

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

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

June 30, 2026 - 10:00 a.m.  
2255 Rayburn House Office Building

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Chairman Chris Smith, Chairman James McGovern, distinguished Members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the human rights situation in the Turkish-occupied area of Cyprus and its broader implications for regional security, democratic governance, and the transatlantic alliance. More than five decades after Turkey's military intervention in Cyprus in 1974, 52 years to be exact, the island remains occupied, and many of the core human rights issues arising from that division remain unresolved. These include the rights of displaced persons and their descendants, property rights, freedom of religion, the preservation of cultural heritage, and accountability under international law. While these concerns are longstanding, developments during the tenure of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have introduced new challenges that warrant close attention from the United States Congress and the international community.

Under President Erdoğan's leadership, Ankara has pursued a more assertive and interventionist policy in the areas it illegally occupies in the northern part of Cyprus, accompanied by growing political, economic, demographic, and religious influence over the territory. Numerous observers, including international human rights organizations, legal scholars, and government reports, have documented concerns regarding restrictions on freedom of expression, pressure on independent journalists and civil society actors, and policies that have altered the demographic character of the occupied area through continued settlement from mainland Turkey. These developments raise important questions regarding compliance with international humanitarian law, the protection of fundamental rights, and the prospects for a negotiated settlement of the Cyprus issue consistent with United Nations resolutions and democratic principles.

In view of the upcoming NATO Summit that will convene in Ankara, on July 7 and 8, it is anticipated that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan will leverage the Summit to portray Turkey as an exemplary, indispensable ally to the United States. However, the reality is far different, if one takes a look at Turkey's belligerent foreign policy and aggressive actions, which undoubtedly challenge international norms, undermine Western security interests and are a constant destabilizing factor in the greater region of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle

East. The contradiction in Turkey's proclaimed credibility as a Western-aligned state is most palpable in the case of its ongoing military occupation of part of the territory of the Republic of Cyprus, a strategic partner of the U.S. and a pillar of stability and security in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Greater Middle East.

Since the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, Turkey has sustained through military force an occupation that remains one of the most consequential and long-lasting violations of international law in post-war Europe. Fifty-two years later, the island remains divided, and the underlying human rights, humanitarian, and security concerns remain unresolved. Nearly half of this period has coincided with the Erdoğan era, a fact that underscores President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's central role in shaping Turkey's Cyprus policy. Rather than advancing efforts toward a comprehensive settlement within the internationally accepted framework, Erdoğan has consistently pursued policies designed to entrench Turkey's strategic, political, and demographic influence in the occupied area. In doing so, he has played a pivotal role in undermining prospects for reunification and disrupting internationally supported efforts to resolve the Cyprus issue in accordance with established U.N. parameters.

Undoubtedly, the ongoing occupation of Cyprus features as one of the rallying points of Erdoğan in order to appeal the nationalists while seeking for yet another re-election, and is one of the strategic political tools he maintains. That is one of the reasons why Turkey's grip on Cyprus — both politically and militarily — remains strong and has not weakened. The intransigent positions of Ankara on the Cyprus issue, along with the continuing threatening rhetoric by Erdoğan underscore Turkey's intention to maintain the issue in its domestic and foreign policy agenda.

The ongoing, flagrant and mass violation of fundamental human rights and freedoms by Turkey of all lawful citizens of Cyprus, including Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriots, Maronites, Armenians and Latins, underscores the indisputable responsibility of Turkey, as the occupying power.

The evidence against Turkey in the case of Cyprus is overwhelming and irrefutable. In particular:

In violation of all rules of international law, including the Charter of the United Nations, Turkey perpetrated a military invasion of the Republic of Cyprus in 1974.

Ever since and for more than half a century, Turkey has continued the illegal occupation of approximately 37% of the territory of the Republic of Cyprus, an independent and sovereign member state of the European Union and the United Nations. More than 40,000 Turkish armed forces are stationed throughout the occupied areas of Cyprus, rendering it one of the most heavily militarized parts of the world. As a matter of fact, Turkey continues the militarization of the occupied areas, with new offensive military equipment and new infrastructure.

