



**Middle
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01 March 2023

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

Dear President Erdoğan:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) of North America and its Committee on Academic Freedom to ask that your government rethink its decision to close all university campuses across the country as a response to the tragic earthquakes of 6 February 2023. We express our sincere condolences to all persons in Türkiye who have lost family members and property and who are coping with the injuries and trauma of living through the unimaginable devastation occasioned by these earthquakes. We are also deeply aware of the profound humanitarian crisis that has unfolded in the aftermath of the earthquakes. We realize that your government has a responsibility to provide temporary shelter to earthquake victims. However, we find the closure of all universities in the country and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of university students from their campuses to be a totally inappropriate means for providing emergency housing. This measure only serves to further aggravate rather than ameliorate an already catastrophic situation. We write to ask that you immediately reverse the decision to close the country's universities and seek more narrowly tailored and appropriate alternatives for emergency housing.

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 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.

Two devastating earthquakes struck ten provinces in the southeastern region of Türkiye on 6 February 2023 causing immense death and destruction. Three weeks after the earthquakes, the death toll already stood above 45,000 and was projected to grow further, with hundreds of thousands more injured, displaced and unsheltered during bitter winter weather. On 11 February, you announced that all universities in the country would be closed until the summer and would have to provide virtual instruction. With almost no notice, all university students were instructed to vacate their dormitories. The ostensible purpose of the

closure of all university campuses was declared to be the repurposing of dormitories as temporary emergency housing for earthquake victims. As a preliminary matter, the announcement made no provision for the fact that a proportion of university students studying outside of the earthquake zone have families and homes that have been shattered by the earthquakes, and that these students may have nowhere to go when forced to vacate their university housing.

The announcement of university closures came without any public consultation or evidence of careful policy consideration given to alternatives that would not compound the current crisis by disrupting the education of a generation of university students. At a time of profound solidarity across the country with earthquake victims, university faculty and students responded to the announcement with dismay, concern and anger because the closure of universities bears little rational relationship to humanitarian relief. Eğitim-Sen (Education Union), the union representing teaching and research faculty across the country, issued a [statement](#) objecting to the decision and noting that it is unacceptable for the government to exact such a heavy price from university students to compensate for its inability to manage the crisis.

In their statement, Eğitim-Sen noted the presence of state-run guesthouses, social facilities and clubs and other public housing institutions across the country that are under the control of local, provincial and central government authorities, as well as tens of thousands of residential units that sit empty in urban centers around the country due to the economic crisis. We would also add that given the scale of the emergency, requisitioning hotel facilities to provide shelter to earthquake victims would be a less disruptive and more comfortable way to offer temporary housing to the families that have been displaced, rather than offering them congregate housing on campuses. Moreover, we echo the Education Union in noting that universities in areas unaffected by the earthquake might be directed, instead, to accept transfer students from campuses damaged by earthquakes so that those young people would avoid further disruption to their lives and educations. We are dismayed that your government has shown such little concern or regard for university students impacted by the earthquakes, whether because their family homes or their campuses have been damaged. These are the communities that should be prioritized in any relief plans involving universities, specifically by keeping campuses open and expanding access to dormitories for university students who are among the displaced. The failure to take the interests and needs of these university students, together with the broader cohort of students across the country, into account represents a violation of the right to education.



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We have written to you previously to denounce your government's abrogations of the autonomy of higher education institutions, your violations of the academic freedom of faculty and students and your interference in university hiring and administrative decisions. All of these measures are part of a broader pattern of your actions undermining the higher education sector in Türkiye. Your decision now to close all universities represents a new low in this dismal record. We have long noted that 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, Türkiye is required to protect freedom of thought, expression and assembly, including the right to education. 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 at the heart of academic freedom and university autonomy. Finally, your government's actions are also in tension with the rights enshrined in articles 25-27 and 42 of the Turkish Constitution. We call on you and your government to reverse the decision to close all universities and to reopen the campuses to university students, thus allowing them to resume in-person instruction. We urge you, as well, to provide the resources necessary for university students from earthquake damaged areas to transfer to universities elsewhere in the country to continue their education.

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

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Eve M. Troutt Powell'.

Eve Troutt Powell
MESA President
Professor, University of Pennsylvania

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Laurie A. Brand'.

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

cc:

İbrahim Kalın, Chief Advisor to the President and Presidential Spokesman

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

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

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

David McAllister, Committee on Foreign Affairs, European Parliament

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



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

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

Farida Shaheed, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education

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