



Turkey's Post-Coup Crackdown, 10 Years on

A decade's legacy



About the Stockholm Center for Freedom

The Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF) is a non-profit advocacy organization that promotes the rule of law, democracy and human rights with a special focus on Turkey.

SCF was set up by a group of journalists who were forced to live in self-exile in Sweden against the backdrop of a massive crackdown on press freedom in Turkey.

SCF is committed to serving as a reference source by providing a broader picture of rights violations in Turkey, monitoring daily developments, documenting individual cases of the infringement of fundamental rights and publishing comprehensive reports on human rights issues.

SCF is a member of the Alliance Against Genocide, an international coalition dedicated to creating the international institutions and the political will to prevent genocide.

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1. Introduction

Ten years after a coup attempt on July 15, 2016, the sweeping crackdown launched in its aftermath continues to shape Turkey's politics, state institutions and civil society, with lasting consequences for human rights and the rule of law.

This report examines how measures introduced or expanded as part of the post-coup crackdown became embedded in Turkey's institutions and political life through the mass dismissal of public servants, the normalization of dehumanizing rhetoric, the suppression of independent media, torture and ill-treatment and the pursuit of perceived opponents abroad.

2. The Coup Attempt and its Aftermath

The coup attempt killed 251 people and wounded more than 2,000. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan immediately accused the faith-based Gülen movement of orchestrating it, an accusation the movement strongly denies. A decade later, key aspects of the coup, including the operational planning and chain of command, remain unresolved.

The Turkish government has targeted followers of the Gülen movement, inspired by the late Muslim cleric Fethullah Gülen, since corruption investigations in December 2013 implicated then-prime minister Erdoğan as well as some members of his family and inner circle. Erdoğan dismissed the probes as a Gülenist conspiracy, and his government designated the movement as a terrorist organization in May 2016, intensifying the crackdown after the coup attempt.

Speaking to a group of international journalists shortly after the abortive putsch, Gülen strongly denied the allegations and [called for the establishment of an international commission](#) to investigate who was behind the events of July 15.

Many military personnel later [testified](#) that they received mobile phone alerts warning of a possible terrorist attack and instructing them to report to their assigned units. The warnings appeared credible because personnel had been on heightened alert following a series of terrorist attacks in major Turkish cities, including the June 28 assault on İstanbul's Atatürk Airport. They said they reported in line with military protocol, unaware that they were being drawn into the coup attempt. Some believed they had been deliberately lured into a trap.

By the following day, authorities had begun mass detentions and suspensions across the military and judiciary. The country's top judicial board initially suspended 2,745 judges and prosecutors, after which detention warrants were issued for them. The number of judges and prosecutors dismissed in the ensuing

purge later rose to 4,006, while thousands of military personnel were detained or placed under investigation.

The state-run Anadolu news agency [published](#) images of detained generals and other senior officers with visible injuries, including bruised and bloodied faces, providing some of the earliest public evidence of abuse. Detainees later described widespread torture and ill-treatment, including beatings, sexual threats and denial of access to toilets and medical care.



Former Air Force commander Gen. Akın Öztürk and other senior Turkish military officers are seen in police custody in Ankara following the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016.

Despite the scale and lasting consequences of the coup attempt, Turkish authorities have not produced a comprehensive and transparent public investigation into what happened.

A parliamentary commission established to investigate the coup completed its work, but its [final report](#) was never published and its whereabouts are unknown. Then-chief of General Staff Gen. Hulusi Akar and then-intelligence chief Hakan Fidan did not testify before the commission or in related court proceedings. Journalists who examined unresolved aspects of the coup [faced prosecution](#).

Questions have also persisted over Fidan's [knowledge of unusual military activity](#) and his meetings with senior commanders before the coup attempt. In subsequent trials, courts largely rejected defendants' requests for additional evidence and forensic examinations that could have tested parts of the official account.

On July 21, 2016, the government declared a state of emergency that remained in force until July 19, 2018. Emergency decrees allowed the executive to impose sweeping measures [without effective parliamentary or judicial oversight](#), laying the legal foundation for mass dismissals, arrests, institutional closures and asset seizures.

Criminal prosecutions continued on a vast scale. According to [figures announced by Justice Minister Akın G rlek](#) on July 12, 2026, authorities have initiated legal proceedings against 720,338 people over alleged G len links since 2016 and secured convictions of 127,102. Investigations or trials involving another 83,404 people are ongoing, while 10,485 people accused or convicted of involvement in the coup attempt or membership in the movement are still in prison.

The government [closed](#) more than 2,000 educational institutions, including 15 universities, and 1,727 associations and foundations under emergency decrees. The overwhelming majority were alleged to have links to the G len movement, while authorities associated others with Kurdish, far-left or other groups designated as threats to national security.

Authorities also [seized the assets of 784 companies](#), valued at an estimated \$14 billion at the time of their takeover.

The coup attempt also marked the beginning of a broader political transformation. Constitutional amendments approved in a 2017 referendum replaced Turkey's parliamentary system with an executive presidency that took effect in 2018, expanding presidential authority and weakening institutional checks and balances.

Over time, mechanisms normalized during the post-coup crackdown were extended beyond alleged G len movement supporters to Kurdish politicians, journalists, lawyers, human rights defenders and other government critics. More recently, prosecutors have increasingly targeted figures from the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), including [elected mayors](#) and [senior party officials](#).

International indicators reflect the depth of Turkey's democratic and rule of law decline. At the end of 2025 Turkey was the source of [18,450 applications pending before the European Court of Human Rights](#), accounting for 34.5 percent of the court's total caseload. The [World Justice Project](#) ranked Turkey 118th among 143 countries in its 2025 Rule of Law Index, including 136th for constraints on government powers and 134th for fundamental rights. [Transparency International](#) ranked the country 124th among 182 countries in its 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index, while [Freedom House](#) classified it as "Not Free," with a score of 32 out of 100.

A decade later, fundamental questions about the events of July 15 remain unanswered, and thousands of related legal proceedings continue. The emergency measures introduced as a temporary response to the coup attempt have developed into a lasting system that transformed Turkey's institutions, weakened safeguards against executive power and expanded the state's capacity to suppress dissent and political opposition.

3. The Purge of Public Servants and Military Personnel

The mass dismissal of some 150,000 people from public institutions, including Turkey's cadre of judges and prosecutors, and the Turkish Armed Forces was one of the most consequential measures of Turkey's post-coup crackdown, destroying the lives of those dismissed and their families while fundamentally reshaping key state institutions and public life.

The dismissals were carried out mainly through emergency decrees issued during the two-year state of emergency, separate administrative decisions by public institutions and, after the state of emergency ended, temporary legal provisions allowing the process to continue.

Turkish authorities began mass dismissals immediately after the coup attempt, before criminal investigations into alleged links to the Gülen movement had been completed or, in many cases, even launched. The process bypassed the individualized review that allegations of membership in a terrorist organization would normally require and instead relied on broad and often vague criteria.



Academics for Peace demonstrate in support of colleagues dismissed from Turkish universities after signing a 2016 peace petition.

The campaign has primarily targeted people affiliated with the Gülen movement, but other government critics, such as the [Academics for Peace](#), a group of scholars dismissed for signing a peace petition critical of the government, have also faced similar pressure.

The first emergency decree containing dismissal lists was published in the Official Gazette six days after the state of emergency took effect. During emergency rule the government issued 32 emergency decrees, 12 of which included mass dismissals from the civil service.

According to official figures, 125,678 people were [dismissed](#) from public service under emergency decrees. Thousands of judges and prosecutors were separately removed by the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK), later renamed the Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSK), while the Turkish Armed Forces expelled 26,206 members, including 150 of the Turkish Armed Forces' 326 generals and admirals, through emergency decrees and administrative decisions. The purge also extended beyond public employment: Authorities [revoked](#) the teaching licenses of 22,474 private-school teachers over alleged links to the Gülen movement.

Rights groups say the actual number may have been considerably higher. The officially documented total does not include an unknown number of civil servants dismissed through separate administrative decisions, including removals carried out after the state of emergency ended. A law [introduced](#) while emergency rule was still in force and adopted shortly after it ended added a temporary provision to Decree Law No. 375 allowing public institutions to continue dismissing personnel for three years outside ordinary civil service procedures. The authority was [later extended](#) by one year. The government has never disclosed a consolidated figure for these dismissals.

The largest purges took place in the [Turkish National Police](#), where 34,636 employees were dismissed, and the Ministry of Education, which removed 34,393.

Critics say the purge also enabled the government to reshape key state institutions by removing experienced personnel deemed politically unreliable and replacing them with officials seen as loyal to the ruling party, further weakening the independence and professionalism of the civil service.

During the state of emergency many dismissals were carried out through lists published in the Official Gazette without prior individual hearings, and those affected often learned of their removal only after seeing their names on the lists. Dismissals made later through administrative decisions were not published in the same way.

The criteria used by authorities to establish alleged links to the Gülen movement became one of the most controversial aspects of the purge. Many of the same indicators used in criminal investigations and prosecutions for alleged membership in a terrorist organization were also relied on to dismiss public servants despite the absence in many cases of individualized evidence of criminal conduct. [International human rights organizations](#) and [Council of Europe bodies](#) criticized the government's reliance on vague indicators and lawful activities rather than individualized evidence of criminal conduct.

These criteria included ordinary activities such as having an account at [Bank Asya](#), a bank affiliated with the movement; sending children to schools viewed by authorities as linked to the movement; staying in movement-linked student houses or dormitories; subscribing to movement-linked publications, belonging to associations or labor unions viewed as connected to the movement; and [donating](#) to or volunteering for organizations later accused of ties to the movement.

Authorities also treated alleged use of [ByLock](#) as an indicator of Gülen links. The encrypted messaging app was once widely available on Apple's App Store and Google Play, but Turkish authorities claim it was used as a secret communication tool for movement supporters.



A view from the courtroom during the retrial of former teacher Yüksel Yalçınkaya (R) in Kayseri in central Turkey on September 12, 2024.

In 2023 the ECtHR ruled in [Yalçinkaya v. Türkiye](#) that the use of ByLock and other alleged Gülen-linked activities as grounds for terrorism convictions without an individualized assessment of knowledge and intent violated fundamental rights. The court found violations of the rights to a fair trial, freedom from punishment without law and freedom of association and said the problem was systemic, affecting thousands of similar cases.

The ECtHR reinforced the requirement of individualized criminal responsibility in its 2026 Grand Chamber judgment in [Yasak v. Türkiye](#), finding that Turkish courts had failed to establish that the applicant knew of the movement's alleged terrorist nature and intentionally participated in it. The [UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention](#) has likewise repeatedly found that Turkish authorities failed to explain how ordinary or previously lawful conduct constituted criminal activity or to provide individualized evidence linking detainees to violence or terrorism.

The Turkish government established the State of Emergency Procedures Review Commission (OHAL Commission) on January 23, 2017, as an appeals body under pressure from the Council of Europe in order to prevent tens of thousands of applications from reaching the ECtHR.

The commission consisted of seven members, including three appointed by the president, one by the justice minister, one by the interior minister and two by the Council of Judges and Prosecutors. Critics questioned the body's independence, noting that most members were appointed directly by political authorities.

The commission began reviewing applications on December 22, 2017. A total of 127,292 applications were submitted. By the time its mandate [ended](#) on January 22, 2023, the commission had approved 17,960 applications, or 14.1 percent, while rejecting 109,332.

The commission was widely criticized by international bodies for failing to provide an effective remedy against the dismissals. The [Venice Commission](#), the Council of Europe's advisory body on constitutional law, raised concerns about the commission's independence, procedural safeguards and the scope of its review, while the [European Commission](#), in its 2020 Turkey Report, expressed serious concerns about its ability to provide an effective remedy against dismissals.

Many applicants whose appeals were rejected had never faced criminal investigations, had received decisions of non-prosecution from prosecutors or had been acquitted in criminal cases. Despite this, their dismissals remained in place.

After unsuccessful appeals before the OHAL Commission, thousands of dismissed public servants later turned to administrative courts, Turkey's Constitutional Court and ultimately the ECtHR.

A key test case in this regard is Mehmet Candar and Others v. Türkiye, which the ECtHR [communicated](#) to the Turkish government in June 2026. The court requested observations on whether the post-coup dismissals were compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights, raising questions about the legality, foreseeability and proportionality of the measures.

In December 2025 the ECtHR [announced](#) that it had received a “substantial number” of applications from civil servants, judges, military personnel and other public officials dismissed after the 2016 coup attempt. The court said it would apply special administrative measures to process the new group of cases, reflecting the continued flow of post-coup dismissal complaints nearly a decade after the purge began.

Dismissed public servants faced consequences beyond the loss of employment. They were permanently banned from working in public service. Many had their passports, and in some cases those of family members, cancelled. Some were forced to leave public housing within 15 days, while the publication of their names in the Official Gazette exposed them to severe social stigma and difficulties finding employment.

The government also made it difficult for them to work formally in the private sector. Confidential codes were put on the database of Turkey’s Social Security Institution and Turkish Employment Agency about dismissed civil servants to deter potential employers. As a result, many purge victims have [had to work in uninsured jobs](#) with very little workplace safety. There have also been [several cases](#) where former public servants have died due to occupational accidents in physically demanding jobs.

While critics and international rights bodies have continued to raise concerns over due process, proportionality and the long-term impacts, the purge created a class of citizens subjected to continuing administrative and social exclusion despite the absence of a criminal conviction. Dismissals imposed without individualized procedures and the failure of the review process to provide effective redress have allowed measures imposed during the emergency to shape the lives of dismissed public servants and their families long after the emergency ended.

4. Torture and Ill-Treatment

Torture and ill-treatment in custody resurged dramatically over the past decade and especially since the July 15, 2016 attempted coup, initially affecting thousands of people detained in mass operations and subsequently becoming an entrenched feature of the country’s detention system. The failure of authorities to investigate allegations effectively has resulted in widespread impunity for the members of the security forces.

The abuse has primarily targeted people affiliated with the Gülen movement, but Kurdish detainees, leftists, protesters and other government critics have also been targeted.

In the immediate aftermath of the coup attempt, tens of thousands of people were detained on coup or terrorism charges, many of them held in improvised locations such as sports halls, stables and the corridors of courthouses.

The UN special rapporteur on torture, who visited the country in late 2016, [found](#) that “torture and other forms of ill-treatment were widespread” in this period, particularly at the time of arrest and in police and gendarmerie lock-ups.



Turkish military personnel detained after the failed coup attempt sit in their underwear with their hands bound behind their backs at the Gaffar Okkan Mounted Sports Facilities in Ankara on July 16, 2016.

Court testimony collected in the years that followed exposed the scale of the abuse. According to [multiple victims' statements in court](#), a police chief who called himself Azrael, the Angel of Death, oversaw two unofficial detention sites in Ankara — a sports hall belonging to the Turkish Volleyball Federation and a makeshift tent in the parking lot of Sincan Prison — where nearly 2,000 people were stripped, deprived of food and water, beaten, electrocuted and held in stress positions in 2016.

A medical doctor assigned to conduct examinations at a gymnasium converted into a detention center [described witnessing and recording](#) the torture of detainees there, while [CCTV recordings kept secret by the government](#) later corroborated the testimony of dozens of gendarmes who said they were beaten,

electrocuted, burned with acid and threatened with rape after surrendering at the Gendarmerie General Command headquarters.

Impunity was built into the legal framework from the outset. Decree Law No. 667, issued on July 23, 2016, granted sweeping protection to officials involved in coup investigations, and prosecutors repeatedly cited it when refusing to investigate torture complaints. Where prosecutions did proceed, penalties were often symbolic: An appeals court [fined a police officer](#) accused of torturing four villagers approximately \$450 and even deferred that payment for five years.



Lt. Col. Levent Türkkan, aide to Chief of General Staff Gen. Hulusi Akar, is pictured in uniform (L) and after being interrogated following the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016.

The abuse did not end with the state of emergency. The Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) [confirmed in two reports published in August 2020](#) the continued existence of ill-treatment and torture in Turkish detention facilities, along with informal questioning, restricted access to lawyers and a fundamentally flawed medical screening system. Turkey has meanwhile blocked the publication of the CPT's report on its 2016 post-coup visit; documents obtained by Nordic Monitor, a Stockholm-based investigative outlet run by Turkish journalists living in exile, [revealed the content of the censored report](#), which recorded detailed accounts of torture in prisons and detention centers.

People forcibly returned to Turkey in rendition operations were also subjected to torture during transfer and at secret detention sites. Court documents [revealed](#) that teacher Zabit Kişi, abducted from Kazakhstan in 2017, was beaten unconscious aboard the intelligence agency's rendition flight and then held for 108 days in a windowless, three-square-meter container at a black

site near Ankara Esenboğa Airport, where he said he was subjected to sexual abuse and torture, including electric shocks, fractured ribs and crushed toes.

