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World Report 2023 - Turkey

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's authoritarian government regularly targeted perceived government critics and political opponents and exerted strong control over the media and judiciary in the long run-up to parliamentary and presidential elections that will take place in the first half of 2023. The deepening economic crisis saw the official annual inflation rate rise to [85 percent in October](#). In October, a government-sponsored law came into force that criminalizes the dissemination of "false information," tightens control over social media companies and online news websites, and gives authorities further powers to censor independent journalism and restrict the right to information.

Freedom of Expression, Association, and Assembly

Print media and private television channels are mostly owned by companies with close government links, which is reflected in the content of their news coverage. Independent media in Turkey operate mainly via online platforms, with authorities regularly ordering removal of critical content and prosecuting journalists, most severely under Turkey's Anti-Terror Law. At time of writing, [at least 65](#) journalists and media workers were in pretrial detention or serving prison sentences for terrorism offenses because of their journalistic work or association with media.

After their June arrest in Diyarbakir, 16 Kurdish journalists working for various Kurdish media platforms were placed in pretrial detention on suspicion of "membership of a terrorist organization," a widely abused charge. In October, nine more Kurdish journalists were arrested and placed in pretrial detention in various cities. At time of writing, they remained in detention.

The government enforced an August 2019 regulation requiring media companies streaming online news coverage and digital streaming platforms to obtain licenses from the government-aligned broadcasting watchdog, the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK). The council has regularly [imposed arbitrary fines](#) and temporary suspensions of broadcasting on the few television channels critical of the government. Online media platforms Voice of America and Deutsche Welle [chose not to apply for licenses](#) from the council on the grounds that it would result in them being subject to similar disproportionate sanctions and censorship; on June 30, an Ankara court [blocked access](#) to both media outlets from Turkey at the [request](#) of the council. Both platforms at time of writing were blocked in Turkey by court order.

Of particular concern in the period before the 2023 elections was the government's [October package of legal amendments](#) tightening control over online news sites and social media companies by compelling them to comply with government content removal requests or face bandwidth reduction (internet throttling), and introducing the vague and widely drawn offence of "disseminating false information," punishable with a one- to three-year prison sentence. Thousands of people every year already face arrest and prosecution for their social media posts, typically charged with defamation, insulting the president, fomenting hatred, or spreading terrorist propaganda.

Provincial authorities regularly ban protests and assemblies of constituencies critical of the government. For example, they banned a women's rights rally in Istanbul on March 8. Turkey's longest lasting peaceful assembly, the Saturday Mothers/People, relatives of people subjected to enforced disappearances by state actors since the 1980s, has been banned for over four years from the central Istanbul location where it has been held since 1995.

Women's Rights

Turkey's 2021 withdrawal from the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, known as the Istanbul Convention, continued to be vocally opposed by women's rights groups in Turkey. In July, in response to multiple legal challenges brought by women's groups and opposition political parties, Turkey's highest administrative court issued a controversial decision finding that the withdrawal from the convention by presidential decree had been lawful. In July, the [UN Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\)](#) [called](#) on the government to reverse its decision, noting that its withdrawal "further weakens protections for women." Following a visit to Turkey, the [United Nations special rapporteur on violence against women](#) said that, in addition to eroding protections, withdrawal from the convention "emboldened perpetrators" and increased women's risk of violence.

Challenges in providing [effective protection to women in Turkey who report domestic violence](#) are reflected in the high number of murders of women, with the Interior Ministry reporting that of 307 women killed in 2021, 38 had received protection orders from police and courts. The CEDAW Committee called on Turkey to ensure adherence to protection orders, including by holding authorities accountable for failure to enforce orders or register domestic violence complaints.

Human Rights Defenders

On April 25, an Istanbul court sentenced [human rights defender Osman Kavala to life imprisonment](#) on the charge of attempting to overthrow the government, and 7 co-defendants to 18-year prison sentences for allegedly aiding and abetting. The case centered on the baseless charge that Kavala organized the lawful and overwhelmingly peaceful 2013 Istanbul Gezi Park protests that spread across Turkey. Kavala has been arbitrarily detained since November 2017 and, at the verdict, the court ordered the immediate arrest of the co-defendants, six of whom were incarcerated at time of writing. President Erdoğan has made repeated public speeches against Kavala throughout the trial and the case demonstrates the high level of political control over Turkey's courts.

The convictions of Kavala and the others, which are under appeal, flagrantly disregard the Council of Europe's February 2022 [decision to trigger infringement proceedings](#) against Turkey for flouting a 2019 European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) judgment ordering Kavala's immediate release on grounds of insufficient evidence. In July, in response to the infringement process, the ECtHR ruled that

Turkey has violated the European Convention on Human Rights through noncompliance with judgments.

The authorities continued to use terrorism and defamation charges to harass rights defenders, and to violate their right to assembly. In October, an Ankara court placed [Şebnem Korur Fincancı](#), the head of Turkey's Medical Association and a rights defender, in pretrial detention pending investigation on suspicion of spreading terrorist propaganda for comments she made in a TV broadcast calling for an investigation into allegations that the Turkish military had used chemical weapons against the armed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

In November, the Court of Cassation issued its decision overturning the 2020 convictions of Taner Kılıç, former chair of Amnesty International Turkey, and three others. Kılıç was convicted on bogus charges of membership of a terrorist organization and the three others for aiding and abetting terrorism because of their participation in a human rights education workshop. The ECtHR ruled in May 2022 that Kilic had been arbitrarily detained and his freedom of expression violated.

Torture and Ill-Treatment in Custody

Allegations of torture and ill-treatment in police custody and prison over the past six years have rarely been subject to effective investigations or the prosecution of perpetrators. There are also [regular reports of ill-treatment, including severe beatings](#) and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, and over-crowding in removal centers where foreign nationals including asylum seekers and migrants are subject to administrative detention pending deportation procedures.

There was no indication that authorities had opened any investigation into military personnel for the torture of Osman Şiban and Servet Turgut, two Kurdish men detained by the army in their village in the southeast in September 2020, taken away in a helicopter, and later found by their families seriously injured in hospital. Turgut [died](#) of his injuries. Şiban is facing trial on charges of "membership of a terrorist organization" for allegedly aiding members of the PKK in his village. Four journalists in the southeastern city of Van who were themselves arrested after reporting on the men's arrest and torture were, in January 2022, acquitted of "membership of a terrorist organization" having spent six months in pretrial detention.

Following a visit to Turkey, the UN Sub-Committee on the Prevention of Torture in September [flagged concerns](#) about the exercise of fundamental rights and guarantees during the first hours of detention, which are of paramount importance for the prevention of torture and ill-treatment, and on the situation of migrants in removal centers.

Kurdish Conflict and Crackdown on Opposition

While clashes between the military and the PKK have greatly decreased in rural areas of Turkey's eastern and southeastern regions, Turkey has concentrated its military campaign against the PKK, including with drone strikes in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq where PKK bases are located, and increasingly in northeast Syria against the Kurdish-led, US- and UK-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). In May, President Erdoğan threatened to launch what would be Turkey's fourth military incursion into northeast [Syria](#) against the SDF controlling the area since 2016. At time of writing, no full-scale invasion of the targeted areas had taken place. In Turkish-occupied territories of northeast

Syria, Turkey and its local Syrian proxies continued to abuse civilians' rights and restrict their freedoms with impunity.

While Turkey blamed the PKK for a July 20 attack on a tourist resort in Zakho in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, killing nine Iraqi tourists, both the Kurdistan Regional Government and Baghdad blamed the Turkish military. Turkish authorities also accused the PKK of a November 13 bomb attack in central Istanbul that killed six civilians and injured scores more, although the group denied involvement.

With the ruling coalition persisting in its campaign of criminalizing the opposition Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) which has [56 seats](#) in parliament, scores of former HDP members of parliament and mayors are held as remand prisoners or are serving sentences after being convicted of terrorism offenses because of their legitimate non-violent political activities, speeches, and social media postings. Among them are jailed former co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, in prison since November 4, 2016, despite a 2020 ECtHR judgment ordering Demirtaş's immediate release. A closure case against the HDP was pending before the Constitutional Court.

Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Migrants

Turkey continues to host the world's largest number of refugees, around 3.6 million from Syria granted temporary protection status, and [over 320,000](#) from Afghanistan, Iraq, and other non-European countries whom the Turkish government mostly deems irregular migrants and in a relatively few cases "conditional refugees."

With opposition politicians increasingly fuelling anti-refugee sentiment by advocating for the return of Syrians to war-torn Syria, President Erdoğan has responded with pledges to resettle Syrians in Turkish-occupied areas of northern Syria. Hundreds of Syrian men and some boys were unlawfully deported to [northern Syria](#), often by being detained and coerced into signing voluntary return forms.

[Afghans](#), many of whom had fled Afghanistan after the August 2021 Taliban takeover, were often unable to register asylum applications and were deported. Pushbacks of Afghans at Turkey's border with Iran were also reported.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The Erdoğan government demonstrated increasing readiness to endorse anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) hate speech fomenting societal polarization in the year before 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections. The interior minister made public speeches including content that was directly anti-LGBT at least five times. The eighth successive [ban on the Istanbul Pride week events](#) in June was matched with an unprecedented number of police arrests of those who attempted to assemble, with 372 kept in custody for many hours before being released. In September, the state broadcasting watchdog RTÜK endorsed for public broadcast a video privately produced to advertise an anti-LGBT platform's event taking place in Istanbul. The video described LGBT people as a virus and destructive of families.

Climate Change, Environment and Human Rights

Turkey is a growing contributor to the climate crisis, which is taking a mounting toll on human rights around the world. In 2021, Turkey ratified the Paris Agreement, yet its climate policies and

commitments are “critically insufficient” to meet global goals to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, according to the [Climate Action Tracker](#). The government has committed to reaching net zero emissions by 2053, yet [new coal power plants](#) threaten this goal.

Turkey is a [major importer of plastic waste](#) from the European Union. Plastics are made from fossil fuels and toxic additives and emit significant amounts of greenhouse gas, contributing to the climate crisis. The government has failed to adequately implement its environmental and occupational health laws and regulations, increasing the negative impacts of pollution from plastic recycling on workers and local communities. Air pollutants and toxins emitted from recycling affect workers, including children, and people living near recycling facilities.

Key International Actors

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February contributed to a humanitarian, energy, and food security crisis for the region and for countries around the world dependent on gas and grain. The conflict has increased Turkey’s international prominence. In July, Turkey assisted the UN in [brokering a deal with Russia and Ukraine](#) to provide a passage for grain shipments through Russian-blockaded Ukrainian ports.

Behind a renewal of tensions with Greece focused on the alleged militarization of Greek islands close to Turkey lies an entrenched dispute over maritime boundaries, the status of Cyprus, and access to gas reserves in the east Mediterranean. The dispute also serves domestic nationalist political agendas in the year before Turkey’s elections. The European Union’s decision-making European Council in its June conclusions renewed a call for Turkey “to fully respect international law, to de-escalate tensions in the interest of regional stability.”

The EU provides financial support to Turkey for hosting refugees in return for restrictions on entry of refugees and migrants to the EU. Though still formally a candidate for EU accession, the process is at a standstill. The EU [included](#) Turkey in its statement on situations that require the UN Human Rights Council’s attention, stressing the “continued deterioration of respect for the rule of law and human rights.”

In its report on Turkey in October, the European Commission stressed that “[i]n the absence of an effective checks and balances mechanism, the democratic accountability of the executive branch continues to be limited to elections,” and pointed to the continuing “deterioration of human and fundamental rights.”

As a NATO member, Turkey in May threatened to veto Sweden and Finland’s expedited NATO membership bid that followed Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Turkey demanded that the two countries take bolder steps to prosecute terrorism, end arms embargoes on Turkey, and extradite to Turkey individuals charged under the country’s Anti-Terror Law. At time of writing, although Turkey had lifted its veto, it had not ratified the membership accession.

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