Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing

on

Worldwide Persecution of Christians

November 18, 2026, 2:30 p.m.

Statement of Dr. John Eibner

President

Christian Solidarity International (CSI)

I would like to begin by thanking Co-Chairmen Smith and McGovern for the opportunity to address the Commission on a vast and complex subject that profoundly affects not only the lives of hundreds of millions of people abroad, but also our political and spiritual culture at home – a subject that regrettably fails to attract the interest it merits in our national life. I speak of the Worldwide Persecution of Christians.

I must also express my gratitude for and pay tribute to Co-Chairman Smith's consistent advocacy on behalf of those suffering for their Christian faith and identity, as well as other victims of oppression. He has been faithfully doing so for nearly half a century as a member of the U.S. Congress.

Co-Chairman McGovern is greatly appreciated by human rights defenders and victims of human rights abuses throughout the world for his thirty years of dedicated service to this cause as a congressman. His initiatives on China and Armenia have been especially impactful. His engagement on human rights issues predate his election to Congress. As a young congressional staffer, he led an investigation into the killings of six Jesuit priests and two women in El Salvador.

There are few rewards for leadership figures, be they political, economic or religious leaders, who stand in sustained solidarity with the persecuted in foreign lands. All too often the interests of the persecuted are not widely perceived as being aligned with our national interests or some other political interest.

By the same token, in cases where there has once been some alignment, the cause of the persecuted has often been discarded once their usefulness for some political or geopolitical purpose has come to an end. Political interest of one sort or another tends to move the needle of concern. Co-Chairmen Smith and McGovern defy the fluctuations of the needle.

In less than two months, Christian Solidarity International (CSI) will celebration its 50th anniversary. CSI's unique mission involves academic research in libraries and archives, public advocacy, "boots-on-the-ground" fact-finding and humanitarian aid operations in some of the world's bloodiest fields of religious persecution, and facilitating the liberation of captives – all done based on Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

> *Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.*

At the time of its founding, CSI was especially focused on the severe and widespread state-sponsored persecution of Christians in the Soviet bloc and China. Some of Chairman Smith's first forays into the world of religious persecution were undertaken in conjunction with CSI, especially regarding China and Romania.

Not infrequently, CSI's course of action has crossed that of Co-Chairman Smith. He hosted hearings on the enslavement of Christian and traditionalist Africans during the declared jihad of the National Islamic Front regime in Sudan, which CSI first brought to international attention. He also hosted hearings on the disappearance, forced marriage and conversion of Coptic Christian women and girls in Egypt, at which CSI gave expert testimony.

Today, co-Chairman Smith stands at the forefront of congressional efforts to respond to the campaign of ethno-religious cleansing unfolding in Nigeria's Middle Belt region, where Fulani militiamen who shout "Allahu Akbar" are massacring indigenous Christians and driving them from their homes. In recent months, Chairman Smith took up the case of Neha Faqir, a Pakistani Christian woman who was abducted and forced by her captors to convert to Islam. I am pleased to report that CSI has been able to facilitate the liberation of Neha's family from bonded labor in one of Pakistan's notorious brick kilns. We continue to work to secure Neha's own liberation.

Those who are engaged with what St. Paul called the "suffering parts of the Body of Christ" are likely to give credence to the Vatican's assessment that Christians are "the most persecuted religious community in the world." According to the Vatican's estimates, "almost 400 million Christians worldwide face persecution or violence," with "5,000 [having been] killed for their faith in 2025."[1]

The phenomenon of the global persecution of Christians is broad and multifaceted, deeply embedded in history, and rooted in a multitude of oppressive worldviews. It will be impossible for us today to do more than scratch the surface. There are a host of emerging challenges that urgently need to be addressed. But I will zero in on one challenge that is currently a priority for CSI. It is also one that we believe should be a priority for policymakers in Washington, not only on human rights grounds, but because it impacts American interests at home and abroad.

