

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing on
“Human Rights in Turkish-Occupied Cyprus: Erdogan's Record and Its Implications for the
Ankara NATO Summit”

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Chairman Smith, Chairman McGovern, and honorable members, thank you for the opportunity to testify. Less than one month ago, I testified before you about human rights in Turkey. The problems Cyprus today faces are inexorably linked to Turkey and its more than six-decade occupation.

For those who justify or apologize for Turkey’s invasion, the narrative is simple: Turkey invaded to protect Cypriot Muslims from ethnic violence if not genocide at the hands of the Greeks. To justify the occupation of Cyprus, however, would be by analogy to accept not only Nazi Germany’s 1938 *Anschluss* of Austria, but also the annexation of Czechoslovakia’s Sudetenland. More recently, Russia’s 2014 invasion and annexation of Ukraine’s Crimea to protect ethnic Russians rested on nearly identical arguments and false claims as Turkey had used in Cyprus four decades previously. Put simply, the notion that human rights or a desire to protect the Cypriot Muslim community motivates let alone justified the Turkish occupation is ahistorical nonsense.

The Background to a Crisis

History matters, if only to show the emptiness of a narrative that Turkish school books indoctrinate and Turkish diplomats continue to embrace. The roots of the conflict date back nearly a century before the Turkish landgrab. The British had occupied Cyprus in 1878 after the Russo-Turkish War and formally incorporated it as a crown colony in 1925. At the time of the British occupation, Cyprus was more than two-thirds Greek and one third Muslim. This should not surprise as, in the years before the Armenian and Pontic Greek genocides, many of the towns and cities along the Anatolian coast were also Christian.

Indeed, while Cypriot nationalists may resent the British occupation of Cyprus and the island’s consolidation as a unit separate from Greece, the fact that the United Kingdom was the suzerain in the early 20th century likely saved its population from suffering the same fate as the Armenians

and the Greeks of Smyrna, neither of whom had a foreign power to protect them from the predations of the Young Turks.

Still, as decolonization swept the globe, many Greeks embraced the idea of *enosis* to unify Greece and Cyprus. Most Greeks and Cypriots envisioned achieving that unity peacefully, but some quarters were impatient. Beginning in the early 1960s, politicians and nationalist movements in both Athens and Ankara instigated communal violence on Cyprus. While some Greek Cypriots advocated *enosis*, Turkey encouraged the *taksim* movement which envisioned Turkish annexation of the island. For some Cypriot Turks, it was an alluring movement: After all, if they suddenly became a Turkish possession, the Cypriot Muslim minority might instantly transform into part of a supermajority that could impose their will on a *dhimmi* community.

Enter the military junta that had seized power in Athens in 1967. It was conservative, nationalist, anti-Communist, punished dissent and was brutal in its suppression of student unrest. It was not monolithic, however. As Georgios Papadopoulos, one of the coup leaders eventually sought to liberalize and reform the junta's rule, disgruntled hardliners led by Dimitrios Ioannidis staged an internal coup to re-establish hardline rule.

On July 15, 1974, Ioannidis instigated a Cypriot National Guard coup against Archbishop Makarios III, Cyprus' democratically-elected president, and the installation of Nikos Sampson whom Ioannidis intended to use to achieve *enosis*. Five days later, the Turkish Army invaded, ostensibly to protect Cypriot Muslims under the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee. This is traditionally where Turks and their apologists in universities and various think tanks end their narrative. They both disregard what happened next and ignore that under the Treaty of Guarantee, Turkey should have restored the constitutional order, not kicked off an occupation lasting more than half a century.

Regardless, on July 24, 1974, the *junta* in Greece collapsed. Greece returned to democracy and forfeited its claims to Cyprus. It was only then, as peace talks continued in Geneva to compel withdrawal, that Turkey invaded again in a blatant land grab, this time absent any *casus belli*. Turkish troops seized and ethnically cleansed a third of the country; the occupation continues to the present.

At the time, Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger sided with the Turks. "There is no American reason why the Turks should not have one-third of Cyprus," he told President Gerald Ford. "The Turkish tactics are right — grab what they want and then negotiate on the basis of possession." Kissinger, perhaps like U.S. Ambassador to Turkey and Envoy Tom Barrack today, also embrace cynical realism to justify aggression.

