



**Middle
East
Studies
Association**
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12 December 2012

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan
Office of the Prime Minister
Başbakanlık
06573 Ankara, Turkey
Via facsimile +90 312 417 0476

Dear Prime Minister Erdoğan:

I write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) of North America and its Committee on Academic Freedom in order to express our dismay and concern over the ongoing pattern of arrests and detentions of academics, scholars and students on the basis of their research and scholarship concerning Kurdish issues. Our concern regarding these violations of academic freedom is aggravated by our awareness that several of these individuals undertook a hunger strike for over two months—beginning on September 12 and ending on November 18th of this year—in protest of their detention.

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 3000 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 have written to you previously about the cases of Ismail Beşikçi, Büşra Ersanlı and Müge Tuzcuoğlu, each of whom was denied their right to freely express nonviolent opinions in the course of their academic research and scholarship by your government. Actions such as the widespread pattern of detention of professors and students alike for their work on Kurdish issues make it appear that the Turkish government has undertaken a campaign to inhibit the dissemination of knowledge about the conditions affecting the Kurdish community in the country and even to prevent Kurdish, leftist, and other students who support Kurdish rights from pursuing their right to an education. Government efforts to silence scholars who voice support for the rights of Kurdish citizens in Turkey send a chilling message to Turkey's scholarly community, Kurdish communities in Turkey and beyond, and to scholars working on the region wherever they may be based. We are very concerned about what seems to be a clear and ongoing campaign to arrest those who seek a peaceful political solution to the Kurdish problem.

While all of the cases of academics detained in connection to their work on Kurdish issues should be subject to immediate review and reconsideration, we are particularly concerned about the crackdown against students for engaging in activities protected by basic norms of academic freedom in the course of their studies and research. In this letter, we draw your attention particularly to the circumstances of seven students currently in detention for engaging in nonviolent political speech, attending academic events and conducting research and writing, all of which should be protected by their right to academic freedom. These seven detained students are: Deniz Zarakolu; Mustafa Polat; Erdal Ozmaskan; Derya Goregenli, Mehmet Mesut Tanrikulu, Gulan Kılıçoğlu and Emine Akman. All seven have been detained on the same grounds, namely that their academic research activities or campus political activism constitutes evidence of their membership in the Union of Kurdish Communities (KCK). In fact, the accusations brought against these students concern what are universally recognized as legitimate academic and scholarly endeavors.

Five of the students were detained and tried as part of a police operation allegedly against the Union of Kurdish Communities (KCK), while the remaining two—Kılıçoğlu and Akman—were detained on similar grounds, but in separate cases. In all seven, the allegations are directly related to activities protected by academic freedom, freedom of thought and freedom of association.

The five students detained and charged pursuant to the anti-KCK operation are: Deniz Zarakolu, a PhD Candidate in the Political Science Department at Istanbul Bilgi University; Mustafa Polat, an undergraduate student in the English Language and Literature Department at Istanbul University; Erdal Ozmaskan, an undergraduate student in the Computer Science Department at Istanbul University; Derya Goregenli, an undergraduate in the Communications and Media Relations Department at Istanbul Bilgi University; and Mehmet Mesut Tanrikulu, an undergraduate student in the Chemical Engineering Department of Istanbul University. Between the dates of October 4th and October 31st 2011 each of these students was detained and accused of membership in the KCK on the basis of having attended or given lectures at a “Political Academy” sponsored by the Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi (the Peace and Democracy Party, or BDP), the legal political party representing Kurdish constituents in the Turkish Grand National Assembly. The BDP Academy was supported by dozens of faculty members from accredited Turkish universities who gave lectures at the Academy concerning Kurdish rights and civil society organizing. Lectures offered at the Academy included such topics as: the social production of gender through public education; the unity of human rights and democracy; emigration; ethics and politics; managing natural resources in the twenty-first century; and identity issues in Turkey. Zarakolu, Polat, Ozmaksan, Goregenli and Tanrikulu have all been detained for nothing more than their participation in this civil society initiative and leading discussions or joining panels on subjects of ordinary academic inquiry. The evidence submitted in court against these students comprised photographs showing them entering and exiting the BDP Academy building and testimony from the students themselves and others as to course offerings. The ongoing detention of these students based on charges grounded in nothing more than protected academic activities is a direct violation of academic freedom. Further, these students are being prevented from completing their studies by virtue of their detention and unreasonable constraints placed on their right to sit for final examinations or submit their research and writing towards completion of their degrees.

Two additional cases of students charged with terrorism also constitute violations of academic freedom. Gulan Kılıçoğlu was detained on April 1 2010 and has since been tried and convicted of membership in the Union of Kurdish Communities (KCK) based on evidence related entirely to her academic research activities. Kılıçoğlu traveled to Salahaddin University in Arbil, Iraq to complete research that she had undertaken on Kurdish politics as a fourth year student in the faculty of political science at Ankara University. This research trip was cited by the judge as evidence of her membership in the KCK when he announced her conviction under the Anti-Terror Law on March 15, 2012 and sentenced her to a prison term of six years and three months. Arresting a student on the grounds that research on Kurdish language rights is consistent with membership in the KCK—rather than specific and direct evidence of membership—suggests that the Turkish government views all research on political issues as tantamount to engagement in prohibited activities. That judgment defies reason.

Like Kılıçoğlu, Emine Akman is an undergraduate detained in the course of her undergraduate studies on the basis of allegations that suggest guilt by association resulting from her Kurdish identity and the fact that she is a student of journalism. The formal charges against Akman relate to her alleged presence at a demonstration while completing her studies at the Marmara University Faculty of Journalism. Her attendance at the peaceful demonstration is corroborated only by an out-of-focus photograph and constitutes the only grounds—other than her identity as a Kurdish journalism student—for the claim that she is a member of the KCK. In keeping with allegations by other detained students, Akman’s attorney has reported that Akman has been subjected to ill-treatment in detention and that she has been prohibited from completing her final examinations while in custody.

None of the students whose cases we have highlighted has been accused of using violence, nor is there any evidence that any of them has ever endorsed its use, either publicly or in academic work. Each student appears to have been targeted solely for having exercised his or her right to freedom of expression and association, a right protected by Turkey’s consent to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the European Convention for

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the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

As we have previously communicated to you, freedom of speech and free expression of ideas are essential to the mission and purpose of higher education. I respectfully ask you to intervene in the cases of Deniz Zarakolu, Mustafa Polat, Erdal Ozmaskan, Derya Goregenli, Mehmet Mesut Tanrıku, Gulan Kılıçođlu and Emine Akman to see that they are released and that charges and/or convictions against them based on evidence of scholarly activities are reversed and withdrawn. Our association will continue to monitor these detentions as well as those of other students, and we hope that your government will uphold the integrity of Turkish universities by ensuring that the right to academic freedom for students and faculty is protected.

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

Sincerely,



Peter Sluglett

MESA President

Professor, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

cc: Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanı, Abdullah Gül (Turkish president)
Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Başkanı Cemil Çiçek (President of the Turkish National Assembly)
Turkish Justice Minister, Adalet Bakanı Sadullah Ergin
Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights, Barbara Lochbihler
Member of the Cabinet of Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the European Union for
Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Carl Hartzell
Special Commissioner for EU Enlargement, Štefan Füle
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Nils Muižnieks