Enforced disappearances, widely reported in Turkey during the 1990s, also reappeared after the coup attempt. Some 30 people, most of them alleged Gülen movement members, have [reportedly been abducted by Turkish intelligence](#) since 2016, many resurfacing in police custody in Ankara after absences of six to nine months. Gökhan Türkmen testified in February 2020 that he had been held incommunicado for 271 days at a black site run by the intelligence agency, where he was tortured and sexually abused, and that officials later visited him in prison to pressure him to retract his allegations. Yasin Ugan [told a court in June 2020](#) that he was tortured for six months with his head covered by a black plastic bag for most of that time. Former civil servant Yusuf Bilge Tunç, who disappeared in Ankara in August 2019, [remains missing](#).

Torture and degrading treatment have also persisted in prisons despite official denials. Strip-searches of inmates, both male and female, have been repeatedly documented, along with allegations of beatings and sexual abuse by prison staff. Caribe Gezer, who alleged she was beaten and sexually harassed by prison guards, [was found dead in her cell](#) in December 2021. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted a resolution in 2023 [naming Turkey among the countries](#) where credible reports suggest torture and ill-treatment tend to be systematic or widespread, along with Azerbaijan and Russia.

The available numbers also indicate the scale of the problem, although rights organizations use different reporting methods. The Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (TİHV) [received 781 applications](#) in 2023 alone from people alleging torture or ill-treatment, bringing the total over the preceding decade to 7,548. In a separate count, the Human Rights Association (İHD) [documented 5,312 people](#) subjected to torture or ill-treatment in the same year. Turkey's own Constitutional Court has in several cases ruled that detainees held over alleged Gülen links were tortured, awarding compensation and ordering investigations that rarely led to accountability.

Allegations of torture and ill-treatment also accompanied the mass protests that followed the March 2025 arrest of İstanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu. UN special rapporteurs [expressed serious concern](#) over allegations of disproportionate use of force and torture by police against demonstrators, and lawyers reported unlawful strip-searches of detained protesters. The World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) [placed Turkey in the second-highest risk tier](#) among 26 countries assessed in its 2025 Global Torture Index, citing widespread allegations of torture, unchecked police violence and institutional barriers that block accountability.

The government's obstruction of independent monitoring has also continued: It has withheld consent for publication of the last three CPT reports as well as a report by the UN Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture.

What began as mass abuse during the immediate post-coup period persisted through police violence, degrading prison practices, enforced disappearances and torture at secret detention sites. Legal immunity for perpetrators, ineffective investigations and the restrictions on independent monitoring have prevented accountability for these abuses.

5. Press Freedom

Turkey's independent media has been systematically dismantled since the coup attempt on July 15, 2016, as emergency-era mass imprisonment and outlet closures developed into a broader system of legal, regulatory, economic and digital control.

The government has employed a range of methods, including terrorism prosecutions, the summary closure of media outlets by emergency decrees, the cancellation of press cards, fines and broadcast bans imposed by the state broadcast regulator, the blocking of news websites and social media accounts, criminal liability for "disinformation" and continued pressure on journalists in exile.

The crackdown initially focused on journalists and media outlets accused of links to the Gülen movement but subsequently expanded to pro-Kurdish media, opposition-aligned broadcasters, leftist outlets and individual critical reporters.

In the aftermath of the coup attempt, the government [summarily shut down nearly 200 media outlets](#) under emergency decrees due to their alleged links to terrorism, while dozens of journalists were jailed on terrorism or coup-related charges. The press cards of hundreds of journalists [were cancelled](#), and by 2018 Turkey had become the world's biggest jailer of journalists. The Stockholm Center for Freedom's "Jailed and Wanted Journalists in Turkey" [database](#) has documented hundreds of journalists imprisoned, wanted, in exile or at large over the decade since the coup attempt.

Terrorism legislation has remained the principal legal instrument used against the press. Journalists have most frequently faced charges of "membership in a terrorist organization" or "disseminating terrorist propaganda," often based on their reporting. Journalists from the pro-Kurdish Özgür Gündem daily, which was shut down by emergency decree in 2016, [were still being sentenced](#) on propaganda charges in retrials nearly a decade later. Mass police operations against pro-Kurdish media outlets also recurred throughout the period including

the [detention of 11 journalists](#) from the Mezopotamya news agency and JINNEWS in 2022.

Legal pressure has been reinforced by the concentration of media ownership in pro-government hands. Most Turkish newspapers and television stations came under the control of government-aligned business allies, and according to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), [about 90 percent](#) of the country's national media outlets are now under government control.

