



Statement before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
On Human Rights in Turkey Today

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Chairman Smith, Chairman McGovern, and honorable members, thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Turks tell a joke about a Turkish professor who makes a statement President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan dislikes. The professor soon finds himself imprisoned for 20 years. He visits the prison library on his first day with a list of books he wishes to read while serving his time. The librarian looks over the list and apologizes: “I’m so sorry. We don’t have any of these books; we only have their authors.”

The joke strikes close to home. After more than two decades of Erdoğan’s rule, the Turkey [Türkiye] that was once a U.S. ally and an aspiring democracy is forever gone. So too is the idea that a liberalized Turkey might embrace religious and ethnic diversity. While I am not Turkish, I have experienced the threat of Turkey firsthand. Turkish officials have launched criminal proceedings against me for analytical writing in U.S. policy journals, and Turkish columnists and officials have both launched anti-Semitic invectives against me; I receive death threats from Turkish trolls on a near-weekly basis. As Erdoğan openly endorses and subsidizes Turkish trolls, it is impossible to consider such views fringe or exculpate Erdoğan and his government.

I have a thick skin but view such behavior as tragic, for it suggests a Turkey that, at its core today, behaves little different than the Islamic Republic of Iran or the Hamas-led Gaza Strip.

It did not have to be this way. Turkey was never a true democracy, but under Turgut Özal’s premiership and presidency, it was moving in the right direction. Özal not only opened space for political Islam, something from which Erdoğan and his cohort sought advantage, but he also acknowledged the fundamental injustices that motivated Kurdish unrest.

A heart attack felled Özal on April 17, 1993. Since then, Erdoğan’s selfishness, personal quests for power, and a belief that force could trump compromise have undercut both democratic structures and the tolerance necessary for any democracy to thrive. Rather than embrace diversity of thought, ethnicity, or religion, Erdoğan and his supporters chose persecution and oppression. While my co-panelists will discuss how this played out among the diversity of Islamic views, I will focus my remarks on ethnic minorities and Turkey’s non-Muslims.

Erdoğan Takes Advantage of Western Naivete to Consolidate Power

First, however, it is necessary to understand how Erdoğan consolidated power. The November 2002 general election victory of Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) shocked the West. Because the five secularist parties split the vote and fell short of the ten percent threshold needed to enter parliament, the AKP amplified its 34 percent vote into a super majority. Both Turks and Westerners worried about Erdoğan’s intentions. After all, as Istanbul’s mayor, Erdogan had regularly disparaged secularism. “Thank God Almighty, I am a servant of sharia,” he declared in 1994. He described himself as “the imam of Istanbul” the following year. After reciting a poem likening minarets to bayonets in 1997, a Turkish court sentenced him to prison for religious incitement.

Following the AKP landslide, Erdoğan sought to assuage those concerned about his Islamism. “We are the guarantors of this secularism, and our management will clearly prove that,” he said, and promised that he had learned the consequences of his previous excesses. American officials

took him at his word. Daniel Fried, assistant secretary of state for European affairs, described the AKP as “a kind of Muslim version of a Christian Democratic party.” while Secretary of State Colin Powell praised Turkey as a “Muslim democracy.” For all the George W. Bush administration emphasized democracy, Powell and the State Department failed to understand that modifying democracy with any adjective necessarily dilutes it.

Erdogan was shrewd and careful to hide his true agenda. He sought to hijack the European Union accession process to weaken the Turkish military and unravel its domestic role that, in part, provided checks-and-balances to would-be autocrats. Erdoğan never respected Europe nor its institutions. When the European Court of Human Rights upheld a headscarf ban at Turkish universities in November 2005, Erdogan criticized the court for making its decision “without consulting Islamic scholars.” The following year, he excised references to secularism from a negotiating paper to discuss the future of Turkey's educational system should Turkey join the European Union.

While Western officials approach diplomacy as a mechanism to resolve problems and disputes, many rogue rulers, from Vladimir Putin in Moscow to Kim Jong-un in Pyongyang to Erdoğan in Ankara, view diplomacy as an asymmetric warfare strategy to distract the West while they pursue other agendas. In Turkey's case, this mean consolidating control.

For more than a decade, Western officials ran interference for Erdoğan, denying warnings of his undemocratic and ideological agenda as overblown. He used this time to consolidate control, transforming technocratic bodies like the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund (TMSF) or the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) into partisan AKP arms to wield against political opponents. He transformed curricula to “raise a religious generation.” Over 22 years of AKP rule, more than 35 million students have matriculated through Turkey's primary and secondary education systems. Over the same period, he has transformed both military and bureaucracy. While many U.S. and European officials today acknowledge the error of their initial Erdoğan assessment, too many are still blinded by wishful thinking. Should Erdoğan depart tomorrow, Erdoğanism will persist. It is now impossible to return to the *status quo ante*.

While many in the United States and Europe see Erdoğan as an Islamist, this is only one component of his ideological agenda; just as potent is his belief in Turkish supremacism. Whether by statement or deed, Erdoğan shows himself to be intolerant, if not overtly racist, toward anyone who does not share his vision and ethnicity.

Erdoğan's Insincerity toward the Kurds

It has now been almost one month since the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) announced its disbandment. Many Western officials applauded the move and depicted it as the end of a 40-year insurgency. Thomas Pigott, the State Department's principal deputy spokesman, for example, called the decision by the PKK to lay down its arms as a “victory for civilization.” Washington, however, should not approach the Kurdish issue in Turkey with the same naivete or wishful thinking that they approached Erdoğan.

The PKK insurgency began in 1984. While Western officials can criticize PKK tactics—I have on many occasions, including in my book *Kurdistan Rising?* —it is also important to

acknowledge Kurdish grievances. Turkey long banned the Kurdish language. Kurds faced arrest for even for using letters like Q, W, and X which did not exist in the Turkish alphabet. While Turkish diplomats point out that Kurds could rise to the top of Turkish politics—Atatürk’s successor İsmet İnönü was likely part Kurdish—they omit that this applied only to Kurds who eschewed their language and culture. Prior to the start of the PKK insurgency, successive governments in Ankara neglected Kurdish villages, towns and cities.

While today, U.S. officials accept the Turkish line that the PKK was and is a terrorist group, U.S. policy did not initially recognize them as such. Only in 1997, after fighting subsided and after Özal offered to negotiate, did the State Department designate then group as a terrorist organization. Clinton administration action was based less on objective assessment, and more on diplomatic and commercial considerations: To conclude a helicopter and arms purchase from the United States, Ankara demanded Washington designate the PKK as a terrorist group. The inconsistency continues as the State Department has de-listed Iran’s Mujahedin al-Khalq, a group that targeted and killed Americans on several occasions, but refuses to do likewise with the PKK, a group that neither targeted nor killed Americans. Those in Washington who blindly repeat Turkish propaganda about the PKK and reject the fact that it long ago shed its Cold War-era Marxism have one thing in common: They have never engaged with the PKK for fear of losing their access to the Erdoğan and his top deputies, nor have they ever visited the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria—called Rojava by many Kurds—to see Kurdish governance in action. Had they done so, they would have discovered the Kurds today are more democratic and progressive than any of the countries surrounding them, including Turkey.

There is also a logical inconsistency in assuaging Turkey by condemning the PKK as a terrorist group, given that PKK offshoots in Syria helped defeat the Islamic State at a time when Erdoğan’s Turkey passively—if not actively—supported the terrorist group. Today, as Erdoğan lambasts the PKK and followers of his one-time ally Fethullah Gülen as terrorists, Turkey openly supports Hamas while Kurds reject the Islamist terrorist group.

Perhaps this is the point: by conflating all Kurdish opponents with the PKK, and then demanding the West label them terrorists, Erdoğan seeks to have the United States and Europe indirectly participate in his repression of Kurds and the opposition they represent. While the State Department and European foreign ministries hope that the PKK disbandment will bring peace, they risk snatching defeat from the jaws of victory if they enable Erdoğan to use the PKK disbandment as cause to eschew reform. While optimists may look at the peace process as a sign that Erdoğan will be more tolerant, history suggests otherwise: Erdoğan’s outreach to the Kurds lasts only so long as he believes they will support his dictatorship. If they vote for other parties then Erdoğan responds with force: Indeed, this explains his imprisonment of Kurdish leader Selahattin Demirtaş’s Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP). If Erdoğan does not release imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan—at least to house arrest—or fails to integrate Kurds back into society while respecting their culture and their more tolerant, less austere religious practices, then fighting will likely resume, as Kurds conclude Erdoğan is insincere and they cannot achieve basic human rights or democracy under his regime.

Erdoğan Targets Greeks in Turkey for Extinction

Under the terms of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, Turkey recognized four ethnic minorities: Greeks, Armenians, Bulgarians, and Jews. Ironically, however, of all Turkey’s minorities, the Kurds may

be the best off, although such a statement is akin to suggesting that someone with cancer is better off than an Ebola victim.

The story of the Greek minority in Turkey is emblematic of the decline of Christianity in the country. Greeks were in Asia Minor and on the Aegean coast centuries before the Turks arrived. In the Ottoman Empire's final decade, the Greek Christian presence in what became Turkey numbered more than two million people. Istanbul [Constantinople] was the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarch, the spiritual head of the world's 300 million Orthodox Christians.

While the Biden administration, all 50 states and the District of Columbia formally and rightly recognized the Armenian genocide, the Armenians were not alone in suffering genocide at the hands of the Turks in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire and the first years of modern Turkey. Greeks suffered a "Thirty Year Genocide" which claimed one million Greek lives, half of the population. The exchange of population that followed the founding of the Republic of Turkey forced much of the remaining Greek Orthodox population to leave Anatolia. Today, only about 2,000 Greeks remain in Turkey, mostly in Istanbul. Such a decline in population has parallels only in the decimation of the Jewish population in Eastern Europe during the Holocaust.

The Republic of Turkey is now more than a century old. Alas, the Greek minority remains at risk. Despite the global significance of the Ecumenical Patriarch, Turkey denies legal status to the Ecumenical Patriarchate. This lack of legal identity hampers the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Turkey refuses to recognize its ownership rights and refuses to issue residence and work permits for "foreign" priests who are essential to its continuity and functioning. Turkey's blockage of the Ecumenical Patriarchate would be equivalent both to Italy refusing to allow non-Italian cardinals visas to transit Italy on their way to the Vatican City and disputing Vatican ownership of its buildings. Indeed, Turkey refuses even to recognize the Patriarchate's ownership of its churches. While the world's Catholics celebrate the Vatican conclave's selection of Pope Leo XIV, the church's first American pope, Turkey has the audacity to demand each Ecumenical Patriarch be a Turkish citizen.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has for over a decade categorized Turkey as among the world's worst violators of religious freedom in the world, largely because of its treatment of its Greek Orthodox minority. The situation has worsened under Erdoğan, leading the Commission to list Turkey as a "Country of Particular Concern." As Putin uses the Russian Orthodox Church to further Russian foreign policy, Erdoğan cynically supports the Russian Orthodox Church to diminish the Greek Church, further undermining the integrity and future of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

This is why it is now more essential than ever for the White House and Congress to elevate the issue of religious freedom. Without the Halki Seminary, which Turkey has shuttered for 50 years, the Greek Orthodox Church cannot train priests domestically. If Erdoğan continues Halki's closure, it is quite possible that Orthodox Christianity will disappear from Turkey before it reaches its two millennia anniversary in just over a decade.

The Consequences of Turkey's Failure to Recognize the Armenian Genocide

Just as the Greek population in Turkey have cratered, so too has the Armenian presence. As with

the Greeks, the Armenian presence declined as a result of Ottoman and Turkish politics. In 1914, the Armenian Patriarchate had registered approximately 5,000 Armenian churches, seminaries, and schools. Today, less than 50 Armenian churches remain.