In 1983, the occupying power proclaimed a secessionist entity in the areas of Cyprus under continuing Turkish occupation. This unilateral declaration was unequivocally condemned by the international community through a series of United Nations Security Council resolutions, most notably Resolutions 541 (1983) and 550 (1984), which declared the purported state

legally invalid and called upon all states not to recognize, facilitate, or assist it in any way. More than four decades later, that entity remains unrecognized by the international community, with Turkey remaining its sole purported sponsor and recognizing state.

Consistent with international law and the binding resolutions of the United Nations Security Council, the United States has long recognized the Republic of Cyprus as the only legitimate and internationally recognized state on the island. This longstanding position reflects a broader international consensus that the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, and unity of Cyprus must be respected and that any resolution of the Cyprus issue must be achieved through lawful means and within the framework established by the United Nations.

Due to the ongoing occupation, the refugees are prohibited from returning to their own homes and properties, which have essentially been stolen from them. Turkey's continued refusal to allow displaced Greek Cypriots to return to or access their homes and properties constitutes an ongoing violation of freedom of movement and property rights, as protected under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In total disregard of the European Court of Human Rights' judgements, Turkey not only refuses to take any measures to stop the violation, but has even facilitated the intensification of the expropriation and sale of those properties, in an effort to prevent the return of their lawful owners and to create new *faits accompli* on the ground to entrench the *de facto* division of the island.

The fate of missing persons remains to this day undetermined. Turkey has consistently refused to cooperate, despite repeated calls by the international community to comply on this purely humanitarian issue. This applies to both Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot missing persons, including also four U.S. citizens missing since the Turkish invasion of 1974. Four American citizens remain unaccounted since the Turkish invasion of Cyprus, and a NATO ally, has yet to provide the cooperation necessary to determine their fate and return their remains to their families for proper burial and long-overdue closure. Turkey has not only failed to account for their fate and whereabouts but continues to deny access to its military archives and to suspected burial sites. Around 60% of the territory under Turkish occupation remains designated as so-called "military zones," including areas with no military purpose, where excavation is restricted, causing multi-year delays. Turkey's obligation to account for the fate of the missing persons stems not only from international human rights law, but also from international humanitarian law.

Turkey dismisses and refuses to execute the European Court of Human Rights' judgments for grave and ongoing violations, including the landmark 4<sup>th</sup> interstate case of Cyprus v. Turkey relating to missing persons and property rights of the displaced persons. Turkey's compliance is not optional but rather a core obligation under the European Convention on Human Rights. As an occupying power, Turkey has legal obligations as defined by international humanitarian law, embodied in the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention and customary international law.

For the past 52 years, Turkey continues to introduce illegal settlers into the occupied areas of Cyprus, in a deliberate policy aimed at altering the demographic and cultural landscape. These continuing attempts at altering the demographic composition of the island, violate both treaty and customary international law, as well as create new consequential facts on the ground.

Turkey's ongoing settlement of the occupied part of Cyprus is proscribed in the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits an occupying power from transferring its own civilian population into the occupied territory. Under the Rome Statute for the establishment of the International Criminal Court, the transfer of settlers constitutes a war crime. It is also a manifestation of ethnic cleansing.

Turkey persecutes citizens of the Republic of Cyprus who remain enclaved in the occupied areas. The treatment of the enclaved constitutes one of the harshest manifestations of occupation, as the Greek Cypriots and Maronites who chose to remain in the occupied areas suffer continuing deprivation of liberties, violation of rights, monitoring, severe restrictions and repression. The oppressive conditions under which that small population is condemned to live are debasing and violate the very notion of respect for the human dignity. Turkey's practices regarding the enclaved violate the right to peaceful enjoyment of one's possessions, the right to ensure education of one's children, the right to respect for one's family life and home, the right to freedom of religion, freedom of expression and the right to an effective remedy. As a result of Turkey's policy, the enclaved population has dwindled from 20,000 who chose to remain in the occupied areas after the end of hostilities in 1974 to only 331 today.

