

CASE STUDY

Turkey



Turkey has been a place of refuge for individuals fleeing repression in neighboring countries and is home to many Uyghurs, one of the diasporas most at risk today of transnational repression. At the same time, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey has repeatedly employed tactics of transnational repression—including extradition, kidnapping, surveillance, and harassment—to target political opponents around the world. While Turkey’s use of transnational repression abroad may suggest an absence of protections at home, the migration service, security agency, and police have shown the ability to effectively respond to the threat of extraterritorial violence. However, the degree of protection for vulnerable people is significantly influenced by changing currents in Turkey’s relationships with other states, including neighboring countries with authoritarian governments. In choosing to prioritize foreign policy aims over building domestic resilience, Turkey does not provide durable safety for exiles and diasporas.

Best practices in Turkey’s response to transnational repression

- Intelligence and law enforcement bodies coordinate to **warn and protect some individuals at risk of being targeted by transnational repression.**
- **Special migration pathways**, including humanitarian permanent residency, are available to diasporas at risk of transnational repression.
- The government has demonstrated that it is capable of **creating accountability for transnational repression** through the application of domestic criminal law.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman greet each other on April 28, 2022 as the two governments work to improve their relationship, which has been tense since the extraterritorial assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul. Photo credit: Bandar Aljaloud/AP via Shutterstock.

Introduction

On 2 October 2018, Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist and long-time critic of Saudi Arabia's government who had been living in exile in the United States, walked into the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in order to obtain paperwork necessary to get married. He never came back out. A month later, Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan unambiguously identified the party responsible for Khashoggi's murder in the pages of *The Washington Post*: "We know the order to kill Khashoggi came from the highest levels of the Saudi government."¹

Dissidents fleeing repression in Central Asia, Egypt, Russia, Iran, and China face the risk of assassination, assault, detention, and rendition in Turkey.

There is an irony to the fact that one of the most well-known acts of transnational repression took place in Turkey, itself a notorious perpetrator of transnational repression that has undertaken a global campaign to forcefully return dozens of individuals from around the world through rendition.² And although Khashoggi's assassination attracted worldwide attention to the lethal ways in which modern authoritarian

states pursue critics across borders, he was not the first nor the last to be targeted by a foreign state inside Turkey. Freedom House has documented 56 incidents of physical transnational repression that took place inside the country from 2014 to 2021. Dissidents fleeing repression in Central Asia, Egypt, Russia, Iran, and China have made their home in Turkey for decades, but many continue to face the risk of assassination, assault, detention, and rendition.

Turkey has demonstrated the ability to respond effectively to the threat of transnational repression on its soil. However, the degree and nature of the response is largely driven by foreign policy considerations. When the origin state using transnational repression is an adversary, Turkey protects the targeted and punishes the perpetrators. When the origin state is a friendly nation, Turkey silences activism and endangers the already vulnerable. In the migration field, Turkey has tried to bestow legal protections on members of diasporas with whom it shares close religious and cultural links, most prominently the Uyghurs. This protection, however, is not comprehensive and Uyghurs continue to find themselves in a precarious position as legal residents but not citizens of Turkey. Migrants from other potentially targeted diasporas are forced to contend with Turkey's overwhelmed and ad hoc migration system that offers few systematic mechanisms for protecting people against refoulement—returning them to a country where there is reason to believe they would face persecution.

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Security

Turkey's policy approach to transnational repression lacks consistency. Although it has demonstrated competence in addressing threats posed by some malign states, it has also facilitated or ignored extraterritorial violence used or attempted by other states. Turkey prevents, punishes, or allows transnational repression within its borders based on foreign policy considerations and prevailing winds in its relationships with other states.

