

Written Testimony
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Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing on
“Human Rights in Turkey Today”

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Co-Chairs Smith and McGovern, and all distinguished Members of the Commission, it is an honor to testify before you today. I appreciate your interest in this topic and your commitment to human rights and religious freedom globally. With the limited time, I can only briefly speak on these important topics, but would be glad to have further conversations and provide additional information.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, where I served for four years as both Vice-Chair and Chair until May 2022, has recommended that Turkey be listed on the State Department’s Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, or IRFA.^[1] This morning, I will talk about the conditions for religious and ethnic minorities in Turkey.

In January, Open Doors released their 2024 Watch List indicating Turkey continues to engage in high persecution against Christians, saying “The combination of rising religious nationalism and a growing emphasis on Islamic values by the government is intensifying pressure.”^[2] The ISIS attack on a Catholic Church in Istanbul in January has only added to their fears. It is reported that approximately 150,000 Christians remain in the country, along with increased numbers of Orthodox refugees from Ukraine and Russia.^[3] Since 2020, Turkey has forced dozens of foreign Christian workers to leave, impacting the ability of many communities to worship.

In October 2023, the European Court of Human Rights faulted Turkey for violating a Syriac Foundation’s rights by expropriating a property they have used for centuries in Turkey’s Mardin Province.^[4] In November 2023, the USCIRF report, “Examination of Threats to Religious Sites in Turkey” documented the expropriation of many religious minority properties and the discriminatory practices of Turkey’s General Directorate of Foundations.^[5] When they confiscate properties from minority communities, it also decreases their revenue, increasing their vulnerability.

The government refuses to grant legal personality to religious communities and continues to block the reopening of the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary. They still refuse to give legal recognition to Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I as the global leader of the orthodox community.

Many religious and ethnic minorities face harassment, discrimination, and violence, including Alevis, the largest religious minority in the country. Their houses of worship, called cemevis, are not recognized by the government and are subjected to vandalism and attacks. Roma people continue to be excluded from formal employment with deteriorating living conditions.

Just as the Hagia Sophia was converted from a church to a museum and then eventually a mosque in 2020, the UNESCO recognized Church of the Holy Savior, also known as the Chora Church in Istanbul, is facing that same fate. Some expect an announcement of the conversion in May, to coincide with the anniversary of the conquest of Constantinople.^[6]

With rising antisemitism in recent years in Turkey, the war in Gaza and recent Turkish government rhetoric have increased it to dangerous levels. Hate speech has also increased against other religious and ethnic minorities, and refugees. The government has announced plans for mass deportations of refugees, going against the legal principle of non-refoulement. Those fleeing religious persecution are especially at risk, including those from Iran and Uyghurs from China.

Turkey continues to criminalize blasphemy under article 216(3) of the Penal code. This is generally politically motivated against those accused of insulting or mocking Islam and to intimidate or retaliate against critics of President Erdogan.^[7]

Kurdish communities had robust democratic municipal governance until 2016, when President Erdogan used emergency powers to amend Law 5393 with Decree Law 674, allowing the removal of Kurdish mayors, replacing them with trustees from Ankara. This began after the collapse of the 2013-2015 peace process, negotiations to settle the Kurdish question and end hostilities between the Turkish government and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).^[8]

In March, Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) lost badly in municipal elections. In the Kurdish city of Van, the Turkish government blocked the installation of the new mayor, with plans to replace him with the losing AKP candidate. After demonstrations in the street for several days, the decision was overturned, and the winning Kurdish mayor was installed.

The Turkish government has often used false accusations of affiliation with the PKK as an excuse to imprison, marginalize, and silence the Kurdish community in Turkey. USCIRF reported that students seeking Kurdish classes have instead been directed to religion classes. They have even even arrested Imams for preaching in Kurdish, equating it with terrorist activity.

Each year, Kurds are harassed and detained for simply attending Newroz celebrations. This March, 200 were detained. One reported being held in a van for hours, while subjected to an “intrusive” and “brutal” body search.^[9] There are multiple accounts of Kurdish journalists arrested in the past few months for reporting on worsening human rights violations in Turkey, some facing 37.5 years in prisons with the accusation of “membership in a terrorist organization.”^[10]

President Erdogan has especially targeted any perceived Kurdish political opponents, imprisoning the leading Kurdish leader Selahattin Demirtas since 2016, former Co-Chair of the People’s Democratic Party (HDP) recently renamed the People’s Democracy and Equality Party (DEM) for “publicly denigrating the government and state organs.”^[11] Thanks to your Commission for including him in the “Defending Freedom Project” as a Prisoner of Conscience, adopted by Rep. Jamie Raskin.

In 2023, over 2900 Kurds were detained for their affiliation with the DEM Party. Since 2015, it is reported that over 22,818 have been detained and harassed as part of the DEM or HDP. In fact, the Turkish government moved to close the HDP right before last year’s May elections accusing it of “terror links.” Amnesty International accused the Turkish government of violating freedom of expression and association.^[12]

The Human Rights Foundation of Turkey has reported a troubling “22% surge in torture and ill-treatment’ in their August 2023 report, with 68.8% of reports coming from Kurdish-majority regions of Turkey.^[13]

The Turkish government is using the same justification of supposed PKK affiliation to target Kurdish citizens of Turkey as it is to attack the people of northeast Syria.

In January of 2018 and then November of 2019, Turkey invaded some of the most religiously diverse parts of northeast Syria targeting religious and ethnic minorities, including Yazidis, Christians, and Kurds, especially women in these communities. Genocide Watch reported that “Turkey has committed war crimes and crimes against humanity in Northern Syria. In areas under Turkey’s control, civilians have been

subjected to horrific crimes against humanity committed by Turkish forces and Turkish supported militias.” [14]

I first learned about the remarkable religious freedom conditions in northeast Syria when appointed to USCIRF in 2018 and have visited on numerous occasions. As the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were liberating areas from the ISIS Caliphate as partners of the US-led Coalition to Defeat ISIS, they were empowering the local community to build self-governance, carefully including all ethnicities and religions, with half the leaders being women.

The city of Raqqa is the perfect example of this stunning transformation. It once was the headquarters of the ISIS Caliphate, but now the headquarters of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. It has the opposite conditions it had under ISIS, as does the rest of northeast Syria. Where else in the region do you see Christian converts as equal members of society and their churches easily registered and celebrated?

As we consider the human rights conditions in Turkey, we must also consider those in areas Turkey occupies and controls in Syria and Cyprus.

In February 2024, Human Rights Watch released a 74-page report documenting “abductions, arbitrary arrests, unlawful detention, sexual violence, and torture.” It says, “Turkey bears responsibility for the serious abuses and potential war crimes committed by members of its own forces and local armed groups it supports in Turkish-occupied territories of northern Syria. Turkish officials are not merely bystanders to abuses but bear responsibility as the occupying power and, in some cases, have been directly involved in apparent war crimes in what it calls a “safe zone.”[15]

In Turkish controlled Cyprus, the U.S. State Department’s most recent Human Rights Report is damning. It documents “Significant human rights issues” including the targeting of national and racial minorities, lack of accountability of gender-based violence, government corruption, trafficking in-person, with widespread impunity. During the 1974 invasion, over 162,000 Greek Cypriots fled, with reports of only 300 remaining and hundreds still missing.[16]

In northeast Syria, Turkey continues to attack with 94 drone strikes since January, killing 23 and 198 drone strikes in 2023, killing 105. They have targeted civilian infrastructure including water stations, electrical plants, oil refineries, grain silos, hospitals, and schools with the goal to destroy this remarkable democracy.[17] Over one million residents are still without electricity, and often without water.

Turkey also continues to conduct air strikes in the Yazidi homeland of Sinjar just across the border in Iraq, causing Yazidi genocide survivors to flee once again.

Turkey's violence has also created chaos allowing ISIS to rise again, with 69 confirmed ISIS attacks in central Syria last month.^[18] The silence of the U.S. government has been shocking, especially since Turkey's actions are against our own goals in Syria.

President Erdogan has announced plans to invade northeast Syria this summer, which will include most of the religious and ethnic minority areas left in the region, impacting Syriac-Assyrian Christians, Christian converts, Yazidis, Kurds, Armenians, Alawites, Circassians, and others. This will force the last of one of the oldest Christian communities in the world to flee or stay and face another genocide.

As Turkey seeks a green light from Iran for this invasion, what is President Erdogan offering Iran for its support? Would Turkey allow the land bridge from Iran and Iraq through Syria to Lebanon and Israel? Would Turkey split northeast Syria with Iran, so they could launch attacks and control this large land bridge?

I urge the U.S. Congress to put pressure on this administration to stand against Turkey's attacks on northeast Syria and to stop any potential invasion. Without using any military action, the U.S. can make the cost too high for Turkey using diplomacy, economic actions, and sanctions.

In addition, the U.S. must push Turkey to settle the Kurdish question, go back to negotiations with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), eliminating Erdogan's excuse to continue to marginalize his own Kurdish population.

This administration has promised to make human rights the center of U.S. foreign policy. I would ask Congress to urge the administration to follow their own words, acknowledge the reality of the problematic conditions in Turkey and the areas it controls, and put human rights in the center of U.S. policy with Turkey.

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