

Human Rights Abuse in Turkey

Hearing of Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

2255 Rayburn House Office Building, Washington DC

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Excerpts of remarks by Co-Chairman Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ)

The hearing of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission—Human Rights in Turkey today—will come to order.

We are here to expose and explore ways to mitigate and hopefully end massive violations of human rights by the government of Prime Minister Erdogan against the people of Turkey.

I have chaired numerous hearings on Turkey over the years including (partial listing) in [1995](#), [1999](#), [2000](#), [2005](#), [2015](#) and [2024](#) and have raised human rights abuses by the Turkish government in numerous fora.

Today, the government of Turkey has unconscionably large number of political prisoners—many of the prisoners being either ethnic Turks adhering to the Gulen movement, or ethnic Kurds.

It's impossible to say what is the true number of political prisoners, but most sources agree it runs to many thousands—*far more* than any other European country.

The State Department's most recent *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* states that the Turkish government admitted to holding "15,539 detainees... in prisons on grounds of their alleged affiliation with the Gulen movement..." In addition, "NGOs estimated approximately 8,500 individuals were held in pretrial detention or were imprisoned following conviction specifically for alleged links with the PKK." And "Observers asserted a significant number of the individuals detained for journalistic work, human rights advocacy, or on terrorism or other charges, were political prisoners."

That was a report dated April of last year. In March of this year, [Deutsche Welle](#) reported: "It is unclear how many of these are political prisoners, defined as people who are in prison solely or primarily because they are inconvenient to the government or organizations or individuals close to it. According to [human rights](#) organizations, there are tens of thousands of them... As of now, more than 1,100 people are already said to have been [arrested](#) during the recent protests sparked by the arrest of Ekrem Imamoglu."

According to the State Department, other shocking abuses of human rights by the Turkish government include: “enforced disappearance; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government or on behalf of the government; arbitrary arrest or detention; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; political prisoners or detainees; transnational repression against individuals in another country; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence and threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecution of journalists, censorship, or enforcement or of threat to enforce criminal libel laws to limit expression; serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association”

The abuses we are committed against every group in Turkey, certainly including Sunni Muslim Turks. We are also going to talk about the rights abuses against Alevi Muslims, Kurds, and Christians, particularly the Greek Orthodox Church and Protestants, and abuses in territory that Turkey occupies illegally – Northern Cyprus and northern Syria.

The 2025 United States Religious Freedom Commission reports strongly recommends that the U.S. Government “include Turkey on the

Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act.”

Two of our witnesses today, Mr. Freedom and Mr. Aslandogan, are Turkish, and they will have things to say today that are critical of the government of Turkey. They are ethnically and spiritually part of the Turkish people, they are loyal Turks - they are fulfilling a duty toward their homeland, which is *of course* a great country with a rich culture. They are testifying today in order to defend the best of Turkey’s religious and civil traditions, at a time when the *government* of Turkey is acting against the *country* and the *people*.

They are doing this at real risk to themselves. The government of Turkey has a terrible record of targeting and pursuing its critics beyond its borders. In this shameful respect, the Erdogan government one of the most aggressive governments in the world, kidnapping or otherwise “disappearing” many of its critics. It has already pursued Mr. Freedom – with death threats, arrest warrants, attacks, social media campaigns, and several kidnap and extradition attempts. So ***thank you*** for your **immense courage** – it is an inspiration to Americans as well, I’m sure, to millions of Turks.

I believe our government's response to this transnational repression has been very weak. That is why in the last Congress, I authored the Transnational Repression Policy Act, and I'd like to thank my friend Rep. McGovern for having been the lead Democratic cosponsor of that bill. The reintroduction of that bill is imminent. The bill would require the President to impose property- and visa-blocking sanctions on foreign individuals and entities that directly engage in transnational repression, and would require the State Department to develop a strategy to fight transnational repression, direct the intelligence community to identify the perpetrators of transnational repression, and the Justice Department to train law enforcement and other employees in detecting and fighting it.

This bill will offer increased protection to our brave witnesses today, and to many other people like them, patriots working to defend human rights in other transnationally repressive countries like China, Russia, Egypt, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Cuba. I encourage Members and victims of transnational repression to support this legislation, which will be re-introduced shortly. I am also preparing legislation that will address *financial* transnational repression. Any experience that our witnesses have on these issues will be very welcome information to the commission.