Prevent, punish, or facilitate

When it comes to certain groups of dissidents, Turkey's government has demonstrated that it can use traditional counterintelligence operations, criminal laws, and police powers to counter transnational repression. For example, in 2019 Turkey arrested and charged two men for spying on behalf of the United Arab Emirates in part for attempting to collect information on "Arab political dissidents living in the country."³ More recently, six people tied to the Russian government were arrested for preparing "armed actions targeting Chechen dissidents in Turkey."⁴ Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT) also foiled the attempted kidnapping of a former Iranian military pilot and detained Iranian agents.⁵ Moreover, interviews with members of some targeted diasporas inside Turkey done as part of the research for this project established that the Turkish police does offer short-term protection for certain individuals who are at risk of physical harm and does provide warnings about potential threats emanating from foreign states. Both of these practices, however, are highly contingent on the public profile of the targeted individual and Turkey's relationship with the foreign government.⁶

These high-profile operations to prevent acts of transnational repression stand in stark contrast to what seems to be more routine security cooperation between Turkey's government and other governments for the express purpose of silencing critical voices. In 2021, activists from Turkmenistan living in Turkey increasingly mobilized to protest the repressive tactics of the government of Turkmenistan. In response, the Turkish government tried to prevent peaceful protests in front of the Turkmen Consulate in Istanbul, arrested those who gathered, and failed to protect others from physical assault by consular staff.⁷ Turkish authorities then began harassing activists by detaining them and threatening them with deportation unless they stopped their political activities.⁸ The police reportedly

targeted people based on a list of activists produced and distributed by the Turkmen Consulate.⁹ Both domestic and international nongovernmental organizations have concluded that the actions of Turkish authorities are in response to requests made by the Turkmen government.¹⁰

Turkey has also increasingly cracked down on political activism by Uyghurs. In 2009, then Prime Minister Erdoğan called the deaths of Uyghurs in Xinjiang a "genocide."¹¹ More recently, however, Turkish authorities have been less vocal in their support of the Uyghurs and taken actions to tamp down political activism by the diaspora in Turkey. Protesters have been warned away from actions in front of the Chinese embassy¹² and many Uyghurs have been arbitrarily detained and threatened with deportation.¹³ Often these actions have coincided with official state visits to Turkey by Chinese officials. Individuals participating in protests and even using popular pro-Uyghur hashtags online receive threats and are put under house arrest by Turkish authorities.¹⁴

Foreign policy goals influence domestic protections

Turkey's domestic security responses to transnational repression against members of various diasporas living in the country—the choice between aggressive protection, indifference, and active persecution—are driven by foreign policy considerations. The pressure on Turkmen activists coincided, for example, with the meeting of the Cooperation Council of the Turkic Speaking States (known as the Turkic Council) in Istanbul. In the past, Turkey has expressed the hope that Turkmenistan would become a full member of the organization.¹⁵

The situation of Uyghurs in Turkey has become more precarious in tandem with the evolution of the relationship between Turkey and China. Chinese economic investment in Turkey has grown significantly since 2016 through multibillion-dollar loans and the development of Belt and Road Initiative projects.¹⁶ In 2017, the two countries signed an extradition agreement that could facilitate the return of Uyghurs to China if charged with terrorism.¹⁷ The treaty was ratified by China in late 2020 and remains unratified but under consideration by the Turkish parliament as the writing of this report. Although the Turkey's officials continue to raise the issue of the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang with Chinese officials,¹⁸ the rhetoric is far more muted than it was a decade ago, and

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increasingly divorced from Turkey's waning domestic support for Uyghur Turks. The increasingly precarious legal situation of Uyghurs in Turkey disincentivizes political activism among this diaspora and, in an indirect way, accomplishes one of the primary goals of transnational repression: silencing dissent.

