

Defending Human Rights *in* Turkey



DEFENDING HUMAN RIGHTS IN TURKEY

STORIES THAT NEED TO BE HEARD

STORIES
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Published in 2021

Imagine being attacked by the police for dancing in the streets for women's rights or peacefully marching for LGBTI+ rights. Imagine being arrested for tweeting disapproval of your government; protesting to save a park; signing a peace petition. Imagine your professor being fired, or your doctor being arrested. These are all examples from Turkey's reality.

This series highlights stories of twenty individuals who have chosen to stand up for human rights. The individuals presented here all continue to defend human rights in Turkey, despite the increasing difficulty and mounting pressure posed by the government. Learn more about the everyday people taking everyday actions in Turkey to stand up for human rights. Read their stories, each one a story that needs to be heard.

Defending Human Rights in Turkey

Not long ago, Turkey was considered a success story of democratic transformation. Today human rights in Turkey are at risk. Turkey displays an increasingly restrictive environment with a distorted system of checks and balances, where the rule of law is undermined. Thousands of journalists, academics, lawyers, and government critics have been sacked, imprisoned, and charged with terror-related or libel crimes.

Defending human rights doesn't have to be a profession; it comes from a belief that all people have the right to live in peace and be treated equally. From doctors to teachers, from plumbers to journalists, everyone can defend human rights.

Sustained attention and a proactive strategy by the European Union and its Member States, and the international community as a whole are needed to defend the space in which human rights defenders can continue their peaceful human rights work without risk of reprisals and unfounded litigation for their work.

About the Netherlands Helsinki Committee

This series is an initiative of the Netherlands Helsinki Committee.

The Netherlands Helsinki Committee (NHC) is a non-governmental organization that operates within the OSCE-region. It contributes to dialogue and cooperation between states and civil society in the area of rule of law and human rights. Founded in 1987, the NHC represented Dutch civil society in the Helsinki Process, following the examples of sister Helsinki Committees from across the OSCE-area. NHC's current activities include human rights defence, integrity and accountability, access to justice and criminal justice reform.

For further information about the Netherlands Helsinki Committee visit: www.nhc.nl

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Meltem Aslan



Meltem Aslan, co-director of the Hafıza Merkezi (Truth Justice Memory Centre) in Istanbul, and one of Turkey's prominent human rights defenders was taken into custody and interrogated in November 2018. Due to an imposed travel ban, continuing her international work in defence of human rights has become impossible. Growing restrictions and pressure on civil society also make the human rights work she does in Turkey increasingly difficult.

Meltem Aslan spent her teenage years in post-coup Turkey, at a time when the destructive military intervention of 1980 stifled political life. It is an often-repeated idea that the repression and fear of the period created an apolitical

“ Meltem and her colleagues now spend significant amounts of time at courthouses in support of similarly beleaguered colleagues.

generation — an idea that has been proven false by the tireless work of human rights defenders like Aslan.

Initially, Aslan pursued a career in business management and consultancy in the United States. After 10 years, she left the private sector and the United States, choosing instead to pursue her passion for human rights.

In the early 2000's a scholarship for a Human Rights Degree at the European Inter-University Centre for Human Rights and Democratisation in Venice first led her to Europe, and then back to her home country, Turkey. She has been working for civil society organisations involved with human rights ever since. Between 2009 and 2018 she served as the executive director for [Anadolu Kültür](#) — an NGO that promotes dialogue and overcoming differences in Turkish society through the arts, promotion of cultural heritage, and intercultural and inter-regional exchange.

In 2011, while working for Anadolu Kültür, Aslan, along with a team of lawyers, journalists and human rights activists, set up Truth Justice Memory Centre (Hakikat Adalet Hafıza Merkezi). The founders were motivated by a deep interest in applying a transitional justice framework

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when dealing with Turkey's multi-layered past violations and injustices. The organisation documents cases of forced disappearances in Turkey, aiming to uncover the truth surrounding past violations of human rights, building a collective memory and supporting survivors in their pursuit of justice.

The organisation was developed in a period when Turkey began accession talks with the European Union (EU). Legal reforms being implemented during the accession process led to a vibrant and diverse civil society in the country. Since then the situation has changed dramatically. Fundamental rights such as freedom of expression have rapidly deteriorated and people working in civil society are targeted by the government. Aslan underlines that this crackdown is not just a Turkish phenomenon, but a global one.

According to Aslan, the EU shoulders a key part of the blame for the dire human rights situation in Turkey today. In what she calls “the mishandling of the refugee crisis,” the EU struck a detrimental deal with Turkey in March 2016. In return for the government's prevention of refugees' departure towards Greece, the EU paid €6 billion in support of refugees in Turkey. This widely criticized deal has provided Turkey with more leverage vis-a-vis the EU in contentious policy decisions, both domestically and internationally. Moreover, the deal has led to an erosion of human rights within the EU as well, thereby taking some of its own moral leverage away.

Osman Kavala, a well-known philanthropist and businessman, Chairman of Anadolu Kültür and supporter of Hafıza Merkezi, has become a symbol of Turkey's deepening human rights crisis. A well-liked and important public figure who formerly advised western leaders on Turkey-related issues, he has now been in pre-trial detention without indictment for over a year. The allegations made against Kavala, accused of attempting to overthrow the government by organizing the Gezi Park protests, are likely politically motivated. Human

rights activists around the world have characterized his imprisonment as an obvious attempt by the Turkish government to stifle dissidence. Meltem Aslan is among the individuals who regularly participated in solidarity gatherings demanding Kavala's release.

On November 16, 2018, Aslan was briefly taken into custody, along with 12 other academics and civil society members. Shortly after the detention, police issued a statement criminalising the 2013 Gezi Park protests, suggesting that the ones taken into custody, together with Kavala, supported the protests with the intention to create chaos and to overthrow the Turkish government. The same police statement cited Aslan's marriage “to a dissident journalist” — co-director of Hafıza Merkezi, [Murat Çelikkhan](#) — as a point of investigation. All except Yiğit Aksakoğlu, Turkey Country Director for the [Bernard van Leer Foundation](#), were released shortly thereafter (Read about [the legal pressure Yiğit faced](#)). Despite their release, investigations into those detained on November 16, and more who were summoned to the police station later for interrogation, continue.

Both the criminal investigation against her and her colleagues as well as the general crackdown on civil society leave many emotionally discouraged according to Aslan. While their work is more important than ever, it is often obstructed by growing difficulties. The lawyers working for Hafıza Merkezi, who would normally be working on the documentation cases of forced disappearances, are now forced to spend large amounts of time working on the cases against Aslan and other colleagues. She and her colleagues now spend significant amounts of time at courthouses in support of similarly beleaguered colleagues — time taken away from their own work.

The ever-mounting pressure on civil society causes wider ripples throughout the field of human rights activism in Turkey, including restrictions on funding and resources. In reaction to the crackdown on Anadolu Kültür, the [Open Society Foundation](#) decided to close its offices and withdraw from Turkey. Despite the personal and structural difficulties, Aslan, her colleagues, and many other human rights defenders and organisations, remain committed to their principles and ideals of a society free of human rights abuses. They continue their work to build a peaceful and democratic country for all those who live in Turkey.

Story first published in January 2019

Raci Bilici



Raci Bilici, a human rights defender from Diyarbakır, is under investigation in Turkey. Bilici faces up to 15 years imprisonment for his legitimate human rights work with the Human Rights Association in the country's volatile Southeast.

Born in 1972, Raci Bilici's professional life has known many ups and downs. But there has always been one clear constant: persecution by the Turkish state. Growing up in a village near the Kurdish metropolis Diyarbakır, Bilici's story mirrors the history of the decade-long violent conflict between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish state.

His birthplace was one of thousands of Kurdish villages razed to the ground during the Turkish state's fight against the PKK in the 1990s, which saw the government employ a scorched earth policy. Like thousands of others, his family

“His continued political activism and vocal opposition to the ongoing violent conflict in the region put him in the crosshairs of the Turkish state.

took refuge in Diyarbakır, where Bilici studied at Dicle University. As a politically active student, he faced repression and the wrath of nationalistic state policies from the start. After university, he started working as a mathematics teacher at a high school, a job he truly loved. However, his continued political activism and vocal opposition to the ongoing violent conflict in the region put him in the crosshairs of Turkish state. At one point, Bilici was thrown into prison for 16 days and tortured.

Upon being released from prison, Bilici was declared unfit for public office by a Turkish court and banned from teaching at state schools. He started teaching at a private dersane (tutoring school) where the ban did not apply. However, continuous political and financial pressure took its toll on Bilici and his family. The stress and precarious nature of his situation meant that Bilici had to take a step back from his activism.

In 2004, when pressure and state repression had eased due to wide-ranging reform process linked to Turkey's aspiration to join the EU, Bilici started to become active in the local [Human Rights Association](#) (İnsan Hakları Derneği - İHD) — an organisation founded in 1986 with the aim of promoting human rights

and democracy in Turkey. İHD is the largest grassroots human rights group in Turkey. It conducts research and educational events, monitors and documents human rights violations, including abuse that occurs in the context of armed conflict. Bilici has since taken up several different roles for the organisation: volunteer, Chairperson of the Diyarbakır branch between 2012 and 2018, and national Vice-Chairperson of the organisation between 2016 and 2018.

Pressure from the state, both in his educational and human rights work, is something that Bilici is as used to as the air he breathes. “The only thing that changes is that sometimes it is more severe than at other times,” he said, looking back at the years he has been active in Turkey's human rights struggle. His story reminds us that contrary to what is often assumed abroad, repressive politics in Turkey did not start with autocratic rule of the current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The peace process between the Turkish State and the PKK broke down in 2015 and violence and political repression have consequently returned to the predominately Kurdish southeast of the country. Turkish security forces, faced with entrenched PKK positions and mines, have used tanks and heavy artillery against the PKK in several cities. The violent clashes turned entire neighbourhoods to rubble and displaced more than half a million people across the region.

“People can lead a dignified life if they have the opportunity to claim their individual and collective rights. We are being persecuted for demanding our rights, but we continue to do so and to call for peace and democracy.

On November 28, 2015, prominent human rights lawyer Tahir Elçi was shot and killed while giving a press conference in the historical centre of Diyarbakır. The murder came as a shock to Bilici. “We had worked together every day,” Bilici said about Elçi. To this day, no progress has been made in the investigation into the murder of the human rights lawyer, and the Turkish government is accused of wilfully stalling it.

Repression has only increased following the coup attempt of July 15, 2016. Tens of thousands were dismissed

from their jobs via emergency decree, hundreds of media organisations and NGOs were simply shut down, many of which had promoted minority rights. State administrators were appointed to all Kurdish-run municipalities.

Like many of his colleagues in the human rights community, Bilici lost his teaching job due to an emergency decree, a job he had returned to in 2008. Many colleagues were imprisoned or left the country. This time, the government's actions spelled the definitive end of his career as an educator. In addition to losing his job, Bilici faced a criminal investigation for alleged membership of a terrorist organisation and spent a week in pre-trial detention. The investigation against him continues and he may face up to 15 years in prison if convicted. Pro-government media has led a smear campaign against him, casting him as an enemy of the Turkish State and people.

Unable to pursue his job as a teacher, Bilici has started to study law and is currently a trainee attorney at a law firm. It is unclear whether he will be able to get a license to practice as a lawyer. Bilici says that the Ministry of Interior Affairs has become highly politicised and he fears that he might be denied his license due to his human rights work.

Regardless of the pressure and the risk associated with his work, Bilici, like many other human rights defenders in Turkey, remains steadfast in his beliefs, “People can lead a dignified life if they have the opportunity to claim their individual and collective rights. We are being persecuted for demanding our rights, but we continue to do so and to call for peace and democracy,” said Bilici.

Story first published in February 2019

Yiğit Aksakoğlu



“ We speak about everything openly, so we cry together and we laugh together. Recently our daughter asked: ‘Why can’t daddy come home? He is not that far away.’

Yiğit Aksakoğlu, along with Can Atalay, are civil society leaders currently being prosecuted by Turkish authorities. Both are accused of organising the Gezi Park protests in 2013 in an attempt to overthrow the government. They, along with 14 others, are standing trial on trumped-up charges on June 24, 2019. Their freedom and their legitimate work, in fighting for and defending rights, are under threat.

“It happened on a Friday morning, these ‘operations,’ as they call them, always happen on Fridays apparently,” recalled Ünzile Aksakoğlu. Ünzile describes when the police came to her house to take her husband, **Yiğit Aksakoğlu**,

to the police station for a “secret investigation” last year (2018) on November 16. Since that day, Ünzile and her two daughters Deniz (7) and Leyla (3) have been separated from Yiğit. Since then, they have been wondering why they have to miss him at home.

Yiğit Aksakoğlu is amongst 13 civil society workers, rights defenders and academics who were called in for questioning in relation to the case of Osman Kavala, a prominent businessman and leading civil society figure in Turkey (Read more about the 13 civil society workers in Meltem Aslan’s story). Since November 2018, Kavala has been held in pre-trial detention in Silivri prison on charges of “attempting to overthrow the government.” Of the 13 taken in for questioning in relation to Kavala’s case, 12 were released after giving their testimony; Aksakoğlu was arrested and has remained separated from his family ever since. Ünzile received the news while waiting outside the courthouse in Istanbul. “We were trying to understand what was going on, but by now I know that I won’t understand,” she said.

Aksakoğlu’s interest in civil society work began in the 1990’s when he was active in the European Students’ Forum AEGEE. After studying abroad for a period, he returned to Turkey and helped set up Istanbul Bilgi University’s Civil Society

Research and Training Centre, where he worked as an instructor between 2003 and 2008. “Because it was the only place for such an education, Yiğit taught many people who are now working in civil society,” Ünzile said during a phone interview.

After working as a freelance consultant and completing his military service, Aksakoğlu started working for the [Bernard van Leer Foundation](#) in 2011. The NGO focuses on early childhood development. His latest project for the foundation, “[Istanbul95](#),” seeks to see the city through the eyes of children, and make urban life safer and more enjoyable for them. Thus far four district municipalities in Istanbul have implemented the project.

“ Because it was the only place for such an education, Yiğit taught many people who are now working in civil society.

Each week Ünzile goes to see her husband in the Silivri prison just outside Istanbul. On Wednesdays, she has exactly one hour, between 9am and 10am, to visit him there. Once a month Deniz and Leyla join her to see their father. There are often long lines leading to long waiting times for visitors of the prison; in order to get there on time the family must leave around 6 o’clock in the morning or even earlier, in order to spend one hour with Aksakoğlu.

It has been difficult for the family to adjust to this situation. Ünzile recalled that she was unable to even leave the house in the two weeks following her husband’s arrest. Yiğit, too, struggled, she said, “At first Yiğit told me that he did not want to know how the girls are feeling. It upset him too much.” But soon afterwards, they began to talk about everything openly. The family has the right for a 10-minute phone conversation. This precious window of time is now exclusively reserved for Deniz and Leyla. The two are rushed out of school every Thursday, so they do not to miss the brief opportunity to speak with their father.

For more than four months, Yiğit has been in isolation, staying in a 13m2 prison cell. He spends most of his time reading novels, poetry, and non-fiction — much of it work-related. Since he is only allowed 15 publications at a time, including newspapers and magazines, and since many people send him books in addition to the ones his wife brings him, he must read fast. “He has a morning

book and an evening book and he prefers to read the books while walking. In between he works, takes notes on his case,” Ünzile described.

Her husband tells her to be positive and not to worry, to look after herself and their girls. But that is not always easy. It helps Ünzile to focus on daily activities such as work at family business and her children. “We speak about everything openly, so we cry together and we laugh together. Recently Deniz asked: ‘Why can’t daddy come home? He is not that far away.’ Then I tell her that he is indeed not that far but that they want to keep him there,” she said.

Early March, an Istanbul judge accepted the indictment in the Gezi Park case. In the 657-page document, Aksakoğlu and Kavala, along with 14 others, are accused of organising the Gezi Park protests in 2013 in an attempt to overthrow the government. Various human rights organisations have [called on Turkish authorities](#) to drop the “baseless” charges and release both men. The first hearing of the case will take place June 24-25. Ünzile described Yiğit’s reaction when he saw the indictment, reacting with the same incredulity as many fellow human rights defenders in Turkey. Aksakoğlu asked, “Is this what they are keeping me for?”

The support Ünzile and her daughters are receiving from friends and colleagues of Yiğit — often people she had never met before — is massive and heart-warming. They have set up a website, [www.yigitaksakoglu.com](#), containing information about Yiğit and the case, and campaigning for his release. They also help with researching evidence against the charges and spend time with Deniz and Leyla. “I’m probably going to miss this when Yiğit is free,” she laughed.

Aksakoğlu, Kavala and the others will stand trial on June 24. Ünzile is convinced that the judge will not keep her husband in prison. “We know that this time will pass, but we hope that it will not last much longer because it damages us and it is a grave injustice,” she said. Yet there is also a creeping doubt in her head, “I’m anxiously asking myself: how can you prove something so absurd?”

“ We know that this time will pass, but we hope that it will not last much longer because it damages us and it is a grave injustice.

Story first published in March 2019

Can Atalay



“It’s my honourable responsibility to defend myself against these infamous accusations.”

Can Atalay, along with Yiğit Aksakoğlu, are civil society leaders currently being prosecuted by Turkish authorities. Both are accused of organising the Gezi Park protests in 2013 in an attempt to overthrow the government. They, along with 14 others, are standing trial on trumped-up charges on June 24, 2019. Their freedom and their legitimate work, in fighting for and defending rights, are under threat.

“These families will enter this courthouse! These families will enter this courthouse!” Can Atalay shouted at the top of his lungs, crushed between a metal fence and dozens of policemen who block the entry to the wedding salon-turned-tribunal. It’s a sunny day in April 2015 in the Aegean town of Akhisar. The families Atalay is

referring to are the families of the 301 miners who were killed in the Soma mine disaster a year earlier.

Thanks to Atalay’s intervention, the families are allowed to attend the trial. Together with the currently imprisoned lawyer Selçuk Kozağaçlı, head of the lawyer’s union Progressive Lawyers Association (Çağdas Hukukçular Derneği-ÇHD), Atalay is the driving force behind the families’ quest for justice. The above scene aptly illustrates the tireless energy and involvement that characterise Atalay, who divides most of his time between courthouses and street protests. And if necessary, he takes the protest to the courthouse themselves, like on that April day in Akhisar.

Atalay also serves as a board member of the Social Justice Foundation ([Sosyal Haklar Derneği](#)). In Soma, the organisation helps victims’ families to pursue justice by bringing them together and providing support in the face of intimidation by the Turkish state and the responsible mining company, Soma Holding. In Aladağ, a small town near Adana, a similar process took place. After 11 children died in November 2016, when a girl’s dormitory caught fire due to negligence, the Foundation set up a branch in the town. Atalay represented the

families of the victims in court and helped to bring them together by organising social activities in the Foundation’s centre.

Atalay grew up in a politically active family. After finishing his law degree in 2003, he began working as lawyer with a focus on freedom of expression and social rights. In 2007, he began working with Union of the Chamber of Architects (Türk Mühendis ve Mimar Odaları Birliği [TMMOB](#)) — an umbrella organization which advises on urban development proposals. There, he focused increasingly on cases concerning numerous urban renewal projects in Istanbul. The projects were an important cornerstone of the Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) economic policy. Comprised of massive demolitions and state-led gentrification, they forced many people out of their homes and led to the destruction of countless neighbourhoods. Atalay worked on cases like the Chamber’s appeal against the third bridge across the Bosphorus, the recently opened Istanbul Airport and other contentious urban renewal projects in historic areas such as Sulukule, Tarlabaşı and Fener/Balat.

“Many people with different concerns came together [during the protests]. We tried to voice their concerns.”

In 2012 Atalay, TMMOB and other unions took on the case of the transformation plans of Taksim Square. They argued that the plans were illegal due to the lack of transparency in the top-down imposed decision-making process. The plans included a tunnel beneath the square and the construction of an Ottoman-style shopping centre in Gezi Park — one of the last remaining green spaces in the centre of the city. The Gezi Park protests started in May 2013 over the same matter, when activists tried to block the cutting of trees in the park. The protest evolved into the biggest anti-government protests in Turkey’s recent history, not the least because of the violent police crackdown ordered by the government. During the protests Atalay, together with his TMMOB-colleagues, architect Mücella Yapıcı and urban planner Tayfun Kahraman, assumed the role of spokespersons for Taksim Solidarity ([Taksim Dayanışması](#)) — a platform they had founded a year earlier. In the aftermath of the protests, TMMOB was stripped of its constitutional right of approval for urban development projects. This was widely perceived as a retaliatory act by the government

in response to the role TMMOB played in the protests.

“Many people with different concerns came together [during the protests]. We tried to voice their concerns as well as we could,” Atalay said. On several occasions, due to his prominence during the Gezi Park protests, Atalay was thrown into police custody for short periods. In the recently opened Gezi Park case, the state prosecution threatens to imprison him up for much longer. Along with 15 others, amongst them his TMMOB-colleagues Mücella Yapıcı and Tayfun Kahraman, he is accused of financing and organising the protests in an attempt to overthrow the government. They face a possible life sentence without parole. Of the sixteen, philanthropist Osman Kavala and Yiğit Aksakoğlu, an NGO-worker for the Bernard van Leer Foundation, are amongst those awaiting the case in pre-trial detention.

Despite the looming life sentences, Atalay, his TMMOB-colleagues Mücella Yapıcı and Tayfun Kahraman and their fellow human rights defenders remain defiant. Following the March 5 publication of the 657-page indictment, Yapıcı tweeted a picture of herself being hugged by Atalay, both laughing out loud, “[While reading our indictment](#),” the caption read.

On June 24 and 25, Atalay and the others will stand trial in Istanbul. This time the human rights lawyer, who has dedicated his career to defending the rights of others, will have to defend himself. “It’s my honourable responsibility to defend myself against these infamous accusations,” Atalay told the [German/Turkish web portal taz.gazete](#) on February 27 this year.

Story first published in March 2019

Pelin Ünker



Pelin Ünker, an award winning journalist who has dedicated her work to contributing to the public interest, has been legally targeted for her coverage of tax evasion schemes of Turkey's political and business elite. Despite multiple cases that have been lodged against her, she remains dedicated to her work.

"Yes, we are not scared, as journalists. But it doesn't mean we are so brave. How a doctor is supposed to look after a patient, journalists are obliged to look out for public interest," [Pelin Ünker tweeted](#) in January 2019, shortly after being convicted for "defamation and insult" and "slandering a public official." A criminal court in Istanbul convicted her to one year, one month and fifteen days of imprisonment, along with a fine of 8,869 Turkish liras (around \$1600). She has appealed the conviction and is

"Especially for imperfect democracies like Turkey, solidarity from abroad can serve as a pressure on the government."

awaiting the court's decision.

Ünker was convicted for reporting on tax evasion schemes of former Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım's family members. Through the [Paradise Papers](#) Ünker disclosed offshore companies in Malta, belonging to two sons of Yıldırım. These companies were used to evade taxes through Malta's significantly lower corporate tax rate. At the same time, companies owned by the family won a \$7 million tender from the Turkish government. While the Yıldırım family does not dispute the facts in Ünker's articles, they still successfully sued her for writing them. This makes her the only journalist worldwide convicted for reporting on the Paradise Papers.

In April of the same year, Ünker once again stood trial. This time the Albayrak family sought her persecution for similar charges. Ünker had reported on the use of tax havens by Berat Albayrak, Turkey's current Minister of Finance and son-in-law of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and other family members and business associates. Ultimately, the judge was forced to drop the case due to the statute of limitations.

"The current people in power don't want to see any journalism on them, unless it praises them."

The cases against Ünker exemplify the dangerous state of journalism in Turkey, where politically connected and regime friendly business conglomerates are purchasing media outlets. Consequently, the government is seizing increasing control of the media, both directly and indirectly. In Turkey, there is an environment where certain topics can no longer freely be reported on and others can only be covered within a framework dictated by the government. The mounting economic pressure on Turkey's population has become the latest taboo topic added to the list. "The current people in power don't want to see any journalism on them, unless it praises them," Ünker said.

Since the coup attempt in 2016, the repressive systems, already in place, have gotten worse. Under the State of Emergency, the government ruled by decree, which left many journalists unemployed or thrown in prison, and saw countless media channels closed down or brought under government control. In 2018, Reporters Without Borders' [World Press Freedom Index](#) placed Turkey in 157th place, between Rwanda and Kazakhstan.

Ünker stressed the importance of international solidarity, "It's the most important thing for a journalist in such a situation." She has received support from international groups, but also from politicians like EU member of parliament David Casa, who asked the European Commission to urge Turkish authorities to drop charges. "Especially for imperfect democracies like Turkey, solidarity from abroad can serve as a pressure on the government," she said.

The cases targeting countless journalists in Turkey not only serve as a way to pressure and intimidate them, but also practically impede their work by taking up a lot of their time. Journalists in the country sometimes joke that they see each other more often in the corridors of courthouses than reporting in the field. Recently, six of Ünker's colleagues from the newspaper Cumhuriyet have been added to the long list of journalists in prison, sentenced on charges of terrorism. Ünker said their sentence is a farce, "Everybody knows that they are not guilty. The judges know, and the politicians know." Yet these journalists are still behind bars.

Ünker may still have her freedom, but she has lost her

job. The newspaper she was working for when reporting on the Paradise Papers, Cumhuriyet, has gone through significant management changes. It has made ideological shifts towards a direction Ünker and others do not agree with. She, along with several colleagues, have since decided to leave the paper. She now works as a freelancer, mainly for the Turkish-language service of Deutsche Welle. In 2018, the German broadcaster established an office in Istanbul as a sign of support for journalism and potential outlet for journalists who have seen numerous other outlets closed or taken over.

Because of her reporting on tax evasion schemes of Turkey's powerful, it is no longer possible for Ünker to work in Turkish mainstream media. The only option for her and many of her colleagues is precarious work as a freelancer, writing for Turkey's few remaining critical outlets or international media based in the country. Despite this, Ünker wants to do her job well and continue to look out for the public interest. She will not be corrupted by money nor stifled from writing the truth. "Maybe I can be sent behind bars for a while, but it is more important for me that my beliefs are not imprisoned," she explained.

Story first published in April 2019



“ I didn’t agree with the judge’s decision, so I appealed. I wouldn’t feel at peace with myself if I wouldn’t have appealed.”

Füsun Üstel, respected academic in history, nationalism and issues of identity, is the first of the Academics for Peace to be imprisoned for signing the “We will not be party to this crime!” petition. This ruling will likely influence the pending cases of other Academics for Peace. Despite the threat of imprisonment, Üstel stood up for her belief that condemning human rights violations or calling for peace is not a crime.

On 7 May, dozens of people gathered in front of the Çağlayan courthouse in Istanbul. Amongst them were academics, civil society leaders, but also Members of Parliament (MPs) and university students. They came together to

bid farewell to political scientist **Füsun Üstel**. “Academics who want peace don’t belong in prison, but at university!” read a banner held by Üstel’s supporters when [she took the microphone](#): “We are not where the words fail, we are at the beginning. We will continue to make our voices heard. As a citizen and as an individual, we will make our demand for a life in peace heard.”

The next day, Üstel submitted herself to the Women’s Closed Prison in the city of Eskişehir. A retired professor from Istanbul’s prestigious Galatasaray University, Üstel is one of over 2000 academics who in early 2016 signed a [peace petition](#) titled “We will not be a party to this crime!” (Bu suça ortak olmayacağız!). The signatories denounced the Turkish state’s violation of fundamental rights and of humanitarian law in the predominantly Kurdish Southeast region during the then ongoing violent conflict between Turkish state forces and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). The petition urged the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government to put an end to the violence. The military crackdown forced tens of thousands of people to leave their homes and round-the-clock curfews in many cities made daily life impossible.

The group of signatories, who came together under the umbrella organisation Academics for Peace (Barış İçin Akademisyenler), immediately faced harsh backlash. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan targeted the academics in public speeches, accusing them of treason and of undermining the country’s security. In the aftermath of the coup attempt in the summer of 2016, many petition signatories were purged from their universities via emergency decree, some of them faced threats by nationalist students, and many left the country.

Turkish prosecutors opened investigations into the academics, who were then indicted for “terrorist propaganda.” Many of them were handed suspended prison sentences, meaning that in exchange for accepting guilt, defendants could avoid imprisonment unless they would be convicted again within a period of five years. Üstel was convicted to 15 months in prison, but refused the suspended prison sentence; she was unwilling to admit that signing the petition was a crime and instead appealed the decision. The sentence was eventually upheld by a higher court.

The decision to reject the suspended sentence and fight the conviction through appeal cost Üstel her freedom, but it was not a difficult decision for her. “I didn’t agree with the judge’s decision, so I appealed. I wouldn’t feel at peace with myself if I wouldn’t have appealed,” she said in an interview in late March. For Üstel, her age and retirement from teaching after the coup attempt influenced her decision to appeal. “It must be a generational thing. My generation has experienced the 1980s,” she said, referring to the 12 September 1980 military coup and subsequent widespread repression. At the same time, Üstel understands why many younger colleagues decided not to appeal. “They have families and wouldn’t be able to work in public service again. I always tell them, ‘don’t appeal, these days will pass.’ But for me it was a matter of principle,” she said.

“ We are not where the words fail, we are at the beginning. We will continue to make our voices heard. As a citizen and as an individual, we will make our demand for a life in peace heard.”

Üstel is the first of the signatories to serve time in prison, resulting in significant attention. “It brings along a big

responsibility,” she said. “Especially for hundreds of other colleagues currently being persecuted.” Üstel might be the first signatory to be imprisoned, but she probably will not be the last. Recently, judges have begun [handing down sentences over 24 months](#), rendering them ineligible for suspended prison sentences. This makes prison time for Üstel’s colleagues more likely. Her friend and co-signatory Tuna Altınel was arrested on 11 March. An Associate Professor in Mathematics, who lives and works in France, was arrested in the city of Balıkesir when retrieving information about restrictions on his passport. Like the others, Altınel is accused of “making propaganda for a terrorist organization.”

In addition to the gathering in front of the Çağlayan courthouse, Üstel’s looming imprisonment has led to an outpouring of solidarity. A week ago, she gave her final class called “In Search of the Convicted Citizen” (Mahkûm Vatandaşın Peşinde), hosted by the Turkish Medical Association (Türk Tabipleri Birliği). The title was chosen in reference to her landmark book “In Search of the Acceptable Citizen” (Makbul Vatandaşın Peşinde) and was widely attended by students, friends, several opposition MPs and journalists. At the end of the lecture, Üstel received a standing ovation. Üstel finds the support of her colleagues heartwarming. When [she submitted herself to prison](#), other signatories from local universities were present to show their support.

Besides Üstel’s academic work, focusing on history, nationalism and issues of identity, she also has a long history of civil society work. Most recently, she served as a board member of the History Foundation ([Tarih Vakfı](#)), which aims to make historical knowledge more accessible to the public. When the university purges took place following the coup attempt, Üstel no longer saw a place for her at a university and decided to retire from academia. She instead wants to focus on a book she is working on.

