

Transnational Repression: a Threat to Rights and Security in the United States Written Testimony

By Enes Kanter Freedom

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Thank you, Chairman Pfluger, Ranking Member Magaziner, and members of the Committee for giving me the opportunity to testify today on the very important issue of Transnational Repression.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's long arm has reached tens of thousands of Turkish citizens abroad while Turkey has been experiencing a deepening human rights crisis since a coup attempt on July 15, 2016. The Turkish government has been carrying out an extraordinary campaign of transnational repression against its critics overseas since the failed coup.

The State Department's 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices in Turkey reported that the Turkish government increasingly coordinated with other authoritarian states to forcibly transfer more than 100 Turkish nationals to Turkey since the 2016 coup, and more than 40 individuals were put through abduction, rendition, and forcible return.

Turkey's campaign has mostly targeted people affiliated with the Gulen movement. The movement is a globally respected faith-based civil society inspired by Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen, focusing on promoting interfaith dialogue and education throughout the world.

The latest annual human rights report on Turkey by the US Department of State sets out violations by Turkey including 'politically motivated retaliation against individuals located outside the country' and 'kidnappings and transfers without due process of alleged members of the Gulen movement'.

Turkish intelligence abducted Selahattin Gulen who was a teacher in Kenya, and Orhan Inandi who was the chairman of a successful school network in Kyrgyzstan. They were abducted and faced torture in prison. They published his pictures on Turkish media with a broken arm. Most recently they abducted Koray Vural who was a businessman in Tajikistan. The list goes on and on, as the reports say more than 100 individuals abducted by the Turkish intelligence faced torture in prison.

Turkey is also pressuring other countries to close many successful math and science academies. As the State Department reported on the Human rights country report in 2022, The government applied bilateral pressure on other governments to secure their assistance with renditions without full due process and couched such requests as cooperation on countering terrorism. Some observers attributed the abrupt closure of a popular Gulen-affiliated school in Albania in September with pressure from the Turkish government.

A letter sent to the Turkish government in 2020 by the responsible UN Special Rapporteur condemned "the systematic practice of state- sponsored extraterritorial abduction and forcible return of Turkish citizens from many countries."

In this letter, UN representatives stated that victims were first spied upon in the host country and then abducted: "Victims remain missing or incommunicado for weeks before being deported. During this time, they are often subjected to pressure, torture, and humiliation to pressure them into consenting to be taken to Turkey or into confessions for trial in Turkey. They are denied access to medical care and legal

aid, and their families are not informed. Victims report repeated torture by intelligence officers, mainly sleep deprivation, beatings, waterboarding, and electric shocks." While Turkish government neither denies nor hides the abductions, these acts are publicly promoted and glorified by government- led media, and the victims are presented in handcuffs before disappearing.

Between 2014 and 2023, Freedom House recorded 112 incidents of physical transnational repression against journalists perpetrated by 26 governments. Turkey is one of the leading ones.

A Turkish journalist interviewed by Freedom House experienced the closure of US bank accounts, likely due to empty terrorism accusations from the Turkish government. There are dozens of people who live in the US and their accounts are still closed.

People whose names appear on the published lists have faced various repercussions including the freezing or closure of their accounts, negative credit scores and various other personal and financial difficulties in Western countries.

As the reports mention, after 2016, Erdogan's regime started to arrest everyone who was in opposition. In one day more than 2 million people labeled as terrorists in Turkey. Then I began to call out human rights violations by President Erdogan in my home country. The Turkish government asked the US government to extradite me, canceled my passport, put my name on Interpol list, imprisoned my father, and set a \$500,000 bounty on my head.

During a 2017 visit to Indonesia, I was nearly kidnapped by the local government officials with intentions to send me back to Turkey. With the help of a good local officer, I was able to get out of the country right away. Later that year, I hardly escaped from police officers at the Romanian airport that the Turkish government sent after me. They tried to arrest me and send me back to Turkey. Thankfully Senator Lankford got involved and helped me to fly back to the US.

In 9 years, I received 12 arrest warrants and countless death threats. They tried to attack me in front of a mosque in Boston. They run social media campaigns against me so their fanatics could harass me or attack me when they see me. They pressured American universities, NGOs and political groups to cancel their events with me.

Sadly, all these are happening because of a so called NATO ally. Instead of protecting and supporting democracy and human rights in the country or abroad, they became an enemy of democracy and human rights.

7 years after having my Turkish citizenship revoked, I became an American citizen. While becoming a citizen, I changed my last name to Freedom and dedicated my whole life to defend freedom.

I'm very grateful to the members of the Congress for inviting me to hear and allowing me to share my story and the story of millions.