

## Academics for Peace in Turkey

Omer Tekdemir, Mari Toivanen and Bahar Baser

### Introduction

In 2012, a group of academics in Turkey found an initiative called the *Academics for Peace* (AfP), to voice their concern about the amounting tensions and violence surrounding the Kurdish rights demands in Turkey. Its foundation coincided with Kurdish prisoners' demands, who had gone on a hunger strike to demand that the Turkish government resume negotiations with Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and to authorise the Kurdish language education and its usage in court defences. In 2012, around 300 academics from 50 different universities signed a petition that would mark the beginning of a series of interventions by academics towards finding a peaceful resolution but also bring about unprecedented ramifications for them.

As one of their main aims, the AfP stated that they wish to contribute to a sustainable peace in Turkey by adopting a critical approach towards the overall peace process. AfP has urged political leaders to take into account the structural inequalities arising from the conflict when drawing a roadmap for a peaceful resolution. In light of this, its initiatives aim at supporting the peace process by producing knowledge on issues such as conflict resolution, peace processes, peace-building at the societal level, and gender dimension of peace-building with regards to the Kurdish rights, which could all be instrumental provided the negotiations are resumed. Ending the almost four-decade long, low-intensity civil war between the Turkish state and the PKK has become of utmost importance in Turkey that is spiralling towards a dangerous direction. The current situation stands in stark contrast to the beginning of the decade, since the country was experiencing a rather open political atmosphere for peace negotiations until the conflict resumed in 2015.

Against this backdrop, the AfP released another petition, "*We will not be a party to this crime!*", in early 2016, in an attempt to draw attention to human rights violations taking place under the pretext of the state of emergency and military curfews in various towns and cities in Southeastern Turkey. This time the petition gathered so much attention from policy-makers but rather than pushing them for policy changes, it brought about criminalization and persecution of its signatories in a highly polarising climate in Turkey. It spurred a massive purge in academia without precedence in the country's history. The case of the AfP doesn't stand alone, as there exist several other examples of similar academic initiatives in history. For instance, the Israeli Academics for Peace petitioned for a two-state solution as a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Not solely pertinent to the Middle East, similar initiatives were also organized recently in Mozambique by local academics. As Laurie Brand argues, authoritarian regimes in the MENA region, in particular, have always used varying degrees of hostility towards the freedom of expression. Especially in times of civil wars, insurgencies or inter-state wars, these regimes have been eager to suppress dissent or critical research by using national security as a pretext. In the case of the AfP initiative, the reaction has been strikingly similar. Whereas the Turkish state has a history of being hostile towards critical

academics, who raise issues considered national taboos (such as the Armenian genocide, Alevi religious or Kurdish national demands), the ferocity and persistence of pursuing measures against the signatories of this petition for peace has been striking.

Indeed, what was and continues to be particular in this case is the reaction by the Turkish state with regards to such an initiative as a petition for peace. However, the peace petition reflects a broader unsettling development in today's Turkish conservative and nationalist society that is steering away from majoritarian ballot-box, democratic politics. The fact that it coincided with the end of the peace process and later on led to a wholesale purge of critical academics from Turkish higher education institutions speaks volumes to the on-going direction the country is heading towards. In this short essay, we briefly explain the developments that paved the way for such a drastic event and examine the repertoires of resistance that the persecuted academics have resorted to in order resist the measures taken by the increasingly illiberal regime in Turkey.

### **Signing a Petition in the Context an Increasing Political Instability**

After decades-long conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state, the Turkish-Kurdish reconciliation process started with the 'democratic opening' (also called the 'Kurdish initiative') and secret negotiations in Oslo in 2009. As fragile as the peace process was, the negotiations were effectively pursued till 2013, before finally collapsing in June 2015. Subsequently, both sides resumed the armed-conflict and the escalating violence spread to the country's political sphere. However, the methods and dynamics of the conflict drastically differed from the previous one between the state and the PKK. The Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H), youth branch of the PKK, declared a 'people's revolutionary war' against the Turkish military forces and took upon a role as a paramilitary force in several Kurdish neighbourhoods (Cizre, Şırnak, Sur, etc.) located in Southeastern Turkey. This irregularly armed group constructed trenches and barricades in cities alongside with armed checkpoints and patrols, whereas the state imposed several curfews to the Kurdish neighbourhoods, thus bringing the conflict to an urban context. The civilian populations were trapped in local neighbourhoods under curfews that become the central scene of this renewed armed dispute.

