

# Seeds of a New Boycott Movement Against Turkey's Repressive State

The government's seizure of Zaman, the largest Turkish daily newspaper, is the latest episode in a state-sponsored campaign to silence dissent. And PR stardust won't be able to cover it up.

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American television audiences recently have been privy to a growing number of Turkish Airlines commercials that were screened during the evenings of the Super Bowl and the star-studded Hollywood Oscar awards. These were not your normal airline commercial. Rather, they were an advert for the upcoming superhero feature movie *Batman v Superman*, of which Turkish Airlines is a sponsor. The ads 'offer' passengers imaginary trips to the cities of Gotham and Metropolis.



Journalists carry an injured woman after Turkish riot-police used tear gas to disperse supporters in front of the Turkish daily newspaper Zaman, Istanbul. AFP

The upcoming March release of the movie is aimed at reversing Turkey's tourism tough times. Terrorist attacks have wiped the shine off the country's image: the suicide bombing in the heart of Istanbul in January targeted tourists (10 German visitors were killed), while tourism to the coastal city of Antalya—a magnet for Russian tourists—has dwindled following Turkey's downing of a

Russian jet last October. The Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Antalya, desperate for the state to intervene, suggested the government step up and invite Madonna, Jennifer Lopez, even Justin Bieber, to lure tourists back.

However, Turkey's problems are much greater than just convincing tourists to keep coming. Since regaining a parliamentary majority in November, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and his obedient Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, seem to be doing their utmost to lead Turkey into darker times.

Proof of this came again this past weekend. On Friday, the state seized the opposition media outlet Zaman, which is identified with the Gulen movement, his sworn rivals, evicting its employees from their offices, and taking over its building with brutal police force.

Within 24 hours Turkey's largest daily had its chief editor replaced by a pro-government state appointed trustee. The AKP government is now one step closer to completely silencing all criticism. This goes beyond the press: almost 2000 cases have been opened against individuals for the crime of insulting the president.



Men run as Turkish anti-riot police officers use tear gas to disperse supporters outside the daily newspaper Zaman in Istanbul, March 5, 2016. AFP

Turkey's leaders' obsessional silencing of their critics could, though, now have reached a peak level that can only damage them. The ruling AKP worked hard to build its strong international image during most of the first decade following the year 2000. But the government's targeting of academics (both Turkish and international) who dare to speak out against the Turkish state's war against its civilian population as part of its conflict with the PKK has outraged the world, though the outcry has been less intense regarding the actual, harsh human rights violations committed by the Turkish state itself in that war.

Responding to the government crackdown on academics, the Middle East Students Association (MESA) issued two statements calling on the Turkish government to "take note of mounting international condemnation of the erosion of democratic rights and freedoms in Turkey, particularly in

connection with the tendency of public prosecutors to intimidate political opponents and academic critics through abuses of the powers of criminal investigation and prosecution.”

And just two weeks ago the International Political Science Association (IPSA) suddenly cancelled their 2016 summer World Congress scheduled to take place in Istanbul, relocating to an as yet-unannounced European city. True, IPSA stated that the cancellation was due to the “deterioration of the security situation in Turkey and the region.”

However, it went on to highlight this decision was also made since it could not “provide an environment favorable to the exchange of intellectual ideas.” That sent a strong message that the cancellation related to the government's repression of freedom of thought at Turkish universities.

If that wasn't enough, last week thirty professors at Columbia University called on its president Lee Bollinger to denounce the recent suppression of academics in Turkey. They also called on Bollinger to suspend activities of its Istanbul-based global center if Turkey continues to take steps against academics. It seems unlikely at this point that their call will trigger action. But Bollinger will face more pressure if the situation deteriorates for the university's own academics.

Only a few weeks ago he declared to students that, in the case of Istanbul or any of the international Columbia branches, "If they start restricting [our] academic freedom ... we're done. We're out of there. We close shop. We can be out in a number of days. We can be out in 24 hours.”

Such examples should send a strong signal to Turkey that if it does not reconsider the ethical and legal justness of its actions it will face more sanctions and further isolation. Just as Israel is challenged daily by the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, Turkey could face a growing and concerted opposition among university students, academia, and leftist movements abroad.

However, just as in Israel, voluntary international sanctions could have the reverse effect that the activists intend: strengthening the government's hold over its electorate through reactionary politics, isolating internal voices of change amidst a failed opposition.

What is clear however is that even glamorous PR can't hide broken and ugly realities, neither stuffing Oscar swagbags with a luxury free trip to Israel nor featuring your national airline in a major motion picture. Turkey is hitting such a low state of affairs that even Superman or Batman can't save the country, much less Justin Bieber.

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