Turkey's response to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi was swift, pointed, and costly. Within weeks of the assassination, pro-government newspapers in Turkey had published transcripts of the audio recording of the killing. Turkish officials also shared the recordings with European and American governments in an effort to drum up support for a multilateral response to Saudi Arabia.¹⁹ Turkey's intelligence services publicly described the makeup of the Saudi "hit squad" and preparations for the

murder.²⁰ President Erdoğan stopped short of accusing Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman personally of the murder but laid the blame squarely on the Saudi government. He also demanded that the suspects be extradited from Saudi Arabia to Turkey in order to be tried, repeatedly emphasizing that the murder took place on Turkish soil.²¹

Turkey ended up paying a significant price for its response to this act of transnational repression. International partners, including the United States, were slow to respond and Saudi Arabia instituted a costly unofficial boycott of Turkish goods and travel to the country.²² Like in other cases of transnational repression on its soil, Turkey's reaction was conditioned by its existing fraught relationship with the Kingdom. The two countries supported opposite sides in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in Egypt and during the 2017–21 Saudi-led blockade of Qatar.²³ As this report was being finalized, Turkey's government agreed to a request from Saudi authorities to transfer the trial being held in connection with Khashoggi's murder to Riyadh.²⁴ The decision amounted to an abandonment of Ankara's efforts to pursue accountability for a heinous assassination committed on its territory, and it reflected Erdoğan's desire to improve his relations with the Saudi leadership, particularly in light of Turkey's worsening economic situation and its need for foreign investment. Just as with Turkmenistan and China, foreign policy considerations rather than human rights concerns have driven Turkey's security responses to transnational repression.

Migration

Turkey has been a destination and transit country for people fleeing oppression and conflict almost since the Republic's foundation. Today, it hosts the world's largest population of asylum seekers: nearly four million, the vast majority of them Syrians.²⁵ In 2016, thanks to a deal reached between the European Union and Turkey, the country became a bottleneck for migrants who must now wait inside Turkey for eventual resettlement elsewhere.²⁶ The migration system is best characterized as "highly differentiated, multi-layered, and occasionally ad hoc."²⁷ While some of Turkey's migration policies, notably its protection of the Uyghurs, offer a shield against transnational repression, lack of due process and other gaps make the system vulnerable to abuse.

For most of its history, Turkey did not have an official policy of asylum or international protection. Instead, immigration was seen as part of the nation-building process, with an emphasis on welcoming "ethnic kin" migrants who would eventually become Turkish citizens. The Directorate General for Migration Management (DGMM) was established in 2014 as the official institution responsible for migration in Turkey. Under the DGMM, a dual track system of protection was created: temporary protection for Syrians and international protection for non-Syrians.²⁸

A bifurcated system with few protections

For people from Russia, Central Asian states and Iran, Turkey offers the possibility of international protection through conditional refugee or subsidiary refugee status. Both groups of protected individuals are required to live in specified satellite cities in Turkey and have limited access to social services. Since the departure of the United Nations' refugee agency, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, from Turkey in 2018, registration and processing of asylum applications is handled solely by the DGMM. Migration experts point out that problems with processing applications, including a lack of trained migration experts, poor-quality translation, incomplete information about the applicants' home countries, and lengthy processing times, persist.²⁹ The DGMM also allows diaspora associations within Turkey to manage some of the registration process for migrants by giving them humanitarian residency permits to distribute to Afghans, Uyghurs, and individuals from countries in Central Asia who have not yet officially registered in Turkey. The associations are meant to act as intermediaries

and use the flexibility of the humanitarian residence permit in order to fill gaps in the overstretched migration system. However, research on the experience of some Afghan migrants living in Istanbul suggests that these permits are sold rather than given out and that the process is extremely vulnerable to corruption.³⁰

Turkey hosts the world's largest population of asylum seekers.

Also worryingly, since the departure of the UNHCR, cooperation and information sharing between the DGMM and the MiT has increased. Interviews conducted for this report suggest that the identities of asylum seekers are routinely shared with the MiT. This is substantiated by media reports of asylum seekers being threatened with deportation by the intelligence agency and by police. Information sharing between migration and security agencies is problematic because it contributes to the securitization of migration generally. With respect to transnational repression, this type of information sharing can aid in the targeting of vulnerable people by a foreign state that is on good terms with Turkey by giving access to information about a wanted person's whereabouts.

Waiting for resettlement exposes people to transnational repression

In theory, conditional and subsidiary protection is meant to be temporary statuses while the refugee awaits resettlement outside Turkey. However, the process of resettling refugees who have fled to Turkey has largely ground to a halt over the last ten years, and people now remain indefinitely in the country. Residing in Turkey with only thin legal protections provides opportunities for transnational repression in several ways.

Their presence in Turkey exposes members of some diasporas to the risk of physical violence. As outlined in the security section, police protections for targeted individuals are driven primarily by currents in bilateral relationships between Turkey

and the origin state. For example, while Turkey has recently publicly stopped a plan to kidnap an Iranian pilot, the Iranian intelligence service is active in the country and members of the Iranian diaspora in Turkey have been killed in the past.³¹

Second, longer waits for resettlement increase the likelihood that origin states may locate targeted individuals and engineer their deportation from Turkey. This was the case recently with an ethnic Turkmen from Uzbekistan who was active in the Turkmen diaspora; although he had applied for asylum, Turkey deported him without due process in January 2022 at the request of Uzbekistan's government.³² Similarly, in 2019, Turkey deported dozens of Iranians at the request of that country's authorities, and some were subsequently sentenced to death.³³ Other Iranians, including a prominent women's rights activist, were threatened with deportation until a public uproar pushed Turkish officials to reverse course.³⁴

A lack of safeguards in deportation procedures that severely reduces the likelihood that lawyers or civil society can intervene in cases where someone is being targeted for expulsion because of their political activism.

While the deportation of Iranians seems to be calculated in part to maintain good relations with Iran, the deportation of at least one Egyptian national facing a death sentence resulted from a failure to properly vet the risks of returning someone to their home state. Mohamed Abdelhafiz was returned to Egypt after arriving in Istanbul from Sudan without a proper visa.³⁵ Eight police officers responsible for the deportation were eventually fired but the case did not lead to any general examination of the migration system's weaknesses. Of particular concern in this regard are a lack of safeguards in deportation procedures that severely reduces the likelihood that lawyers or civil society can intervene in cases where someone is being targeted for expulsion because of their political activism. Some of the most striking problems are that deportation decisions can be appealed only within seven days and information about the whereabouts of people in predeportation detention is not easily accessible, making timely appeals almost impossible.³⁶

Misapplying security designations

The widespread use of security designations opens the door to abuse by states seeking to target individuals beyond their borders. Security designations, or restrictive codes, may be imposed by a court or by various state agencies, including the intelligence agency. Almost 100,000 people are said to have these designations in Turkey today.³⁷ Code G-87, "individual who poses a danger to general safety", is one such designation that is meant to be reserved for people who pose a serious and immediate threat but has been applied to various foreign dissidents and activists including those from China, Iran, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

Documents obtained by human rights groups recently showed that several targeted Turkmen activists had this designation.³⁸ It has also been used to deport political opponents to Tajikistan³⁹ and to deny protection to Iranians seeking asylum, as well as to stop prominent Uyghur activists from entering the country.⁴⁰ The source of information that leads to an individual receiving this designation is not publicly known but appears to come at least in part from foreign governments and is not independently vetted by Turkish authorities. The non-transparent method by which this designation is applied has serious consequences for vulnerable people residing in Turkey.

Uyghurs in Turkey

Despite the recent negative treatment of Uyghurs by authorities noted above, this diaspora historically has been welcomed in Turkey. Uyghurs have been arriving in the country for more than seventy years, driven by waves of opportunity and repression.⁴¹ The first, relatively small group of Uyghurs arrived in Turkey with the assistance of the UNHCR and eventually received citizenship in the early 1950s. More recently, groups of Uyghurs have come to Turkey from China, Egypt, and Central Asian states. While Turkey is an appealing destination because of common cultural, religion and linguistic traditions, Uyghurs—one of the groups targeted most by transnational repression globally⁴²—are not well protected against the risk of being forcibly returned to China and increasingly face the possibility of detention as a consequence for political activism.