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[1] "Holy See: Christians are Most Persecuted Religious Community in the Word," *Vatican News*, March 5, 2026.

I speak of the effort by the current Armenian government to overthrow the head of the global Armenian Apostolic Church, Catholicos Karekin II, and impose state control over this historic bulwark of Christian Armenia. I will connect this instance of religious persecution to one of the major geopolitical developments of our times: The rise of the Republic of Turkey and its expanding footprint in the Middle East, Africa, Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Turkey's rise has massive implications for the future of religious freedom in these regions.

Let us start with the Turkish pole of this problem before arriving at Armenia.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), under the chairmanship of Dr. Asif Mahmoud, concluded this year: "Turkey's religious freedom violations remain systematic and ongoing." USCIRF has urged the Secretary of State to place Turkey on the State Department's "Special Watch List" of severe violators of religious freedom – a recommendation that has not been fulfilled.

When it comes to Turkey's multi-denominational Christian community, persecution today comes mainly in the form of harassment, restrictive administrative measures, interference with church leadership, deportation of non-Turkish church workers and semi-official media campaigns portraying Christians as aliens in society. These day-to-day forms of repression are interspersed with occasional murders intended to intimidate vulnerable communities. Among the better known were the extrajudicial executions of the Armenian human rights activist Hrant Dink (2007), the leaders of the evangelical Christian community in Malatya – the German citizen Tilmann Geske and wo Turkish converts to Christianity, Necati Aydin and Uger Yüksel (2007) – and the Roman Catholic Bishop Luigi Padovese (2010).

The most telling part of the USCIRF report is contained in one brief and accurate explanation of this persecution. It reads:

> "Sunni Islam remains the state favored religion. Erdogan and his ruling Justice and Development Party have invoked a form of religious and ethnic nationalism that centers Sunni Islam as central to Turkish identity; they have also advanced policies that establish Islam as a central component of Turkish public life at the expense of religious minority communities and secularists."[2]

Erdogan and his political party may have "invoked" this form of nationalism. But it did not come from a vacuum. The militant, anti-democratic, ethno-religious nationalism that today drives persecution of Christian communities in Turkey has deep historical roots. It emerged at the foundation of the Republic of Turkey, as a synthesis of the ideologies of Islamism and ultra-Turkish nationalism.

The grisliest product of this ethno-religious nationalism was the Great Christian Genocide of 1915-1923, following the *jihad* declared by the Ottoman Caliph as the First World War was getting underway. Although we are accustomed to simply speaking of the "Armenian Genocide," the genocidal tempest in fact targeted all Turkey's Christian communities in one way or another: Armenians, Syriac/Assyrian/Aramaeans, and Greeks, and their various

[2] USCIRF, *Country Brief, Turkey (Türkiye),* August 2026

religious institutions. One of the few ways for Christians to save themselves from death, displacement or enslavement during the genocide was to convert to Islam.

The First World War and its turbulent aftermath led to the disintegration of the Ottoman Caliphate, and its transition into a rump Turkish state, the Republic of Turkey. But Turkey's new leaders preserved continuity regarding the place of the Christian remnant and other religious minorities in society.

A consensus emerged amongst the country's Turco-Muslim power elite on an unwritten but universally understood set of requirements for full admission to public life. As the Turkish political scientist Dr. Baris Ünlü of the University of Virginia writes, these requirements were: "1) To live a secure and privileged life in Anatolia, one had to be a Muslim, and 2) no one is to tell the truth about what was done and will be done to non-Muslims, no one is to sympathize with them or engage in politics on their behalf."[3] Another leading Turkish schola comments, "Minimizing the non-Muslim communities to the point of erasure one of the foundational objectives of the republic."[4]

For the Republic of Turkey's first eight decades, the political winds blew mostly in the direction of Turkish language-based nationalism. During Erdogan's tenure over the past twenty-four years, the winds have shifted towards sharia-based, Muslim Brotherhood-oriented Islamism. But even though these two political strands may seem opposed to each other, especially in the minds of the many in Washington who struggle to think outside the American political context, they are in fact inseparable.

It salutary to recall the words of one of Turkey's prominent semi-official, mainstream ideologues to get a good sense of the interconnectedness of political Islam and Turkism, the imperialist ambitions of this ideological synthesis, and its means of fulfillment. The historian, jurist, and publicist Prof. Dr. Ekrem Bugra Ekinci of Marmara University asserts:

> "Islam became the principal force that preserved the national identity of the Turks and enabled them to dominate the world. … Sultan Alparslan express[es] this truth: 'We Turks are pure Muslims. We do not know what *bidah* (religious innovation) is. Therefore, Allah made us exalted.' …Turks were essentially a warrior nation. With the help of Islam, they preserved their unity and solidarity. Thanks to the spirit of jihad ignited by this religion, they established strong, great, and long-lived states. They ruled vast territories. Through both war booty and

[3] Baris Ünlü, "The Turkishess Contract and the Formation of Turkishness", published in A. Alemdaroglu and F.M Göcek, eds. *Kurds in Dark Times: New Perspectives on Violence and Resistance in Turkey*, Syracuse: SUP, 2023, pp.93-94.

[4]Kerem Öktem, "Turkish Supremacy and its Discontents: Minorities and Majorities in the Turkish Republic", published in P. Dinc and O.S. Hünler eds, *The Republic of Turkey and its unresolved issues*, Springer Nature, March 29, 2025, pp. 20-21.

> trade fostered by an environment of peace and security, they became the wealthiest nation in the world."[5]

The ideological foundation of the Turkish state and the political culture that animate it are relevant, not only for its domestic affairs, but also its foreign policy. Turkey pursues an expansive, revanchist foreign policy, animated by the same strains of Turco-Islamism that dominate its domestic politics. Prof. Dr. Ekinci points in this direction when he reminds us of Turkey's historic rule over strong states and vast territories outside Anatolia. He attributes the former imperial preeminence of the Ottoman Caliphate to the pursuit of *jihad* – i.e., striving for the territorial expansion of Islam – in the sense of the projection of both military and commercial power.

Today, Islamist Turkey combines hard and soft power tools in pursuit of paramountcy outside its borders. It does so within several overlapping conceptual frameworks. One is maritime, seen in Turkey's expansion of claims on the resources of Mediterranean and Aegean Seas and an accompanying naval buildup, following its Blue Homeland doctrine of 2006.[6] But long before the formulation of this doctrine, the Turkish navy crossed the Mediterranean in 1974 to invade and occupy northern Cyprus. The near complete ethno-religious cleansing of its Greek Christian community was the consequence. It remains today one of the world's frozen conflicts.

The 'Blue Homeland' doctrine was preceded by a doctrine of 'Strategic Depth' formulated by former Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in 2001.[7] It amounts to a declaration of Turkey's intention to become a global power by building spheres of influence in the pursuit of informal empire. This doctrine is often referred to as "neo-Ottomanism," and indeed it places great emphasis on advancing Turkish power in the lands once possessed by the Ottoman Caliphate. A crucial element of the influence this foreign policy is designed to extend abroad is the Turco-Islamist supremacism inherent in the ideology of the Turkish state.

Turkey scored a great success in this direction at the end of 2024, with the overthrow of the secular Assad dictatorship in neighboring Syria by *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS). HTS was a rebranded al Qaeda militia headed by Ahmed al-Sharaa, otherwise known in jihadist circles as Muhammad al-Jolani – a killer of Americans and Syrian and Iraqi Christians, among others.

President Trump explained these events this way: "Turkey did an unfriendly takeover." He confirmed that these jihadist militias were "controlled by Turkey."[8]

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[5] Prof. Dr. Ekrem Bugra Ekenci, "What did the Turks gain by becoming Muslim?", ekrembugraekenci.com, June 3, 2026.

[6] Sinem Adar and Ilke Toygür, "Turkey, the EU and the Eastern Mediterranean Crisis: Militarization of Foreign Policy and Power Rivalry", *SWP Comment*, no. 62, December 2020.

[7] Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position*, Istanbul: Kure Yayinlare, 2001.

[8] Joe Stanley-Smith, "Trump Says Turkey Orchestrated Assad's Overthrow in Syria", *Politico*, December 16, 2024.

Turkey and its allies' decision to unleash al-Jolani's al Qaeda-linked militia and other jihadists in the bloody, fifteen-year effort to produce regime change in Syria devastated the country's Christians and other non-Sunni Muslim communities.[9] During that period, the Christian population of Syria dropped from 1.5 million to fewer than 350,000.[10] This emptying of Christians from Syria was accompanied by violence against Christians and their religious institutions reminiscent of that used during the Great Christian Genocide in the Ottoman Caliphate and the anti-Christian massacres that preceded it.

Turkey's aggressive neo-Ottomanism causes increasing concern to Jews in Israel, the territory of which, like Syria, was also under the control of the Ottoman Caliphate until the First World War. The anxiety is fueled by Erdogan's belligerent public declarations, among them: "Jerusalem is ours"; "Israel is a burden that humanity can no longer bear."; "May Allah, for the sake of his name *'Al-Qahhar'* (the Vanquisher), destroy and devastate Zionist Israel." [11] The existence of an independent Jewish state on former Ottoman territory is an affront to the Muslim supremacist ideology that animates the Turkish state. Now that Iran is gravely wounded by Israeli and American military actions, Turkey is positioning itself to take leadership of the international movement to destroy Israel.

Turkey's Strategic Depth doctrine does not stop at the frontier of the old Ottoman Caliphate. It extends to Turkic Muslim Azerbaijan and the other Turkic states of Central Asia. This Eurasian dimension of Turkey's 'Strategic Depth' doctrine draws on the pan-Turkic vision expressed by Turkish Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He declared in October 1992: "The Turkic world, which … stretches from the Adriatic Sea to China, has now emerged as a concrete reality. This is the realization of our 100-year-old dream."[12] The boast that this vision had been fulfilled was rather premature. But in the ensuing three decades much progress has been made towards fulfilment.

The Turkish-led Organization of Turkic States (OTS) has grown from an informal platform for the promotion of common cultural and linguistic issues into a geopolitical platform for coordinating defense, security cooperation, infrastructure development and customs simplification. Turkey sees favourable conditions for this project "to expand

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[9] John Eibner, "Social Pluralism, Religious Cleansing and 'Hybrid Warfare' in Contemporary Syria," published in John Eibner ed. *The Future of Religious Minorities in the Middle East*, Lanham: Lexington, 2018, pp. 193-210.

[10] "Syria: 'In 14 Years, The Christian Presence has Fallen by 84%,'" Zenit News, December 13, 2025.

[11] Michael Rubin, "Erdogan's Demands on Jerusalem could raise Questions about Istanbul's Sovereignty", American Enterprise Institute, December 26, 2024; Ashley Perry, "Why Jerusalem is Increasingly Warry of Erdogan's Turkey", *The Jewish Chronicle*, July 19, 2026; Yana Suryadnaya, "Erdogan Threatens to invade Israel 'just like we entered Karabakh and Libya'", *i24News*, July 18, 2024; Anika van Koningsveld, "'May Allah destroy Israel', Erdogan says in Eid al-Fitr prayers", *JNS*, March 30, 2025.

[12] Caroline Cox and John Eibner, *Ethnic Cleansing in Progress: War in Nagorno Karabakh*, Zurich, 1993, p.19.

geographically and evolve into a more robust political, military and potentially military entity, with Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev pressing for such militarization."[13]

Now we come to the persecution of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Superficially, it appears to be a domestic Armenian church-state squabble – albeit a serious one, in which an increasingly authoritarian, lawless state is using its coercive powers against the Church, not to mention the country's political opposition.

In fact, this persecution is intrinsically connected with Turkey and Azerbaijan's efforts to jointly extend their strategic depth. So tight are the bonds between these two Turkic states that Erdogan and his Azerbaijani counterpart, Ilham Aliyev, routinely speak of the two countries as a "one nation, two states" condominium. When it comes to asserting supremacy over Armenia's Christians, Turkey and Azerbaijan work as a unit.

The persecution, though handled by the Armenian government led by by Nikol Pashinyan, is driven by these two Turkic Muslim powers. The situation is not altogether unlike how Soviet leaders in Moscow used Armenian politicians in Yerevan to persecute the church during the communist era.

The suppression and ultimate eradication of Armenian Christian communities has been a dynamic at work in Azerbaijan, as in Turkey, since the former became a sovereign state in 1918. Since then, substantial Armenian Christian communities in Nakhichevan, Sumgait, Kirovabad, Baku and Nagorno Karabakh have vanished. In Nakhichevan, the demise of the substantial Armenian Christian minority was achieved over decades through onerous administrative measures and social discrimination during Soviet rule. Massacres triggered the mass exodus of Armenian Christians from Kirovabad, Sumgait, and Baku as the Soviet Union was collapsing. The ethno-religious cleansing of Armenian Christians from Nagorno Karabakh was a process that took place in three stages: The first Karabakh War (1988-1994), the second Karabakh War (2020), and an Azerbaijani military attack following a nine-month blockade of the Armenian population (2023).

Azerbaijan has emerged militarily victorious over Armenia. It did so with the support of Turkey, which included bringing thousands of jihadists from Syria to fight.[14] Not only did Azerbaijan complete the eradication of Christian communities inside its borders, but it also continues to occupy swathes of borderland territory belonging to the Republic of Armenia and to hold twenty Armenian Christian hostages in Baku.[15] The occupied land and the hostages are retained as leverage as Azerbaijan dictates conditions for the signing of a capitulation treaty with Armenia. Aliyev has already staked a claim on Armenia by repeatedly referring to it as 'Western Azerbaijan' and pursuing the settlement of hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis there. [16]

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[13] Emil Ardaliani, "Turkey Reshapes the Organization of Turkic States", *Marana Magazine*, June 16, 2026.

[14] Fabrice Balanche, "Syrian mercenaries against Karabakh," fabricebalanche.com, 23 April 2023.

[15] "Free the Nagorno Karabakh hostages," *Christian Solidarity International*, www.csi-int.org.

[16] Robin Fabbfro, "Aliyev Says Yerevan 'historically' Azerbaijani," *OC Media*, December 22, 2022.

The goal of the Turkish-Azeri condominium is the *de facto* integration of a de-nationalized Republic of Armenia into its sphere of influence. For the most part, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is complying with this program. As the prime minister has often publicly stated, he fears that the alternative is a war that will end Armenian statehood. [17]

The Armenian Apostolic Church stands in the way of this project for subjugating Armenia to the Turco-Islamist supremacism that prevails in both Turkey and Azerbaijan. As a result, in the aftermath of the ethnic cleansing of Nagorno Karabakh, the Church itself has come under attack.

In May 2025, the head of the Church, Catholicos Karekin II, addressed a World Council of Churches-sponsored conference in Bern, Switzerland. The Catholicos explicitly condemned Azerbaijan's and Turkey's wars of aggression against Nagorno Karabakh, the forcible displacement of its Armenian Christian population, the holding of hostages in Baku, the seizure of Armenian borderlands, and the destruction of Armenian spiritual and cultural heritage.[18] Turkey and Azerbaijan were incensed, but left it to Armenia's Prime Minister to lead the assault against the Church.[19]

Immediately afterward, Pashinyan began demanding the replacement of the Catholicos and a "reform" of the Church. His government indicted and imprisoned archbishops, bishops and priests. The charges against these clergy range from terrorism and coup plotting at one end of the spectrum to planting a marijuana joint and "obstructing a judicial act" at the other. The Catholicos himself has been charged with the latter crime, and banned from traveling abroad. At the present time, fourteen churchmen are facing criminal charges of one sort or another.[20] Pashinyan has also set up a committee of ten renegade church leaders to press for the removal of the Catholicos and lead an uncanonical reform process in the Church. His pattern of persecution bears many striking resemblances to that undertaken by the Bolsheviks - so far, minus the murder.

A comprehensive account of this assault against the Armenian Apostolic Church can be found in: John Eiber, Joel Veldkamp and Peter Flew*, A Church Under siege: Armenia's Unlawful Campaign to Silence the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church*, Aram Manoukian Institute, August 18, 2026.

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[17] Arshaluys Barseghyan, "Pashinyan claims Armenia faces war if opposition wins parliamentary election," *OC Media*, 20 March 2026.

[18] World Council of Churches, Address of His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians at the conference "The Preservation of the Armenian Spiritual, Cultural and Historical Heritage of Nagorno-Karabakh" in Bern, Switzerland, 27 May 2025.

[19] "Pashinyan and Baku Target Armenian Church Leadership," *Oragark*, June 13, 2025.

[20] The Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin II, Archbishop Nathan Hovhannisian, Archbishop Haigazun Hajarian, Archbishop Bagrat Salstanyan, Archbishop Mikael Ajapahyan, Archbishop Arshak Khachatryan, Bishop Vahan Hovhannesian, Bishop Moushegh Babayan, Bishop Hovnan Hakobyan, Rev. Fr. Moves Sahakyan, Rev. Fr. Garegin Arsenyan, and Deacon Hrayr.

Last February, I had the privilege of visiting Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan in prison in Yerevan – the same prison where his namesake, Archbishop Bagrat Vardazarian, was held by Stalin's NKVD before being executed in 1937.

Archbishop Bagrat knew exactly why he was in prison. As he told Vice President Vance in a letter CSI delivered for him, he was in prison for bringing "my Christian faith and testimony into the public arena, in the hope that the Armenian nation and state remain true to their historic Christian tradition at a time of national crisis."[21]

Unfortunately, Archbishop Bagrat's letter was not heeded. To say that the United States and its western partners have turned a blind eye to all this is no overstatement. The same is true of threats facing Christians in Syria and other regions now within Turkey's strategic reach. American policymakers like Ambassador Tom Barrack seem quite content to hand management of the greater Middle East over to Turkey, in the hope Turkey can be trusted to protect U.S. interests. If present trends and policies remain in place, even more Christian communities in the immense Turkish-Azerbaijani sphere of influence will be destroyed or wither away.

Needless to say, this outcome would be a world-historical tragedy for Christianity and for international religious freedom. But we would be wrong to reduce this challenge to a problem of "mere" human rights principles, or to imagine that such a calamity for religious freedom could take place with no real implications for U.S. interests.

Turkey's ambitions are distinctly at odds with U.S. interests. U.S. policymakers may value the security and trade dividends its alliance with Turkey brings, especially given the current conflict with Russia. But the U.S. will come to regret abetting the rise of Turkey as a global power. The turbocharging of the ideologies of Muslim supremacism that would result would cause lasting damage to American interests.

The U.S. can prevent this outcome by re-energizing its support for religious freedom in Turkey's sphere of influence, and prioritizing the survival of beleaguered Christians and religious minorities in its policymaking.

If the United States has the will to place higher priority on religious freedom and begins to see some value in those persecuted for their Christian faith or identity, I have no doubt, it has all the necessary tools to halt their further erosion.

Thank you.

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[21] "Jailed archbishop appeals to Vance on visit to Armenia, Azerbaijan," *Christian Solidarity International*, February 10, 2026.