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**Before the Committee on International Affairs
Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia and Emerging Threats
U.S. House of Representatives
Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) Chairman**

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

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Freedom of speech and freedom of assembly are among the most precious rights that belong to American citizens and to our neighbors from abroad who have taken up residence in our beloved country.

The right to speak freely -- and to bear witness by assembling in public -- are prerogatives that have allowed the United States to make its own moral progress on issues such as civil rights and equality.

As Americans, we like to think that these rights are universal, and that they should not be subject to evasion or avoidance by foreign governments that disrespect their own people.

Indeed, in 1948, both the United States of America and Turkey voted in the U.N. General Assembly to adopt the historic Universal Declaration of Human Rights, guaranteeing the "right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association" (UDHR article 20) and the "right to freedom of opinion and expression" (UDHR article 19).

Yet last week, on May 16, there was a dreadful episode of violence in which protesters assembled at Sheridan Circle, in front of the residence of the Turkish ambassador, were subjected to gratuitous and outrageous beatings by persons who were apparently part of the security detail of President Erdogan.

There is no excuse for this. Any security concerns on the part of the Turkish delegation could have been handled by notifying the Metropolitan Police Department and seeking their assistance. Instead, the videotape seems to indicate that members of the Turkish security detail, dressed in plain clothes, left the ambassador's residence and crossed the street to assault

demonstrators on the roundabout of Sheridan Circle, including by throwing metallic objects and beating them with sticks.

This is completely unacceptable on any occasion, but particularly during a state visit in which two countries are supposed to discuss serious issues. It is eerie, in the extreme, to see a photograph of President Erdogan peering out the window at the continuing violence, with no apparent attempt to stop the outrage.

These dastardly events are even more eerie and loathesome in light of the location of the attack. It was 41 years ago, on September 21, 1976, in the same area of Sheridan Circle, that a car bomb was exploded by Chilean agents seeking to assassinate political dissident Orlando Lettelier and his associate Ronni Moffet. Both Lettelier and Moffet were killed.

I am an admirer of the longer ambitions of Turkey, with Ataturk's creation of a secular state and adoption of modern methods of education and governance. There have been times when critics could object to how some other countries in Europe, including Germany, were reluctant to allow resident Turks to become citizens. Turkey has been an important partner of the United States in strategic matters, including fighting terrorism. Istanbul is a destination of choice for thousands of American tourists, and is a popular place to change planes on longer journeys to Asia.

But this "state visit" was a disaster, and must be acknowledged as such by the government of Turkey. The deliberate fomenting of violence and chaos was wholly inappropriate – and was in fact gravely shocking – for any serious political leader. It will scare off the very tourists that one might wish to attract to see the wonders of Turkey's Hagia Sophia and Topkapi Palace. And it is a blow against Turkish-Americans and the Turkish people.

As a former U.S. member of the United Nations Human Rights Committee, sitting in Geneva and New York over the course of eight years, as a former vice chair of the NGO known as "Freedom House", as a former federal prosecutor, and as an American citizen, I must decry this breach of the peace and the injuries caused to innocent civilians by this maladroit and unnecessary episode. U.S.-Turkish relations are too important to be eroded by stupidity like this.