The chief reason for this, of course, was the Armenian genocide. For decades, the U.S. government officials sidestepped, if not denied, the Armenian genocide. While few outside Turkey doubt that more than one million Armenians died in Anatolia and Turkish-held territory against the backdrop of World War I, several pro-Turkish partisans and historians obfuscated the claim of genocide. The late Princeton historian Bernard Lewis, for example, said no smoking gun exists to prove intent. German-American political scientist Guenter Lewy argued that claims of genocide rested on Allied propaganda and forgeries.

In reality, evidence was multifaceted and overwhelming. In hindsight, it appears Lewis sharpened his denial to preserve access, much like how too many American historians of Iran today soft-pedal the Islamic Republic in order to ensure they continue to receive visas and archival access.

In 2017, any denial should have ended when historian Taner Akçam found a telegram proving that Ittihatists systematically exterminated Armenians. On July 4, 1915, Bahaettin Sakir sent the message to Governor Sabit Bey to coordinate the exile and extermination of the Armenians. The telegram read, “Are the deported Armenians exterminated? Are the destructive elements destroyed, or expelled only? Let me know precisely, my brother.” Both the letterhead and ciphred text prove beyond doubt that the telegraph is original.

What do such debates mean for Erdoğan’s Turkey? After all, while the Armenian genocide might be tragic, do events that occurred more than a century ago matter today? Here, unfortunately, the answer is yes. Genocide denial perpetuates genocide. The Holocaust in Europe was tragic, however after Hitler’s fall Germany acknowledged its role in genocide, paid reparations, and educated its society to ensure that it could not happen again. Neo-Nazis might still exist, but only on the fringe of society. They are pilloried and rightly so. The same is true in Rwanda. Hutu *génocidaires* may still exist in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi, but there is no denying the atrocities they perpetrated in Rwanda in 1994. When the *génocidaires* speak, most outside Kinshasa and Brussels stigmatize them.

In Turkey, however, systematic denial means that the ideology, religious intolerance, and racial hatred that catalyzed the Armenian genocide remains legitimate and mainstream—embraced, not only by Erdoğan, but by the entirety of Turkey’s elite. This, in turn, makes the resumption of genocide much more likely. Indeed, the fact that the 2020 Azerbaijan surprise attack on the indigenous Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh occurred on the centenary anniversary of the Ottoman invasion of independent Armenia was likely no coincidence. That both Erdoğan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev threaten, assault, and deny an independent Armenia’s right to exist sends a signal that the hatred that motivated the ethnic cleansing and genocide across Anatolia could restart theoretically at any time, perhaps on a false pretext.

Indeed, the State Department itself hints even if not articulates this phenomenon not only with the Armenians but also with the Greeks and Jews. In its 2023 *Report on International Religious Freedom*, the State Department warned about Turkish “discrimination deriving from geopolitical issues with Israel, Greece, and Armenia” against Turkish Jews and Christians. Frankly, however,

the State Department could go further. Its religious freedom reporting ignores the “denativization,” in the words of University of Michigan scholar Hakem al-Rostom who wrote about how Turkey rendered Armenians into foreigners in their own ancestral lands before, during, and after the genocide. That erasure of Armenian presence and identity continues.

In May 2025, the World Council of Churches met in Bern, Switzerland to consider the problem of erasure of cultural heritage. The Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious scholars as well as academics noted correctly, “protecting heritage is not only about monuments—it is about the living expression of faith, identity, and memory.” Turkey, however, continues to destroy religious heritage not only inside Turkey itself, but encourages similar actions by Syria and Azerbaijan toward Armenian property.

Alas, as the United States and European powers normalize their relations with Turkey or believe they need Erdoğan’s cooperation or mediation in Ukraine or Iran, Erdoğan concludes he can act with impunity on ideological grounds against minorities. This explains why, for example, his government recently released early and then openly and publicly embraced the murderer of Turkish-Armenian intellectual and editor Hrant Dink.

