



**Middle
East
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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 concern over the detention of Cihan Erdal, a PhD candidate at Carleton University, on 26 September 2020. Erdal was detained together with 81 others, including politicians, academic and activists, on as yet unknown allegations.

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 2800 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. Erdal is a doctoral student conducting sociological research concerning youth-led social movements in Europe and Turkey. Both for his research and to visit family, Erdal regularly travels to Turkey from Canada. However, he relocated from Turkey to Canada in 2017 to pursue his doctorate at Carleton University in Ottawa. He was in Turkey in September for a family visit and to pursue his doctoral fieldwork.

While the grounds for the detentions of Erdal and others have not yet been made public, we understand from widespread reporting in the Turkish press that the detentions are related to events surrounding protests in Turkey on 6-8 October 2014. Those protests were in response to the seizure at the time of the Kurdish-Syrian border town of Kobane by the Islamic State (ISIS). At that time, the Peoples' Democratic Party (known by its acronym, HDP), the third largest party in the Turkish parliament, submitted parliamentary requests for an investigation of the circumstances leading to the detention of some of these protesters by the Turkish government. In addition, a number of party members, including Erdal, signed a letter to the Turkish government calling for steps to protect Kobane from ISIS attacks. At that time, Erdal was a youth representative in the HDP and a member of the Central Executive Committee, as were a number of other individuals detained on 26 September. We understand that the Ankara Chief Prosecutor's Office has recently launched an investigation into the Kobane protests and the signatories of the Kobane letter. Thus, it appears that Erdal and other former Central Executive Committee members of the HDP are currently being detained for their role six years ago in protesting the Turkish government's refusal to lend assistance to a Syrian Kurdish town near the Turkish border under siege by ISIS.

Criminal investigations of individuals for activities that should be protected by the freedoms of speech and association under the Turkish Constitution and Turkey's international human rights commitments are regrettably all too common in Turkey. The detentions of Erdal and the other 81 individuals arrested on 26 September are particularly egregious because they target individuals for protected activity intended to forestall the massacre of civilians in a town just across the border. Moreover, in Erdal's case, this arbitrary detention has the effect of disrupting his current academic research and undermining his progress in his doctoral program.

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. 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 of freedom of opinion, 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.

We respectfully request that your government take immediate steps to drop any charges against Erdal, release him from detention, and allow him to leave the country so that he may return to Canada to resume his studies. We also ask your government to refrain from taking any further actions inimical to his academic freedom and right to education, including any steps that would prevent his ability to continue doctoral fieldwork in Turkey if he so chooses.

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
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