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**Contribution to a Report[[1]](#footnote-1):**

**Psychosocial dynamics conducive to torture and ill-treatment**

**Issued by:** Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

**Purpose:** To inform the Special Rapporteur’s annual interim report to be presented to the General Assembly at its 75th Session in October 2020

**Torture and Ill-Treatment: Turkish Case**

Turkey has experienced some major changes in the field of politics in 2002. The five-year period by the post-modern coup of February 1997 until the general elections in 2002 was very challenging for Turkey.[[2]](#footnote-2) The first priority of the AKP government, which was established in 2001 and achieved a significant success in the elections in 2002, was to start negotiations with the European Union at full speed. One of the first issues on the agenda in the framework of the negotiations among the EU and Turkey was Turkey's notorious report on torture and ill-treatment. Within the framework of these negotiations, the AKP's promise was formulated in the party program in the form of 'zero tolerance to torture'. This formula, which was taken up in negotiations with the EU, became very popular. Despite Turkey’s enthusiasm for democracy and the liberalization atmosphere, then remarkable, EU countries were sceptical on human rights issues. However, they all approached in good faith, demanded practical changes in the field of human rights. Improvement laws on human rights were also discussed in negotiations with EU countries. However, press organs and EU officials in the EU have been constantly underlining an issue: "The laws enacted are very pleasing, but we want to see the implementation."[[3]](#footnote-3) Indeed, it has been revealed that the EU's concerns have been justified over time. Human rights activists and democrats lawyers in Turkey have all focused on a point in the positive atmosphere at the beginning of the 2000s: 'Turkey must implement reforms in improving the human rights in accordance with their needs and universal rules of law.'[[4]](#footnote-4) Because certain purposes in accordance with the instrumentalization of law in Turkey was not a new issue. Turkish people's awareness of human rights is extremely weak. Almost everyone in Turkey, unless breach of their fundamental rights enjoys the violation of ‘other’ people's rights especially if those ‘others’ are not sharing similar ideological formation or a way of life with themselves. One of the most important point to be emphasized for the Turkish society is that the culture of coexistence has not developed in fully-fledged sense. The concept of ‘fellow citizen’ does not mean much to the Turkish society. Let's briefly try to address the psycho-social bases of human rights abuses as torture and ill-treatment.

Turkish society has been in constant contact with Europe for historical reasons. We can define this relationship as 'admiration for Europe secretly, but obviously a hatred for Europe'.[[5]](#footnote-5) There is always an admiration and longing for Europe (the West) in daily life. The prosperous social and economic life in Europe is praised in daily conversations. However, it immediately meets with suspicion in large segment of society on human rights criticism from Europe, simply by flawless claims like; ‘Europe will divide Turkey, Europe is always against Turkey, because they are Christians etc.’ Especially the criticism coming from Europe about the violation of the rights of the Kurdish people is rejected in full anger by the majority of the society. [[6]](#footnote-6)At this point, I will consider the effects of three processes two are historical and completed the other is political and ongoing. Examining these processes, I believe, can give us some analytical tools to understand psychosocial background of Turkish society. The first of these processes is a situation that we can define as post-imperial trauma. Ottoman Empire Primary and secondary schools’ history textbooks in Turkish national education curricula put Ottoman Empire *vis-à-vis* the West, especially over military 'successes' Many Turkish youths who have completed 12 years of education have a stereotype in their minds that the Ottoman Empire was strong and successful against the West thanks to its military power. But this empire collapsed and huge human influx from the geography of Europe (significantly from the Balkans and Greek territory) to Turkey (I am using the Word "Turkey" in a geographical sense) emigrated. Since the lands are lost against the West, the reactions from the West are always met with suspicion. Similarly, many people at war with the Russian Caucasus in the 1870s (Muslims) emigrated to Turkey as well. Both the social environment created by these migrations and the ill-treatment of people during the migrations and the ‘lost lands’ caused a trauma in the mind of the Turkish society. In this article, I named this trauma, which is reinforced and kept alive in the curriculum, as post-imperial trauma. Because of this trauma, every criticism about human rights coming from the West is interpreted as the West will disrupt our union and imprison us in an even smaller geographical area.

The second process I will consider was typified by a slogan’ 21st century will be of the Turks’. There was a very heated debate in Turkish public opinion during and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This debate was one of the most important issue discussed by the Turkish society in the early 1990s. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, post-Soviet Turkic republics were expected to provide support to Turkey and even by some commentators a unity under the leadership of Turkey was seen plausible and possible. However, those post-Soviet republics entered again significantly under the influence of Russia. The dreams of returning to the "glorious days" of the Ottoman empire have totally been destroyed. This was so-called a serious issue discussed both in daily press and academic circles. The Turkish society had a very closed structure until the 1990s. It has been noticed by the Turkish society that there are important educational efforts and working discipline under the successes of the Western world and even Russia. This trauma aroused the thought that there was not much chance of success of the Turkish society with its current education system and economic structure and the search for strong leaders became the basic political motivation of the society.

This 'imperial' past and current imperial aspirations offer a wide range of political manoeuvring areas to powerful political leaders in agitating and directing Turkish society. In this vein, the third process I will consider is neo-Ottomanism debates that have emerged in recent years, especially in political discourses, more particularly in the discourses of AKP’s leader Erdogan and some politicians of AKP. The book titled Strategic Depth (Stratejik Derinlik in Turkish) written by former Prime Minister Ahmet Davudoğlu, was also considered as the theoretical infrastructure of this neo-Ottomanism. Indeed, political and military engagements, which have been attempted in Syria, Iraq, Somalia, the Balkans (in Egypt for a short time) and finally in Libya for the last seven years, are perceived as dreams of reunification, as areas of influence, for the lands lost by the Turks. The fact that the government instrumentalizes these policies in social perception and accuses the social and political opposition inside as obstacles for its imperial purposes, and it finds a significant number of buyers in Turkish society.[[7]](#footnote-7) In other words, while AKP and its leader pursue large imperial projects outside, the opposition inside perceived by most of the Turkish society as obstacles to these projects. All in all, Erdogan as a strong political figüre, is given an unlimited credit by large segments of the society.

I tried to go down to the root of psycho-social motives, which caused the insensitivity of the Turkish society about human rights violations above. Such processes constitute the basic reading point in Turkey's relations with the West. Turkey's relations with the West, particularly the European Union, brings the human rights violations on the agenda. The “crimes” that cause human rights violations are generally ‘crimes’ of freedom of thought and freedom of expression; or crimes that are dealt with belonging to a social or an ethnic group. Huge portion of Turkish society believes and behaves as defined in the national education curriculum of the state. Thus, people who are outside this realm perceived as problematic, dangerous and extensions of the West within us. In this sense, it is assumed that these people pose a threat to 'social integrity'. Then, they are treated as people who want to divide and break up the Turkish state. Therefore, it is believed that violating the fundamental rights of these people is seen legitimate.

Now we can mention a few examples related to the legitimization of torture and ill-treatment in Turkey.

**Placing All the Kurds As Dividers Under the Name of PKK**

PKK was founded as an organization engaged in terrorist activities in Turkey's Southeast in the 1980s and gradually increased its effectiveness. How this organization was established and its contact with the state is beyond our scope. However, almost every kind of opposition in Turkey's Southeast Kurdish region grounded by the state language as PKK activities. The most common example of this is the removal of a significant number of Kurdish-origin municipal mayors, who have come to power by popular vote, recently. State officials simply blame them supporting PKK. For example, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, stated recently ‘we have serious evidence that they (municipal mayors) support PKK. They support the PKK but they do not accept it."[[8]](#footnote-8) Many of the dismissed mayors went to prison after being deposed from their posts. For example, Diyarbakır Mayor Selçuk Mızraklı, who was dismissed, was sentenced to 9 years and 4 months in prison.[[9]](#footnote-9) In fact, the fact that human rights violations which are overshadowed, clearly manifested in the language used against the PKK. This language is literally a dehumanization language. While explaining how the PKK targets were hit frequently in the Turkish press; expressions such as bloody terrorist organization, terrorists hiding in their lairs, treacherous terrorist organization, bloody face of terrorism, baby killer terrorists are used.[[10]](#footnote-10) It is possible to hear these statements not only in the press, but also in Daily use of people. Likewise, we witness that politicians, who should remain the coldest bloody and who should ensure social reconciliation, frequently use the same discriminatory language. The main problem here is more than military operations to a terrorist organization. Because, civilian people also suffer greatly during these operations. Especially in the 1980s, hundreds of villages were emptied under the pretext of terrorist operations in Turkey's Southeast. People took their very few belongings or nothing with them and left their villages within a day or two. They had great difficulties in retaining life in the cities they migrated to. They were also treated as criminals by government officials in cities.[[11]](#footnote-11) Hundreds of Kurdish intellectuals were subjected to heavy torture in Diyarbakır prison, following the 1980 military coup under the name of combating terrorism. Inhuman prison conditions such as large numbers of people staying in very narrow prison wards, physical violence, and faecal feeding. Forced disappearances were the regular events of the time.[[12]](#footnote-12) Long-term adverse propaganda was carried out before these torture and ill-treatment. They are shown as non-civilized, uncultured, nonhuman beings of the people living in the region.

**FETO, A Mere Tool Blaming and Dehumanizing Others.**

The Gülen movement was exposed one of the agonizing fundamental human rights violations in Turkey. Turkey's largest non-governmental organization engaged in education has been subjected to a full lynching under the pretext role in anti-corruption operation in 17 to 25 December 2013. The movement was promptly labelled as "parallel state"[[13]](#footnote-13) and a propaganda campaign was launched against it claiming that the Gülen movement wanted to seize the Turkish state, wanted to destroy the state etc. This propaganda was first and foremost out by Erdogan, the prime minister of the time. The Prime Minister used a powerful demonization language against the movement. Some of the terms he used are assassins, the parallel state, the evil network, the traitors within us, the traitors of the country, the leeches that suck the blood of the nation.[[14]](#footnote-14) The Gülen Movement was subjected to a full-scale lynching campaign after the July 15, 2016 coup attempt. The concept of FETO (so called Fethullahist Terrorist Organization),[[15]](#footnote-15) which was put into circulation short before the coup, was widely used in the language of the prime minister, the president, the ministers and by the press. In order to understand how Erdogan had gone far one can see the video in the link below. He scolded the journalist who did not use the term “terrorist organization” in a live broadcast[[16]](#footnote-16) and forced him to use the term “terrorist organization”. In such ways a perception was crated about the movement, ‘a terrorist organization.’ Shortly after the coup, thousands of school buildings connected to the Gülen movement were looted and the items in the buildings were stolen by the crowds. Effective religious figures have given fiery sermons that will entice the public and said that everything belonging to the Gülen movement can be taken as spoils.[[17]](#footnote-17) Preaches were even made that spouses of people from the Gulen movement could be used as a sexual commodity. The inclusion of a large number of people in the raids caused legitimization of the plundering in the eyes of crowds. People from the Gulen movement had to hide in the country after the coup. State officials and government-controlled media frequently use(d) such slogans for the Gülen movement members, “They were caught in their lairs, July 15 murderers are looking for holes to escape, the ringleader of the bloody terrorist organization, we will narrow the world to the armed terrorist organization”.[[18]](#footnote-18) In this way, they are subjected to constant demonization before the society.

**Impunity in the Face of Torture and Ill-Treatment**

Between the end of 2015 and the first days of 2016, just after the general elections, the government organized a military operation in the southeast of the country. It was claimed that the purpose of the operation was to capture PKK members who were hiding in some cities. During this operation, a number of serious human rights violations such as killing a lot of people, injuring people, and being imprisoned in their homes for a long time came to the agenda and were kept on the agenda for a long time, especially on social media. Although approximately 130 people were killed in the basements of the houses, an investigation was not required. For example, during this period, a 57-year-old woman named Taybet Inan was screened and killed by guns because she appeared in front of her house. Her brother-in-law, who wanted to take her dead body was killed as well in the same way. The corpses could not be taken for seven days. Whoever came out of houses they were fired immediately. Taybet İnan's funeral was organized and buried 23 days after her death. Her children were not allowed to participate in the funeral. [[19]](#footnote-19) Nobody has yet been sentenced for effective investigation into the killing of Taybet İnan. Another example of ill-treatment and torture happened to Hacı Lokman Birlik. The 24-year-old Union was shot down by security forces on October 3, 2015. While injured, his body was dragged by being attached to an armoured police vehicle and killed as such. It turned out that 30 police officers had been photographed at the beginning of his funeral, but no police investigation was launched into this murder.[[20]](#footnote-20) The worst examples of torture and ill-treatment remained unpunished, came along after the July 15, 2016 coup attempt. Thousands of soldiers were subjected to severe torture for days after the coup, on the grounds that they were involved in the coup. No legal process was initiated against any torturer, even though the torturers were certain even with photographs and video recordings. After the coup attempt, a large number of civil servants (approximately 500,000 as of today) were detained on charges of attempting a coup, many of them dismissed from their jobs. Many of these people were sentenced to prison terms at certain times, and they were subjected to severe ill-treatment both before the imprisonment process and under bad conditions in prison. Some of them died as a result of torture. For example, 42-year-old history teacher named Gökhan Açıkkollu was detained in Istanbul for 13 days after the July 15 coup attempt.[[21]](#footnote-21) It was witnessed that he was tortured in custody. His head was hit against the wall, his ribs were broken with kicks. Although he was sick, his medications were not given. He could not bear the torture and died on the 13th day of the detention. His body was asked to be buried in the cemetery of the traitors. The funeral prayer was not performed. Açıkkollu was found innocent 1.5 years after his death and officially returned to his post. However, no investigation was opened against the torturers. Officials who use public power are comfortable in knowing that they will not be punished after their torture.[[22]](#footnote-22) The assurance that they will not be punished gives the impression that the decision was taken from above in the eyes of torturers and they believe that the ones who are above bear the blame.

1. This contribution was prepared by Prof. Dr. Sammas Salur, on behaf of Human Rights Defenders e.V. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. url: <https://140journos.com/28-%C5%9Fubatta-neredeydiniz-c20148b94585> (18 June 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a detailed overview of the discussions see: url: <https://www.ab.gov.tr/p.php?e=20926> (17 June 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. url: <http://www.tmmob.org.tr/etkinlik/tmmob-demokrasi-kurultayi-1998/insan-haklari> (15 June 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Oğuzhan Cengiz, Türkmen Beyi Bahçeli, İstanbul, Bilgeoguz Publications, 2014, s. 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. url: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/avrupanin-gozde-teror-orgutu-pkk/1614405> (16 June 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. By the TV commercials as well, especially Kuruluş Osman (The Inception, Ottoman) Payitaht Abdulhamid (The Capital, Abdulhamid), Kurtlar Vadisi (The Valley of the Wolves) ‘Ottomanist nationalism’ and Neo-Ottomanism have been agitated in the minds of the Turkish people. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. url: <https://www.haberler.com/disisleri-bakani-cavusoglu-hdp-li-belediye-13344174-haberi/> (20 June 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. url: <https://www.dw.com/tr/sel%C3%A7uk-m%C4%B1zrakl%C4%B1ya-9-y%C4%B1l-hapis-cezas%C4%B1/a-52693818> (17 June 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. url: <https://www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/bebek-katili-abdullah-ocalandan-hdpye-yeni-cagri-888994.html> (14 June 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. url: <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/09/150904_90lar_4_guneydogu> (14 June 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. url: <https://www.dw.com/tr/ihd-istanbul-zorla-kaybetme-devlet-politikas%C4%B1/a-50228168> (15 June 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. url: <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/haberler/paralel-devlet> (15 June 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. url: <https://www.turkererturk.com.tr/pensilvanyadaki-alamut-kalesi-2/> (14 June 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. url: <http://fetogercekleri.com/fetode-bugun/> (19 June 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. url: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tl6cG3yZOHI> (13 June 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. url: <https://aktifhaber.com/yasam/cemaatin-mallari-ganimettir-tepe-tepe-kullanin-diyen-balkanlioglu-oldu-h118791.html> (15 June 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. url: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/feto-elebasi-gulenin-yegeni-silahli-teror-orgutu-uyeliginden-yargilanacak/1711573> (13 June 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. url: [https://t24.com.tr/haber/taybet-inan-23-gun-sonra-defnedildi-esi-ve-cocuklari-izin-verilmedigi-icin-cenazeye-katilamadi,323748](https://t24.com.tr/haber/taybet-inan-23-gun-sonra-defnedildi-esi-ve-cocuklari-izin-verilmedigi-icin-cenazeye-katilamadi%2C323748) (16 June 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. url: <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/388073/haci-lokman-birlik-sorusturmasi-4-yildir-yerinde-sayiyor> (14 June 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. url: <https://www.tr724.com/iste-gokhan-acikkollu-cinayetinin-belgeleri-iskenceyle-oldugune-sahidim/> (17 June 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/10/12/custody/police-torture-and-abductions-turkey> (20 June 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)