

Statement Regarding Threats to Academic Freedom and Higher Education in Turkey

July 21, 2016

African Studies Association

American Academy of Religion

American Anthropological Association

Executive Committee of the American Comparative Literature Association

American Council of Learned Societies

American Folklore Society

American Historical Association

American Society for Environmental History

American Sociological Association

American Studies Association

Association for Middle East Women's Studies

Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies

Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present

British International Studies Association

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

Executive Committee of the California Scholars for Academic Freedom

Economic History Association

European Association for Middle Eastern Studies

European Association of Social Anthropologists

European Network for Cinema and Media Studies (NECS)

Executive Board of the European Society for Translation Studies

German Middle East Studies Association (DAVO)

German Studies Association

International Center for Medieval Art

Italian American Studies Association

Italian Society for Middle Eastern Studies (SeSaMo)

Latin American Studies Association

Law and Society Association

Linguistic Society of America

The Medieval Academy of America

Middle East Studies Association  
Modern Language Association  
National Communication Association  
Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association  
Political Studies Association  
Société Française de Littérature Générale et Comparée  
Society for Cinema and Media Studies  
Society for Classical Studies  
Society of Architectural Historians  
Southeastern Medieval Association  
TESOL International Association  
World History Association

The above listed organizations collectively note with profound concern the apparent moves to dismantle much of the structure of Turkish higher education through purges, restrictions, and assertions of central control, a process begun earlier this year and accelerating now with alarming speed.

As scholarly associations, we are committed to the principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression. The recent moves in Turkey herald a massive and virtually unprecedented assault on those principles. One of the Middle East region's leading systems of higher education is under severe threat as a result, as are the careers and livelihoods of many of its faculty members and academic administrators.

Our concern about the situation in Turkish universities has been mounting over the past year, as Turkish authorities have moved to retaliate against academics for expressing their political views—some merely signing an “Academics for Peace” petition criticizing human rights violations.

Yet the threat to academic freedom and higher education has recently worsened in a dramatic fashion. In the aftermath of the failed coup attempt of July 15-16, 2016, the Turkish government has moved to purge government officials in the Ministry of Education and has called for the resignation of all university deans across the country's public and private universities. As of this writing, it appears that more than 15,000 employees at the education ministry have been fired and nearly 1600 deans—1176 from public universities and 401 from

private universities—have been asked to resign. In addition, 21,000 private school teachers have had their teaching licenses cancelled. Further, reports suggest that travel restrictions have been imposed on academics at public universities and that Turkish academics abroad were required to return to Turkey. The scale of the travel restrictions, suspensions and imposed resignations in the education sector seemingly go much farther than the targeting of individuals who might have had any connection to the attempted coup.

The crackdown on the education sector creates the appearance of a purge of those deemed inadequately loyal to the current government. Moreover, the removal of all of the deans across the country represents a direct assault on the institutional autonomy of Turkey's universities. The replacement of every university's administration simultaneously by the executive-controlled Higher Education Council would give the government direct administrative control of all Turkish universities. Such concentration and centralization of power over all universities is clearly inimical to academic freedom. Moreover, the government's existing record of requiring university administrators' to undertake sweeping disciplinary actions against perceived opponents—as was the case against the Academics for Peace petition signatories—lends credence to fears that the change in university administrations will be the first step in an even broader purge against academics in Turkey.

Earlier this year, it was already clear that the Turkish government, in a matter of months, had amassed a staggering record of violations of academic freedom and freedom of expression. The aftermath of the attempted coup may have accelerated those attacks on academic freedom in even more alarming ways.

As scholarly organizations, we collectively call for respect for academic freedom—including freedom of expression, opinion, association and travel—and the autonomy of universities in Turkey, offer our support to our Turkish colleagues, [second the Middle East Studies Association's "call for action" of January 15](#), request that Turkey's diplomatic interlocutors (both states and international organizations) advocate vigorously for the rights of Turkish scholars and the autonomy of Turkish universities, suggest other scholarly organizations speak forcefully about the threat to the Turkish academy, and alert academic institutions throughout the world that Turkish colleagues are likely to need moral and substantive support in the days ahead.