



**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
sbs-mesa@email.arizona.edu
www.mesana.org



October 4, 2013

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 in order to express our dismay and concern over recent reports of reprisal actions against university students and professors as a consequence of their support for public demonstrations held across Turkey in late May and June of 2013, known as the “Gezi Protests.”

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 reprisal actions with which we are concerned fall into three categories. First, students suspected of having supported the Gezi Protests are reportedly being denied scholarship assistance on the grounds of protected activities involving the non-violent expression of political opinions. Second, there have been credible reports that at least one university is requiring undergraduate students to answer a questionnaire concerning their support for protests and their voting preferences prior to enrolling in courses. Third, faculty members, academics and scholars who have publicly expressed their support for the Gezi Protests have reportedly faced inappropriate disciplinary action. Such actions evince a disregard for principles of academic freedom and freedom of thought and expression that exacerbate a climate of intimidation resulting from the recent spate of government arrests of academics, researchers, journalists and publishers that formed part of the background to the grievances expressed in the Gezi Protests.

With respect to reprisal actions against students, a government circular published by the Higher Education Loans and Dormitories Institution (KYK) on July 29th enumerated the preconditions for the award of scholarships, grants and loans to university students during the 2013-2014 academic year. It stated that those who engage in “protests, boycotts, occupations, vandalism in public spaces, chanting slogans and the like” shall be ineligible for student loans. We understand that this announcement was based on regulations dating back to 1997; however, the timing of its publication and the framing of the preconditions created a widespread perception that the government was deliberately penalizing student protesters and seeking to intimidate other students. The subsequent announcement of a series of measures by your government to prevent university campuses from being the venues for protests further underscores fears that the right to peaceful and nonviolent freedom of expression and freedom of assembly is being curtailed for university students by your government. In particular, the decision to replace private security forces on campuses with police forces and the threat



to have plainclothes police officers in addition to uniformed police on campuses has created a climate of intimidation as the new academic year begins.

Also in connection to apparent restrictions targeting students who supported the Gezi Protests, Afyon Kocatepe University has reportedly implemented a new “questionnaire” that undergraduate students are required to fill out in order to register for their courses online. The questions inquire about the students’ voting preferences, whether they have ever attended a political meeting or protests and whether they have social media accounts. When the students raised concerns over these questions, the administration responded that the questionnaire was an instrument for conducting doctoral research but failed to provide any convincing explanation as to why the course enrollment was contingent upon answering the questionnaire or why it was compulsory in order to register for classes. As a consequence, the deployment of the questionnaire raises serious concerns that students’ right to an education is being inappropriately conditioned on their political views.

Reprisal actions against faculty members and scholars for their support of the Gezi Protests are equally troubling. The disciplinary investigation initiated against Assistant Professor Timuçin Köprülü, after he wore a t-shirt bearing the slogan “Resist” during his speech at the university graduation ceremony, is a case in point. Professor Köprülü, a law professor at Uludağ University, attended the graduation ceremony wearing the t-shirt and addressed the audience with a speech in defense of lawyers who had recently been arrested in connection with the Gezi Protests and criticizing excessive force by the police in their crackdown against peaceful demonstrations. As a consequence of his speech and the t-shirt that he wore, the university administration opened a disciplinary investigation against him. Such an investigation is in clear violation of basic tenets of freedom of speech and academic freedom, as Professor Köprülü is accused of nothing other than the expression of a political view deemed unpopular by the Uludağ University administration.

We have written to you previously about actions by your government that appear designed to intimidate students, researchers, scholars, academics and professors for their political affiliations or political views. In measures adopted and criminal investigations initiated against academics for their political views, research and publications, we have noted a troubling trend of conflating peaceful activities with advocacy of violence. In these most recent instances, we find that both the government and university administrations are acting to suppress freedom of speech and freedom of assembly on university campuses through a combination of regulatory action, deployment of police forces and initiation of disciplinary investigations. Taken together with the previous cases we have brought to your attention, the new forms of crackdown both by the government and by university administrators in response to the Gezi Protests add to a record suggesting that the Turkish government contributes to or passively tolerates serious violations of academic freedom.

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 the government refrain from targeting academics for exercising their right to freedom of expression and association. Government and



university administration efforts to silence scholars and students who voice support for the political opposition in Turkey send a chilling message to Turkey's scholarly community.

We respectfully ask you to clarify that university students will not be penalized through the withdrawal of scholarships, grants or loans—or the declaration that they are ineligible to apply for the same—as a consequence of their participation in peaceful demonstrations or their expression of political views. We also ask that you reverse any measures that would deploy police forces on university campuses with the intention of preventing public demonstrations from being organized.

Finally, we ask that your government take all necessary steps to protect researchers, scholars and faculty members from unfair reprisal actions by university administrations on the grounds of their political opinions. In particular, we ask that an investigation be undertaken by appropriate officials in the Turkish Higher Education Council as to the actions by the Uludağ University administration against Professor Köprülü with a view to terminating any disciplinary investigation and reversing any punitive measures adopted against Professor Köprülü. We also 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.

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