To echo Üstel’s words in front of the courthouse “We are the beginning,” colleagues started reading her book “In Search of the Acceptable Citizen” on camera. On the website of the Academics for Peace, colleagues regularly upload videos of themselves reading the book. By doing so, they show that even though Üstel is imprisoned, her ideas and work are still being heard and disseminated.

Story first published in May 2019

Gökalp Şeyhmus



“ Little did Gökalp know that a statement, which opposed armed violence, would throw his life into chaos and leave him and his family’s future uncertain.

Şeyhmus Gökalp is a doctor who has dedicated much of his career to social causes. He has been legally targeted for a statement opposing the violence of the Turkish army, made by his organisation, the Turkish Medical Association.

“May I kindly ask you to avoid overly dishevelled my house?” Şeyhmus Gökalp asked the anti-terrorism police as they raided his house on the morning of January 30, 2018. Gökalp had just made tea for his wife and daughters when the police barged in.

Six days earlier Gökalp’s organisation, the [Turkish Medical Association](#) (Türk Tabipler Birliği, TTB), released a [press statement opposing the launch of the Turkish army’s military offensive in the Syrian city of](#)

[Afrin](#). “War is a human-made public health problem with effects of destroying nature and humankind,” read the statement of the Ankara-based organisation.

Little did Gökalp know that a statement, which opposed armed violence, would throw his life into chaos and leave him and his family’s future uncertain. Gökalp, who served as a council member of the TTB between 2014 and 2018, did not give the statement much thought when his organisation issued it. Throughout his career, he saw it as a medical professional’s duty to inform the public of the dangers of war. It was a view he shared with the Association, “We have always taken a stance against war, to benefit the public and society,” he said.

Growing up in a Kurdish family of seven in Nusaybin, a town on the border with Syria, Gökalp knew all too well the dangers of war. In his region, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the Turkish army have been fighting a war for decades. The war peaked in the 1990s, and since the 2015 collapse of the peace process, violence has returned, threatening the lives of all those in the region.

In the 1990s, his family moved to the eastern town of Iz to flee the violence. Gökalp returned as a young adult, after gaining a place in the Medical Faculty of Euphrates University in Elazığ. During his studies, he spent time in prison for participating in anti-war protests. His story echoes the story of Raci Bilici, a human rights defender who also spent a considerable time of his student years behind bars.

Upon graduation, Gökalp started working in a locally-supported project in Diyarbakır’s Bağlar district, where he provided free medical care to lower-income families. Throughout his career, Gökalp has taken on socially oriented medical roles. In the last few years, he worked with people who fled the war in Syria and people who suffered from fighting in Diyarbakır. The historic city centre of Diyarbakır, where Gökalp used to work, became a war zone in 2015 when the peace process between the PKK and the Turkish state fell apart. “When I was going to work in the morning, I heard the sounds of shooting. The fighting was ongoing while I was giving people medication and treatment,” Gökalp said.

“ We have always taken a stance against war, to benefit the public and society.

Like [Academics for Peace](#) (Read the case of [Füsün Üstel](#)), these doctors have been publicly targeted by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. They have been accused of treason and identified as “servants of imperialism.” The hostile atmosphere has led to threats and intimidation of all the doctors involved in the Association. On top of that, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Health have launched an investigation into the doctors as part of a wider crackdown, which targets people that have been criticising the Turkish army’s operations in Afrin. Over 300 people, amongst them prominent journalist and human rights defender [Nurcan Baysal](#), have been detained for social media posts, amongst other statements.

Gökalp quickly learned that the TTB statement would not only cost him his freedom, but his job as well. As he was taken into the Diyarbakır police station, he was told that he had been suspended from his job at the Diyarbakır Central bank, where he served as the resident doctor for the last eight years. From the police station, Gökalp and his colleagues were brought to the anti-terrorism unit in Ankara, where they spent several days in custody.

In May 2019, more than a year later, the signatories faced a judge who handed down [prison sentences to all eleven doctors](#). They were convicted for “provoking animosity and hatred” and for “terrorist propaganda.” Ten of them, including Gökalp, were sentenced to 20 months in prison. Hande Arpat was the only doctor to receive a higher sentence: 3 years, 3 months and 3 days. The doctors appealed the ruling and are currently awaiting the decision. It is not yet clear when the appeal hearing will take place.

The statement opposing violence, and its aftermath, have thrown Gökalp and his family into limbo. He is currently out of a job and the result of the court case could land him in prison anytime. The case put considerable strain on his life, he said, “I don’t say that to get pity for myself, but it’s just the reality we have to deal with in this country.” The arbitrary nature of the Turkish judicial system makes things even more uncertain and difficult. After he was released from pre-trial detention, [Yiğit Aksakoğlu](#), portrayed earlier in this series, succinctly summarised the situation of Turkey’s justice system, “One: there is no justice, two: there is no system.”

Story first published in June 2019

Nadire Mater



Nadire Mater is a journalist who has been judicially targeted for her solidarity to the pro-Kurdish newspaper *Özgür Gündem*.

Nadire Mater is 70 years old, but time has not taken a toll on her fighting spirit. This became immediately apparent when we sat down at the *Bianet* office in central Istanbul. Twenty years ago, Mater was one of the founders of *Bianet*—a multilingual online media platform that focuses on a wide range of human rights issues. “From an early age I was interested in rights issues, not only my own rights but also the rights of others,” she recalled. She thought that journalism would allow her to stay close to this interest.

Yet, Mater was not always a journalist. She started her working life as a social worker, but the 1980 coup put an end to her career. After the coup, she took up journalism. “It wasn’t my dream job or anything, but I found a job in journalism, so I became a journalist,” she explained. In the years after the coup, she worked for several media outlets, including the renowned magazine *Nokta*, the news agency

“ They told me that I made everything up. But how could I have done that? I’m not Tolstoy, am I?

Interpress Service (IPS), and *Sokak* magazine, which she founded together with friends. She also worked as the Turkey representative of Reporters Without Borders.

Working at *Bianet* allowed Mater to further develop her interest in human rights. When creating the media platform, a group of journalists and academics tried to find out whether a different approach to media is possible. “The goal was to create space in the media for those who have no voice,” she explained. Looking back, Mater concludes that they managed to achieve this goal. “We proved that a different approach to communication in media is indeed possible,” she said. *Bianet* not only produces content, but it is also involved in educational projects, teaching aspiring journalists how to report news in a responsible way. “The help of academics was very important in this regard. They did important theoretical groundwork,” Mater said. On the bookshelf behind her, I saw dozens of booklets on a variety of subjects: from how to report on gender-based topics to reporting focused on children, but also a handbook on media ethics. The next generation was working diligently in the newsroom.

In addition to her work at the office, Mater, like many of her colleagues, spends quite some time in and around courthouses to support

prosecuted colleagues and friends. Mater has participated in countless solidarity demonstrations throughout her career, most prominently the Saturday Mothers (*Cumartesi Anneleri/İnsanları*) — a group of women whose loved ones forcibly disappeared during the 90s. In a weekly sit-in, now supported by a bigger group, they demand that the people responsible for the disappearances are punished. Even though local authorities banned these peaceful sit-ins in August 2018, they continue their protest every Saturday in Istanbul. At the time of this interview, the group has completed its 748th meeting. “The people who are responsible are still not convicted for their crimes, but at least we don’t lose people the same way anymore,” Mater said.

In the 90s, Mater participated in a solidarity campaign with the Kurdish newspaper *Özgür Ülke* when its office was bombed in 1994. “Us simply being there was so important for our colleagues, because Kurdish journalists have generally been left alone. If this wouldn’t have been the case, they wouldn’t have faced so many problems,” Mater explained. When she was asked to participate in a solidarity campaign in 2016 with the pro-Kurdish paper *Özgür Gündem*, it was only natural to join. “I believe it is something all journalists should do,” she added. Together with other prominent journalists and authors, she supported the paper while it was under pressure by acting as a guest editor-in-chief for one day. After the coup attempt of 2016, the paper was closed by an executive decree and many editors were arrested. Unlike in 1993, the guest editors-in-chief, including Mater, were put on trial for supporting the newspaper.

Those who were prosecuted for their contribution to the solidarity campaign are now part of the Editor-in-Chief on Watch Campaign trials (*Özgür Gündem Dayanışma Davaları*). Mater criticised the arbitrariness of Turkey’s broken justice system. “The ones who are standing trial don’t know what they are persecuted for. They are simply not told!” She reminded us that the repression of *Özgür Gündem* is part of a wider, deeply rooted crackdown on critical media in Turkey, which further intensified after the coup attempt of July 2016. Currently, dozens of journalists are imprisoned for charges related to degrading the State and many media outlets have been shut down.

“ The goal was to create space in the media for those who have no voice.

Mater faced a judge herself in November 2016 for the same *Özgür Gündem* solidarity campaign. During her defence, she stressed the importance of a plurality of

voices in the media. She received a 15-month deferred prison sentence. Similarly, judges handed down prison terms to several other guest editors for “making propaganda for a terrorist organisation,” and many of the sentences were deferred. But some human rights defenders, such as journalists [Murat Çelikkan](#) and [Ayşe Düzkan](#) respectively spent 2 and 4,5 months of their 18 months sentences in prison. Some of the hearings are still ongoing. However, most recently, Reporters Without Borders Turkey representative Erol Önderoğlu, forensic doctor [Şebnem Korur Fincancı](#) and writer Ahmet Nesin were the first from the solidarity campaign to be acquitted after a 3-year trial.

2016 was not the first time Mater was taken to court by the Turkish state. In 1999, she published “Mehmet’s Book” (*Mehmedin Kitabı*) — a book that tells the stories of 42 soldiers who fought for the Turkish army in the predominantly Kurdish southeast during the violent conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). According to Mater, the case clearly shows why journalists in Turkey are put on trial. “I wasn’t the subject [of the persecution], but the book was. The people talking in the book were the young guys who did their compulsory military service in a warzone. It was their words that were persecuted.” After the fourth print, the book was banned and a confiscation order was issued. In 2001, Mater was acquitted for insulting the military. “They told me that I made everything up. But how could I have done that? I’m not Tolstoy, am I?” she asked.

Unlike in previous campaigns, this time Mater found herself on the receiving end of solidarity. She recalled that colleagues from many countries flew in for a day to attend her trial and report on it in their home countries. It is something that can often be seen in the current oppression in Turkey: People who dedicate their lives to support the struggles of others are not left alone when they are in trouble. Mater observed that the solidarity is especially strong amongst journalists. The fact that colleagues attend each other’s trials is testimony to this solidarity, she argued. Mater is upset with the state her country finds itself in, but it does not inhibit her unbridled positivism. She even takes her own trial with a smile. “We didn’t receive much attention with our initial solidarity campaign. After the court cases, we made it to the news as ‘terrorist journalists.’ That’s when our story spread. We protested in front of the courthouse and journalists, including Kurdish journalists, stood with us in solidarity,” she concluded.

Story first published in July 2019

Cavidan Soykan



Cavidan Soykan is an academic who has dedicated much of her career to refugee rights. She is one of the Academics for Peace being judicially targeted for signing the “We will not be party to this crime!” petition, which opposed the military violence perpetrated by the Turkish state in the pre-dominantly Kurdish southeast region.

It came as no surprise to Cavidan Soykan when she read a news report on Turkish authorities [deporting refugees back to Syria](#). She knew that the unlawful deportations reported on earlier this summer were not the first; “It happened before and it will happen again,” she said. Ankara has long denied allegations by international human rights organisations that

“The initial self-censorship and fear in response to the crackdown against refugee rights defenders.

Syrian refugees are being unlawfully forced to return to a country that is far from safe.

Instead, the Turkish government claims that refugees are only being sent back to cities where they were first registered when they came to Turkey. This is due in part to the significant portion who left their city of registration and migrated to Istanbul for better job prospects. Those who are being sent back to Syria, the government argues, are being sent back on a voluntary basis.

Soykan agrees with many critics that the lack of a coherent integration policy, combined with the dire economic downturn in Turkey, has fuelled an atmosphere of tension and xenophobia. Turkey currently shelters more than [3.6 million Syrian refugees](#), in addition to those who fled from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and other countries. This makes Turkey the [country hosting the largest number of refugees worldwide](#)—a fact for which Ankara has been widely applauded. However, legislative restrictions have made it difficult for many Syrians to make a living in Turkey.

“Soykan experienced the resulting crackdown on human rights defenders first-hand when she signed a petition... and was later sacked from her university for the petition.

While Turkey is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the [geographical reservation](#) on the definition of a refugee that Ankara stipulated when signing the Convention allows it to register Syrians under a temporary protection status rather than as refugees with full rights. “You cannot expect people to be able to settle down and lead a normal life without giving them a secure legal status,” explained Soykan. She continued, “Just following an open door policy doesn’t mean you are protecting refugee rights.”

Soykan began studying Turkey’s asylum policy before the conflict in Syria forced many of them to flee their country. She wrote her doctoral thesis at the University of Essex between 2008 and 2013, focusing mainly on Iranian, Iraqi, Afghan and Somali migrants and refugees. After obtaining her PhD, she returned to Turkey and began teaching human rights at Ankara University’s Faculty of Political Science. By then, many people had already fled war-torn Syria—a country that shares a 900 km border with Turkey. The academic remembers that she, many of her colleagues, and other human rights activists initially lauded their government’s efforts to shelter Syrians seeking safety from the war. She explained further, “But we could also see other motives related to Turkey’s foreign policy. Also, the Turkish government thought the war would end and the ‘guests’ would return, but that’s not what happened.”

From the beginning of the conflict to now, the situation for Syrians in Turkey has changed dramatically. “In the beginning, Syrians were happy that they could come to Turkey, that the border was open and that they could find safety,” Soykan explained. “But in 2015 they [the Syrians] started to realise that the war was not going to end anytime soon and that they needed a more secure legal status in Turkey.” She added that until 2015, the Turkish government and media had mainly been referring to Syrians as “guests” and “Muslim brothers and sisters” instead of “refugees” who would be “sent home,” a discourse that became more prevalent after the [EU-Turkey deal](#).

Trapped in Turkey without full refugee status and the rights that accompany the status, the situation of Syrians quickly began to deteriorate. When describing the situation, Soykan said, “They did not have the legal right to work until 2016. So people worked illegally in the informal economy and were exploited.” The high unemployment rate among the Turkish population, coupled with incoherent refugee policies and a lack of transparency by the government on this issue, led to growing discontent amongst the population. All over Turkish social media, rumours spread about preferential treatment of Syrians, including that they receive priority access to health care and education, as well as claims that Syrian businesses are exempt from taxation.

A key turning point came in March 2016, when the European Union (EU) and Turkey signed a highly controversial deal. In the deal, Turkey agreed to take back the migrants who travel through Turkey to Greek islands. For each migrant Turkey took back, the EU would take in and settle a Syrian refugee. Lastly, the EU also promised €6 billion in assistance funds for the Syrians in Turkey. Soykan summarised the situation by saying, “Turkey wanted the money and the EU wanted Turkey to stop migration to Europe, so the government became the gatekeeper that kept Syrians in Turkey.”

“Despite the judicial pressure she is currently facing, and her health issues, she hopes she will soon recover and continue her human rights work in civil society once again.

“The refugee deal made people understand that Syrians would not go anywhere anytime soon,” Soykan continued to explain, “Racist attacks on Syrians increased.” In a move sharply criticised by human rights organisations, the Turkish government closed the border with Syria by building a wall, in effect preventing Syrians fleeing the war from coming to Turkey. At the same time, regulations for Syrians already in the country tightened significantly. Istanbul and nine provinces on or near the border [stopped registering Syrians in 2017 and 2018](#). Syrians who were already registered in a certain district would now have to apply for official travel permits in order to leave that district, turning even small family visits and business trips into a bureaucratic nightmare.