The closure of schools and the denial of access to secondary education formed a central element of Turkey's policy toward the Greek Cypriot enclaved population, contributing to conditions that pressured many to leave the occupied areas. Turkey bears responsibility for the arbitrary restrictions imposed on Greek Cypriot schools in the occupied areas, including extensive censorship of textbooks, the absence of adequate secondary education facilities, and limitations placed on the appointment and approval of teachers. The vetting process for teachers, who must receive authorization from the subordinate Turkish-administered regime before being permitted to teach, remains a significant barrier to the exercise of the right to education.

These restrictions represent a clear violation of the fundamental right to education, as enshrined in international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other relevant conventions. They also contravene the commitments outlined in the 1975 Third Vienna Agreement, which established obligations regarding education and the maintenance of normal living conditions for the Greek Cypriot enclaved population.

Since the Turkish invasion, the rich cultural and religious heritage of the island's occupied areas has suffered severe damage and is at risk of complete destruction. The destruction, alteration, or abandonment of Christian monuments continues unabated. Over 500 Greek Orthodox churches and chapels, as well as 17 monasteries, have been desecrated, vandalized, or repurposed—many converted to mosques, military depots, or storage facilities, while cemeteries have also been desecrated. This systematic targeting of religious sites aligns with policies aimed at eradicating the area's cultural identity. Many sacred artifacts—estimated at 20,000—remain missing, and approximately 60,000 cultural items have been illegally exported and sold globally, including in the U.S., often through auction houses. The damage affects Orthodox, Armenian, Maronite, and Catholic religious heritage. Despite Turkey's obligations under the 1954 Hague Convention to protect cultural property in times of armed conflict, violations persist. We should not forget that, the issue of the destruction of culture heritage by

Turkey in the occupied areas has also a U.S. component, as USAID had previously financially contributed to the rehabilitation of several religious sites, which are regrettably not preserved and are still not accessible by the religious groups to which they belong to.

Another manifestation of the violation of the freedom of religion or belief in the occupied areas is the fact that the displaced cannot worship freely in the churches of their occupied villages. Specific permission from the occupation forces is required for services, including for the attendance by members of the Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian churches living in the government-controlled area, yet such permits are consistently rejected. In the context of international human rights law, the occupying power is violating the right of each person to take part in cultural life safeguarded by the International Convention of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and fails to respect freedom of religion, freedom of opinion and expression and the rights of persons belonging to ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion.

Turkey's influence in the occupied areas extends beyond political and security matters and increasingly reaches into the cultural and religious sphere of the Turkish Cypriot community, which has historically been characterized by a predominantly secular identity. In recent years, this influence has been reflected in the expansion of religious infrastructure, including an increased number of mosques, religious schools, seminaries, Quran courses, and the introduction of compulsory religious instruction in schools.

These developments are part of a broader effort to reshape the social and cultural character of the occupied areas and to strengthen Ankara's influence over the Turkish Cypriot community. Such policies contribute to the gradual transformation of the identity of the occupied area as part of an organized of a broader strategy of Islamization and Turkification to serve political objectives aimed at consolidating Turkey's occupation of the island and re-shape the future parameters of any potential resolution to the Cyprus issue.

The concerning domestic situation regarding freedom of the press and freedom of expression in Turkey has increasingly extended into the occupied areas of Cyprus. A series of high-profile cases for allegedly inciting the public to offend the Turkish state and its representatives illustrates this trend. This is part of a wider crackdown against dissenting voices in the Turkish Cypriot community. As such, it serves a sinister purpose: to further consolidate Ankara's control over the occupied areas of the Republic of Cyprus by silencing voices who stand against Turkey's policy of perpetuating the division and call for reunification.