Such amounting political tensions and sporadic armed-clashes have led to large-scale violence in the region. As a result, the social divisions within the population have grown and the country's political economy has become destabilised. Simultaneously, the curfews imposed across largely Kurdish-populated towns and cities under the state of emergency have further exacerbated the security situation. On March 2017, the UN Human Rights Office published a report depicting how this armed dispute and state violence had led to a destruction of urban infrastructure, sporadic killings and serious human rights violations unforeseen in the post-1990s period in Turkey. The UN office concluded that between July 2015 and December 2016, more than 30 towns had been affected by the curfews and violent clashes, and that between 335,000 and half a million people had been displaced in Southeastern Turkey.

It was in this context that in January 2016, initially 1,128 and later an additional 1,084 academics signed a petition to call for the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government to end the state violence in the Kurdish-populated territories, to resume the negotiations and to activate a conflict resolution plan for the decades-long conflict. The loosely structured group of academics prepared a petition and opened it for signatories within and outside Turkey. The academics, who signed the petition, came from all walks of life and of very heterogeneous backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious and political affiliations, and academic positions varying from PhD students to more established scholars. Together they demanded for the state to end violence committed against its own citizens and to return to the negotiation table, stating that “we will not be a party to this crime”. It urged the government to abandon its securitization policies, and to “back down from its deliberate massacre and deportation of Kurdish civilians in the region”. They specifically called for the state to stop using heavy military operations against its own citizens, to seek non-violent channels to resolve the conflict, and to emphasize human security issues over state-centric security policies. Calling for the international organizations to investigate on the human rights violations committed in the region, the petition caused disturbance among the ruling elite and associated political circles and has ever since stayed on the top of government’s agenda.

Gradually, it has also become a way to silence opposition groups and public figures that have voiced criticism against the government’s policies. Alongside with academics, the crackdown on journalists, public figures, politicians, or anyone voicing criticism and dissent towards the government measures has been intensifying. The putsch in the summer 2016 provided grounds for wide-scale purges of military personnel, politicians, journalists, academics and other who were deemed a threat to national security under the declared state of emergency. For instance, a number of Kurdish MPs together with both co-leaders, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ of the Peoples’ Democratic Party’s (HDP), were arrested in late 2016 and the elected Kurdish municipality leaders belonging to the HDP or pro-Kurdish Democratic Regions Party (DBP) were replaced by Interior Ministry’s decree on the grounds that they allegedly provided support for ‘terrorism’. These events show growing evidence of the undemocratic direction the country is steering towards and of the eventuality of the peace process fading further away. In this particular context, the AfP has gained more significance as the reactions to it reflect broader and highly worrisome developments in the country’s political scene.

## **The Ramifications of the AfP Petition**

### ***How it played out in Turkey***

The ramifications of the AfP campaign exceeded the wildest speculations (including of the signatories) as it became a scene for hegemonic political struggles in domestic and international politics. The signatories were immediately accused with ‘treason’ by state authorities, especially after the President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s speech that identified the signatories as ‘pseudo-scholars’, who had become pawns of foreign powers and sympathisers

of terrorists, thus undermining Turkey’s national security. As a result, criminalization of the signatories took an unprecedented scale. The pro-government media, prosecutors in various cities, Higher Education Council (YÖK) and certain universities with their vice chancellors and rectors immediately leashed a lynching campaign against the signatories that became targeted with criminal and administrative investigations, suspensions, forced resignations and retirements, detentions, dismissals, passport revocations, denial of pension rights and travel bans to broad. Such measures dramatically increased after failed coup attempt on July 15<sup>th</sup> last summer when the government released a post-coup decree and declared a state of emergency. The government and universities used this military coup and its alleged perpetrator, the ‘soft-Islamist’ Gülen movement (the so-called Fetullahist Terror Organisation-FETÖ) as a golden opportunity against the AfP although the signatories had no connection to either the organisation nor the failed coup attempt.

The signatories have faced accusations ranging from the Turkish Penal Code article 216 “inciting people to hatred, violence and breaking the law” and article 301 “insulting Turkish institutions and the Turkish Republic” to Anti-Terror Law article 7 “making propaganda of a terror organisation”. Between the signing of the petition in January 2016 and June 2017, altogether 372 academics had been removed or banned from public service and 505 academics subjected to a criminal investigation (see Table 1).

#### **Rights violations against Academics for Peace**

	<b>Public</b>	<b>Private</b>	<b>Total</b>
Removed and banned from public service with the decree laws*	364	8	372
Dismissal	37	39	76
Resignation	15	10	25
Forced Retirement	20	1	21
Removed and banned from public service with the decree laws + dismissal + resignation + retirement	401	51	452
Disciplinary Investigation	442	63	505
Disciplinary investigations. Decision of the Investigation Committee: Dismissal from public service. Pending CoHE (YÖK) approval.	107	5	112
Preventive suspension	90	11	101
Suspension from administrative duty	3	4	7
Police custody	67	3	70
Pre-trial detention**	2	2	4

\*Among the Peace Petition signatories, 42 academics, who had been earlier dismissed or forced into resignation, were also removed and banned from public service with the decree laws. In addition, PhD students within the Faculty Training Program suffer from rights violations due to the amendments in the procedures and principles and the decree laws.

\*\* 3 academics had to stay in pre-trial detention for 40 days and 1 for 22 days until they were released after the first court hearing. Their court case was opened under the Anti-terror Act Article 7/2 and is still continuing.

The signatories have received threats against life as well as social pressure to leave their neighbourhoods in addition to judicial cases and investigations. Even the private, higher education institutions resorted to exclusionary measures against the signatories by black-listing their national insurance numbers. As a result, the aggressive responses and authoritarian policies have caused what could be called a ‘civil death’ for many signatories,

who chose or were forced to stay in the country due to travel bans. This has also touched upon academics regardless of their institutional standing.

**Positions of Academics for Peace signatories removed and banned from public service with the decree laws, dismissed, resigned, retired**

Position	Total
Research Assistant (the majority of which are PhD students)	146
Assist. Prof. Dr.	112
Prof. Dr.	84
Assoc. Prof. Dr.	61
Instructor	28
Expert	6
Dr.	6
Lecturer	5
PhD Student	2
Teacher	1
unknown	1

452

Source: <https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/314> (Last accessed 25 June 2017)

The affair has also gained international visibility, including the case of the four signatories, Esra Mungan, Muzaffer Kaya, Kıvanç Ersoy and Meral Camcı. They presented the petition at a press declaration in 10 March 2016 and five days later they were jailed and kept in detention for 3 months till the completion of their criminal investigation. Accused on the grounds of “producing terrorist propaganda”, their trials are still pending. However, they continue to state of not having any affiliation whatsoever with the PKK, and express their support for the government’s need to resume the peace process. They have argued that as citizens of Turkey and as academics, they have an ethical obligation to call for their government to provide security, stability and the possibility of reconciliation for its citizens.

Rather than taking a political position per se, the AfP claims it is their right as citizens of the country to democratically participate and to exercise the freedom of thought and speech. Due to the signatories’ heterogeneous backgrounds, creating a collective political identity that assigns to any existing political party in Turkey seems unlikely. In contrast, this movement shares similarities with broader global movements that nonetheless come about as a result of localized events and concerns. Examples of such include the Occupy and austerity movements, the Indignados in Spain and the popular uprisings in the context of the so-called Arab spring. Not assigned to any traditional political parties, leaders or party structures, they share similarities in their demands for democratic rights and freedoms in the context of growing authoritarian tendencies across the globe.

The purge on academics in Turkey also created wider fear among academics, who were not involved in the petition. For instance, certain academic institutions started applying self-censorship under the threat of dismissals and other sanctions from the authorities. For instance, a conference on Latin America and Turkey on 20-21 June 2017 to be held by Koç

University in Istanbul was cancelled, when two participants revealed that they had been disinvented by the steering committee due to the ‘sensitivity’ of their topics. Other academics have received similar notices and not being invited by conference and seminar committees for being ‘troublesome’. The crackdown concerns also students, who have reported that their universities have urged them to change their thesis topics due to the current political climate. This shows that ‘critical’ knowledge production on sensitive issues, such as the Kurdish issue, in itself has become risky and with eventual consequences. Some academics and individuals in other professional sectors have chosen to maintain a low profile, resort to self-censorship and not to voice any critical opinions they might have of government’s current crackdown. A worrying development within the institutions has been students and fellow colleagues acting as informants and denouncing dissident academics to the authorities.

