

SCHOLARS AT RISK

N E T W O R K

UPR-Pre-Session, December 12, 2019, Presentation on Turkey

Good morning. My name is Jesse Levine and I serve as Senior Advocacy Officer for Scholars at Risk.

Scholars at Risk works to protect threatened scholars, and to advance the human rights that the higher education space needs to function – rights including academic freedom, the right to education, and freedom of assembly.

I am here today because what has happened to scholars, students, and other members of the higher education community in Turkey over the past three years represents the vanguard of a growing global crisis, which threatens not just those of us who live and work on campuses, but in a very real sense has the power to erode democracy, quash progress, and distort truth everywhere.

And unfortunately, we as a human rights community have not done enough to name this phenomenon and address it for the global problem that it is.

Many of us here know about the targeting of universities in Turkey, but the history of the past three years bears repeating:

It began in January 2016, after a group of scholars known as Academics for Peace released a petition demanding that the government observe human rights standards in the southeastern part of the country, and the government responded by placing all of the more than 2000 scholars who had signed the petition under criminal investigation.

It got worse six months later, after the July 2016 coup attempt, when Turkish authorities declared a three-month state of emergency, which they then extended, over and over, for a full two years. Claiming, without disclosing any evidence, that the exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen and members of his movement were behind the coup attempt, the government initiated thousands of official actions purportedly aimed at purging Gülenists from public institutions, and in effect targeting the entire public sector -- including universities -- throughout the country.

What followed is well known. Fifteen universities were immediately closed, leaving more than 2,800 faculty members jobless, and severely disrupting the education of more than 58,000 students.

In the months and years that followed, authorities ordered more than 7,500 scholars and administrative personnel fired and stripped of their passports -- in effect killing their careers at home, and denying them the ability to start over abroad -- what's known as "civil death."

And, since placing them under investigation, authorities have charged hundreds of Peace Petition signatories, in nearly uniform indictments, with "making propaganda for a terrorist organization", all for signing a document. 152 of these cases, out of more than 800 brought to trial, have resulted in guilty verdicts and prison sentences ranging from fifteen months to three years. Most of the defendants have avoided prison time, either because their sentences were suspended, they were released pending appeal, or they were acquitted. But there is no erasing the chill throughout the

higher education space now that professors and students know they can be prosecuted solely for non-violent political or academic expression.

By the sheer numbers, the pressures on scholars in Turkey since January 2016 are astonishing. During this UPR cycle, the attacks reported by Scholars at Risk are nearly triple the number for any other country during the same period, with imprisonments, prosecutions, investigations, terminations, restrictions on travel, and university closures affecting more than 10,000 higher education personnel, and well over 50,000 students.

But the impacts to Turkey's higher education space as a whole go well beyond what even these staggering numbers show. A recent study on research outputs by scholars in Turkey, for example, has shown a ~28% decline on average across all disciplines and a ~44% decline in the social sciences.

The tragedy of the past few years, then, is not only the loss to individual scholars and students. It's not only the lectures that were never given, the books unwritten, the ideas never formed. It is also the wholesale erosion of a nation's rich university tradition. That tradition -- which has historically included the protection of scholars within Turkey's borders and welcoming refugee scholars from abroad -- appears to have been replaced with a doctrine that defines all universities and scholars as a potential fifth column. An ideology that names higher education as a presumptive enemy of both the people and the government.

And while Turkey has seen the highest number of attacks arising out of this ideology, the problem is by no means limited to Turkey's borders. It is a global crisis. And we as a community have not done enough to name, understand, and respond to the problem.

There is no disputing that universities are pillars of a free society. When they are functioning well, they are engines of social and scientific progress. They are the foundational: Without them, other core democratic institutions, like journalism and civil society, simply could not exist.

Yet, to name just one example of our deficit of action, since the inception of the UPR process, States have made more than 750 recommendations concerning attacks on journalists. They have made more than 900 recommendations concerning human rights defenders. But to date, scholars or academic freedom have been the subjects of only two State UPR recommendations.

Scholars at Risk makes five specific requests in its UPR submission. But these are all embodied in one simple, but crucial, overarching request. A great many of you will make recommendations to Turkey concerning the right to free opinion and expression, the right to education, and related rights. We urge you, above all, to take decisive action by adding a single word to those recommendations.

That word of course, is scholars. By identifying the specific population being targeted -- just as States have called out attacks on journalists and human rights defenders in the past -- you will signal to the world that scholars matter; that universities matter; that they are being targeted; and that the time for the world to take specific and direct action is long overdue.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

Recommendations:

SAR respectfully urges UN member states to call on Turkey to:

- Reverse all charges against, and where applicable, unconditionally release from detention, all higher education personnel who have been the subjects of criminal prosecution in retaliation for the nonviolent exercise of academic freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of association, and related rights.
- Pending such actions, ensure that criminal actions proceed in a transparent manner, according to recognized international standards of due process, fair trial and related rights.
- Restore all scholars, students, and higher education personnel who were the subjects of Turkey's emergency decrees to their former university positions.
- Reinstatement of the passports of all scholars, students, and higher education personnel and their families who were subjected to Turkey's emergency decrees or similar post-State of Emergency provisions.
- Amend, revise, repeal or otherwise ensure that actions under the Anti-Terrorism Law and Article 301, if any, are narrowly construed and consistent with Turkey's obligations under domestic and international law to protect academic freedom and related rights.

Finally, Scholars at Risk respectfully calls on UN member states to recognize the specific, targeted threats against the higher education space, by explicitly mentioning **scholars and/or universities** in their recommendations relating to freedom of expression, right to education, and related rights.

Example: "Safeguard and restore human rights protections for **Scholars**, Journalists, and Human Rights Defenders engaged in nonviolent expression, critical inquiry, and dissent."