



**Middle  
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Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu  
Office of the Prime Minister  
Başbakanlık  
06573 Ankara, Turkey  
Via facsimile +90 312 417 0476; +90 312 403 62 82; + 90 312 422 26 67

Dear Prime Minister Davutoğlu:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) of North America and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our serious concern over reports that the Higher Education Council (Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu, or YÖK) had an emergency meeting to commence an investigation against scholars who signed a petition for peace in the Kurdish regions of the country (“Peace Petition”). YÖK officials are reportedly treating this petition as pro-PKK “terrorist propaganda” that falls outside of the protections of academic freedom. Further, there are reports that YÖK plans to convene university rectors to take additional action against signatories at their universities. These actions by YÖK represent a violation of academic freedom and are consistent with broader efforts on the part of the state to punish critics of state policies.

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.

The government’s actions against the Peace Petition signatories are distressing for at least three reasons. First, investigating the signatories after President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan criticized the campaign in a public address, calling the signatories “traitors,” suggests that YÖK’s actions are inappropriately politicized. As we noted in our letter sent on January 7, 2016, the government has enhanced YÖK’s regulatory authorities in ways that are inimical to university autonomy. In this environment, it is hardly surprising that universities are proactively taking punitive measures in anticipation of your government’s actions. Within a day of President Erdoğan’s speech and the announcement of the YÖK investigation several universities initiated punitive measures against their faculty. Assistant Professor Hülya Doğan at Bartın University is reportedly under investigation by her university for being a signatory of the petition. Likewise Sivas Cumhuriyet University has reportedly launched an investigation against Professor Ali Çeliksöz for having signed the petition. Associate Professor Latife Akyüz has been suspended by Düzce University administration, and a criminal investigation has been opened against her for “terrorism propaganda”—all for being a signatory of the petition. The rector of Abdullah Gül University in Kayseri, has reportedly demanded the resignation of Professor Bülent Tanju solely on the grounds that he is a signatory of the Peace Petition. The local prosecutor in Kayseri, taking note of the rector’s action, has also initiated a criminal investigation against Professor Tanju under Articles 216 and 301 of the Penal Code. The mere act of signing the Peace Petition has left Professor Tanju facing possible charges for “inflaming hatred and hostility among peoples” and “denigration of the Turkish nation” under these penal provisions. Lecturer Ümran Roda Suvağcı from Hakkari University has been taken custody for having signed the petition. Further disciplinary and investigations have reportedly been initiated by the rectors of four universities—Samsun Ondokuz Mayıs University, Antalya Akdeniz University, Abant İzzet Baysal University, and Ankara Hacettepe University—against members of their

faculties who are signatories. Many more universities are likely to follow suit, amounting to a wave of punitive actions against academics solely on the grounds that they have criticized the government's policies in the southeastern provinces. In a university system in which rectors are appointed by the state and YÖK is free to initiate politicized investigations of academics, the actions being taken against signatories of the Peace Petition are a stark reminder that restrictions on academic freedom have become a matter of state policy in Turkey.

Second, among the signatories of the petition are scholars whose research is on the Kurds, other minorities, politics, history, and other related fields. That is, their scholarly work is related to the concerns raised in the text of the petition. By treating the Peace Petition as treasonous and launching an investigation of signatories, the government is effectively interfering with the ability of these academics to conduct their research. President Erdoğan suggests that the petition calls for foreigners to intervene to correct the situation in Turkey. In fact, the petition called for national and international independent observers to monitor the situation in the Kurdish region. This is not a call for foreign intervention, but rather an invitation to engage in the kind of independent observation that is the hallmark of both human rights monitoring and academic research. To investigate and criminalize a petition in which scholars call for independent observers to monitor areas under siege and curfew where civilian deaths have been reported is to strike at the heart of the academic enterprise—the ability to conduct independent research.

Finally, since the general elections in 2011, this is our twentieth letter calling upon your government to protect academic freedom in Turkey. Unfortunately, more often than not these letters have identified instances in which members of your government have used their authority to silence critics within Turkish academic circles by branding them terrorists or traitors for engaging in academic research or exercising their right to free speech to call for peaceful political change. Equally, these cases have often arisen in the context of academics' conducting research or publishing findings critical of your government's policies with respect to Kurdish citizens or the Kurdish regions of the country. The politicization of regulatory powers over higher education to punish dissent and silence critics of your government's policies on various issues, including Kurdish rights, represents a serious violation of academic freedom, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, and has cast a long shadow over the democratic credentials of your government.

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. 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.

We respectfully ask that your government take immediate steps to ensure that YÖK drop any investigation of or action against the signatories of the Peace Petition and that any actions—including university, YÖK or criminal investigations or charges—against Professors Bülent Tanju, Hülya Doğan, Latife Akyüz, Ümran Roda Suvağcı and others be reversed. As of this writing reports are emerging about additional disciplinary

investigations as well as an independent criminal investigation launched by the Istanbul Public Prosecution Office against all the signatories under Article 301 of the Penal Code and Article 7 of Anti-terror Law alleging “terrorist organization propaganda”; we respectfully demand that any such investigations also be dropped. Against a backdrop of mounting international condemnation of the erosion of democratic rights and freedoms under your administration, taking steps to protect academic freedom and the right to education would be an important step to address concerns about human rights in Turkey.

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

Yours sincerely,



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Professor, City University of New York



Amy W. Newhall  
MESA Executive Director  
Associate Professor, University of Arizona

cc:

- Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanı (President of the Republic of Turkey)
- İsmail Kahraman, Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Başkanı (President of the Turkish National Assembly)
- Bekir Bozdağ, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Adalet Bakanı (Justice Minister of the Republic of Turkey)
- Yekta Saraç, Türkiye Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu (YÖK) Başkanı (President of the Turkish Higher Education Council)
- İhsan Sabuncuoğlu, Rector, Abdullah Gül University
- Hüseyin Akan, Rector, Ondokuz Mayıs University
- Ramazan Kaplan, Rector, Bartın University
- Mustafa Inal, Rector, Akdeniz University
- Hayri Coşkun, Rector, Abant İzzet Baysal University
- Faruk Kocacık, Rector, Cumhuriyet University
- Murat Tuncer, Rector, Hacettepe University
- Nigar Demircan Çakar, Rector, Düzce University
- Ebubekir Ceylan, Rector, Hakkari University
- Barbara Lochbihler, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights
- Monika Kacinskiene, Member of the Cabinet of Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
- Johannes Hahn, Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations
- Nils Muižnieks, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights