

CASE STUDIES

Turkey



Former Turkish prime minister, and current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan addresses Kosovo citizens at a rally in Pristina. Image credit: Samir Yordamovic/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images.

The Turkish state's current campaign of transnational repression is remarkable for its intensity, its geographic reach, and the suddenness with which it escalated. Since the coup attempt against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in July 2016, the regime has pursued its perceived enemies in at least 31 different host countries spread across the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. The campaign is also notable for its heavy reliance on **renditions**, in which the government and its intelligence agency persuade the targeted states to hand over individuals without due process, or with a slight fig leaf of legality. Freedom House catalogued 58 of these renditions since 2014. No other perpetrator state was found to have conducted such a large number of renditions, from so many host countries, during the coverage period—and the documented total is almost certainly an undercount.

Ankara's campaign has primarily targeted people affiliated with the movement of religious leader Fethullah Gülen, which the government blames for the coup attempt. Recently, however, the effort has expanded, applying the same tactics to Kurdish and leftist individuals. As Turkey has shifted toward a more consolidated authoritarianism under Erdoğan, with overwhelming power concentrated in the presidency, its practice of transnational repression has grown more extreme.

Before the coup attempt

Prior to 2016, Turkey's government had increasingly sought to use its diaspora for political ends, but it did not engage in extensive transnational repression activities. Under Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), which held power

beginning in the early 2000s, the government viewed Turks living abroad both as a potential source of domestic political support and as a resource for advancing its foreign policy priorities.²⁷⁰ But stark divisions within the diaspora—reflecting divisions within Turkey between Turkish nationalists and Kurdish nationalists, and between leftists and Islamists, among others—were exacerbated by the state’s more overt politicization of such communities. These rifts sometimes erupted into street clashes, and Kurdish and leftist activists in particular reported feeling threatened by the state.²⁷¹

The threats were not necessarily imaginary. In January 2013, three Kurdish exiles, including a cofounder of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), an outlawed militant group, were murdered at a Kurdish cultural center in Paris, France. A Turkish man who was arrested following the killing died in custody before he could stand trial, leaving allegations that he had been an agent of Turkey’s National Intelligence Organization (MIT) unresolved.²⁷²

There were also signs that Turkey’s international posture was changing as President Erdoğan consolidated power, especially after 2013. As he pivoted away from his formerly moderate image and toward hard-line Turkish nationalism, the Turkish government strengthened its ties to overseas nationalist groups like the Osmanen Germania biker gang, which was accused of spying on and threatening Turkish exiles, and which German authorities banned in 2018.²⁷³ Turkey’s Directorate of Religious Affairs, commonly known as the Diyanet, which oversees imams and mosques for the Turkish diaspora, also became an instrument for surveilling exiles.²⁷⁴

Rapid escalation after the coup attempt

The failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, triggered a transformation in Turkey’s use of transnational repression. Almost immediately after a night of violence in which coup plotters in the Turkish military killed more than 250 people but failed to seize power, Ankara initiated a “global purge” that mirrored its domestic crackdown.²⁷⁵ Both operated on the basis of guilt by association, condemning people for their real or suspected connections to the Gülen movement, often with little effort to link them directly to the coup attempt itself. The result is that many targets of renditions have been **teachers or education administrators** who worked at schools that the Gülen movement runs around the world.²⁷⁶

The main tactics of the global campaign have been mobility controls, detentions, and illegal renditions. Turkey’s

government says it has returned 116 people from 27 countries in connection with the coup attempt.²⁷⁷ In a letter to the Turkish leadership in May 2020, UN experts referred to “at least 100 individuals ... subjected to arbitrary arrests and detention, enforced disappearance and torture.” In its own research, Freedom House was able to identify 58 people rendered from 17 countries. Family members of the victims, in addition to dozens of people rendered in mass cases who have not been individually identified in public sources, likely make up the difference between this number and the Turkish government’s statements.

From the perspective of the Turkish state, all of these people are legitimate counterterrorism targets. After the Gülen movement and the AKP split politically in 2013, but long before the coup attempt, the government designated the movement a terrorist organization, dubbing it the “Fethullahist Terror Organization” or “FETÖ” and ascribing to it a variety of far-fetched plots. The designation is now embedded in Turkish law and practice, continuing a long history of abuse of the terrorism label in the country. At the international level, in imitation of Interpol’s color-coded notification system, Ankara has released its own list entitled “Terör Arananlar,” or “Most Wanted Terrorists,” which includes about a thousand suspects. Most are alleged to be affiliated with the PKK, but others are Gülen movement members, members of minor leftist groups, and in a handful of cases, members of Islamist militant groups like the Islamic State.²⁷⁸ Adopting the United States’ terminology, the progovernment English-language newspaper *Daily Sabah* regularly features articles on the campaign in a section of its website called “The War on Terror.”²⁷⁹ All 110 of the physical transnational repression cases that Freedom House catalogued as having been perpetrated by the Turkish state involved accusations of terrorism.

