



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

### **Human Rights in Turkey Today**

**Tuesday, April 16, 2024**

**10:00 – 11:30 a.m.**

**220o Rayburn House Office Building**

#### **As prepared for delivery**

Good morning. I join Co-Chair Smith in welcoming the witnesses and the public to today's Human Rights Commission hearing on Türkiye. Mr. Kanter Freedom, Mr. Bilici, Ms. Maenza – it is a pleasure to see all of you again.

I regret that I missed the beginning of the hearing, but would like to make a few brief observations now.

First, let me share with you that for the first time since I've been co-chairing this Commission, when we reached out to potential witnesses about joining today's panel, they declined our invitation.

The reason: they feared that their appearance here could lead to reprisals against family members or local partners in Turkey.

This is truly unprecedented.

It demonstrates that the Erdogan government's willingness to impose severe costs on those who express dissent has succeeded in intimidating people into silence.

It also shows what happens when entire movements are recklessly and unjustly stigmatized or criminalized on grounds of so-called "terrorism" – people become afraid to be associated in any way with those who've been targeted.

Second, as we heard in the Commission’s hearing on transnational repression in February, Turkey is both an origin country and a host country for transnational repression.

That means Türkiye both targets people of Turkish origin living abroad – including here in the U.S. – and hosts on its territory refugee and diaspora communities who are targeted by other states – among them Uyghurs, one of the diasporas most at risk of transnational repression.

So today is another opportunity for me to say that Congress needs to move forward now with consideration of H.R. 3654, the Transnational Repression Policy Act, which I co-lead along with Co-Chair Smith.

The U.S. urgently needs a comprehensive strategy to counter acts of transnational repression committed by any state, whether ally or adversary.

I’m sure our witnesses today agree with me that this cannot wait.

Third, it is important to acknowledge the results of last month’s elections in Türkiye.

Nationwide, candidates from the CHP opposition won 1.1 million more votes than President Erdogan’s AKP party. The CHP succeeded in defending their mayoralties in Istanbul and Ankara and made inroads in the AKP’s traditional base of support.

It is worth noting that Erdogan immediately recognized defeat – no claims of fraud or rigging.

These results strike me as important, encouraging and worth our attention.

Finally, we cannot lose sight of the fact that, as reported by the State Department, tens of thousands of people – including opposition politicians, former members of parliament, lawyers, journalists, and human rights activists – are still detained for supposed ties to “terrorist” groups or peaceful legitimate speech.

One of them, Selahattin Demirtaş, a Kurdish politician, is recognized as a prisoner of conscience by the Commission’s Defending Freedoms Project. He has been detained since 2016. My distinguished colleague Jamie Raskin, a member of this Commission’s executive committee, advocates for his release.

With regard to this case and so many others, one of the lessons of history is that the strategy of throwing people in prison to repress their aspirations tends to fail.

We are also seeing that, in today's chaotic world, countries are increasingly judged by whether they comply with their human rights obligations fully, especially when it's inconvenient; or selectively, only when it suits them. Türkiye's failure to implement European Court of Human Rights rulings is an example of the latter.

My message to the Turkish authorities is the same message I have for my own government: you don't want to be on the wrong side of this judgment.

Thank you and I yield back.