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Turkey exploits post-9/11 counterterrorism model to target critics in exile

Turkey has drawn extensively from the U.S. counterterrorism post-9/11 playbook to go after exiled political enemies, in particular the Gulen movement.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/12/09/turkey-us-terrorism-war-exiles-repression>

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By Greg Miller

ANKARA, Turkey — As abduction teams fanned out across neighborhoods in Nairobi in October, their targets — members of a Turkish religious movement — seemed to have few worries beyond the hassles of a hectic weekday.

One was returning from a visa appointment with his family; a second was at the motor vehicle office for a driving test; still others were trying to beat traffic during the early Friday commute.

By morning's end, seven Turkish nationals had been abducted at gunpoint, hooded and handcuffed by masked agents traveling in unmarked vehicles, according to Western security officials, witnesses and relatives of the victims. While three were later released, four were taken to a remote airstrip outside the Kenyan capital, officials said, and forced aboard a plane waiting to take them to a Turkish prison near here.

The abductions were the latest of more than 118 “renditions” that Turkey’s intelligence service, MIT, has orchestrated over the past decade, according to the spy agency’s website, making it one of the most aggressive practitioners of such extralegal operations. In Nairobi, MIT relied on Kenyan government operatives to carry out the abductions and was able to bypass Kenyan courts, according to the Western security officials who, like others, spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss a sensitive operation.

Turkey has branded this global campaign its own “war on terror” in an echo of the phrase that came to define the period after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in the United States. Turkey has also drawn extensively from the U.S. counterterrorism playbook. Beyond renditions, it has used secret detentions, terrorism watch lists, asset seizures and torture — including at least one reported case of waterboarding — against exiles, according to U.N. documents, human rights groups, Western security officials and public records in Turkey.

Repression’s long arm

Turkey has stepped up efforts to intimidate and repatriate critics living in exile by labeling them terrorists. The Washington Post is investigating a global surge in campaigns of cross-border repression. The United States and other Western governments have struggled to stem this phenomenon. As a result, sanctuary for those fleeing persecution is shrinking on nearly every continent.

These operations have been “justified in the name of combating terrorism,” according to a U.N. report, even though nearly all those targeted are members of a religious sect known as the Gulen movement with no history of terrorist attacks. Turkey has labeled the group a terrorist organization because of its members’ alleged involvement in a failed 2016 coup. But the United States and other governments have rejected this designation, and the movement has not been accused of acquiring explosives, plotting attacks against civilians or other activities associated with terrorism.

This article includes previously unreported details about Turkey’s rendition operations and its reliance on counterterrorism capabilities to target exiles. It is based on dozens of interviews with Western, Turkish and other government officials, U.N. advisers and human rights experts, as well as victims of abductions and their relatives and associates. The Washington Post also relied on Turkish court records, U.N. documents and other materials.

Turkish officials defended the country’s campaign against the Gulen movement, saying that the Turkish government abides by legal processes — including arrest warrants and criminal trials — that the United States often bypassed in its own operations against terrorist groups.

“This is a terrorist organization,” a senior Turkish official said in an interview here, adding that the government apprehends members overseas and returns them to Turkey “because it is important for them to be judged here.”

Kenyan officials, including a representative of the office of the president, did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Turkey's attempt to characterize this crackdown as counterterrorism is seen by human rights organizations and Western security officials as an attempt to legitimize a campaign of transnational repression, a term for governments' use of violence and intimidation against exiles seen as a political threat.

In doing so, Turkey is part of a broader phenomenon. Global powers and autocratic leaders have applied the terrorist label to an expanding array of exiled groups and cast operations against them — including assassinations and abductions — as a continuation of the post-9/11 struggle.

China has applied the term to members of the Uyghur religious minority; India to Sikh separatists; Iran to journalists and women's rights activists; Vietnam to Christian dissidents; and Rwanda to opposition figures — to cite only some of the countries now routinely branding critics living outside their borders as terrorists.

They have done so in part to exploit the pejorative power of a term that has no internationally agreed-upon definition, but also to justify their manipulation of a global counterterrorism apparatus that enables them to seize assets, track travel and capture supposed suspects, international monitors said.

The post-9/11 efforts of Washington and its allies largely succeeded in dismantling al-Qaeda and preventing further attacks in the United States. But in straying from long-standing laws and norms, the campaign came to be associated with targeted killings by drone, CIA black sites and torture, indefinite detention without trial at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, the brutalization of prisoners by the U.S. military at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, and the United States' own rendition operations around the globe.

After 9/11, the United States was “driving a completely legitimate set of objectives,” said Juan Zarate, who served as a senior counterterrorism official in the George W. Bush administration. The abuses, however, “had a corrosive effect not just on the legitimacy of what we were doing but in allowing authoritarian regimes the running room to claim that what they were doing were within the boundaries of what the West had done.” International monitors and security officials said the abuse of counterterrorism capabilities has added to the complicated legacy of the response to the Sept. 11 attacks.

“Twenty-plus years after 9/11, you would anticipate a diminished” reliance on the terms and tactics associated with the war on terror, said Fionnuala Ni Aolain, who served as special rapporteur to the United Nations on counterterrorism and human rights from 2017 until last year. “Instead, what we find is a repurposing, reappropriation and acceleration of those methods by backsliding democracies and authoritarian regimes.”

Mourners carry the casket of Turkish Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen after a funeral prayer service at Skylands Stadium in Augusta, New Jersey, on Oct. 24. Gulen, who was accused by Turkey of organizing a failed 2016 coup, died in exile in the United States on Oct. 20.

A remote airstrip and a secret flight

Turkey's operations have primarily been aimed at members of an Islamic movement founded by Fethullah Gulen, a reclusive cleric who attracted millions of followers. [He died Oct. 20](#) at a U.S. hospital, after spending decades in exile living in a compound in Pennsylvania. Gulen was once a close ally of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and helped fuel his rise to power. But the alleged involvement of Gulen loyalists in a failed 2016 coup triggered a sweeping crackdown involving mass purges and arrests, according to the Turkish opposition, human rights groups and public records.



Mourners carry the casket of Turkish Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen after a funeral prayer service at Skylands Stadium in Augusta, New Jersey, on Oct. 24. Gulen, who was accused by Turkey of organizing a failed 2016 coup, died in exile in the United States on Oct. 20. (Leonardo Munoz/AFP/Getty Images)

Turkey declared the Gulen sect a terrorist group and began referring to it as FETO, or “Fethullahist Terrorist Organization.” The United States refused Turkey’s demands that it do the same, as well as requests that Gulen be extradited, citing a lack of evidence that he or the organization were violating any laws.

Gulen movement leaders have long denied responsibility for the coup, in which a faction of the Turkish military commandeered tanks and fighter jets in a failed attempt to oust Erdogan.

The Gulen organization “is a peaceful movement that categorically rejects violence in discourse and action,” said Y. Alp Aslandogan, executive director of the Alliance for Shared Values, a Gulen-affiliated organization based in New Jersey. The FETO designation, he said, “has not been recognized or ratified by the United Nations or any U.N. member state except Turkey.”

Though banned in Turkey, the organization has spread widely internationally, establishing charities and schools in dozens of countries. Erdogan treats these branches as nodes in a terrorist network still plotting to infiltrate and overthrow his government, and touts MIT's work to eradicate them. Abductions are routinely highlighted in the pro-government news outlet Daily Sabah, with photos of handcuffed Gulen followers forced to stand between Turkish flags under a recurring "War on Terror" headline.

MIT has [published a tally of its rendition operations on a webpage](#) that depicts FETO as the equivalent of al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the PKK, a Kurdish militant group that has been designated a terrorist organization by the United States and other governments. A version published in March of this year boasts that 114 Gulenists had been "brought to justice" from 28 countries.

The tally does not include the Turkish nationals flown out of Kenya.

Ranging in age from their early 40s to mid-50s, none had been accused of crimes or immigration violations in Kenya, according to relatives and associates. Two were in the process of securing visas to relocate to the United States, U.S. officials said. A third, Mustafa Genc, had lived in Kenya for 24 years and served as the director of a respected private school established by the Omeriye Foundation, a Gulen-linked charity. The other three who were abducted also worked for the school or foundation.

Gulen movement leaders said Turkey has generally targeted prominent representatives of the movement overseas, major financial supporters and individuals with ties to the organization's founder. They spoke on the condition of anonymity, citing fear of retaliation. Genc, a well-known figure in diplomatic circles in Nairobi, appears to have been on MIT's radar for years. His name is on a 2018 document listing dozens of Gulen followers in Kenya who were under investigation by a Turkish prosecutor, according to a copy of the document obtained by Nordic Monitor, a Stockholm-based organization that tracks Turkey's operations abroad.

Genc, 46, was briefly detained in Kenya and released in 2021 as part of a previous rendition operation targeting one of Gulen's nephews, according to associates and human rights organizations.

All four of those abducted in Nairobi in October had U.N. refugee status and were supposed to "be protected from forcible return" to a country where they faced threats to "life or freedom," according to documents issued by the Kenyan government.

And yet Kenya's National Intelligence Service collaborated with MIT on a mission that involved months of surveillance and was designed to circumvent courts and international legal protections, according to Western security officials familiar with details of the operation.

One of the abductions took place shortly after 7:30 a.m. on a residential street in northwest Nairobi, according to an account provided to The Post by Necdet Seyitoglu, one of three

Turkish nationals who were abducted but later released. The others released were the spouse and teenage son of separate targets.

Seyitoglu, who works for an education consulting firm in Nairobi and is involved in Gulen organizations, said he had just climbed into a colleague's car for the commute to work when a white SUV cut in front of their vehicle. They were then surrounded by four gunmen. "I thought it was a robbery and I was ready to give all my money," Seyitoglu said. "But they ordered us toward the [SUV] and pushed us in. Then I understood they are not robbers."

Necdet Seyitoglu, photographed in an undisclosed location on Nov. 25. Seyitoglu was abducted while on the way to work in Nairobi in October but released later that day. (Tom Jamieson for The Washington Post)

Seyitoglu, 49, said he and his colleague, Huseyin Yesilsu, 42, were handcuffed and hooded as the SUV sped out of the city. Their captors wore masks and civilian clothes. Seyitoglu said he could tell they were Kenyan from a brief glimpse of one's skin and the language they spoke, but that he and Yesilsu suspected Turkey's hand.

After hours of driving, the SUV stopped and Seyitoglu said he could hear scraping sounds possibly made by agents changing license plates. He used the delay to plead with his captors to examine his passport, which showed that he was a U.K. citizen, having lived 18 years in Britain before moving to Nairobi.

"They took a picture and sent it to their boss," he said.

Those in charge of the operation appear to have balked at the potential fallout over their treatment of a British national. By coincidence, the head of Britain's MI6 spy agency, Richard Moore, was scheduled to arrive in Nairobi just days later for meetings with Kenya's intelligence service.

Seyitoglu was ushered into a different vehicle and then dropped off on the outskirts of Nairobi. His captors gave him \$6 for a taxi, he said, but refused to return his phone or laptop. Only when he finally made it home, he said, did he learn that Yesilsu was still missing and that others had also been abducted.

Seyitoglu said he has since returned to work but remains shaken. "Every single morning when I leave home I am looking over my back," he said. "Is there a car or an [SUV] following me? It is a kind of trauma."

As news of the abductions spread, Western diplomats, U.N. representatives and human rights organizations launched a frantic effort to prevent Kenya from transferring the captives to Turkey.

Initial signals seemed reassuring. In a private conversation with a Western diplomat, Kenyan President William Ruto insisted that the Turkish refugees were still in Kenya and

that his government would follow international law before making any decisions on whether they would be transferred, according to officials familiar with the discussion. In reality, they were already gone.

All four were forced aboard a secret flight that departed a remote Kenyan airstrip on the Friday they were abducted and landed two hours later — presumably in Somalia, where Turkey has a large military installation — according to associates citing information provided by a lawyer who met with the captured men in Turkey. From there, the captives were put on another plane to Turkey, the associates said.

“We have been played,” a U.N. official said in a text to his colleagues as word spread that weekend that it was too late to stop the transfers, according to individuals who saw the message.

Genc, Yesilsu, Alparslan Tasci, 40, and Ozturk Uzun, 56, had been deposited in cells in Sincan prison near Ankara by the time the Kenyan government publicly acknowledged their departure, according to Western security officials and associates of the prisoners. That Monday, three days after the abductions, Kenya’s principal secretary for foreign affairs, Korir Sing’Oei, confirmed that the government had participated in the operation but only after having “received assurances from the Turkish authorities that the four will be treated with dignity in keeping with national and international law.”

Charges against those abducted in Nairobi have so far not been made public. Others brought back to Turkey have faced broad allegations of belonging to “an armed terrorist network,” according to charging documents obtained by The Post that do not accuse defendants of involvement in any specific terrorist plots.

In many cases, the charging documents show, defendants had left Turkey long before the coup, and evidence against them consists of alleged deposits made to a Gulen-affiliated bank or use of an encrypted messaging app downloaded by Gulen followers. Turkey’s use of app downloads as evidence in prosecutions was criticized last year by the European Court of Human Rights, which ruled that Ankara had violated numerous European conventions with terrorism laws so sweeping that “anyone who had used [the app] could, in principle, be convicted on that basis alone.”

The senior Turkish official defended the prosecutions, saying they “are not a witch hunt. People are charged for certain crimes and if they are acquitted they are let go.”

Lawyers who have represented Gulen members abducted in other countries said they were unaware of any cases that had ended in acquittal. The lawyers spoke on the condition of anonymity, citing concern about government retaliation.

‘Coercion, torture and degrading treatment’

Kenya’s involvement puts it on an expanding roster of countries accused of collaborating with Turkey on extrajudicial renditions.

They include Albania, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Gabon, Kosovo, Kazakhstan, Lebanon and [Pakistan](#), “among others,” according to a 2020 report by a U.N. working group on involuntary disappearances that was submitted to the Turkish government. The Post obtained a copy.

The report said the renditions were often preceded by secret cooperation agreements with other governments “containing broad and vague references to combating terrorism.” When formal extradition measures fail, the report said, Turkish authorities “resort to covert operations” in which those apprehended are “forcibly disappeared for up to several weeks” and “often subjected to coercion, torture and degrading treatment.”

The report details a half-dozen cases, including the 2018 abduction of a Turkish woman in Lebanon who later said in a petition submitted to a Turkish court that she had been “subjected to electrical shocks, waterboarding and hanging upside down.” Waterboarding is an interrogation method meant to induce the sensation of drowning that was used by the CIA on al-Qaeda suspects, [including Khalid Sheikh Mohammed](#), the self-proclaimed mastermind of the 9/11 attacks.

In a written response to the working group, Turkey insisted that it had always “acted in line with its international human rights obligations” and accused the Gulen movement of “presenting itself as the victim of human rights violations to hide its crimes.”

In some countries, collaboration with Turkey has triggered repercussions.

After Moldova handed over seven teachers from a Gulen academy in 2018, the country was sanctioned by the European Court of Human Rights. The head of Moldova’s intelligence service later pleaded guilty to abusing his authority in ordering the rendition. There was similar fallout in Kosovo following its 2018 transfer of six Turkish nationals. A parliamentary investigation concluded that the targets “had been arbitrarily detained, forcibly disappeared and illegally transferred to Turkey.”

Kosovo’s interior minister and spy chief were fired even as Erdogan publicly boasted that “our intelligence agency brought six top FETO terrorists to Turkey,” and vowed that MIT would continue hunting Gulenists.

“We will find them,” Erdogan said, “and we will bring them back to Turkey.”

Detainees kneel during an early-morning Islamic prayer at the U.S. military prison for “enemy combatants” in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, in 2009. (John Moore/Getty Images)

‘What about Guantánamo?’

To those involved in the U.S. response to 9/11, there are important distinctions between the war on terror and attempts to co-opt it.

They note that there was near-universal agreement among U.N. members that al-Qaeda and its offshoots were terrorist organizations, a level of international support notably absent in the campaigns against Uyghurs, Sikhs and Gulenists.

And while India, Turkey and China have overwhelmingly targeted their own people, U.S. counterterrorism operations were generally not directed at U.S. citizens, but at alleged members of al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and their affiliates. An exception was the 2011 drone strike in Yemen that killed Anwar al-Awlaki, a cleric accused of preparing al-Qaeda recruits for attacks.

Even defenders of the war on terror, however, acknowledge that post-9/11 revelations of secret prisons, torture chambers and rendition flights did lasting damage to the West's ability to hold other governments to account for human rights violations.

"The retort from China and Russia is often, 'What about Abu Ghraib? What about Guantánamo?'" said Zarate, the Bush administration counterterrorism official. "These have become narrative caricatures that these regimes use to deflect criticism."

In Turkey, officials responded to questions about the abductions with a similar refrain. "It's not like they are removed to a remote gulag and left there," the senior Turkish official said. "The American war on terror [used CIA black sites and Guantánamo] to allow authorities to do whatever they wanted with impunity."

Human rights experts said that the U.S. war on terror also gave rise to new international authorities, agencies, watch lists, surveillance platforms and other capabilities with inadequate guardrails to prevent them from being abused.

Many were mandated by U.N. resolutions that ultimately had the perverse effect of helping enable countries to target exiles, said John Sifton, the Asia advocacy director at Human Rights Watch. "A lot of countries cited these resolutions as justifications for harsh laws" now being wielded against targets of transnational repression, he said.

