

Abdulhamit Bilici's testimony to Transnational Repression Hearing at Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Thank you Cochairs Christopher H. Smith, James P. McGovern and members of Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for giving me the opportunity to testify today on the very important issue of Trans-National Repression.

I personally experienced both national and transnational repression as a journalist. I was the editor in chief of **Zaman** daily, the largest newspaper in Turkey. Erdogan government brutally raided my newspaper in March 2016 five months before the coup attempt and they shut down the paper after the coup attempt together with 200 critical media outlets. When Erdogan regime took over the paper, the first thing they did was to fire me and to appoint a pro-government editor who converted the newspaper into a regime mouthpiece in 24 hours. Facing serious threats, I had to leave the country for my safety. While living in the U.S for the last 8 years as an exiled journalist and driving for **Uber** to support my family, I have used every opportunity to speak out against the repression of the media and have tried to be the voice of the silenced journalists and other victims of Erdogan regime.

One of such occasions was an event hosted by the **Dayton (Ohio) Council on World Affairs** titled "Freedom of the Press and Democracy" in 2017. A couple of days before the event, I received a phone call from the chair of the organizing committee. She told me that Erdogan regime affiliated person reached out to her and asked to cancel the event, saying that you cannot give a platform to a "terrorist" as current Turkish governments names all its dissidents. The person who was trying to intimidate a nationwide American NGO and to prevent my speech was Islom Shakhbandarov, CEO of the Ahiska Turkish American Community Center, a fanatic supporter of Erdoğan's party. Even he dared to threaten the organizers that if they do not cancel the event, they will never be allowed to Turkey. They were brave enough not to cancel the event, but very much concerned about my safety. They contacted the police and asked for an escort. As a result, from the moment I went to Dayton, a police car escorted me to all the events. Unable to stop my speeches, that person hired a cameraman and showed up at each event to harass me with silly slurs and baseless accusations while filming everything. Despite all the obstacles, I continued telling my story and large-scale persecutions taking place in Turkey, completed the program and left Dayton. I thought it was over. Two days later, I woke up to see my Dayton story is on the headlines of all progovernment media with nasty accusations. I am not sure yet, if that fanatic is rewarded by Erdogan regime or demoted due to his failure to prevent

my speech. And I do not know if he paid any price regarding American law enforcement for acting in coordination with Erdogan regime to intimidate a journalist on US soil.

What I am sure is that my case is not unique and not the worst. 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 especially since the coup attempt in 2016. The Turkish government has been carrying out an extraordinary campaign of transnational repression against its critics overseas without any check.

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 in last 8 years, and more than 40 individuals were put behind bars through abduction, rendition, and forcible return.

Turkey's campaign has targeted all dissidents with liberal, left, Kurdish backgrounds, and especially people affiliated with the Hizmet/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. Many respected institutions awarded him with peace awards, but Erdogan regime labeled him as terrorist just because Gulen stood for democracy and against widespread corruption.

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. Turkish government 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 and sometimes bribing other countries to shutdown many successful schools which provide modern education over 170 countries. As the

State Department reported on the Human rights country report, Erdogan 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 2023 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, the UN representative 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.

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.

Turkey is among world champions in jailing journalists. At the same time, dozens of opposition journalists live in exile like me. Parallel to efforts to destroy free media at home, Erdogan government launched an operation to intimidate journalists in exile. Sabah Newspaper, run by the Erdogan family, regularly publishes the home addresses of exiled journalists. They secretly take pictures of them and publish their locations in coordination with Turkish spy agency. Recently they targeted **Bülent Keneş**, an academic and former editor-in-chief of the now-closed English language daily Today's Zaman. The pro-government newspaper revealed his home address and published secretly taken photos after Erdoğan asked Sweden to deport him in order to approve their NATO membership.

Abdurrahman Şimşek, who is suspected of having ties to Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MİT), who chased Bülent Keneş in Stockholm for months to find out his address and take his photos. Şimşek also recently targeted two other journalists in exile, **Cevheri Güven** in Germany, and **Abdullah Bozkurt** in Sweden, revealing their addresses and sharing it on Sabah's front page. Bozkurt was the former Ankara representative of Today's Zaman. He was also attacked by three men who were waiting for him in front of his house in Stockholm in 2022.

Last year, they targeted **Ekrem Dumanli** who lives in exile in the US. Similarly, they revealed his home address via secretly taken photos.

Ahmet Dönmez who lives in exile in Sweden and known for his reports on mafia groups associated with Turkish officials, was attacked by a gang in Stockholm in front of his 6-year-old daughter and lost his consciousness. He was treated in intensive care due to an injury to his head.

In July 2021 another exiled journalist, **Erk Acarer**, was attacked "with fists and knives" in the courtyard of his apartment in Berlin.

Adem Yavuz Arslan, who lives in exile in America was attacked by Erdogan's bodyguards in Washington while doing his job as a reporter. He is in the target list of Erdogan regime which requests extradition with bogus accusation via red notice.

Levent Kenez, the Swedish-based editor of Nordic Monitor, was also tracked by Turkey's intelligence agency, which leaked his private information to the media back home.

Once again, I was targeted in Washington by another Erdoganist paper, Akşam, which called me "Uber terrorist" on the headline, sharing my contact details.

The photos of the most exiled Turkish journalists currently appear at "Terrorist Wanted List" of Turkey's Interior Ministry. Although we were editor in chiefs of ideologically two different newspapers, I and **Can Dunder**, in exile in Germany, now we are at the same wanted list together. Erdogan promises a bounty of TL 500,000 (\$26,710) for our heads.

The list of persecution and repression goes on and on. But what can be done, what can Congress do, what can Turkey's democratic allies do to prevent these? The President of the United States can impose sanctions pursuant to the **Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act** with respect to officials of the Government of Türkiye found responsible for

- the detention of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners;
- the politically motivated detention of journalists;
- restricting of freedom of free expression through social media; and
- other gross violations of internationally recognized human rights.
- security assistance provided to the Government of Türkiye could be tied strongly to improvement of democracy and human rights.

The Secretary of State can impose visa restrictions under the announced

“Khashoggi Ban” for individuals and their family members who,

- engaged in serious, extraterritorial counter-dissident activities,
- suppress, harass, surveil, threaten, or harm journalists, activists, or other persons perceived to be dissidents for their work;
- engaged in such activities with respect to the families or other close associates of such dissidents.

Congress and the administration should candidly engage the Government of Türkiye

- to take steps to improve the dire climate for journalists and those supporting the journalism profession,
- to end the enforcement of draconian laws and regulations that restrict freedom of expression
- to release all journalists, media workers and all prisoners of conscience,
- to end ongoing crackdown on free expression on the internet, including by repealing or amending laws that allow the government to block a website or remove content from news sites,
- to halt its frequent requests that social media companies block accounts and content of journalists and media outlets

I believe these measures could help to bring Turkey back to democracy and prevent its further slide into the club of authoritarian countries. It must be, because we are not talking about China, Iran or Cuba, but a NATO member Türkiye. The decline of democracy is a global pandemic, and this is tragic. But a NATO country cannot be among leading actors of national and transnational repression.