



Holding Its General Assembly in Turkey Could Imperil INTERPOL's Legitimacy

Suat Cubukcu, Ph.D.

Adjunct Faculty, George Mason University

Suleyman Ozeren, Ph.D.

Adjunct Faculty, George Mason University



Suat Cubukcu, Ph.D.

Professorial Lecturer,
American University

Suleyman Ozeren, Ph.D.

Adjunct Faculty,
George Mason University

The International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) General Assembly convenes on November 23-25, 2021, in Istanbul, Turkey. It will be one of the most historic meetings for the body, as the majority (12 out of 13) of its Executive Committee members, all of its appellate body members, and the organization's president will be elected. Several risks and challenges await INTERPOL's new governing body.

Being the largest global police organization with 194 member countries, INTERPOL has a vital role in connecting police organizations to fight international crime worldwide. The primary functions of INTERPOL include issuing Red Notices and diffusion communications among member police organizations. On average, INTERPOL issues more than 10,000 Red Notices and more than 100,000 wanted-person alerts every year.

While INTERPOL's involvement is necessary for law enforcement at the international level, the organization has been susceptible to political abuse by autocratic governments. According to the recent report from the Heritage Foundation, countries known to be human-rights abusers and intolerant of political criticism have misused INTERPOL to track down political dissidents in other countries and persecute them in their homeland. Moreover, the unlawful use of INTERPOL leads to detrimental consequences for the suspects who are not prosecuted in a fair trial. Any person named in a Red Notice, for example, could be subject to arrest and imprisonment, cancellation of a visa, deportation, being barred from accessing financial systems, and a tarnished reputation for being accused—most likely in public—of being an international criminal.

Unfortunately, some member states, including Russia, Turkey, China, and Venezuela, have weaponized INTERPOL and targeted thousands of political refugees with Red Notices. In the last decade, the number of requests from these

autocratic countries for INTERPOL to arrest and extradite political opponents has risen significantly. In 2020 alone, INTERPOL issued 11,094 Red Notices, a large portion of which came from these autocratic regimes.

Article 3 of the INTERPOL Constitution states: “It is strictly forbidden for the Organization to undertake any intervention or activities of a political, military, religious or racial character.” These autocratic countries have been violating INTERPOL’s rules and misusing the organization, which is supposed to focus on non-political crimes, such as drug trafficking and violent offenses.

According to the 2021 Freedom House report on transnational repression, Turkey has rendered political dissidents from at least 31 different countries, where the Turkish government has persuaded the host governments to hand over its perceived enemies—without due process. Most of the targeted individuals are Gulenists and Kurdish and leftist activists. The report highlights Turkey’s recent misuse of INTERPOL by noting that “no other perpetrator state was found to have conducted such a large number of renditions, from so many countries, during the coverage period.”

Being one of the top jailers of journalists, Turkey has investigated, arrested, or imprisoned more than 220,000 civilians for terrorism charges since 2016. The Turkish governments’ use of INTERPOL for transnational persecution of political opponents increased exponentially after the July 2016 abortive coup. Amnesty International reports that “the judiciary disregarded fair trial guarantees and due process and continued to apply broadly defined anti-terrorism laws to punish acts protected under international human rights law.” According to Turkish officials, 116 people from 27 countries had been brought to Turkey to face “terrorism” charges for their alleged connection with the abortive coup. Freedom House has identified 55 people from 17 countries who had been rendered and sent to Turkey after being charged with alleged terrorism. These reports, however, are not exhaustive and underreport the numbers, as some of the renditions have been clandestine operations.

In addition, the AKP government has abused INTERPOL’s Stolen and Lost Travel Documents Database by sending thousands of official requests for the organization to invalidate passports and restrain the travel rights of the government’s political opponents. These individuals were taken by surprise, completely unaware that their passports had been revoked.

Some European Union leaders, such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel and international organizations, like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, have condemned Turkey for misusing the organization’s mechanisms and urged INTERPOL to be cautious when reviewing Turkey’s requests for assistance. Turkey’s Deputy Foreign Minister, however, contends that “the [INTERPOL] general assembly in Istanbul will be an important opportunity.” The Turkish government strives to leverage its position in INTERPOL as a host country to further its practice of transnational repression.

It should be noted that while INTERPOL has no policing authority to arrest or prosecute suspects, the organization’s power comes from its coordination capacity and its perceived legitimacy. It is imperative that INTERPOL remains a legitimate and effective transnational crime-fighting organization. INTERPOL’s legitimacy can be sustained only if the organization builds and maintains safeguards against abusive practices by its member states and prioritizes human rights and the rule of law.

While the authoritarian regimes might see the INTERPOL General Assembly as an opportunity to steer the organization in a repressive direction, democratic countries should take advantage of the meeting and create awareness against the misuse of INTERPOL.

The measures listed in the Transnational Repression Accountability and Prevention Act, a bipartisan bill in the U.S. Congress, could provide guiding principles for other countries to prevent the abuse of INTERPOL.

As a preventive measure, governments should be extra cautious about implementing Red Notice requests. The General Assembly could create an independent working group to investigate the recent abuses of Red Notices and other diffusion mechanisms.

INTERPOL is one of the most important intergovernmental cooperation platforms for law enforcement worldwide; however, bringing safeguards to prevent abusive practices would strengthen the organization's integrity, credibility, and legitimacy.

About the authors:

Dr. Suleyman Ozeren is an adjunct professor at George Mason University. His research interest includes international security, Turkey-US relations, Turkish foreign policy, political violence, and conflict resolution. Dr. Ozeren has worked collaboratively with the European Union; the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe; US Congress; George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies; and Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF).

Dr. Suat Cubukcu is a Professorial Lecturer in the Department of Justice, Law, and Criminology at American University in Washington, D.C. His research focuses on terrorism, extremism, disinformation, and policing. Dr. Cubukcu also serves as a consultant Senior Researcher and analyzes global and regional trends and patterns of terrorism incidents and creates innovative data visualizations for the US government.

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1050 Connecticut Ave NW Suite 500,
Washington, DC 20036
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