

Testimony for Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Chairman Smith, Chairman McGovern, and distinguished Members of the Commission,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the deteriorating state of human rights in the Republic of Turkey.

My name is Alp Aslandogan, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Alliance for Shared Values, a U.S.-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to promoting interfaith dialogue, education, and societal peace.

I appear before you not only as a human rights advocate but also as a participant of the Hizmet movement—also known as the Gulen movement—a peaceful, service-oriented, faith-based civil society initiative that has become one of the principal targets of state-sponsored persecution under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s authoritarian rule. I also appear here as someone who personally experienced and continue to experience some of the violations of human rights I will describe.

Since the unsolved failed coup attempt of July 2016, the Turkish government has unleashed a sweeping and relentless crackdown on dissent. The persecution has extended far beyond coup plotters or political opponents, reaching entire communities, including journalists, academics, students, lawyers, Kurds, Alevis, women, civil society members, and human rights defenders. Participants in the Hizmet movement have been disproportionately and systematically targeted.

I can count my extended family members, colleagues, professors of literature and sciences among those targeted.

Under the pretext of combating terrorism, Erdogan’s regime has weaponized vague and overly broad anti-terrorism laws to silence peaceful critics and dismantle independent institutions. According to the Turkish government’s own data, more than 2 million individuals have been investigated since 2016 on terrorism charges—often for actions as benign as donating to a charity, working at a school, or downloading a public messaging app like WhatsApp that allegedly was linked to the movement.

The consequences have been devastating. Over half a million public employees and private citizens have been arbitrarily purged from their jobs, blacklisted, and denied future employment. More than 1,600 schools, 15 universities, and over 500 NGOs have been shut down or seized. Nearly 1,000 private companies have been taken from their owners and given under the control of regime loyalists. Hundreds of media outlets, including dozens of newspapers and radio stations, have been closed. Hundreds of thousands of innocent citizens have been arrested.

Today, more than 1,400 inmates in Turkish prisons are identified as seriously ill, including hundreds who are severely ill, unable to care for themselves, or require life support. Over 800 infants and young children are living in prisons alongside their mothers.

In March of this year, 41 students—including 14 minors—were arrested and charged with terrorism for engaging in routine religious and social activities. In the eyes of the Erdogan regime, a few youth coming together to hang out together or going to a movie theater is now treated as organized crime. In May, more than 500 college students and individuals have been detained. The level of persecution has now reached university campuses. Activities such as organizing a picnic, traveling in a group, or studying together are now considered acts of terrorism in Turkey.

Recent developments signal further erosion of democratic norms. In 2025, Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu was detained in what is widely seen as an effort to prevent him from challenging President Erdogan in future elections. President Erdogan has also convened a legal team tasked with drafting a new constitution, raising concerns that he may attempt to extend his presidency beyond 2028. Over 1,400 individuals were arrested for peacefully protesting the politically motivated detention of Mayor İmamoğlu.

This scale of repression is not only devastating—it is systematic and deliberate.

Turkey has also emerged as a global leader in transnational repression. According to the U.S. State Department, Turkish authorities have orchestrated the forced return of more

than 100 individuals from over 20 countries since 2016, using a combination of renditions, abductions, and politically motivated extradition requests.

Among the documented cases are the abduction of four educators from Kenya, another educator from Kyrgyzstan, and the kidnapping of a businessman in Tajikistan—many of whom faced torture in prison.

In October of last year, a close friend of mine, Mr. Mustafa Genc, who has been organizing interfaith dialogue activities in Kenya has been abducted in Nairobi and forcibly flown to Turkey.

The United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention issued several decisions against Turkish government, finding their actions in violation of the international law.

Hizmet-affiliated schools in countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Albania have been forcibly seized and transferred to the Turkish government-backed Maarif Foundation—often against the will of parents and students, and frequently accompanied by a significant decline in educational quality.

Turkey also has abused INTERPOL mechanisms, including Red Notices and Diffusion Requests, to target exiled dissidents, journalists, and civil society leaders abroad—undermining the integrity of international legal institutions.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) repeatedly has condemned Turkey's misuse of anti-terror laws. In the landmark Yüksel Yalçinkaya case, the Court ruled that the Turkish government unlawfully prosecuted individuals solely based on their use of the ByLock messaging app, possession of an account at Bank Asya, or donations to legally operating humanitarian charities. Despite these rulings, Turkey continues to violate its obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights and other international treaties, showing a blatant disregard for the rule of law.

In a country where independent media has been virtually eliminated, social media remains the last platform for truth-telling and civic mobilization. But even this space is under siege.

More than 712,000 websites currently are blocked in Turkey. Thousands of X accounts, YouTube videos, and Facebook pages have been removed. In 2025 alone, X blocked 126 accounts—and later 700 more—at the request of Turkish authorities. During the protests following the detention of Istanbul’s mayor, an additional 200 X accounts were blocked. When U.S. social media companies comply with these demands, they risk enabling authoritarian censorship, silencing the voices of human rights victims, and blocking paths to democracy.

This persecution extends beyond Turkey’s borders. Turkish-Americans affiliated with the Hizmet movement, such as myself, live in forced exile, unable to visit loved ones—even to attend funerals—for fear of reprisals. Family members in Turkey face harassment, detention, and loss of livelihood. Properties and financial assets are frozen. U.S.-based citizens and residents face de-banking and discrimination due to politicized Turkish blacklists. Smear campaigns have spread false terrorism accusations against law-abiding Americans.

Turkey’s human rights record is reflected in global rankings. Freedom House scores Turkey 33 out of 100 on civil liberties, classifying it as “Not Free.” The country also is ranked “Not Free” in internet freedom. Reporters Without Borders ranks Turkey 158 out of 180 in media freedom. The World Justice Project’s Rule of Law Index ranks Turkey 117 out of 142. Transparency International ranks Turkey 115 out of 180 in corruption, and the Heritage Foundation places it among the “Mostly Unfree” economies. The CIVICUS Monitor lists Turkey’s civic space as “Repressed.”

In light of this dire situation, I respectfully urge Congress to take action. U.S. cooperation with Turkey, including military and security assistance, should be conditioned on measurable improvements in human rights and the release of prisoners of conscience. Congress should reintroduce and pass the Turkey Human Rights Promotion Act in the 2025-26 legislative session. The Global Magnitsky Act should be applied to Turkish officials responsible for gross human rights violations or corruption. Regular hearings and briefings should be held to maintain oversight and amplify the voices of victims. Congressional offices should use public platforms, including social media, to tell the stories of persecuted individuals and communities. Finally, the United States should leverage its leadership at NATO summits to push for democratic reforms and respect for international norms.

Turkey's authoritarian trajectory under President Erdogan has made it one of the leading violators of human rights globally. The systematic persecution of the Hizmet movement, the erosion of democratic institutions, and the blatant disregard for international law demand a strong and principled response.

The United States must not look away. It must lead—with moral clarity, legislative resolve, and unwavering support for those who stand for freedom and justice.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to defending human rights around the world.