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Turkey: Attacks on the Legal Profession Unacceptable

International legal and human rights community condemns moves to undermine the independence of lawyers and the rule of law

The escalating attacks by Turkish authorities on the Istanbul Bar Association, its leadership, and members of the legal profession are an affront to the independence of the legal profession and the rule of law, an international coalition of lawyers, bar associations and human rights organizations warned today.

Removal of Elected Leadership

On 21 March 2025, the Istanbul 2nd Assize Court issued a ruling to remove the elected leadership of the Istanbul Bar Association under Article 77/5 of the Attorneyship Law. The decision mandates the dismissal of the Bar's president and executive board and orders new elections. This move undermines the independence of the legal profession and makes a mockery of the fundamental principles of justice and the rule of law in Turkey.

Criminal Proceedings Against Bar Leadership

In parallel, Istanbul Bar President İbrahim Kaboğlu and ten executive board members have been charged with “making propaganda for a terrorist organisation through the press” and “publicly disseminating misleading information,” with the prosecution seeking up to 12 years' imprisonment and political bans.

These charges and the related civil proceedings stem directly from a public statement issued by the Bar regarding the killing of two journalists, Nazım Daştan and Cihan Bilgin, in Syria in December 2024, and calling for an independent investigation into their deaths. That a professional association is now facing criminal prosecution for such a principled, rights-based intervention illustrates the severe restrictions faced by legal professionals in Turkey who engage in human rights advocacy.

Arbitrary Detention of Board Member

The arbitrary detention of Istanbul Bar board member Fırat Epözdemir further exemplifies the judicial harassment targeting the Bar's leadership. Arrested on 23 January 2025, after returning from an advocacy visit to the Council of Europe, Epözdemir has been charged with alleged “membership in a terrorist organisation” and “making propaganda for a terrorist organisation” under an indictment dated 8 April 2025. His continued detention and prosecution reflect an intensifying crackdown on legal professionals in Turkey who challenge state policies and defend human rights.

Escalating Attacks on Lawyers Amidst March 2025 Protests

Since the arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu on 19 March 2025, Turkey has witnessed widespread protests and the detention of hundreds of people across the country. Lawyers responding to these mass arrests to provide legal assistance have themselves become targets of repression. In İzmir and İstanbul, a number of lawyers were arrested while attempting to support detained protesters, including the former Chair of the İzmir Bar Association, Özkan Yücel, who was detained in an early morning raid on his home. On 28

March 2025, Mehmet Pehlivan, a lawyer representing Ekrem İmamoğlu was also arrested and later released under a judicial control order.

In addition to these arrests, lawyers seeking to represent those in custody faced serious obstacles trying to contact their clients and carry out their professional duties. In many cases, they were denied access to clients held in police custody or were only allowed to meet under restricted conditions that undermined confidentiality and effective representation. Reports indicate that lawyers were barred from entering courthouses during key questioning procedures, or were told hearings had taken place in their absence. In some instances, they were prevented from even confirming the whereabouts of those detained. Refusals to acknowledge, provide or confirm the fate or whereabouts of detained individuals is an element in the crime of an enforced disappearance.

These actions by the Turkish authorities constitute a direct interference with the right to legal defence, impeding access to justice and further criminalising legal support for peaceful protest and dissent. They mark a dangerous intensification of pressure on the legal profession and an erosion of fair trial guarantees and the rule of law.

Call to Action

These escalating attacks reveal a pattern of repression trampling over human rights and due process safeguards and mechanisms established to protect the rule of law. They also exemplify efforts to target the legal profession, undermining international standards that protect the role and rights of lawyers and their professional associations in the exercise of their professional functions.

We call upon the international community to:

- Demand the immediate cessation of all civil and criminal proceedings against the Istanbul Bar Association's leadership and members.
- Publicly condemn the Turkish authorities' misuse of the justice system to suppress independent legal professionals and institutions and undermine public confidence in the rule of law.
- Insist on the immediate and unconditional release of Firat Epözdemir and all other lawyers detained solely for carrying out their professional duties.
- Call on the Turkish authorities to allow the Istanbul Bar Association to operate independently and without any intimidation, harassment or reprisals.
- Urge international mechanisms, including the Council of Europe, United Nations, and European Union bodies, to take robust and effective actions to uphold the independence of the legal profession, human rights and the rule of law in Turkey.

Signatories:

Amnesty International

Berlin Bar Association

Défense Sans Frontière-Avocats Solidaires (Defense Without Borders-Solidarity Lawyers, DSF-AS)

Deutscher Anwaltverein (German Bar Association, DAV)

Federation of European Bars (FBE)
Foundation of the Day of the Endangered Lawyer
Geneva Bar Association
Giuristi Democratici (Italian Democratic Lawyers)
Human Rights Watch (HRW)
Indian Association of Lawyers
International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI)
International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
**International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), within the framework of the
Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders**
Law Society of England and Wales (LSEW)
Lawyers for Lawyers
Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada (LRWC)
**Magistrats Européens pour la Démocratie et les Libertés (European Association of
Judges and Public Prosecutors, MEDEL)**
Milan Bar Association
National Association of Democratic Lawyers (South Africa)
National Union of Peoples' Lawyers (Philippines)
**Republikanischer Anwältinnen- und Anwälteverein (Republican Lawyers' Association,
RAV)**
The Defense Commission of the Barcelona Bar Association
**The European Association of Lawyers for Democracy and World Human Rights
(ELDH)**
The International Observatory for Lawyers in Danger (OIAD)
The New York City Bar Association
Turkey Human Rights Litigation Support Project (TLSP)
**World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the
Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders**