

Turkish Medical Association central council detained for demanding peace

On Jan 24, 2018, the central council of the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) issued a short statement to express its opinion against the ongoing military operations by the Turkish army in northern Syria and to call for an end to the war by demanding peace.¹ In its short announcement, TTB underscored the validity of its professional oath and duty to defend human lives.¹

In the aftermath of the announcement, mainstream media and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan personally accused the TTB of being “terrorist sympathisers”.² TTB responded to this accusation by issuing another statement on its website and emphasised that its announcement was valid for every person affected by the war, the announcement was written with the dignity and responsibility of medical professionalism, and the accusations were inflicting provocative attacks and a lynch campaign towards TTB and its members.³

In the following days, threats against the TTB escalated and official requests for protection of TTB members against the threats were left unreplied by Turkish officials.⁴ On Jan 30, 2018, 11 senior central council members of the TTB, including Rasit Tukul, who in 2015 received the highest number of votes for the presidential election in Istanbul University but was declined by the government,⁵ were arrested and were accused of “propagandising for terrorist organisations” according to the Turkish Penal Code.⁶ The World Medical Association strongly condemned the arrests, urged the Turkish Government to immediately release the physicians, and denounced the attacks on “freedom of expression, which is enshrined in article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that Turkey ratified in 2003”.⁷

The current attack on TTB and freedom of expression of medical personnel in Turkey is not the first of its kind. For the past decade, Turkish authorities have been suppressing academic freedom, professional advocacy, and medical practice when professionals aim to express their opinions.⁸⁻¹⁴ Currently, hundreds of academics known as Academics for Peace are being prosecuted for signing a petition calling for peace in Turkey.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ This systemic suppression of academic freedom and freedom of speech is part of a broader trend in Turkey towards an irreversible loss of universal values of professionalism and ethics in every field of academia, including medical research and advocacy. Additionally, the recent detention of 11 members of the TTB, who should be released immediately, is a clear demonstration of the security threats that physicians are facing in Turkey. The reactions of the international community and medical associations to these developments are clear indications that these detentions are unjustified and are in stark violation of the universal principles of medical ethics and international conventions, such as Geneva Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War¹⁸ and the UN Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict,¹⁹ to which Turkey is a signatory.

I declare no competing interests.

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