All of the issues I have outlined represent only some of the enduring consequences of the prolonged Turkish military occupation, which remains contrary to international law and the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, including respect for the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of the Republic of Cyprus. The continued division of the island and the policies implemented in the occupied areas have resulted in persistent violations of the fundamental rights and freedoms of Cypriot citizens and continue to undermine the principles of human rights, accountability, and the rule of law.

Turkey maintains an intransigent stance for a solution of the Cyprus issue outside the UN framework and agreed parameters, putting forward the narrative of a "two state solution", in

violation of international legality and the relevant U.N. Security Council Resolutions. Turkey is trying to impose this narrative on the ground by actions of the Turkish Forces, including advances into the UN-patrolled buffer zone, with the objective of claiming more of the territory of Cyprus as part of the secessionist entity. They constitute, in effect, a further encroachment on the territorial integrity of the Republic of Cyprus, in violation of the UN Charter.

The case of Varosha in Famagusta (Ammochostos) illustrates the enduring human and legal consequences of the continued occupation of Cyprus. Sealed off since 1974 and widely known as the “Ghost City,” Varosha remains a direct reminder of unresolved obligations under international law. United Nations Security Council Resolutions 550 (1984) and 789 (1992) specifically address the status of the fenced-off area and call for its return to its lawful inhabitants under United Nations control, without waiting for a final political settlement. In total disregard of the repeated calls by the United Nations Security Council, Turkey proceeded to the reopening of a part of the fenced-off area of Varosha, in an effort to prevent the prospect of its return to the lawful inhabitants, thus undermining the prospects for a peaceful settlement.

In this context, Turkey’s continued military occupation of northern Cyprus, its unrelenting aggressive behavior, in conjunction with its assertive posture in the Eastern Mediterranean must be viewed as part of a broader pattern—not as isolated incidents.

The United States rightfully regards the status quo in Cyprus as unacceptable. The steadfast support of the U.S. for resolving the Cyprus issue and its longstanding commitment to the reunification of the island is crucial in this respect. The international community, including the U.S. as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, is clear that the Cyprus issue can only be resolved within the agreed framework, on the basis of a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation, in order to ensure a future in which all Cypriots, Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, can live together in peace, security and prosperity in a reunited country. Ending the ongoing Turkish occupation is the only meaningful way to restore the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all Cypriot citizens.

In conclusion, the situation in Cyprus is not merely a frozen conflict of the past; it is an ongoing challenge to the principles of international law, human rights, and the rules-based international order. The continued presence of Turkish forces, the lack of accountability for unresolved humanitarian issues, and policies that seek to alter the political and demographic realities on the ground have prolonged the suffering of Cypriots and obstructed the prospects for a lasting settlement. As a close partner and NATO ally of the United States, Turkey’s actions in Cyprus must be examined through the same standards of respect for sovereignty, human rights, and international commitments that guide the broader transatlantic community. A sustainable resolution can only be achieved through adherence to the established United Nations framework, respect for the rights of all Cypriots, and a genuine commitment to restoring trust and advancing a just and durable peace.

For more than five decades, Turkey has maintained an illegal military occupation, disregarded repeated calls by the international community, and pursued policies aimed at entrenching its control over the occupied areas rather than advancing a lawful and lasting resolution. These actions are contrary to the principles reflected in U.S. law, including the United States’

longstanding commitment to respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, human rights, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. They also run counter to U.S. strategic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, where stability, respect for international norms, and reliable partnerships are essential to maintaining regional security. The continued illegal occupation of Cyprus is not simply a bilateral dispute; it is a challenge to the rules-based order that the United States and its allies seek to defend. As Turkey seeks to present itself as a responsible actor within the transatlantic alliance, its conduct in Cyprus exposes a persistent contradiction between its stated commitments and its actions on the ground. A nation cannot credibly claim leadership within NATO while disregarding international law, undermining the sovereignty of a fellow European state, and pursuing policies that perpetuate division, instability, and the denial of fundamental rights.