

SCHOLARS AT RISK N E T W O R K

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The Honorable Abdulhamit Gul
Minister of Justice
Republic of Turkey
Ministry of Justice
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Ankara, Turkey

December 4, 2017

Re: Concern for Turkish scholars & universities

Your Excellencies:

We write to express ongoing, grave concern about a large number of scholars in Turkey who face criminal charges solely as a result of the nonviolent expression of ideas; specifically having signed a petition in January 2016 (the so-called “Peace Petition”), criticizing government policy in the southeast of the country. As several of these scholars’ trials are scheduled to begin this week, we once again urge you to take any action practicable to reverse the dangerous and destructive course of the past two years, by dismissing the charges against these scholars and ensuring full protection within Turkey of human rights, including due process, freedom of expression, freedom of association, and academic freedom.

Scholars at Risk (SAR) is an international network of over 500 universities and colleges in 38 countries dedicated to promoting academic freedom and its constituent freedoms of thought, opinion, expression, association and travel. In cases involving alleged infringement of these freedoms, Scholars at Risk intervenes in hopes of clarifying and resolving matters favorably.

SAR first wrote in connection with this matter in January 2016, after Turkish authorities responded to the release of the Peace Petition by placing its signatories – 1,128 professors and researchers from 89 universities – under investigation. Unfortunately, since that time, and in particular following the July 2016 coup attempt and subsequent declaration of a state of emergency, such pressures have increased, as thousands of scholars, researchers, administrators, and students, among others, have been targeted with criminal investigations, detentions and prosecutions; suspensions, terminations and expulsions; and restrictions on travel. Peace Petition signatories have faced particularly harsh attacks, with nearly half of them suffering professional retaliation and/or being banned from leaving the country.

As SAR and others have noted previously, the mass actions taken by Turkish authorities against the Peace Petition signatories, among others, appear to be based solely on their nonviolent expression of an opinion on a matter of legitimate academic and public concern.

We were therefore dismayed to learn that, on September 23, Turkey began issuing indictments against Peace Petition signatories, charging them with “propagandizing for a terrorist organization,” a crime that carries a sentence of up to seven-and-a-half years in prison. Although the total number of these indictments has not been made public, we understand that authorities are bringing charges university-by-university, against multiple signatories each day. To date, we understand that scholars from at least ten universities in Turkey – including İstanbul, Galatasaray, Boğaziçi, Mimar Sinan, Nişantaşı, Yeni Yüzyıl, Mimar Sinan Güzel Sanatlar, Marmara, Ozyegin, and Yıldız Technical Universities – have been summoned to court beginning on December 5.

The ongoing prosecution of these scholars remains a grave violation of Turkey’s obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, and related instruments and standards. Not only do these actions strip the individuals of their rights to academic freedom, freedom of expression and freedom of association; they also threaten to do irreparable harm to Turkey’s higher education sector, and to its democracy.

We therefore respectfully urge you to prevent any further harm to the scholars, their institutions, and to the reputation of Turkey’s higher education and research sector, by:

- directing, through all appropriate means, that responsible authorities or officials cease and dismiss any investigations, prosecutions, detentions, or legal, administrative or professional actions undertaken against the Peace Petition signatories in response to their nonviolent expression of views on matters of professional and public concern;
- taking any available action to terminate or reverse all other ongoing administrative, civil, and criminal actions against scholars, students, and higher education institutions which are based on the nonviolent exercise of the rights to freedom of association, freedom of expression, academic freedom, and related human rights;
- ensuring that any proceedings against the scholars concerned proceed in a manner consistent with Turkey’s obligations under domestic and international law, including internationally recognized standards of due process, fair trial, academic freedom, freedom of expression, and freedom of association, and to ensure the well-being and access to counsel and family for scholars currently in custody; and
- publicly reaffirming Turkey’s commitment to the essential values of higher education and research, including academic freedom, freedom of expression and freedom of association.

We appreciate your most urgent attention to this matter and look forward to your earliest reply.

Sincerely,



Robert Quinn
Executive Director

CC:

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