights advocates and religious leaders to express our deep concern about longstanding, serious violations of religious freedom in Greece.

In Greece, there is no formal or informal separation of Church and State. Rather, the Greek Orthodox Church is deeply embedded in Greek society and plays a critical role in the policy-making process, including its execution. The Greek Constitution (in Article 3 thereof) goes as far as to state that: “The prevailing religion in Greece is that of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ.” Greek Orthodox clergy even receive their salaries and pensions from the Greek government. As such, the Greek Orthodox Church is *de facto* an organ of the Greek government.

Greece is a signatory of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and has acceded to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In addition, it is a signatory, but has not ratified or acceded to, the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Greece has an obligation under customary international law and the relevant conventions to which it is a party to provide religion freedom to all its citizens.

As a party to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), Greece is subject to the European Court of Human Rights whose numerous decisions attest to the lack of religious freedom in Greece, outside of the Greek Orthodox faith. Greece continues to contravene ECHR's: Article 1-obligation to respect human rights, Article 8-the right to respect for private and family life, Article 9-freedom of thought, conscience and religion, Article 10-freedom of expression, Article 11-freedom of assembly and association, and Article 14-the prohibition of discrimination (including based on religious grounds and association with a national minority).

According to reports by the U.S. Department of State, among other respected institutions, the following religious groups have faced significant religious freedom violations or have no religious freedom in Greece, including Macedonian Christian Orthodox followers, Muslims, Jews, Catholics, Scientologists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, evangelical Christians, and other Protestants.

One example, highly noted in reports, is that Greece does not recognize the right of the Turkish minority to freely elect its own religious leaders - or muftis. Rather, Greek authorities continue to impose their self-appointed “Muftis” on the Turkish minority in contravention of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne and international human rights instruments. Muftis elected by the Turkish minority have been prosecuted and imprisoned by Greek authorities. The elected Muftis of Xanthi (such as Mehmet Emin Aga) and Komotini (such as Ibrahim Serif) were not recognized by the Greek government and have been prosecuted several times under the Greek penal code. The European Court of Human Rights held

that these persecutions violated Article 9 of the Convention.

More specifically, a prime example of the abuse of religious rights of the Macedonian Orthodox Christian minority is the ongoing struggle of Archimandrite Nikodim Tsarknias, a monk of the Macedonian Christian Orthodox faith. He was an ordained member of the Greek Orthodox Church from 1973 until 1991. While working for the Florina Diocese Bishop, Bishop Augustine, Archimandrite Tsarknias disclosed his Macedonian ethnic identity and opposed Augustine's attempt to eradicate Macedonian religious customs. This resulted in his excommunication from the Greek Orthodox Church as well as Greek government authorities declaring him a "national threat."

Since the early 1990s, Archimandrite Tsarknias has, at varying times, been harassed, beaten, fined and jailed for his advocacy of religious freedom for the Macedonian Orthodox Christian minority in Greece. On one occasion, he was beaten in front of a courtroom, ostensibly for wearing Macedonian Orthodox Christian religious garments. State Department Human Rights Reports on Greece, until 2007, referenced the abuse that Archimandrite Tsarknias faced at the hands of Greek authorities and others in Greece. In October 2012, Archimandrite Tsarknias met with Ambassador Suzan Johnson Cook, the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, to discuss the situation facing religious minorities in Greece.

A striking campaign has been set up by the Greek state, through the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Anthimos of Thessaloniki, targeting Greece's ethnic Macedonian minority. Anthimos has vilified Macedonian-identifying Greek citizens, even inciting violence toward them, on National Greek TV. Most notably, in a sermon he delivered in Thessaloniki on August 14, 2011, Anthimos called upon Greeks to join him in 40-50 buses he had set aside, to travel to the town of Meliti, Greece, in order to destroy a planned Macedonian language radio station. Instead of promoting Christian values of peace, tolerance and togetherness, Anthimos uses his position of trust to incite the Greek nation to ethnic hatred and violence.¹

As the new Secretary of State, we strongly urge you to call upon Greece to ratify the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and to actively and in good faith secure religious freedom for all religious minorities in Greece. Additionally, it is important that future State Department Human Rights Reports as well as Reports on International Religious Freedom accurately and thoroughly portray the situation in Greece. For your reference, we have attached a report *Greece: Religious Freedom Abuses – The Case of the Macedonian Orthodox Christian Minority*, which also details examples of what other religious minorities are facing in Greece. Your attention to this matter, concerning a U.S. ally, is warranted.

Sincerely,

ORGANIZATIONS

AMERICAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY NATIONAL AFFAIRS OFFICE

¹ The rise of Greece's racist and violent Golden Dawn political party is decidedly spurred by Anthimos and others who similarly encourage xenophobia and intolerance.

FEDERATION OF WESTERN THRACE TURKS IN EUROPE

HUMAN RIGHTS LAW FOUNDATION (HRLF)

INSTITUTE ON RELIGION & PUBLIC POLICY

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

RUSSIAN ORTHODOX AUTONOMOUS CHURCH OF AMERICA

UNION OF COUNCILS FOR JEWS OF THE FORMER SOVIET UNION (UCSJ)

UNITED MACEDONIAN DIASPORA (UMD)

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CC: Dr. Suzan Johnson Cook, Ambassador-at-Large, International Religious Freedom
Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, Chair, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom