

# ACADEMICS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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"SUPPORTING ACADEMICS AS A HUMAN RIGHTS ACTOR IN  
A CHALLENGING CONTEXT"

**VOLUME 4**  
**APRIL 2019**

**Academic Activism under Extreme Conditions:**  
**TURKEY'S ACADEMICS FOR PEACE**



## Foreword

Universities and academics in Turkey have been facing severe political pressure for more than three years now, giving way to a variety of human rights violations against members of the academic community, including imprisonment, prosecutions, undue treatment, dismissals and travel bans. The Human Rights Foundation of Turkey's (HRFT) EC-funded project, "Supporting academics as a human rights actor in a challenging context"<sup>1</sup>, aims to support and empower academics, who have been facing political, judicial and administrative pressures due to their work and statements as human rights defenders.

The Project's newsletter "Academics for Human Rights" aims to provide updated information on human rights violations against academics in Turkey and disseminate project outcomes, raising awareness on both national and international scales to help strengthen solidarity for taking an effective stance against human rights violations in Turkey's academia.

Earlier issues of the Academics for Human Rights focused on Turkey's Academics for Peace (AfP). The first issue focused on the "Peace Petition Affair", the threats to AfP and the resulting human rights violations<sup>2</sup>, while in the third issue we depicted the state of the judicial proceedings against AfP<sup>3</sup>. This current issue of Academics for Human Rights aims to bring the "activism" of AfP in light, investigating the different ways in which they resist to the ongoing pressures and attacks, while at the same time reclaiming their scholarly presence under Turkey's extreme conditions. Doing so, we aim to contribute to the development of novel strategies and forms of action at both national and international scales to effectively and systematically support their struggle.

We gratefully acknowledge the AfP Solidarity Network, networks of lawyers and academics, and various independent journals, especially Bianet, whose voluntary labour has been a hard-going rigorous process, which involved commitment and persistence. Their politically and intellectually driven labour has greatly contributed to the contents of Academics for Human Rights newsletters.

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission, European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) Country Based Support Scheme (CBSS) Turkey Programme, 2017-2019, Reference: EuropeAid/154567/DD/ACT/TRP. More information on the Project is available at: <http://www.tihvakademi.org/english/>

<sup>2</sup> [www.tihvakademi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BULTEN01.2108ENG.pdf](http://www.tihvakademi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BULTEN01.2108ENG.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [www.tihvakademi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BULTEN03.2108ENG.pdf](http://www.tihvakademi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BULTEN03.2108ENG.pdf)

## **1. Advocacy for Peace, Human Rights and Academic Freedom**

In the recent period, the Academics for Peace, calling for the immediate termination of the gross/serious human rights violations in the regions affected by the curfews and military operations, have been particularly targeted as a symbol of human rights struggle carried out within the Turkish academia. As detailed in earlier issues of the Academics for Human Rights, several practices have violated their human rights, including being labelled as “supporters of terrorism” by the public authorities’ discourses, which paved the way for criminal investigations, prosecution cases, politically motivated trials, and penal investigations resulting with their imprisonment<sup>4</sup>. Despite these violations and intensifying marginalisation, the AfP have put much effort in addressing peace, human rights and freedoms through the plea statements they have given in courts<sup>5</sup>.

## **2. AfP’s “Struggle for Presence”**

### **2.1. AfP Solidarity Network and AfP Coordination for Judiciary Proceedings**

The AfP have been relentlessly marginalised in the face of intensifying political pressure and state intervention<sup>6</sup>, which required them to put much effort in a “struggle for presence” in two distinct but interrelated ways. First, it required them to practice an act of existing and standing next to each other and thereby repair the breakdown caused by intensifying oppression and marginalisation. This practice of presence has been about documenting rights violations against the AfP and archiving the whole process for transferring it to the next generations<sup>7</sup>, the AfP Solidarity Network being the pioneer of this practice.

This kind of presence has also been about collecting details of everyday life at court rooms, documenting tedious facts and empirical details, making connections

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<sup>4</sup> For details see: [www.tihvakademi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BULTEN03.2108ENG.pdf](http://www.tihvakademi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BULTEN03.2108ENG.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> For excerpts from court hearings see: <https://afp.hypotheses.org/ongoing-cases/excerpts-from-the-hearings>

<sup>6</sup> This involves being listed as persons affiliated to terrorist organisations in the decree laws, which dismissed them from their academic positions, banned them from public service for life, and hence deprived them from their right to work and social security rights. They have also had their passports cancelled indefinitely, resulting in the confiscation of their right to freedom of movement.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.barisicinakademisyenler.net/English>

between different processes and writing evaluation reports, and sharing legal advice through a hard going rigorous process<sup>8</sup>. The pioneer of this practice has been the Coordination Committee for Judiciary Proceedings formed as part of the AfP Solidarity Network. Through these practices the AfP has been involved in a struggle for presence that drive exactly a process of subject formation.

## **2.2. Reclaiming Scholarly Presence: Emerging Spaces of Research and Learning beyond Turkey's Mainstream Institutions**

As detailed in an earlier issue of the Academics for Human Rights<sup>9</sup>, efforts to conduct academic work within the institutional academic setting had already been restricted by several formal and informal constraints before the state of emergency, forcing Turkey's academics question prevailing academic practices in Turkey's higher education institutions and quest for new approaches to learning, knowledge production and dissemination. That said, the institutional academic environment has undergone a severe destruction during the state of emergency and in the context of growing oppression in Turkey, placing new pressures on the AfP. In particular, their relentless exclusion from Turkey's higher education system<sup>10</sup> required a more proactive attitude with respect to existing/standing as academics in front of others. The AfP suggested that this need can be addressed through the pursuit of a scholarship that would put as much effort in developing alternative spaces of research and learning outside mainstream higher education institutions as in producing new practices to address the mounting challenges of the institutional academic setting.

### **Academics with No-Campus (Kampüssüzler)**

The Academics with No-Campus (Kampüssüzler) is one of the pioneers of this quest. Emerged before AfPs' dismissals, Kampüssüzler is an initiative which is in pursuit of critical and collective inquiry in processes of knowledge production and dissemination. Advocating a wholistic, mutual and relational approach, Kampüssüzler embarks on a quest of overcoming the fragmented nature of academic scholarship

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<sup>8</sup> <https://afp.hypotheses.org>

<sup>9</sup> [www.tihvakademi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BULTEN01.2108ENG.pdf](http://www.tihvakademi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BULTEN01.2108ENG.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> They were listed as persons affiliated to terrorist organisations in the decree laws, which dismissed them from their academic positions, banned them from public service for life, and hence deprived them from their right to work and social security rights. They have also had their passports cancelled indefinitely, resulting in the confiscation of their right to freedom of movement. With the regulations enforced under the state of emergency, which were turned into a permanent reality through various legislations that reflect elements of the state of emergency despite its termination in July 2018, appeal mechanisms and judicial remedies have become inaccessible and ineffective to these purged academics

into disciplines and the division of labour between empirical and theoretical work. It is also involved in practicing new approaches to learning based on principles of collective learning and sharing.

### **Solidarity Academies**

Whilst academics had already acknowledged the problems of mainstream higher education institutions in Turkey and have struggled for peace, justice, human rights, democracy and academic freedom, with their exclusion from mainstream institutions via various measures, forms of resistance to intense marginalisation and to extreme coercion have started to take place outside the university.

One of the prominent responses of the AfP for scholarly presence has been Solidarity Academies, which emerged in various cities across Turkey<sup>11</sup> that have seen the purge of academics. Solidarity Academies initially started by hosting classes delivered by different academics on specific subjects, which were an attempt by dismissed academics to engage with their students and the general public and in a way encouraged discussion among participants about topics which have been excluded from Turkey's academic curricula as a result of academic dismissals. Activities held in Solidarity Academies also involved providing classes, summer and winter schools to undergraduate and graduate students, language courses for young academics, consultancy and academic publications.

Under the extreme political conditions of Turkey, Solidarity Academies have come to represent purged academics' fight for pursuing their academic activities out of the mainstream higher education institutions, building alternative spaces for research and learning, and staying in solidarity with their students and with the wider community, primarily pro-peace and pro-democracy groups, organisations and activists associated with Turkey's left-wing politics, in their struggle for peace, human rights, democracy, freedom of opinion and speech, and academic freedom<sup>12</sup>.

Obviously, this was a process which involved various challenges including establishing formal, institutional relationships with academic institutions across the

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<sup>11</sup> These included Ankara, Antalya, Dersim, Eskişehir, Kocaeli, İstanbul, İzmir, Kocaeli, Mardin, Mersin and Urfa.

<sup>12</sup> For different accounts of Solidarity Academies, see:

Amsler, S. (2018) Organising an alternative university: A reflection on the conference 'Critical, Emancipatory and Socialist Endeavors', *tripleC*, 16 (2): 775-781.

Erdem, E. and Akın, K. (2019) Emergent repertoires of resistance and communing in higher education: The Solidarity Academies movement in Turkey, *South Atlantic quarterly*, 118 (1): 145-164.

world, access to academic databases, to national and international funding schemes, and to employment opportunities abroad and in Turkey. Overcoming these difficulties required that they are institutionalised. After a long process of legal struggle, three of the Solidarity Academies succeeded to be registered as a cooperative and an association<sup>13</sup>.

### **Bir.Ara.Da**<sup>14</sup>

Through these initiatives, the AfP have over time started experimenting with practices of a different sense of academic community based on values of self-organisation, autonomy, solidarity, academic co-production and collective learning.

The Bir.Ara.Da Association is founded as an intermediate organisation for coordinating the actions of the different initiatives, distilling lessons from each other, contributing to the establishment of best practices through debate and cooperation and sharing strategies.

Founded on the principles of peace, justice, human rights, democracy, freedom of opinion and speech, critical inquiry and academic autonomy, Bir.Ara.Da provides the institutional setting for dismissed academics for carrying out research in line with these principles, experimenting with critical educational and pedagogical practices, and exploring emergent alternatives to mainstream higher education across the world.

### **Off-University**<sup>15</sup>

The Off-University initiative, registered as a charitable association in Germany, is formed by AfP living in Germany as a strategy to address the challenges faced by threatened academics in the context of growing authoritarianism across the world. Central to this strategy has been the development of emancipatory education-research activities founded on a democratic, inclusive, cooperative approach. Doing so involves the development of an online platform of co-teaching for dismissed academics in collaboration with universities in Germany and the USA<sup>16</sup>. The initiative

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<sup>13</sup> These are Ankara Solidarity Academy ([www.adakoop.org](http://www.adakoop.org)), which is registered as a cooperative, while Kocaeli Solidarity Academy ([www.kocaelidayanisma.org](http://www.kocaelidayanisma.org)) and Eskişehir School ([www.eskisehirkulu.org](http://www.eskisehirkulu.org)) are registered as associations.

<sup>14</sup> <http://biraradadernek.org/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://off-university.com/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://observatoireturquie.fr/index.php/2019/03/28/summer-term-at-off-university-begins/>

offers accredited online courses taught by academics who have been purged from their institutions, forced to resign, and are persecuted in Turkey.

### **HRFT Academy<sup>17</sup>**

The oppression on academics has directly and significantly affected the human rights movement in Turkey. Many of the purged scholars, especially those associated with Academics for Peace, were among the supporters of human rights activism in their capacity as researchers and educators. It is, however, no longer possible for many of them to continue their human rights related work in a university-based setting, which, in turn, undermines the overall capacity of civil society organizations in the field of human rights. Against this background have emerged academic initiatives which run as part of Turkey's established human rights organisations.

Formed as part of the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey's (HRFT) long term strategy to respond to this challenge, HRFT Academy aims to facilitate academics' human rights related research and teaching within a civil society network, while at the same time increasing the overall capacity of the human rights movement in Turkey through a holistic and integrative collaboration model between academics and civil society actors. The HRFT Academy runs public seminar series on rights and a training program for human rights activists and undertakes research activities regarding the effects of violations on academics and the unmaking of higher education in Turkey.

### **School of Human Rights<sup>18</sup>**

Chief among the academic initiatives that run as part of Turkey's established human rights organisations is the School of Human Rights. Running in collaboration with the Common Platform of Human Rights, the Human Rights Association and the Alumni Association of Middle East Technical University, the School of Human Rights is founded to re-establish the Centre for Human Rights following the Centre's shut down at the Faculty of Political Sciences at Ankara University and the dismissal of its academics via decree laws.

The primary objective of the School of Human Rights is to create an alternative platform for open inquiry and critical debate in the field of human rights and strengthen the relationship between academics and civil society organisations in

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.tihvakademi.org/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://insanhaklariokulu.org/>

Turkey. Central to the School's activities are research on academic freedom and human rights and a free on-line learning platform on human rights based on an interaction, self-motivation, and self-organisation.

### **Kültürhane**<sup>19</sup>

A unique initiative that emerged in the context of the relentless marginalisation of AfP is Kültürhane, the primary objective of which is to create a new public space in the southern province of Mersin in Turkey, where the local community meet and develop cooperative relationships with each other. The space provided by a café and a public library named after the suicide of Mehmet Fatih Tıraş, one of the AfP and a human rights defender<sup>20</sup>, is enriched by talks over science, arts and literature given in an informal setting<sup>21</sup>. Kültürhane also aims to contribute to the development of the economic foundations of solidarity, based on the notion of "commons"<sup>22</sup>. Doing so involves providing a meeting space for various academics, teachers, workers, public officials dismissed during the state of emergency in Turkey and a meeting point for the products of various food collectives, consumer cooperatives and local producers and consumer-citizens.

## **4. Evaluation: Turkey's Emerging Academic Spaces**

AfP's academic activism put into gear a process of subject formation that challenges arguments about "civil death". It has been about the marginalised academic community stepping up to address the big challenges they face by (i) existing/standing next to each other and (ii) existing/standing as academics in front of others.

Importantly, AfP's struggle for presence as part of these processes of subject formation has been central to the proliferation of new academic spaces beyond Turkey's mainstream higher education institutions. These emergent initiatives contain plural "other" academies critical of mainstream higher education institutions in Turkey,

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.kulturhane.org/tr/>

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed account, see: Özkırımlı, U. (2017) How to liquidate a people? Academic freedom in Turkey and beyond, *Globalizations*, 14 (6): 851-856.

<sup>21</sup> <https://m.bianet.org/bianet/toplum/190039-mersin-de-yeni-bir-kamusal-alan-kulturhane>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.birartibir.org/dayanisma-ekonomileri/253-isigin-sizdigi-catlak>



and the paradigms, practices and politics that support them. These diverse initiatives, across which a different academic community is emerging, place values such as peace, justice, human rights, democracy, freedom of opinion and speech as their focal point of concern. They contribute to the flourishing of open inquiry and critical debate and are in pursuit of doing so in ways that foreground a democratic, inclusive, participatory, co-operative approach to processes of academic labour, knowledge production and public engagement. Proceeding through experimentation, prototyping and taking risks, these initiatives have an unknown and incomplete character. Yet, they have the potential to become a generative force for a broader transformation that can potentially revert the catastrophe that has occurred in Turkey's higher education system and revitalise the institutional academic environment in Turkey.

## **5. Suggestions for Staying in Solidarity with Academics for Peace**

Given the ongoing prosecution of the AfP, there is an urgent need to develop novel strategies and forms of action to effectively and collaboratively stay in solidarity with the AfP in their struggle. Hence, we call academic institutions, associations, civil society organisations and international bodies to take effective and long-running steps for empowering AfP in their struggle for presence in the current repressive environment.

Below we list a number of ways in which you might do so, as shared by the AfP in various platforms:

- Consider providing small to mid-scale research funds for the academics who have been banned from leaving Turkey, to help them pursue their research and sustain their livelihoods and scholarly careers.
- Consider providing small to mid-scale funds for Turkey's emerging academic initiatives, to support their activities and help them nurture.
- Consider commissioning universities to prepare research grants for and/or develop research partnerships with Turkey's emerging academic initiatives.
- Consider providing on-line platforms for colleagues who are banned from leaving Turkey to give courses, seminars, etc. You may consider partnering with the Off-

University initiative for accredited on-line courses taught by academics purged from their institutions.

- Consider providing honorary memberships or affiliated memberships for academics banned from academia to help them preserve their academic titles. If possible and/or applicable, international pairing partners can take initiative to ask their partner in Turkey whether they would need/want honorary affiliation.

- Consider commissioning universities and developing diplomatic relations to prepare short term work possibilities, research grants or research asylums abroad to help academics to continue their academic work.

- Consider distance learning options and academic consultancy to post-graduate students whose rights to education are violated, to help them continue their scholarly careers.

- Consider providing AfP access to scientific data bases and on-line libraries of your institutions.

- Consider providing Skype and recorded video options, and free-registration to conferences for colleagues who are banned from leaving Turkey or not allowed to go to international meetings.

- Consider providing free access to your institution's on-line language training courses to support early careers academics having difficulty in learning foreign language in Turkey's particular social-cultural and political conditions.

- Use the resources of your institution and the public platforms available to you to disseminate knowledge about the plight of academics in Turkey. This could involve, for example, organizing talks, exhibitions, and press conferences, or producing films and publications, holding round table meetings in future conferences regarding academic freedom

Human rights violations against academics have reached an unprecedented scale in Turkey. In the face of the recent developments and growing authoritarianism both in Turkey and all around the world, there is shared consideration among academics, civil society organisations, professionals, and activists that there is an urgent need to develop novel strategies and forms of action to effectively and collaboratively carry out the struggle for human rights.

Formed as part of HRFT's "Supporting Academics as a Human Rights Actor in a Challenging Context" Project, the Academics for Human Rights Network aims to establish and strengthen a formal civil society network on both national and international scales to carry out human rights advocacy effectively in a challenging context.

Academics, human rights and civil society organisations, professionals, and activists, and other institutions and individuals are invited to be part of the Academics for Human Rights Network. By joining the network, you or your institution will receive our newsletter that will inform you or your institution of the recent developments related to Turkey's academics and the violation of multiple rights. You will also be communicated about the ways in which we might collaborate with you or your institution to support and empower academics as human rights actors in a challenging context. To express your interest in joining the network, please send an email to: [tihvakademi@tihv.org.tr](mailto:tihvakademi@tihv.org.tr)

# ACADEMICS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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