

Turkey Proves No Safe Haven For Central Asian Activists



(Left to right) Kazakh President Qasym-Zhomart Toqaev, Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in Samarkand on November 11.

ALMATY, Kazakhstan -- Such is the life of a Central Asian activist abroad: One minute you are bringing attention to a fellow activist in trouble, the next minute the trouble has reached you.

“Transnational repression” -- or a government going abroad to silence an opposition activist -- is increasingly a mainstay topic for rights organizations covering Central Asia, with the region’s three most authoritarian countries -- Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan -- all high-level offenders.

The phenomenon involves governments around the world -- usually nondemocratic ones -- seeking to intimidate, extradite, and sometimes even kill their perceived enemies in foreign jurisdictions.

About a decade ago, Turkey was one of the safer places for Central Asian activists to seek refuge, due to its lack of travel restrictions for regional citizens and a fairly low extradition threat.

In recent years, though, that has not been the case, with experts indicating a changing attitude on the part of the Turkish authorities.

Tajik Activists Disappear

Just in the last month, two Tajik political activists living in Turkey have vanished without a trace, raising fears they have been transported back to their homeland where long jail sentences and mistreatment in detention have been the norm for government critics.

According to Central Asian rights expert Steve Swerdlow, Suhrob Zafar of the Group 24 Tajik opposition group had spent the last two weeks trying to trace fellow activist and Istanbul-based exile Nasimjon Sharifov, with whom no one has had contact with since February 23.



Suhrob Zafar (above) of Group 24 spent the last two weeks trying to trace fellow activist and Istanbul-based exile Nasimjon Sharifov.

The effort included visits to migrant detention centers and requests for information from Turkish authorities, who claimed no knowledge of Sharifov's whereabouts, Swerdlow said on X, formerly Twitter. He also recalled how Zafar had contacted him in a bid for assistance.

But on March 11, it was Zafar's disappearance that Tajik activists were raising alarm over, after being unable to contact the Group 24 leader since March 10.

Throughout his decade living in Turkey, according to Group 24, Zafar has received regular threats in the form of text messages warning him that he would be killed or abducted.

He has also been detained by Turkish authorities on several occasions, presumably at Tajikistan's request, before later being released.

In Tajikistan, Group 24 has carried the designation of an "extremist organization" since a Supreme Court ruling in October 2014, shortly after it called for rallies against the regime of authoritarian President Emomali Rahmon.



Activist and Istanbul-based exile Nasimjon Sharifov has not been heard from since February 23.

The ruling broadly coincided with the end of the regime's tolerance for even limited political opposition.

Less than a year later, the high court applied the same label to the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) -- a moderate, faith-based opposition party that had held seats in the parliament prior to contentious elections in March 2015.

Many of the IRPT's top leaders were then jailed after a court found them guilty of masterminding a purported rebellion that took place when a top defense official and his supporters broke ranks before being beaten by government troops in clashes outside the capital, Dushanbe.

Of course, 2015 was also the year that Group 24's founder, businessman Umarali Kuvvatov, was shot dead in Istanbul -- something of a watershed moment for Central Asian dissidents living in the city.

Turkey's 2016 Turning Point

It seems unlikely that Turkey had any direct hand in the oppositionist's killing, even if the assassins

were able to skip the country before they could face justice.

The Tajik-born man who reportedly lured Kuvvatov to the dinner where he was poisoned before being gunned down in the street was sentenced to life in jail by a Turkish court.

But recent years have seen Turkish authorities much more prepared to engage with Central Asian governments over the dissidents seeking safe haven on its territory. And that is likely because Ankara expects its Central Asian partners to return the favor.



President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has lately been prepared to engage more with Central Asian governments over dissidents seeking safe haven on Turkish territory, likely because Ankara expects its Central Asian partners to return the favor.

In an update published last month, Freedom House listed Turkey and Tajikistan among the Top 5 most prolific perpetrators of transnational repression based on data from the last decade. China, Egypt, and Russia were the other three.

The turning point for Turkey was undoubtedly the 2016 coup attempt against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the government when some 250 people were killed.

That event led Turkey's government to declare an all-out war on the network of U.S.-based Muslim thinker Fethullah Gulen, a former Erdogan ally that Ankara held responsible for the coup, charges that Gulen fiercely denies.

Tens of thousands of dismissals and jailings followed in Turkey, and increasingly tense relations between Ankara and any country where Gulen had connections -- mostly through the network of the scholar's private schools.

