

# Peace Profile: Academics for Peace in Turkey

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## Academics for Peace in Turkey

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In 2012, a group of academics in Turkey launched an initiative called the *Academics for Peace* (AfP). Its foundation coincided with a hunger strike announced by Kurdish prisoners to call attention to a range of unresolved issues surrounding the Turkish-Kurdish conflict in Turkey. The group's first petition – signed in 2012 by around 300 academics from 50 different universities– marked the beginning of a series of interventions by academics to promote a peaceful resolution to the decades-old conflict. A core AfP aim was to point the way for the peace process to be put on a sustainable path. To do so, the AfP emphasized shining a critical light on the long-standing assumptions that had guided previous attempts to resolve the Kurdish issue, none of which had produced lasting peace. Central to this project was the AfP's urging of political leaders to foreground the underlying sources of the conflict –particularly the enduring and significant structural disadvantages faced by Turkey's Kurdish citizens –when drawing a roadmap for 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. In 2012, the country was in the midst of a relatively open political atmosphere for peace negotiations and despite increasing tensions there was hope of ending the almost four-decade long, low-intensity civil war between the Turkish state and the PKK. Yet just three years later the negotiations had collapsed, fighting had resumed and the conflict looked like spiralling out of control. Against this backdrop, in early 2016 the AfP released another petition – “*We will not be a party to this crime!*” –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 southeast Turkey. This time the petition gathered significant attention from policy makers but rather than advancing policy changes, it brought about criminalization and persecution of the signatories in a highly polarising climate in Turkey. It spurred a massive purge in academia without precedent in the country's history.

The case of the AfP does not, however, stand alone; several other examples of similar academic initiatives exist in history. For instance, the Israeli Academics for Peace petitioned for a two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Similar efforts have also been organized well beyond the Middle East, such as the recent initiative by local activists in Mozambique. Nevertheless, the MENA region is a striking exemplar, one that Laurie Brand argues has seen authoritarian regimes consistently deploy some degree of hostility towards freedom of expression, particularly during conflicts such as civil wars, insurgencies or interstate wars. ‘National security’ serves in this region especially as a pretext for regimes to suppress dissent or critical research given the disproportionate levels of violence and instability found there. In the case of the AfP initiative, the Turkish state reaction has tended to hue to this script. Whereas the Turkish state has a history of being hostile towards critical academics who raise issues considered national taboos (such as the Armenian genocide), the ferocity and persistence of pursuing measures against the signatories of this petition for peace has been striking.

Leaving aside for a moment the conflictual context in which the AfP initiative emerged, it bears noting that it was a *plea for peace and an end to violence* that has drawn out this ferocious response from the Turkish state. This stunning fact speaks volumes about the direction in which Turkish politics is heading. The rise of sharply conservative and nationalist rhetoric in Turkish politics and society and the declining importance of democratic deliberation and rational policy making provides the central context for the collapse of the peace process and the histrionic reaction of the Turkish state to the slightest hint of opposition.

The ‘democratic opening’ (also called the ‘Kurdish initiative’) of 2009, which began with secret negotiations between the Turkish government and the PKK, heralded the prospect that decades of conflict between the parties might come to an end and a genuine process of Turkish–Kurdish reconciliation might begin. While the peace process remained fragile, negotiations continued through 2013, after which they broke down. Violent conflict erupted again in June 2015 when both sides resumed fighting in the field. The escalating violence spread as well to the country’s political sphere. This new phase of the conflict between the state and the PKK, however, saw the emergence of methods and dynamics never seen before. The youth branch of the PKK – the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H) – declared a ‘people’s revolutionary war’ against the Turkish military forces and adopted a paramilitary posture in several Kurdish neighbourhoods (Cizre, Şırnak, Sur, etc.) in southeast Turkey. This group constructed trenches and barricades in cities as well as armed checkpoints and patrols. For its part, the state imposed curfews in the Kurdish neighbourhoods. For the first time the conflict was brought to directly to urban contexts, trapping civilian populations in local neighbourhoods.

This mounting political tension 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. In March 2017, the UN Human Rights Office published a report detailing the degrading of urban infrastructure, sporadic killings, and serious human rights violations brought about by the conflict. The report noted that scale of the damage was unprecedented 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 southeast Turkey.

The unprecedented crisis prompted academics to mobilize. In January 2016 1,128 of them (joined by a further 1,084 later) signed a petition calling on the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government to end state violence in Kurdish-populated territories, to resume negotiations and to craft a plan to resolve the conflict once and for all. A loosely-structured group, the academics opened the petition to signatories both within and outside Turkey.

While sharing a common professional background, those who joined the petition were otherwise profoundly diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious and political affiliation, and academic position (signatories included PhD students as well as established scholars). Indeed, little else united them save a fundamental desire for an end to bloodshed, a call for peace and non-violence, and a desire to express solidarity with the victims of the conflict, stating: “we will not be a party to this crime”. The petition called for a retreat from securitization of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict and for the government to “back down from its deliberate massacre and deportation of Kurdish civilians in the region.” They specifically called for the state to eschew heavy military operations against its own citizens, to seek non-violent channels to resolve the conflict, and to emphasize human security over state-centric security policies. Calling for international organizations to investigate the human rights violations committed in the region, the petition caused a stir within the ruling elite and associated political circles, remaining at the top of the government’s agenda ever since.

The government’s repression of the academics has morphed over time into a general policy of silencing all opposition groups and public figures voicing criticism towards government policy generally. Journalists, public figures, politicians, and private citizens voicing opposition to the status quo have moved into the government’s crosshairs. The failed July 2016 putsch provided yet another pretext to extend purges to the military and to other politicians, journalists, academics and notable individuals deemed a threat to national security under the declared state of emergency. For instance, in late 2016 several Kurdish MPs and both co-leaders of the Peoples’ Democratic Party’s (HDP) – Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ – were arrested. Furthermore, the elected Kurdish municipality leaders from the HDP and pro-Kurdish Democratic Regions Party (DBP) were replaced by the Interior Ministry after a decree accused them of providing support to ‘terrorism’. Incident after incident provides clear evidence that Turkey’s slide into authoritarianism is accelerating and that the chances for a renewal of the peace process are fading. Understood as an extended metaphor of broader socio-political developments, the AfP is thus of crucial significance for people in Turkey and abroad seeking to understand the present crisis.

No one in the AfP campaign (including the signatories) would have predicted the extent of its impact or that it would become an avatar of hegemonic political struggles in Turkey and abroad. The immediate branding of the signatories as ‘traitors’ caught the group somewhat by surprise. The vehemence of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s speech identifying the signatories as ‘pseudo scholars’ who had allowed themselves to become the pawns of foreign powers and terrorist sympathisers and thus a threat to the security of the nation was striking. Criminalization and the effective lynching of the signatories in the public square soon followed, with pro-government media, public prosecutors in various cities, the Higher Education Council (YÖK) and the senior leadership in certain universities all reading from the same script. Academics who had signed the petition were targeted with criminal and administrative investigation, suspension, forced resignation or retirement, detention, dismissal, passport revocation, denial of pension rights and travel bans. These measures

dramatically increased after the 15 July 2016 crisis, facilitated greatly by the post-putsch state of emergency. The government and universities used the putsch and its alleged perpetrator, the ‘soft Islamist’ Gülen movement (the so-called Fethullahist 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 were removed or banned from public service and 505 academics subjected to a criminal investigation.

As mentioned, this has been a very public lynching. Signatories have received death threats and more diffuse social pressure to flee their neighbourhoods in parallel to the formal judicial measures of the state. At the same time, certain private higher education institutions have taken cues from the wider repressive environment by creating a ‘black list’ of signatories’ national insurance numbers, thus contributing to the systematic closing off of opportunity for academics dismissed from their posts. What we see, then, is a diffuse process of authoritarian social and economic exclusion that has resulted in a kind of ‘civil death’ for many of the signatories who have chosen to remain in Turkey (or were forced to by travel bans). Moreover, professional or institutional standing has provided no shield for academics from this situation.

The treatment meted out to four signatories in particular – Esra Mungan, Muzaffer Kaya, Kıvanç Ersoy and Meral Camcı – garnered international visibility for the petition. Five days after presenting the petition at a press stop on 10 March 2016 the four were arrested and detained for three months pending completion of the criminal investigation. Formally accused of “producing terrorist propaganda”, all four have yet to be brought to trial.

