

Aram Hamparian

Executive Director
Armenian National Committee of America

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Violence Outside the Turkish Ambassador's Residence:
The Right to Peaceful Protest

Thank you Chairman Rohrabacher and Ranking Member Meeks for this opportunity to testify about the May 16th attack by Turkish President Erdogan's bodyguards against peaceful protesters outside the Turkish Ambassador's residence.

I participated in this peaceful protest at Sheridan Circle and was witness to this brutal assault on Americans and American values.

I personally saw unprovoked attacks by President Erdogan's bodyguards and others against civilians protesting the Turkish government's policies. The Turkish President's security detail was large, clearly well-trained, and extremely violent - kicking and punching protesters even after they had fallen to the ground defenseless and, in at least one case, unconscious. I did my best to help the injured and stayed with many of them later that evening while they were being cared for at the George Washington University Hospital's emergency room.

Live footage that I filmed for the Armenian National Committee of America Facebook page served as source video for CNN, the Associated Press, and other major media outlets. Our viral video spread news of this incident around the world and, along with excellent video and reporting by the Voice of America and others, helped place a global spotlight upon the Erdogan regime's increasingly violent efforts to suppress dissent, both at home and now, increasingly, abroad. Your leadership in educating your Congressional colleagues and the American public about this outrage is deeply appreciated.

At the time of the incident I felt certain that it was an orchestrated attack, launched on orders from above. Video evidence I have reviewed subsequent to the violence, including a frame-by-frame analysis by the Washington Post and an audio analysis by the Daily Caller, confirm my conviction that this attack was, in fact, launched at the direction of President Erdogan.

At the time, I offered live, on-the-scene comments. While rushed and shared in a stressful setting, my words then reflect my views today:

"This is the very type of intolerance that has come to predominate in Turkey, and it is now been exported here. I was here. I saw every bit of this. I saw a group of peaceful protestors in Sheridan Circle - there is grassy area across the street from Turkish Ambassadors residence - they were protesting, exercising their Constitutional right to speak their mind, to hold signs, to share their opinion, to express their views."

"They were rushed from across the street by a group of - a pro Erdogan crowd - broke through the police lines, attacked just literally anybody within reach, with their fists and anything else they could get a hold of, and they beat as many people as they could, they left many bloodied, many have been taken to the hospital. This is exactly the type of violence you see in Ankara and they're exporting it here. They're exporting it here. I'm going to repeat myself: It's one thing for the Turkish government to do that to its own citizens, and it's a terrible thing. It's another thing for us, as Americans, to see that exported to the United States, and it was exported to right here to the nation's capital. Right here, blocks from the White House!"

The fact that Erdogan would act in such a brazen and brutal manner against Americans during a high-profile visit to Washington, DC offers a chilling insight into the depths of violence his forces visit every day upon those in Turkey who - far from the media spotlight - dare to dissent against his despotic rule.

Last Tuesday's aggression by the Turkish government at Sheridan Circle is clearly part of an escalating and very troubling pattern. Having been allowed by U.S. Presidents - past and present - to enforce its gag-rule against honest U.S. remembrance of the Armenian Genocide, the Turkish government is now openly and unapologetically exporting its intolerance and violence to America.

Past incidents involving violence by President Erdogan's bodyguards include a 2011 attack on a United Nations security detail and also a March, 2016, assault on protesters and journalists outside the Brookings Institute here in Washington, DC. I took part in last year's Brookings protest and witnessed first-hand the violence visited by President Erdogan's security on people gathered, upon our internationally respected Embassy Row, to exercise their Constitutional rights.

President Erdogan is acting with remarkable arrogance and absolute disdain for our country, open disrespect for our police, and outright contempt for the principles that inspire and guide our democracy. The news that the Turkish Foreign Ministry has filed an official protest with U.S. Ambassador John Bass over the conduct of U.S. law enforcement offices is as outrageous as it is offensive.

By way of background, our protest in Sheridan Circle followed an early, larger demonstration held across the street from the White House in Lafayette Park. The ANCA co-hosted this protest, along with other civil society groups concerned about a broad array of Turkish violations of human rights, humanitarian standards, press freedoms, and international law.

Our Facebook event page was titled, "Protest Against The Erdogan Dictatorship," and invited supporters to "Join supporters of human rights, religious liberty, and regional peace at a rally outside the White House (in Lafayette Park) during President Trump's May 16th meeting with Turkish President Erdogan. Among the issues listed on this page were: Erdogan's post-coup consolidation of authoritarian power; mass arrests of the HDP leadership; vast purge of his political opposition; arrest of record numbers of journalists; restrictions on religious freedom and worship; Wikipedia ban and social media crackdown; aggression against Kurds in Syria and Iraq; anti-American rhetoric and actions; continued military occupation of Cyprus; obstruction of justice for genocide of Armenians, Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs and Greeks, and; illegal economic blockade of Armenia.

Among those protesting alongside human rights advocates, Armenians, Kurds, Greeks, and others at Lafayette Park was a religious freedom group seeking Turkey's release of Pastor Andrew Brunson, a U.S. citizen from North Carolina who, after leading a Christian ministry in Izmir for more than two decades, has, since October of 2016, been unjustly imprisoned in Turkey on trumped up charges.

Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member, I very much appreciate the opportunity to share my testimony with you today and look forward to answering any questions.