The remaining independent outlets operate under constant regulatory threat. The Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), whose board is dominated by the ruling party, has repeatedly penalized critical broadcasters: In 2025 alone it [imposed 99 sanctions](#), fined broadcasters and digital platforms approximately \$5.3 million and ordered multi-day broadcast suspensions, with 87 percent of sanctions targeting the five stations most critical of the government. The pro-opposition TELE1 broadcaster was [put under government trusteeship](#) in October 2025, and its editor-in-chief was arrested on charges of espionage.

New legislation has expanded the legal tools used against journalists. Article 217/A of the penal code, known as the disinformation law, entered into force in October 2022 and calls for prison sentences of one to three years for spreading information authorities deem false. Press freedom organizations say the law has been [used to charge at least 83 journalists in 114 separate cases](#), while the Turkish Journalists Union reported that [more than 300 journalists faced prosecution](#) between April 2025 and April 2026, describing the abuses as part of an institutionalized regime of repression.

The March 2025 arrest of İstanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, Erdoğan's main political rival, triggered the most intense wave of media repression in years. Journalists covering the ensuing mass protests were detained and prosecuted. RTÜK threatened to revoke the licenses of networks that departed from official statements, while authorities blocked social media accounts and throttled internet bandwidth. [Foreign correspondents were also targeted](#): Swedish journalist Joakim Medin was detained upon arrival in Turkey, and BBC correspondent Mark Lowen was deported after being accused of posing a threat to public order.

Leaving the country has not put journalists beyond the government's reach. During Sweden's NATO accession process, Ankara made the extradition of journalists living in exile an explicit condition for ratifying membership, with Erdoğan [naming journalist Bülent Keneş](#), the former editor-in-chief of the shuttered Today's Zaman daily, as someone Sweden needed to hand over. Sweden's Supreme Court [blocked Keneş's extradition](#) in December 2022, citing the political nature of the case and the risk of persecution, and in 2025 Swedish courts [rejected Turkey's extradition request](#) for journalist Abdullah Bozkurt, ruling

that the accusations against him were based on his journalistic activities. Journalists in exile in Sweden, including Keneş, Bozkurt and Levent Kenez, [have also been targeted](#) by the pro-government Sabah daily, which published their home addresses and photographs of them taken covertly, while Turkish authorities have [restricted access inside Turkey to the social media accounts](#) of at least five prominent exiled journalists, including Can Dündar and Amberin Zaman.

RSF Secretary-General Thibaut Bruttin said in July 2026 that Turkey [had become a testing ground](#) for methods of suppressing independent journalism, including hostile takeovers of media outlets, campaigns to discredit journalists, preventive detentions and prolonged court cases, with some of these tactics later copied by other governments.

Turkey's international standing reflects the decade-long decline. The country [was ranked 163rd out of 180](#) in the 2026 World Press Freedom Index published by RSF, and Erdoğan has repeatedly appeared on RSF's list of ["press freedom predators."](#) Following a joint mission to Ankara in November 2025, eight leading international press freedom organizations, including the International Press Institute, the Committee to Protect Journalists and RSF, [warned that the state of the media posed a serious threat to democracy](#), describing the pressure on independent journalism as a "systemic siege."

Since the 2016 coup attempt, Ankara's emergency measures have developed into a permanent and adaptable system of media control. As independent journalism migrated from shuttered newspapers and broadcasters to online outlets, social media and operations abroad, the government extended its pressure to those spaces, leaving critical reporters vulnerable to prosecution, censorship and official retaliation.

6. Hate Speech and Dehumanization

The Turkish government's campaign of hate speech against the Gülen movement began after corruption investigations in 2013 and intensified dramatically after the abortive putsch, becoming an enduring feature of Turkey's political discourse.

The campaign has combined inflammatory rhetoric from President Erdoğan and senior officials with systematic amplification by pro-government media, impunity for those inciting hostility or violence against the movement and the selective use of insult, incitement and other speech-related charges against government critics.

The Gülen movement has remained the principal target of this campaign, with the government using dehumanizing language to portray its followers as an internal enemy to legitimize their persecution.

Erdoğan set the tone for the campaign. Since 2013 he has used roughly [240 slurs and insults](#), including “terrorists,” “traitors,” “vampires,” “leeches,” “tumor” and “virus,” and at one point declared that they had “no right to life.” As recently as July 2025, at a ceremony marking the ninth anniversary of the coup attempt, he [again described the movement as a “virus”](#) that Turkey had not yet completely removed and pledged to continue the campaign “without slack, without error.”



