

Testimony of Enes Kanter Freedom  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission  
Hearing on Human Rights Violations in Turkey  
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Chairman Smith, Chairman McGovern, and distinguished Members of the Commission,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the continued deterioration of human rights and democratic institutions in Turkey.

There was a time when Turkey stood as a unique bridge between East and West—where civilizations, religions, and cultures converged. It was home to a vibrant, educated, and intellectually open Muslim society. Turkey was seen as a “superb ally” by the United States and a model for the broader Islamic world—a democracy that showed how Islam, modernity, and civil society could flourish together.

Sadly, that vision has been shattered under the authoritarian rule of President Erdogan. His policies and hateful rhetoric have polarized society, weaponized religion for political gain, and dismantled what was once considered a democratic model.

Today, we are talking about a Turkey that leads in transnational repression, supports Hamas, evades U.S. sanctions on Iran and Russia, and assists criminal networks with money laundering. It is a country where opposition politicians, elected mayors, intellectuals, and journalists are arrested; businesses are seized; and mothers with infants are imprisoned for making charitable donations. College students—including minors—are detained simply for attending social gatherings. Even offering food or financial assistance to the families of political prisoners is treated as an act of terrorism.

In Turkey, opposition parties, politicians, and journalists continue to face widespread persecution under President Erdogan’s authoritarian rule. Critics of the government are routinely subjected to politically motivated prosecutions, arbitrary detentions, and smear campaigns. Independent media outlets have been shut down or co-opted, while journalists reporting on corruption or dissenting views are silenced through legal harassment or imprisonment. Despite growing international pressure and clear rulings from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), prominent political figures like businessman and philanthropist Osman Kavala and former HDP co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş remain behind bars. Similarly, Istanbul’s popular opposition mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu faces politically charged legal challenges aimed at disqualifying him from future elections. These actions demonstrate the Turkish government’s blatant disregard for democratic norms and international human rights obligations.

I speak today not only as an NBA player but also as a survivor of the Erdogan regime’s transnational repression—and as a member of the Hizmet movement, a faith-inspired civil society initiative rooted in the teachings of Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen. The movement is committed to interfaith dialogue, quality education, and peaceful coexistence across the globe.

Mr. Gulen’s ideas and teachings made lasting contributions to Turkish society—educating generations, promoting open-mindedness, and offering peaceful, community-based solutions to societal challenges. He was the first Muslim public figure to condemn the 9/11 attacks and was globally recognized for his leadership in promoting education and interfaith dialogue. He met

with Pope John Paul II and earned the respect of numerous international religious and intellectual leaders.

Sadly, he passed away in October 2024. But his ideas, teachings, and the example of his personal life continue to inspire millions in the United States and around the world.

Since 2016, nearly 3 million people in Turkey have been labeled as terrorists. Since I became outspoken, I have personally endured 12 arrest warrants, a revoked passport, and a \$500,000 bounty on my head—experiences shared by many Turkish Americans. My father was imprisoned. My mother was recently detained. In 2017, I narrowly escaped a kidnapping attempt in Indonesia and was nearly arrested in Romania. The Turkish government has abused the INTERPOL system to pursue me and thousands of others abroad. It has pressured U.S. universities and NGOs to cancel events featuring me and has repeatedly tried to silence me through threats and intimidation.

While my case is known, millions of victims remain unheard. Turkey's prisons are dangerously overcrowded. Torture, prolonged solitary confinement, and denial of medical care are widespread. These are not isolated incidents—they are part of a deliberate campaign to crush dissent and dismantle civil society.

Allow me to share a few stories:

1-Ibrahim Gungor (71), Alzheimer Patient, Sentenced Prisoner

Ibrahim Gungor (71), a father of four, known for his honesty and service, now left to die in prison. Advanced-stage Alzheimer patient denied release — cannot recognize his daughter, uses a catheter, and is unable to care for himself. Despite this, Turkey declared him “fit for prison.” His only crime: attending peaceful religious study groups and helping students.

2-Ozlem Duzenli (36), Laboratory Technician

Ozlem Duzenli a young mother imprisoned in Turkey with her 7-month-old baby. The prison has no crib, no clean place to nurse — she holds her baby on the concrete floor. Her child had a 104-degree fever, and the prison did nothing. Her only ‘crime’? Depositing \$2.50 into a bank — something the European Court ruled is not a crime. Yet Turkey still sentenced her.

3-Hatice Dogru – 5 Months Pregnant, Chronically Ill, Imprisoned

Hatice Dogru, a pregnant woman with a chronic heart condition jailed for attending a condolence visit. Despite high-risk pregnancy and worsening symptoms, she is denied medical care. Her baby and her life are at risk — yet Turkish government refuses to release her.

4-Kamil Acar – Teacher, Imprisoned for 8 Years

Kamil Acar, a teacher imprisoned for 8 years in Turkey. He was healthy when arrested, but developed kidney failure behind bars. He's suffered years of internal bleeding, and his health worsens every day. He's been eligible for parole since 2023 — but Turkey still refuses to release him.

5-Engin Kara – Critically Ill, Imprisoned Teacher

Engin Kara, a teacher with end-stage liver disease. He received a transplant, and doctors warned he would not survive in prison conditions. Still, Turkey sent him back to prison. He suffers constant pain, torn ligaments, and risk of organ rejection.

6-Adil Kesim – 67 Years Old, 60% Disabled, Chronically Ill Adil Kesim — a 67-year-old disabled man sentenced to 14 years in a Turkish prison. He suffers from diabetes, chronic heart disease, high blood pressure, and takes 30 medications a day. He can't walk without help. Yet Turkey claims he's ‘fit for prison.’

Turkey is no longer functioning as a democracy in any meaningful sense. President Erdogan has consolidated near-total control, sidelined the judiciary, muzzled the media, and criminalized

opposition—all under the guise of national security. Now, he is working to change the constitution so he can remain in power indefinitely.

As Erdogan strengthens ties with authoritarian regimes, he undermines democratic values and regional security. A NATO ally that rejects democratic norms is not just a moral failure—it becomes a strategic liability.

We must remember: Turkey's geopolitical importance and its people are far greater than one man. We cannot allow Erdogan to hijack an entire country and nation in pursuit of his dangerous, grand ambitions.

I respectfully urge the U.S. Congress and this Commission to:

1. Publicly condemn the continued political detentions;
2. Condition U.S. support and arms sales on measurable improvements in human rights and the rule of law;
3. Support independent civil society voices from Turkey, especially those forced into exile;
4. Demand compliance by Turkey with rulings from the European Court of Human Rights;
5. Take steps to counter Turkey's transnational repression, abuse of INTERPOL and ensure protection for exiles and dissidents abroad.

The people of Turkey—especially its youth—still dream of a free and just society. I thank and applaud this Commission's efforts to stand with them.

Thank you.