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Human Rights in Turkey Today Rep. Chris Smith April 16, 2024

Good morning and welcome to everyone joining us this morning. We are here to talk about human rights in Turkey today. We will hear about massive violations of human rights by the government of Prime Minister Erdogan against the people of Turkey.

Since 2016, the government of Turkey has, according to the U.S. *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, “arrested or imprisoned more than 95,000 citizens, and closed more than 1,500 nongovernmental organizations on terrorism-related grounds, primarily for alleged ties to the movement of cleric Fethullah Gulen.”

Other shocking abuses of human rights by the Turkish government include “arbitrary killings; suspicious deaths of persons in custody; forced disappearances; torture; arbitrary arrest and continued detention of tens of thousands of persons, including opposition politicians and former members of parliament, lawyers, journalists, human rights activists... severe restrictions on freedom of expression and press freedom, including violence and threats of violence against journalists, closure of media outlets, and arrests or criminal prosecution of journalists and others for criticizing government policies or officials, censorship, site blocking... serious restrictions on internet freedom ...”

The abuses we are going to talk about today are committed against every group in Turkey, certainly including Sunni Muslim Turks. We are also going to talk about the rights abuses against Alevi Muslims, Kurds, and Christians, particularly the Greek Orthodox Church, and abuses in territory that Turkey occupies illegally – northern Cyprus and northern Syria.

This Commission, and the U.S. Congress, considers itself a friend of the Turkish people. And when the government of Turkey government commits grave human rights violations against its own people, this friendship means that we stand with the people. And we call on the government of Turkey to *change its course* of human rights abuses.

Two of our witnesses today, Mr. Freedom and Mr. Bilici, are Turkish, and they will have things to say today that are critical of the government of Turkey. I believe they are showing themselves to be *true Turkish patriots*. They are ethnic Turks, they love their homeland, which is *of course* a great country with a rich culture. They are testifying today in order to support the best of Turkey's religious and civil traditions, to improve the life of the Turkish people.

They are doing this at real risk to themselves. The government of Turkey has a terrible record of targeting and pursuing its critics beyond its borders. In this shameful respect, the Erdogan government one of the most aggressive governments in the world, kidnapping or otherwise "disappearing" many of its critics. It has already pursued Mr. Freedom – with death threats, arrest warrants, attacks, social media campaigns, and several kidnap and extradition attempts. So *thank you* for your **immense courage** – it is an inspiration to Americans as well, I'm sure, to millions of Turks.

I believe our government's response to this transnational repression has been very weak. That is why I have authored the Transnational Repression Policy Act, H.R. 3654. It has ten cosponsors, and I'd like to thank my friend Rep. McGovern for being the lead Democratic cosponsor of that bill. The bill would require the President to impose property- and visa-blocking sanctions on foreign individuals and entities that directly engage in transnational repression, and would require the State Department to develop a strategy to fight transnational repression, direct the intelligence community to identify the perpetrators of transnational repression, and the Justice Department to train law enforcement and other employees in detecting and fighting it.

This bill will offer increased protection to our brave witnesses today, and to many other people like them, patriots working to defend human rights in other transnationally repressive countries like China, Russia, Egypt, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Cuba. I encourage Members and victims of transnational repression to support my bill.