

Read the text of BRISMES' message in support of colleagues in Turkey

19 January 2016

Ahmet Davutoğlu  
Prime Minister  
Republic of Turkey

Your Excellency,

I am writing on behalf of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express our deep concern at reports of the treatment being accorded to academics who have spoken out against atrocities allegedly being committed against Kurds by the Turkish authorities.

BRISMES was founded in 1973 to bring together teachers, researchers, students, diplomats, journalists and others who deal professionally with the Middle East. Membership is open to all, regardless of nationality, and we maintain strong and expanding links with both institutions and individual scholars in the Middle East, including many in Turkey itself. As such, we are strongly committed to maintaining the principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in the UK and elsewhere.

1,128 Turkish and Kurdish 'Academics for Peace' originally signed the statement "We will not be a party to this crime", calling on the Turkish government to cease hostilities against its Kurdish population. Since the publication of this statement, these academics have been subject to a sustained campaign of abuse and violence from both the Turkish state and its supporters. Following speeches by the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, denouncing the statement, we understand that prosecutors have begun proceedings to charge all 1,128 signatories (who include BRISMES members) with 'propagandising for a terrorist organization' and 'overtly insulting the Turkish nation, the State of the Republic of Turkey, Grand National Assembly of Turkey, the Government of Republic of Turkey and the judicial organs of the state'. Individual academics are also being investigated by their own universities. If convicted of these charges they could face 1-5 years in prison, while the associated university investigations (possibly also involving a travel ban) may result in academics facing disciplinary proceedings or dismissal from their posts. Less formally, many university academics are facing a witch-hunt, with individual details and photos being widely shared on social media by government supporters, who are openly threatening the lives of signatories and calling them traitors. We understand that the consequences for our colleagues in the smaller cities outside of Istanbul and Ankara have been particularly serious, and that a number have had to flee for their lives.

The legitimacy of these actions has already been questioned by prominent legal experts and others both in Turkey and outside it. Coming as they do in a context of the continuing imprisonment and deaths of journalists, lawyers and activists, such attacks on academic freedom and freedom of speech constitute a matter of grave concern to the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies. We accordingly call upon the Turkish government to reverse these actions; to withdraw its prosecutions; to immediately release all those imprisoned; and to reaffirm the principles of academic freedom and free speech to which the Turkish

government is committed as a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international agreements.

Frances Guy  
President, BRISMES