

First they came for Turkey's journalists, then their academics - Opinion

The university professors who protested the Turkish government's repressive military activity in the country's Kurdish southeast now face the same precarious and intimidating future as journalists who dare defy President Erdogan.

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On one of my last nights during a recent stay in Istanbul, I made my way down to a restaurant, just off the main pedestrian avenue of Istiklal Caddesi in the Beyoglu neighborhood. Arriving a bit late, the table was already full of old and new friends, mostly academics and journalists, some Turkish, and others foreigners. Not surprisingly, in no time the conversation took a turn towards President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's recent attack on the country's academics, which led to a [wave of arrests and investigations](#) of university professors, and left us debating which of our colleagues could be left unemployed or threatened with sanctions.

In fact, Turkish academicians could increasingly find themselves in a similar position to Turkish journalists – that is to say, in a precarious and intimidating situation.

Just two months ago, Can Dunder, the editor of Cumhuriyet, one of Turkey's leading opposition dailies, [was arrested](#) together with his colleague Erdem Gul, for publishing a story on an alleged Turkish arms transfer to Syrian rebels. Both are facing life sentences on charges of aiding a terrorist organization, and threatening to overthrow the government, a punishment the Washington Post recently described as

'shocking' and a further sign of Erdogan's efforts to move ['away from democracy and into the abyss of authoritarianism and ignorance.'](#)

In addition to journalists, private businesses and media outlets with alleged ties to the Gulen movement have had their companies [seized by the government](#). This is before mentioning the growing number of Turkish citizens receiving jail time and court-ordered financial penalties for crimes related to defaming Erdogan. Earlier this month, a woman was [sentenced to 11 months in jail](#) for making a rude gesture at Erdogan at a political rally in 2014.

Academicians have become the latest target of Erdogan, and the prime minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, a professor himself, following the issuing of a [petition they signed](#) condemning the Turkish military and state operations taking place in Turkey's Kurdish regions. [In the petition](#), 1,128 Turkish academics, together with international signatories, such as Noam Chomsky, Immanuel Wallerstein, and David Harvey, stated: "We, as academics and researchers working on and/or in Turkey, declare that we will not be a party to this massacre by remaining silent and demand an immediate end to the violence perpetrated by the state." The petition highlighted what it described as systematic collective punishment.

Erdogan lashed out at the Turkish signatories, calling them ["academic terror actors."](#) rhetorically claiming they support PKK terrorist acts. These words come upon earlier statements accusing them of "falling into the pit of treachery", with him stating, "in a state of law like Turkey, so-called academics who target the unity of our nation have no privilege to commit crimes...[they don't have immunity.](#)"

With the continued strife in Turkey, it is not hard to imagine why the petition was organized. Since the November 2015 snap-elections, when the AKP managed to regain its parliamentary majority, the Turkish government has set at all its energies on rooting out any PKK presence from Kurdish populated regions, at a heavy cost to the civilian population. The government itself initiated talks with the PKK aimed at a peaceful resolution of the decades-old conflict that has led to the death of over 30,000 since the 1980s, reaching a ceasefire in 2013.

When this peace process collapsed last summer, Turkey's leaders - rather than working to breathe new life into the talks - opted to take the PKK head on in a military confrontation. However, whereas in the past the Turkish security forces' opponents were guerilla fighters in the surrounding mountains, the Kurdish resistance is now located in the heart of the cities, often taking on the characteristics of a popular uprising.

In the numerous major urban centers under curfew, such as Silopi, and Cizre, and the Sur neighborhood of Diyarbakir, to name a few, the situation is dire. According to the [Human Rights Foundation of Turkey](#) (TIHV), between August 16-Janauary 21, a total of 58 curfews have been implemented by the state, leading to the death of at least 198 civilians, among which 39 are children. [Amnesty International](#) describes the curfews as "crippling," and that they "don't allow people to leave their houses...effectively laying siege to entire neighborhoods," placing the "lives of tens of thousands at risk."

[Pictures emerging](#) of these cities show major destruction, such [as this video](#) from the Sur district of

Diyarbakir, suggestive of a major warzone. Further, personal stories, such as that of [Taybet Inan](#), show us the extent of human suffering. Last month, Inan, a 57-year old mother to eleven children, was shot dead by the security forces. In attempt to retrieve the body, her brother-in-law was also shot dead, while her bereaved husband was wounded. In the end, her dead body laid out in the open for seven days until the family was finally able to retrieve it for burial. In the last two weeks alone, it has been [reported that at least 10 people](#) have met a similar fate, with ambulances unable to reach them in time to take them to local hospitals for treatment.

Any questioning of the government's policy towards its war on the PKK can lead to serious accusations of supporting the terror group. [In one case](#), in late December, a university lecturer in Amasya was detained as she finished lecturing for allegedly spreading terrorist propaganda. A student had reported to the police her alleged discussion of human rights violations even before the lecture was over. In addition to being detained, her office was searched, and police seized documents. Fortunately, for her, the court found the claim baseless and released her. However, this demonstrates to what extent academics are in danger of having their words twisted, the result of which could even be to land them in jail.

Now with this group of academics speaking out against government policy, the threat of sanctions against them seems more real than ever.

In the first round, twenty-seven academics were detained for singing the petition; the state prosecution claimed they were promoting terror propaganda. They have been [released pending trial](#), however the Supreme Education Board announced that it would be taking legal action against all the local academics who signed it. Even if the case does not result in official charges, already 29 of the signatories, from among nine public and private universities throughout Turkey, have been suspended from their work place, in what one Turkish news outlet, [Diken](#), is calling a witch-hunt.

As of late last week, 85 professors and 6 graduate students at Istanbul University and Yildiz Technical University are facing an internal investigation by their universities, with Yildiz's administration claiming they "[publicly insulted the Turkish Nation](#), the state of the Republic of Turkey, Grand National Assembly of Turkey, the Government of the Turkish Republic and the judicial organs of the state as well as propagandized for the terrorist organization."

In such an atmosphere, it is not hard to imagine that many more academics from the 89 universities in which they work are feeling the backlash, not least, for the younger scholars who signed the petition, being blocked from future job opportunities.

Back at the restaurant, our conversation almost seemed like déjà vu: We had spoken in the past in very similar terms about journalists, in addition to our regular discussions about what the future holds for Turkey, and for those who do not see eye-to-eye with the government.

Turkey seems to be headed for stony days for both its civilians' security and for free speech. If its government does not reach some type of understanding with the PKK, the melting of the snow, which

traditionally reignites fighting between the Turkish army and the PKK, together with spring's warmth, could spell much more difficult days than now. This of course is not even addressing the recent ISIS bombing in the heart of the tourist center of Sultanahmet, which killed 11 German visitors, and the serious challenges it poses for tourism, as well as a sluggish economy.

As we were about to part ways, I sipped my last bit of raki and whispered to myself the Turkish drinking toast: *en kötü günümüz böyle olsun* (may such times be the worst of our days). Usually, this is meant to be express the sunny feeling that all our days be just as happy like the current moment. But with Turkey's days looking more and more difficult, I saw it differently, thinking that we should hope that we do not see even worse days than the current ones, with all of us knowing that indeed things can get worse. The days the AKP ruling party provided hope are long over.

As I made my way back up Istiklal, all seemed eerily normal, as it must in many parts of Turkey. Despite that, as Turkey's instability becomes more palpable, most Turkish citizens have some awareness that something has gone terribly wrong. That is a feeling that will remain and cannot be conveniently excised, even if the silencing of dissent deepens and becomes even more institutionalized.

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