Throughout this period, Turkey was itself going through intense political turmoil. Violent clashes in the predominantly Kurdish southeast, terror attacks in several big cities, and a coup attempt in the summer of 2016 coincided with mounting pressure on civic space. Soykan experienced the resulting crackdown on human rights defenders first-hand when she signed a petition criticising the state's excessive military operations in Kurdish cities, and was later sacked from her university for the petition — similar to other [Academics for Peace](#) such as [Fusun Üstel](#). In early 2017, in the wake of the coup attempt, Soykan, along with half of the Political Science Department's staff, lost their jobs in purges of the public sector and academia authorised by emergency decrees. [The Human Rights Centre](#) at Ankara University, where she taught, was also shut down by the University's administration.

It was in this environment that people working on refugees' rights began to experience growing restrictions in their work. The detention of [Taner Kılıç](#), honorary president of Amnesty International Turkey, had a particularly chilling effect. For Soykan and her colleagues, Kılıç's arrest had a big impact because he is one of the most prominent figures in defending refugee rights and a renowned legal expert in the field. "We realised that if something like this can happen to Taner, anything can happen to us who work for refugee rights as well," she explained.

Soykan has been very active in civil society organisations throughout her career. In 2009, she started volunteering at the Association for Solidarity with Refugees (Mülteci-Der) in her hometown Izmir — a city on the Aegean coast that has hosted thousands of migrants and refugees. Upon her return from the UK, she became a board member and vice-president of Mülteci-Der — a position she held between 2014 and 2018.

In this repressive climate, many refugee rights organisations quit or scaled down their campaigns and collaborations. "We moved press conferences to hotels where we would not attract big crowds," she recalled. After Kılıç (a founding member of Mülteci-Der) was arrested, Soykan said she had to tone down her criticism of the government in order not to endanger the work of the NGO. Soykan also recalled that Ankara University's Human Rights Centre stopped being invited to discussions on the government's draft asylum bill after the Centre's board published a critical comment about the legislative text on its website.

The initial self-censorship and fear in response to the crackdown against refugee rights defenders is slowly fading away, replaced instead by growing indignation with the government's practices, Soykan observed. Following the latest deportations of Syrians, citizens and civil society organisations took to the streets in protest. Soykan believes these demonstrations forced the government to pay heed to this part of public opinion. Nevertheless, Soykan's dismissal and prosecution for signing a peace petition have stopped her from continuing her academic career and banned her from working in the public sector. A travel ban also prevents her from traveling abroad. Despite [the recent ruling](#) by the Constitutional Court stating convictions for signing a petition were unlawful, her court case is ongoing. But first and foremost, since her dismissal Soykan has been battling serious health issues that have rendered her largely immobile. Despite the judicial pressure she is currently facing, and her health issues, she hopes she will soon recover and continue her human rights work in civil society once again.

Story first published in August 2019

Nejat Taştan



“ So many people are putting in so much effort to build a better future, we must be able to change something, right? It only fuels my motivation.”

Nejat Taştan has been defending human rights in Turkey for over thirty years. Currently focusing on upholding the rights of vulnerable groups, he is one of the Istanbul 10 — a group of human rights defenders taken into custody during a digital security training in 2017. The group is being prosecuted under Turkish Anti-terrorism legislation.

spoke about the baseless terrorism charges for which he and his colleagues will stand trial on 27 November 2019. They face up to fifteen years in prison if they are found guilty of “aiding an armed terrorist organisation.”

Nejat Taştan's story dates back to 5 July 2017 when police raided a hotel on the island of Büyükada, near Istanbul, where Taştan and nine other human rights defenders were attending a digital security workshop. After being taken into custody, government-controlled media alleged that the participants were planning a repeat of the 2016 coup attempt, and that they were operating as agents for foreign powers. “We had become used to being painted as terrorist supporters, but it was a first for civil society members to be accused of being operatives of a foreign government,” Taştan said.

Following the panel discussion Taştan noted that he is tired of talking about his case. Taştan, along with lawyer Şeyhmus Özbekli, were released on bail as part of the group that has become internationally known as the ‘Istanbul 10’. As one of only two who were released, Taştan gave many interviews in an attempt to raise awareness for his colleagues who

“I will now tell you how I became a ‘terrorist,’” [Nejat Taştan](#) joked during a panel discussion on the [impact of counter-terrorism measures on human rights](#) which took place September 2019 in The Hague. During the panel, Taştan

remained behind bars. A frequently-used quote at the time sums up this drive: “Why am I free while they aren’t?” After mounting international pressure, the others were eventually released, having spent an additional 113 days in jail; however, the case against them remains open.

“ It all goes in waves. There were times when it seemed to get better, but now I understand that we have actually not made much progress.

As we continued our conversation in front of St. James’ Church, Taştan’s eyes lit up the moment the conversation moved beyond his trial and he started talking about his work. He has been active in the human rights community for over thirty years and is full of stories gathered throughout the decades. Taştan has worked for a wide range of organisations and has run projects focusing on a variety of rights issues. He was among the founding members of the Human Rights Foundation of (Turkey Türkiye İnsan Hakları Vakfı – [TİHV](#)) (whose current Chair, [Şebnem Korur Fincancı](#), was featured in this series previously) and has held several roles in the Human Rights Association (İnsan Hakları Derneği – [İHD](#)). Most recently, Taştan founded the Association for Monitoring Equal Rights (Eşit Haklar İçin İzleme Derneği – [ESHİD](#)), and currently works as the Coordinator of the organisation.

His experience defending human rights over the years has taught him many things along the way. “When I started in the 1980s, I believed rights had to be protected, of course, but I did not know how to systematically address these issues. One of the most important things I learned is not to be subjective,” he said. Taştan explained that coming from a Marxist background, he initially perceived human rights as something ‘bourgeois’ and ‘elitist.’ “But through my work I came to understand how important they are and how they should be upheld in an objective way. Now my old friends joke that I have become a liberal,” Taştan laughed.

Over the years, Taştan has seen a lot of change in Turkey. “It all goes in waves. There were times when it seemed to get better, but now I understand that we have actually not made much progress,” Taştan concluded. In 1983, when Taştan moved from his hometown Adıyaman in the southeast to the capital, Ankara, to study, the repressive aftermath of the 1980 coup could still be

felt everywhere in Turkey. For Taştan, the political orientation of the ruling party did not matter in his work. “We fought the regime of the 1980 coup exactly the same way as we are fighting the current regime,” he said, explaining that his human rights work is not supposed to support or oppose any particular political party; instead, it aims to defend everyone’s rights.

Rights defenders usually do not like to compare different eras of Turkish history, they tend to avoid singling out specific eras as particularly bad, because for them all rights violations are unacceptable. But Taştan wanted to stress one important point which sets these last years apart from the past: Turkey’s state institutions no longer respect their own laws. “Before, there was a sense of what to expect in a judicial process. If you would say X, you would be prosecuted by law Y. That is no longer the case: I could be prosecuted for anything I do. The same goes for jurists, journalists or other human rights defenders. We are all subjected to the extreme arbitrariness of the system,” he said.

“ I gave thirty years of my life [to this cause], if I would go somewhere else, I would not be happy.

Taştan contracted polio at the age of one, which has caused him to walk with difficulty throughout his life. Describing his belief about how human rights work should operate, he said, “Whenever the topic of disability rights [in the context of human rights discussions] comes up, people look at me. But I would always try to avoid speaking on the matter. That is because I believe that you do not have to be the ‘owner’ of a problem to defend it. That is how human rights work for me.”

When asked about which topics within human rights work he has worked on the most, he listed discrimination and land mines’ victims. Despite his wariness to focus on disability rights earlier in his career, the topic found him after all, he joked. His organisation, ESHİD, has undertaken a project to tackle the obstacles people with disabilities face in accessing justice. Taştan stressed that people with disabilities are part of a larger group of disadvantaged people who are discriminated against, and struggle accessing their rights. Taştan sees discrimination as one of the most important topics human rights defenders can tackle in Turkey because discriminatory practices are deeply ingrained in society. Sharing an example, he mentioned, “One of the first

things Alevi children are taught is: do not tell anyone that you are Alevi outside our home.” Another topic close to his heart are the victims of land mines. In the southeast of the country, where the conflict between the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) and the Turkish state is centred, unregistered land mines have been a major issue, claiming countless lives, “sometimes in people’s own gardens,” he explained. He has dedicated a large part of his career to assisting victims of land mines to access justice.

Taştan said that his work, besides the obvious risks, could be emotionally draining and even traumatising at times. He shared one anecdote about going to the Iranian border town of Şemdinli to investigate the bombing of the Umut Bookshop in 2005, during which the owner lost his life. “The bookshop owner’s wife arrived with her daughter. At some point, I was holding the child in my arms,” he remembered. “At that time, my son was the same age as that child. When I came home, I found myself confronted with the question: should I show more affection to my child?... The child in Şemdinli does not have a father anymore,” Taştan said, recalling the worry he had that this could also happen to his own child and clearly touched again by the memory.

Despite these difficult moments, they have never hampered Taştan’s motivation to positively change the trajectory of his country. He has never thought about giving up his work in Turkey. When people abroad ask him whether he will return to Turkey for his next hearing, he quickly responds, “Of course.” He elaborates further, “I gave thirty years of my life [to this cause], if I would go somewhere else, I would not be happy. And besides, so many people are putting in so much effort to build a better future, we must be able to change something, right? It only fuels my motivation.”

Story first published in October 2019

Berrin Sönmez



Berrin Sönmez has been fighting for women's rights in Turkey for most of her life. Despite media suppression and shrinking space in publications for dissenting voices, she is an influential and critical voice in public debate.

Similar to many human rights defenders, from early in age, Berrin Sönmez had a strong sense of justice. As a young girl, she observed that women around her were not treated the same way as men. "I saw how women were worn down in all parts of society," said Sönmez. Growing up in a religious family, she discovered feminism as a way to challenge these injustices. With the support of her family, she blended her Islamic and feminist identity. She now proudly identifies as an Islamic feminist.

Sönmez pursued a career in academia, after completing her studies at Ankara University's

“Growing up in a religious family, she discovered feminism as a way to challenge these injustices. She now proudly identifies as an Islamic feminist.

faculty of Linguistics, History and Geography. She worked as a researcher and later as a teaching assistant in the small western city of Afyon on behalf of the Ministry of Education. Throughout her career, she dealt with the discriminatory practices of the Turkish state.

Because of the government's interpretation and implementation of secularism at the time, she was not allowed to wear her headscarf in public institutions. For a period, Sönmez stopped wearing her headscarf, but later in life started again. She seldom discusses the decision regarding her headscarf in public, "After all, it is a very personal matter," Sönmez said.

In 1997, the so-called "post-modern" coup took place in Turkey, during which a clamp down on religious freedom took place. Based on vaguely defined competences in the Constitution, the Turkish military traditionally perceives itself the guardian of secularism in the country. Partially based on this, on February 28, 1997 the military forced certain members of government to resign, causing the coalition to fall apart, and the Islamic-oriented Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan to step down. At the time, Sönmez was working as a teacher in cultural history in Afyon. In the wake of the military intervention, state institutions restricted religious freedom,

claiming it to be a threat to secularism. Religious schools were shut down and the (already limited) number of women with headscarves at universities were barred from entering campuses. Religious teachers, portrayed as "anti-secularist," were fired from their positions, including many of Sönmez's colleagues and friends. Eventually in 2001 Sönmez was forced to retire herself.

Today, just two decades later, the state's relationship with religion is drastically different. This began in 2002 when, for the first time in the Republic's history, a religiously oriented political party won enough votes to form a single-party government. This party, Justice and Development Party (AKP), has been in power ever since. Turkey's current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was (and still is) the AKP leader. In 2002 when his Party came to power, Erdoğan was serving a prison sentence for reciting a religious poem, charged with inciting violence, and religious or racial hatred — ironically a similar charge commonly lodged against rights defenders nowadays who have criticised his government. After Erdoğan's release and since coming to power, he has gradually consolidated power and tightened his grip on the Party and the country.

“We should not forget the women's movement is a beacon of hope and still very strong.

Sönmez's forced retirement coincided with the rise of the Party that has shaped Turkey for nearly two decades. Like many people, she initially supported the AKP's efforts to democratise and further integrate Turkey with the European Union. The headscarf ban in public offices, in place for decades, was gradually dismantled under President Erdoğan. Over time however, Sönmez began to grow wary of the Party's motives. "When an internet law was discussed in 2007-2008 of which I was critical, I realised they didn't allow any criticism. That's when I stopped supporting them," she recalled. In the years since, the AKP has lost the support of many democratic groups in the country as it strengthened its grip on power and the authoritarian tendencies surfaced. "Nowadays, they don't allow any critique anymore. From a party that challenged the status-quo, it gradually became the status-quo itself," Sönmez said.

Women's rights have also been under tremendous pressure. Sönmez argued that the dominance of men in

representative bodies in Turkey's current government illustrates this well. The current cabinet only sports two female ministers. "That's actually good. It's double the number compared to the previous cabinet," Sönmez joked. For her, it shows how patriarchal structures inform government ideology. As a result of these hardening structures, the opportunity to lobby for new legislation

and the effectively implement existing laws strengthening women's rights have become more difficult over the past years, Sönmez said. Despite Turkey's ratification of the Council of Europe's 2011 Istanbul Convention, which aims to prevent and combat violence against women, the Turkish government has failed to implement the necessary measures to give the Convention real effect (also read Canan Arın's story here). Consequently, violence against women is still a very serious problem in Turkey today. According to the We Will Stop Femicides Platform (Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu) [440 women were killed in 2018 alone](#), and in many cases perpetrators are not brought to justice.

Her forced retirement in 2001 allowed Sönmez to dedicate more time for the feminist activism she has always pursued. Sönmez joined the Capital City Women's Platform ([Başkent Kadın Platformu Derneği](#)), where she served as the president between 2011 and 2013. The Association works to increase women's public participation through education, employment and political activism — exactly the goals Sönmez set out to achieve as a young girl when first introduced to feminism.

Nowadays Sönmez is an influential and critical voice in public debate, despite media suppression and shrinking space in media and publications for dissenting voices in Turkey. She writes columns for the critical news website [Gazete Duvar](#) and discusses women's matters in the weekly talk show "The Feminist Perspective" (Feminist Bakış) on the media platform [Medyascope](#).

The women's movement is a crucial arena for the dialogue about topics that are otherwise hardly spoken about in public. In a country where criticism of the government is decreasingly tolerated, these discussions are made ever more important. While democratic forces in Turkey, including women's rights movements, are facing an uphill battle; for Sönmez, the women's movement remains an inspiration for continued activism. When asked about the status of the movement Sönmez said, "We should not forget the women's movement is a beacon of hope and still very strong."

Story first published in November 2019

Anjelik Kelavgil



Anjelik Kelavgil is an LGBTI+ rights defender, who has defended rights for all in Turkey. An active member of the LGBTI+ rights community in Ankara and throughout Turkey, Anjelik has remained steadfast in fighting for what they* believe in despite the often dangerous situation in the country where LGBTI+ activities are surveilled and staunchly suppressed.

* Anjelik goes by the pronoun they.

When the TEKEL tobacco plant workers put up tents in central Ankara in December 2009 to oppose privatisation measures, Anjelik Kelavgil was still a teenager. Out of sympathy

“ We know that there is one thing that we have that they [the authorities] don't — and that is courage.

for the workers' struggle, who were ferociously dispersed by the police with pressurised water in the cold winter, Anjelik joined the protests.