### *How it Played out Outside Turkey*

In the aftermath of the petition, the harsh crackdown on academics in Turkey resonated in the wider academic community. The petition gave birth to expressions of solidarity and support by academics and institutions, who felt concerned over the diminishing space of academic freedoms in Turkey. As for individual initiatives, several international academics have already signed the petition before the first crackdown, including well-known scholars such as Noam Chomsky, Slavoj Žižek, David Harvey, Judith Butler, Étienne Balibar and Seyla Benhabib. As the purge of academics in Turkey grew in intensity with detentions and criminal investigations, several chose to leave the country for the fear of being investigated upon and eventually detained, thus leading to a record number in asylum requests from Turkey. They settled in Germany, France, the UK and Sweden, among other countries. Partially as a result of this, ‘national’ sections of AfP were organised, for instance, in France, Germany, Switzerland and the UK, also including local academics, who had grown concerned over the worsening situation for their fellow colleagues in Turkey.

In many cases, as a result of individual initiatives, institutional-level support grew stronger and led to concrete measures. Numerous seminars, symposiums and discussion events were organised and continue to be organised in Europe and North America to discuss advocacy strategies and how to assist scholars at risk in Turkey and outside. Several INGOs, including EuroMed Rights, the Human Rights Association (IHD) and Helsinki Citizens Assembly, issued calls to end all repressive measures targeted against the signatories. Amnesty launched a campaign in April 2016 to support the arrested academics in Turkey. Also scholarship programmes and possibilities were opened for Turkish academics. For instance, the New York City University-run Scholars at Risk Network that does matchmaking between scholars at risk and higher education institutions abroad have provided numerous scholarships for Turkish academics and invited institutions to support them. Other similar networks, NGOs and institutional initiatives that have traditionally provided support for threatened academics across the globe, such as Scholars Rescue Fund, the Philipp Schwartz Initiative of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the Norwegian top institutions under the scheme ‘Students at risk’, now include a growing number of Turkish applicants. Also in 2016, the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) granted the Academic Freedom Award to ‘the over

2,000 signatories of the Academics for Peace petition'. In June 2017, the AfP in the UK, France, Germany and Switzerland launched a call for targeted academic boycott of Turkey, calling for "all institutions of higher education, funding councils, academic and professional associations, and individual faculty members to boycott the Turkish higher education system", including a boycott on complicit universities and their rectors.

Similar authoritarian developments on suppressing academic freedoms have been witnessed in other countries during the last year. In late 2016, Russian authorities suspended the license of European University at St. Petersburg, and earlier this year, the Orban government in Hungary targeted the Central European University over concerns about 'potential foreign influence'. Meantime, the Egyptian government required researchers to apply for permission from the intelligence service before conducting research in the country, as well as ordered a travel ban for the academic activities (*i.e.* conduct research, attend seminars etc.), which affected nearly 100 academics. Conversely, the extent of the international support, namely in Europe and North America has to some extent reflected the intensity and scope of measures undertaken by Erdoğan's government to suppress academic freedoms in Turkey. The government's reaction to the petition has been unprecedented in the near Turkish history, but on a more optimistic note, it can also be argued that this has been matched by the expressions and demonstrations of transnational solidarity and support among the fellow academics abroad.

### **What Lies Ahead?**

With the rise of global right-wing populism in the context of liberal authoritarianism and majoritarianism, tendencies celebrating anti-intellectualism and post-truth have become a *de facto* matter of the world. Turkey and her current political life is also shaped by this new organic crisis of the capitalist system with its conservative and illiberal reaction to the economic, social and political predicaments that are globally tangible from Trump's America to Modi's India. What significance does a singular petition for peace have in understanding the more global transformations of political landscapes and tendencies?

As such, the petition did not cause a change in government's policy towards the 'Kurdish rights question'. But, as an unintended consequence, it drew considerable attention to the violations of academic freedoms in Turkey, to the precarity of the academic labour market as well as to the broader and increasing trend of failing democracy and rule of law in the country. In the context of the state emergency decrees, it showed that the measures of 'counter-terrorism' can be very broadly interpreted to include anyone critical of the current government. The post-putsch period provided a convenient setting and justification for the government to pursue even harsher policies towards dissidents. The utilized measures went well beyond intimidation, as they were extended to arbitrary dismissals and court cases against the academics, who were falsely accused of sympathising with the PKK or extreme left-wing groups, or being part of the Gülen movement, allegedly the responsible actor in the failed coup attempt. Although ramifications of such measures did not silence all the

signatories, they constituted a clear warning for those, who were hesitant to voice concerns over the worsening situation in Turkey.

In the meantime, although the petition brought to the surface the creeping authoritarianism in Turkey, it did not manage to draw attention to the human rights violations and humanitarian crisis in the Kurdish dominated regions in Turkey. As an unintended consequence, the attention received by the petition left to the shadow the deteriorating situation of Kurds in Turkey. Also the issue of petition and its consequences seems to be rarely dealt with in relation to the Kurdish rights issue that had been the major points of criticism raised by it in the first place. It did, however, show that the government does not enjoy unequivocal support by the academic community, and therefore, to some extent cast a delegitimizing light over the state's policies.

The petition could be considered an act of civil disobedience in a broader sense and the striking reaction by the government towards it might just incite similar acts of civil disobedience by the public tired of the growing authoritarianism in the country. On July 9<sup>th</sup> hundreds of thousands of people participated in an anti-Erdoğan march in Istanbul, to be met with accusations for supporting terrorism by the president. The crackdown on academic freedoms have given way to new repertoires of action to contest such measures and to made more critical voices be heard by the public and the government officials. For instance, 'street academies' are organised, where the dismissed academics give public lectures on a variety of topics. The exiled signatories and those who were already living abroad express solidarity with the dismissed academics unable to leave the country, and aim to exercise an impact on the Turkish policies at distance. The transnational solidarity networks by individuals, higher education institutions and NGOs have also called for more measures and initiatives to be taken to ensure the improvement of academic freedoms in the country. Whereas their impact can be measured in the long-run, the case of the AfP reflects the broader political realities deeper societal changes in today's Turkey. Moreover, this civil movement of hope creates an alternative approach - in the period of securitisation and the present time of the politics of fear, where demands for peace become criminalised, such movement will have popular demand - not just in Turkey, but also beyond.

## RECOMMENDED READINGS

Academics for Peace Official Webpage. 2017. Available at <https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/1>, last accessed July 10, 2017.

Akkoyunlu, K. and Öktem, K., 2016. "Existential Insecurity and the Making of a Weak Authoritarian Regime in Turkey". *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 16 (4), pp.505-527.

Altıparmak, K. and Akdeniz, Y. 2017. *Barış İçin Akademisyenler: Olağanüstü Zamanlarda Akademiye Savunmak*, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları.

Baser, B., Akgönül, S. and Öztürk, A. E., 2017. "Academics for Peace" in Turkey: A Case of Criminalising Dissent and Critical Thought via Counterterrorism Policy". *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, pp.1-23.

- Brand, L. A., 2007. "Middle East Studies and Academic Freedom: Challenges at Home and Abroad". *International Studies Perspectives*, 8 (4), pp.384-395.
- Butler, J., 2017. "Academic Freedom and the Critical Task of the University". *Globalizations*. DOI: 10.1080/14747731.2017.1325168
- Darici, H. 2016. "Of Kurdish Youth and Ditches". *Theory & Event*, 19 (1).
- Flader, U. 2016. "Voices from the Dark: The Academics' 'Peace Petition' and the Remnants of Opposition in Turkey". *Movements@Manchester*, February 24.
- Human Rights Foundation of Turkey. 2016. "Factsheet on Declared Curfews in Turkey between 11 December 2015 and 8 January 2016". Available at <<http://en.tihv.org.tr/fact-sheet-on-declared-curfews-in-turkey-between-11-december-2015-8-january-2016/>>, last accessed July 04, 2017.
- Human Rights Watch Report. 2015. "Turkey: Mounting Security Operation Deaths". Available at <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/22/turkey-mounting-security-operation-deaths>>, last accessed July 08, 2017.
- Kontny, O., 2017. "From Dissensus to Conviviality: The New Cultural Politics of Difference in Turkey". *Middle East-Topics & Arguments*, 7, pp.51-63.
- Tekdemir, O., 2016. "Conflict and Reconciliation between Turks and Kurds: The HDP as an Agonistic Actor". *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 16 (4), pp.651-669.
- Uğur, M. 2016. "Academic Freedom under Threat in Turkey", *Times Higher Education*. Available at <<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/academic-freedom-under-threat-in-turkey>> last accessed June 30, 2017.