While some other Central Asian governments had cracked down on Gulen-linked institutions before the coup attempt, many schools and universities continued to function in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

During Erdogan's visit to Bishkek in 2018, he referenced what Ankara calls FETO -- Fethullahist Terrorist Organization -- multiple times in his speeches and openly warned then-President Sooronbai Jeenbekov that he risked being overthrown by "Gulenists."



Orhan Inandi, the Turkish-born founder of the Gulen-inspired Sapat school network in Kyrgyzstan, was abducted by Turkish agents in Bishkek in June 2021.

In the end, Jeenbekov was overthrown in 2020 by forces supporting current Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov, who pointedly failed to condemn Ankara when Orhan Inandi -- the Turkish-born founder

of the Gulen-inspired Sapat school network in Kyrgyzstan -- **was abducted** by Turkish agents in Bishkek in June 2021.

Inandi, who also held a Kyrgyz passport when he was abducted, **was sentenced** last year by a court in Ankara to 21 years in prison for "establishing an armed terrorist group."

Marked Turkmen

In the early years of Central Asia's post-Soviet independence, Turkey risked souring its relationship with the region's largest country, Uzbekistan, by refusing to extradite opposition leaders Muhammad Solih and Abdurahmon Polat.

Uzbekistan halted visa-free travel between the two countries in response, a benefit that was only reinstated after Shavkat Mirziyoev came to power following the death of the first Uzbek president, Islam Karimov, in 2016.

Until recently, Turkey was one of the few countries where citizens of Uzbekistan's neighbor, Turkmenistan, could travel visa-free. But that changed in 2022 when the Turkish government revoked the visa waiver at Turkmenistan's insistence.

Tajikistan is the only Central Asian country in Freedom House's longer-term transnational repression Top 5. But Turkmenistan was in the watchdog's "Top 5 perpetrators in 2023."

And Ashgabat would not have earned that status without active support from Turkey, which has long been the main destination for Turkmen seeking a way out of their highly repressive, economically failing country.

Although sources of RFE/RL's Turkmen Service have described deportations by Turkey in their thousands since Ankara reimposed visa restrictions, the closed nature of Central Asia's most authoritarian state makes it difficult to separate politically active migrants from the regular kind.

But at least six Turkmen political activists have been deported to Ashgabat: Farhat Meimankuliev, Rovshen Klychev, Umit Kuzybaev, Dovran Imamov, Maksat Baimuradov, and Serdar Durduliev, RFE/RL's Turkmen Service has reported.



In 2020, Dursoltan Taganova was held in a deportation center before being released after calls by 11 human rights organizations.

Dursoltan Taganova -- a relatively high-profile opposition activist in Istanbul -- had at least two close shaves with deportation even before the new travel restrictions were imposed when she was detained in 2020 and 2021.

In 2020, Taganova was held in a deportation center before being released after 11 human rights organizations urged the Turkish authorities not to follow through with the deportation.

The next year, Taganova **told journalists** she had been summoned to Turkish immigration, where she was warned she might face problems with her residency unless she stopped her political activities.

Turkmen activists in Turkey were a notable focus of a brief submitted for Turkmenistan's Universal

Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council by the University of Southern California Human Rights Advocacy Group and the Vienna-based advocacy group Freedom for Eurasia.

The brief's authors called Turkey "an increasingly unsafe environment" for Turkmen political activists and rights defenders, where Turkmen as a whole face "surveillance, travel restrictions, discrimination, and other abuses that Ashgabat and Ankara have increasingly used to control and monitor" both them and their relatives back home.

The brief noted that Turkish police had "reportedly compiled a list of 25 Turkmen migrants subject to deportation, as directed by the Turkmen Consulate [in Istanbul]."

These concerted efforts to end the status of Turkey's largest city as a hub for Turkmen political activism may be having the intended effect.

Eziz Mamedov, another Turkmen resident of Istanbul, has reported regular acts of intimidation since he became politically active in 2021, including being knifed by an unidentified assailant during a protest outside the consulate.

In January, though, Mamedov [said](#) he was no longer pursuing activism.

"I thought, why am I throwing myself into the fire?" Mamedov said. "What we have sacrificed and done on behalf of the [Turkmen] people has not paid off."

With contributions from RFE/RL's Tajik and Turkmen services and RFE/RL's Ferghana Valley Bureau