

**Human Rights in Turkish-Occupied Cyprus:
Erdoğan's Record & Its Implications for the Ankara NATO
Summit
Rep. Chris Smith, Co-Chairman
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Good morning, and welcome to today's hearing of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission on “Human Rights in Turkish-Occupied Cyprus: Erdoğan's Record and Its Implications for the Ankara NATO Summit.” This hearing follows another, which I chaired on June 3, “[Can Turkey Find Its Way Back to Freedom? Authoritarian Consolidation versus the Defense of Turkish Democracy.](#)” That is how serious and various the dangers are posed by the government of Turkey today – to people within Turkey, to its diaspora abroad, and to the human rights of people in neighboring countries – above all, Cyprus.

I particularly want to thank Ambassador Evangelos Savva of the Republic of Cyprus, who will brief us on the situation before we turn to our hearing with expert witnesses.

As leaders prepare to gather in Ankara for the NATO Summit, it is appropriate that we examine not only President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's words, but also his record. It has now been twenty-three years since Erdoğan came to power in Turkey, first as prime minister, and then as president.

It's also appropriate that we talk about Cyprus. During these 23 years, no territory neighboring Turkey has provided a clearer window into Erdoğan's worldview, his ambitions, and his approach to power than Cyprus.

The island of Cyprus is home to approximately 1.4 million people. The island is divided into the south, which is legally governed and administered by the internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus, and a northern zone, where the Republic has legal sovereignty but is unable to govern, as it is occupied by Turkey, which has set up a "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus," unrecognized by any government, save Erdoğan's. This division originates in Turkey's 1974 invasion of the island and remains one of the longest-running unresolved conflicts in the world.

Cyprus serves as an important object lesson as we assess Erdoğan's intentions toward Greece, Armenia, Israel, Syria, Iraq, and even parts of the Balkans and Europe. What we see in his Cyprus policy is not reassuring.

Much of the world has treated Cyprus as a frozen conflict. Erdoğan has not. During his twenty-three years in power, he has systematically changed facts on the ground in ways that have made a negotiated settlement more difficult and have raised new human rights concerns.

Erdoğan has taken apart the post-1974 status quo piece by piece. Rather than preserving the status quo while negotiations continued, Erdoğan has systematically dismantled it.

One of the clearest examples is demographic change. Successive Turkish governments encouraged settlement from mainland Turkey, but under Erdoğan, that policy has accelerated dramatically. As Michael Rubin notes in his written testimony, *"There has been a surge in settlement since Erdoğan came to power."* Many Turkish Cypriots themselves now fear that they

are becoming a minority in their own community, with political, cultural, and economic decisions increasingly shaped in Ankara rather than in northern Cyprus. What began as an occupation has increasingly become a project of demographic transformation.

Erdoğan's policies have also placed growing pressure on the distinct identity of the Turkish Cypriot community. Turkish Cypriots have long been known for a comparatively secular and pluralistic political culture. Yet journalists, academics, trade unionists, civil society leaders, and elected officials have repeatedly warned that they face increasing political pressure, diminished local autonomy, and efforts to reshape their society and culture according to the narrow nationalism of Ankara.

The same pattern is evident in Erdoğan's treatment of Greek Cypriot rights and heritage. International courts have repeatedly recognized violations involving property rights, missing persons, and other continuing consequences of the island's division. Churches, monasteries, cemeteries, and archaeological sites in the occupied north continue to suffer

neglect, desecration, inappropriate conversion, or restricted access. These are not simply historic monuments. They are living expressions of a people's religious faith, identity, and historical memory.

Perhaps nowhere has Erdoğan's determination to create irreversible facts on the ground been more visible than in the abandoned Greek Cypriot city of Varosha (Ammochostos) in the Turkish-occupied zone of Famagusta. Varosha was occupied by Turkey in 1974, when its Greek Cypriot residents were forced to flee. For decades, the city remained sealed off and untouched because the international community understood that its lawful inhabitants—not new settlers or developers—must one day return. The emptiness of the city symbolized the hope that a comprehensive settlement might someday permit its lawful inhabitants to return.

Under Erdoğan, however, Turkey has begun opening portions of Varosha to new inhabitants and encouraging development, in total disregard of longstanding United Nations Security Council resolutions 550 and 789 calling for the area to

be resettled only by its original and lawful residents. As Savas Tsivicos notes in his written testimony, *“In total disregard of the repeated calls by the United Nations Security Council, Turkey proceeded to the reopening of a part of the fenced-off area of Varosha, in an effort to prevent the prospect of its return to the lawful inhabitants, thus undermining the prospects for a peaceful settlement.”* Erdoğan has treated Varosha as yet another opportunity to create irreversible facts on the ground, ***replacing diplomacy with unilateral action.***

Nor has Erdoğan limited himself to political and demographic change. Erdoğan has also transformed occupied northern Cyprus from a territorial dispute into a forward operating platform for projecting Turkish military power across the Eastern Mediterranean. The construction of a major drone base, followed by additional deployments of advanced military assets, demonstrates that Cyprus is no longer merely occupied territory. Under Erdoğan, it has become an instrument of regional power projection, a potential threat to Greece, Syria,

and Israel, and to the very NATO alliance of which Erdoğan is a member.

This hearing is, therefore, not primarily about history. It is about policy. The Cyprus we see today is not simply the product of events in 1974. It is also the product of twenty-three years of deliberate decisions by President Erdoğan—decisions that have reshaped the island, weakened the prospects for reconciliation, undermined the rights of both Greek and Turkish Cypriots, and offer an important window into how Erdoğan exercises power beyond Turkey's borders. As NATO leaders prepare to gather in Ankara, that record deserves careful scrutiny.