

Turkey: Drop Bogus Charges against Istanbul Bar Association Leadership

Human Rights Foundation Turkey, 5 January 2026

The continued prosecution of the president and 10 executive board members of the Istanbul Bar Association, and the prosecutor's request for their conviction on terrorism charges are a damning reflection of the troubled state of the rule of law and democratic norms in Turkey today, 38 human rights and lawyers' organisations said today. They called on the authorities to immediately terminate the abusive criminal proceedings and drop charges ahead of the 26th Istanbul Heavy Penal Court's expected final hearing scheduled for 5 to 9 January 2026.

The prosecutor seeks the criminal conviction of all eleven members of the Bar's elected leadership - President Prof. İbrahim Özden Kaboğlu, Ahmet Ergin, Bengisu Kadı Çavdar, Ekim Bilen Selimoğlu, Ezgi Şahin Yalvarıcı, Fırat Epözdemir, Hürrem Sönmez, Mehmedali Barış Beşli, Metin İriz, Rukiye Leyla Süren, and Yelde Koçak Urfa - on the charge of "spreading terrorist propaganda" under Article 7/2 of the Anti-Terrorism Law, solely for issuing a public statement on 21 December 2024 concerning the killing of two journalists in northern Syria and the arrest of journalists and lawyers at a related peaceful protest in Istanbul the day before.

The trial prosecutor's final opinion confirms and deepens the concerns raised by 56 international organisations in the joint statement of January 2025, condemning the initiation of criminal and civil proceedings against the Bar's leadership, and in the April 2025 joint statement, which deplored the removal of the elected board and the escalating attacks on lawyers across Turkey. A group of the organisations also submitted a joint amicus curiae brief in which they concluded that the proceedings violate Turkey's obligations under international human rights law and constitute an unjustified interference with the independence of the legal profession.

A clear misuse of criminal law

In his final opinion, the prosecutor alleges that by referring to the two individuals killed in Syria as journalists and by citing international humanitarian law applicable to the protection of civilians and media workers in conflict zones, the Bar leadership "treated as a war crime" an operation carried out by security forces, thereby intentionally legitimising and disseminating the ultimate separatist aims of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The prosecutor further asserts that describing those killed as journalists "encouraged" membership of the PKK and "made its methods appear legitimate", amounting to "press

and media-based terrorist propaganda” under Article 7/2 of the Anti-Terrorism Law. These allegations, which claim that a lawful, rights-based statement consciously advanced the objectives of an armed organisation, are wholly unfounded and legally unsustainable.

As emphasised in both joint statements in January and April 2025 and the amicus curiae brief in September 2025, the Istanbul Bar Association has a statutory and ethical duty to speak out on violations of human rights and the rule of law. The prosecutor’s position effectively criminalises the Bar Association’s discharge of this duty protected under both domestic law and international human rights law and standards. The prosecutor’s construal of a legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of expression as a terrorism offence amounts to a misuse of criminal law and judicial harassment.


Violations of international standards and the Bar’s statutory mandate

International and regional human rights standards, including the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of the Profession of Lawyer, and consistent jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, affirm that lawyers and their associations must be able to engage in public debate on matters of justice and human rights without fear of reprisals.

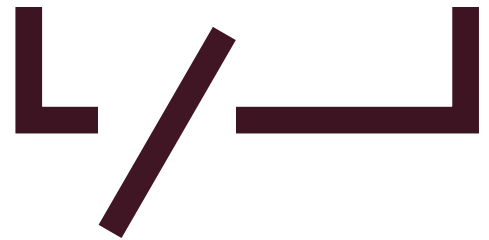
Criminalising their exercise of the rights to freedom of expression and association contravenes the provisions of these instruments safeguarding the rights and role of lawyers and their professional organisations, as well as Articles 10 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights, Articles 19 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and Articles 26, 27 and 33 of the Constitution of Türkiye.

As reiterated in the earlier statements and the amicus curiae brief, the Bar Association’s 21 December 2024 statement was a lawful, legitimate and necessary intervention on an issue of public concern: the killing of journalists and the unlawful detention of journalists and lawyers engaged in peaceful assembly. On 27 November 2025, the seven journalists and two others who were also being prosecuted for their participation in the peaceful assembly on 20 December 2024, protesting the killing of the two journalists were acquitted in the final hearing of their trial.

The criminal proceedings, therefore, strike at the heart of the independence of the legal profession and amount to a misuse of counter-terrorism laws to silence criticism, suppress human rights monitoring, and undermine self-governance of bar associations.



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Call for immediate action

Ahead of the next hearing due to take place over five days from 5-9 January 2026, the signing organisations urgently call on the Turkish authorities to:

- Immediately terminate all criminal proceedings against the Istanbul Bar Association's president and executive board, drop the unfounded charges under Article 7/2 of the Anti-Terrorism Law and bring an end to the parallel and politically motivated civil proceedings aimed at removing the Bar Association's leadership.

We further call on the Turkish authorities to ensure systemic change to:

- Guarantee the independence and self-governance of bar associations, in line with domestic law and Turkey's international human rights obligations.
- End the misuse of anti-terrorism and criminal laws to target lawyers, human rights defenders, journalists, and civil society actors, and instead respect and protect their human rights.
- Sign and ratify the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of the Profession of Lawyer.

We call on the international community to:

- Sustain close monitoring of the proceedings before the Istanbul 26th Heavy Penal Court;
- Condemn publicly the Prosecutor's final opinion and the escalating threats to the legal profession in Turkey;
- Engage directly with Turkish authorities to ensure that the rights of lawyers are respected and upheld and that lawyers and bar associations are protected from harassment, retaliation and unfair prosecution.

Signatories: (in alphabetical order)

- *Amnesty International*
- *Bar Human Rights Committee of England and Wales (BHRC, UK)*
- *Center of Elaboration and Research on Democracy (CRED)*
- *Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (Le Conseil des barreaux européens, CCBE)*
- *Çağdaş Hukukçular Derneği (Progressive Lawyers Association, Türkiye)*
- *Defense Commission of the Barcelona Bar Association (Spain)*
- *Deutscher Anwaltverein (German Bar Association, Germany)*
- *Eşit Haklar İçin İzleme Derneği (Association for Monitoring Equal Rights, Türkiye)*
- *European Association of Lawyers for Democracy and World Human Rights (ELDH)*
- *The European Criminal Bar Association (ECBA)*
- *Fédération des Barreaux d'Europe (European Bars Federation, FBE)*
- *Foundation Day of the Endangered Lawyer*
- *Hak İnsiyatifi Derneği (Rights Initiative Association, Türkiye)*
- *Hakikat Adalet Hafıza Merkezi (Truth Justice Memory Center, Türkiye)*
- *Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers (UK)*
- *Human Rights Institute of the Brussels Bar (Belgium)*
- *Human Rights Watch*
- *İnsan Hakları Derneği (Human Rights Association, Türkiye)*
- *İnsan Hakları Gündemi Derneği (Human Rights Agenda Association, Türkiye)*
- *The International Association of Democratic Lawyers (IADL)*
- *International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI)*
- *The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)*
- *International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders*
- *Kadının İnsan Hakları Derneği (Women for Women's Human Rights, Türkiye)*
- *Kaos GL Derneği (Kaos GL Association, Türkiye)*
- *The Law Society of England and Wales (LSEW, UK)*
- *Lawyers for Lawyers (Netherlands)*
- *Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada (LRWC, Canada)*
- *Lyon Bar Association (France)*
- *National Union of Peoples Lawyers (NUPL, Philippines)*
- *Özgürlük İçin Hukukçular Derneği (Lawyers for Freedom Association, Türkiye)*
- *PEN Norway (Norway)*
- *Sivil Alan Araştırmaları Derneği (Civil Space Studies Association, Türkiye)*
- *Turkey Litigation Support Project (TLSP, UK)*
- *Türkiye İnsan Hakları Vakfı (Human Rights Foundation of Turkey, Türkiye)*
- *Vereinigung Demokratischer Jurist:innen VDJ (Association of Democratic Jurists, Germany)*
- *World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders*
- *Yurttaşlık Derneği (Citizens Assembly, Türkiye)*