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Turkey’s top officials openly claim credit for the kidnapping offensive against the Gülen movement, and praise the role of the MIT in the renditions.²⁸⁰ State media articles describe

MIT's direct involvement in multiple abductions, as in Sudan in 2017.²⁸¹ An investigation by European journalists linked aircraft used in the operations to front companies connected to MIT.²⁸² As President Erdoğan said in a speech after the abduction of six teachers from Kosovo in March 2018, “Wherever they may go, we will wrap them up and bring them here.”²⁸³

Mobility controls

Aside from renditions, the most important tool of Turkish transnational repression has been **mobility controls**. The authorities canceled more than 230,000 passports after the coup attempt in a bid to confine suspected opponents within Turkey and limit mobility for those already outside the country. The government also reported as lost or stolen an unknown number of passports. Gülen movement members abroad reported being unable to renew passports or have passports issued for children at Turkish consulates, meaning they would have to return to Turkey and face the risk of arrest. Although tens of thousands of passport cancellations were later officially rescinded, the process was marred with errors, and some of the affected individuals continued to encounter problems when using passports to travel. Canceled passports in turn created opportunities for detention during travel, and the detainees could then be extradited or rendered back to Turkey.

The Turkish government has tried to exploit Interpol to target exiles. Following the coup attempt, it allegedly tried to “batch” upload some 60,000 names onto the agency's notification system.²⁸⁸ German chancellor Angela Merkel denounced these tactics in August 2017, arguing that Turkish “misuse” of the Interpol system had become unacceptable.²⁸⁹ Ankara's flagrant abuse may have resulted in policy changes in some areas, though Interpol has not officially commented on the issue. Romanian court documents denying an extradition to Turkey in July 2019 appear to indicate that Interpol had created a policy to set aside requests based on the coup attempt as a violation of its rules against politically motivated requests.²⁹⁰

Interpol notifications nonetheless remained a useful tool, leading to the detentions of German-Turkish writer Doğan Akhanli and Swedish-Turkish journalist Hamza Yalçın in August 2017, and the unlawful deportations of two individuals accused of membership in the PKK from Serbia and Bulgaria. Due to the opacity of Interpol, and also to the fact that notices entered into the global system may persist in national systems even after they are revoked, it is difficult to determine whether the organization has genuinely dealt with the problem of politically motivated requests originating in Turkey. At a minimum, it is clear that Interpol notices continue to result in detentions of Turkish citizens around the world, including in cases where the request is likely related to the coup attempt. As of fall 2020, Turkish citizens associated with the Gülen movement continued to be detained in locations as far away as Panama, sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia.²⁹¹

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A few of the renditions, including one involving a group from Azerbaijan, appear to be classic abductions—people were bundled into cars on the street and then reappeared in Turkey with no procedures. But most have entailed the corruption and co-optation of host country institutions: local police or security services arrest Turkish citizens, who are then held in detention for a short period before being secretly transferred to Turkish custody and immediately taken to Turkey on Turkish aircraft. In the best-documented cases, there has been a thin veneer of legal procedure, as when Kosovar authorities revoked the residency permits of six Turkish schoolteachers and then declared them a national security threat and swiftly transferred them to Turkish custody. The operations are often clumsy. In Kosovo, one of the six men arrested and rendered to Turkey the same day was not on the original list—he was a different Turkish teacher with the same first name as the intended target.²⁸⁴ In Mongolia, the attempted rendition of a school administrator sparked protests across the country, leading to his release and a crisis for the Mongolian government, which was seen as aiding the attempt.²⁸⁵

Ankara's aggressive campaign has had significant local repercussions. In Kosovo, the head of the intelligence agency was forced to resign after the March 2018 renditions.²⁸⁶ Following a similar set of renditions in Moldova, the head of that country's intelligence service was convicted and given a suspended sentence for his involvement.²⁸⁷ In at least these two cases, there were accusations that the Turkish government received high-level political support for the operations, but that the intelligence chiefs were blamed instead.

A widening scope

Although the Gülen movement has borne the brunt, Ankara's transnational repression campaign has widened beyond it. Can Dündar, then editor in chief of the major secularist daily *Cumhuriyet*, left the country for Germany in June 2016 after being sentenced to prison for leaking national security information in an article about Turkish arms shipments to Syria—on the same day an assailant tried to shoot him outside the courtroom. Since going into exile, Dündar has faced numerous threats. He and several other Turkish journalists in Germany have received protection from the German authorities.²⁹² In September 2020, the Turkish state moved to seize Dündar's assets in Turkey in connection with his conviction.²⁹³

Other recent incidents underscore the expansion of the **rendition** tactic to non-Gülenist targets. In March 2018, Ayten Öztürk was detained at an airport in Beirut, Lebanon, and held for five days before being handed over to Turkish officials. She was jailed in Turkey for five months without access to a lawyer, during which time she alleges she was

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tortured. Öztürk is accused of being linked to the left-wing Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front (DHKP-C).²⁹⁴

In September 2020, Isa Özer, a former local candidate of the largely Kurdish and left-wing Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), was rendered without due process from Odesa, Ukraine, to Turkey. The operation appeared very similar to the renditions of two Gülen movement members from Ukraine in 2018—there was almost no time between detention and handover, and no clear legal process.²⁹⁵ Like thousands of other members of the BDP and its sister Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), Özer is accused of PKK membership.