The protests lasted for over four months and became the largest workers strikes in Turkey from recent decades. For Anjelik, this was the beginning of becoming politically active, and they have remained so ever since.

In their teenage years, during their first protests Anjelik, who now identifies as non-binary trans, was not open about their gender identity. Despite leftist circles being known as one of the more socially progressive groups in Turkey, Anjelik feared non-acceptance of their gender identity amongst circles they moved in. “I felt I wouldn't be accepted,” Anjelik said when describing their earlier years.

In 2013, Anjelik put up a tent in Gezi Park, Istanbul, in support of a different group's rights, during another wave of large protests. What started out as small group of environmentalists' demonstration to prevent the tearing down of the Gezi Park's trees to make room for an Ottoman-style shopping mall, became a national and international sensation.

The violent suppression of the initial Gezi Park protestors sparked outrage amongst a wider group in Turkish society, many of which joined the demonstration in solidarity. Increasing police brutality against the growing number of protestors ignited what is now known as the biggest anti-government protest in recent Turkish history.

“ It was like a big wedding. People who didn't know each other danced together and exchanged ideas.

Anjelik remembers the summer of 2013 as a period where many became more accepting of others with different political beliefs and identities. Irrespective of socioeconomic classes, Kurds, LGBTI+s, Kemalists, conservatives and many others came together in their desire to protect the park and more generally, to protect people's right to defend it. A wide range of groups found common ground in their resentment towards police brutality and the increasingly authoritarian tendencies of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. “It was like a big wedding. People who didn't know each other danced together and exchanged ideas,” Anjelik shared. For them, the peaceful Gezi Park protests meant the beginning of a personal renaissance. In the years following the protests, Anjelik embraced their gender identity and came out as non-binary trans.

During this period, the LGBTI+ community in Turkey, an integral part of the Gezi Park protests, broke through barriers of fear and gained increasing visibility and acceptance in society. The Istanbul Pride march in 2013, which took place during the Gezi Park protests, was attended by tens of thousands of people, many of whom wanted to show solidarity to the community; this was a drastic change from the first Istanbul Pride march in 2003 with a few dozen in attendance. A decade later, tens of thousands flocked to the central Istanbul Istiklal Avenue in a colourful march, supported by a large number of local and international civil society organisations. Pride marches were organised in cities all over Turkey as a result and similar support was shown during in the following year.

Since the Gezi Park protests of 2013, and through people Anjelik met that summer, they became immersed in Turkey's vibrant LGBTI+ scene. They joined the Pride Week's organising committee, gaining valuable experience in activism. Those encounters and the LGBTI+ rights NGO, Social Policy Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Studies Association (Sosyal Politikalar

Cinsiyet Kimliği ve Cinsel Yönelim Çalışmaları Derneği – SPoD), which Anjelik still actively supports, are vital for them.

Today, Anjelik is a full time trans-activist, advocating equal rights for the LGBTI+ community wherever they can. Currently, they work at the NGO Pink Life (Pembe Hayat), where they, amongst other tasks, organise the PinkLife QueerFest film festival — the 9th edition of which will take place in January 2020 in Ankara and Istanbul.

While acceptance has been growing amongst certain parts of Turkish society, the increased visibility of the LGBTI+ community has also led to negative reactions both from within society and from the authorities. “It meant that some people started hating us more,” Anjelik explained. In describing why there has been a negative backlash, Anjelik said it was a consequence of people being more directly confronted with the LGBTI+ community's existence in Turkey. Outside Anjelik's work — and friend circles — it remains difficult to be accepted in society. “Every part of [Turkish] society is dominated by masculine, patriarchal and heteronormative structures. If you are different, people look upon you as if you have an illness,” said Anjelik.

Despite victories of the LGBTI+ community in Turkey, a 2013 Pew Research Centre poll found that 78 percent of people in Turkey do not think homosexuality “should be accepted” in society. According to the TransMurder Monitoring report in 2016, Turkey has ranked highest in the number of murders of trans persons in Europe — approximately 60 murders of transpeople have been reported over the last ten years. “If they want to finish our activism, there is no other option left but to kill us,” Anjelik concluded.

Authorities have also retaliated. In 2015, the Istanbul Pride march was violently dispersed. All subsequent marches have since been banned. In 2017, under the guise of the State of Emergency, the Ankara Governorship indefinitely banned all LGBTI+ related activities, citing “social sensitivities,” “public health and morality,” and “protection of others' rights and freedoms.” Ankara continued using the justifications to ban events despite the lifting of the State of Emergency in July 2018. Under this ban, an earlier version of the Pink LifeQueerFest film festival had also been repressed. Getting around these bans, organisers of LGBTI+ events defiantly moved some events underground or even to different provinces. The LGBTI+ community remained steadfast throughout this period and in April 2019 the Ankara Regional Administrative Court annulled the general ban.

community remain, including arbitrary crackdowns by police officers. Recently, Anjelic experienced an unannounced passport control at the grocery store, where they were “not to be allowed to go on the streets.” Eventually Anjelic was let go, but the repressive situation fuels imminent fear. “For us, the streets are full of gangsters in uniform,” Anjelic described. In addition to physical threats, the LGBTI+ community have also been facing judicial harassment. In November 2019, 19 members of the LGBTI+ Solidarity Platform of the Middle Eastern Technical University (METU) stood their first trial on charges of “participating in unlawful assembly or demonstrations” and “resisting despite warning or use of force.” Contradicting the regional court’s ruling on the ban, the METU rector prohibited the 9th METU Pride march organised on 10 May 2019. In defiance of the prohibition, the march still took place. Police entered the campus and violently dispersed the group of students, allegedly because they refused to leave the march. During the first hearing, the defendants stated the police violence started without warning and those who were taken into custody were beaten by the police. The next hearing will be in Ankara on 12 March 2020. As this case suggests, the pressure from society and authorities have fostered a suffocating environment in which the LGBTI+ community can never really feel safe.

Even though Anjelic is registered in different universities, their belief in academia as it functions in Turkey nowadays is close to non-existent. After the coup attempt of 15 July 2016, tens of thousands were fired from their jobs by decree (including [Fusun Üstel](#) and [Cavidan Soykan](#), also profiled in this series). To Anjelic it meant losing the best, most critical teachers in a “witch hunt.” Anjelic compared the current universities in Turkey to the church schools in the Middle Ages. “There is hardly any critical thinking or knowledge production left, the main usage is a diploma which can help you to earn more in the working space,” they said. The space for critical thinking and questioning the patriarchal and heteronormative norms in Turkish society have suffered as a result.

“It makes me very happy not to know how I’ll define myself. Life is like an adventure, you don’t know where it is going to end.

But time and time again the LGBTI+ community has

responded to societal pressure and authorities-based repression with resilience and a determination to continue to defend their rights and the rights of any group whose voice the government has tried to silence — similar to the portraits of human rights defenders this series has shown. “We know there is one thing that we have that they [the authorities] don’t — and that is courage,” Anjelic stated. For Anjelic, life is resistance, and there is a lot to gain and discover, both personally and for wider society. “It makes me very happy not to know how I’ll define myself. Life is like an adventure, you don’t know where it is going to end,” Anjelic said.

Story first published in December 2019

Gönül Öztürkoglu



“After she was released from pre-trial detention in March 2019, she continued to work in that position. “It’s an honour to work there.”

Gönül Öztürkoglu is a human rights defender and peace activist who has dedicated much of her career to rights for all. In December 2019, she was sentenced to over six years imprisonment on charges of terrorism related offences based on her work for a human rights organisation.

I’m a peace activist, how can I have anything to do with violence?” human rights defender [Gönül Öztürkoglu](#) asked, clearly agitated. President of the Malatya Branch of the Human Rights Association (İnsan Hakları Derneği – İHD), Öztürkoglu was recently convicted of “membership of a terrorist organisation” and “making propaganda for a terrorist organisation,” after having spent almost four months behind bars in pre-trial detention.

During Öztürkoglu’s trial, her activities carried out for İHD, such as attending a panel for International Women’s Day, making press statements and attending peaceful protests, [were used as evidence against her](#) — a common tactic used to silence critical voices in Turkey.

Unlike her male co-defendant in the case, Öztürkoglu was not allowed to appear in court for her first hearing in Malatya, a province in Eastern Anatolia, instead remaining in a women’s prison in Elazığ. During the hearing, she was forced to speak to the judge through an online video conference-system — a system that has been used more frequently over the last years in Turkey, and is deemed problematic by rights groups. Öztürkoglu agreed: “It makes it more difficult to express yourself, because there is a lot of background noise so you can quickly lose your concentration.”

She was left to guess the reasons why she had to attend her trial via a video screen from jail and why she was kept in detention a month longer than her co-defendant. “Maybe it’s because our co-presidents [from İHD] gave such a strong defence to the judge the first time,” Öztürkoglu said. She joked whether the strongly worded defence speeches by Eren Keskin and Öztürk

Türkdoğan, İHD's co-presidents and prominent human rights activists, might have angered the judges in the Malatya court. In December 2019, over a year after her initial arrest, she was sentenced to six years and three months imprisonment.

Öztürkoğlu's persecution occurred in turbulent times for Turkey. The 2016 coup attempt worsened the already unstable political situation in the country. Malatya — home to the unit of the Turkish armed forces that protects Turkey's borders with Iran, Iraq and Syria — came under suspicion of being behind the attempted coup. As a result, Öztürkoğlu explained, the entire city of Malatya, and especially those civil society organisations and neighbourhoods deemed critical of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government were declared guilty by association. She stressed that the Malatya chapter of the İHD was very quick to denounce the coup attempt, but to no avail, like thousands of others, politicians, academics or civil society members, Öztürkoğlu was accused of terrorist activities in the aftermath of the July 2016 coup attempt.

Like many human rights defenders in Turkey, Öztürkoğlu was politicised at an early age. When she was still a little girl in the early 1980s, her older brother Kazım, involved in a member of a leftist revolutionary group, was incarcerated and tortured by the military regime following the violent coup of September 12, 1980. Öztürkoğlu remembers how her mother waited by the roadside every day, hoping for the safe return of her son. She also remembers the violent raids on their house, when soldiers overturned bookcases looking for books that deemed dangerous by the junta. After Kazım's release, he suffered from a brain tumour—likely a consequence of the severe torture in prison — that would eventually cost him his life. “His songs are still in my mind, and sometimes I sing them and get very sad,” Öztürkoğlu said.

It was also in the aftermath of the 1980 coup and its many human rights violations that İHD was founded. In 1986, a group of political prisoners along with lawyers, journalists and intellectuals set up the nationwide human rights organisation that has since launched important campaigns against torture, the death penalty (eventually abolished in 2004), and restrictions against freedom of expression. Today, İHD is the largest human rights organisation in Turkey with dozens of regional offices all over the country. Many of its members are facing trial and the organisation has been subject to attacks of public officials and media alike. In an earlier episode, the former chairperson of İHD's Diyarbakir branch, Raci Bilici, was featured in this series.

Öztürkoğlu joined the İHD board in 2013 and was elected president of the Malatya branch in 2016. After she was released from pre-trial detention in March 2019, she continued to work in that position. “It's an honour to work there,” she commented. Öztürkoğlu has volunteered for İHD for as long as she can remember, taking part in countless demonstrations, panel discussions and campaigns, all with the aim of making her idea of a peaceful society a reality. She was also part of the Peace Block (Barış Bloku), an initiative of several civil society organisations, founded in 2015. The initiative mobilised voices for peace when fighting resumed in the region, caused by the collapse of the most recent ceasefire between the Turkish government and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Thousands died and half a million people were displaced from their homes as a result.

“ Describing an encounter she had with a police officer, she shared that he asked her “Do you really need to do all these things that you do?” to which she replied, “Yes, and if I have to defend you, I will do it as well.”

Life has gotten more difficult since her initial arrest, but she does not let herself be discouraged. Describing an encounter she had with a police officer, she shared that he asked her “Do you really need to do all these things that you do?” to which she replied, “Yes, and if I have to defend you, I will do it as well.” The anecdote typifies Öztürkoğlu's belief in the society she wants to fight for, but is also a damning example of the polarised state of the country, as she finds herself having to explain the rule of law to police officers and judges.

She takes pride in the human rights activities in which she has participated, including regional projects about Alevi minority and children's rights, or panels about human rights violations during the State of Emergency in the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt. Last month she attended a Malatya commemoration of Hrant Dink, an Armenian journalist and then Editor-in-Chief of the Armenian-Turkish newspaper Agos, who was murdered on January 19, 2007 in front of his newspaper's office in Istanbul. Dink, born in Malatya, was considered the country's most

important voice for Armenian-Turkish reconciliation. To this day, justice has not been ensured, and every year thousands of people take to the streets on January 19 to demand justice.

Öztürkoğlu is waiting for justice, too. She appealed her conviction and the regional court will decide whether to uphold or quash the conviction. Öztürkoğlu expects the court to uphold it, which would mean her return to prison any day now. Öztürkoğlu continues to live with Damocles' sword hanging over her head.

Story first published in January 2020

Evgil Türker



“The main thing for us is to live here in safety.”

Evgil Türker is an Assyrian rights defender and journalist who has dedicated much of his life to protecting the Assyrian community and culture. A leader in the Syriac community, Türker has remained steadfast in his fight to defend the rights of his community.

Evgil Türker's hometown Midyat, in southeast Turkey near the Syrian border, is the centre of one of the oldest civilizations in the world — the Assyrian Christians. A tour around town is like visiting an open-air museum. Churches and monasteries carved out of the yellow limestone typical for the region are scattered across the city. Rug-making and jewellery workshops are the dominant businesses in the small town. However, underneath all this beauty, the dark

sides of history lay just beneath the surface. Assyrians, an ethnic minority group of Syriac Christians, are from ancient Mesopotamia, in present day Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, where some of them live today. However, the majority now lives elsewhere, with its diaspora spread across different countries. Large Assyrian communities live in European countries such as Switzerland and Germany.

In the 1980s, Türker worked as a craftsman in one of the jewellery workshops in Midyat. Upon completing his compulsory military service, following a police raid in a shared student house, he was briefly taken to custody. After his release, he left the country to live in exile, similar to many Assyrians before him. Eventually granted asylum in Switzerland, Türker travelled throughout Europe to organise Assyrian cultural events. Türker also worked as a journalist, telling the little-known story of his people in order to facilitate dialogue amongst the Assyrian diaspora. “At the time there was no channel for Assyrians, so we broadcasted on Med TV [a Kurdish satellite channel broadcasting from abroad], but later we opened our own Channel, [Suroyo TV](#),” Türker recalled.

The reasons why Assyrians are no longer living on their homeland makes for “a long story,” Türker sighed. Central in the story is [Sayfo](#) (Sword), events which took place over a hundred years ago during the First World War and the demise of the Ottoman Empire. Intertwined with the Armenian genocide, Sayfo designated the mass slaughter of the Assyrian population within the Empire's borders. Hundreds of thousands were killed or sent on death marches by the Young Turk government, which hand in hand with local tribesmen, embarked on a campaign of ethnic and religious cleansing.

“Because we are both of a different religion and a different race, the Turkish government understood we couldn't be assimilated, so we were forced to flee again.”

The “Turkification” policies — first implemented by the Turkish Republic after its foundation in 1923 — continued targeting Assyrians throughout history. The imposition of the [Wealth Tax](#) in 1942, which particularly targeted non-Muslim citizens, the [Istanbul Pogrom](#) of 1955, as well as anti-Christian sentiment following the Turkish intervention of Cyprus in 1974 are just some examples. “Because we are both of a different religion and a different race, the Turkish government understood we couldn't be assimilated, so we were forced to flee again,” Türker said. Assyrians in southeast Turkey left their hometowns, first to neighbouring countries like Iraq and Syria, later to bigger cities in Turkey, and eventually to Europe, both as workers and as asylum seekers. In Turkey, due to discriminatory measures, Assyrians, and other non-Muslim minorities were left with limited opportunities. It is nearly impossible to raise through the ranks in bureaucratic jobs—a trend that continues today. “As citizens of the Turkish Republic we are equal under the Constitution, but the Turkish Republic has never applied this principle to its Assyrian citizens,” said Türker.

In the beginning of this century, when the current Justice and Development Party's (AKP) government came to power, a new era seemed to start. Türker remembers the hopeful times, explaining: “Because of the EU accession process many positive steps were taken.” Laws were passed to expand freedom of expression, facilitate the foundation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and —

significant for the Assyrians who fled the country — the AKP promised to return to citizens the rights of property expropriated when they left the country. Upon invitation of the Turkish government, some Assyrians returned to their ancestral land. So did Türker, who obtained his Turkish passport again and moved back to Midyat in 2010.

Willing to use the organisational experience gained in the Assyrian diaspora, Türker was chosen as the head of the Federation of Syriac Associations ([Süryani Dernekler Federasyonu – SÜDEF](#)). Türker stressed that SÜDEF has worked with different parties across the political spectrum, from the Turkish authorities and affiliated organisations, to foreign NGO's and oppositional parties. Shortly after Türker's return, the war in neighbouring Syria confronted Turkey with the arrival of large numbers of refugees. On behalf of SÜDEF, Türker coordinated aid and welcomed people in Midyat. “Many of the people who fled from areas like Qamishlo had relatives living in the region. Eventually, most of them moved on to Istanbul and later moved to Europe or elsewhere,” Türker explained. As a result, only a small number of asylum seekers and refugees remained in Midyat.

In addition to being the head of SÜDEF, Türker also publishes articles in the monthly newspaper [Sabro](#) (Hope), with [a mix of Syriac and Turkish articles](#), with the aim of giving the Assyrian community a voice — a minority that only has one representative in Parliament, Tuma Çelik, a member of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).

An hour drive from Midyat, the Mor Gabriel monastery, established in 397 A.C., majestically stands on a hilltop. It is the oldest surviving Syriac Orthodox monastery in the world. In 2008, the monastery was the centre of a land dispute with the Kurdish village leaders, backed by the local representative of the AKP. Swaths of land were transferred to the Turkish Treasury and to the Ministry of Agriculture (the property was eventually returned in [2017](#)). “That was a real breaking point,” Türker remembered. Similar tactics were applied to other swaths of land, whose original owners were oftentimes abroad and therefore less able to challenge these expropriations. “Assyrians started asking themselves questions: could the government be serious about our rights if they take away our land?” Türker mentioned. Ahmet Türk, a veteran Kurdish politician who was elected mayor of Mardin in 2014, promised to help transfer disputed areas back to the Assyrian community.

However, in 2016, Ahmet Türk was replaced by a government-appointed trustee and arrested under the

State of Emergency following the 2016 coup attempt. “[The trustee] behaved as if [the land] was his father’s backyard,” Türker commented. Land was once again transferred to the Turkish Treasury, while other swaths of land which are not returned yet, are still disputed in costly court-cases.

Even though the situation of property rights worsened after the Mor Gabriel dispute, there were also hopeful times, Türker recalled, referring to the short-lived peace process in the region from 2012 to 2015 between the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Turkish state. In the fight between the two parties, the Assyrian community never took a side but were always caught in the middle. Following the collapse of peace in 2015, fallout was severe and violence once again returned to the region, along with round-the-clock curfews. Many cities in the region turned into war-zones (Read the stories of [Fusun Üstel](#), [Cavidan Soykan](#) who protested the violence with a petition).

Assyrians also bore the brunt of the gradual collapse of the rule of law in Turkey in recent years. Several prominent members of the community were targeted. Most recently, earlier this year Sefer Bilçen, “priest Aho” of the Mor Yakup church, was arrested on charges of “aiding and abetting a terrorist organization.” After six days of detention, he was [released](#), but his trial goes on. Türker raised, “It’s nonsensical. How can a priest be a member of a terrorist organization? If he is the member of any organisation it would be a Christian one as the church’s leader.” Türker continues to advocate the plight of his people: “The main thing for us is to live here in safety.”

Story first published in March 2020

Bülent Şık



“ One way or the other, these results had to be shared with the public.

Bülent Şık is a food engineer and public health researcher, convicted for his whistle-blowing activities. Despite being barred from his research and academia in Turkey, Şık has remained steadfast in his work to spread information relating to public health, which he believes the public has a right to know.

As a child, Bülent Şık wanted to become a lawyer. His interest in law was fuelled by his uncle Ahmet Albay — an attorney and local politician of the secular Republican’s People’s party (CHP) in the southern town of Adana. “He was my idol,” Şık said. “My uncle’s law office was close to our school, and I went there all the time, reading and working as a kind of assistant,” he added. In 1980, these inspiring visits were brutally halted when Albay was

[murdered](#) because of his work providing legal defence for the victims of the 1978 [Maraş Massacre](#) — a pogrom during which a right wing mob stormed a majority Alevi neighbourhood, killing over 100 people. Two other lawyers in the case, Ceyhun Can and Halil Sıtkı Güllüoğlu, were killed as well.

Shortly after the murder of his uncle, the violent military coup of September 12, 1980 took another heavy toll on Şık’s family and society at large. More than half a million people, most of them leftists, were taken into custody in Turkey. Many were tortured in prison, 50 people were executed. Others were blacklisted, thousands lost their citizenship. The Şık family was forced to leave Adana, their hometown; they moved to the southern seaside town of Antalya. There, his high school chemistry teacher [Ruhi Mülâyim](#) convinced him to study food engineering in Izmir, where Şık specialised in environmentally friendly food analysis techniques. After graduating, Şık started working in the laboratories of the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Livestock, where he where he undertook research on topics related to public health and food safety.

“The government may push you out of the system and hold your work in disregard, but I said: even though it might not be in an academic research or publication, whatever the circumstances are, I will continue to produce and share knowledge.

Şık started to work at Akdeniz University as a faculty member. Between 2010 and 2016, Şık was deputy director of the newly founded Food Safety and Agricultural Research Centre. As Deputy Director, Şık contributed to research — commissioned by the Ministry of Health — on possible links between the rising number of cancer cases in several industrial provinces in western Turkey, and the soil, air, food and water pollution in these areas. The results were shocking. Pollution levels found in food and water were at toxic levels. Pesticides, heavy metals and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon were found in food samples. The water in several residential areas was found to be unsafe to drink due to lead, chrome, aluminium and arsenic pollution.

In December 2015, after five years of research and analysis on thousands of samples, sixteen separate working groups presented their findings during a four-day conference in Antalya to an audience of academics, health professionals and representatives from the Ministry. Shocked by what they had discovered, Şık remembers asking a high-ranking official at the conference what the Ministry would do with the results. “He told me that they would take all the preventive measures necessary,” Şık recounted.

In the meantime, in the beginning of 2016, Şık signed the peace petition “We will not be a party to this crime!” (Bu Suça Ortak Olmayacağız! in which 1,128 academics called for the end to state violence in the predominantly Kurdish southeast of the country (similar to other [Academics for Peace](#), such as [Füsün Üstel](#) and [Cavidan Soykan](#)). In January 2016 — a few weeks after the conference in Antalya — the petition was made public. This immediately drew the ire of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government and their supporters. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan accused the academics of “treason.” Bülent Şık started receiving threatening phone calls, social media messages, and

his office door and those of eight of his colleagues, academics and researchers who had also signed the petition were marked. Şık could not go to work for ten days. Three weeks after the petition had come out, Şık was fired. He lost his job at the research centre and was immediately bared from the research projects that had just been concluded. Şık only went back to his office once to collect some of his personal belongings. “Luckily I made a copy of all the analysis reports of research from my computer, just to have as a backup,” said Şık.

But he did not expect the Ministry to deliberately hide the results of the research from the public. “Call me naïve, but there were at least 20 academics and so many Health Ministry bureaucrats involved [in the research], and the results were of enormous importance to the public. We had taken biochemical samples from people, so we also had a responsibility towards them,” Şık explained. Out of a job, Şık was still curious about the fate of the project. Over a year later, he found out that all the work he and his colleagues had done had been in vain. The reports that documented the serious health impact of various toxins in the air, food and water supplies of millions of people ended up untouched in some drawer of the Health Ministry.

Following the 2016 coup attempt, Şık also lost his job at Akdeniz University via emergency decree. It came as no surprise to him, “[After the petition,] we were stigmatised, and we knew that our time would come. The coup attempt only sped things up,” he said. In the repressive environment that followed the coup attempt, [over 6,000 academics lost their jobs in a similar way](#). Şık’s younger brother, investigative journalist [Ahmet Şık](#), was taken into custody, along with 17 colleagues and executives of the newspaper Cumhuriyet. He would be held in pre-trial detention for over a year.

After Bülent Şık understood that the results of the research were not going to be shared with the public, he started to analyse the material he had hastily downloaded from his office computer. “In one way or the other, these results had to be shared with the public,” he explained. But deciphering the research results was not an easy task, as he only had the raw material of the two out of the sixteen projects he had participated in himself. From Ministry-employed researcher, Şık went on to become a whistleblower. After one year, Şık shared the research results in a series of articles on the daily newspaper [Cumhuriyet](#) and on Bianet (co-founded by [Nadire Mater](#), previously featured in this series) — an online media platform with a focus on human rights.

Following the articles, the Ministry of Health launched an investigation into Şık, accusing him of various crimes. In September 2019, Şık was [convicted](#) of “disclosure of confidential information in respect of a duty” and sentenced to 1 year and 3 months imprisonment — a decision currently undergoing appeal.

“A scientist is primarily responsible to society, not to companies and institutions. Because the health and the future of the societies are more important than the short term interests of the companies and the institutions.

The Ministry never challenged the facts of the research it had itself commissioned. Şık would not find support from his former project colleagues. Instead, after the publication of the first article, a former colleague called Şık, discouraging him to publish anything else, and warning him that there would be a “price to pay.” In response, Şık argued that people have the right to know what is happening to them. Further to his point, in court, Şık also said, “A scientist is primarily responsible to society, not to companies and institutions. Because the health and the future of the societies are more important than the short term interests of the companies and the institutions.”

It was not all bad, Şık emphasised. After all, more people heard of the case than they otherwise would have. Also, the widespread solidarity he received both [internationally](#) and from within Turkey was important and heart-warming. Besides his own and his brother’s case, Şık himself also followed cases of fellow Academics for Peace. “It must have been at least 20 times that I was in the courthouse around this time” he recalled. After the [Constitutional Court](#) ruled in July 2019 that the freedom of expression of the academics was violated, Şık’s case for signing the petition was dropped.

The tumultuous times, his job loss, his legal persecution, and that of his colleagues and his brother significantly impacted Şık’s life. Being an academic who had been dismissed by decree for signing the peace petition made it impossible to find another job. Besides a ten-months stint as a rapporteur for the Chamber of Food Engineers, he has started working on making the knowledge in his

field available to the wider public — a topic to which he had always given great importance. He has been writing a regular column, “The Chemist in the Kitchen” ([Mutfaktaki Kimyacı](#)), on food safety and related topics for Bianet. “It feels good to realise that I can still do that,” he said. With the hard impact of the coronavirus on Turkey, Şık has now also been writing about the global pandemic. He stresses the systemic problem of the destruction of nature as a cause of the spread of the virus and warning for other possible outbreaks that might [aggravate the impact](#) of the coronavirus. “The government may push you out of the system and hold your work in disregard, but I said: even though it might not be in an academic research or publication, whatever the circumstances are, I will continue to produce and share knowledge,” Şık concluded.

Story first published in April 2020

Sebla Arcan



“ I believe you don’t need to be subject to rights violations to be part of a struggle. I do it to be able to sleep at night, to be a good person.”

Sebla Arcan is a human rights defender who has dedicated much of her life to demanding justice for those who have been subject to enforced disappearance in Turkey. Despite being taken into custody and facing violence from the state, Arcan has remained steadfast in her support for the Saturday Mothers.

Sebla Arcan is working as an economist for a living, but her real passion is in the struggle of the Saturday Mothers ([Cumartesi Anneleri/İnsanları](#)). She is the spokesperson for the group, which, for 25 years, have been demanding answers from the state about missing relatives that have been subject to enforced disappearance by Turkish state forces. Following her mother-in-law’s footsteps, Arcan

became involved with the group through her volunteer work for the Human Rights Association ([İnsan Hakları Derneği - İHD](#)) in the ‘90s (Read the stories of two others who worked at İHD here: [Raci Bilici](#) and [Gönül Öztürkoğlu](#)).

Despite not having lost a family member through enforced disappearance herself, Arcan became an integral part of the Saturday Mothers. “I believe you don’t need to be subject to rights violations to be part of a struggle,” she said. For her it is a matter of conscience, “I do it to be able to sleep at night, to be a good person,” she explained.

The modern Republic of Turkey inherited the practice of enforced disappearances from the late Ottoman Empire. The first reported case took place in 1936, when [Salih Bozışık](#), a workers’ leader and member of the Turkish Communist Party (TKP), “disappeared” in police custody. In the period following the September 12, 1980 military coup, the İHD recorded the enforced disappearance of 15 people. However, it was not until the ‘90s that it became a common practice in Turkey the government’s way of silencing critics. “With the excuse of counterinsurgency programs, all

freedoms were brushed aside in every part of Turkey. [The disappearances] had taken the form of systemic state terrorism,” Arcan said.

In 1995, Arcan joined İHD’s Committee on Enforced Disappearances (İHD Kayıplar Komisyonu), which started documenting cases. Between 1992 and 1996, İHD reported 792 cases of enforced disappearances and murders committed by the state. Due to the danger associated with reporting, the real number remains unknown. “Family members were threatened, forced to flee to different provinces and risked to be disappeared themselves,” Arcan explained. Several İHD administrators looking into cases in the predominantly Kurdish southeast, where a majority of state-forced disappearances took place, [were forcibly disappeared themselves](#). Throughout the ‘90s, Arcan herself was taken into custody, faced violence, and stood trial multiple times for her work as a human rights defender. She has been acquitted in all the trials she stood.

“ If you now ask a random person on the street about forced disappearances, they will respond: ‘Are you talking about the Saturday Mothers?’”

The repression of the state meant the disappearances happened away from the public eye, especially in the west of the country where Arcan was living at the time. But in 1995, the case of [Hasan Ocak](#), who was arrested after violent unrest in Istanbul’s Gazi neighbourhood, set things in motion. His family, and especially his mother [Emine Ocak](#), campaigned vigorously to learn what his fate was. Witnesses had seen Ocak being taken away by the police and 55 days later his body was found in an unmarked cemetery. His fingerprints were inked, his belt and shoestrings were gone — all procedural measures indicating an arrest. The authorities initially denied any wrongdoing, but eventually the Minister of State, Algan Hacaloğlu, was forced to admit the state’s responsibility.

It was the first time the Turkish government openly admitted culpability in an enforced disappearance. Despite this, no judicial process followed the admission of guilt. The prosecutor simply stated that the Turkish police does not kill or torture so he saw no need to open an investigation. “Then we realized that we couldn’t expect anything from legal proceeding,” Arcan recalled. One week later, five families who also lost their loved ones started a silent sit-in on Galatasaray square in central Istanbul.

(Checkout [Nadire Mater’s](#) story, who has participated in countless gatherings of the Saturday Mothers). The group wanted to expose the cruel actions of the state to society and demanded the end of enforced disappearances.