Kissinger's *realpolitik* have not stood the test of history. Today, Greece and Cyprus are America's most reliable allies in the Eastern Mediterranean. From Libya to Gaza and from Syria to Somalia, Turkey is a source of instability. While Kissinger conflated cynicism with sophistication, he never

understood the weakness of his realism: While short-term deals might appeal alluring, their long-term consequence could devastate not only human rights but also American interests. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government currently poses more of a danger to Cypriots and democracy than the junta ever did.

The U.S. State Department, though, does U.S. policy no favors when it continues a policy to avoid deeming northern Cyprus "occupied." Fear of moral clarity and a failure to recognize international law does not encourage peace-making; rather, it rewards aggression. If Secretary of State Marco Rubio worries that Barrack and Turkish officials might complain at such a stark description of northern Cyprus' condition, then the proper response is not word play, but a clear message: End the occupation.

Cypriot Muslims Face a Cultural Genocide Perpetrated by Turkey, Not Greece

Whereas successive U.S. administrations have been content to consider Turkey's occupation a frozen conflict and to abandon the idea for all practical purposes of ending the island's *de facto* division, that status quo neither serves the interests of Cypriot Muslims nor does it even tenable.

Shortly after the Turkish invasion, Turkey began transferring settlers into its occupied zone. To bolster the numbers of ethnic Turks and Muslims on the island, successive governments in Turkey encouraged the migration. For poor agricultural workers and low wage urban workers, often conservative Muslims, the economic benefit was clear, as they left ramshackle shacks and shantytowns to move into the houses from which advancing Turkish troops had expelled Greek Cypriots.

The lack of credible international response has consequence, as in March 2018, Turkish forces and their proxies invade the Syrian canton of Afrin, ethnically cleansing Kurds and expelling Christians and Yazidis, taking control over their property. Turkey has since expanded that model across northern and northeastern Syria as it has sought to change the demographic balance.

European diplomats, State Department officials, and self-described human rights activists often focus on Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank, but the two issues are not analogous. The West Bank is technically disputed territory without clearcut sovereignty, as there was no recognized, independent Palestine at the time Israel took military possession from Jordan in 1967. Cyprus, however, was a sovereign country when Turks invaded 14 years after its independence.

There has been no scientific census in Turkish-occupied Cyprus but estimates now place the number of Turkish settlers and their offspring at more than half the population of the Turkish-occupied zone. Settlers likely outnumber true Turkish Cypriots. There has been a surge in settlement since Erdoğan came to power. Between 2013 and 2023, for example, the population of the occupied zone increased by more than a third. The reason for the acceleration of settlement, Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Conventions notwithstanding, appears a deliberate

decision by Erdoğan to drown out Turkish Cypriots. What Turkey now does to the native Cypriot Muslims is not far different from what the Han Chinese do in East Turkestan, the Uyghur-region China's communist government refers to as Xinjiang.

While Turks and occupation authorities in Cyprus hide the true numbers at play in northern Cyprus, the State Planning Organization of the Turkish entity on the island places the population of the occupied zone is just shy of 500,000. Of these, Cypriots Muslims who can document family lineage to Cyprus before 1974 number only around 230,000.

Too often, American policymakers assume that all ethnic Turks or Turkish Muslims are the same. This is wrong. Turkey traditionally had a diverse sectarian landscape, even among Muslims. Up to 20 percent of the Turkey's Muslim population are Alevi, with a higher percentage among Turkey's Kurds. Of Turkey's Sunni Muslims, most are traditionally moderate, influenced by Anatolian Sufism. Erdoğan, however, follows a more austere exegesis influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood.

In Cyprus, meanwhile, as in many island nations, Muslims were traditionally cosmopolitan and tolerant. Turkey's flood of settlers, especially under Erdoğan, were the opposite: Austere, conservative, and intolerant not only of Christians, but also of Muslims who were not as observant. The longer the occupation continues, the more Cypriot Muslim culture and the promise it holds for healing and peace, withers.

From Real Estate to Weaponry, Erdoğan Shreds the Status Quo

While the United States, Europe, and perhaps even the United Nations continue to approach Cyprus as a frozen conflict, Erdoğan has systematically shredded that understanding.

