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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 concerning the alarming incidents that have been reported at Marmara University's Faculty of Communications under the leadership of its government-appointed dean, Yusuf Devran. Since his appointment in July 2011, Dean Devran has reportedly used his position to single out students and faculty for surveillance, verbal and physical harassment, disciplinary proceedings and ethnic and political profiling—including the designation of students as potential PKK affiliates as a result of their involvement in activities deemed critical of the government or of the dean himself, or simply because they are ethnically Kurdish. Beyond the targeting of students and faculty, he has also used his position to cancel academic programs on the basis of objections to their substantive focus in a manner inimical to academic freedom. The mounting reports of intimidation and persecution of students and faculty on Marmara University's campus are of grave concern, and the alleged actions of Yusuf Devran threaten freedom of thought and freedom of research at the university.

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 body that appointed Devran to his current position – the Higher Education Council (Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu, or YÖK) is a legacy of the 1980 military-coup government's efforts to regulate and control university activities in Turkey. In the era since Turkey returned to civilian rule, we would expect a less intrusive role for YÖK and a concomitant diminution in the atmosphere of intimidation at the country's universities. Regrettably, the record of YÖK activities under the AKP-led government suggests precisely the contrary, with a steady increase in incidents violating the rights of students and faculty at universities, many of which we have documented in the letters we have written to you in the last year. The case of the events at the Faculty of Communications at Marmara University since Devran's appointment as dean by YÖK offers the most troubling and intensive example of violations of academic freedom that are becoming unfortunately common on university campuses across the country.

Based on reports that have emerged through individual testimonials by students and faculty, and in press coverage in Turkey, Dean Devran's actions can be best described as seeking to establish direct and absolute control over the activities of academic staff and students in the Faculty of Communications, ranging from the content of courses to the organization of academic events, the conduct of examinations, and even to the substance of research and writing. Further, this control has apparently been established through the creation of an atmosphere of physical intimidation, with the institutionalization of a police presence on campus, the initiation of over thirty internal disciplinary investigations and threats of lawsuits against academic staff members in a single year, and even verbal and physical harassment by Dean Devran against academic staff who criticize or resist his policies.

In addition to this overt campaign of intimidation, there are also reports of more covert efforts including pressure brought to bear on faculty members and research assistants to discriminate against Kurdish and leftist students and to alter graduate admissions criteria in accordance with the dean's



personal selection standards, rather than merit-based evaluation. All of these actions constitute massive interference with, and violation of, academic freedom and basic rights such as freedom of thought and the right to an education. In the context of the current government crackdown on professional reporters and given the significant role this Faculty of Communications has historically played in the training of Turkish journalists, it also creates the appearance of furthering a government campaign against the media through the appointment of university administrators who restrict access to education for future journalists and seek to limit critical scholarship at key institutions.

The list of specific incidents violating academic freedom and the right to education at Marmara University's Faculty of Communications during Devran's deanship is long and deeply troubling. In this letter, we highlight five areas of significant concern associated with particular incidents and assertions of arbitrary authority to limit or terminate faculty and/or student academic activities or research. We list these areas of concern in summary fashion here and attach a more detailed account of each set of concerns in an annex to this letter:

- The administration of the graduate admission examination has reportedly been tainted by ethnic and political profiling, with students designated with letter and color codes to set them apart for alleged affiliation with Kurdish or leftist organizations and merit-based admissions criteria set aside in favor of an admission process influenced by such profiling.
- Academic staff members and research assistants have reportedly been targeted with measures ranging from disciplinary investigations and forcible detention on campus to verbal and physical harassment as a result of their criticism of the university administration on such social media sites as Twitter or their resistance to Dean Devran's changes to admissions policies.
- The atmosphere of intimidation created by these measures has been further exacerbated by the introduction of a large body of private security personnel onto the campus together with the institutionalization of the presence of undercover police officers.
- Dean Devran has directly interfered with the planning and conduct of scheduled academic events that he deems unduly critical of the government – such as a seminar on media freedoms under the AKP.
- Dean Devran has used Twitter and other social media to threaten the Faculty of Communication's alumni base of journalists for their criticisms of his actions on campus.

The pattern of censorship that emerges from these cases gives the appearance of coordination between the government and university administrators to ensure that certain subjects be excluded from academic scrutiny, which would constitute a clear violation of academic freedom. Indeed, Yusuf Devran, appointed dean of the Faculty of Communication at Marmara University by YÖK, is a concrete and extreme example of the concerns we have raised regarding violations of academic freedom undertaken by government-appointed university administrators.