Turkey grants permanent residency permits to Uyghurs who can prove their identity with official documents through a special state agency called the Office for Foreigners with Turkic Origin and Descent. Those who cannot prove their identity because their official documents—usually a Chinese passport—have expired are instead granted a humanitarian residence permit. This practice helps Uyghurs avoid interacting

with the Chinese embassy in Turkey, which routinely refuses to renew passports and tries to convince Uyghurs to return to China by issuing one-way travel documents.⁴³

However, residence permits do not guarantee safety or security. Permits can be denied or canceled, especially if security or terrorism concerns are invoked. Turkey does not seem to closely vet the sources of these accusations and has detained Uyghurs in deportation centers because their names have appeared on a Chinese wanted list.⁴⁴ Though Turkey claims not to deport Uyghurs to China, there have been reports that some Uyghurs have ended up back in China after being deported to third countries; in one such case, Zinnetgul Tursun, Abdullah Ahmedov, and their two young children were reportedly deported from Turkey to Tajikistan; Tursun and her children were subsequently returned to China in 2019, while Ahmedov's fate is unclear.⁴⁵ Last year, arrests and detentions of Uyghurs, often accompanied by threats of deportation, markedly increased.⁴⁶ As noted in the security section, many

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observers have attributed this to positive changes in the relationship between Turkey and China. The looming threat of a formal extradition treaty, already ratified by China, increases feelings of precarity among Uyghurs in Turkey and has serious consequences for their ability to effectively engage in activism on behalf of relatives and friends experiencing repression inside China.

Recommendations to the Turkish government:

- **Use regular channels of bilateral legal cooperation** to seek the return of people accused of criminal acts from abroad instead of relying on extrajudicial tactics to repatriate political opponents.
- **Re-evaluate the practice of distributing humanitarian residence permits** through diaspora associations to ensure that the process is transparent and not vulnerable to corruption.
- **Establish safeguards within deportation procedures** that provide an opportunity for migrants to receive legal aid and sufficient time to appeal deportation decision.
- **Ensure that Uyghurs of any nationality are not deported to third states** from which they may be forcibly returned to China.
- **Review existing information-sharing channels established to combat organized crime and terrorism** to ensure that foreign states do not have undue influence in how security designations are applied to people residing in Turkey.
- **Expand and formalize existing practices of warning and protecting individuals** who are targeted by foreign states.

About the Project

Defending Democracy in Exile: Policy Responses to Transnational Repression examines what is being done to protect exiles and diaspora members who are being intimidated and threatened by the governments from which they fled. This report assesses the responses put forward by the governments of countries where exiles and diasporas reside, by international organizations, and by technology companies.

It represents the culmination of the second phase of our research into transnational repression. It combines an analysis of the policies of nine host countries, interviews with members of diasporas targeted by transnational repression who reside in the United States, interviews with staff at technology companies, and data on 735 physical, direct transnational repression incidents that occurred between 2014 and 2021. With this report, we aim to advance the ongoing conversation among members of the general public, civil society, media, and policymakers on countering this practice.

Over a 16-month period, we developed an original methodology for evaluating policy responses to transnational repression, trained and collaborated with 16 in-country analysts to gather data, and held two roundtables to review and refine our findings and recommendations. Collaboration with academics and civil society researchers around the world was integral to the success of this project.

Yana Gorokhovskaia and Isabel Linzer led the project and cowrote the final report and eight of the nine country reports. Research Associate Bochen Han provided research support and wrote one country report. Intern Paulina Song helped to catalog and vet incidents for the transnational repression database. The project was made possible through the generous support of the National Endowment for Democracy.

Our data collection and coding methods can be viewed at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression/about-acknowledgements>. Data is available on request through the research@freedomhouse.org email account. Please use the subject line “Transnational Repression Data Request.”

This report builds on the findings of *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope of Transnational Repression*—the first global study of this dangerous practice—which Freedom House released in February 2021. The first phase of our research sprang from our engagement with academic researchers dedicated to examining transnational repression.

Finally, none of this would have been possible without exiles from Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, India, Egypt, Rwanda, Russia, China, Turkey, Vietnam, Equatorial Guinea, and Ethiopia who agreed to speak with us about their experiences of transnational repression. Their courage and resilience are an inspiration.

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