

Testimony to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
Andrew O'Donohue, Ph.D.
June 2026

Chairman Smith, Chairman McGovern, and Honorable Members,

Thank you for this opportunity to testify about how my research helps us understand Turkey's slide into authoritarianism. As a political scientist, I conducted my doctoral research on Turkey, including two years on the ground and a longitudinal analysis of thousands of Turkish judicial decisions. My testimony identifies why Turkey is at a turning point today and how pro-democracy actors both inside and outside Turkey can protect human rights.

Turkey's Turning Point: From Competitive to Full Authoritarianism

Turkey today stands at a dangerous inflection point. The country is transitioning from *competitive authoritarianism*, a system in which elections are unfair but still winnable for the opposition, to *full authoritarianism*, a system in which the opposition cannot win power through elections.¹ What is now at stake is whether Turkey will shift from a political system like Hungary's, in which Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was able to lose at the ballot box, to a regime like Russia's, in which President Vladimir Putin cannot be removed through elections.

Since 2015, Turkey has been a textbook example of competitive authoritarianism: a system in which opposition political parties can still compete for power in elections, but in which the government's abuse of state power tilts the playing field in its favor.² Turkey's ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (or AKP), wielded its control over state institutions to place itself at a significant advantage vis-à-vis opposition parties. As Turkish political scientists Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüşçü document, the ruling party "abused its control over the state-owned media and regulatory agencies; used legal actions to harass critics and reward supporters in the media and civil society; employed large-scale repression of opposition groups through the securitization of dissent; and relied on widespread use of public resources and abuse of public-policy instruments to gain access to greater private finance for the party."³

Still, between 2015 and 2025, Turkey's government could still lose at the ballot box. In March 2019, the opposition candidate for mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, defeated the AKP's candidate.⁴ When Turkey's Supreme Election Council (YSK) nullified İmamoğlu's victory and ordered a re-run election in June 2019, İmamoğlu won again.⁵ İmamoğlu even increased his margin of victory from 13,000 votes to more than 800,000 votes.⁶ After a court convicted the popular Istanbul mayor and dissuaded the opposition from running İmamoğlu as their presidential candidate, the opposition lost Turkey's presidential elections in May 2023.⁷ Nonetheless, in Turkey's March 2024 local elections, the opposition scored a decisive victory. İmamoğlu won reelection in Istanbul by more than 12 percentage points; the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (or CHP), to which İmamoğlu belongs, surpassed the AKP's vote share for the first time this century.⁸ Put simply, until 2025, it was still possible for Turkey's voters to choose new leaders through elections.

Since early 2025, Turkey has veered toward full authoritarianism. It has become increasingly doubtful that Turkey's government will allow voters to choose new leaders through elections. Until last year, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had refrained from crossing the Rubicon of arresting his main rival. However, as the ruling party's popularity has declined, repression of the political opposition has increased. In March 2025, Turkey's government arrested Istanbul mayor İmamoğlu, whom the opposition CHP selected as its candidate for the next presidential elections and who consistently outperforms President Erdoğan in public opinion polls.⁹ İmamoğlu has been held in prison since March 2025; more than 400 of his supporters have also been put on trial.¹⁰

A deepening judicial crackdown on Turkey's main opposition party, the CHP, has pushed Turkey toward full authoritarianism. In May 2026, a court in Ankara removed the leadership of the CHP, voiding the results of a 2023 party congress that elected Özgür Özel as the party's chair.¹¹ The CHP's previous leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, led the CHP to repeated election defeats between 2010 and 2023. By contrast, Özel was viewed as "young," "energetic," and "a rising star of Turkey's opposition."¹² The court's decision suspends Özel and other senior CHP officials—and replaces them with Kılıçdaroğlu and his allies, who were in power before the 2023 congress.¹³ Taken together, these legal decisions against İmamoğlu and Özel reflect a pattern in which Turkey's judiciary has hobbled Erdoğan's most popular rivals, sought to weaken and divide the main opposition party, and moved Turkey closer to full authoritarianism.

Turkey's next presidential and parliamentary elections must be held by May 2028. Under Turkey's constitution, President Erdoğan can only run for president again if he calls early elections or changes the constitution to remove term limits.¹⁴ The judicial crackdown on Turkey's political opposition increases the risk that Turkey's electorate will not be able to choose new leaders, even if public opinion were overwhelmingly in support of an opposition candidate such as İmamoğlu.

The Changing Role of the United States: The Retrenchment of U.S. Democracy Promotion

The United States' foreign policy toward Turkey has transitioned in recent years from limited support for democracy to increasing silence in the face of democratic backsliding. This shift in U.S. foreign policy is particularly clear in the case of Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu. In December 2022, when a Turkish court convicted İmamoğlu in a highly politicized case, the U.S. State Department expressed that it was "deeply troubled and disappointed" by the verdict.¹⁵ The U.S. State Department also affirmed the United States' broader support for fundamental freedoms in Turkey, stating: "We remain gravely concerned by the continued judicial harassment of civil society, media, political and business leaders in Turkey, including through prolonged pretrial detention, overly broad claims of support for terrorism, and criminal insult cases. The people of Turkey deserve the ability to exercise their human rights and fundamental freedoms without fear of retribution."¹⁶

In March 2025, when the same mayor was convicted and *imprisoned* on separate, politicized charges, the U.S. State Department issued no such public statement.¹⁷ Just days after İmamoğlu's arrest, U.S. special envoy Steve Witkoff described President Donald Trump's recent phone call with President Erdoğan as "great" and "transformational."¹⁸ Less than a week after İmamoğlu's arrest, Secretary of State Marco Rubio met his Turkish counterpart to discuss increased

cooperation and made brief mention of “concerns regarding recent arrests and protests in Türkiye.”¹⁹

In May 2026, after a Turkish court removed the leadership of Turkey’s opposition CHP, the U.S. State Department did not issue a press release mentioning democracy or human rights in Turkey. On May 22, just one day after the court’s decision, U.S. Secretary of State Rubio again met with counterpart, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan.²⁰ However, the State Department’s readout of the meeting makes no mention of democracy, human rights, or the court decision against Turkey’s political opposition.²¹ This shift in U.S. foreign policy, together with reduced financial, institutional, and rhetorical support for democracy, is part of a pattern that Professor Evren Balta, Professor Oded Haklai, and I describe as a “retrenchment of U.S. democracy promotion.”²²

Pathways to Protecting Freedom in Turkey

This testimony, rooted in my academic research on Turkey, offers several policy recommendations for monitoring human rights violations, supporting independent media, and protecting educational cooperation.

1. *Monitoring Violations of Human Rights:* As of April 2025, the United States government has scaled back the State Department’s annual reports on countries’ violations of human rights.²³ As Professor Balta, Professor Haklai, and I have observed in our published research, “Overturning decades of precedent, these reports will no longer condemn practices such as holding political prisoners, restricting ‘free and fair elections,’ denying freedom of peaceful assembly, or harassing human rights organizations.”²⁴ Consistent with long-standing State Department tradition, the U.S. government should return to the practice of including and condemning relevant state practices, such as holding political prisoners, in annual human rights reports.
2. *Supporting Independent Media:* Historically, Western governments and international organizations, such as the European Union and United Nations, have supported independent media outlets in Turkey.²⁵ Since 2025, the United States has scaled back its commitments to supporting independent media in Turkey and globally. In March 2025, an executive order moved to dismantle the U.S. Agency for Global Media, which is the parent organization for Voice of America and has an estimated global audience of more than 361 million people.²⁶ In April 2025, a federal judge blocked the administration from dismantling Voice of America.²⁷ However, Voice of America Turkish (VOA Türkçe) has not published any new reporting on Turkey since March 15, 2025.²⁸ Consistent with long-standing tradition, the United States should restore and reinforce its support for media outlets such as Voice of America.
3. *Protecting Educational Cooperation:* Cooperation in the field of education has proven uniquely stable in U.S.-Turkey relations. The Turkish Fulbright Commission—created through a bilateral agreement in 1949—predates Turkey’s accession to NATO in 1952.²⁹ The Turkish Fulbright Commission has run without interruption since 1950, building bilateral ties through a unique network of more than 5,000 alumni.³⁰ The American Research Institute in Turkey (ARIT), founded in 1964, is another prominent example of

how educational cooperation has become deeply institutionalized.³¹ Today, however, support for educational cooperation has come under fire: The Fiscal Year 2026 Consolidated Appropriations Act reduced the budget for the U.S. State Department's educational and cultural exchange programs, including the Fulbright and Gilman scholarship programs, by \$74 million relative to prior year funding.³²

Congressional support is essential to ensure that the United States protects human rights in Turkey by monitoring and condemning abuses of those rights, supporting independent media, and safeguarding educational opportunities for U.S. and Turkish students and scholars. Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

References

- ¹ Andrew O’Donohue, “Why Türkiye Is at a Tipping Point Between Democracy and Authoritarianism,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 26, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/03/turkey-protests-erdogan-democracy-authoritarianism?lang=en>. For the definition and conceptualization of competitive authoritarianism, see Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5–6.
- ² Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüşçü, “Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey,” *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 9 (2016): 1581–606; Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, 5–6.
- ³ Esen and Gümüşçü, “Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey,” 1582.
- ⁴ Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüşçü, “Killing Competitive Authoritarianism Softly: The 2019 Local Elections in Turkey,” *South European Society and Politics* 24, no. 3 (2019): 317–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2019.1691318>.
- ⁵ Esen and Gümüşçü, “Killing Competitive Authoritarianism Softly”; Andrew O’Donohue and Cem Tecimer, “A Turkish Court Sentenced Erdogan’s Rival to Prison. That Could Backfire.,” *Washington Post*, December 21, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/12/22/erdogan-imamoglu-turkey-2023-election/>; Ayça Alemdaroğlu et al., “Turkey’s Hard Road to Democratic Renewal,” *Journal of Democracy* 36, no. 3 (2025): 121–34.
- ⁶ Esen and Gümüşçü, “Killing Competitive Authoritarianism Softly”; O’Donohue and Tecimer, “A Turkish Court Sentenced Erdogan’s Rival to Prison. That Could Backfire.”; Alemdaroğlu et al., “Turkey’s Hard Road to Democratic Renewal.”
- ⁷ Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüşçü, “How Erdoğan’s Populism Won Again,” *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 3 (2023): 21–32; Senem Aydın-Düzgit et al., “How Erdoğan Rules Through Crisis,” *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 4 (2023): 80–93.
- ⁸ Alemdaroğlu et al., “Turkey’s Hard Road to Democratic Renewal,” 122.
- ⁹ Ayla Jean Yackley, “Turkey Detains 37 in Escalating Crackdown on Opposition to Erdoğan,” *Turkish Politics, Financial Times*, March 20, 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/c5950647-1ec0-449f-bd01-90a62382acaa?syn-25a6b1a6=1>.
- ¹⁰ Alys Davies, “Istanbul’s Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu on Trial for Corruption Charges,” *BBC*, March 9, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c204ymjnn80o>.
- ¹¹ John Paul Rathbone, “Turkey Court Removes Leader of Opposition as Erdoğan Tightens Grip,” *Turkey, Financial Times*, May 21, 2026, <https://www.ft.com/content/c1dce05a-c5f1-4b59-96f5-d9585ab64e91?syn-25a6b1a6=1>.
- ¹² Gönül Tol [@gonultol], “Important moment in Turkish politics: Turkey’s main opposition party dumped its embattled leader Kilicdaroglu in favour of Ozgur Ozel, young, energetic CHP lawmaker, after squandering what many viewed as the opposition’s best chance to end two decades of Erdogan’s rule.,” Tweet, Twitter, November 5, 2023, <https://x.com/gonultol/status/1720961384144310467>; Ayla Göl, “Turkish Democracy on Trial: How Erdoğan’s Rule Has Undermined Justice and Weakened His Rivals,” *The Conversation*, June 1, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.64628/AB.a3k9utmyq>.
- ¹³ Rathbone, “Turkey Court Removes Leader of Opposition as Erdoğan Tightens Grip.”
- ¹⁴ Göl, “Turkish Democracy on Trial.”
- ¹⁵ Ned Price, “Turkey’s Conviction and Sentencing of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu,” United States Department of State, December 15, 2022, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/turkeys-conviction-and-sentencing-of-istanbul-mayor-ekrem-imamoglu/>; O’Donohue, “Why Türkiye Is at a Tipping Point Between Democracy and Authoritarianism.”
- ¹⁶ Price, “Turkey’s Conviction and Sentencing of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu.”
- ¹⁷ O’Donohue, “Why Türkiye Is at a Tipping Point Between Democracy and Authoritarianism”; Evren Balta et al., “The Trump Effect on Global Autocratization: Theory and Evidence from Israel and Türkiye,” *Middle East Journal* 79, no. 2 (2026): 209.
- ¹⁸ Gizem Nisa Cebi, “Trump-Erdogan Talks ‘great, Transformational’ but ‘under-Reported’: US Envoy,” *Anadolu Ajansı*, March 22, 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/trump-erdogan-talks-great-transformational-but-under-reported-us-envoy/3517286>.
- ¹⁹ United States Department of State, “Secretary Rubio’s Meeting with Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan,” *United States Department of State*, March 25, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-rubios-meeting-with-turkish-foreign-minister-fidan-2/>.
- ²⁰ United States Department of State, “Secretary Rubio’s Meeting with Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan,” *United States Department of State*, May 22, 2026, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/05/secretary-rubios-meeting-with-turkish-foreign-minister-fidan/>.

-
- ²¹ United States Department of State, “Secretary Rubio’s Meeting with Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan,” May 22, 2026.
- ²² Balta et al., “The Trump Effect on Global Autocratization: Theory and Evidence from Israel and Türkiye.”
- ²³ Graham Smith, “The State Department Is Changing Its Mind about What It Calls Human Rights,” *Investigations, NPR*, April 18, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/04/18/nx-s1-5357511/state-department-human-rights-report-cuts>.
- ²⁴ Balta et al., “The Trump Effect on Global Autocratization: Theory and Evidence from Israel and Türkiye”; Smith, “The State Department Is Changing Its Mind about What It Calls Human Rights.”
- ²⁵ Andrew O’Donohue et al., *Turkey’s Changing Media Landscape* (Center for American Progress, 2020), 28, https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2020/06/09110232/06-20_TurkeysChangingMediaLandscape.pdf; Bianet, “Hakkımızda [About Us],” Bianet, June 1, 2026, <https://bianet.org/hakkimizda>; Medyascope, “Künye [Identity],” *Medyascope*, June 1, 2026, <https://medyascope.tv/kunye/>.
- ²⁶ Tyler Pager, “Trump Orders Gutting of 7 Agencies, Including Voice of America’s Parent,” U.S., *The New York Times*, March 15, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/15/us/politics/trump-order-voice-of-america.html>.
- ²⁷ Minh Kim, “Judge Blocks Trump Effort to Dismantle Voice of America,” U.S., *The New York Times*, April 22, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/22/us/politics/judge-trump-voice-of-america.html>.
- ²⁸ Voice of America, “Türkiye Haberleri | VOA Türkçe | Güvenilir Haber,” VOA Türkçe, June 1, 2026, <https://www.voaturkce.com/Turkiye>.
- ²⁹ Turkish Fulbright Commission, “Mutual Memory,” accessed November 2, 2023, <https://70th.fulbright.org.tr/?lang=en>; Andrew O’Donohue, “The Deinstitutionalization of U.S. and Turkish Foreign Policy: Why Societal Ties Are an Anchor in Bilateral Relations,” *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 14, no. 1 (2025): 62–82, <https://doi.org/10.20991/allazimuth.1621528>.
- ³⁰ Turkish Fulbright Commission; O’Donohue, “The Deinstitutionalization of U.S. and Turkish Foreign Policy.”
- ³¹ O’Donohue, “The Deinstitutionalization of U.S. and Turkish Foreign Policy.”
- ³² NAFSA, “FY2026 Funding for International Education and Exchange Programs,” 2026, <https://www.nafsa.org/fy2026-funding-international-education-and-exchange-programs>.