



**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



November 3, 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 serious concern over reports that Barış Ünlü, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Ankara University, has been prosecuted on the grounds that he was engaged in “terrorist propaganda” and had praised “crime and criminals.” In an alarming case of violation of academic freedom, the indictment bases its allegations on a final exam Barış Ünlü gave in his course “Political Life and Institutions in Turkey” in January 2015 and presents his exam questions as evidence. The message of the indictment suggests that even the academic study of the Kurdish movement has now been criminalized by the Turkish government.

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.

For his course on political institutions and life in Turkey, Barış Ünlü assigned texts by Abdullah Öcalan, the incarcerated leader of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) as part of his curriculum. In his final exam, he asked students to compare two texts written by Abdullah Öcalan in terms of his engagement with colonialism, the nation state, revolutionary violence, and democracy. The texts in question were Öcalan’s 1978 brochure entitled *The Path to the Revolution of Kürdistan/Manifesto* and his 2012 article entitled “Democratic modernity as a means to build a new system in the Middle East.” Barış Ünlü also asked his students to consider the changes in the Kurdish movement and society, in Turkey and globally, during those 34 years in responding to the exam question.

The indictment provides a brief analysis of the texts to draw the conclusion that the PKK has remained a terrorist organization that has not changed in 34 years. The indictment further asserts that Abdullah Öcalan constitutes a threat to Turkish national security, and that Professor Ünlü’s exam question served to brainwash students by legitimizing Öcalan and

presenting him as a political leader. In short, the indictment conflates the use of texts for critical examination in an academic curriculum with engaging in terrorist propaganda. Further, if presenting Öcalan as a political figure is treated as a basis for criminal investigation, the government runs the risk of effectively criminalizing all academics, students, journalists and political organizers working on Kurdish issues.

In addition, the indictment enumerates incidents that occurred on Ankara University's campus allegedly as a result of provocations by PKK or KCK affiliated students. The indictment alleges that classes had to be canceled on 21-22 March 2013, 9 October 2014, and 24-25 March 2015 as a consequence of disruptions by pro-Kurdish students. The indictment goes on to claim that these incidents demonstrate that the campus was under threat from pro-Kurdish activists and describes Barış Ünlü's class as a provocation in this context. Yet independent media reports cast doubt on the version of events presented in the indictment. Further, the indictment does not even purport to show a direct connection between Professor Ünlü's course and these incidents.

There are at least two distressing facets to your government's actions in this case. First, using the content of a final exam question as a basis to prosecute a professor represents a clear violation of academic freedom. The content of Professor Ünlü's political science course does not constitute a legitimate basis for criminal inquiry. Further, the attempt to attribute responsibility to Ünlü's course for tensions around the Kurdish question on Ankara University's campus is to ignore the political reality of polarization around these and other issues in contemporary Turkey.

The second troubling aspect of the indictment concerns its timing. At the time that Professor Ünlü was offering his course, peace negotiations were underway between government officials and Abdullah Öcalan himself. This peace process was unilaterally terminated by the Turkish government at the end of July 2015 following a suicide bombing, apparently by ISIS, in Suruç, Turkey that caused the deaths of over 30 pro-Kurdish peace activists. What has followed is a Turkish government campaign targeting those aligned with the victims in the Suruç attack rather than the perpetrators. Indeed, since this summer the government has launched military action in the Kurdish provinces of Turkey and created a permissive climate for private acts of anti-Kurdish violence, culminating in attacks on pro-Kurdish politicians, media offices and ultimately another suicide bombing at a pro-Kurdish peace demonstration killing over one hundred people in a central area of Ankara. The timing of the indictment against Professor Ünlü—which was initiated nine months after the final examination in question—makes it appear to be an extension of the government's broader campaign against Kurdish and pro-Kurdish activists, politicians, media and their supporters.

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 opinion, 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.

We respectfully ask that your government take immediate steps to drop the charges against Barış Ünlü. We also continue to 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