Entities ostensibly created to foster counterterrorism cooperation have become vehicles to track down dissidents. In the Middle East, the innocuously named Arab Interior Ministers Council has functioned as a regional surveillance network, according to human rights organizations. An Emirati national accused of supporting calls for political reforms during the Arab Spring was detained upon arrival in Jordan last year after a retinal scan flagged him as an alleged terrorism suspect, according to Joey Shea, the United Arab Emirates researcher at Human Rights Watch.

Khalaf al-Romaithi, who had lived in exile for years, was extradited days later to the United Arab Emirates. He is among dozens of current or former members of an organization accused of links to the Muslim Brotherhood who in 2013 were given multiyear prison sentences for alleged threats to overthrow the government, as part of a mass trial condemned by human rights groups.

UAE and Jordanian officials did not respond to requests for comment. Other countries have used counterterrorism financing laws to freeze assets and file criminal charges against dissidents, journalists, religious organizations and human rights groups, according to a U.N. report published last year that described the practice as part of a “playbook of misuse.”

In many cases, the measures being co-opted were enacted at the behest of Western governments. India, for example, passed stringent new laws after 2010 to make it compliant with the recommendations of the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force, a global organization that seeks to combat money laundering and terrorism financing. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, however, those measures have often been used to silence or subdue perceived opponents of the government. They include Muslim activists, Kashmiri protesters and journalists, according to a report released in September by Amnesty International, which itself has been targeted under the laws. Amnesty’s bank accounts in India have been frozen since 2020 after the organization criticized Delhi’s human rights record, Amnesty officials said. Indian officials did not respond to a request for comment.

President Joe Biden and Kenyan President William Ruto make their way to the Oval Office of the White House on May 23. Biden hosted Ruto for an official state visit, the first time an African leader received that honor since Barack Obama was president. (Demetrius Freeman/The Washington Post)

An apologetic note

The abductions in Kenya have underscored the limits of U.S. influence. In recent years, the United States has broadened its partnership with Kenya to counter the rising clout of Russia and China in Africa. Ruto was hosted for an official state visit by President Joe Biden earlier this year, the first time an African leader had received that honor since Barack Obama was president.

The United States has also expanded security support to Kenya, where the 1998 bombing of the U.S. Embassy served as an early warning of the determination and capabilities of al-Qaeda.

In 2020, the FBI teamed with Kenya to open a Joint Terrorism Task Force in Nairobi, the first time the United States had established overseas a version of the multiagency units that proliferated in the United States after 9/11. Members of Kenya’s counterterrorism police have been trained at the FBI academy in Quantico, Virginia.

But Kenya has also been courted by other nations seeking to advance their interests. Turkey has pledged hundreds of millions of dollars to build a new commercial center near Nairobi, and Turkish defense contractors have maneuvered to become key suppliers of tanks, armed drones and other military hardware to Kenya’s armed forces, according to information posted online by the Turkish and Kenyan governments and Turkish corporations.

The abductions and Kenyan officials' apparent dissembling about them stunned Western officials.

U.S. officials summoned Kenya's ambassador in Washington to the State Department on Oct. 25 for a meeting in which Marta Youth, the top department official on refugee issues, expressed "shock at the detention and involuntary return" of the Turkish nationals, according to an official who reviewed a summary of the meeting.

Post journalists discussed a series of stories on governments targeting their own citizens living abroad with increasingly brazen and unapologetic tactics. (Video: The Washington Post)

CIA Director William J. Burns and Moore, his British counterpart, also raised the issue in separate meetings with Ruto in Nairobi in October, officials said.

Ruto has struck an apologetic note and admitted to the U.N. high commissioner on refugees that the renditions were a "violation of Kenya's long-standing policies," according to Western diplomatic officials.

Ankara has yet to acknowledge the latest abductions, in contrast with previous cases. The four men were allowed to make brief calls to relatives in Turkey, according to associates. A lawyer who met with them upon their arrival in Turkey declined to answer questions from The Post, hanging up abruptly after saying he was no longer their attorney.

Erdogan's government has made clear that the crackdown against the Gulen movement will continue despite the death of its founder. Turkish authorities just last month detained 459 people across dozens of provinces accused of being members of FETO.

In a speech to party members on Oct. 22, four days after the Kenyan abductions, Erdogan lamented that Gulen himself had not been captured before his death but said that "he cannot escape from divine justice."

About this story

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