

**Middle
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4 February 2021

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 dismay concerning the detentions of Boğaziçi University students over recent days. Following a month of protests against the appointment of a member of your political party as rector of the university, a matter we wrote to you about on [7 January 2021](#), five Boğaziçi University students were detained over the course of 29-30 January, for being “LGBT deviants” (according to your Minister of Interior), and then a far larger group of [159 students were detained](#) on 1 February for protesting the earlier detentions. On 2 February, the protests against the detention of students spread nationwide, leading to police crackdowns and the detention of 279 more students in [Ankara](#), [Istanbul](#), and [Izmir](#).

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 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.

We are deeply concerned about the increasingly routine arbitrary detention of students and outraged that Minister of Interior Süleyman Soylu publicly denounced Boğaziçi University students as “[LGBT deviants](#).” This alleged deviance relates to an art project created by members of the Boğaziçi Art Collective, some of whom are LGBTI+ identified. We are shocked that your government, which is under international and constitutional obligations to protect the free speech rights of these college students, ordered these arrests. Moreover, the arrests appear to be in response to the urging of media—owned by your government’s supporters—which broadcast claims that the art in question was offensive to their religious sensibilities. As we indicated in our letter of [20 January 2021](#), the imposition of government-sanctioned standards of morality on the activities of Turkish universities has the effect of stifling creativity, trampling on rights of free speech and academic freedom, and worryingly singling out LGBTI+-identified individuals and subjects of study for targeted rights violations. These arrests and the media climate that your government has enabled, stigmatizing students based on religious sensibilities, are the realization of the fears we gave voice to last month.

The mass arrests of 1 February occurred while students were peacefully protesting both your undemocratic appointment of Melih Bulu as rector of Boğaziçi University and the detention of the five students involved in the art project. According to news reports, the police raided the campus and detained 159 students and faculty on the pretext that they were obstructing building entrances and engaging in unlawful protest. Students were reportedly subjected to severe mistreatment, including beatings that resulted in broken bones among other injuries requiring hospitalization. Those who were detained were reportedly deprived of food and water, while other students remained trapped inside the campus and barred from leaving. Disturbing images of snipers situated on the roofs of buildings adjacent to the campus gate are emblematic of your administration's treatment of university students as enemies. The news of the detentions resulted in further protests on 2 February, with hundreds more students and other protesters detained, this time in Istanbul and Ankara. This pattern of meeting protest with ever greater repression is deeply alarming, all the more so because it is targeted at universities.

This approach to students and higher education more generally is sadly consistent with your government's record of stifling dissent and criminalizing protest. Indeed, last month your government sent teams of police commando units to the homes of Boğaziçi University students, ramming doors and breaking down living room and bedroom walls to enter their residences at dawn instead of engaging in ordinary arrests. The spectacular violence your government deployed against the students underscores both your extreme intolerance of any criticism of your government and the degree to which you treat political opponents as dangerous criminals. Detained students at the time reported abusive treatment and threats of sexual assault by law enforcement officials once they were in custody, with the most severe mistreatment and sexual harassment being reported by LGBTI+ students.

In addition to the criminalization of protests against your government, the public statements made by you and members of your government demonizing the Boğaziçi University students is deeply troubling. In various speeches, you have labeled these students as "elites," likened them to "terrorists" for opposing your policies, and then targeted them as "immoral"—implying specifically that students identified as LGBTI+ are "deviants". Likewise, the AKP governor of Istanbul issued a statement on 1 February, emphasizing that the Boğaziçi University's LGBTI+ Club members were among those detained. The singling out of the LGBTI+ Club despite the fact that members of other clubs also participated in the protests and were among those arrested is an example of the casual and gratuitous homophobia that your government has embraced.

According to the latest news reports on 3 February, your appointed rector, Melih Bulu, has ordered the closure of the LGBTI+ Student Club at Boğaziçi University. Under the university's bylaws, this is not an order that the Rector should be able to issue unilaterally, but rather one subject to

stipulated procedures. Further, reports suggest that the actions that form the basis for the closure of the LGBTI+ Student Club were misattributed to them. Thus, acting on inaccurate information and in contravention of university procedures, Melih Bulu has compounded the undemocratic circumstances of his appointment by using his role to govern the university in an undemocratic and improper manner that promotes an intolerant and homophobic climate at Boğaziçi.

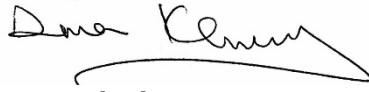
As we have mentioned in prior letters (see again our letters of 7 January 2021 and 20 January 2021), the pattern of violations of academic freedom and the right to education by your government has gone from bad to worse. Boğaziçi University has often been singled out for denunciations by your government. We see now that your government's targeting of Boğaziçi's students, academics and the autonomy of the university's governance has only accelerated with each passing year, culminating in the literal handcuffing of the university's campus, the physical destruction of students' homes, and outright assault against faculty and students. The intolerant and even violent treatment to which you have subjected both faculty and students at Boğaziçi University over the course of the last month is in keeping with your government's disgraceful record of violating academic freedom and freedom of speech, and your determined efforts to undermine the autonomy and quality of higher education in Turkey.

As a member state of the Council of Europe and a signatory to 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 to freedom of expression and association, which are at the heart of academic freedom. The rights being trampled by your government's actions are also enshrined in articles 25-27 and 42 of the Turkish Constitution.

We urge your government to immediately secure the release of all Boğaziçi University students and faculty detained on 29-30 January and 1 February 2021, and all others—students, faculty and other protesters—detained on 2 February 2021 as they protested the earlier detentions. We further ask that your government restore the tradition of university self-government in Turkey, withdrawing not only Bulu's appointment as rector to Boğaziçi University, but also, as we called for in our letter of [7 November 2016](#), rescinding the legal framework that enables you to make appointments of university rectors by presidential decree. We also urge you to adhere to democratic principles in higher education, respect the human rights of the students and faculty, and ensure that officials responsible for the mistreatment of the detained students are held accountable.

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
Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Rektörlüğü (Office of the Rector of Bogazici University)



Re: Boğaziçi University Student Arrests

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Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Mezunlar Derneği (Bogazici University Alumni Association)

Matthew A Palmer, Deputy Assistant Secretary, United States Department of State