



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

1219 N Santa Rita Ave  
The University of Arizona  
Tucson AZ 85721 USA

520 621-5850  
520 626-9095 fax  
caf@mesana.org  
www.mesana.org



October 30, 2015

Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu  
Office of the Prime Minister  
Başbakanlık  
06573 Ankara, Turkey  
Via facsimile +90 312 417 0476

Dear Prime Minister Davutoğlu:

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 over reports that faculty members Drs. Beyza Üstün, Ali Ekber Doğan and Dilek Tucer have been targeted for disciplinary action by state officials as a result of sharing their academic expertise with the media. In a recent letter, we expressed our distress with regards to the Higher Education Council's expanded authority to engage in precisely such disciplinary proceedings in violation of core precepts of academic freedom. The treatment of Drs. Üstün, Doğan and Tucer underscore the gravity of the threat to academic freedom when state-appointed administrators are given the power to sanction academics for the content of their views.

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 a public statement, Beyza Üstün, professor of environmental engineering at Yıldız Technical University, shared her expert opinion on hydroelectric power plants and their impact on public health and water. The Minister of Forestry targeted her, denouncing her statements as unfounded and unscientific. The Minister further threatened to file an official complaint against Dr. Üstün initiating a disciplinary investigation against her both by her university and by the Higher Education Council. This official campaign of intimidation sends a chilling message to the academic community in Turkey and abroad, and directly undermines academic freedom and freedom of speech. Dr. Üstün has since been elected to parliament as a representative of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) but remains under investigation.

Similarly, Ali Ekber Doğan, Assistant Professor of Public Administration at Mersin University offered public comments concerning his analysis of the electoral campaign of Burhanettin Kocamaz to become mayor of

Mersin. Based on this analysis, Doğan concluded that the mayor's policies might be detrimental to LGBT, Kurdish, Alevi and diversity rights. As a direct result of Doğan's public statement, the mayor filed a lawsuit against Doğan, seeking a two-year prison sentence and Doğan's dismissal from public institutions including his termination at Mersin University, which is a public university.

As we have previously documented, including in our letter of 12 December 2012, concerning the case of Professor Onur Hamzaoğlu, such politically motivated disciplinary proceedings and government sanctions against academics are not isolated incidents but rather establish a pattern of academic freedom violations in Turkey. A similar investigation targeted gastroenterologist Dilek Tucer. During a press conference, Tucer was asked about the health hazards of pollution in the area where she worked, and in response, she shared academic research findings documenting how pollution and heavy metal accumulation increase the risk of stomach and colon cancer. When she shared these research results and her own expert opinion, the governor of the affected city, Edirne, suspended her from her work at the state hospital. Again, the targeting of Dr. Tucer was designed to suppress her research and resulted in the violation of her academic freedom by a state official appointed by your government.

All of the examples chronicled in this letter raise serious concerns that the Turkish state has authorized various institutions and appointed officials to suppress the conduct of academic research, limit the dissemination and publication of scholarly analysis and findings, and to use disciplinary proceedings under the jurisdiction of the Higher Education Council to undermine academic freedom, freedom of speech and assembly.

As a member state of the Council of Europe and a signatory of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Turkey is required to protect freedom of thought, expression and assembly. Further, Turkey is also a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), all of which protect the rights to freedom of expression and association, which are at the heart of academic freedom. These rights are also enshrined in articles 25-27 of the Turkish Constitution. We urge your government to take all necessary steps to ensure that these rights are protected and ask that your government refrain from targeting academics for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association. Government and university administration efforts to silence scholars who share their academic research findings with the broader public send a chilling message to Turkey's scholarly community.

We respectfully ask that you reverse any disciplinary proceedings currently underway that target scholars for publishing or offering expert opinions to the media concerning their research. We also ask that you reverse any other measures that jeopardize academic freedom and take the necessary steps to protect researchers, scholars and faculty members from unfair reprisal actions by university administrations, the Higher Education Council, and state officials on the grounds of their public statements or fields of academic inquiry. We urge you to take note of mounting international condemnation of the erosion of democratic rights and freedoms in Turkey.

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

Sincerely,



Nathan Brown  
President, Middle East Studies Association  
Professor, George Washington University

cc:

- Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanı, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Turkish president)
- Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Başkanı, İsmet Yılmaz (President of the Turkish National Assembly)
- Türkiye Adalet Bakanı, Kenan İpek (Turkish Justice Minister)
- Türkiye Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu (YÖK) Başkanı, Yekta Saraç (President of the Turkish Higher Education Council)
- Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights, Barbara Lochbihler
- Member of the Cabinet of Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Monika Kacinskiene
- Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn
- Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Nils Muižnieks