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March 26, 2018

Mr. Robert Dick,
National President,
Returned & Services League of Australia
PO Box 721 FYSHWICK ACT 2609

Dear Mr. Dick,

We appreciate the support the RSL gives returned servicemen and women, and in commemorating the sacrifices they made at Gallipoli. Since many people visit Gallipoli to celebrate Anzac Day, we would like to express our concerns about ongoing events in Turkey, which challenge the spirit of these ANZACS. In light of Turkey's lurch towards authoritarianism under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and the repressive measures being taken within the ongoing state of emergency, along with Turkey waging war on Kurdish fighters in Syria and Iraq, and threatening US troops in Syria, we ask you to discourage your members from going to Gallipoli to celebrate the ANZAC spirit until Turkey changes its political trajectory, withdraws its troops from Syria and Iraq, and stops supporting extremist jihadi militants in Syria, as Turkey's aggression and support for terrorism has implications for the safety and security of Australians.

Following the terrorist attacks in Western Turkey between 2015 and January 2016, Australia and many other countries deemed Turkey an unsafe tourist destination. Although terrorist attacks targeting civilians in Western Turkey appear to have stopped since January 2016, in other ways the situation has further deteriorated. Since the failed coup in July 2016, Turkey has been in a state of emergency that has allowed a purge involving nine pro-Kurdish politicians losing their seats in parliament, the arbitrary dismissal of 152,000 government employees and more than 100 elected mayors, and the arrest of 160,000 people, with at least 50,510 people remaining in prison. No section of society has been spared. The purge has impacted military personnel, civil servants, elected politicians and mayors, journalists, academics, teachers, NGO workers and ordinary citizens accused of having links with the Gulen Network and/or the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), or accused of criticizing President Erdogan or government policy. Those arrested are denied due legal process, and many are subject to torture, as evidenced by a recent UN human rights report. The crackdown has led to the closure of 145 media outlets and 1,528 community organisations.

In addition, after the Turkish government called an end to peace talks with the Kurds in July 2015, Turkey's security forces have waged war on the Kurdish population in eastern Turkey, evicting up to 1.3 million people from their homes, besieging and destroying large sections of Kurdish-majority cities, villages and even destroying cemeteries. At least 400 civilians have been murdered in basements and in the street when trying to hide, escape or seek medical attention.

Meanwhile, the Turkish military (TSK) has invaded Syria and Iraq under the pretext of 'neutralising' all 'terrorists' – the label the Turkish government gives Kurdish fighters, who have been fighting ISIS since

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2014, and whose political representatives are trying to establish a democratic system of government that respects human, ethnic and women's rights. Its actions further destabilize the region.

Turkey is becoming an increasingly authoritarian state, led by a president who wants absolute power, who uses Islam and ultra-nationalism to coerce the population, and who acts in defiance of international laws, including human rights law. This is no-where more apparent than Turkey's recent offensive in Afrin, called Operation Olive Branch. Between January 20 and March 18, Turkey subjected the peaceful Kurdish-majority enclave in north-east Syria to airstrikes and ground attacks using tanks and artillery, killing more than 300 civilians and up to 1,500 Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the same forces who defeated ISIS in Raqqa and who were clearing ISIS from Deir Ezzor. In Afrin, Turkey has destroyed roads, schools, archeological sites and communication towers and has damaged a major hydro-electric dam that has left Afrin city without water and electricity since March 9. In other ways, Turkey has committed war crimes and crimes against humanity, including ethnic cleansing. To take control of Afrin, which Turkey saw as a security threat because it was secured and administered by Kurds, Turkey uses TSK soldiers and extremist jihadi militias that include ex-ISIS, al-Qaida (now called Hayat Tahrir al-Sham), Ahrar al-Sham and others. These militia want to establish a Sunni Arab caliphate based on Sharia Law in Syria, which Turkey has allegedly promised them in return for their services. Having taken control of Afrin, and displacing more than 250,000 people (one Kurdish source says 500,000), these militias have undertaken widespread looting and some local residents claim they have taken women as sex slaves. Turkey threatens to extend its offensive to Manbij and east of the Euphrates, where US troops are based. Such actions may broaden the war, which could implicate Australian Defence Forces, and empower extremist jihadi militias, some of whom have already spread to the Philippines, Indonesia and elsewhere in Asia, thus increasing the terrorist threat to Australia.

While members of the international community have voiced objections to Turkey's aggression in Syria and Iraq, no one has been willing to back these objections with material consequences.

Australian soldiers did not die at Gallipoli to support these types of actions. Australian soldiers died to protect European and Australian people from them. Hence, Kurdish Lobby Australia requests that the RSL withdraw its support for Anzac Day celebrations at Gallipoli, out of respect for the values of the fallen, which are inimical to those of the current Turkish government.

Yours sincerely,

Ziran Fatah
President, Co-chair

Dr Gina Lennox
Public Officer, Co-chair