

Testimony of Enes Kanter Freedom

Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of Lantos Human Rights Commission, for the opportunity to testify today on human rights violations in Turkey.

Regrettably, human rights violations in Turkey have escalated significantly, turning what was once a model into a problematic country.

Allow me to share several international indexes and reports with you;

Turkey ranks 165th out of 180 countries in Freedom of the Press. Authoritarianism is gaining ground in Turkey, challenging media pluralism, with all possible means used to undermine critics, as reported by Reporters Without Borders. Additionally, Turkey ranks 117th out of 142 countries in the Rule of Law Index, 133rd out of 142 countries in terms of fundamental rights, and 147th out of 163 countries in the World's Safest Countries index according to the Economy and Peace Institute. Furthermore, Turkey is placed 140th out of 169 in the Liberal Democracy Index list, categorized as an electoral autocracy, and defined as among the worst offenders along with Nicaragua, the Central African Republic, and Guatemala.

The latest Freedom House report highlights a troubling trend termed “civil death,” employed as a strategic tool by authoritarian regimes to marginalize opponents by imposing restrictive measures that effectively exclude them from society.

According to the State Department's country human rights and terrorism reports, under broad antiterror legislation passed in 2018, the government continues to restrict the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms, compromising the rule of law.

Since the 2016 failed coup attempt, authorities have dismissed or suspended tens of thousands of civil servants and government workers, including more than 60,000 police and military personnel, and more than 4,000 judges and prosecutors. They have also arrested or imprisoned more than 95,000 citizens and closed more than 1,500 nongovernmental organizations on terrorism-related grounds, including hundreds of highly successful math and science academies, universities, and media outlets, primarily for alleged ties to the movement of cleric Fethullah Gulen.

The movement is a globally respected faith-based civil society inspired by Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen, focusing on promoting interfaith dialogue and education

throughout the world. According to the State Department 2022 Country human rights and terrorism reports The Gulen Movement is not a designated terrorist organization in the United States, or anywhere else. But the Turkish government continues to detain and arrest Turkish citizens as well as foreign citizens residing in Turkey for alleged ties to the movement or terrorism-related links, often based on scant evidence and minimal due process.

Fethullah Gulen has dedicated his life to interfaith and intercultural dialogue, community service, and providing access to quality education. He was the first influential Muslim public figure to condemn the 9/11 attacks publicly and express sympathy for the American people. Gulen's lifelong work on interfaith cooperation has earned him recognition from Christian and Jewish leaders in his homeland Turkey and a personal audience with the late Pope John Paul II. His efforts have also been praised by other global leaders who recognize his vital role in fostering mutual understanding and peace and his leadership in humanitarian initiatives. In 2008, Gulen was ranked among the top 100 in Foreign Policy and Prospect magazines' joint poll of the "Top 100 Public Intellectuals." Many respected institutions awarded him with peace awards but Erdogan regime labeled him as terrorist just because Gulen was pro democracy and in opposition to Erdogan's policies.

Turkey is also one of the leading countries in transnational repressions. The State Department reported that the Turkish government increasingly coordinated with other authoritarian states to forcibly transfer more than 100 Turkish nationals to Turkey since the 2016 coup, and more than 40 individuals were subjected to abduction, rendition, and forcible return.

Between 2014 and 2023, Freedom House recorded 112 incidents of physical transnational repression against journalists perpetrated by 26 governments. A Turkish journalist interviewed by Freedom House experienced the closure of US bank accounts, likely due to baseless terrorism accusations from the Turkish government. Additionally, individuals in the US whose names appeared on published lists faced various repercussions, including the freezing or closure of their accounts, negative credit scores, and various other personal and financial difficulties.

As the reports mention, after 2016, Erdogan's regime began arresting everyone who opposed it. In one day, more than 2 million people were labeled as terrorists in Turkey. Then I began to speak out against human rights violations by President Erdogan in my home country. The Turkish government asked the US government

to extradite me, canceled my passport, put my name on an Interpol list, imprisoned my father, and set a \$500,000 bounty on my head.

