



Turkish medical leaders are arrested after protesting against Syria incursion

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The senior leadership of the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) is either in detention or being hunted by police after authorities issued arrest warrants for 11 of its administrators including its chair, Raşit Tükel.¹ Several hours after the first dawn raids eight of the 11 doctors were in custody, the ministry said, while police operations continued in eight provinces to find the others.

The Ankara public prosecutor's office said that those apprehended would be questioned on suspicion of "making propaganda for a terrorist organisation," "praising crimes and criminals," and "inciting the public to hatred or hostility"—referring to a statement by the TTB on 24 January in which doctors called for a halt to Turkey's military incursion into the Syrian region of Afrin.

The statement, "War is a Public Health Issue," called on Turkey to cease operations in Afrin province, a region of Syria controlled by a Kurdish rebel group, the YPG. Turkey's government has claimed that Afrin is a haven for Kurdish militants of the PKK, a separatist group that Turkish security forces have battled for decades.

Since the "Operation Olive Branch" offensive began on 20 January some 61 civilians have died in Afrin, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Turkey has said that at least 649 fighters it described as terrorists have been "neutralised," but an expected attack on the city of Afrin has yet to materialise.

Describing the war as a "man made public health problem," the TTB's statement ended with the appeal: "No to war, peace immediately."

At a political meeting on Sunday the country's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, accused the doctors of treason. "This 'No to war' cry by this mob . . . is nothing other than the outburst of the betrayal in their souls . . . This is real filth, this is the dishonourable stance that should be said 'no' to," he told members of the ruling AK party in the northern Amasya province.

"Believe me, they are not intellectuals at all, they are a gang of slaves. They are the servants of imperialism," said Erdoğan.

The TTB was bombarded with complaints and death threats from government supporters after issuing the statement, and it took the unusual step of formally asking Ankara's provincial governorship for protection. But no official reply came except the arrest warrants.

Other ministers joined Erdoğan in attacking the TTB. "They do not represent Turkish doctors," said Ahmet Demircan, health minister, to reporters. "The TTB has no right to make such a statement, and it made a big mistake. There will be consequences for making such a statement at such a critical moment."

The 11 doctors—eight men and three women—will join over 300 other Turks, including bloggers and journalists, who have been arrested for publicly criticising the Afrin operation.

In a parliamentary meeting the leader of Turkey's biggest opposition party, the CHP, which supports the Afrin operation, nevertheless condemned the doctors' arrests. The detentions "are not right, and they will only hurt Turkey's image abroad," said Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. "You do not let doctors speak their minds. You oppress them."

Amnesty International called for the doctors' immediate release, and the World Medical Association's (WMA) president, Yoshitake Yokokura, urged Turkish authorities to "end the campaign of intimidation."

He said, "The WMA has clear policy that physicians and national medical associations should alert governments to the human consequences of warfare. The Turkish Medical Association has a duty to support human rights and peace."

¹ The doctors are: Raşit Tükel (m), Sezai Berber (m), Sinan Adıyaman (m), Selma Güngör (f), Şeyhmus Gökcalp (m), Hande Arpat (m), Ayfer Horasan (f), Taner Gören (m), Funda Obuz (f), Yaşar Ulutaş (m), and Nazım Yılmaz (m).