Inspired by the mothers of the Plaza del Mayo in Argentina, they chose to do this sit-in protest in the centre of Turkey’s largest city; each carries the photos of the ones who were lost while telling their stories. This action worked. The protest gained widespread attention in Turkey and abroad; mainstream media began reporting on Hasan Ocak’s case. Renowned artists like [Sezen Aksu](#) and [U2](#) recorded songs to bring even more attention to the protest. As a result, enforced disappearances have stopped in the country. Moreover, Arcan pointed out that the movement, which now counts hundreds of people, managed to create widespread awareness in society. “If you now ask a random person on the street about forced disappearances, they will respond: ‘Are you talking about the Saturday Mothers?’”

These achievements did not come without a price. Between 1999 and 2009, the group was forced to stop protesting due to weekly attacks and arrests by the police. Two years after the sit-ins resumed, Arcan and the relatives of people who have been forcibly disappeared, representing all the Saturday Mothers, were received by then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Each mother told their story and urged the Prime Minister to find those responsible for the disappearances and let justice prevail. They also demanded that Turkey sign the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance — a treaty to which Turkey is still not a party.

After the meeting with Prime Minister Erdoğan in 2011, a parliamentary research commission was established to look at the case of [Cemil Kırbayır](#). Kırbayır was forcibly disappeared from the north-eastern province of Kars during the 1980 military coup. The commission wrote an extensive report, after having spoken to all the people responsible for Kırbayır’s torture and disappearance. Once again, things stalled at the desk of the prosecutor, who refused to open an investigation.

After Erdoğan’s government moved away from its democratisation agenda and EU accession negotiations, no other cases were investigated. Despite this, Arcan remains hopeful. She sees the 2011 report as proof that there are possibilities to investigate enforced disappearances, regardless of how long ago they happened. “After 31 years they managed to find every single person who interrogated and tortured Cemil Kırbayır. All you need is the political will to show that as

a government you do not want it to happen again,” she stated. The circumstances changed and what remains is the feeling that a lot could have been achieved at the time. But the Saturday Mothers were not surprised, they knew the workings of the Turkish state. “If it would be openly investigated, it would prove that people that are still working for the state today have committed crimes against humanity,” Arcan explained.

“ We were young when we started, we aged in the square. The children of the disappeared grew up on the square where we saw each other every week. Many people don’t even see their own family every week. I could say that we have become one big family.

A real turning point came in 2018 when the SaturdayMothers were barred from holding their [700th](#) peaceful weekly protest. The sit-in was once again met with police violence; they were branded “terrorist mothers” by the same government which seven years earlier received their delegation and listened to their demands. Arcan and those who lost family members by enforced disappearance were taken into custody. Arcan says that by forbidding the vigil in Galatasaray square the government wants to send a message of warning to society. In describing this message, she says, “Do not go on the street and do not disobey us. [The government] wants to give people the feeling: if this can be done to the Saturdays Mothers what would they do to me?” Every Saturday since, armoured police vehicles occupy Galatasaray square to block the protest, forcing the Saturday Mothers to hold their [sit-in](#) in front of the building of İHD, a few blocks away.

In the meantime, several mothers have passed away, but now the wives and children of the disappeared continue the protest. Arcan finds that the inter-generational dimension of the ongoing protest is very special. Reflecting on the movement, Arcan shared, “It may be our biggest achievement. We were young when we started, we aged in the square. The children of the disappeared grew up on the square where we saw each other every week. Many people don’t even see their own

family every week. I could say that we have become one big family.”

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Saturday Mothers were forced to move their [protest](#) online. Every Saturday at noon, they hold a press release and tell the story of one of their loved ones. The group publishes videos and organises events. The attendance is higher than usual; thousands of people tune in to listen to the stories of the group. “Online, people don’t have to face a police blockade,” Arcan joked. The Galatasaray square remains under police barricade, but Arcan is already thinking about their return. Undeterred, and with the determination that characterises the protest, Arcan cannot wait to be back outside. “When the health of the participants allows us, we will be back on the streets again,” Arcan concluded.

Story first published in May 2020

Yasemin Öz



“ I am sure that we are facing repression today because we are seen as a force.

Yasemin Öz is a human rights lawyer and defender, who contributed to the foundation of the LGBTI+ rights movement in Turkey. Despite the often dangerous situation in the country for civil society and especially for LGBTI+ activists, Öz has remained steadfast in fighting for her beliefs and defending the rights of all people.

When Yasemin Öz started studying law at the University of Ankara, she did not have the words to express her attraction to girls — but that was about to change. In 1994, she was part of a group of university students who met for discussions. These meetings eventually evolved into the development of a stencil magazine which tackled different topics of relevance for LGBTI+ people each issue. Öz decided to join them.

“After my first meeting, I started calling myself gay and a lesbian,” she recalled. “I had always known that I was gay, but I thought that there had to be some sort of specific criterion [to call oneself that],” she explained. More than two decades later, the organisation that emerged from those meetings, KAOS GL, short for Kaos Gay and Lesbian Cultural Research and Solidarity Association (Kaos Gey ve Lezbiyen Kültürel Araştırmalar ve Dayanışma Derneği) continues its significant work. Today it is one of the leading NGOs for LGBTI+ rights in Turkey.

The early days of KAOS GL helped Öz and other organisation members to better understand themselves and each other. It also provided general information to others who did not fit into society’s gender norms. They could approach KAOS GL with questions and for support. Öz knows the importance of finding people who understand the difficulties of asserting your LGBTI+ identity. “As a child, I wanted to fit in, but because I was attracted to girls I was constantly reminded that I did not. My teacher even made me visit a psychiatrist,” Öz recalled her time in high school.

In the 1990s, the internet was not commonly used and information on the topics covered by KAOS GL was scarce. There was a lack of

literature and examples in public life, especially for lesbian women, Öz pointed out. In Turkey, there are two famous singers who are open about their LGBTI+ identity: Zeki Müren who was openly gay and Bülent Ersoy who is a trans-woman. But for lesbians, Öz noted, even today there are almost no role models in which lesbian women can recognise themselves. “Is there one famous lesbian in Turkey?” Öz asked, “I must be Turkey’s most famous lesbian. And I am not even famous,” Öz laughed.

“If you are not able to speak up in your own group, it will be very difficult to make your voice heard in society.

In the early days, KAOS GL gathered in cafés frequented by leftists, but even in these environments, they were cautious about being overheard. Their presence as a group was still seen as a taboo so they were forced to whisper during their meetings. Now Öz realises that this secrecy was a big obstacle. “If you are not able to speak up in your own group, it will be very difficult to make your voice heard in society,” she explained. Being able to do so without any fear is a valuable lesson Öz has learned during her lifelong struggle for LGBTI+ rights, for which she received the [Felipe de Souza Award](#) in 2013.

After Öz graduated in 1997, she began working as a lawyer, but along with many others who entered the workforce, she remained actively involved in the debates KAOS GL started. She and her fellow activists tried to keep the organisation active. Relying solely on volunteers, this was not an easy task. They would send the magazine for free to LGBTI+s in prison; costs kept exceeding their income. “If we could not make ends meet, we would ask members earning the most to help pay for rent. It was rather tiring and we spent a lot of time trying to keep KAOS GL afloat — time we would have rather used to develop politics,” Öz added.

When Mama Cash, a Dutch NGO, provided financial support to KAOS GL in 2001, they were finally able to establish an office where discussions could be organised, people could be invited to attend lectures — this all helped in professionalising the grassroots organisation. Other financial issues improved with the introduction of a subscriber system, and four years later KAOS GL acquired the legal status of a foundation. Acquiring this legal status was not easy.

When KAOS GL’s first applied for its legal status in 2005, the Ankara governor lodged a complaint, arguing that the organisation violated public morality. However, the public prosecutor assigned to this case decided not to proceed, ruling that homosexuality was not immoral. Öz was involved in preparing the landmark case for KAOS GL. She has also worked as a lawyer for the organisation on several other cases, including the attempted prohibition of an (unpublished) magazine issue on pornography and violence against trans-women in Turkey.

At the beginning of the 2000s, with the newly elected Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, the political climate appeared to be more favourable for LGBTI+ rights. The AKP aspired to join the European Union, and the opening of the accession process in 2005 led to the adoption of laws that expanded minority rights. At the same time, access to the internet became more common, making it easier for activists to organise, share and obtain information. In this context, in 2007 the first big LGBTI+ Pride March was organised in Istanbul, bringing thousands of activists together from different LGBTI+ and feminist groups. Öz, who had moved to Istanbul for her work, helped with the organisation of the event in her capacity as a lawyer.

Since then, the LGBTI+ Pride March has grown in numbers every year, reaching over 100,000 participants in 2013, the same summer as the widespread Gezi Park protests. (Read about [Anjelic Kelavgil's](#) experience in accepting their gender identity during these protests). The nationwide protests, which started as an environmental protest to stop the demolition of a park, quickly turned into an anti-government protest against increasing authoritarianism, which had extra meaning for the LGBTI+ community. “The park was a place where LGBTI+ people could sit freely during the day,” she explained. During the protests, the LGBTI+ community was very visible and managed to make new alliances within other activist circles and the human rights community.

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“These alliances are very important,” Öz said. She referred to KAOS GL’s activism to end the ban on headscarves in place in public institutions until 2013 as an example. “If a religious man can enter public spaces, religious women should be able to do so as well. I might not agree with that group’s worldview but that’s not the point. I have to defend them when they are discriminated against. Only then can we challenge the ideology that imposes these exclusions on all of us,” Öz argued.

Currently, Öz is working on KAOS GL’s annual human rights monitoring reports, collecting and documenting instances of discrimination against LGBTI+ people. In the latest report, few positive notes were made. Currently, all civil society is facing enormous pressure from the government — made even worse after the 2016 coup attempt — with fines, purges, closures and imprisonment. Pride marches have been banned and attempts to hold them despite the restrictions have been met with police violence.

To Öz, the repression signifies the increased importance and power of the LGBTI+ movement: “Before, we were not taken seriously, but now our identities cannot be denied anymore and I am sure that we are facing repression today because we are seen as a force,” Öz concluded.

Story first published in June 2020

Cihan Aydın



“ They did all they could to try to prevent our demands from being shared with the public.

Cihan Aydın is a human rights lawyer and President of the Diyarbakır Bar Association in Turkey. Despite the often-dangerous situation for government critics, and especially lawyers in the field of human rights in Diyarbakır, Aydın has remained steadfast in defending the rights of all people.

All Kurdish kids unfortunately grow up with the same dream,” **Cihan Aydın**, the president of the Diyarbakır Bar Association, said, “They want to fight injustice and become a lawyer.” Back in the 1980s, Aydın, who grew up in a village in the province of Dersim, was one of these kids. “In this region, everybody has lived through tragedies in relation to the state, from extrajudicial killings to enforced disappearances and torture,” Aydın explained. Even though he did not experience such stories

in his direct family, they were all around him, and so after finishing high school, Aydın moved to Diyarbakır to study law.

In Turkey’s collective memory, Dersim is known for violent state repression. In the 1990s, when the fight between the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the Turkish state reached a violent peak, villages were burnt and tens of thousands of people were displaced. Still, that is not all the region represents to people who grew up there. Speaking to Aydın on the phone over the weekend, he went back to Dersim to enjoy the province’s rich nature. While he tells about his work, birds chatter in the background. “Whenever I find the time, I go to enjoy nature by cycling or hiking, but unfortunately for the last two years I have had very little time to do so,” Aydın said. Aydın, who has been working as a lawyer in Diyarbakır since 1998, has been serving as the Bar’s president since 2018. These past two years were especially busy, with an [amendment in the Law on Lawyers](#) (Avukatlık Kanunu), verbal attacks by senior government officials and the quest for justice for [Tahir Elçi](#) — one of Aydın’s predecessors who was killed in the summer of 2015.

The killing revived old traumas in society at a moment during which the short-lived peace

process between the PKK and Turkish state, which had started two years earlier, was in the midst of its collapse.

Last month, Aydın and his colleagues [protested](#) an amendment to the Law on Lawyers. From all over Turkey, lawyers took to the capital of Ankara, intending to present their objections to the parliamentary petition committee. With only a few hundred meters to go to the Parliament, they were met by a barrier of armoured police vehicles who blocked their way and prevented them from reaching the building. According to Aydın, such a flagrant violation of the lawyers’ [right to protests](#) and freedom of expression can only be explained by fear. “They did all they could to try to prevent our demands from being shared with the public,” Aydın mentioned. Unfortunately, the protest was curbed and the amendment was approved by Parliament.

The change to the legislation is problematic because it allows multiple bar associations to be formed in each province, whereas the previous system only allowed for one association per province. To the dissatisfaction of the government, many of the current bar associations have criticised the state for its human rights violations and the deteriorating rule of law of the country. According to the amendment, now, in provinces with over 5000 registered lawyers, a group of 2000 lawyers can set up their own bar association. Additionally, the three largest bar associations in Turkey, namely those in Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir, will also lose representational power at the national Union of Turkish Bar Associations (Türkiye Barolar Birliği), favouring bars from smaller provinces disproportionately. The changes do not directly apply to the Diyarbakır Bar Association itself, which is an association with over 1500 lawyers, but the objections are more fundamental, Aydın explained. “We believe it is a move to disempower the current bar associations. The law serves a clear political purpose and is presented for securing the government’s political future,” he explained. These changes are seen as presenting an additional [risk](#) to the independence and impartiality of the judicial system.

“ The judicial system serves for a large extent as the government’s backyard, and such remarks obviously influence the prosecutors.

In his work, Aydın always had a special interest in human rights. After having worked at the Human Rights Association (İnsan Hakları Derneği – İHD, similar to Raci Bilici and Gönül Öztürkoğlu),[MR1] [GE2] he worked on the Justice for Everyone Project (Herkes İçin Adalet Projesi).

In this project, Aydın and his team actively engaged with disadvantaged groups such as children, women and inmates. They taught them about their rights in schools, neighbourhoods and prison cells. In the past years, such projects have become difficult to carry out in the increasingly repressive and violent environment. After elected, officials of the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) were ousted by emergency decree, and government-appointed trustees were installed in their place. It became nearly impossible for bar associations to cooperate with local authorities.

“ They want to instil a sense of hopelessness so that we leave the scene. Luckily, there are many people who stand their ground here.

The Diyarbakır Bar Association has also faced more direct pressure as prosecutors launched [investigations](#) against its board members. One case was opened against them after a public statement expressing solidarity with victims of the Armenian Genocide. Another investigation was launched when the Bar Association sided with HDP parliamentarian [Osman Baydemir](#), who was temporarily suspended for using the word “Kurdistan” in Parliament. Both cases against the Bar have since been merged. In April 2020, prosecutors opened an investigation in which the Bar faced charges of “insulting religious values” because it criticised the President of the Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı), Ali Erbaş, for using inciting language towards [LGBTI+ individuals and people with HIV](#). The trials and investigations were opened in an atmosphere of mounting intimidation and Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu’s verbal attacks. In 2019, he accused the Diyarbakır Bar of “making terrorist propaganda” and operating in coordination with the PKK. Aydın said, “The judicial system serves for a large extent as the government’s backyard, and such remarks obviously influence the prosecutors.”

The Diyarbakır Bar Association faces a long history of pressure from authorities. Still, the killing of its president Tahir Elçi on November 28, 2015 came as a shock. Elçi was shot in broad daylight while giving a press statement in the historic centre of Diyarbakır. Until today, it remains unclear what exactly happened at the scene. Aydın said the killing reopened old wounds of the past and he once again realised the risks his job brings along, “Working as a lawyer in Diyarbakır, especially in the field of human rights, has always been a job with risks. The threat is always there,” he stated. Shortly after the killing, the peace process collapsed and the repression of Kurds greatly increased. The Diyarbakır Bar Association set out on a quest for justice for its former president.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, it organised weekly protests every Friday in front of the courthouse. At the same time, Forensic Architecture, based in London, conducted an independent investigation into the killing on behalf of the Bar. The multidisciplinary research group based at the University of London [concluded](#) that the fatal shot likely came from police officers at the scene and not from the PKK as the Turkish authorities had claimed. [In March 2020](#), a case was finally opened and the first hearing is set for October 21, 2020.

Besides the pressure on the Bar itself, in recent years Aydın and the over 1500 lawyers connected to the Diyarbakır Bar have seen a surge of court cases based on the arbitrarily used Anti-Terror legislation. They experience, on a daily basis, how easy it is to accuse people of being members of a terrorist organisation. “For whoever the government wants to eliminate, they find a secret witness and make them give or fabricate a false statement — there is always a secret witness available. All else it takes are social media posts, and the past attendance of protests, and you are accused of being a member of a terrorist organisation,” Aydın stated.

For Aydın, this disregard for the rule of law is a deliberate tactic to demoralise people like himself who stand up for human rights. “They want to instil a sense of hopelessness, so that we leave the scene. Luckily, there are many people who stand their ground here,” Aydın concluded.

Story first published in July 2020

Canan Arın



Leading women’s rights defender and lawyer Canan Arın has been fighting for women’s rights in Turkey for most of her life. In recent discussions on the possibility of Turkey withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention and increasing pressure on critical lawyers, Arın is an influential voice in the women’s rights movement.

Canan Arın has been a lawyer for almost 50 years. As a daughter of civil servants, she was raised in a Kemalist family, and growing up, she was taught that women were equal to men. But when she returned to Turkey from London in 1976 after studying Constitutional Law, these beliefs were challenged, as she learned about the glaring inequalities inherent to Turkish law. “The Family Code stated that the husband is the head of the family. And our Penal Code said that when a woman is raped, it is a crime

“ Instead of focusing on further expanding our rights, we are forced to defend the hard-won rights we do have. That is horrible to witness.

against the family order and the public. Not against the person,” Arın explained.

Ever since Arın found out about these inequalities, she has been an outspoken feminist and an advocate for women’s rights. In addition to her work as a lawyer, she is one of the founders of the [Purple Roof Women’s Shelter Foundation](#) (Mor Çatı Kadın Sığınağı Vakfı) — a solidarity centre and shelter that supports women in combatting violence against women. Arın was also involved in setting up the women’s right organisation [KA.DER](#), which advocates equal representation of women and men in all fields of life. She is also one of the founders of the IstanbulBar Association Women’s Rights Enforcement Centre (İstanbul Barosu Kadın HaklarıUygulama Merkezi).

Arın has actively worked on reforming Turkish laws. Together with colleagues, she advocated for and worked on a new penal code that would ensure equal rights for women. Having studied the penal codes in several countries, and taking inspiration from other legislation, Arın and her colleagues eventually wrote the “Crimes Against Sexual Inviolability” (Cinsel Dokunulmazlığa Karşı İşlenen Suçlar) section of the current Turkish Penal Code, which was adopted in 2004.

Arın has made consistent and unmistakeable contributions to the expansion of women's rights in Turkey ever since her return in 1976. Other than the new Penal Code, Arın helped draft a new civil code and a new family code with an expansion of women's rights, which were introduced as part of Turkey's efforts to become a member of the European Union (EU).

In recent years though, women in Turkey have been forced on the defensive once more. Violence against women has risen rapidly. According to women's rights organisation [We Will Stop Femicide Platform](#) (Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu), almost 2,000 women were killed since February 2015 in Turkey, often by their husbands or boyfriends. In 2019 alone, 474 women were murdered, most often by men they knew. Despite this troubling increase of violence against women, the Turkish government has been debating with drawing from [the Istanbul Convention](#) — a Council of Europe treaty specifically aimed at preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. In 2012, Turkey was the first country to ratify the treaty — the same year that the government passed Law No. 6284 to Protect Family and Prevent Violence Against Women (6284 Sayılı Ailenin Korunması ve Kadına Karşı Şiddetin Önlenmesine Dair Kanun) as well as various gender equality policies.

“ In these repressive times, the women's movement offers a glimmer of hope to Arın. “We are the best opposition, that's why the government wants to control us.”

Arın is appalled at this prospective rollback of rights. “Instead of focusing on further expanding our rights, we are forced to defend the hard-won rights we do have. That is horrible to witness,” she explained. She points out that the necessary legal tools for the protection of women currently do exist in Turkey, but that lack of enforcement is the actual problem. She gives an example: “Abortion is legal in Turkey. But de facto, it is difficult for women who want to have an abortion. Because our President wants women to give birth as much as they can. But who is going to look after these women and children? Are there any jobs?” Arın does not hold back. She has been a vocal opponent of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet

ve Kalkınma Partisi –AKP) ever since it came to power in 2002. Arın criticises the reforms made to expand rights of minorities and women in the early days of the AKP government, labelling them “hypocritical.” “It was all due to the pressure of the strong women's movement and the hope to enter the EU that these laws were changed,” she explained. According to Arın, President Erdoğan and his government are now showing their true colours. “He said it himself: ‘[Democracy is like a train, you get off once you have reached your destination.](#)’ Now he is off,” she stated.

The government signed the Istanbul Convention in 2011 because of international developments, Arın told. Two years earlier, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in the landmark case of [Opuz v. Turkey](#) that Turkey violated its obligation to protect women from domestic violence. Nahide Opuz and her mother had suffered years of brutal domestic violence from her husband. Despite their complaints, the police and prosecuting authorities did not protect Opuz and her mother, which eventually resulted in Opuz's husband killing her mother. The case raised pressure on Turkey to sign the treaty. Arın sees the current debate about the Istanbul Convention as a sign of electoral opportunism, but fears the consequences in case Turkey withdraws: “We would make a fool out of ourselves in the international arena and it would give the signal that men are free to commit violence to women,” she added.

The open attacks on the rule of law meant not only an erosion of Turkey's democracy, but have also come at great personal cost to many. Arın keeps an eye on many of these cases and is visibly upset when she mentions some of them: her colleague [Ebru Timtik](#), who died during a hunger strike in pursuit of a fair trial; the cases against prominent businessman and philanthropist [Osman Kavala](#); and Kurdish politician Selahattin Demirtaş, the latter two are both in prison, or the [Saturday Mothers](#) (Cumartesi Anneleri/İnsanları) who were banned from protesting at their regular spot since August 2018 (for more about the Saturday Mothers, read [Sebla Arcan](#) and [Nadire Mater](#)'s stories). “They [the Saturday Mothers] were called ‘terrorists’ and all they did was ask where the graves of their loved ones are,” said Arın.

Her courage to speak up for cases she finds important has also led to her own persecution. “In my talks, I always like to give the most striking examples, so that they stick with people,” she explained. In 2011, a group of lawyers from the Antalya Bar Association joined a training on violence against women. Arın lectured the group on early and forced marriages as a form of violence. To highlight that early marriages have been custom throughout history, she mentioned marriages of the

prophet of Islam and then-President Abdullah Gül, who married his wife when she was fifteen. After the conference, a [prosecutor opened a case](#) against Arın for “insulting the President of the Republic” and “for publicly degrading the religious values of a section of the public.” The case was later suspended. “It shows that already back then there was no independent judiciary,” Arın said.

“ I think that all women are courageous. I think that we are indebted to our grandmothers all over the world for having provided us with the rights we have today. Even if I might not see it, women will prevail.

In these repressive times, the women's movement offers a glimmer of hope to Arın. “We are the best opposition, that's why the government wants to control us,” Arın said with a smile. She turned 78 this year, but Arın is still very active in the movement. She mentors younger colleagues, publishes articles on women's rights, and occasionally takes up cases as well. Recently, she took up a case of a 13-year old girl who was raped by her uncle. In a country where violence against women often goes unpunished, Arın is particularly proud of the verdict in this case: “I managed to get him behind bars for 30 years,” she shared.

In 2018, Arın won the prestigious [Bruno Leoni Award](#) for her struggle against child marriages. In her acceptance speech, she dedicated the Award to all courageous women: “I think that all women are courageous. I think that we are indebted to our grandmothers all over the world for having provided us with the rights we have today.” They give her inspiration to remain hopeful for the future: “Even if I might not see it, women will prevail,” she stated.

Story first published in August 2020

Kazım Kızıl



Documentary maker and video activist Kazım Kızıl is a prominent voice seeking justice for the voiceless and the disenfranchised. Despite facing interrogation and trial on multiple occasions, and while currently awaiting the review of his prison sentence, Kızıl continues his invaluable work of documenting injustice.

Kazım Kızıl vividly remembers the very first day he ever held a photo camera — a present from his aunt. That day, Kızıl took pictures of anything that crossed his lens. Back at home, he proudly told his aunt about all the images he took, but to his infinite disappointment, he was told that there was no film in the camera. Still, the seed for his love of photography was firmly planted.

“A lawyer friend of mine explained that I had recorded police violence which could serve as evidence against them in court.

Kızıl was born in the Aegean city of Manisa, but grew up in various cities throughout Turkey as the family followed his father on different teaching postings across the country. Kızıl's first real photo camera (this time with film) was a present from his brother, and sometimes it feels like he hasn't stopped taking pictures or shooting videos ever since. “I was not very political, but I went to some demonstrations and meetings of friends and I uploaded the videos I took [there],” he shared. Kızıl seemed to be in the right place at the right time, and in the rapidly developing digital era of citizen journalism, his footage quickly started getting used for various news items and publication channels. Today, Kızıl is a well-known photographer, video activist and documentary filmmaker based in Izmir.

Kızıl's first notable experience with state censorship occurred in 2013. Because he was interested in social justice, Kızıl decided to document Labour Day celebrations and protests in Istanbul, where the governor had banned all gatherings in and around the central Taksim square. Taksim square is a traditional venue for demonstrations in Istanbul, where trade union activists are now [barred](#) from marching to since 2013. In the neighbourhood of Okmeydanı, known for its restive leftist

population, Kızıl was caught up in violent clashes between the police and protestors, but accidentally ended up behind police lines. “It was as if I was the police's personal cameraman,” Kızıl said. He recorded policemen firing tear gas and plastic bullets at the protestors.

“Due to the ever-increasing pressure, Kızıl is careful now, but it does not stop him from doing his work.

The police, who initially allowed Kızıl to film, and then apprehend him, eventually let him go once all the images on his camera were deleted. Kızıl managed to recover some images and posted a [clip](#) on social media. The day after, someone started harassing Kızıl online and tried to convince him to delete the clip. Kızıl found out later that the account those messages were coming from belonged to one of the police officers who had stopped him in Istanbul. He only later understood what the officer, who could be identified in the footage, was so afraid of: “A lawyer friend of mine explained that I had recorded police violence which could serve as evidence against them in court,” he noted. It was this first coincidental reporting trip that showed Kızıl the impact and power images can have.

The same month, protests erupted in Gezi Park in Istanbul. They eventually grew to be the largest anti-government protests in Turkey's recent history and quickly spread across the country. (Read about [Yiğit Aksakoglu](#) and [Can Atalay](#) who stood trial for allegedly organising the protests; [Meltem Aslan](#), who was investigated for organising the protests; and [Anjelik Kelavgil](#) who found great solidarity in the protests). Kızıl documented the protests in Izmir and joined the video collective Street Camera ([Kamera Sokak](#)). During the protests, which were met with heavy-handed police violence almost everywhere, Kızıl lost his camera. Without money to buy a new one, he used his phone and equipment borrowed from friends for a long time.

He is still forced to improvise, “I am still not very rich, but I am not [as poor] as that time,” Kızıl joked. With countless trips throughout the country — from the Syrian border, where he documented the plight of the refugees; to the mining town of [Soma](#), where he followed the [quest for justice of families of 301 miners](#) who died due to negligence of the mining company in 2014 — Kızıl documents the universal fight for justice, and became a

well-known activist in the process.

His first documentary was almost entirely improvised, like most of his working schedule. When he heard about the growing resistance of villagers in the olive-farming Aegean village of Yırca, who were protesting against the expropriation of their land in favour of a thermal power station, Kızıl went out to film them. With just his phone and a power bank as equipment, he stayed in the village and became friends with the villagers. The day before the court decision on the thermal plant project, the company behind the project — Kolin Holding — cut down over six thousand olive trees. The court decided in favour of the village and halted the project, but the trees, the villagers' main source of income, were already gone. Kızıl decided to turn the story of Yırca into a documentary. In 2015, “[The Tree of Eternity: the Yırca Resistance](#)” (Ölmez Ağac: Yırca Direnişi) came out.

After covering the story about Yırca, Kızıl made numerous short movies and two documentaries: “[Where are you buddy](#)” (2017) (Neredesin arkadaşım), about child labour in the south-western town Denizli, and “[Mother Emel](#)” (2019) (Emel Anne) about the mother of [Ali Ismail Korkmaz](#), who was beaten to death by a group of men, amongst them several undercover policemen, during the Gezi Park protests in 2013.

Themes that reoccur in Kızıl's work include children, fighting for justice and the environment. To protect his artistic freedom he has refused to conform to any labels, such as that of an environmental journalist. “I often get approached when there are protests somewhere against the destruction of nature, but I simply cannot go everywhere,” he said. However, anywhere Kızıl goes, he approaches his subject with a strong sense of humanity and a message for a better world. It resonates at movie screenings in communities, which Kızıl prefers over big movie theatres. Recently, Kızıl was told the story of a man who did not sell his land for the development of an energy plant because he had seen “The Tree of Eternity” and was inspired by the resistance in the documentary. “These stories are exactly the reason I make movies,” Kızıl explained.

Like so many fellow human rights defenders in Turkey, Kızıl's work has cost him his freedom. In April 2017, while covering protests in Izmir about the [contested constitutional referendum](#), Kızıl was hard-headedly taken into custody and later arrested. He was charged with violating the Law on Meetings and Demonstrations and “insulting the President” — an accusation commonly used to silence government critics. Initially

he did not know what evidence his case was based on, which made it impossible for him to prepare a defence. After 65 days behind bars, Kızıl found out, in the newspaper, that he was being prosecuted for three of his Tweets. His indictment followed soon after and he was released after his first hearing. “I got lucky,” Kızıl realises, thinking of his many colleagues in prison.

Behind bars, Kızıl experienced the importance of solidarity. Friends and colleagues set up a [campaign](#) rallying for his freedom. Every Friday, Kızıl received numerous letters, which was heart-warming. “I would be busy all week reading and answering them,” Kızıl recalled. He was eventually acquitted for violating the Law on Meetings and Demonstrations but received a [prison sentence of one year and three months](#) for insulting the President. He lodged an appeal. “I am planning to go to the Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights if necessary,” he added. After his release, Kızıl took a three-month holiday before he started working again. Due to the ever-increasing pressure, Kızıl is careful now, but it does not stop him from doing his work. Besides developing new ideas for future documentaries, Kızıl has worked on various journalistic projects during the pandemic.

The intimidation of journalists, photographers and filmmakers in Turkey continues. And it does not stop there: at demonstrations, the police aim teargas canisters directly at Kızıl, film him, and let him know that he was being watched. Last year, while researching the suspicious death of an 11-year-old girl named [Rabia Naz](#) in the Black Sea town of Giresun, Kızıl was [taken into custody](#) again together with journalist Canan Coşkun. Luckily, there was another loud public opinion campaign for their release: “That was the only reason we did not land in jail again,” he said.

Story first published in September 2020