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

In the immediate aftermath of the coup attempt, pro-government and ultranationalist figures extended this rhetoric to the property and families of alleged movement members. At a pro-government “democracy vigil” in Istanbul’s Kısıklı neighborhood on July 22, 2016, Islamist preacher Metin Balkanlıoğlu [described property seized from the Gülen movement as “spoils of war”](#) and told the crowd to use it freely. In Sakarya then-Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) lawmaker Zihni Açıba [said a group that gathered outside military housing](#) on the night of the coup attempt shouted that the soldiers’ wives were “lawful” to them and demanded that the women be handed over. He said video and audio recordings of the incident existed.

In later years the campaign expanded from insults and threats to proposals for coercive treatment and calls for mass violence, disseminated through TV broadcasts and social media. In a 2020 appearance on the pro-government Akit TV, communications professor Muttalip Kutluk Özgüven [said followers who had](#)

[committed no crime should be sent to “rehabilitation camps”](#) for psychological treatment, adding that their bodies did not belong to them and that they were obligated to serve the state.

In an online discussion, pro-government commentator Furkan Bölükbaşı and other participants openly debated poisoning alleged Gülen followers in prisons, while another pro-Erdoğan commentator, Fatih Tezcan, [said](#) during a live broadcast that the government should massacre them all. None of the remarks resulted in prosecution.

The campaign was reinforced by state institutions and a pro-government media ecosystem that repeated official labels, presented as established fact, and marginalized dissenting accounts. A [Stockholm Center for Freedom \(SCF\) report](#) documented how government-aligned outlets launched a coordinated wave of dehumanizing coverage after Gülen’s death in October 2024, while authorities restricted more moderate voices. A [December 2025 report](#) by the Netherlands-based rights group Stichting Justice Square similarly concluded that hate speech against the movement had been institutionalized through state agencies, religious institutions and the media.

Other groups, including Kurds, Alevis, Syrian refugees, LGBT people, Christians, Jews and Armenians have at times also faced hostile or discriminatory rhetoric, though not with the same sustained, state-led intensity. In 2025 the Council of Europe’s anti-racism commission (ECRI) [warned](#) that hate speech and hate crimes were worsening in Turkey, citing Erdoğan’s description of LGBT people as a “virus of heresy,” spikes in anti-Armenian and anti-Greek rhetoric and a rise in anti-Semitic hate speech after October 2023.

Syrian refugees have been another prominent target. An [SCF report](#) documented how inflammatory rhetoric by politicians and media contributed to hostility toward Syrians living in Turkey under temporary protection, who at the time numbered roughly 3 million.

Despite repeated warnings from international organizations and human rights groups that such rhetoric fuels discrimination and violence, no meaningful corrective has emerged. The absence of accountability for explicit threats and calls for violence has allowed dehumanizing rhetoric to become normalized in Turkey’s public discourse.

7. Transnational Repression

Turkey’s post-coup crackdown has extended far beyond its borders, developing into one of the world’s most extensive systems of transnational repression, pursuing critics and perceived opponents across dozens of countries.

The Turkish government has employed a range of methods, including covert abductions and forcible returns, diplomatic surveillance and profiling, the misuse of extradition procedures and international policing mechanisms, restrictions on passports and consular services, financial blacklisting and pressure through state-backed religious and educational networks.

The campaign has primarily targeted people affiliated with the Gülen movement, although journalists, Kurdish activists, leftists and other government critics have also faced similar pressure abroad.

Turkey has carried out covert renditions in cooperation with foreign intelligence or law enforcement agencies in a number of countries. As of 2025 the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) had [publicly acknowledged](#) 128 separate operations to forcibly return people accused of links to the Gülen movement. Many were transferred outside formal extradition procedures and later reported arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, torture or other ill-treatment.



Mesut Kaçmaz with his wife and two daughters, who were abducted from their home in Pakistan in 2017 and forcibly returned to Turkey despite UN refugee protection and court orders barring their deportation.

In Pakistan in 2017 armed men seized educator Mesut Kaçmaz, his wife and their two teenage daughters at their home despite the family's UN refugee protection and court orders barring deportation. They were held incommunicado before being [forcibly returned to Turkey](#). The following year six Turkish educators were [abducted in Kosovo](#) and flown to Turkey without normal extradition proceedings, triggering a political crisis after it emerged that Kosovar security officials had acted without informing senior government leaders.

Similar operations were carried out in many other countries, including Cambodia, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. These and other early cases were documented by SCF in a [report on abductions, renditions and forcible returns](#).

