



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

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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 of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom regarding police violence at Ankara's Middle East Technical University (METU) on December 18, 2012. On that day, an extraordinarily large police contingent was deployed during your visit to the METU campus to attend a ceremony for the launching of the Göktürk-2 satellite. Eye-witness reports by METU faculty and the academic personnel association attest that excessive force was used by the police against students who had organized a protest against your government's policies on the regulation of higher education and the attendant violation of student rights.

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.

METU academic personnel report that prior to your arrival on campus, students had gathered to protest new government policies affecting the Higher Education Council (Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu, or YÖK), the regulatory institution controlling universities in Turkey. Eye witness accounts by the academic personnel together with media reports confirm that some 3000 police officers arrived on campus in dozens of armored vehicles and 8 TOMA tanks (*toplumsal olaylara mudahale araci*, or armored riot control vehicles equipped with water cannon and tear gas diffusion machinery) and launched an unprovoked attack against the unarmed students to force their dispersal at least an hour and a half before you arrived on campus. Only after they had been assaulted with tear gas canisters and percussion bombs did the students pick up the projectiles thrown at them by the police along with stones and other objects to respond to the police attack. The excessive force unleashed by the police against the students is captured in gruesome images and footage recorded by faculty and personnel on campus. The sheer size of the police presence and their immediate resort to force to break-up a non-violent protest turned the site into a bloody scene. The violation of the students' rights of freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of association in this police attack is incontrovertible. The damage done to the campus, the disruption of academic teaching and research resulting from the saturation of campus buildings with tear gas, and the endangering of the health of young children at an on-campus daycare facility also inundated with tear gas only add to the tally of harm to university life.

Following these events, faculty and alumni issued statements in support of the students and condemning the scale of police violence. Your comments, Prime Minister Erdoğan, that the METU



faculty is “failing the nation” and would “do well to resign” and that the protesters were not students but “provocateurs” suggest that you fully endorse police actions in violation of basic rights. Your statements regarding students and faculty at METU raise serious questions about your government’s commitment to academic freedom and suggest a troubling erosion of democratic rights in Turkey, including freedom of thought and freedom of association.

In our previous letters, we have addressed many cases involving violations of academic freedom during your premiership, but your statements targeting METU faculty and students are the first example of such violations that you appear explicitly to endorse. Indeed, the suggestion in your remarks that students who would protest government policies are being “badly trained” and that the faculty responsible for such training should resign because of their political views amounts to an unvarnished repudiation of academic freedom. Subsequent to your statements, and perhaps following your lead, the police raided several student apartments and took a number of students into custody, on the grounds of support for terrorism related to their organization of, and/or participation, in the planned student protest against your government’s policies.

YÖK, like the police, also opened an investigation into the student protesters on allegations of support for terrorism. In previous letters we have expressed our disappointment that your government would choose to expand the powers of YÖK—an institution created during the military-coup era of the early 1980s to place university campuses under executive control—and use the institution to undertake inquiries into the activities of university students, tarring them with the brush of terrorism for mounting peaceful, non-violent protests against your government’s education policies. Further, the ongoing role of President Abdullah Gül in appointing the head of YÖK, and President Gül’s record of overruling faculty votes in order to appoint his own preferred candidates as university rectors and presidents, amount to a further impermissible politicization of academic affairs on university campuses. It was precisely these policies and practices that the METU students were protesting when they were confronted first with police violence and then with charges of support for terrorism. These investigations and allegations exacerbate the already severe violations of academic freedoms at METU, suggesting that political protests on campus may now be criminalized by both the police and educational institutions instead of being treated as protected speech in keeping with Turkey’s own constitution as well as its international human rights obligations.

Following your statements targeting METU students and faculty, and the initiation of investigations by both the police and YÖK, several university rectors condemned the “student violence” at METU. In response, students and faculty members in many of these same universities organized protests and issued public statements and press releases in support of students and faculty at METU and condemning their own rectors’ statements as unrepresentative of their university. In the light of your government’s practice of imposing administrators on universities over the objections of faculty and students, this divergence in public statements is unsurprising. We have written to you previously on behalf of CAFMENA about the cases of government-appointed administrators whose actions violate basic tenets of academic freedom (see, for instance, our recent letter concerning Dean Yusuf Devran at Marmara University’s Faculty of Communications). Taken together with the previous cases we have documented, the incidents at METU and responses to them across the country’s campuses contribute to a record suggesting that the Turkish government has undertaken a campaign to inhibit the free dissemination of knowledge, control the conduct of academic research and even restrict the right to an education wherever these protected activities touch on issues deemed politically sensitive.



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 that police violence on campuses is not tolerated. We call for the investigations and charges against the students to be dropped. Finally, we respectfully request that government officials refrain from making comments inimical to academic freedom, such as those that criminalize activities entitled to fundamental human rights protections. We also would like to take this opportunity to ask your government to reconsider the large role that President Gül and YÖK have been accorded in electing university administrators.

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
Visiting Research Professor, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

cc:

Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanı, Abdullah Gül (President of the Turkish Republic)
Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Başkanı Cemil Çiçek (President of the Turkish Grand National Assembly)
Adalet Bakanı, Sadullah Ergin (Minister of Justice)
Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu (YÖK) Başkanı, Gökhan Çetinsaya (President of YÖK)
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