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Statement on Academic Freedom in Turkey

The American Association of University Professors does not normally take positions on alleged violations of or threats to academic freedom outside the United States, both because we are hesitant to impose our standards on others, whose histories and situations may differ, and because we are usually incapable of conducting in other countries the kind of thorough investigations we require to place American institutions on our censure list.

But the current situation in Turkey, where most recently [three scholars have been jailed and a British scholar deported](#) for allegedly "making terrorist propaganda," cannot pass without protest. The arrests and deportation were but the latest actions taken against 1,128 Turkish professors who in January signed an [Academics for Peace petition](#) calling for an end to the military campaign against Kurdish separatists in southeastern Turkey. More than a thousand additional academics have signed the appeal since then. Scholars who signed were accused by president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of "treason" and have suffered an array of repercussions, including criminal investigations and university-level disciplinary proceedings. [According to reports](#), almost 800 academics who signed the letter have faced action either by their university, state authorities, or both. Thirty-eight have been dismissed, 29 suspended and 531 face an administrative investigation. Other faculty members who signed the petition have been denounced and threatened on social media. Some have received intimidating visits in their campus offices by groups of nationalist students

A total of 1,406 academics from 62 countries have now signed [a further letter](#) calling on the international community to urge Turkey's government to "stop the witch-hunt" against dissident academics, "respect academic freedom, free the arrested academics, and reinstate all the academics suspended or expelled during the persecution campaign with compensation."

The arrests of the three academics came a day after President Erdoğan called for a broadening of the definition of terrorism. He said there was no difference between "a terrorist holding a gun or a bomb and those who use their position and pen to serve the aims" of terrorists. Erdoğan added that this could be a journalist, a lawmaker or an activist. According to many observers, the crackdown on academics is part of a wider effort by President Erdoğan to stifle criticism of government policies and

restrict liberties in the country. A number of journalists have been imprisoned in recent months, and earlier in March the government seized the offices of an opposition newspaper, *Zaman*, the second largest newspaper in the country.

Now the government has [reportedly](#) drafted a new bill to suppress academic freedom. According to the draft bill, any professor involved with "activities that have separatist claims or terror activities, or acts in support of this" may be dismissed from their positions and lose public offices. Under the proposal, the state higher education authority may move against scholars for "crimes" of political and ideological petition; propagating for political parties; and discrimination based on language, race, color, gender, political thoughts, philosophical belief, religion and sect.

In January, US ambassador to Turkey John Bass issued [this statement](#):

We are seeing reports of academics being investigated and subjected to penalties for expressing their opinions about the conflict in the southeast. While we may not agree with the opinions expressed by those academics, we are nevertheless concerned about this pressure having a chilling effect on legitimate political discourse across Turkish society regarding the sources of and solutions to the ongoing violence. In democratic societies it is imperative that citizens have the opportunity to express their views, even controversial or unpopular ones.

Expressions of concern about violence do not equal support for terrorism. Criticism of government does not equal treason. Turkish democracy is strong enough and resilient enough to embrace free expression of uncomfortable ideas.

We applaud the ambassador's statement and share his concern, which can only be intensified by the subsequent developments described above. Until recently Turkey had a reputation for leaving scholars alone to pursue their interests, at least relative to its neighbors. Many Arab students and even faculty members have moved to Turkish institutions in recent years. But the current crackdown could lessen Turkey's academic appeal. On behalf of the AAUP, we join with our colleagues in the international scholarly community in calling on the Turkish government to stop the witch-hunt against Academics for Peace, respect academic freedom, free the arrested academics, and reinstate all the academics suspended or expelled during the persecution campaign with compensation.

—Rudy Fichtenbaum, President, American Association of University Professors

—Henry Reichman, First Vice-President and Chair, Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure,
American Association of University Professors