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26 October 2020

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 grave concern about your government's policies on Kurdish language rights. These policies have direct implications for the study of and research in Kurdish at schools and higher education institutions, as well as the evaluation of academic research conducted and written in this language. Recent media reports on restrictions imposed on students who wish to write their academic theses in Kurdish at Dicle University's Kurdish Studies graduate program exemplify the adverse impact of your government's policies on academic freedom and the right to education in Turkey.

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 more than 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. Kurdish language policy in the field of education should be understood within the framework of citizens' rights to study in one of the native languages of the country. Regrettably, at no time in the history of the Turkish republic has the Kurdish language or the rights of Kurdish-speaking citizens of Turkey been accorded this recognition. Your government's Kurdish language policies have at times been more permissive than the most draconian restrictions of the republican era, but by and large those policies have reflected partisan agendas rather than the recognition of Kurdish language rights, including the right to education in Kurdish. The result today is that few students have access to Kurdish language programs, and those who do are limited in their ability to conduct advanced research and writing in Kurdish and have few if any employment opportunities upon graduation.

A review of the history of your government's approach to Kurdish language rights in higher education illustrates the dependence of these policies on the vagaries of partisan agendas. On 5 December 2003, [the Official Gazette number 25307](#) published bylaws that regulated the right to education in languages and dialects spoken in Turkey. This change was viewed as an outgrowth of your government's efforts at that time to harmonize Turkish regulations with European Union requirements. It took another six years before the first higher education program in Kurdish was approved. On 12 October 2009, the Cabinet of Ministers [approved the Ministry of Education's official petition number 26256](#)—to open an "Institute of Living Languages in Turkey" [Türkiye'de Yaşayan Diller Enstitüsü] at Mardin

Artuklu University, a decision subsequently published in the [Official Gazette number 27419](#) on 1 December 2009. Contemporaneous media reports framed this decision and subsequent meetings on language rights held by your government with civil society groups as part of a broader effort to mobilize support in favor of a constitutional amendment package that was put to a referendum on 12 September 2010. Following the passage of the referendum, the “Kurdish opening” of that period and the hard-won right to Kurdish language education were largely removed from the government’s agenda.

The case of Mardin Artuklu University is emblematic of how Kurdish studies programs became hostage to your government’s partisan agendas. When Mardin Artuklu University’s Institute of Living Languages opened the first Kurdish and Syriac programs in higher education in 2011, these programs were heralded as evidence of the democratization of language rights and the right to education in Turkey. In addition to Mardin Artuklu, five other universities located in the Kurdistan region of Turkey started offering Kurmanji and/or Zaza language and literature programs, representing the two major variants of Kurdish languages that are most prevalent in Turkey. Kurdish was not, however, recognized as a native language of Turkey, nor as a foreign language—its status was far more liminal. The Kurdish language programs were based in departments of: [Eastern Languages and Literatures](#) at Dicle University; [Eastern Languages and Literatures](#) at Tunceli [Munzur University](#); the Institute of [Living Languages](#) at [Van Yüzüncü Yıl University](#); [Eastern Languages and Literatures](#) at Muş Alparslan University; and the Institute of [Living Languages](#) at Bingöl University. Only three of these universities—[Muş Alparslan](#), [Bingöl](#), and [Mardin Artuklu](#)—were able to offer Bachelor’s degree programs in Kurmanji and/or Zaza. While [these programs](#) were allowed to thrive while your government pursued a Kurdish “peace process,” they have deteriorated significantly since you reverted to a militarized strategy toward the region. As peace negotiations were collapsing, seventy people affiliated with Mardin Artuklu University, including vice-rector Kadri Yildirim who was also the head of the Institute of Living Languages, were arrested in 2014. Following the removal of the rector of the university, a new rector, Ahmet Ağırakça, who was openly hostile to Kurdish studies, was appointed. Rector Ağırakça moved swiftly to terminate faculty contracts, reassign faculty members to teach courses outside their field of specialization, and harass students and faculty members with disciplinary investigations (see our letter dated [10 October 2016](#)). In roughly the same period, hundreds of academics signed a Peace Petition calling for an end to the brutal counterinsurgency campaign undertaken by your government in the Kurdistan region of Turkey beginning in the summer of 2015. The Petition was seized upon as a further pretext to purge faculty, including those teaching in the Kurdish language programs (see our previous letters dated [14 January 2016](#); [8 February 2016](#); [22 February 2016](#); [17 March 2016](#); [12 January 2017](#); [16 February 2017](#); [4 April 2017](#); [19 May 2017](#); [17 October 2017](#); [21 March 2019](#); [11 June 2019](#)).