We have written to you previously on behalf of CAFMENA about the cases of academics working on Kurdish issues who have been detained and whose academic freedom has been violated by your government. Taken together with those cases, actions such as the intervention of government-appointed university administrators to prevent academic publications or events concerning issues deemed sensitive by the government make it appear that the Turkish government has undertaken a campaign to inhibit the dissemination of knowledge, the conduct of academic research and even the right to an education where any of these protected activities overlap with criticism of the government or touch on issues deemed politically sensitive, such as Kurdish rights.

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 no censorship of publications or events be permitted by any government appointed university administrator or other officials. Further, we ask that you take all necessary steps to preserve academic freedom on all of Turkey's university campuses.

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

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Sluglett', written in a cursive style.

Peter Sluglett
MESA President
Professor, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

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
President of the Turkish Higher Education Council (Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu-YÖK Başkanı), Gökhan Çetinsaya
Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights, Barbara Lochbihler
Member of the Cabinet of Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Carl Hartzell
Special Commissioner for EU Enlargement, Štefan Füle
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Nils Muižnieks



ANNEX TO CAFMENA LETTER CONCERNING INCIDENTS AT THE MARMARA UNIVERSITY FACULTY OF COMMUNICATIONS

In our letter, we identified five areas of concern related to recent incidents at Marmara University's Faculty of Communications under decanal regime of Yusuf Devran who has served since July 2011 as the government-appointed Dean of the Faculty. In this Annex, we provide additional background on each of the areas of concern highlighted in our letter.

The first issue we draw to your attention consists in reports that Dean Devran directed university administrators to designate certain students with a "P" (allegedly standing for "PKK") on the lists of students registered for the graduate admissions exam, in order to set those designated students apart for special treatment, scrutiny or surveillance on the basis of suspicions concerning their political and ethnic affiliations. Personal reports (also published in the media) state that the dean resorted to this strategy on those oral exam committees that he did not chair. According to the graduate admissions process at Marmara Communications, the students would traditionally take a written exam followed by an oral exam. Different committees would be assigned for the oral examination of each graduate school applicant. Reports indicate that last year, not only did Dean Devran chair 8 out of 15 oral exam committees, but he also tried to influence the decision-making process in those committees that he did not chair or take part in by pre-marking the list of applicants with such marks as "P." For example, Azad Bedirhan, a Kurdish student whose name was marked by a "P," did very well in the graduate school admission exam, but was not admitted reportedly as a result of his "P" designation. The student has affirmed repeatedly that he has no connection to any activity to which the "P" designation might relate and that he has never been the subject of any disciplinary hearing during his exemplary record of four years of undergraduate study. Despite this underlying record, Bedirhan appears to have been targeted, leaving only ethnicity as the explanation for the designation. Aside from graduate admissions, it has also been reported that Kurdish and leftist students are identified by colored markings on regular midterm and final exam lists and sent to a separate building for the administration of the exam, apart from other students. If true, this sort of designation or profiling practice amounts to an impermissible singling out of students for disparate treatment, raising serious concerns regarding protection of their right to an education free from discrimination on the basis of ethnicity or political orientation. Further, Dean Devran's twitter record includes personalized attacks on some students with similar labels, aggravating the poisonous atmosphere on campus and reportedly contributing to serious tensions amongst students.

Our second area of concern is the alleged targeting of academic staff members and others who disapprove of the dean's policies with various measures that include disciplinary investigations, involuntary detention on campus, and even verbal and physical harassment. Associate professor Necmi Emel Dilmen and research assistants Uraz Aydın and Behlül Çalışkan are among those who have been reported to be singled out for such treatment. Additionally, press records indicate that during the graduate admissions process, a professor who was on the admissions committee was bullied and harassed in an attempt to force her to accept and sign a list of students for admission who had been pre-selected by the dean rather than by criteria of academic achievement and merit as measured by exam results. Notably, the dean's list excluded students like the Kurdish student discussed above, Azad Bedirhan, despite his record of academic success. When this professor refused to sign-off on the dean's list, she was detained on campus until midnight by the dean's security personnel. Following this incident, this professor has taken up the practice of coming to campus with a bodyguard to ensure her safety. An additional example of threatening actions undertaken against faculty members is the case of Associate Professor Necmi Emel Dilmen. After Professor Dilmen criticized, via Twitter, the campus presence of police and other heightened security measures put in place by Dean Devran, the dean allegedly physically assaulted Dilmen in the dean's office and then had him forcibly ejected from his office, accusing him in the process of engaging in "propaganda" against the university.



The treatment of research assistants lends further weight to this second area of concern regarding allegations of the arbitrary and abusive exercise of authority by Dean Devran. For instance, research assistant Uraz Aydın's private email—containing criticisms of the dean—to the Union of Higher Education was intercepted by the dean, who then successfully demanded that the Rectorate of the University open a disciplinary and criminal investigation against Aydın. Likewise, Behlül Çalışkan was reprimanded by the dean for critical "tweets," while another academic staff member was threatened with disciplinary investigation on the grounds that security personnel had seen this person privately cursing the dean. In another case, Dean Devran suspended a student, Mikail Boz, on the grounds that he had made unflattering comments about the dean on a website. Further reports indicate that Devran has also intercepted Facebook postings and tweets among Kurdish or pro-Kurdish students and used this private communication as a basis to accuse such students of engaging in "separatist activities." These incidents reveal a pattern of harassment and surveillance of academic staff members, faculty and students by the dean, which extends to their personal Facebook and Twitter accounts, private email and other social media communications in which they air criticisms of university administration. The surveillance and punishment of speech by academic staff and students is particularly troubling in the case of a Dean of Communications, presiding over a faculty that should be training students to avail themselves of their speech rights in multiple venues rather than seeking to limit speech.

The third issue that we would like to highlight is the exacerbation of this atmosphere of intimidation occasioned by the employment of a large body of private security personnel on campus and the institutionalization of the presence of undercover police officers. For instance, Dean Devran has reportedly stationed police officers in an office adjacent to the space provided for research assistants. The alleged responsibilities of these police officers include monitoring the activities of faculty and research assistants and reporting them to the administration, with a particular focus on any evidence of contact with detained students or planned visits to imprisoned journalists. The heart of the research by academic staff members in a Faculty of Communication is conducted through their interactions with journalists and exploring newsworthy subjects such as the detention of large numbers of civilians—whether they be students, members of the press corps or others. Suggesting that such communication is illicit and establishing surveillance systems to report the research activities of the academic staff to the administration through an overt police presence is inimical to any definition of academic freedom. Further, the guilt-by-association approach to dissent evidenced by these policies is itself threatening to freedom of thought and the free dissemination of information and knowledge. To say that these measures create a hostile campus environment for the conduct of research on the media would be a vast understatement.

The fourth arena in which Dean Devran's actions threaten academic freedom concerns his direct interference in the planning and conduct of scheduled academic events. For instance, Dean Devran decided to prohibit the use of university facilities to offer a planned seminar entitled "Journalism, the Government and Freedom of Opinion: Report Card on Ten Years," which would have considered media freedoms during the decade of AKP rule (the seminar ultimately went forward in a separate venue). In addition to this example of an arbitrary attempted-cancellation of a planned seminar, the Dean's actions have created an intimidating climate in which comparable conferences and workshops are planned off-campus from the outset to avoid his efforts to regulate, control and police academic research and academic speech.

Finally, our fifth area of concern stems from the interaction of Dean Devran with the alumni base of the Faculty of Communications at Marmara University and the broader journalistic community in Turkey. As we noted, this Faculty has long been an important site for the production of the country's most influential and active journalists and commentators. Unsurprisingly, then, some of this alumni base has noted and taken exception to the new regime of surveillance and intimidation that Dean Devran has instituted on campus. In one telling example, the dean entered into a testy and threatening public exchange with alumnus Ismail Saymaz, a respected journalist with the mainstream wide-circulation newspaper, *Radikal*. After Saymaz tweeted criticism of the dean's attempt to cancel the



seminar on the AKP's ten-year record on the media, Dean Devran issued a particularly harsh set of tweets that exemplify his pedagogical approach. Specifically, he wrote that:

“I decide what academic events may be held on the campus of the Faculty. You will no longer be allowed to deceive Marmara Communications students. The liar, Ismail Saymaz, claims that he was barred from entering the campus. Who prevented you from entering the campus? If you cannot prove your claim you are nothing but a liar, Ismail. Know this: Marmara Communications will no longer train deceitful journalists like yourself. Ismail Saymaz at *Radikal* newspaper is a provocateur and a collaborator. I will sue him.”

The threats and insults directed at an alumnus for criticizing the censorship of events on Marmara University's campus, together with the insistence that the Faculty of Communications will henceforth produce the “right” kind of journalist according exclusively to Dean Devran's standards, exemplifies the poisonous atmosphere reported by faculty and students.