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His Excellency Recep Tayyip Erdoğan  
Prime Minister  
Başbakanlık  
06573 ANKARA

March 9, 2009

Prime Minister Erdogan:

I am writing to express my profound concern with the alarming violations of religious freedom and property rights that the Republic of Turkey has perpetrated against the Syriac Monastery of Mor Gabriel in Midyat, Turkey. Mor Gabriel is the oldest surviving Syriac Orthodox monastery in the world and a place of pilgrimage for the Assyrian/Syriac peoples. Founded in 397, Mor Gabriel Monastery is a center of significance for Christianity, particularly the Syriac Church.

Baseless charges leveled against Mor Gabriel such as illegally occupying the land the monastery has been on for nearly two millennia and proselytizing to Muslims are troubling at best and inspire violence against the monastery at worst. These actions show Turkey's slide away from secular democracy and the rule of law towards fundamentalism. The Treaty of Lausanne signed in 1923 of which Turkey is a signor states: "Turkish nationals belonging to non-Muslim minorities shall enjoy the same treatment and security in law and in fact as other Turkish nationals. In particular, they shall have an equal right to establish, manage and control at their own expense, any charitable, religious and social institutions, any schools and other establishments for instruction and education, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their own religion freely...." Unfortunately, the Turkish government has failed to abide by the unequivocal principles of the Treaty of Lausanne. Turkey's continuous hostilities towards Mor Gabriel not only jeopardizes the integrity of the property but also of all those that reside, visit, and learn within its walls.

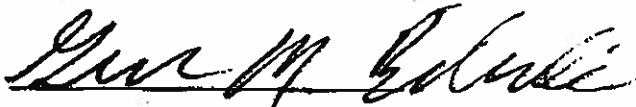
While we understand and appreciate the role that your country has played as a strategic ally in our Global War on Terror, we are disappointed with your demonstrated lack of progress towards religious tolerance. As a member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, I am sensitive to the need of nurturing the relationship between the United States and Turkey. A key factor in this relationship is ensuring that Turkey grows as a secular, constitutional democracy.

As you know the characteristics of secular democracies necessarily include freedom of religion. While Turkey has made strides in other areas of modernization, it still falls far short of granting its citizens religious freedom. I make no extraordinary demands, but simply ask that you allow your citizens and institutions to be free of harassment based on religion.

In anticipation of President Obama's visit and his ambitious agenda to further develop a U.S.-Turkey strategic relationship, I ask that you take this opportunity to display your good will and pledge to grant the Mor Gabriel Monastery the ability to operate in an environment free of harassment and hostility; and to allow the free practice of worship and education of the Syriac Church..

Show the United States that Turkey will safeguard religious and human rights for the Mor Gabriel Monastery, and that you will be working to continue the democratization of Turkish society as a whole. For this, we and nearly 300 million Orthodox Christians would be eternally grateful.

Very truly yours,



Gus M. Bilirakis

Member of Congress