During this reporting period, arrests and detentions of Turkish academics became less frequent as compared to the previous reporting period. However, close to 200 scholars previously detained were sentenced or convicted. Isolated incidents of attacks on schools, school students and personnel, and school-related child recruitment, occurred in the context of Turkey’s conflict with the PKK in the southeast of the country.

Context

A state of emergency, instated after the July 2016 coup attempt and lifted in July 2018, characterized the first half of the 2017 to 2019 reporting period. Shortly after, the Turkish Parliament passed new legislation which gave Turkish authorities broad powers similar to those held under the state of emergency. Throughout the reporting period, courts used articles of Turkey’s Penal Code (including Article 314/2 relating to “membership of a terrorist organization”) and the Anti-Terror Law (including Article 7/2 relating to “making propaganda for a terrorist organization”) to charge and convict journalists, students, academics, and human rights activists. Turkey's misuse of such laws has received criticism over many years for violating human rights. According to Turkey’s Ministry of Justice, as reported by Human Rights Watch, 69,259 people were on trial on charges of 'terrorism' by July 2019, for alleged links to what the Turkish government called the ‘Fethullahist Terrorist Organization’ (FETÖ). As reported in Education under Attack 2018, the Turkish government accused followers of a movement affiliated with Fetullah Gülen, a US-based Muslim cleric, of orchestrating a 2016 coup and designated them as belonging to ‘FETÖ’.

Conflict continued in Turkey’s mainly Kurdish southeast, where Turkish security forces engaged in military operations against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Violence continued at lower rates during the current reporting period, with almost 100 civilians killed from January 2017 to December 2019. The Turkish government also continued to address the effects of the conflict in Syria on its southern border, hosting more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees, 50 percent of whom were under the age of 18.

The conflict in the southeast and the July 2016 attempted military coup both had profound effects on the education system in Turkey. According to Human Rights Watch, thousands of academics were among those that the Turkish government dismissed or prosecuted. In May 2018, the rights group stated that these actions were leading to self-censorship, and harmed academic freedom in Turkey. Between mid-July 2016 and early 2018, at least 33,000 professionals from the Ministry of Education were also dismissed under Emergency Decrees. Reports of the detention of school and university students and staff decreased during the reporting period, although prosecutions of academics arrested in prior years were ongoing from 2017 to 2019. Reported numbers of attacks on schools also declined.

Attacks on schools

Between 2017 and 2019, GCPEA identified at least three reported attacks on schools. Reports of attacks on schools declined significantly during the reporting period, as compared to the period covered in Education under Attack 2018, when GCPEA collected over 30 reported attacks on schools between 2014 and 2016. Just one alleged attack was reported in 2017 and two in 2019. Media sources reported that all incidents occurred in the southeast of the country, in the context of the ongoing conflict between Turkish state armed forces and the PKK. Reported incidents from 2019 included:

- On May 5, 2019, local media Anadolu Agency alleged that a reading room had been opened for students whose school, the Cumhuriyet Primary and Secondary School in İdil district, Şırnak province, had been set on fire.
- Local media sources reported that on October 17, 2019, a mortar shell struck a school in Bilekli village, Birecik district, Şanlıurfa province. The attack allegedly damaged the roof but did not injure any students or staff.

Attacks on students, teachers, and other education personnel

Between 2017 and 2019, GCPEA collated approximately 20 reported incidents of attacks on schools, students, teachers, and other education personnel, that affected over 60 people. Turkish security forces continued to arrest or detain students, teachers, and other primary and secondary school personnel from 2017 to 2019, although such incidents were reported less frequently than from 2013 to 2016. Many detained teachers worked at Gülen-affiliated schools.
In 2017, in addition to 14 cases of arrest or detention reported in Education under Attack 2018, media sources reported that a teacher was abducted in Siverek district, Şanlıurfa province, in southeastern Turkey. The teacher was allegedly killed, and his body was discovered on July 12, 2017.