The AfP has taken no position whatsoever on the particular axes of contention within the conflict but rather asserted the right of the citizens of the country to democratically participate and to exercise freedom of thought and speech. The sheer plurality of ethnic and religious background and the diverse social and political experience of the signatories almost necessarily precludes a collective political or partisan position, in any case. The AfP is thus not a programmatic political movement but shares similarities with other movements for peace globally that have emerged from a specific localized crisis or conflict. Examples include the Occupy and anti-austerity movements, the Indignados in Spain and the popular uprisings that emerged out of the so-called Arab spring. These movements arose outside the traditional political party structures and leaderships and share a common demand for democratic rights and freedoms in the context of growing authoritarianism or socio-economic marginalization across the globe.

The purge in Turkey has also produced a palpable climate of fear among academics who were not involved in the petition. Certain academic institutions have instituted policies of self-censorship under the threat of dismissals and other sanctions from the authorities. For instance, a conference on Latin America and Turkey scheduled in June 2017 at Koç University in Istanbul was cancelled when two participants revealed that they had been

disinvited by the steering committee due to the ‘sensitivity’ of their topics. Other academics have received similar advice or have failed to be invited by conference and seminar committees to ‘avoid trouble’. The crackdown has also affected students, who have reported ‘guidance’ from their universities to change thesis topics due to the current political climate. This shows that ‘critical’ knowledge production on sensitive issues, such as the Kurdish one, has itself become risky or even taboo. Some academics and individuals in other professional sectors have chosen to maintain a low profile, to self-censor or to avoid voicing any critical opinions they might have of the 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.

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 across the globe, who felt concerned over the diminishing space of academic freedoms in Turkey. Several international academics had 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 organized, 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 organized and continue to be organized 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 has directed its Scholars at Risk Network to matchmake scholars at risk and higher education institutions abroad, providing numerous scholarships and support for Turkish academics. Other similar networks, NGOs and institutional initiatives that have traditionally provided support for threatened academics across the globe, such as the Scholars Rescue Fund, the Philipp Schwartz Initiative of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the top Norwegian 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 of complicit universities and their rectors.

Similar authoritarian moves to suppress academic freedoms have been witnessed in other countries during the last year. In late 2016, Russian authorities suspended the license of the European University at St. Petersburg, and earlier this year the Orbán 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 ordering a travel ban on locals undertaking academic activities abroad (*i.e.* conducting research, attending seminars etc.), which affected nearly 100 scholars. Conversely, the extent of the international support, primarily in Europe and North America, has to some extent reflected the intensity and scope of measures undertaken by Erdoğan’s government to suppress academic freedom in Turkey. Large-scale political purges have recurred throughout modern Turkey, especially during periods of crisis, but this present emergency is unprecedented in recent Turkish history. 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 fellow academics abroad.

The current anti-intellectual, post-truth zeitgeist has clearly developed in parallel with the troubling rise of global right-wing populism and majoritarianism in the West, and liberal authoritarianism elsewhere. It would be fair to claim that all of these concerning trends – in Turkey and abroad – speak to a deeper crisis in the global capitalist system, which has produced a conservative and illiberal backlash in places as diverse as Trump’s America to Modi’s India. What significance does a singular petition for peace have in understanding these deeper trends and shifts in the global political landscape?

While no definitive answer can yet be given to the question, what is certain is that, as intimated throughout this essay, the AfP petition and the reaction to it has acted as a kind of extended metaphor or avatar of the deeper political context. While the petition failed in its objective of shifting government policy towards the ‘Kurdish rights question’, it was nevertheless consequential, inadvertently drawing considerable attention to violations of academic freedom in Turkey, to the precariousness 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 such measures failed to 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 has failed to draw attention to the human rights violations and humanitarian crisis in the Kurdish dominated regions in Turkey. Indeed, one unintended consequence of the petition's foregrounding of these broader issues has been to cast the deteriorating situation of Kurds in Turkey in shadow. Discussion of the rights violations and repression meted out to academics because of the AfP has occurred almost completely divorced from the conversation about the Kurdish rights issue, which was of course the central concern raised by the petition in the first place. Nevertheless, the petition has exposed the limits of support within the academic community for the government's policies and has to some extent therefore cast a delegitimizing light on them.

The petition could be considered an act of civil disobedience in a broader sense and the striking reaction by the government towards it might well incite similar acts of civil disobedience by a public tired of the growing authoritarianism in the country. On 9 July 2017, hundreds of thousands of people participated in an anti-Erdoğan march in Istanbul, only to be met with accusations for supporting terrorism by the president. The crackdown on academic freedom has 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 organized, 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 and 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 a movement will have popular demand not just in Turkey, but also beyond.

## RECOMMENDED READINGS

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