The remilitarization of the Kurdish question in Turkey by your government has resulted in the targeting not only of Kurdish politicians and civilians, but much of Turkish academia and [Kurdish studies in particular](#) (see our previous letters dated [7 August 2012](#); [4 September 2012](#); [12 December 2012](#); [12 December 2012](#); [12 December 2012](#); [3 November 2015](#); [30 November 2015](#); [5 January 2016](#); [17 February 2016](#); [4 April 2018](#)). Kurdish studies programs are at the mercy of everything from the discretionary and politicized decisions of the highest echelon of the Turkish state bureaucracy to the hostility of appointed university administrators. The result has been a deplorable record of repression of education rights and restrictions of academic freedom.

Beyond the purging of scholars whose research and writing are deemed undesirable—as with the Peace Petition signatories—your government’s policies through the Higher Education Council (YÖK) exclude publications in Kurdish from being recognized as part of the scholarly record of academics seeking promotion in their institutions. Moreover, your government has introduced new restrictions on the number of undergraduate students allowed to enroll in Kurdish studies programs at the few universities permitted to offer B.A.s in the field, resulting in shrinking enrollments: at Bingöl from [41](#) to [31](#), at Mardin Artuklu from [41](#) to [26](#), at Muş Alparslan from [41](#) to [36](#). Restrictions on graduate students’ right to write their academic theses in Kurdish at [Dicle University](#)—a cause for recent media attention to your government’s Kurdish language policies—further add to this grim record. Finally, by setting strict limits on available teaching positions for Kurdish language instruction in primary and secondary schools, your government has foreclosed the principal employment path ordinarily available for graduates of language and literature programs in all other languages. The combination of all these restrictions on Kurdish studies—undergraduate enrollment, research and writing in the language of study, recognition of publications towards scholarly promotion and employment opportunities for graduates—poses an existential threat to the handful of programs in Kurdish languages and literatures in the country.

[Article 42 in](#) Turkey’s Constitution states that no language other than Turkish is recognized as a native language in education, a provision that is the basis for denying Kurdish any status as an official language of the country. The same clause states that no one can be denied the right to education. This tension would be best resolved by an amendment adding Kurdish as an officially recognized language of Turkey. While your government has not hesitated to amend the constitution repeatedly to address what you have described as anti-democratic provisions, there are few provisions of the constitution more in need of amendment than this one. Without such an amendment, the Kurdish language is relegated, as described by the regulations passed by your government on 5 December 2003 and published in [the Official Gazette number 25307](#), to the category of a “dialect” “traditionally spoken in the daily lives of Turkey’s citizens.” Depriving Kurdish of its status as a native language of Turkey, in turn, justifies the consignment of Kurdish language programs to “Eastern



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Languages” programs or institutes of “living languages,” in ways that diminish and even caricature the importance of these languages to large communities of Turkish citizens.

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 speech, thought, expression and assembly, as well as academic freedom. Scholars are indeed entitled to these protections. 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 enshrined, as well, in articles 25-27 of the Turkish Constitution. All citizens of Turkey—and especially those from the large Kurdish-speaking community in the country—would benefit from recognition of their right to study and conduct research in the Kurdish languages.

We respectfully ask that your government recognize Kurdish as an official language as part of your obligation to protect and promote citizenship rights, the right to education and academic freedom. We also urge your government to desist from implementing arbitrary regulations on scholars and students working in the field of Kurdish studies or on issues related to Kurdish communities. Finally, we respectfully request that the rector of Dicle University, recently appointed by your government, lift restrictions on writing academic theses in Kurdish.

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

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dina Rizk Khoury', with a long, sweeping underline.

Dina Rizk Khoury
MESA President
Professor, George Washington University

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laurie Brand', with a stylized, cursive style.

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 Republic of Turkey)

Yekta Saraç, Türkiye Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu (YÖK) Başkanı (President of the Turkish Higher Education Council)

Ziya Selçuk, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Milli Eğitim Bakanı (Minister of Education of the Republic of Turkey)

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

Irene Khan, 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