In 2018, media and civil society sources reported one alleged incident of an attack on students. In Istanbul, on June 8, 2018, Turkish police arrested at least 20 students protesting the Ministry of Education’s policies. The theme of the protest was “The report cards are yours, but the future is ours.”

In 2018, GCPEA also identified two incidents where teachers were arrested for their perceived association with the Gülen movement. For example, state-run local media Anadolu Agency reported that on January 11, 2018, authorities arrested at least 25 teachers in Samsun province, 23 of whom had allegedly been dismissed from their teaching positions.

In other countries, Turkey demanded the extradition of Turkish nationals who were teachers in schools associated with the Gülen movement. The New York Times and Reuters reported that six Turkish teachers at a Gülen-affiliated school in Kosovo were extradited on the orders of the Turkish government and arrested in late March 2018. In 2019, Human Rights Watch also reported that Turkish authorities requested the extradition of teachers who were Turkish nationals supportive of the Gülen movement resident, in various countries, and that extraditions were mostly carried out bypassing legal procedure. The teachers were immediately arrested and prosecuted once in Turkey.

Child recruitment at, or on the way to or from, school

For the 2017-2019 period, GCPEA documented at least one alleged case of child recruitment. As reported in Education under Attack 2018, the PKK recruited a 15-year-old girl as she was on her way to school in Van province, according to the Turkish Ministry of Interior. According to the survivor, a PKK member threatened to harm the survivor’s family if she did not join the group.

Attacks on higher education

Between 2017 and 2019, GCPEA documented over 60 reports of attacks on higher education in which over 650 academics, as well as university students and personnel, were injured, arrested and detained, or charged. Such cases slowed during the course of the reporting period. According to University World News, there were at least 1,691 detentions or warrants issued for university students and staff during the two years from January 2016 to January 2018, including 1,236 reported to have been physically detained.

In addition, university students and academics previously arrested went to trial, facing conviction and sentencing, during the current reporting period. In April 2019, Amnesty International reported that 691 academics were, or had been, on trial on charges under Article 7/2 of the Anti-Terror Law, such as “making propaganda for a terrorist organization” after signing an Academics for Peace petition that called for an end to fighting in southeast Turkey in 2016. As of May 1, 2019, 185 academics had been given prison sentences, of which 149 were suspended and four were deferred.

On July 26, 2019, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Front Line Defenders reported that the General Assembly of the Constitutional Court ruled that the convictions and sentencing to prison of ten academics who were signatories of the petition for “propagandizing for a terrorist organization” were unconstitutional, and advised reparations and retrials. Human Rights Watch reported that many of signatories of the petition were subsequently acquitted.

Arrests and detentions of university students and personnel slowed from 2017 to 2018. According to information reported by Scholars at Risk, Human Rights Watch, and media sources, at least 400 university students and personnel were arrested or detained, or had arrest warrants issued for them in 2017. In 2018, similar sources reported that nearly 150 were arrested or detained. For example:

- Scholars at Risk reported that the Turkish government issued detention warrants for 17 individuals who had previously worked for Gazi University because of alleged connections to the Gülen movement; 11 of those individuals were reportedly detained.

- On March 22, 2018, Turkish police reportedly detained at least five students who had displayed banners condemning military operations in Turkey’s southeast at an event on Boğaziçi University’s campus, according to Scholars at Risk and Human Rights Watch. The event had taken place three days earlier, on March 19, 2018.
Three other students were reportedly detained on March 25, 2018, and two more on March 31, 2018.\footnote{2110}

On April 12, 2018, according to Scholars at Risk, Turkish police reportedly used force to break up a group of students protesting at Osmangazi University, against the April 5 killing of four university personnel by a research assistant who had accused them of being supporters of Fethullah Gülen. The police also reportedly arrested three of the protesting students, releasing them later in the day.\footnote{2111} Ten other students were briefly detained on the same day outside the Council of Higher Education in Ankara, as they peacefully protested the university’s response to the killings. Police also reportedly used force to disperse that protest.\footnote{2112}

Scholars at Risk reported that Turkish authorities raided student dorms in Adana and detained 25 university students because of alleged connections to the Gülen movement.\footnote{2113}

According to Scholars at Risk, Turkish authorities issued detention warrants for 15 Hacettepe University personnel because of alleged connections to the Gülen movement. Nine of the academics affected had previously been dismissed from their positions, and nine personnel were detained.\footnote{2114}

On November 16, 2018, the Dean of the Faculty of Law at İstanbul Bilgi University, and a professor of mathematics at Boğaziçi University, were briefly detained by police because of alleged connections to human rights activist Osman Kavala, according to Human Rights Watch, Scholars at Risk, and Al Jazeera.\footnote{2115} Kavala was the chairperson of Anadolu Kültür, a civil society organization that had co-organized the Boğaziçi European School of Politics, an academic program in which the Dean had participated.\footnote{2116} The professor of mathematics had also signed the Academics for Peace petition, according to Bianet.\footnote{2117} Police also allegedly detained at least ten others in the same incident.

In 2019, over 50 university students and staff had been arrested or detained because of participation in university protests, according to media and NGO sources. These included:

- On March 8, 2019, at least seven female students were reportedly detained during a Women’s Day gathering at Ege University in İzmir city, İzmir province.\footnote{2118}

- On May 10, 2019, Scholars at Risk, Amnesty International, and local media reported that police used excessive force, including teargas, rubber bullets, and a water cannon, to disperse students who took part in a peaceful lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) Pride Parade on the Middle East Technical University (METU) campus, in Ankara, and detained 25 students. The university’s rector had banned the parade. As of August 2019, 18 students and one academic had been charged with unlawful assembly under the Law on Meetings and Demonstrations, according to Amnesty International.\footnote{2119}

- On June 30, 2019, Scholars at Risk reported that state security forces allegedly arrested four students from METU in Ankara to prevent them from displaying political banners at the university’s graduation ceremony, which they missed while in detention. Police released the students later on the same day, but they were reportedly charged with “making propaganda for a terrorist organization.” In 2018, students at METU were arrested and charged after carrying political banners at the annual graduation ceremony.\footnote{2120}

- On July 8, 2019, police reportedly used excessive force against demonstrators and arrested one student at METU in Ankara when dispersing a student protest. Students had demonstrated for over 50 days about the removal of trees from campus.\footnote{2121}

- On December 25, 2019, media and local sources reported that police dispersed a group of women’s rights activists who were protesting femicide and violence against women at Ankara University. Police allegedly arrested at least five students.\footnote{2122}

In 2019, GCPEA also identified two reports of arrests of scholars for their academic activities:

- Scholars at Risk reported that on January 30, 2019, authorities issued an arrest warrant for a dual American-Turkish citizen and professor at the University of California Davis, for “making propaganda for a terrorist organization.” The professor returned to Turkey for court proceedings on June 26, 2019, when he was detained by authorities. While the length of his detention was not noted, he was acquitted of charges on October 24, 2019.\footnote{2123}
- Authorities reportedly arrested a Turkish professor at the Claude Bernard Lyon 1 University, on May 11, 2019 in Balikesir, on charges of “making propaganda for a terrorist organization,” after participating in a screening of a documentary in France in February 2019, organized by the Kurdish Friends of Lyon and Rhône-Alpes. On July 30, 2019, the Balikesir 2nd Heavy Penal Court ordered his release without judicial control and exemption from forthcoming hearings, according to Scholars at Risk. The scholar was also a signatory to the Academics for Peace petition.2124


[2116]、“Constitutional Court rules that freedom of expression of Academics for Peace has been violated,” Frontline Defenders, July 31, 2019; Human Rights Watch, “Turkey: Constitutional Court clears academics from spurious ‘terrorism propaganda’ charges,” Amnesty International news release, July 26, 2019.


Scholars at Risk Network, Academic Freedom Monitor, Middle East Technical University, June 30, 2019.

Cumhuriyet; Human Rights Foundation of Turkey, as cited in ACLED, Event ID TUR8584; “Turkish students protest plans to bulldoze green area, police fire pepper spray,” Reuters, July 8, 2018.

