

BILL ANALYSIS

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AUTHOR'S / SPONSOR'S STATEMENT OF INTENT

The Ecumenical Patriarchate, located in modern-day Istanbul, formerly known as Constantinople, in the Republic of Turkey, is the Sacred See that presides over a community of self-governing churches of the Orthodox Christian world. The See is led by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, who is the 269th direct successor of the Apostle Andrew and who holds titular primacy as *primus inter pares*, "first among equals," in the community of Orthodox Churches worldwide. The Orthodox Church has been in existence for nearly 2,000 years and numbers approximately 300 million members around the world, with more than two million members in the United States. The government of Turkey refuses to recognize the international status and the rights and religious freedoms of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the head of the Greek Orthodox Christian Church, which is a minority religion in Turkey. The government of Turkey and Turkish prime ministers have limited the candidates available to the Holy Synod for selection as the Ecumenical Patriarch to Turkish nationals who have performed mandatory military service in the Turkish armed forces, and they continue to insist that any new spiritual head of Orthodox Christians, including Orthodox Christians in Texas and throughout the United States, be approved by them. Because of selective enforcement of laws and regulations, the once large eligible community of Turkish citizens of the Orthodox faith has declined to only approximately 2,500 persons, most of whom are elderly.

Before its closure, the Theological School of Halki was the only educational institution for Orthodox Christianity in Turkey; the school was closed in 1971 by Turkish authorities under a law requiring that higher education in religion and minority training be controlled by the state. The United States Congress passed a resolution expressing its sentiment that the Orthodox Theological School of Halki in the Republic of Turkey should be reopened in order to promote religious freedom. The government of Turkey has reneged on its agreement to reopen the Theological School of Halki, thus impeding training for Orthodox Christian clergy within its borders. In recent years, the government of Turkey has, in violation of the inalienable rights of all peoples, confiscated more than 90 percent of the properties of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and has placed a 42 percent tax, retroactive to 1999, on the nonprofit Balukli hospital, which is run by the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The dissolution of the spiritual head of Orthodox Christian Churches in the coming decades is inevitable if Turkey continues its policy of interference in religious matters, despite the government's stated policy of being purely secular in its dealings.

All Christians in our state, in the United States, and around the world stand to lose this nearly 2,000-year-old Sacred See, where the text of the New Testament was codified, the canonical structure of the Christian church was established, and the Nicene Creed was written and first pronounced; the disappearance of the Ecumenical Patriarchate would mean the loss of a crucial link between Christians and their religious history, sacred texts, and religious forebears. The disappearance of this See would also mean the end of a crucial link between Christians and the Muslim world; at a time when individuals hostile to the United States are attempting to create conflict between Christians and Muslims, the continuing presence of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Turkey is a powerful testament to the coexistence of these two faiths in Istanbul since 1453.

Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on America, the spiritual leader of Orthodox Christians, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, gathered international religious leaders and produced the first statement signed by Muslim leaders that condemned the attacks as "anti-religious." The importance of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to the United States is reflected in the record number of Congressional cosponsors of the measure that bestowed on him America's highest civilian award, the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor--an award also given to George Washington, Winston Churchill, Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, and Pope John Paul

II. The European Union, a group of nations with a common goal of promoting peace and the well-being of its peoples, began accession negotiations with Turkey on October 3, 2005. The European Union defined membership criteria for accession to the European Union at the Copenhagen European Council in 1993, obligating candidate countries to have achieved certain levels of reform, including stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, adherence to the rule of law, and respect for and protection of minorities and human rights. The Treaty of Amsterdam, which came into effect in 1999, affirms that the European Union is founded on the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law; Article 13 of the Amsterdam Treaty enables the European Council to take appropriate action to combat discrimination based on religion or belief. Turkey's current treatment of the Ecumenical Patriarchate is inconsistent with the membership conditions and goals of the European Union.

The United States has long been a beacon of hope for vulnerable and disenfranchised people around the world, and the State of Texas has long valued and defended the principles of democracy, individual liberty, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion; as citizens of conscience of this great land, we bear both the responsibility and the honor to raise our voices against injustice in behalf of those unable to speak for themselves.

RESOLVED

That the 81st Legislature of the State of Texas hereby express its support for the Ecumenical Patriarchate and urge the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations, as leaders of the international community, to encourage the government of Turkey to cease its discrimination against one of the oldest institutions in Christianity, the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

That the State of Texas call on the government of Turkey to eliminate all forms of discrimination based on religion and to immediately grant the Ecumenical Patriarchate appropriate international recognition, the right to determine ecclesiastic succession, and the right to train clergy of all nationalities.

That the State of Texas call on the government of Turkey to pledge to uphold and safeguard religious rights without compromise.

That the Texas secretary of state forward official copies of this resolution to the president of the United States, to the United States ambassador to the Republic of Turkey, to the ambassador of the Republic of Turkey to the United States, to the presidents of the commission, parliament, and Council of the European Union, to the secretary general of the United Nations, to the speaker of the house of representatives and the president of the senate of the United States Congress, and to all the members of the Texas delegation to Congress with the request that this resolution be officially entered in the Congressional Record as a memorial to the Congress of the United States of America.