Prior to the Turkish invasion, Famagusta—and its southern Varosha quarter—was a major tourist hub that attracted European and Western glitterati to its pristine beaches and resorts, earning it the nickname of “the Cannes of the Eastern Mediterranean.” In 1974, Turkey first bombed the city to force residents to flee, and then occupied it, refusing to allow its residents to return, even after establishing the ceasefire. Varosha became a ghost town. Billions of dollars of real estate sat fenced off and empty.

Diplomats have long expected the return of its residents to Famagusta to be the key step in any negotiated peace. That Varosha remained vacant gave Cypriots, Western Europe, and UN diplomats hope that Ankara was still interested in a resolution to the Cypriot conflict. Now, however, Erdoğan signals that Turkey may act unilaterally to populate and develop Varosha. In 2020 and 2021, the Turkish forces removed fences to allow tourists and visitors to re-enter the neighborhood. The fear now is that Erdoğan, perhaps with the backing of Barrack, will seek to redevelop the beach town, prospect that could net investors billions of dollars. This, of course,

would violate UN Security Council resolutions that state that Varosha's residents must first return to their documented property, especially of Turkish redevelopment tore down old structures.

Resort development and beach front construction may make certain individuals wealthy, but it would be tragic for human rights, Cypriot peace, and U.S. reputation if individual enrichment trumped international law and U.S. national interests.

Some violations of the status quo are even more dangerous. Cyprus has a National Guard combining ground, maritime units, and helicopters, but it does not have a formal military as many other European states do. Balance is crucial.

That balance is now in jeopardy. President Donald Trump now makes headlines for his proposal both to sell F110 Turbofan Engines to Turkey prior to the July 7-8, 2026 NATO Summit in Ankara and to welcome Turkey back into the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program. Both moves would privilege Turkey's own defense industry over America's given Ankara's desire to reverse engineer American technology to utilize in Turkey's own Kaan jet fighter program. NATO member or not, from the perspective of intellectual property, transferring cutting-edge military technology to Turkey is as dangerous as providing America's military technology and trade secrets to China.

That such sales would move forward after Turkey betrayed its previous understandings by redeploying U.S.-provided F-16s to occupied northern Cyprus should generate bipartisan outrage in Congress and end forever the notion that Turkey seeks American aircraft for NATO defense. On March 9, 2026, as Trump focused on the ongoing war in Iran, Erdoğan ordered the deployment of six F-16s to occupied northern Cyprus, a blatant attempt to change the status quo and, also, for the Turkish audience, to make Erdoğan appear strong and Trump impotent.

The Turkish F-16s now based in Turkey serve no military purpose; after all, the İncirlik is only 150 miles away in mainland Turkey. Cruising, that represents a 15-minute flight, but at its top speed, an F-16 could cover that distance in just six minutes. Rather, the sole purpose of Erdoğan's move was to obstruct diplomacy and make Turkey's landgrab permanent. In August 1990, after overrunning Kuwait, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein deployed Iraq's Soviet MiG-29s, Su-22s, and French Mirage F1s at captured Kuwaiti airfields as he sought to consolidate his gains. The United States must see Erdoğan's recent moves in the same light.

Turkey's Drone Base in Occupied Cyprus Endangers the Region

Too often, U.S. presidents, be they Republican or Democrat, believe they enter the Oval Office with a blank slate. History does not restart every four or eight years, however. Precedents matter. It is doubtful Erdoğan would have sent F-16s to occupied Cyprus had the United States not earlier gone silent when Turkey altered the military balance by transforming an occupied airport in northern Cyprus into a drone base.

On December 16, 2019, İsmail Demir, the head of Turkey's Defence Industry Directorate, reported that Turkey had flown drones to Lefkoniko Airport, which it restyled Geçitkale Air Base. Turkey has now transformed Lefkoniko into perhaps the Eastern Mediterranean's largest drone base. As Erdoğan explained in May 2021, "There are two airports in Cyprus. One is Ercan which our citizens in Turkey know, and another one that was there before but which now has a new name to which we transfer our unmanned aerial vehicles."