Jews Should Not be Museum Exhibits

Jews have traditionally felt welcome in Turkey. Atatürk separated mosque and state and banned political parties from organizing around religion. In their state-provided text books, Turks learned that their Jewish community was loyal. Jews never rose up against the Ottoman Empire as Greeks, Armenians, Arabs, Bulgarians, and others did. That has now changed.

Anti-Semitism permeates the AKP as deeply as genocide denial. Shortly after Erdoğan came to power, a Turkish translation of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* became a national best-seller, apparently after Erdoğan’s party subsidized its print run and distribution. In 2011, Egemen Bağış, at the time Turkey’s Minister for European Union affairs, belittled the Bulgarian foreign minister because he allegedly had Jewish blood. Turkish diplomats tweeted support for the *Israel Lobby*, a book that alleges Jews harbor dual loyalty. Erdoğan himself endorsed a film suggesting one motivation of the 2003 Iraq war was a Jewish desire to harvest the organs of dead Muslims. As Erdoğan began to turn on Atatürk’s secular vision, kiosks outside government buildings in Ankara began selling pamphlets calling Atatürk a “closet Jew.”

I visited Turkey perhaps three or four times a year for the first decade of Erdoğan’s rule, and often met with representatives of the Jewish community. Their fear was palpable. Not only did they feel themselves as potential targets for terror, but they also feared that Erdoğan would retaliate against them if they did not, with one voice, endorse his positions and vocally deny their concern to outside powers. Erdoğan’s willingness to allow Hamas operatives safe haven to plot attacks on Jews in Israel and elsewhere represents a palpable threat to Turkey’s Jews as well as American and European Jews who may visit Turkey as tourists.

Just as the Islamic Republic of Iran points out its Jewish community or opens its synagogues to tourists to suggest Iranian tolerance, so too does the Erdoğan regime point to Istanbul’s few synagogues as evidence that Turkey is safe for Jews. In effect, Erdoğan treats Jews as museum exhibits rather than vibrant and independent communities.

Why Human Rights Matters to National Security

While the State Department chronicles human rights abuses, too often policymakers compartmentalize findings so that they do not interfere with broader American policy initiatives. This is a mistake, because the willingness of regimes to abuse human rights and restrict religious freedom is perhaps the best canary in the coal mine as to that regime's true character. If Erdoğan is willing to privilege the Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin in his effort to subvert the Greek Orthodox Church, that is a sign that he will never put Western interests first. Likewise, if he seeks to apply the terror label to Kurds because they refuse to embrace his more doctrinaire interpretation of Islam or because as a community, they refuse to vote for the AKP, then it is counterproductive for the United States blindly to follow his lead.

The danger is greater as Erdoğan seeks to cultivate his personal relationship with President Donald Trump to bypass accountability and the consequences of his own terror support, win relief on Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) sanctions, and receive the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, among other weaponry.

While inexperienced ambassadors may conflate a successful tenure with their own ingratiation of the host country's ruler, wishful thinking consistently undermines U.S. national security and broader American interests. To provide F-35s to a regime that flirts with the Islamic State, shelters Hamas, sides with militant factions in Syria, helps Russia bypass sanctions, and represses Christians, moderate Muslims, and Jews is to pour fuel on a fire, not to extinguish it.

Indeed, while Turkey might talk NATO, its animosity toward religious minorities suggests that it is more likely to use U.S.-supplied weaponry to threaten Jews in Israel, Christians in Greece and Armenia, and Hindus in India rather than defend Europe against Russia in time of conflict.

Turkey too often responds in religious terms and seeks to project its own grievances. It sought to host the Olympics depicting its bid as Islam's due. Erdoğan often depicts the West as a Christian Club that excludes Turkey misses an important point: If Turkey had not killed or deported 99 percent of its Christians let alone allowed the remainders to live in peace, Turkey would also have a healthy, native Christian population.

This is not to bash Turkey. There will be no stability in the region until Turkey is at peace with itself and its neighbors. This must remain the goal of the United States, but to achieve it, Washington must calibrate policy to reality rather than to its own wishful thinking.