Turkey Rounds Up Academics Who Signed Petition Denouncing Attacks on Kurds

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[Turkey](http://www.theguardian.com/world/turkey) has been accused of violating academic freedom by rounding up university teachers who signed a petition denouncing military operations against Kurds in the south-east of the country.

Police have detained at least 12 academics over alleged “terror propaganda” after they signed a petition together with more than 1,400 others [calling for an end to Turkey’s “deliberate massacre and deportation of Kurdish people”](http://bianet.org/english/human-rights/170978-academics-we-will-not-be-a-party-to-this-crime).

In a crackdown, condemned by the US ambassador as “chilling”, police are also still processing the paperwork of nine other academics who also face arrest.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has severely criticised the signatories, including political scientist Noam Chomsky and the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, and called on the judiciary to act against their alleged treachery.

Prosecutors launched an investigation into the academics over possible charges of insulting the state and engaging in terrorist propaganda.

Noam Chomsky. Photograph: Graeme Robertson for the Guardian

Staff from 90 Turkish universities calling themselves “Academicians for Peace” signed the petition last week calling for an end to the military campaign against the [Kurds](http://www.theguardian.com/world/kurds) and accusing the government of breaching international law.

Entitled “We won’t be a party to this crime”, the petition urged Ankara to “abandon its deliberate massacre and deportation of Kurdish and other peoples in the region”.

All 1,128 Turkish signatories of the petition are under investigation, according to the Doğan news agency. If convicted, they could face between one and five years in prison.

Some of the academics who signed the petition have been the subject of a backlash by nationalist students, according to signatories who asked not to be named. One accused Erdoğan of a launching a witch hunt against the group and denied sympathising with terrorists.

She said: “My door at the university has been marked. Students wrote that they didn’t want terrorists as professors. They have also started a petition calling for me to be fired. At other universities signatories have [also] had their doors marked in red.

She said she and fellow signatories had been subjected to threats and intimidation, citing a speech by the convicted criminal and extreme nationalist [Sedat Peker, who said he wants to “shower in the blood” of the signatories](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/probe-launched-into-mafia-leaders-bloodbath-threats-against-academics-.aspx?PageID=238&NID=93884&NewsCatID=509).

“Students and extreme rightwing groups have been circulating our pictures on social media or pamphlets, accusing us of being PKK terrorist teachers. They have said we won’t let you breathe in this city or this university. So the threats are very direct.” Another said “individuals are becoming the targets”.

A third said: “It is really dangerous, some people have gone into hiding. I’ve been threatened.”

The US ambassador to Turkey, John Bass, delivered rare public criticism of the Turkish government. In a statement he said: “While we may not agree with the opinions expressed by those academics, we are nevertheless concerned about this pressure having a chilling effect on legitimate political discourse across Turkish society regarding the sources of and solutions to the ongoing violence.”

he Middle East Studies Association, which represents 3,000 scholars, accused the Turkish government of violating its obligations to protect freedom of expression under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In a [letter to the prime minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu](http://mesana.org/committees/academic-freedom/intervention/letters-turkey.html#Turkey20160114), written after the investigation was launched but before the arrests were confirmed, the association said: “These actions represent a violation of academic freedom and are consistent with broader efforts on the part of the state to punish critics of state policies.”

The letter highlighted the case of several senior academic signatories who had been threatened with disciplinary action by their universities over the petition. It said: “Many more universities are likely to follow suit, amounting to a wave of punitive actions against academics solely on the grounds that they have criticised the government’s policies in the south-eastern provinces.

Chomsky hits back at Erdoğan, accusing him of double standards on terrorism

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“In a university system in which rectors are appointed by the state and YÖK [the higher education council] is free to initiate politicised investigations of academics, the actions being taken against signatories of the peace petition are a stark reminder that restrictions on academic freedom have become a matter of state policy in Turkey.”

In response to the petition, Erdoğan fired off an angry tirade against “those so-called intellectuals” accusing them of treason and being the “fifth columns” of foreign powers, sympathising with terrorists and bent on undermining Turkey’s national security.

In a televised speech to Turkish ambassadors in Ankara, Erdoğan invited Chomsky and other academics to visit the area to see “the true picture”.

Chomsky hit back at Erdoğan, rejecting the invitation. In an email to the Guardian, he said: “If I decide to go to [Turkey](http://www.theguardian.com/world/turkey), it will not be on his invitation, but as frequently before at the invitation of the many courageous dissidents, including Kurds, who have been under severe attack for many years.”