Almost immediately, Turkey used its drone base to undermine peace and security in Cyprus. It launched surveillance drones to monitor vessels exploring offshore waters for gas and oil before harassing ships from NATO states such as Italy. It subsequently moved attack drones such as the Bayraktar-TB2 onto the base, posing a threat to countries ranging from Libya to Israel. Just as Trump and Barrack do now, so too did Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman when she visited Ankara on May 28, 2021. In an interview with *Hürriyet*, she declared, "The relationship with Turkey is a very critical one to the U.S. Turkey is a NATO partner, a strategic ally, a force in the world..." Rather than creating diplomatic space, her praise convinced Erdoğan that the United States was weak and would bend to further aggression. Had the Biden administration stood up to Erdoğan's assault on the status quo and compelled the withdrawal of the drones and the shuttering of the airfield through any number of means, it is doubtful Erdoğan would have later redeployed the F-16s. In a quip commonly misattributed to Mark Twain, Insanity is "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." By such a definition, U.S. policy today is pure craziness.

Northern Cypriot Money Laundering Endangers Human Rights and Regional Security

About two million tourists visit northern Cyprus each year, almost 80 percent of whom come from Turkey explicitly to take advantage of its beaches and unregulated economy. Russians and Iranians also flood the territory, while other Europeans take advantage of the cheap deals and the unregulated economy without recognizing that they are profiting off the systematic Turkish looting of a European Union member state.

Like other unrecognized states—Russian puppets Abkhazia and Transnistria, for example—northern Cyprus has become a hub for money laundering and other illicit activity. While Transparency International ranks Cyprus as cleaner than Italy, Spain, and Poland, the Turkish-occupied zone is a sector where criminality thrives—and deliberately so.

Both casinos and universities have become hubs for money laundering. In recent years, the casino industry has thrived in northern Cyprus. While the United States and Europe regulate big-name outlets that operate in their territory, there is no such regulation or transparency in northern Cyprus, which now boasts 25 casinos, or roughly one per every 20,000 residents, roughly the proportion of casinos per resident in Nevada. Only Erdoğan and the Turkish intelligence service—not even the political leadership of the so-called Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus—know where the casino profits go, though some likely ends with cash transfers to Hamas, Hezbollah, Al-Shabaab,

various Al Qaeda affiliates, and other Islamist projects. Both Edi Rama's Albania and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus are today hubs for drug smuggling into Europe.

The nearly two dozen universities that operate in northern Cyprus represent another organized crime scheme. The diplomas they issue are as fraudulent as the one Erdoğan himself showed to prove college acceptance. While Erdoğan was motivated by academic fraud and the desire to bypass the prohibition of non-university graduates rising to the premiership and presidency, the northern Cypriot scheme is simply to collect money from and help organizations like Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Lebanon's Hezbollah place their operatives under cover in Europe. Because Cyprus is a European Union member, many rogue elements and terrorist rightly believe that the occupied north can be a useful beachhead to infiltrate operatives further into Europe. The universities also provide cover for human traffickers to attract and exploit desperate Iranians, Afghans, and Syrians. Occupation, even in frozen conflicts, can have a tremendous and deleterious impact on human rights.

U.S. Policy Moving Forward

Too often, when diaspora activists complain, be they Greeks, Armenians, Uyghurs, Kurds, or Biafrans, policymakers dismiss their concerns as exaggerated or, when they do recognize them as representing real human rights abuses, they like Kissinger, create a firewall between justice and U.S. national interest. In almost every case, the passage of time shows what one generation saw as sophisticated and a necessary sacrifice of human liberty, the next generations recognized as a cynical own-goal not only to America's image, but also to its national interests. This has certainly been the case with the Turkish occupation of Cyprus.

In the partisan meatgrinder of Washington, however, Cyprus also could be the exception to the rule. Beyond the White House, Democrats and Republicans broadly recognize the value and importance of ending the conflict in Cyprus and rolling back Turkish aggression and occupation. There simply put is no difference between what Turkey seeks in terms of independence for the so-called Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, and what Russia had tried to achieve with the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic. Erdoğan and the diplomats he purchases may talk about a binational Cyprus, but what Turks seek is *taksim*. Put another way, Erdoğan today is no different than Ioannidis. Like Ioannidis, Erdoğan should face prison for his crimes.

Between 1940 and 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull recognized Vichy France; it was a mistake that the United States should not repeat. The State Department should no more ascribe legitimacy to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus than it does for Russia's puppet-states carved out of the territory of independent neighbors like Moldova, Georgia, or Ukraine.