In 9 years, I received 12 arrest warrants and countless death threats. They tried to attack me in front of a mosque in Boston, run social media campaigns against me, and pressured American universities, NGOs, and political groups to cancel their events with me. During a 2017 visit to Indonesia, I was nearly kidnapped by local government officials with intentions to send me back to Turkey. With the help of a good local officer, I was able to leave the country immediately. Later that year, I narrowly escaped from police officers at the Romanian airport whom the Turkish government had sent after me. They attempted to arrest me and send me back to Turkey. Thankfully, Senator Lankford intervened and helped me return to the US.

While my story is well-known, millions of people out there have stories or voices that are not heard, especially the stories of innocent political prisoners. Prison conditions remain alarming, with overcapacity, torture cases, and inadequate investigations. Torture and ill-treatment extend beyond detention centers, affecting thousands.

Allow me to share a few stories of the prisoners of conscience with you:

1- A physics teacher, Şerife Sulukan is fighting for her life in Prison, with her 89% disability and paralysis. Sulukan, who also has other illnesses, is suffering this ordeal because

She sent her child to a closed school. There can be no such crime, no such punishment.

2-Emre Turan, A teacher diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer is not allowed to receive proper treatment, and a medical report was given stating that he could stay in prison.

3-Lutfu Koc was detained for working in a dormitory closed by decree. He has a cyst in his brain. He can't access the necessary treatment in prison since April '19 last year.

4-Ayfer Yavuz, mother of 3 children, and former teacher, she was arrested at the prison gate when she was visiting her husband, leaving three kids with a family member for three years.

5-Yusuf Ozmen, is another stage 4 Cancer patient, Food Engineer, was arrested for the second time in 2021. Needs urgent care but he is still being kept in prison.

6-Ramazan Sarıkaya (50) He was arrested for opening a bank account at a certain bank affiliated with the Hizmet Movement. His kidney disease is in the last stage,

and he was told by the doctors that the next stage would be dialysis. He is dealing with harsh prison conditions and health problems.

7-Sümeyye Tercanoglu, a mother with a 7 month-old baby, she and her husband were arrested on baseless charges, leaving others to take care of their baby. That baby needs her mother.

8-Esra Ekmekci is a mother in prison, she has 3 children, one of them has Autism, very elderly ill grandparents can barely take care of them.

9-Sedanur and Osman Emercen family arrested for working at a private school, Their 7-year-old daughter was left with a family member to take care of her.

10-Kazim Avci, He dedicated his whole life to charities and is now being arrested for that. At 67 years old, he had a heart attack in prison on 02/22 and suffers from diseases such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and the risk of prostate cancer. In his last defense, he said that his body had no strength left, he had many diseases, and he fell in the ward.

11-Veyssel Tikaç, a teacher, who lives in prison with 9 stents in his heart, said that his heart

vessels were blocked, he could not insert stents anymore, and that he is struggling with many

illnesses in prison. He is afraid that he will die in prison.

12-Gulden Asik, a mother of three who has cancer, The doctors told her the cancer would spread unless she had the surgery. However, she does not want to

be operated on and go back to prison for post-op recovery.

13-Dudu Ozyurek, She is a seriously ill, has MS, she cannot help herself with her needs, her cellmates are helping her out with basic needs. Although she has an Illness report stating she is not suitable for prison conditions, Turkish Authorities are not releasing her.

14-Hatice Yildiz, a 75-year-old mother is arrested for the allegation of "funding the organization" for sending money to her daughter in prison and her daughter's cellmate.

The list goes on and on. Turkish prisons are full of educators, academics, journalists, housewives with babies, and elderly, very ill people. So many families are separated, and so many children are left with no parents near them.

Sadly, all this is happening because of a so-called NATO ally. Instead of protecting and supporting democracy and human rights, they have become an enemy of democracy and human rights.

Turkey's failure to adhere to the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in cases such as the crackdown on participants of the Hizmet movement is a clear violation of international human rights standards. By disregarding ECHR decisions, Turkey undermines the principles of justice, fair trial, and respect for fundamental rights.

The US Congress should take bolder steps, prioritize human rights in dealing with the regime, speak out more, and advocate for the implementation of European Court of Human Rights decisions by the Turkish government as a means of holding them accountable for their violations of human rights and advocating for all political prisoners.

I'm very grateful to the Lantos Human Rights Commission for inviting me to testify and allowing me to share my story and the stories of millions.

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