International bodies have found serious rights violations in several rendition cases. The [UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention](#) concluded that the arrest, detention and forcible transfer of the six educators from Kosovo by Kosovar and Turkish agents were arbitrary and violated international human rights standards. The ECtHR separately found that [Moldova](#) and [Azerbaijan](#) violated the rights of Turkish nationals by circumventing extradition safeguards and carrying out extralegal transfers to Turkey.

Since the coup attempt, Turkish embassies and consulates have increasingly served as operational hubs for surveillance and profiling.

SCF's 2026 report, "[Weaponized Diplomacy: How Erdoğan Uses Turkish Missions for Transnational Repression](#)," found that diplomatic missions in 115 countries on five continents had compiled information on critics, schools, associations and businesses, with some profiles later transmitted to prosecutors in Turkey and used to open terrorism-related investigations.

Through consular restrictions, critics abroad could be denied documents, prevented from registering births or marriages, separated from relatives or exposed to prosecution upon returning to Turkey. Such administrative measures turned ordinary dealings with the Turkish state into a source of pressure.

Ankara also sought to internationalize domestic accusations through international policing mechanisms. A separate SCF [report](#) documented attempts to use INTERPOL notices, diffusions and travel-document databases against critics whose alleged offenses were political in nature.

Turkish authorities have also frozen the assets of hundreds of citizens living abroad under terrorism-financing legislation. SCF also [documented](#) how administrative asset-freeze lists affected people living abroad even in the absence of a criminal conviction. Those listed were subsequently flagged in commercial financial-risk databases with "non-conviction terrorism" labels, resulting in bank account closures, the denial of financial services and damage to their credit records.

State-backed institutions outside the diplomatic service and security apparatus reinforced the campaign. The Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet) used overseas mosque networks to [collect information on alleged Gülen followers](#), prompting investigations in several European countries. The Turkish Maarif Foundation, established in 2016, became the government's principal vehicle for taking over schools linked to the movement. By 2024, [232 schools in 21 countries](#) had been

transferred to the foundation, extending Ankara's control over education facilities formerly associated with the movement.

International organizations and foreign governments have repeatedly documented Turkey's use of transnational repression.

In 2020 four UN special rapporteurs sent a joint communication expressing serious concern over what they described as Turkey's "systematic practice of state-sponsored extraterritorial abductions and forcible returns" involving at least 100 Turkish nationals. The [UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention](#) has repeatedly concluded that Turkey and cooperating states were responsible for arbitrary detention and unlawful transfers.

The [US State Department](#), in its 2022 human rights report, pointed to Turkey's transnational pressure and identified its tactics. [Freedom House](#) counted 132 incidents of direct physical transnational repression by Turkey since 2014 and ranked it the [world's second most prolific perpetrator](#) in 2023. [Human Rights Watch](#) documented cooperation between MIT and foreign authorities in renditions. [Amnesty International](#) has issued urgent appeals warning that abducted individuals face a risk of torture upon return. [Germany's Office for the Protection of the Constitution](#) similarly reported in its 2025 annual report that MIT continued to target perceived opponents abroad, including Gülen movement supporters.

Turkey's overseas campaign has depended partly on the response of foreign governments. Where local authorities cooperated, perceived opponents were abducted or returned outside ordinary extradition procedures; where such operations were not possible, Ankara relied on surveillance, consular restrictions, international policing mechanisms and financial pressure.

The resulting system has allowed domestic accusations to follow critics across borders, exposing them to legal, economic and personal consequences even when they live beyond the immediate reach of Turkish authorities.

8. Conclusion

The measures introduced in the aftermath of July 15 did not remain confined to the state of emergency or to those accused of involvement in the coup attempt. Over the following decade, practices initially justified as exceptional became part of the ordinary functioning of the state, while the range of people exposed to prosecution, dismissal, censorship and other forms of pressure steadily expanded.

The result has been a lasting transformation of Turkey's institutional and political landscape. This deterioration is reflected not only in the experiences documented

throughout this report, but also in Turkey's standing in international rule-of-law, press-freedom and corruption indexes and in repeated findings by UN bodies and the European Court of Human Rights concerning arbitrary detention, due process and other rights violations. Ten years on, the legacy of the crackdown is therefore measured not only by the number of people directly affected, but also by the extent to which Turkey has been transformed into a more authoritarian country, with expanded executive power, weakened institutional safeguards and forms of repression once justified as exceptional becoming normalized.