Such a policy would require two changes. First, Rubio should direct the U.S. ambassador or chargé d'affaires in Cyprus, as well as all U.S. diplomats to state handling Cyprus issues to state clearly

that Turkey illegally occupies Cyprus. Second, the State Department must only grant Turkish Cypriots visas to the United States on Cypriot passports. For Turkish Cypriot politicians to attend the United Nations General Assembly for sidebar meetings with U.S. officials and other world leaders with U.S. visas issued on Turkish passports undermines recognition of Cypriot sovereignty. The State Department should further shutter any Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus offices in the United States.

Europeans should not treat an occupation and human rights tragedy as an opportunity for a cheap vacation. Just as the Trump administration requires special visa scrutiny for those who have traveled to Iran or Iraq and seek to visit the United States, so too should the same procedure apply to Germans, French, and Scandinavians who despite their rhetoric of human rights, contribute to the Turkish occupation machinery by booking vacations in occupied Cyprus. No airline that services the occupied zone should have overflight or landing rights in the United States.

The U.S. State Department and the Department of the Treasury should further support adding Turkey to the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) blacklist for its involvement in money laundering in occupied northern Cyprus. Even for those who consider Turkey an ally, there is precedent. The United States, for example, once listed both Israel and South Korea respectively on its Tier 3 and Tier 2 blacklists for their failure to counter human trafficking. In both cases, the governments responded by working with U.S. authorities to reform and rectify the problem. Washington should always make such designations on objective criteria, rather than bend standards to assuage diplomatic umbrage. If Turkey wishes to win U.S. support to remove any blacklisting, it should simply stop its criminality.

Cyprus' own case is also instructive. For decades, concerns about Cypriot financial dealings, especially regarding Russia, overshadowed U.S.-Cypriot relations. Beginning around 2004, however, Cyprus began working actively in partnership with the United States to resolve concerns. This was especially true after Cyprus' 2012-2013 financial crisis, after which Cyprus' extraordinary effort enabled the country to make the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) whitelist. The 2019 Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act of 2019 which passed with true bipartisan support, included a condition that the State Department had to certify that Cyprus remain committed to anti-money laundering efforts, a condition that it has repeatedly fulfilled.

In short, failure to hold Turkey to an account for financial irregularities and money laundering in northern Cyprus does not represent standard or realist diplomatic practice but runs counter to how the United States treats its allies and to best diplomatic practice consensus.

Finally and most radically, the United States should consider pressuring the United Kingdom to abandon its Sovereign Base Area in Cyprus. London granted Cyprus independence on August 16, 1960, but retained sovereign control over Akrotiri and Dhekelia. Article 1 of the Treaty between the United Kingdom and Cyprus recognizing Cypriot independence declared, "The territory of the

Republic of Cyprus shall comprise the Island of Cyprus, together with the islands lying off its coast, with the exception of the two areas... referred to as the Akrotiri Sovereign Base Area and the Dhekelia Sovereign Base Area. The base area represents approximately three percent of Cypriot territory that essentially remains a colonial possession. While the Cypriots were unhappy at the British conditional independence upon their continued presence, they did not want to obstruct the broader goal of independence.

Britain justified its presence as a sign it would protect Cyprus. But after a Turkish invasion and more than five decades of occupation, it is clear British authorities simply lied. After Brexit and with Britain's ability to project force in decline, it is time for the United Kingdom to go home, and to transfer sovereignty fully back to Cyprus.

The Cypriot government might then lease the military portion of the bases—a tiny fraction of the Sovereign Base Area's total territory—to the United States. The logic here is simple: Turkey seeks to bully Cyprus and through Cyprus, the European Union. The United Nations has been at best ineffective and at worst deleterious as it has allowed time to launder Turkey's occupation. The 2004 Annan Plan, rightly rejected by Greek Cypriots, exposed the emptiness of UN officials since it would have rewarded aggression but impose no consequences should the Turks continue their occupation. A deployment of U.S. forces, including F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, electronic warfare planes, anti-drone and anti-ballistic missile defenses would not only augment sovereign Cyprus' qualitative military edge and show Turkey that its salami-slicing aggression will not succeed, but it would also relieve the Pentagon from Turkish extortion over the use of Incirlik.

The best diplomacy is bipartisan, rooted in moral clarity and respect for human rights and backed, when necessary, by force. It is time to make ending Turkey's illegal occupation of Cyprus and, for that matter, portions of Syria and Iraq, core components of U.S. foreign policy.