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23 February 2023

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

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 the persecution of Sibel Tekin, a faculty member in the School of Communication at Hacettepe University in Ankara and a [documentary filmmaker](#). We are deeply disturbed by this latest addition to your government's ongoing assault on academic freedom and the right to education in Türkiye, [documented in our numerous intervention letters](#) over the last eleven years.

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 2400 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.

A feminist documentary filmmaker working on social movements, social injustice, and political violence, Sibel Tekin was most recently working on a documentary film investigating the Turkish government's decision to make daylight savings time permanent and its negative impact on students and workers during winter in Ankara's Tuzluca district, also known as "Little Moscow." According to news reports, during the filming of this documentary, a vehicle belonging to a penal correctional facility entered Tekin's camera's scope and was recorded as a result. When the penal correctional officers inside the vehicle complained to the authorities, Tekin's house was reportedly [raided by law enforcement at 2 o'clock in the morning on Saturday 17 December 2022](#). She was detained pre-trial, while her computer, documentary filmmaking materials, footage, and archive were confiscated. Subsequently, her dossier was transferred to the anti-terrorism unit, which then arrested Tekin [on the grounds of alleged membership in an as yet unnamed "armed terrorist organization."](#) [No evidence has been presented to support this](#) disturbingly vague claim; even prison [officials at the Sincan penitentiary](#) where she was sent were unsure of where to hold her because the basis for her detention was under-specified in the arrest document. The claim that she is a member of *an* armed organization without providing any indication of *which* organization it is, is so extraordinary that it

has been widely remarked upon in the Turkish media as evidence in itself of the arbitrariness of her detention.

Sibel Tekin's [filmography](#) includes documentaries about the Gezi Park protests. Hence, her [lawyer reportedly suspects the police of pretextually basing her detention on the now confiscated footage when their real reason for targeting her is tied to her work on those protests](#). Your government's attempts to associate the Gezi Park protests with terrorism and the related vendetta against Osman Kavala have become a focal point of international human rights scrutiny, as evidenced by the multiple adverse decisions against your government by the [European Court of Human Rights](#).

Our past letters have documented your government's long record of efforts to silence scholars and other professionals --in fields ranging from public health and forensic medicine to environment to Kurdish studies -- who raise criticisms of its policies or who support positions that diverge from yours on political, social, economic, and environmental matters (see, for example, our letters dated [26 October 2020](#), [5 August 2020](#), and [20 July 2020](#)).

Documentary films, like Tekin's work, occupy a critical position at the intersections of these issues; they help raise public awareness and are also vital to democratic accountability by documenting the outcomes of the policies your government imposes. Given your government's track record of violating academic freedom and democratic rights to persecute critics, we are gravely concerned by the arbitrary arrest and persecution of a scholar and filmmaker whom you may well be seeking to silence because of her critical perspective.

These concerns are compounded by the [new social media law](#) and the [2021/19 circular issued by the Directorate of Security](#) that ban filming, recording, or photographing the police, as well as sharing these images via social media. Owing to the absence of a credible basis for the raid of Tekin's home by the police, her lawyers at first thought she had accidentally filmed the police in contravention of these new rules. Once it became clear that she had caught a corrections vehicle and not the police on film, there appeared to be no legal basis at all for the raid and her arrest. The retroactive submission of her dossier to the anti-terror unit has been interpreted by her lawyers as a delaying tactic that restricts access to it, preventing them from examining the basis for her detention at the time. [Reportedly](#), the indictment accuses her of being a member of a terrorist organization without specifying which one. It comments on her documentary filmmaking aesthetics, and uses her filming in the dark hours of the morning as "evidence" that she was allegedly exploring the locations she was filming at the orders of her organization(s), with her academic position and gender being a "front," according to the prosecutor. According to news reports, the prosecutor included in the dossier past prosecutions of Tekin, those in which she was found not guilty, as evidence of her past "criminal activity." [On 30 January 2023](#), the court decided to

conditionally release Tekin from prison. It imposed a travel ban on her, as well as the requirement that she provide her signature in a police station fortnightly. All of these actions against Tekin amount to the violation of her rights to freedom of expression and academic freedom as a university professor, a documentary filmmaker, and a citizen under the Turkish Constitution.

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, Türkiye is required to protect academic freedom, which is grounded in the freedom of thought, expression and assembly. Türkiye 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, [together with the right to information and the freedom to disseminate information through film and other media](#), are also enshrined in articles 25-27 of the Turkish Constitution. We urge your government to take all necessary steps to desist from its politically motivated targeting of higher education institutions and return to ensuring that these rights are protected.

We respectfully repeat our numerous requests that your government take immediate steps to reverse its present course and restore protection for academic freedom and freedom of expression in Türkiye. We also request the immediate release of Sibel Tekin and the return of her filming equipment, archive, and other materials.

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

Sincerely,



Eve Troutt Powell  
MESA President  
Professor, University of Pennsylvania



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

Cc:

Mustafa Şentop, Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Başkanı (President of the Turkish National Assembly)

Bekir Bozdağ, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Adalet Bakanı (Justice Minister of the Republic of Türkiye)

Erol Özvar, Türkiye Yükseköğretim Kurulu (YÖK) Başkanı (President of the Turkish Higher Education Council)

Mahmut Özer, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Milli Eğitim Bakanı (Minister of Education of the Republic of Türkiye)

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

Bernard Guetta, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

Christian Sagartz, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

Dunja Mijatović, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Kati Piri, Member of the Dutch Parliament (The House of Representatives)

David McAllister, Committee on Foreign Affairs, European Parliament



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

Volker Türk, 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

Gabriel Escobar, Deputy Assistant Secretary, United States Department of State