



**Middle
East
Studies
Association**
of North America, Inc.

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4 September 2012

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan
Office of the Prime Minister
Başbakanlık
06573 Ankara, Turkey
Via facsimile +90 312 417 0476

Dear Prime Minister Erdoğan:

I write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) of North America and its Committee on Academic Freedom in order to express our dismay and concern at recent remarks by Turkish Minister of the Interior (İçişleri Bakanı) Idris Naim Şahin comparing writing and publishing ideas in support of Kurdish rights to terrorism. These assertions inappropriately conflate peaceful advocacy for Kurdish rights with acts of violence. They also evince a disregard for principles of academic freedom and freedom of thought and expression that exacerbate the climate of intimidation resulting from the recent spate of government arrests and detentions of academics, researchers, journalists and publishers who voice support for the rights of the Kurdish community in Turkey.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 3000 members worldwide MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

In an address to the Marmara Management Federation (Marmara Yöneticiler Federasyonu, or "MAYFED") at the Grand Cevahir Hotel on 7 August, 2012, Minister Şahin stated that "the nation's state of emergency is not limited to the field of battle but also includes the battle of the pen in Istanbul and the battle of the book in Istanbul." ["Ülkenin olağanüstü gündemi sadece çatışma alanı ile ilgili değildir bu çatışma İstanbul'da kalemlerle devam ediyor, İstanbul'da kitaplarla devam ediyor."] He went on to say that there is no difference between mortar shells lobbed in the southeast of the country and texts in the service of Kurdish rights written in Ankara. In the same speech he also characterized the lawful political party that serves as the de facto representative of Kurdish interests, the BDP (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi - the Peace and Democracy Party), as a puppet political party, going on to suggest that it is an

extension of terrorist organizing. Further, his most recent comments only add to his existing record of treating artistic and scholarly expression as an extension of terrorism – in December he was quoted in another speech arguing that whether painted on a canvas, written in poems or published in scholarly articles, texts advocating Kurdish rights amount to “terrorism propaganda.” Minister Şahin’s characterization of writing, publishing and political organizing as extensions of violent activity or terrorism erases the cardinal distinction between the pen and the sword on which all forms of freedom of expression, association and thought are premised.

We are distressed that a member of your government’s cabinet is willing to publicly elide the distinction between non-violent expression and terrorism in this manner. If indeed this represents your cabinet’s approach to freedom of thought then your government’s stance is anathema to the most important prerequisites of academic freedom. By claiming equivalency between free speech and violence, Minister Şahin is endorsing the targeting of individuals for exercising freedoms that are legally protected by Turkey’s consent to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

This letter follows a recent letter that I sent to you on behalf of CAFMENA concerning the case of Müge Tuzcuoğlu, whose right to academic freedom was violated by your government as a direct result of the conflation of peaceful activities with advocacy of violence. Actions such as these make it appear that the Turkish government has undertaken a campaign to inhibit the dissemination of knowledge about the conditions affecting the Kurdish community in the country. Government efforts to silence scholars, journalists and publishers who voice support for the rights of Kurdish citizens in Turkey send a chilling message to Turkey’s scholarly community, Kurdish communities in Turkey and beyond, and to scholars working on the region wherever they may be based. We are very concerned about what seems to be an ongoing campaign to treat all advocates of a peaceful political solution to the Kurdish problem as potential terrorist threats.

I respectfully ask that you and members of your government exercise greater caution in making public statements that suggest that the Turkish government intends to criminalize peaceful advocacy, free expression and exchange of ideas and opinions concerning the rights of the Kurdish community. I also urge you to take note of mounting international condemnation of the erosion of democratic rights and freedoms in Turkey.

4 September 2012
Re: Remarks by Turkish Ministry of the Interior
Page 3

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to your positive response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Fred M. Donner".

Fred M. Donner
MESA President
Professor of Near Eastern History, University of Chicago

cc: Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanı, Abdullah Gül (Turkish president)
Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Başkanı Cemil Çiçek (President of the Turkish
National Assembly)
Turkish Justice Minister, Adalet Bakanı Sadullah Ergin