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H.E. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan
President of the Republic of Turkey
T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Genel Sekreterliği
06689 Çankaya, Ankara
Turkey

Dear President Erdoğan:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) of North America and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our deep disappointment with your government's continued targeting of Professor Bülent Şık, whose research focuses on public health, food safety and the right to a healthy environment, and who was given a prison sentence for making public his research on industrial pollution. The persecution of Professor Şık is symptomatic of your government's disregard for both academic freedom and public health. The treatment of Professor Şık sends a chilling message that your government prioritizes profits over the lives and rights of Turkish citizens.

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 2500 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.

We wrote to you, in a letter dated [21 March 2019](#), when Professor Şık was first targeted for publishing his findings on the contamination of soil, food, air and water by [carcinogenic industrial chemicals](#) in Antalya, Ergene, and Dilovası. Between 2011 and 2016, he took part in a study launched by the Ministry of Health that yielded disturbing findings that the Ministry suppressed and hid from the public. After several years of waiting for the Ministry to address the findings, Professor Şık decided to unilaterally disclose those that concerned the cancer risks posed by toxic pollution in western Turkey. On 15-18 April 2018, he made public the findings of the study, including a map of carcinogenic contamination based on his research. The [Ministry of Health filed a lawsuit](#) against Şık alleging that he had disseminated "classified information" and that the disclosure was unauthorized, in violation of his duties of confidentiality. [On 26 September 2019, he was sentenced to 15 months in prison](#) for "disclosing classified information." He was acquitted on the count of "obtaining classified information" without due authorization. Professor Şık is appealing the sentence.

While obligations to maintain confidentiality may pertain to some forms of government-funded research, the public has a right to be informed of findings that indicate an urgent risk to public health. Rather than suppressing the findings and prosecuting Professor Şık, the Ministry of Health should be taking urgent action to address environmental pollution

and protect public health. The dramatic increase in cancer diagnoses in the affected regions attests to the importance of Professor Şık's findings. The prosecution of Professor Şık under these circumstances is not only a violation of his academic freedom, but also indicative of your government's worrisome indifference to public health.

The case of Professor [Şık](#) confirms the broader pattern of persecuting academics perceived to be critics of your government whether based on their advocacy of Kurdish rights or criticisms of industrial policies that advance the interests of corporate sectors supportive of your government. (See our letters dated [12 December 2012](#) and [30 October 2015](#)). For example, former Chair of the Department of Public Health at Kocaeli University, Professor Onur Hamzaoğlu, was similarly targeted by your party's officials for revealing his research findings, which also documented [carcinogenic industrial pollution in the same region, Dilovası, studied by Professor Şık](#). At the time, the AKP mayors of Kocaeli and Dilovası filed a lawsuit against Professor Hamzaoğlu on grounds of alleged "[academic misconduct](#)" for publishing his research findings and thereby purportedly [inciting public panic](#). Our earlier letters also document the case of Professor Beyza Üstün, targeted for disciplinary investigation because she published her research on the public health impact of hydroelectric power plants (see our letter dated [30 October 2015](#)). While these scholars have been penalized for their work on the adverse health impacts of your government's environmental and industrial policies, academics supportive of such policies, like the Rector of Ankara University, Erkan İbiş, were celebrated for promoting dubious research on the safety of nuclear energy (see our letters dated [12 December 2012](#), [12 January 2017](#) and [16 February 2017](#)).

Our letters over the last four years have clearly documented your government's strategy of using emergency decrees and prosecutions to silence academics whose research or views have been deemed unsupportive of your government's policies, and to manipulate anti-terror laws as a means to repress critical scholarship and stifle dissent.

The fact that these policies are being adopted in the midst of a pandemic speaks volumes about your government's priorities. At a time when government obligations to protect public health have become clearer than ever, your government's targeting of professionals who disclose risks to public health, including the case of Professor Şık, is shocking.

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 academic freedom, which is grounded in the 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.

Lastly, Turkey is a signatory of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which includes obligations both to protect Turkish citizens' rights to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health and to "respect the freedom indispensable for scientific research." (Article 15(3)).

Once again, we respectfully urge your government to desist from repressing academic freedom and freedom of expression for scholars and researchers. In particular, we call on your government to halt the prosecution of scholars whose research reveals the negative effects of its policies in areas including, but not confined to, public health and environmental regulation, to drop all charges against Professor Şık, and to cease your government's campaign of harassment against professional and academic organizations. The freedom to conduct the research necessary to identify risks, mitigate harms and offer protections for public health is essential to your government's capacity to meet its most basic obligations. The changes we respectfully request would send the message to your citizens and the Turkish scientific community that you prioritize the protection of public health and academic freedom over partisan political or economic gains.

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

Sincerely,



Dina Rizk Khoury
MESA President
Professor, George Washington University



Laurie Brand
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom
Professor, University of Southern California

cc:

Ibrahim Kalın, Chief Advisor to the President and Presidential Spokesman
Mustafa Şentop, Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Başkanı (President of the
Turkish National Assembly)
Abdülhamit Gül, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Adalet Bakanı (Justice Minister of the
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Yekta Saraç, Türkiye Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu (YÖK) Başkanı (President of
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Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanı (Minister of Foreign
Affairs of the Republic of Turkey)

Bülent Ekici, President of Istanbul Sehir University

Maria Arena, Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

Viktor Almqvist, Press Officer for the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the European Parliament

Josep Borrell Fontelles, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

Fiona Knab-Lunny, Member of Cabinet of Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

Hannah Neumann, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

Raphael Glucksmann, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

Christian Danielsson, Director-General for Enlargement at the European Commission

Dunja Mijatović, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Kati Piri, Member, Committee on Foreign Affairs, European Parliament

Nacho Sanchez Amor, Member of European Parliament and European Parliament Standing Turkey Rapporteur

Verónica Michelle Bachelet Jeria, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

David Kaye, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression

Koumbou Boly Barry, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education

Qu Dongyu, Director General of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization

Viorel Gutu, Subregional Coordinator for Central Asia and United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization Representative in Turkey

Vladimir Rakhmanin, Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative for Europe and Central Asia, United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization